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## Neutral Northerners during the Irish Civil War: A Biographical Study

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One could be forgiven for assuming that the Irish Civil War was a conflict that split the entire nation, with everyone clearly taking either one side or the other. The term “civil-war politics” dominated political discourse and analysis in the Twenty-Six Counties until quite recently and perpetuated the notion that supporters of the two main political parties in the Republic of Ireland were the descendants of those who had fought for or supported one side or the other during the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> It would be more accurate to describe this twentieth-century political phenomenon as “Treaty-split politics,” given the fact that a large proportion of not only the general population but also the IRA itself remained neutral during the Civil War. As Bill Kissane has demonstrated, numerous civil-society organizations maintained a neutral line throughout the conflict, advocating peace to no avail.<sup>2</sup> The Labour Party also maintained a neutral position, or as its leaders perhaps more accurately termed it, an “antimilitarist” one. Labour assumed the role of official opposition in Dáil Éireann, and in doing so, signalled its intention to accept the institutions of the Free State that emerged from the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Sensing the lack of appetite for further violence in the country, the Labour leadership believed that this strategy presented the best means

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian P. Kavanagh, “An End to ‘Civil War Politics’? The Radically Reshaped Political Landscape of Post-Crash Ireland,” *Electoral Studies* 38 (June 2015): 71-81.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Kissane, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 126-50.

of advancing a progressive agenda on social and economic issues.<sup>3</sup> However antimilitarist the country may have become in 1922, the constitutional issue remained at the forefront of Irish political discourse. Republicans generally viewed Labour supporters with contempt for this strategy, arguing that they had effectively taken the pro-Treaty side and were actively legitimizing the Free State through their actions.<sup>4</sup>

While the IRA was definitively split over the Treaty, not all members were willing to carry their strongly held opinions into a violent confrontation with former comrades. The Neutral IRA Association was formed in December 1922, and its membership was open to those who had been active during the War of Independence but were opposed to the Civil War. It claimed a membership of around 25,000 and advanced peace proposals to the political and military leaders of the civil-war belligerents.<sup>5</sup> These went unheeded, despite the strength in numbers of neutral IRA members and public support from a large number of local-government bodies. Again, while these individuals remained neutral in the Civil War, it is clear that most of them were not supporters of the Treaty or the Free State.<sup>6</sup> In Ulster the IRA generally followed the national trend, with its divisions declaring either in favor of or against the

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<sup>3</sup> Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of the 28th Annual Meeting Held in the Mansion House, Dublin, August 1922, and of the Special Congress on Election Policy Held in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on February 21st 1922* (Dublin: Dollard Printing House, 1922).

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Grant, *Irish Socialist Republicanism, 1909-36* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 111-12.

<sup>5</sup> For context total IRA membership in the autumn of 1921 was 121,650. When the Civil War began in June 1922, the National Army had 9,700 soldiers, and the anti-Treaty IRA had an estimated 12,900 volunteers. A National Army recruitment drive later saw enlistments rocket to 60,000 before the Civil War came to an end. See Michael Hopkinson, *Green against Green: The Irish Civil War* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 136; Gerry White, "Free State versus Republic: The Opposing Armed Forces in the Civil War," in *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, ed. John Crowley, Donal Ó Drisceoil, Mike Murphy, and John Borgonovo (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 691-97.

<sup>6</sup> Kissane, *Politics of Irish Civil War*, 147.

Treaty. The exception was the 4th Northern Division under the command of Frank Aiken; this was the only division in Ireland to declare a formally neutral position on the Treaty. Aiken and some of his men later took the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War, but only after their garrison at Dundalk barracks had been attacked by the National Army in July 1922. Previously, Aiken had been a prominent advocate of seeking unity in the IRA to ensure that internal conflict did not distract from what he saw as a priority—the destabilization of Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Volunteers in the 4th Northern Division later revealed that a swift decision to maintain neutrality was reached once the Civil War had broken out, and that they would also cease all operations in Northern Ireland given that “all hopes of a united Ireland effort against the British forces in the North was smashed for the time being.”<sup>8</sup> While the 4th Northern Division was unique in its formal declaration of neutrality, there were many more IRA Volunteers from within the Six County area who saw the Civil War as a distraction from the main task at hand—the destabilization and destruction of Northern Ireland.

This article explores the attitude taken to the Civil War by IRA members from the Six Counties, with a focus on those who took a decidedly neutral position. If we consider the stance attributed to the IRA divisions covering the Six County area, only the 1st Midland Division, which extended into Fermanagh, took a pro-Treaty position. The 2nd and 3rd Northern Divisions were anti-Treaty and the 4th Northern Division, as already discussed, was officially neutral. These macro-level assessments, however, tell us little about the individual positions taken by IRA members. To have an opinion on the Treaty

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Lewis, *Frank Aiken's War: The Irish Revolution, 1916-23* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2014), 170-85.

<sup>8</sup> John McCoy's Witness Statement 492, 139 (16 March 1951), Bureau of Military History (hereafter cited as BMH). All such witness statements can be found in the Irish Military Archives, Dublin.

did not extend to preparedness to wage war in support of one's position. In the case of Northern Volunteers the perception that the Treaty split and subsequent Civil War was a Twenty-Six County affair held sway with large numbers. Some did fight on the pro- and anti-Treaty sides, but most either attempted to reignite the fight against Northern Ireland from exile in the South or simply became so disillusioned by the Civil War that they emigrated or embarked on the difficult process of reintegrating themselves into civilian life in Northern Ireland.

This article begins with an overview of the events leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War and outlines how the concept of a joint pro- and anti-Treaty IRA force with the object of attacking and undermining Northern Ireland provided a place for the Northern neutrals to continue their activism. Attention then shifts to the fate of the Northern neutrals after the Civil War commenced, with a large number of those wanting to remain active agreeing to be transferred to the Curragh under the assumption that they would use it as a training camp to prepare for re-engagement exclusively in the fight against partition. The article then finishes with detailed biographical studies of two men who attempted to maintain their neutrality— John Larkin and Tom Morris. Their stories are explored through official documentation, correspondence, and oral histories. To consider the positions that they took and their memories of events in 1922-23 provides insights into the politics and motivations of Northern IRA Volunteers during the Civil War and draws attention to the impact of politics and postconflict life on personal construction of narrative and memory.

## Northern Neutrals

In this article the term “Northern neutral” is used to refer to IRA members from the Six Counties of Northern Ireland who refused to fight on either side of the civil-war

divide in 1922-23. These individual neutral Northerners held views similar to those of their compatriots who later went on to form the Neutral IRA in the South. They had personal views on the Treaty but saw the Civil War as a destructive and counterproductive conflict. The Northerners differed, however, in that they placed much less emphasis on promoting peace for the sake of the country and more stress on promoting unity so that offensive action by a united IRA could be directed at the security forces of Northern Ireland. The idea for some form of joint action directed at the North by the pro- and anti-Treaty factions of the IRA emerged soon after the Treaty split. By March 1922 the basis of plans for a joint Northern offensive had been agreed. The pro-Treaty IRA (known as GHQ) would supply the weapons and ammunition, while the anti-Treaty IRA (the Executive) would assume the leadership roles. Local IRA units in Northern Ireland and along the southern side of the border would provide most of the personnel. Robert Lynch has aptly summed up the twin objectives of the strategy: first, to come to the aid of the nationalists in Northern Ireland, and second “to avert a divisive war in the South by instigating a unifying one in the North.”<sup>9</sup> A weapons-exchange agreement was reached between GHQ and the Executive whereby the weaponry of the former would be smuggled into Northern Ireland and then replaced with that held by the former. This agreement was intended to ensure that the British did not become aware that the Free State forces were involved in the conspiracy if and when guns were captured. Donegal became the principal site of operations for the joint offensive by Executive and GHQ forces. The offensive itself was scheduled to begin on 2-3 May, with the joint force “invading” Northern Ireland from south of the border and the Northern units “rising” from within.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Lynch, “Donegal and the Joint-IRA Northern Offensive, May-November 1922,” *Irish Historical Studies* 35:138 (Nov. 2006): 189.

The offensive was a disaster for the Northern IRA. Pro-Treaty units along the border did not take part and the Belfast IRA delayed action until later in the month. This meant that the IRA units that did rise in Derry and Tyrone were left exposed to a massive crackdown by the police and the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC).<sup>10</sup> Internment was then introduced in Northern Ireland on 22 May after the IRA assassinated the Unionist MP William Twaddell. Within days the bulk of Northern IRA membership was neutralized. Most of those who escaped internment did so by crossing the border to sanctuary in the Free State.<sup>11</sup>

The growing rupture between pro- and anti-Treaty forces in the South, along with the combination of coercive legislation and USC reprisal attacks in the North, led to a potentially explosive situation developing in Donegal. The diverse medley of characters now present in that county brought with it the threat of disorder and potential bloodshed.<sup>12</sup> Pro- and anti-Treaty forces had already been involved in armed confrontations resulting in fatalities on 4 May—almost two months before the shelling of the Four Courts and the recognized beginning of the Civil War. Tensions were running extremely high, with massive levels of distrust between the two sides. It was into this powderkeg that hundreds of Northern IRA members landed after fleeing across the border in May 1922.

