**The Dublin Municipal Officers’ Association,**

**Local Government Trade Unionism & the 1916 Rising**

In December 1918, as the result of the long-deferred General Election became apparent, Sir Henry Augustus Robinson, President of the Local Government Board, observed that ‘It is a fair and square fight’ between Dublin Castle and Sinn Féin as to who is to govern the country.[[1]](#endnote-1) Robinson understood much earlier than any other member of the British administration that the electoral triumph of Sinn Féin and the assembly of Dáil Éireann represented a new and much more formidable challenge than the familiar Fenian incendiaries or agrarian outrage. Arthur Griffith, founder and ideological guide of Sinn Féin, urged upon the Dáil the strategy of organising a counter-state from the ground up that would be recognised by the Irish people and thus deprive the Castle administration of legitimacy.[[2]](#endnote-2) This counter-state would be a national administration built upon a local base. A further step in the success of the counter-state was the 1920 local elections, the first for six years, when Sinn Féin took control of urban and county councils. The claim of the Dáil to be the legitimate government of an independent Irish state, hitherto largely propagandist, could now take on definite state forms as the local authorities transferred allegiance from the Local Government Board in Custom House to the Dáil Éireann Department of Local Government.[[3]](#endnote-3) The success of the counter-state strategy of taking control of local government was due in large part to the spectacular growth of trade union organisation amongst the permanent officials in the urban and county councils in a new trade union of local government officials, the Irish Local Government Officers’ Trade Union (ILGOU). Driving the foundation and rapid growth of the ILGOU was a new leadership in the Dublin Municipal Officers’ Association (DMOA), radicalised by the 1916 Rising.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898 ended the gentry-dominated Grand Juries and Freeman Rolls and replaced them by locally elected county, urban district and rural district councils. With a franchise restricted to ratepayers ‘economy’ was an effective electioneering slogan deployed by both Unionist and Nationalist candidates for local elections. The appointment, salaries and conditions of service of the permanent officials employed by the local authorities came under regular and sustained attack. In response the Dublin Corporation officials decided that their best defence lay in a permanent organisation. In October 1901 the DMOA held its first AGM. The membership included all professional and clerical staff of the City Council.[[5]](#endnote-5) Despite the continued attacks on the officers the DMOA remained conservative in its ambitions, reflecting the status-conscious membership, despite the occasional emergence of individuals who urged a more militant attitude. One of those militants was Edward Kent, a clerk in the City Treasurer’s Office, then becoming better known by the Irish name of Éamonn Ceannt.

Ceannt was elected DMOA Vice-Chairman in 1908 and in the following year Chairman. He served on the Executive in 1911 and 1912, resigning from it in 1913. These years marked the rise of James Larkin and the more aggressive trade unionism of the ITGWU. Ceannt proposed, unsuccessfully, that the DMOA support the striking carters in 1908. He also proposed that the DMOA should amalgamate with the Civil Service Guild to bring the local officers and the national civil servants together in a single organisation. Ceannt was a committed activist. In these years he not only served on the DMOA Executive but also in the Gaelic League, and in the Sinn Féin Council, where he spoke in defence of the 1913 locked out workers against Arthur Griffith. His activism led to his induction into the revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in 1911 by Seán MacDiarmada. He was a founder of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913 and, by 1916, was Director of Communications on the Volunteer Executive, Commandant of the 4th Battalion as well as acting as a key planner of the 1916 Rising in the IRB Military Council.[[6]](#endnote-6) As Commandant of the 4th Battalion Ceannt was in charge of operations at the South Dublin Union, controlling access to the city from Islandbridge and Richmond Barracks. One of the last to surrender, Ceannt was defiant to the end. He was executed on 8 May, along with Michael Mallin and Seán Heuston. In his last note to his wife Áine he suggested she apply to the DMOA for assistance.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Within the ranks of the DMOA there was a growing resentment at the inflation in food prices and the curtailment of salaries triggered by the outbreak of world war in 1914. Only disciplined and militant trade unions could hope to fulfil their primary objective of defending members’ living standards. In this fundamental task the DMOA Executive was clearly failing. Resentment at the erosion of wages amongst the DMOA general membership was channelled by a new leadership that emerged after the 1916 Rising. Abandoning the deferential tactics of previous Executives, which relied on quiet influence amongst the councillors, a new leadership of 1916 veterans and sympathisers came to the fore ready to harness this resentment to the cause of the Republic. Initially the reaction within the DMOA to the Rising was muted. Within a week of the executions the Executive recorded a vote of sympathy ‘with Mrs Kent on the death of Mr E. Kent and with Mrs MacBride on the death of Mr. J. MacBride’.[[8]](#endnote-8) John MacBride was employed as a water bailiff and was a member of the DMOA. A proposal for the relief of dependents received no support. It was only at the December 1916 AGM, following protests from the floor, that a fund was inaugurated to assist Ceannt’s widow and children.[[9]](#endnote-9) The protests from the floor mark a new leadership making its presence felt.

