

Daithí Ó Corráin, School of History & Geography, DCU: ‘The question of compensation is a burning one’: bricks, breadwinners and the bereft

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One of the most unfortunate and under researched aspects of the Rising is how it affected civilians: through the destruction of their property, loss of life, livelihood or personal injury. This morning I want to share with you some of my current research on compensation in the aftermath of the Rising. In this context 1917 proved a critical year for thousands of Dublin's citizens as their entitlements were painstakingly worked out

COMPENSATION FOR PROPERTY

The *Irish Times* described Easter Week as an orgy of fire and slaughter. And many contemporaries likened the smouldering ruins of O'Connell Street and the adjoining thoroughfares to a scene from the First World War. As the sense of shock at the insurrection subsided, attention swung very quickly to the issue of restitution, even as the executions were taking place. A consensus swiftly emerged that the Imperial Treasury should make good the loss to private citizens of 'those rights ... that the Government exists to protect'. In early May 1916 traders and property owners came together to form the Dublin Fire and Property Losses Association to deal with insurance companies and the government. The driving force behind this was William Martin Murphy, one of the most prominent businessmen of his day, whose interests in Clery's department store, the Imperial Hotel and Dublin United Tram Company were all significantly affected by the insurrection.

The British government quickly conceded that it would have to pay for the damage caused by the military and, in particular, by the use of artillery. Politically, a generous measure of compensation was a means of conciliating the Dublin business community, citizens, and municipality. Given British anxiety for America to enter the First World War, a demonstration of statesmanship in Ireland might sooth inflamed Irish-American opinion. So in mid-June 1916 the Property Losses (Ireland) Committee was established to deal with property claims

Three principles were adopted: property claims would be dealt with on the basis of insurance; second, looting which was widespread would be deemed the same as burning for settlement purposes; and lastly claims for consequential losses, such as loss of profits or customers, would not be entertained. The claims were divided into two categories: damage to buildings and damage to contents. A total of 7,0001 claims were received of which 90 per cent were admitted by the committee.

As you would expect, the largest awards were for the 210 cases in which property had to be rebuilt. The largest of these awards was Clery's which was granted £77,292 for the destruction of 21-27 Sackville Street. But there were some 3,200 small claims for personal effects such as tools, bicycles, jewellery, clothing and so forth. Let's take a few local Drumcondra examples: Robert Evans sought £8 15s for his bicycle which was being repaired at J.J. Kelly cycle agents at 2 Lower Abbey St and was awarded £6. Nora Dickson of 6 Drumcondra Road Lower was awarded 15s for the destruction of ostrich feathers. Agnes Carroll of 24 Cabra Road sought £5 for railings torn up to make a barricade and was awarded £3-15-0. Claims to the Property Losses Committee have recently been digitised by the National Archives of Ireland and are available online. A total of £1.84 million was paid out in compensation for loss of property – a staggering amount given the stringencies of the First World War. In simple purchasing terms the relative value of that sum today is about €200M

REBELLION VICTIMS

When Herbert H. Asquith, the British prime minister, visited Dublin in May 1916 he was reminded that life lost was as deserving of compensation as property destroyed. But the government was opposed to compensation for loss of life or injury deeming it too difficult to distinguish the innocent from those who participated in the Rising. This had severe repercussions for some of Dublin's poorest and most vulnerable citizens who had to contend on a daily basis (as we heard in Dr McManus's paper) with overcrowded homes, poor diet, high child mortality, economic insecurity and grinding poverty. As if this was not bad enough grieving families had to face not only the ongoing pain of their bereavement but also the difficulties of supporting themselves in the absence of a major breadwinner. Furthermore, non-combatant casualties did not benefit from the emotive notions of sacrifice or patriotism which surrounded members of the Irish Volunteers and Citizen Army or those imprisoned after the Rising. The families of dead, injured or imprisoned volunteers received financial assistance from the Irish National Aid and Volunteers' Dependents fund. One could be compensated for ostrich feathers but there was nothing for non-combatant Easter 1916 widows and their children.

However, the Dublin MPs – particularly John D. Nugent MP for College Green and national secretary of the AOH – Dublin Corporation, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and even General Sir John Maxwell all pressured the government to reconsider its stance regarding civilians. This was against a background of increasing public disquiet about some of the more notorious episodes of Easter week such as the murder of Francis Sheehy Skeffington and two others in Portobello Barracks; and North King Street where thirteen civilians were killed by the military. Some of the North King St dead left young families. Peter Connolly for example left a widow and 8 children ranging in age from 18 years to just 8 months.

A Rebellion Victims Committee was established in October 1916 under the chairmanship of solicitor Charles Orpen – elder brother of the artist, William. It awarded payments out of public funds to (a) persons who had suffered loss due to personal injuries and (b) dependents of breadwinners killed or injured in the Rising **provided there was no association with the rebels**. The Rebellion Victims Committee received 550 applications of which 246 were in respect of deceased persons and 304 cases of personal injury.

In a World War One context the number of civilian fatalities was almost the same as the number of civilians living on the east coast of England killed by airplane and Zeppelin attacks between 1914 and Feb 1916. According to the research for the memorial in Glasnevin 54% of the 485 victims of 1916 were civilian. Most of the deaths and injuries were sustained on Easter Monday when the majority of people were enjoying the bank holiday and did not realise that a rising was in progress. As the week progressed the need for food, urgent calls of duty such as feeding animals, and the difficulty of keeping children from straying into the bullet-swept streets or the necessity to flee burning buildings swelled the number of casualties.