For Northern IRA members the Treaty split was viewed principally through the prism of partition. There was no definitive flag being waved by either side to attract

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 190-91.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Campbell, “A Cold House for Catholics”? The Consolidation of the Northern Ireland State in the 1920s,” in *A Formative Decade: Ireland in the 1920s*, ed. Mel Farrell, Ciara Meehan, and Jason Knirck (Sallins, Co. Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2015), 204-5; Robert Lynch, *The Northern IRA and the Early Years of Partition, 1920-1922* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 153-54.

<sup>12</sup> Pauric Travers, *Donegal: The Irish Revolution, 1912-23* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2022), 128.

antipartitionist Northerners to their ranks, as demonstrated by the officially neutral position taken by the 4th Northern Division. Eventually, the practical support being offered by GHQ in terms of supporting a renewed fight in Northern Ireland swayed most of the Northern IRA officers in that direction. Tom Morris, an IRA officer from south Derry who was later placed in command of a group of neutral Northerners exiled in the Free State, listened to both sides and concluded that the Executive “didn’t give a damn.”<sup>13</sup> Others who had done the same were more circumspect, noting that GHQ had simply offered more material support for the fight against partition and therefore attracted the support of a majority of the Northern officers.<sup>14</sup> Despite the collapse of the Northern offensive in May, preparations for similar actions were ongoing right up until the night before the shelling of the Four Courts. Some anti-Treaty leaders were confident that the proposed fight in the North had brought unity to the IRA only hours before the shelling took place, and they had directed that lorries be stocked with mines and then sent north to Donegal. But the lorries never left the Four Courts and probably contributed to the explosions that rocked the building once it was shelled.<sup>15</sup>

Once hostilities formally commenced, many of the Northerners attempting to maintain a neutral line in Donegal were left rudderless. There was no love lost between the joint IRA force commanded by Seán Lehane and Charlie Daly and the National Army in Donegal, commanded by Joe Sweeney. Relations had been toxic, particularly after the fatalities of 4 May in Buncrana and Newtowncunningham.<sup>16</sup> Sweeney’s troops quickly took the initiative and seized a number of strategic posts throughout the county. The

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (Louis O’Kane Papers, LOK.IV.A.09, Cardinal Ó Fiach Library and Archive, hereafter cited as CÓFLA).

<sup>14</sup> Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 130-31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>16</sup> Lynch, “Donegal and Joint-IRA Northern Offensive,” 192.



joint IRA force had located themselves close to the border in east Donegal to make attacks on Northern Ireland more convenient logistically. The National Army now controlled a line of posts through the center of the county, hemming Lehane and Daly's men in between them and the Northern enemy.<sup>17</sup> The joint force was losing men rapidly, especially the Northerners, who were not prepared to fight against the National Army. Any ambiguity was quickly cleared up as the battle was drawn along civil-war lines. Lehane and Daly's forces retreated further and were eventually transformed into a set of flying columns. Their resistance only really ended with the capture of Daly's men and their execution at Drumboe Castle on 14 March 1923. Lehane's group had already given up on Donegal and moved south in November 1922.<sup>18</sup>

One of those executed with Daly in Drumboe was Seán Larkin, an IRA officer from south Derry. In oral-history interviews carried out by the Co. Tyrone priest and historian, Father Louis O'Kane in the 1960s, Larkin's former comrades from his home area questioned his motivation for engaging in the "Southern" fight when the majority of Northerners who had fled to Donegal in May 1923 refused to get involved.<sup>19</sup> It should be noted, however, that there were large numbers of Northerners fighting in the National Army throughout Ireland. A total of 1,685 men from Northern Ireland attested and joined up in the period between April and the end of December 1922.<sup>20</sup> Economic necessity seems to have been the primary motivating factor in these cases, as noted by

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<sup>17</sup> Travers, *Donegal*, 128-29.

<sup>18</sup> Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 169-75.

<sup>19</sup> Transcript of Interview with Roddy O'Kane, 16 July 1966 (LOK.IV.B.11, CÓFLA); Hugh Breen, quoted in written review of conversation with Hugh Breen, Frank McMahon, Aloysius McKee, and John James McKee, 16 July 1966 (LOK.IV.B.18, *ibid.*); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

<sup>20</sup> Return Showing Number of Men Who Have Left Counties in Northern Ireland during the Period from 1 April to 31 December 1922 to Join the Free State Army (HA/32/1/168, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, hereafter cited as PRONI).

the Northern Ireland government, which had attempted to survey those crossing the border to join up in 1922 and 1923.<sup>21</sup>

The collapse of the joint IRA force in Donegal put an end to one phase of an organized structure for the Northern neutrals, but another one had already begun in earnest. In this second phase those declaring neutrality were encouraged to join the National Army on the basis that they would not be required to engage in civil-war hostilities, and that their mission would be to train and plan for attacks on Northern Ireland exclusively. The nucleus of this group in Donegal was initially stationed at Lifford barracks and had posts in nearby Porthall and on the eastern side of the Inishowen peninsula at Moville and Greencastle.<sup>22</sup> Tom Morris was in command of this neutral group. He and his men had been instrumental in surreptitiously moving large quantities of weapons over the border in advance of the Northern offensive, and the weapons that remained on the southern side of the border were to play a significant role in the power moves between the neutrals and the pro- and anti-Treaty sides in Donegal.

Morris, who was O/C of the 2nd Northern Division, declared his neutrality on the outbreak of the Civil War. The group of men under his command in Donegal remained with him as neutrals and were joined by others who crossed the border after May seeking refuge and a means to continue the fight in the Six Counties.<sup>23</sup> To Lehane's great dismay, a number of men who had been fighting under his command in the joint IRA

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<sup>21</sup> Derry City Commissioner to Inspector General of Royal Ulster Constabulary, 23 Feb. 1923 (HA/32/1/168, PRONI).

<sup>22</sup> Adrian Grant, *Derry: The Irish Revolution, 1912-1923* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2018), 138; Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 8 Sept. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.08, CÓFLA); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

force also joined up with Morris's group.<sup>24</sup> Their motivations for doing so are unclear, but the prospect of maintaining neutrality inside the officialdom of the National Army may have appeared more attractive than remaining with the disintegrating joint IRA force that was in rapid retreat and becoming more clearly associated with the anti-Treaty forces as the opening weeks of the Civil War drew on.

The question of what to do with the Northern neutrals who found themselves within the orbit of the Free State was raised at the earliest stages of the Civil War. Realizing that a clear message needed to be delivered to the Northern IRA members left reeling and disillusioned by the Southern conflict, Richard Mulcahy proposed that a meeting be held to discuss matters. This gathering took place at Portobello Barracks on 2 August 1922 and was attended by the Southern IRA leadership and a group of Northern IRA officers mainly representing the 2nd and 3rd Northern divisional areas. One of the crucial decisions reached at the meeting was that the IRA be reorganized to follow the lines of the border. There would now be a North Eastern Command that covered the exact geographic boundary of Northern Ireland. Morris was placed in charge of this new structure, which was essentially moribund.<sup>25</sup> Those IRA members who remained in the Six Counties were either interned or were keeping the lowest possible profile. Those like Morris and his men in Donegal may have possessed a desire to carry out operations in the Six Counties, but their hands were immediately tied. It was also decided at the meeting that no attacks on British or Northern Ireland security services were to take place, and that no operations of any kind were to be staged in the Six Counties.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 169.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-91.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Of most acute interest here is the additional plan made on 2 August to enlist Northern IRA members in a neutral force that would be sent to Keane Barracks at the Curragh, where they would prepare for future action in Northern Ireland. The nature of this action and its timing were not made clear at the meeting, and in fact they never were. Robert Lynch's pioneering work on the Northern IRA provides the most detailed depiction of how this force was raised and then treated with increasing contempt by the Provisional Government as the Civil War dragged on. Plans were made to accept eight to nine hundred men into this unit, which was placed under the command of Roger McCorley from Belfast. In reality the neutrals in the Curragh were tolerated for a time, before pressure was brought to bear on them to either join the National Army or go back home. This pressure accelerated after the death of Michael Collins, and various accounts point to a shift in attitude to the neutrals among the Free State authorities. These accounts also note the poor conditions and insensitive treatment afforded to the neutrals at this time. Some of them acceded to strong pressure and joined the National Army. A detachment of those who enlisted was dispatched to Kerry under the command of Roger McCorley to fight against the anti-Treaty IRA, with the rest either leaving the Curragh or remaining there until the end of the Civil War—at which point they were told either to “join the army” or to “clear out” by Free State minister Ernest Blythe.<sup>27</sup> Tom Morris believed that practically all of the men who remained at the Curragh eventually emigrated to the United States.<sup>28</sup> This perception was held by others, including Patrick Maguire, who was convinced that the few who returned to Northern Ireland ended up eking out a living as small farmers, farm laborers, or road workers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 191-97.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Maguire's Witness Statement 693, 15 (23 June 1952), (BMH).