In early 1917 a group of activists, many of them IRB men and some of whom had participated in the Rising, took control of the DMOA. They then used the DMOA to launch the Irish Local Government Officers Trade Union (ILGOU) as a national trade union of local government officials that would support the Dáil Éireann department of local government as the only legitimate state authority in Ireland. Members of this group of activists included Henry Mangan, the City Accountant; Moynihan the City Engineer, and Joseph Hutchinson, also in the City Accountant’s office; and Thomas Gay of the Capel Street Library. Mangan, Hutchinson and Moynihan had been involved in 1907 in a project to erect a Celtic Cross on the site of the Battle of Fontenoy of 1745, where the Irish Brigade led by Charles O’Brien, 6th Viscount Clare defeated the English forces. Mangan was also active in the Celtic Literary Society and wrote plays on revivalist themes. Mangan was close to Arthur Griffith and had drafted the Sinn Féin policy on a National Civil Service Scheme.[[10]](#endnote-10) He acted as advisor to Collins on protecting the money contributed by buyers of the republican bonds and he also advised Cosgrave in the Dáil department on evading the liabilities imposed on the local councils for the Malicious Injuries Decrees. Thomas Gay was a member of the A Company 4th Battalion Volunteers and served during the Rising with Con Colbert’s Marrowbone Lane garrison, but evaded arrest in the surrender. Gay made the Capel Street Library available to Collins for meetings of the IRB and for contacts with his intelligence agents in the DMP G Division; Broy, Neligan, Kavanagh and McNamara.[[11]](#endnote-11)

At the head of this group of activists who launched the ILGOU was Harry Nicholls. Nicholls was one of the not insignificant group of Protestant rebels active in 1916.[[12]](#endnote-12) His introduction to nationalism was the language revival movement. He joined the Gaelic League in 1910 at the age of twenty, whilst a student of engineering at TCD. In December 1913 he was appointed as a temporary member of the engineering staff of Dublin Corporation. This was about the same time he was initiated into the IRB Teeling Circle which had Bulmer Hobson as centre. He joined the Irish Volunteers A company 4th Battalion under the command of Éamonn Ceannt when it formed in November 1913. A fellow member of the A Company was the councillor W.T. Cosgrave. In 1915 he served as the Irish Volunteer member on the O’Donovan Rossa Funeral Committee. A further radicalising influence on Nicholls was the 1913 Lockout. On the Friday 29 August he went to the meeting outside Liberty Hall where Larkin burnt the government proclamation banning the public meeting planned for the morrow. Caught in a baton-charge by the DMP on Eden Quay and beaten to the ground by Constables 33B and 188B, Nicholls made a complaint, receiving a grudging but formal apology from Inspector McKaig ‘who didn’t want the police to be at loggerheads with respectable people’. Nicholls promptly brought the letter of apology to the *Irish Worker* for publication.

In the Rising Nicholls, confused by the countermand order of MacNeill, missed the mobilisation of his own 4th Battalion but joined in with the Irish Citizen Army garrison at St Stephen’s Green. He was deported after the surrender, initially to Knutsford Prison and then to Frongoch where he was elected leader of Hut 11 with Dick McGee as his second.[[13]](#endnote-13) Nicholls was not amongst those early releases approved by the Sankey Commission. He was taken to Wormwood scrubs to be questioned by the Committee but his defiant account of his activities ensured his continued detention. He had to wait until the general emptying of Frongoch at Christmas 1916 to return to Dublin, even though the Chief Commissioner of the DMP objected to his release.[[14]](#endnote-14)