Whereas compensation for property was based on insurance, compensation for dead and injury was guided by the scales used in industrial accidents under the 1906 Workmen's Compensation Act which did two important things. It categorized and valued the loss of the body's parts and capacities, and it differentiated between temporary and permanent disability. The compensation awarded by the Rebellion Victims Committee fitted into a broader First World War pattern. The Ministry of Pensions established in 1916 to see after pensions for disabled soldiers and dependents was also guided by the Workmen's Compensation Act. Cases in which injury to health was caused by alleged wrongful arrest or shock to nerves without any actual wound having been received were ruled outside the scope of the Rebellion Victims inquiry

The RVC process was highly bureaucratic and significant time elapsed between the submission of applications in November 1916 and the payment of awards in the late spring/early summer of 1917. Many families were saved from starvation during the winter of 1916-17 only through the efforts of the St Vincent de Paul, the Mansion House Relief Fund instigated by the lord mayor, James Gallagher, pawning what little they had or depending on their extended family or neighbours for support.

In mid May 1917 Mary Murray wrote in desperation to the under secretary at Dublin Castle:

13 months ago my good husband was shot coming from Fairymore races leaving me with 6 helpless children. I am almost all the time depending on the charity of the neighbours. I have been awarded £273 by the Rebellion Victims Co. It is really very hard after all the time I have been waiting. I am now left to starve. A friend before Easter advanced me £2 to put me over the Easter and now I am left

without a single thing... In common Christian charity you might try and do something as after all one doesn't relish going to the workhouse and it will be the only refuge left if I have not some money within a few days.

Applicants had to complete a detailed 21-question form which had to be signed by a justice of the peace. Those who were bereaved had to demonstrate financial dependency on the deceased. Applicants were rarely given the benefit of the doubt. Each aspect of the form had to be verified. The Dublin Metropolitan Police reported on the applicants, the circumstances in which individuals were killed or injured and if people had returned to work and contain a range of moral judgments on whether the deceased was 'respectable', 'hardworking', 'honest', 'of sober habits', 'had no connection with extreme political organisations'. Deaths, births and wage levels had to be certified all of which delayed payment to already desperate families.

The scale of award depended on a variety of factors: number of dependent children, how many family members were contributing to household income, if wife was working, what a deceased husband had earned. Recognition was sometimes taken of sons serving in the war. 14-year-old Christopher Andrews brought home 12s. a week working as a messenger. He was fatally wounded on Lower Mount Street on 26 April; his widowed mother Maria worked as a cleaner in the National Library at 12s. a week to support 3 other children: Patrick (9), Maria (7) and Maggie (5). In a supporting letter, Thomas W. Lyster, director of the Library, pointed out that before Christopher's death there was 22s. a week to sustain five people, now there was 12s. for the sustenance of four. He suggested that if Maria Andrews' son was a rebel she would have been given money by the Irish National Aid Association 'but he was only doing an act of mercy to one of the King's soldiers who was calling for water. IS there no state help for this poor woman?'. Maria Andrews received £150. Many forms were marked with a shaky X and filled out by solicitors keen to gauge a portion of any award in fees.

BREADWINNERS

The maximum award paid out to the families of deceased working men was £300. The Rebellion Victims Committee tried to prioritise the very hard cases such as that of the Brennan family. Malachy Brennan, a lorry man who earned £1 and 12s. a week, was shot on 28 April leaving a widow, Mary, and six children, five of whom were under 15. They received an award of £250. This might seem like a significant sum but one must factor in the higher prices of goods during the war and the difficulties of survival for nine months without a breadwinner. The Brennan family had to change address while their claim was settled. Awards were generally apportioned to mothers and children. The sums for minors were lodged with trustees in the Recorder's Court until the beneficiaries reached their majority.

INJURIES

Determining awards for the injured was more complicated as it required a medical examination by Sir Thomas Myles who acted as the government's medical referee. Myles had been involved in the Kilcoole gun-running and was a prominent home ruler. For labourers even a relatively minor injury could bring untold financial and emotional hardship. According to the British Medical Journal at the time, a simple fracture of the arm would keep a person from work for at least four weeks even if it was treated under the best conditions by a skilful surgeon and did involve the shattering of bone common with bullet wounds. Restoring good function after a simple fracture of the leg could take up to six months. Then as now fractures of the leg generally involved some degree of shortening and hence limp, however they were set. This had serious consequences in a labour market in which lack of movement would result in loss of employment. For example: lame for life, Fanny Geary had to wear a special boot as one leg was left 3 inches shorter than the other. She had to relinquish her job in Jacobs Factory. There were numerous cases of permanent damage to legs, arms, ankles, hands and heads – and seriously reduced life prospects. One of the more gruesome was Christopher Barnes, an 11 year-old schoolboy who had been shot in the head. He had to wear a cap with a protective metal plate to protect the hiatus in his skull.

For temporary personal injuries a weekly payment was awarded based on previous earnings. Fanny Geary received hurt pay of 7/6 from 28 Apr for 1 year then an allowance of 5/8 a week. If payments were to continue they were generally commuted for a capital sum. Many recipients of injury awards were dissatisfied and appealed to have their cases re-opened to no avail.

CONCLUSION

The Rising exacted a much greater human toll than has been recognized. Ultimately the British government received little gratitude for its compensation schemes. For mollified property owners avoiding financial disaster was not really a cause for celebration. Though certainly welcomed compensation for injury or loss of a breadwinner did not in the long run arrest the steady transformation of Irish public opinion.

FURTHER READING

- “‘They blew up the best portion of our city and ... it is their duty to replace it’: compensation and reconstruction in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 39, no. 154 (Nov. 2014), pp 272-95