## Northern Neutral Experiences of the Civil War

The study of individual experience during the Irish revolutionary period has become more practical in recent years as a result of the wide availability of detailed primary sources. The application files of the Military Service Pensions Collection, the Bureau of Military History (BMH) witness statements [switched BMH and MSPC for better flow], and other oral-history sources provide a vast array of information that allows researchers to delve into the minutia of individual experience. Some of the BMH witness statements, particularly those left by Northerners, continue into the Truce and civil-war periods, and here we find traces of the disillusionment felt by many from the North. In these traces we can find discussion of apathy toward the “Southern” Civil War as well as toward the decidedly neutral positions being taken by Northern IRA members.

More detailed information has emerged in some of the files of the Military Service Pensions Collection. It is from this collection that the most of the information relating to John Lafferty’s neutrality is derived.<sup>30</sup> Lafferty was forthright in his defense of the neutral position and vocal in correspondence over the years about the challenges that he and other neutrals faced, and about the identity of those from whom these challenges came. More has previously been known about Tom Morris, given his role as a senior officer in the Northern IRA. In oral-history interviews with Father Louis O’Kane in the late 1960s, Morris was at pains to emphasize the maintenance of his neutrality and the hurt that he felt when the Civil War commenced and some of his men took sides.

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<sup>30</sup> I am deeply indebted to the Chicago branch of John Lafferty’s family for providing additional information on his life and political activities in the United States. Michael Zmora shared his extensive family research with me and crucially alerted me (among other things) to Lafferty’s return to Ireland in support of Sinn Féin in 1957.

Yet at least three individuals, including John Lafferty, have accused Morris of putting pressure on Northern neutrals to fight on the pro-Treaty side in the Civil War. Many believed at the time and subsequently that the transfer of the Northern neutrals to the Curragh in 1922 was a tactic used by the Provisional Government to neutralize a large group of men who could potentially have joined the anti-Treaty side.<sup>31</sup> This disturbing understanding feeds into a wider betrayal narrative articulated by Northern nationalists about the failures of the Irish revolutionary period. The biographical studies of Lafferty and Morris below illustrate some of the differing experiences of individuals during this period and show how their post-civil-war lives followed very different courses. Patrick Maguire's feeling that most of the men who went to the Curragh as neutrals in 1922 emigrated or returned home to work on "little farms" or as farm laborers and road workers raises intriguing questions about the class background of those who were committed to continuing the fight against Northern Ireland during the Civil War.<sup>32</sup>

The contrasting postconflict experiences of Lafferty and Morris outlined below provide the beginnings of a much-needed analysis of the paths followed by individual IRA members from the Six Counties that became Northern Ireland. Taking a biographical approach allows us to gain insight into how their backgrounds and experiences prior to and during the revolutionary period may have affected their post-conflict fortunes, while also raising interesting questions about how life narratives shift over time depending on the political and social context in which individuals find themselves throughout their lives.

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<sup>31</sup> Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 191-92.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Maguire's WS 693, 15 (23 June 1952), (BMH).

## John Lafferty

John Lafferty was born on Brook Street in Coleraine on 5 July 1894.<sup>33</sup> He was the eldest child of John and Ellen, who were both from County Donegal and had married in the parish of Dunboe near Coleraine in the previous year.<sup>34</sup> The father was a barman in Coleraine at the time of his first child's birth. The family was living in Moville in County Donegal at the time of the 1901 census, where John senior was listed as a spirit merchant and grocer. In the few years before 1901 the family had expanded with the birth of two more children and by then employed a female domestic servant.<sup>35</sup> By 1911 the family had grown even further with three more children. The family of eight were now back in north Derry in the townland of Doaghs near Magilligan. John senior was listed as a farmer and John junior (now aged 17) was working along with him on the farm.<sup>36</sup> Details of John junior's early life are sketchy. He did not leave any kind of memoir that is publicly available, nor did he comment on his childhood or family much in the documentary sources that I have been able to consult. The most detailed of these are the records of his application and correspondence in regard to a military-service pension from the 1920s until his death in 1958. It is therefore difficult to discern what were his mother and father's politics, or if they were active or supportive of advanced nationalist and Republican movements in the period. Lafferty's pension application

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<sup>33</sup> Coleraine Union District, Co. Londonderry, Births Registered 1894, John Lafferty, 5 July 1894,

[https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/birth\\_returns/births\\_1894/02254/1847784.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/birth_returns/births_1894/02254/1847784.pdf) (accessed 19 Jan. 2023).

<sup>34</sup> Marriage of John Lafferty and Ellen Carson Solemnized at the Roman Catholic Church in Dunboe, Coleraine, Co. Londonderry, on 23 July 1893, [https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage\\_returns/marriages\\_1893/10604/5863324.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage_returns/marriages_1893/10604/5863324.pdf) (accessed 19 Jan. 2023).

<sup>35</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901, <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000673794/> (accessed 19 Jan. 2023).

<sup>36</sup> Census of Ireland, 1911, <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai002818944/> (accessed 19 Jan. 2023).

includes multiple accounts of his time as an active Republican. His first involvement with the movement came not in Ireland but soon after he left the family farm in Magilligan to pursue an engineering apprenticeship at a locomotive works in Glasgow. It was here in 1915 that he joined the Irish Volunteers and was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).<sup>37</sup>

Lafferty, along with twenty other Volunteers from Scotland, travelled back to Ireland in March 1916 to take part in the Easter Rising. He formed part of what has been termed the “Kimmage Garrison”—a group of émigré Irish Volunteers from the industrial cities of Britain who spent the weeks prior to Easter Monday at Larkfield Mill, a property owned by the Plunkett family in Kimmage, Co. Dublin.<sup>38</sup> Around fifty men spent their time at the mill training and preparing munitions. On Easter Monday morning, under the command of George Plunkett, they commandeered a tram (while paying the relevant fares) and made their way to the center of Dublin. Assembling at Liberty Hall, they were dispatched in differing groups to the General Post Office (GPO) and other posts in the O’Connell Street area.<sup>39</sup> Lafferty was one of those sent to the GPO. He remained in the building until the surrender, after which he was taken to the Rotunda and then on to Richmond barracks before being sent to Knutsford prison and finally to Frongoch internment camp in Wales. He remained in Frongoch until the

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<sup>37</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 April 1927 (MSPC/W24SP6369).

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Coyle, “Biographical Dictionary for the Members of A Company Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan, Glasgow, Who Fought in the Easter Rising,” in *We Will Rise Again: Scotland, Ireland, and the Easter Rising*, ed. Stephen Coyle and Máirtín Ó Catháin (Glasgow: Calton Books, 2018), 40-60; Ann Matthews, *The Kimmage Garrison, 1916: Making Billy-Can Bombs at Larkfield* (Dublin: Four Courts Press: 2010).

<sup>39</sup> “Honest Lads and Not Hooligans: Recollections of Cormac Turner, They Remember 1916,” 5 April 1956 (BB12506, RTÉ Archives), <https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1993-easter-1916/1994-they-remember-1916/606781-they-remember-1916-cormac-turner/> (accessed 15 Oct. 2022).



general release of Irish prisoners in December 1916, after which he went to meet with Michael Collins in Dublin.

Collins instructed him to return to north Derry, make contact with existing nearby Republican structures, and begin work in organizing Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers in and around the Magilligan area. He waited for a contact from a local IRB member, but when this did not come, he got in touch with prominent Republicans from Derry city. After a period of ill-health he helped to form a Sinn Féin club and a company of Volunteers in September 1917.<sup>40</sup> Typical IRA operations in the area were attacks on Unionist business property, but direct attacks on the police were more common in the south of the county.<sup>41</sup> Lafferty's main activity during the War of Independence appears to have been acting in support of the railway workers' munitions strike in 1920—crucially aimed at frustrating the transport of British forces and weapons. At this time he was working on the railways in Belfast and helped to raise funds and send money to William O'Brien of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in Dublin.<sup>42</sup> On the reorganization of the IRA into divisions in April 1921 the ten Volunteers in the Magilligan area, including Lafferty and his younger brother William, were formed into a specific outpost.<sup>43</sup> Lafferty does not mention any further notable activity until May 1922 when the Northern offensive was scheduled to commence.<sup>44</sup>

Lafferty and his comrades would have been expected to play their part in the planned offensive, but the confusion around the start date and the swift collapse of the

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<sup>40</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 April 1927 (MSPC/W24SP6369).