It might be expected that Nicholl’s would have lost his job in the Engineering Department of the city corporation, as a result of either his participation in the Rising or his lengthy absence. In fact Nicholls enjoyed an immediate improvement in his position. On his release from Frongoch and return to Dublin it was proposed and seconded by Councillors Mahon and Foley that Nicholls, formerly a temporary appointment to the engineering staff, be moved to a permanent position.[[15]](#endnote-15) Mahon, a councillor for Mountjoy Ward, was a member of the IRB and the printer of the *Irish Volunteer* newspaper. Foley was a councillor for the more middle-class Clontarf Ward. The motion to appoint Nicholls was passed 30 for and 9 against.[[16]](#endnote-16) Amongst the Councillors who voted against Nicholls was Michael ‘Bird’ Flangan of Usher’s Quay Ward, a prosperous market gardener and supporter of the Redmondite Parliamentary Party. He was also father of Louisa Flanagan, who was being courted by, and was to marry in 1919, William Cosgrave.[[17]](#endnote-17) The re-employment and promotion of Harry may well signal the shift in public opinion that was already visible on the streets and was now filtering through to the Corporation.

Though he remained active in the Irish Volunteers and the Gaelic League, organising a meeting in memory of Thomas Ashe at Dingle in September 1917, it was as a trade union leader that Harry Nicholls played a vital role in the political task that now unfolded. The reconstruction of Irish republicanism and separatism after 1916 was a complex task generating a new leadership, largely dominated by Michael Collins, and new organisational structures. These included a determined movement by the IRB to take control of trade unions and bring them to support for the revolution.[[18]](#endnote-18) Though Nicholls has left no direct evidence his actions suggest that his republican activism had turned toward capturing the trade union of the municipal officers and aligning it with the revolutionary Dáil.

Dáil Éireann set out its claim to be the legitimate government of Ireland by establishing its own departments of government.[[19]](#endnote-19) Of these, the one that proved most successful in establishing itself as an effective political force was the Department of Local Government under William Cosgrave.[[20]](#endnote-20) Acting as a trade union leader, Nicholls played no small part in ensuring the success of Cosgrave’s revolutionary department. Elected to the DMOA he used that association as a springboard to launch, in the same week that the Dáil assembled, the ILGOU. The first task facing Nicholls was that of harnessing the dissatisfaction amongst the Dublin Corporation officials at the erosion of salaries caused by wartime inflation. Abandoning the former tactics of humble pleading that had proved utterly ineffective Nicholls adopted an aggressive militancy on the wages issue. The campaign on pay was brought to a head with a strike by the Dublin Corporation officers on 21 June 1920, at the height of the War of Independence and at the moment when Sinn Féin was completing its sweep of the local government elections. This strike, called and led by Nicholls, was the first strike ever in Great Britain or Ireland by local government officials.

The citizens of Dublin were astonished to see the city law officer, Borough Surveyor, waterworks engineer, city accountant and other top officials mounting a picket line at the City Hall and leading a march of the corporation officials to the union headquarters. These men were the acme of respectability and for them to be seen on strike as the *Evening Telegraph* put it; ‘for all the world as if we were back in the days when licensed vintners’ assistants were on picket duty’ was a ground-breaking advance in trade union organisation of the white collar sector. It was also a tribute to the organisation and agitation skills of Nicholls. The Corporation caved in, wage increases were conceded, and the ILGOU rapidly grew as the nation-wide trade union of local government officials.

Though the Dáil could issue decrees and the Sinn Féin councils could pass motions, only the salaried officials could actually make a national local government system function. Nicholls proposed that local government officials would act as administrators in support of a Sinn Féin revolution. Nicholls even persuaded the members to defer the increases so recently won, to prevent the collapse of Dublin Corporation. By the end of 1920 the corporation faced bankruptcy as the British state withheld funds. On behalf of the ILGOU, Nicholls agreed that the officials would loan money to the corporation by allowing it withhold a quarter of wages until the following April, thus ensuring its survival. When a dispute arose on sick leave entitlements Nicholls referred the case to the Dáil Éireann courts despite the protests of the official who had initiated the dispute. The official in question was fearful of attracting the attention of the Black and Tans if word got out that he had appealed to the underground courts. When the Kells’ Town Clerk queried the legality of an increase won for him at a Dáil Éireann arbitration court by the union, he got a frosty reply that the legality of a Dáil appointed body could not be questioned by the union. Nicholls also refused to allow the union to represent or act on behalf of any official that continued to support or obey the British Local Government Board. The Assistant Town Clerk John Flood was dismissed by Dublin Corporation for refusing to record votes in Irish and Henry Campbell, the Town Clerk, was also dismissed for maintaining contact with the British authorities. Nicholls had little sympathy for either man, though both were members of the union.

Other assistance that Nicholls provided to the revolutionary Dáil was less public but no less vital. When the new union required a permanent General Secretary Nicholls appointed Éamonn Price to the job. Price was a former civil servant dismissed for being active in 1916. He had been interned in Frongoch along with Nicholls. Price’s job as General Secretary was to travel the country setting up new branches. However Price was also Director of Organisation of the IRA. His post as union General Secretary was most likely nothing more than a convenient cover under which he could travel the country on IRA business.

Nicholls, as ILGOU President, addressed its first annual conference in November 1920. In this speech Nicholls drew together his labour and republican radicalism. His labour radicalism shows the influence of Larkinite syndicalism. From this perspective the world of labour is divided into the employed and the employers who were locked in battle. In this struggle organisation was the key to victory; the unorganised were fated to be crushed. Nicholls envisioned the ILGOU becoming the One Big Union for all the employees of local authorities, regardless of status or grade. However, he also used his conference speech to firmly align the ILGOU and the local government officials with Dáil Éireann. It was, he said, the duty of the local officers to support the Sinn Féin dominated local council’s democratic decision to reject the authority of the British state and to come under the authority of the Dáil Éireann local government department. This was a dangerous or even foolhardy speech to deliver in Dublin of November 1920 with the Auxiliaries prowling the streets.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Organisational genius allied with proven militancy enabled Nicholls to bring many of the Corporation officials along with him, even though many were Protestant and few, even those who were Catholics, were republican in their politics. ILGOU affiliation to the Irish Trade Union Congress signalled a commitment to trade union principles of solidarity and positioned the civil and public service organisations at the centre of the trade union movement of the independent state.

**Martin Maguire**

**Notes**

1. Brendan O’Donoghue, Activities Wise and Otherwise: The Career of Sir Henry Augustus Robinson, 1898-1922, (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2015), p288 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Owen McGee, *Arthur Griffith*, (Merrion Press, Dublin, 2015), p.193. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999; pd edition, 2005), pp. 323-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Maguire, *Servants to the Public A History of the Local Government and Public Services Union, 1901-1990,* (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. National Archives of Ireland (NAI), NA/1056 LGPSU Papers, DMOA Executive Committee minutes, 10 October, 1901. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. James Quinn, ‘Ceannt, Eamonn’, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, http://dib.cambridge.org, [retrieved 20 January, 2016]; Maguire, *op. cit*., pp. 27-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Piarais F. Mac Lochlainn, *Last Words: Letters & Statements of the Leaders Executed After the Rising at Easter 1916*, (Office of Public Works, Dublin, 996) pp. 136-8 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. NAI, NA/1056, LGPSU Papers, DMOA Executive Committee minutes, 11 May 1916. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. i*bid*., 2 December, 1916; Maguire, *op. cit.,* pp. 31-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. McGee, *op. cit*., p.193. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement (BMH, WS) 1413 ‘Tadgh Kennedy’; WS511 ‘Michael Lynch; WS 644 ‘Joseph Hyland; WS 615 ‘Frank Thornton; WS 39 & 92 ‘Seán T. O’Kelly. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Martin Maguire, ‘Harry Nicholls and Kathleen Emerson: Protestant Rebels’ in *Studia Hibernica* no. 35, 2008-2009, pp. 147-166. Nicholls activism in the revolutionary movement can be tracked through the various sources in WS 296, Harry Nicholls and Military Service Pensions File MSP34REF15964 ‘Henry Nicholls’; NAI, Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers (CSORP) 16628/1918 part II, 21699/Henry Nicholls; National Library Ireland (NLI) ms. 10,915/11 ‘Personal narrative of events of the Easter Rising’; Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks Dublin, Holmes/Nicholls papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. BMH WS 411 ‘Éamon Markham’; WS 388 ‘Joseph Good’. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. NAI, CSORP 21699 Henry Nicholls file; ‘Report of Chief Commissioner (File 22055)’. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dublin City Archives, Council minutes 1917, 290; Reports and printed documents of the Corporation of Dublin. vol. 1 1917, no. 48, p. 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *ibid.,* Joseph V. O’Brien, *‘Dear Dirty Dublin: A City in Distress, 1899-1916*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982) appendix C, pp. 266-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Michael Laffan, *Judging W.T. Cosgrave*, (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2014), pp 62-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Padraig Yeates, ‘Craft workers during the Irish revolution, 1919-22’, *Saothar 33*, 2008, pp. 37-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann, 1919-22*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Laffan, *Cosgrave, op. cit*., pp. 49-100. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Maguire, *Servants to the Public, op. cit*., appendix 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)