<sup>41</sup> Grant, *Derry*, 87-140.

<sup>42</sup> John Lafferty to Eamon de Valera, 14 Nov. 1932 (MSPC/W24A1807).

<sup>43</sup> 2nd Northern Division, 4th Brigade (Maghera), 3rd Battalion (Dungiven), (MSPC/R0399).

<sup>44</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 April 1927 (MSPC/W24SP6369).

offensive meant that they did not engage in any activity. His commanding officer then instructed him to cross the border to the east of the Inishowen peninsula in County Donegal, directly across Lough Foyle from Magilligan. Lafferty reported to Captain Gerard Loughrey in Moville barracks, who then sent him further north to the village of Greencastle, located about a mile across the water from Magilligan. It was here that Lafferty became officially neutral in the widening split between the pro- and anti-Treaty factions of the IRA. He and the other Six County men in Moville and Greencastle were visited by Tom Morris, who advised them to come under his command as a neutral force within the structure of the National Army. Their sole purpose would be to act as a fighting force against Northern Ireland and potentially within it. Lafferty formally agreed to serve for twelve months on this basis.

When he was applying for a military-service pension in the mid-1920s, Lafferty wrote a letter to Cumann na nGaedheal Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, in which he outlined his active service and the circumstances in which he found himself as a Northern neutral during the Civil War. In this letter he made vague references to the pressures placed on him during August 1922 by Dan McKenna and Johnny Haughey and on the consequences of his refusal to come under their express command.<sup>45</sup> Haughey and McKenna had both served as officers in the 2nd Northern Division and went on to fight on the pro-Treaty side in the Civil War, and have later careers as officers in the National Army.<sup>46</sup> McKenna, from Draperstown in County Derry, later rose through the ranks to become Chief of Staff of the Free State Army during the Second World War.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 Apr. 1927 (MSPC/W24SP6369).

<sup>46</sup> Grant, *Derry*, 119, 135, 138.

<sup>47</sup> David Murphy, "Daniel McKenna," in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* online (2009), DOI, <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.005721.v1>.

Haughey, from Swatragh in the same county, had a more modest military career, reaching the rank of commandant before his retirement in 1928.<sup>48</sup> He is probably best remembered today for being the father of the Fianna Fáil leader and Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey.

It is highly likely that Lafferty was anticipating the sympathies of his Cumann na nGaedheal recipient when he wrote a letter to Peter Hughes in 1927 and therefore did not expressly state what Haughey and McKenna had directed him to do. He simply stated that they had asked him to “sign an agreement for six months and obey any orders issued by them.”<sup>49</sup> At this point Lafferty was in a desperate situation. He had given up his apprenticeship in Glasgow in 1916 and had lost his job with the Midland Railway Company in 1918 when his Republican connections were discovered. In 1920 he started a game-and-poultry business in north Antrim, renting a large tract of land. He lost this land in 1922 when he went to join the Northern neutral forces in Donegal. On his eventual return to Northern Ireland at the end of 1922 he found it impossible to make money from his business or to find alternative work. The downturn in the economy saw unemployment levels soar, and those with known Republican politics and a history of active service found it even more difficult to obtain work in a hostile environment. Lafferty’s wife died in 1926 and he became the sole parent to their four children.

When writing to Hughes in 1927, Lafferty had already applied for a military-service pension but began sending letters to as many people with influence as possible in order to secure an expedited decision owing to the gravity of his situation. By this

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<sup>48</sup> Minute Sheet Reference, 2821/SP/9208, note 13, concerning Haughey Retirement to Reserve Officer (MSPC/24C184).

<sup>49</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 April 1927 (MSPC/W24SP6369).

stage he was in debt, had given up his family home, and had sent his children to live with his parents on the farm in Magilligan, which was also up for sale. His children often missed school because they had to sustain long periods without food or sufficient clothing.<sup>50</sup> He learned that he could have the decision expedited by attending meetings with the board of assessors directly in Dublin, but he could not afford the travel expense and [deleted so that] he had to wait for a session in Donegal. In his letter to Hughes, Lafferty simply stated: "I declined to sign any form as I had previously attested for a period of 12 months in the regular army, and I was doubtful as to what the intentions of McKenna and Haughey were at that time."<sup>51</sup>

Lafferty secured his pension in 1927 but sought an increase in 1932 when Fianna Fáil came to power. In a letter to Eamon de Valera in 1932, Lafferty was less circumspect about what had occurred in late 1922. Without mentioning any names, he noted that he and others were placed under great pressure to attack an anti-Treaty IRA post along with troops of the National Army. When he refused to do so, and then also refused to sign additional regular-army papers transferring him to the Curragh, he and others were placed under arrest with the intention that they would be taken to Mountjoy Prison. Twenty-one other men also refused the transfer to the Curragh along with Lafferty, perhaps fearing that their neutrality would not be respected, or perhaps curious as to how moving further away from the border could ever be strategically useful in the fight against Northern Ireland. But they escaped before the transfer took place and spent time on the run in Donegal, surviving by working on farms for room and board.

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<sup>50</sup> See full John Lafferty Pension File (MSPC/W24SP6369).

<sup>51</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 April 1927 (ibid.).

Lafferty eventually resolved to make his way to Dublin with the intention of confronting Richard Mulcahy and seeking an explanation for their treatment. While he was not able to have an audience with Mulcahy, he claimed that he had been offered any job he desired at Portobello Barracks, which at the time was home to two National Army garrisons tasked with patrolling Dublin and guarding against anti-Treaty IRA attacks.<sup>52</sup> Lafferty rejected this offer and was again arrested and held for refusing to abandon his neutrality. He went on hunger strike and was once more asked to take up a post in the National Army. On this refusal in November 1922 he was finally released and made his way back home. What happened to the others is unknown, but they likely dispersed and reintegrated into civilian life on either side of the border or outside of Ireland. It is also interesting to note that Tom Morris, the man who had initiated and controlled the force of neutral Northerners in Donegal, was one of those whom Lafferty claimed had him arrested. Morris always remained adamant that he maintained a strict neutrality during the Civil War—a claim that was disputed by other veterans in later years.<sup>53</sup>

Lafferty, like many others from the Six Counties who resolved to remain neutral, found himself in a precarious position on his return home. As noted earlier, his wife had passed away and he was unable to support his four children adequately. He was firmly of the belief that his refusal to join the National Army and to fight against the anti-Treaty IRA had marked his card in the Free State and precluded him from obtaining a job in the public service.<sup>54</sup> This apparent blacklisting, coupled with his inability to find

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<sup>52</sup> John Dorney, "Wellington Barracks, Dublin, 1922: A Microcosm of the Civil War," *The Irish Story*, 9 June 2022, <https://www.theirishstory.com/2010/06/09/wellington-barracks-dublin-1922-a-microcosm-of-the-irish-civil-war/#.Y8q9jOzP1TY> (accessed on 30 Aug. 2022).

<sup>53</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 22 Oct. 1927 (MSPC/W24A1807); Lehane quoted in Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 169; Patrick Maguire's WS 693, 15 (23 June 1952), (BMH).

<sup>54</sup> John Lafferty to Army Finance Officer, 22 July 1927 (MSPC/W24A1807).

work in the hostile environment of Northern Ireland, forced him to consider emigration seriously. He made an attempt to restart his game-and-poultry business in 1927 when word suddenly arrived that his military-service pension was to be granted. The pressure of his debts and a desire to plan for the future of his business meant that he continued to write regular letters to the minister for defense and the army-finance officer seeking an advance on his pension or at least an indication of when it would be paid.<sup>55</sup> It appears that his long-term plans for the business were not enough to provide the kind of financial support required by his family. Lafferty wrote again to the defense minister in February 1928, informing him of his intention to emigrate on 14 April; he sought as substantial an advance as possible on his pension in order to facilitate this escape from his difficulties. His stated intention was to leave his children in Magilligan with his mother and to use the pension money to support them financially.<sup>56</sup> Lafferty left Belfast for Canada in July 1928, settling temporarily in Saskatoon.<sup>57</sup> On 18 November 1931 he walked across the border into the United States at International Falls, Minnesota, and by the end of the year he had settled in Chicago, where he remained until his death in 1958 from facial cancer at the age of 64.<sup>58</sup>

Like many of those active in the Republican movement from 1916 to 1923 who went on to emigrate during the interwar years, Lafferty remained active in various Irish organizations. In his letter to Eamon de Valera in 1932 he mentioned his involvement with the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR).<sup>59</sup> This

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.; John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 22 Oct. 1927 (MSPC/W24A1807).

<sup>56</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 26 Feb. 1928 (MSPC/W24A1807).

<sup>57</sup> John Lafferty to Chief Pay Officer, 30 July 1928 (ibid.).

<sup>58</sup> John Lafferty's Application for Citizenship of the United States of America, 4 May 1931 (courtesy of family); State of Illinois Medical Certificate of Death: John Lafferty, 6 Oct. 1948 (MSPC/W24A1807).

<sup>59</sup> John Lafferty to Eamon de Valera, 14 Nov. 1932 (MSPC/W24A1807).

organization was established in 1920 after de Valera's public falling out with the established Irish-American structures in the form of the Friends of Irish Freedom. The AARIR was essentially created to advance de Valera's wishes for Irish-American support in the period.<sup>60</sup> The signing of the Treaty of December 1921 split the AARIR, with those in support arguing that the organization no longer had any purpose.<sup>61</sup> Those taking the anti-Treaty side and maintaining loyalty to de Valera sustained the AARIR for decades afterward.<sup>62</sup> Lafferty was active in the organization from the time of his arrival in Chicago in 1929, but he left around 1931 owing to dissatisfaction with the way in which it was being run.<sup>63</sup> His resignation predates further debates within the AARIR about Fianna Fáil's treatment of IRA members in the early 1930s, and it appears that his dissatisfaction was administrative rather than political. He was also involved closely with supporting other Fianna Fáil-aligned groups in Chicago at this time.<sup>64</sup>

Lafferty's close alignment with Fianna Fáil suggests that his neutrality did not extend to the Treaty, but it is admittedly problematic to project his views in the 1930s onto the tumultuous earlier period of the Civil War. One definite constant was his commitment to Irish and Republican causes—particularly antipartitionism. **He** was prominent as an organizer of political and cultural events in Chicago, acting as a committee member for various fundraisers, festivals, parades, and commemorations. He was active in the American League for an Undivided Ireland, the United Irish Clubs of

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<sup>60</sup> Timothy J. Sarbaugh, "American Recognition and Eamon De Valera: The Heyday of Irish Republicanism in Southern California, 1920-1922," *Southern California Quarterly* 69:2 (1987):133-50.

<sup>61</sup> *New York Times*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>62</sup> *Derry Journal*, 14 Nov. 1934.

<sup>63</sup> John Lafferty to Eamon de Valera, 14 Nov. 1932 (MSPC/W24A1807).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Chicago, and the Ulster Irish Liberty Legion among other bodies.<sup>65</sup> He also remained an active trade unionist while in America.<sup>66</sup> Significantly, he returned to Ireland during the 1957 general election in the Republic. By this time his connections to Fianna Fáil had definitively been severed as he campaigned on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidates.<sup>67</sup> Partition was firmly back on the agenda at the 1957 general election, which probably explains Lafferty's eagerness to get involved. The IRA began an armed action against Northern Ireland known as the Border Campaign, or Operation Harvest, in November 1956. While this was a military campaign directed against Northern Ireland and operated mainly from within the Republic, Sinn Féin made clear early in 1957 that it would field as many candidates as possible at the next general election.<sup>68</sup> When the election took place in March 1957, they put forward nineteen abstentionist candidates, with four of them taking seats.<sup>69</sup> This result was a significant advance for the party, which had been rudderless since the 1920s and had become largely irrelevant to debates around political action in the IRA during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>70</sup> The short-lived upsurge in support for Sinn Féin candidates in the Republic in the late 1950s may have been partly linked to the emotional response to the deaths of IRA members Seán South and Fergal O'Hanlon during an attempted attack on a police barracks in Fermanagh on 1 January 1957. All four seats were lost at the next election in 1961,

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<sup>65</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 16 February 1947; *Garfieldian*, 24 Nov. 1949, 11 April 1951, 29 Oct. 1952.

<sup>66</sup> *Suburban Economist*, 5 Nov. 1958.

<sup>67</sup> *United Irishman*, April 1957.

<sup>68</sup> *Irish Times*, 9 Jan. 1957.

<sup>69</sup> Brian M. Walker, *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-1992: Irish Elections to Parliaments and Parliamentary Assemblies at Westminster, Belfast, Dublin and Strasbourg* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1992), 192-98.

<sup>70</sup> Grant, *Irish Socialist Republicanism*, 151-52.



reflecting a sharp decline in popular support for the IRA campaign, which was called off in 1962.<sup>71</sup>

The story of John Lafferty's life in America is a common one. It has been possible to trace shifts in his political views through fragments in his correspondence and through newspaper reports mentioning him. His prominent role in Chicago Irish American circles allows for this loose profile to emerge and to demonstrate that the civil-war [lower case?] neutrality of Northerners was less likely to have been based on apathy and more likely to have been a tactical response to the position in which they found themselves when the conflict broke out in 1922. The political profile of someone like John Lafferty fits with the profiles of the majority of the Southerners who had joined the Neutral IRA in 1922. They were more likely to take an anti-Treaty viewpoint but thought that a military conflict over the issue was futile.<sup>72</sup> For those in the Neutral IRA an end to the Civil War was their goal. For the neutral Northerners their goal was the end of partition, making the Civil War nothing but a distraction in their eyes.

Lafferty's economic fortunes improved somewhat in Chicago, but he relied on his military-service pension right up until the end of his life, and his widow sought help in offsetting funeral costs from the Department of Defence.<sup>73</sup> He remarried in Chicago and two of the children who had been left behind in Ireland in 1928 came to live with him. When he applied for US citizenship in 1931, he was working as a laborer.<sup>74</sup> His death certificate notes that he spent most of his working life as a railway clerk, but he also co-owned a pub with his son in Chicago between 1947 and 1954, where given Lafferty's

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<sup>71</sup> Walker, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1992* [italics added], 199-205.

<sup>72</sup> Kissane, *Politics of Irish Civil War*, 147.

<sup>73</sup> Mary Lafferty to Department of Defence, 19 Nov. 1958 (MSPC/W24A1807).

<sup>74</sup> John Lafferty's Application for Citizenship of the United States of America, 4 May 1931 (courtesy of family).

life-long history of activism, the politics of Ireland was surely a popular topic of conversation.<sup>75</sup> His late return to Ireland to campaign for Sinn Féin at the 1957 general election demonstrates further that neutrality on the Civil War did not translate into a similar stance of nonalignment on the Treaty settlement. Furthermore, for the Northerners who maintained neutrality during the Civil War, antipartitionism was at the core of their thinking. The return of Lafferty to Ireland to support the principle of armed Republican activism at a time when partition was facing its most serious challenge since 1922 typifies the primacy of antipartitionism in the thinking of Six-County Republicans like him throughout the rest of their lives.

Tom Morris

Thomas James Morris was born in Moneymore, Co. Derry, on 14 March 1897.<sup>76</sup> He was the fourth child of John and Lizzie Morris. In 1901 the family of seven lived in a two-bedroom house on Lawford Street in Moneymore, and John was described in the census as a laborer.<sup>77</sup> By 1911 the family had expanded with the birth of three more children. Two of the older girls are not listed in the 1911 census. It is possible that they had moved elsewhere for work, given that they would have been aged around 16 and 20 respectively at that time. The eldest son Felix, aged 19 in 1911, was described as a farmer's son and his father John was listed as a farmer.<sup>78</sup> The family owned farmland in

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<sup>75</sup> State of Illinois Medical Certificate of Death: John Lafferty, 6 Oct. 1948 (MSPC/W24A1807). Pub ownership information courtesy of family.

<sup>76</sup> District of Moneymore in Magherafelt Union District, Co. Londonderry, Births Registered 1897, Thomas James Morris, 14 March 1897, [https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/birth\\_returns/births\\_1897/02132/1810181.pdf](https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/birth_returns/births_1897/02132/1810181.pdf) (accessed 2 Feb. 2023).

<sup>77</sup> Census of Ireland, 1901, <http://census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000629273/> (accessed 25 Jan. 2023).

<sup>78</sup> Census of Ireland, 1911, <http://census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai002877632/> (accessed 25 Jan. 2023).

the townland of Ballynenagh, a few miles west of Moneymore, which was probably purchased or inherited around this time.<sup>79</sup> John's improved economic status allowed the family to extend their house on Lawford Street, with an extra bedroom having been added between 1901 and 1911.<sup>80</sup> Like most Republican activists of the time, Tom Morris did not leave a written account of his early life, but he did provide detailed interviews to Father Louis O'Kane in the late 1960s.

O'Kane was one of the most prolific of a band of people who collected unofficial testimony from veterans of the Irish Revolution. He recorded more than ninety interviews totalling over four hundred hours of audio, some of which was later transcribed.<sup>81</sup> His interviewing style was far from what one would expect of an oral historian today. O'Kane had an advanced knowledge of the events of 1916-25 in the North of Ireland and would often stop his interviewees to contradict their memories. His keen personal interest in learning more about certain topics or in clarifying the course of events would often prompt him to cut across an interviewee in mid-sentence and to take the conversation off in an entirely different direction. This [deleted penchant] can be infuriating for the researcher, but it also brings out the kind of information that is missing from the less spontaneous documentation associated with the Bureau of Military History witness statements or with the officialdom and verification methods of the Military Service Pensions Collection. In the meanderings of typical rural Irish conversations about far-out familial connections, priests who have come and gone from parishes, and the families associated with tracts of land, we find a

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 8 Sept. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.08, CÓFLA).

<sup>80</sup> Census of Ireland, 1911, <http://census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai002877604/> (accessed 25 Jan. 2023).

<sup>81</sup> Eve Morrison, "Louis O'Kane in Context," in *Reflections on the Revolution in Ulster: Excerpts from Rev. Louis O'Kane's Recordings of Irish Volunteers*, ed. Dónal McAnallen (Armagh: Cardinal O'Fiach Library and Archive, 2016),

rich, if somewhat dense, archive that provides a foothold for understanding some of the motivations and actions of individuals based on their backgrounds, community contexts, and everyday lives. While the interviews are problematic, if approached with an attuned critical ear they provide the kind of insight that is often missing from official records or written sources.

Morris began his interview with O’Kane by stating that he had been born and raised in Moneymore and spent most of his childhood in the town rather than on the farm. He attended a local agricultural college as a teenager, but when John Redmond called on members of the Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British Army, the seventeen-year-old Morris enlisted and went off to fight in France. He was not an Irish Volunteer himself at this time but joined the army and was accepted even though he was under the official legal age for enlistment. Morris fought with the 10th (Irish) Division and received a medal for his service at the Battle of Messines. He was promoted to the rank of major and received training in various military strategies during his time in the division. Morris stated that his parents were not at all political, and that he was entirely unaware of the political situation at home while he was out of the country during the war. He did not return home on furlough or leave the front for almost the entire duration of the war, and prior to his wartime service he had no access to newspapers and did not receive any correspondence relating to the rapidly changing political situation in Ireland. When he eventually was released for a period of home leave early in 1918, he attended a political rally in Cookstown where Countess Markievicz addressed a political gathering. Noting that the area was predominantly “Redmondite,” he was conscious of the hostility of some of those assembled to the separatist message coming from the well-known speaker. Listening to the speech in his uniform, Morris noticed that the man beside him had thrown an orange at Markievicz, so Morris turned

and “gave him a slap on the mouth.” This act of aggression caused something of a stir, with the fruit-thrower being hauled away by the RIC.<sup>82</sup>

This single incident vividly illustrates the complexity of Ulster nationalist politics at this tumultuous time. A supporter of the constitutional-nationalist movement was assaulted by a man in British Army uniform for attempting to degrade the honor of someone making a speech devoted to entirely ending the British presence in Ireland. Moreover, a representative of the state then got involved in the altercation and acted more firmly on the side of those considered to be supportive of the anti-state message. Within two years Morris was demobilized and out of his British Army uniform. The rise of Sinn Féin as the dominant electoral force in Ireland had been confirmed overwhelmingly at the 1918 general election (though the Nationalists maintained a significant following in Ulster), and an escalation in the IRA’s guerrilla war and its targeting of RIC personnel saw an upsurge in resignations by constables unwilling to risk their lives for the maintenance of a system that many of them no longer supported personally. Such complexity would once again typify the politics of the civil-war period in Ulster, with Tom Morris at the center of the grey area of neutrality on the “Southern conflict.”

Sensing the political shift in society and in himself on that brief return home early in 1918, Morris instructed that the weapons he had brought home from the front as souvenirs be distributed to the local Volunteer unit. He continued to take weapons home whenever he could until his demobilization in late 1919; he noted that his bags were never checked and that he could have taken back a machine gun if his bag had

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 8 Sept. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.08, CÓFLA); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

been big enough.<sup>83</sup> Morris became active in the IRA immediately after his demobilization, prompting the local priests to denounce him angrily from the altar for falling so far from his respectable position in society.<sup>84</sup> His younger brother John was already active and had introduced him to a number of prominent Republicans in the area. Joe Mallon was commander of the local IRA with its center in Coalisland. Mallon had also been training men in south Derry, but the geographical spread of the area stretched IRA resources.

Given his military pedigree, Morris was asked to organize IRA units and to train men in the south Derry and north Tyrone areas. During the War of Independence he organized and took part in raids for arms around the Big Houses of the area, and he also participated in a number of ambushes and attacks on police barracks.<sup>85</sup> His active-service record was interrupted by a period spent in prison, on hunger strike, and on the run. He was also shot and wounded by a B Special while cycling over the Sperrins and needed time to recuperate.<sup>86</sup> Morris was strict with his men, particularly the younger ones, and strictly prohibited the consumption of alcohol. Destroying poitín stills was a regular activity for him and his men and was viewed as part and parcel of the struggle for the Republic.<sup>87</sup> During the Truce period, when the IRA saw a massive upsurge in membership across the country, Morris restricted membership in the area under his

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 8 Sept. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.08, *ibid.*).

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 8 Sept. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.08, *ibid.*).

<sup>86</sup> T. J. Morris to Officer I/C Administration, 24 Oct. 1929 (MSPC/WDP7883); Thomas A. Kelly's Verification of Claim Made by Thomas James Morris for Disability Pension under Provisions of Army Pensions Acts, 1923 and 1927, 20 June 1929 (MSPC/WDP7883); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>87</sup> Louis O'Kane's Notes on Group Interview with Hugh Breen, Frank McMahan, Aloysius McKee, and John James McKee (LOK.IV.B.18, CÓFLA); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

control to ensure that potentially untrustworthy or less committed recruits could be kept out of the organization.<sup>88</sup>

Morris had been replaced by Charlie Daly as the commanding officer of the 2nd Northern Division during his imprisonment. This period saw an escalation in IRA activity up until the Truce was declared. Morris was released from prison in January 1922 and returned to command after Daly's removal from the post in February 1922. The reason given for Daly's removal was mismanagement of the division and failure to escalate action to undermine the Northern Ireland government. Daly, a Kerryman who had taken the anti-Treaty side in the split, accused his superiors of removing him for political reasons. He was later appointed Vice O/C of the joint IRA force based in Donegal during the first half of 1922.<sup>89</sup> Morris's prominent role in the northwestern IRA at this time coincided with planning for the escalation in IRA action within the Six Counties during the spring and the Northern offensive planned for May 1922. During this time Morris was present at IRA training camps in the Sperrins and oversaw the smuggling of large quantities of weapons across the border into Northern Ireland. Morris would dress as a priest and have a local hackney driver take him across the border to make the necessary arrangements. He would then use the same disguise to keep an eye on the arms shipments as they were taken across the border in oil tankers.<sup>90</sup>

With the collapse of the Northern offensive and the roundup of IRA suspects in Northern Ireland in late May 1922, Morris continued to command the 2nd Northern

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

<sup>89</sup> Fergal McCluskey, *Tyrone: The Irish Revolution, 1912-23* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 120; Grant, *Derry*, 132, 134.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 8 Sept. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.08, CÓFLA); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

Division from across the border in Donegal, but this division had effectively ceased to operate in its own area. Like many Northern IRA members, he did not declare for either IRA faction after the Treaty split but investigated the level of support that would be forthcoming for action against the Northern Ireland government from both the GHQ and Executive sides. But he quickly lost faith in the Executive side. After he attended a convention called by the Executive, he came away thinking that “they didn’t give a damn about the North.” He was greatly disappointed in particular with Liam Lynch, whom he accused of discouraging supplies of weapons and ammunition going to the North for the fight against partition. As noted earlier, Morris initially had a more positive perception of GHQ intentions toward the fight in the North and moved closer to the structures of the pro-Treaty side of the split. Yet on the outbreak of the Civil War he declared his neutrality, reflecting the attitudes of most of his men, who thought, “What’s the good of fighting now?”<sup>91</sup>

Some of Morris’s actions during the civil-war period have already been outlined, and reports from his contemporaries and subordinates suggest that his claims of neutrality were flimsy at best. The principal criticism of Morris was that he drew Six County men away from the joint IRA force in Donegal in May and June 1922; he offered the opportunity to enjoy the advantages of National Army status while remaining neutral in the Civil War.<sup>92</sup> This arrangement meant that those who followed Morris did so on the basis that they would not be forced to wage the “Southern fight” and would be held in reserve as an official, though perhaps clandestine, force to return north when the time was right. When Morris was appointed to take charge of the new IRA North

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, *ibid.*).

<sup>92</sup> Seán Lehane claimed that Morris “seduced his men,” and despite claims of neutrality, he later “cooperated with the Staters.” See Lehane quoted in Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 169.



Eastern Command at the Portobello Barracks meeting on 2 August 1922, it was agreed that there would be no further action in the Six Counties. But the decision to train eight to nine hundred neutral men at the Curragh held out the hope that action would be approved at some future date, perhaps after hostilities in the South had calmed or ceased.<sup>93</sup> No one could have known in early August 1922 that the Civil War would continue until the following April, or that the aspiration toward a confrontation with Northern Ireland would dissipate rapidly after the death of Collins. It is possible that Morris genuinely believed that Northern neutrality would be respected by GHQ, and that Northerners were more likely to get the support that they needed for taking the fight to Northern Ireland from the pro-Treaty side. Yet reports that Morris subsequently put pressure on the men under his command to fight on the pro-Treaty side stand in contrast not only to his previous position but also to his own recollections of events.

In Morris's telling of the events of 1922-23 he maintained his neutrality throughout and stated that during this period he was "always under a cloud with Dublin" because of a dispute over a consignment of three hundred rifles. Morris wanted them moved across the border into Northern Ireland, but GHQ took them and held them in Buncrana. Morris then took the weapons without permission and moved them to Porthall barracks near Lifford in readiness for moving across the border. The rifles were then retaken "for safe keeping" by the National Army, though most likely for use in the Civil War in the South.<sup>94</sup>

Seán Larkin, who had been a brigadier under Morris in south Derry, was one of the group of men who remained with Lehane and Daly after their joint force became decidedly anti-Treaty and engaged in hostilities with the National Army in Donegal.

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<sup>93</sup> Lynch, *Northern IRA*, 189-91.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

Larkin was executed along with Daly and two others at Drumboe Castle in March 1923.<sup>95</sup> Morris was highly critical of Larkin for engaging in the Civil War, even going so far as to cast doubt on his motivations for doing so by insinuating that he was simply seeking a way to avoid his duty in the Six Counties. When one considers that Morris was accused of being firmly on the pro-Treaty side, his harsh criticism of Larkin is not surprising. Yet he was equally critical of other men previously under his command who had joined the National Army and fought on the pro-Treaty side in the Civil War.<sup>96</sup> This stance accords with his steadfastness in stating that he remained neutral and respected the neutrality of others throughout the Civil War. It is worth reproducing Morris's own words on this matter. While he muddled some of the dates and details of the period, his recollections are fascinating when compared with how others remembered the same events. After relating the story of how the rifles were retaken from him by the National Army at Porthall barracks, Morris told Father Louis O'Kane that the result of his intransigence was as follows:

My men was all taken down to the Curragh.

[Louis O'Kane] Aye to Keane Barracks, was it?

[Tom Morris] Aye, down into the barracks and I was flaming over it.

[LOK] Were you in charge of the men down in Keane Barracks then?

[TM] No, I wouldn't do that. I stayed up in Donegal all the time, up in Greencastle.

[LOK] Until when?

[TM] Until the end of 1923. Well, then I got the option of going into jail. It really amounted to more or less that, you know.

[LOK] Well then you remained neutral?

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<sup>95</sup> Grant, *Derry*, 138.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

[TM] I was neutral the whole time, up to the last minute. Dan McKenna and the whole of them went into the Army and let, they let me down. [Johnny] Haughey and the whole of them. I was still there.

[LOK] But how did you exist in Greencastle?

[TM] Well, you see, I had the official allowance all the time, you see, from the IRA.

[LOK] Oh, I see, yes.

[TM] And so had my officers all, do you see?

[LOK] How many remained with you neutral, we'll say?

[TM] Well, they all went to America, practically.

[LOK] Is that right?

[TM] All the neutral ones, you see. Well, some of them like Barney Mallon and Paddy Crawford and a few of them good ones, they went in just as a stepping stone as they thought, and as I thought too, in to be trained in the Curragh, you see.

[LOK] I know, and they were kept there.

[TM] And they were kept there, do you see?

[LOK] But I thought it wasn't as late as the end of '23. I thought they did not respect your neutralities after the spring of '23.

[TM] Ah, I doubt it was about the middle of the year. About the middle of the year.

[LOK] It was after the execution, was it?

[TM] Oh, it was after the execution. The boys were still in being trained, do you see, for. . . .

[LOK] No, I got the impression from others . . . that the neutrality that was enjoyed by the 2nd Northern Division in the Keane Barracks [ . . . ], neutrality was respected up to a point early in '23 when there [*recte* they] was told to do things: they either join the army or get out.

[TM] Aye.

[LOK] But you think it was later?

[TM] Aye, it was. It was the middle of the year, about the middle of the year alright. Because I refused to take any part. Whenever it was put up then, a number of them went in, and we still hoped, you know, that things would settle down, you know.<sup>97</sup>

At this point O’Kane interjected and asked him to return to his recollections of planning for the Northern offensive in April and May 1922. He did briefly return to the issue of neutrality, but only to comment that their position was respected by all sides until 7 July 1922 when Lehane and Daly’s group (which was by then definitively combatant on the anti-Treaty side) unsuccessfully attacked Lifford barracks.<sup>98</sup> There is no doubt that Morris was much closer to the pro-Treaty side, but the motivating factor appears to have been the attitude of prominent anti-Treaty Republicans to the fight against Northern Ireland prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. Morris bitterly insisted that the anti-Treaty IRA resistance to sending weapons to the North was “what turned me madly against that whole bunch of them, the Southerners. They didn’t give a damn about the North . . . ; they refused to give the North one single round, and all we got, we got from the Free State army.”<sup>99</sup>

Morris’s life after 1923 suggests that his closeness to the pro-Treaty side during the Civil War, whether he was definitively neutral or not, may have served his future prospects well. He served as a commandant-general in the Coastal Defence Corps until the end of January 1924. He then resigned this position on doctors’ orders owing to ill-health, likely caused by his hunger strike and forced-feeding in Newcastle jail as well as

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

by the gunshot wound that he received in 1922.<sup>100</sup> He spent time in Argentina to recuperate in a less harsh climate.

His period of service in the Coastal Defence Corps is also interesting. Morris stated that he had been stationed in County Donegal, and that he would have been patrolling the area around Lough Foyle where he and his neutral men had been based.<sup>101</sup> He maintained that his rationale for joining the Coastal Defence Corps was that he had been neutral in the Civil War, and that this noncombatant status therefore allowed him to serve without engaging in the fight.<sup>102</sup> His resignation left him unemployed, and after a period of seeking work unsuccessfully during 1924, he wrote to Peadar MacMahon, chief of staff of the National Army, pleading that his application for a military-service pension should be prioritized. He lamented that he found his struggle to find work very hard to take “after all I have done and suffered for the country, [and to be] treated now as an outcast, is hardly what one would expect.” He had fallen on hard times while living in Dublin and found it impossible for him and his wife to exist.<sup>103</sup>

His luck turned, however, soon after he had been approved for a military-service pension in 1925. He moved to Moville on the western shore of Lough Foyle in 1925, applied for the job of inspector of bailiffs for the Moville Fisheries Board, and was appointed out of a twenty-seven strong field of applicants for the position in 1926. The board was made up of prominent individuals and fishery owners from the area, many of whom would have known Morris from his time in the district during 1922 and 1923.

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas James Morris's Application for Disability Pension (MSPC/WD7883); Thomas James Morris's Application for Certificate of Military Service, 12 Nov. 1924 (MSPC/W24SP139); Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA); *An t-Óglách*, 6 Oct. 1923.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>103</sup> Morris to Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Peadar MacMahon, 10 Nov. 1924 (MSPC/W24SP139).

Notice of his appointment in the *Derry Journal* highlighted that he had been an officer in both the National Army and the British Army.<sup>104</sup> Morris rejoined the Free State Army during the Second World War, retiring as a commandant in 1946 and returning to his old job at Merville.<sup>105</sup>

To return to the broader neutrality narrative, he hinted to Father O’Kane that he felt comfortable being in the Free State Army during the Second World War period since it contained those with both pro- and anti-Treaty sympathies.<sup>106</sup> When the Foyle Fisheries Commission was established as a cross-border agency in 1952, Morris was appointed chief inspector; Samuel McCorkell, who had been his opposite number on the Derry (or Northern Ireland) side of Lough Foyle, was appointed as assistant inspector.<sup>107</sup> This was surprising given Morris’s history of antistate activity in Northern Ireland and his own feeling that he remained on a blacklist in the Six Counties right up until old age.<sup>108</sup> Morris was in a financial position strong enough to purchase Admiralty House—a large property on the shorefront in Merville—as a family home in the early 1950s. The family earned extra income through its additional use as a staffed guesthouse operated by Mrs. Morris.<sup>109</sup> By this time Morris appears to have become largely disillusioned with political issues, despite maintaining a fiercely antipartitionist viewpoint. His position as chief inspector at the cross-border Foyle Fisheries Commission and its southern predecessor at Merville likely precluded him from being too outspoken on political issues or remaining involved in activism. When O’Kane

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<sup>104</sup> *Derry Journal*, 21 May 1926.

<sup>105</sup> Summary of Remuneration Paid to Thomas J. Morris for Service as Reserve/Temporary Officer during the Year Ended 31 March 1941 (MSPC/W24D4).

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>107</sup> Foyle Fisheries Commission, *First Annual Report for the Six Months Period Ended 30th September 1952* (Belfast: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1953), 3.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>109</sup> *Derry Journal*, 9 Aug. 1954; *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 March 1969.

offered to drive him around the Magherafelt area after one of their interviews in 1967, Morris replied, “No Father, I’d prefer to leave that place until it comes in under the Republic. I’m going to leave it that way. I have no love for any part of it until we get it all.” O’Kane asked him if he was disillusioned, to which Morris replied: “Aye, very badly. It’s heart-breaking what I’ve had to stand up to.”<sup>110</sup>

Morris’s recollections in the late 1960s of his own experiences do not accord totally with the historical record. He gets years and dates wrong, for instance, but this is not uncommon in oral-history interviews, particularly when the recollection takes place decades after the events in question. What is more striking is Morris’s insistence that he remained in Donegal throughout the Civil War and afterward, despite a witness stating that he was at Keane Barracks in the Curragh.<sup>111</sup> In addition, his military-service pension file shows that he was living in Dublin in 1924 even though his later conversations with O’Kane would lead one to believe that he never left Donegal and held his ground as a neutral officer within National Army structures throughout the Civil War. This was certainly not the case and leads one to question his wider narrative of strict neutrality and his efforts to remain outside the civil-war split. It is quite possible that Morris genuinely believed that his actions were consistent with a personal mission to stay out of the fight. His severe criticism of Dan McKenna and Johnny Haughey for fighting on the pro-Treaty side of the Civil War was not quite as scathing as that which he reserved for Larkin on the anti-Treaty side, but the rift with Larkin seems to have been partly based on prior personal animosity. His expressed anger over his men having been taken to the Curragh and his statement that he refused to be involved might well both be genuine. Yet he did not contradict O’Kane when he mentioned that

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<sup>110</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>111</sup> Patrick Maguire’s WS 693, 15 (23 June 1952), (BMH) .

the men had eventually been put under pressure to give up their neutrality or get out, and simply stated that he personally refused to give up his neutrality.<sup>112</sup>

Morris's story is intriguing. It is difficult to ascertain how he might have squared his personal commitment to neutrality with the accusation that he pressured some of his men into joining the Free State Army to fight. Is it possible that there was a serious miscommunication between Morris and his subordinates? Was he suggesting that they take his lead and attest in order to join a noncombatant section of the army? The statements by those pressured suggest not, and it would be unwise to second-guess the conclusions that a number of different individuals independently reached. The fact that John Lafferty also named Morris as one of the people who placed him under arrest when Lafferty refused to become a regular Army recruit further suggests that Morris's role was not as benevolently minded toward neutrality as he later expressed.<sup>113</sup> Lafferty refused to go to the Curragh, rightly sensing that further pressure might have been brought to bear on him to engage in the Civil War. All this suggests that Morris had been acting in a less than neutral manner from an early stage in the Civil War rather than recognizing the poor likelihood of a new offensive in the North in early 1923 and changing tactics accordingly.

Tom Morris's story of remaining neutral during the Civil War is fascinating for a number of reasons, not least because it was contradicted by men who claimed that he had pressured them to abandon their own neutrality and join the army. It is also interesting how almost fifty years after the events in question, Morris was keen to ensure that his status as a neutral was recorded in some way. Perhaps he was aware of

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Thomas Morris, 30 Oct. 1967 (LOK.IV.A.09, CÓFLA).

<sup>113</sup> John Lafferty to Minister for Defence Peter Hughes, 12 April 1927 (MSPC/W24SP6369).



the criticism levelled against him by others and wanted to provide a counter to it. The interviews also suggest that for those who valued antipartitionism above everything else, maintaining the image of having been aloof from and disillusioned by the Civil War was vitally important to personal and community narratives of the events of 1916-25 in the north of Ireland.

## Conclusion

Any appetite for a renewed IRA offensive in Northern Ireland amongst the leadership of the IRA factions quickly dissipated on the outbreak of the Civil War. The priorities of the Civil War belligerents now stood in sharp contrast to the majority of active Republicans from the Six Counties. Northern neutrality was based partly on revulsion at the internecine fighting, but predominantly on the fight against partition being a significantly higher priority. That the neutral Northerners sent to the Curragh in late 1922 were kept there for so long without a concrete plan of action suggests that an ulterior motive of distraction was at play. Perhaps there was an aspiration towards a renewed Northern offensive in the event of an early end to the Civil War. However, the treatment of the neutral Northerners at the Curragh suggests there was little intention of utilising their service after the summer of 1922. That they were pressurized to join the National Army and unceremoniously dumped at the war's end leads strongly to the conclusion that they were retained at the Curragh to ensure they were not tempted to join the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War.

John Lafferty's experience accords closely with the community memory of the Northern neutrals struggling to get by in Northern Ireland or emigrating to the USA in the 1920s. More detailed analysis of individual experiences will be required to

investigate this narrative further and examine the links between social class, political opinion, and the postconflict life experience of Northern IRA members. Refusing to fight for the National Army in the Civil War did not leave a clear path to a military career or ease entry to a career in the public service of the Free State. The nuance of neutrality meant little in Northern Ireland, where the stain of any kind of Republican activity marked one's card for life. Tom Morris' life story is all the more fascinating in this context. Regardless of the truth about his dedication to neutrality, he maintained a personal narrative in which he was strictly neutral and made no personal compromise or attempt to interfere with the neutrality of others. This personal narrative did not stand in the way of his rise to a senior public-service position in the Free State, nor did his active service in the Six Counties between 1919 and 1922 stop his ascent to a senior role in one of the few cross-border bodies that existed in Ireland before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Morris was neutral in the sense that he did not fight in the Civil War, but on balance it appears likely that he did compromise that neutrality by playing a role in forcing others to fight.

The ways in which Lafferty and Morris constructed their stories tells us much about the political contexts in which they found themselves at different times. Lafferty's desperation is evident in his correspondence, but his emphasis on certain events shifted depending on the political context. Morris's late 1960s narrative of strict neutrality and his insistence that he stayed in Donegal throughout the Civil War seem to have been presented to deaden any notion that he acted otherwise. His interviewer, Father Louis O'Kane, was a fellow south Derry native who was a young teenager during 1919-23. He was someone who looked up to Tom Morris as a hero of the struggle in this locality. O'Kane was fascinated with this history and had meticulously pieced together the timeline of events by gathering whatever documents he could find and by interviewing

as many veterans as possible. He was the focal point of connection between these veterans who were now in their old age. There is a strong Southern-betrayal narrative that comes through in the O’Kane interviews, particularly from those veterans who remained in the Six Counties or who emigrated from Ireland. Though it is difficult to speculate on Morris’s motivations from this remove, one possibility for his less than truthful retelling of his life story may have been a fear of association with a betrayal of the nationalists and Catholics who were left behind in Northern Ireland.

The story of Northern Ireland during the Civil War is one of nation building and the consolidation of power in the Unionist government. It is also the story of the defeat of the Northern IRA and the discontented accommodation made by Northern nationalists with their new reality as a minority. In this context, the Northern neutrals can be seen as a form and a force of resistance, maintained in exile by a government that possessed no enthusiasm to support their aims, regardless of the rhetoric. Their experience typified the sharp edge of an indifference to the North that moulded and evolved in parts of the southern jurisdiction of Ireland throughout the twentieth century. It is an attitude and a reciprocal suspicion that has endured through one hundred years of partition, and which is likely to continue to dominate political discourse around constitutional matters on the island of Ireland for some time to come.