

# The History and Lasting Impact of the Westmeath Men's Social & Benevolent Association of New York

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"This man, whose name we shall not mention, was very prominent in business and was considered in fairly good circumstance," wrote Christopher J. Murray on the founding of the Westmeath Men's Social & Benevolent Association of New York City. "Conditions changed however, he met with business reverses. In addition to this, sickness entered his home and one by one carried his little family to eternal rest in Calvary Cemetery. Finally, discouraged and heartbroken, he gave up the fight and he, himself, in a very short while, joined the other members of his family in death."<sup>1</sup>

Unbeknownst to his friends, the well-regarded man had gone bankrupt and there was no money left over for him to be buried with his family. His peers came to his aid, and they raised funds for the proper funeral and burial.

"The few men who took part in the noble work wished soon afterwards to form a society for the purpose of aiding the sick and in general to do and perform all such care-taking as might be necessary for the relief and advancement of its members," Murray said of it. "To continue this laudable undertaking it was found necessary to seek members from among their own acquaintances, and in a short time results seemed to manifest themselves so thoroughly that the membership increased beyond the fondest hopes of the organizers."<sup>2</sup>

Thus began the historic Westmeath Men's Social & Benevolent Association of the City and County of New York, an organization formed in early 1891 and officially incorporated in the State of New York on July 23, 1892.<sup>3</sup>

The Association's original mission statement was as follows:

- The intellectual and social improvement of its members
- The cultivation and encouragement of mutual friendship and good will
- To aid and assist members in sickness and distress
- To provide burial for deceased members when no ability exists
- To encourage all persons, native or descendants of natives of the County Westmeath in union, as representatives of our fatherland and also to assist at all times possible each other's welfare, in this, our adopted country

- To promote a spirit of brotherly love and sociability among its members and help to encourage a spark of true friendship and benevolence towards one another<sup>4</sup>

While there were Westmeath-based organizations that attempted to achieve similar goals in New York (which included both female-only and youth-based organizations), this association became the most successful and the far most notable. It also still exists today. Its first president was James Quest, a Castletown-Geoghegan-born immigrant who worked as a proofreader for a printing house.<sup>5</sup> Two hundred members were enrolled from the start and its origin was proudly acclaimed in *The Westmeath Examiner*.

Meetings for the Westmeath Men's Association took place twice a month, both on the first and third Friday at 8:30 pm at Curry's Central Hall on East 47th Street in Manhattan.<sup>6</sup> Curry's was an original meeting place for the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

The Westmeath Men's Association hierarchy included a president, vice-president, treasurer, recording secretary, financial secretary, corresponding secretary, sergeant-at-arms, and at least four trustees of which one would be the official association chairman. The recording secretary was tasked with recording the minutes of every meeting, usually in a notebook. That would typically include things like recording which officers were present and which were absent, the topics discussed, motions raised and their voting results, payments due to or from the association and the recording secretary's signature affirming the validity of them. The officers reported to and were held accountable by the board of trustees, which the chairman presided over. Elections were held every year. While meetings had a formal agenda,

members were permitted to bring their children and the gatherings were highly social. During special occasions, the children were often called on to perform Irish songs or act out famous Irish speeches.<sup>7</sup>

The organization drew in members from all economic classes, both rich and poor. One of its most prominent members in the early years was the Mullingar-born Michael J. Jennings, who was not only a very successful saloon operator and liquor importer, but also a spokesman for Clan-na-Gael, the American counterpart to the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).<sup>8</sup> The Association's recruiting efforts were bolstered by Gaelic sports since members had the opportunity to play for the official Westmeath Men's hurling and Gaelic football clubs.<sup>9</sup> These clubs played against others that were operated by similarly run Irish county-based associations. The primary venue for these Irish games was at Celtic Park in Long Island City, a neighborhood in Queens right outside of Manhattan.

The Westmeath Men's Association also hosted social events but in the late 1890s and early 1900s it found itself competing for attendance with a group of young men that called themselves the Raharney Rovers.<sup>10</sup> Comprised mostly of friends that had emigrated together from Raharney, Killucan, Kinnegad, and other surrounding areas, its first president and secretary were Christopher J. Flanagan and Christopher J. Murray respectively, both from Raharney. Realizing that the two organizations were better off as one combined, the Raharney Rovers slowly folded into the Westmeath Men's Association, and secured permanent influence in it in return. The last time the Rovers were mentioned by name individually was in 1910.<sup>11</sup>

For example, Murray was elected president of the Westmeath Men in 1906.<sup>12</sup> Murray's Raharney Rovers had raised funds for St. Brigid's stained glass windows in 1905<sup>13</sup> while the broader Westmeath Men raised funds for the Multyfarnham Abbey church restoration project the same year.<sup>14</sup> Suffice to say, members of the Westmeath Men's Association were hardly immigrants permanently exiled from their homeland. They were actively engaged and concerned with affairs taking place abroad. Westmeath Men's member Michael J. Jennings even had the sole American distribution rights to "Locke's Whiskey" from the famous whiskey distillery in Kilbeggan<sup>15</sup> and the Association took pride in promoting it as their hometown drink.

The Westmeath Examiner newspaper was also more than receptive to publish regular letters and columns from the group, with Christopher J. Murray, primary

correspondent on their behalf, which he often signed under a pen name, Raharney Rover.<sup>16</sup>

As Irish county associations like theirs began to grow in prominence in the early 20th century, the Westmeath Men teamed up with a dozen other county associations to finance the purchase of a large park in a town north of Manhattan. In what was known as Wakefield Park in Yonkers, NY, and done under an umbrella organization they formed called the Irish Counties Athletic Union (ICAU), they had hoped to build a venue that would compete with Celtic Park as the center of Irish sports.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the project failed when local residents in Yonkers successfully pressured the town to shut down the games there.<sup>18</sup>

This failure did not deter future cooperation among the county associations, however, and they would continue to plan events together. Meanwhile, the Westmeath Men's Association shifted its primary interests from sports to politics. In 1907, for example, the Westmeath Men swapped leaders and elected Dr. Joseph P. Brennan in the place of Murray.<sup>19</sup> Brennan, an osteopath born in Cloneyheigue,<sup>20</sup> and a long follower of Charles Stewart Parnell, believed that the membership should be mobilized to support political initiatives in Ireland, specifically Home Rule, which was then being championed by Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) leader John Redmond. The Home Rule movement believed that Irish self-government could be achieved through political pressure in the British parliament rather than by physical means. Redmond's Home Rule lobby was bolstered by a massive grass-roots network of support where towns organized United Irish League (UIL) branches in Ireland and United Irish League of America (UILA) branches in America, with New York City being the central hub of activity in the latter.

Dr. Brennan, who had met John Redmond personally on one of his trips to the United States, founded his own UILA branch in New York<sup>21</sup> and later with the additional distinction of having just become a county association president, entered himself into a parliamentary race for the vacant seat in South Westmeath without ever leaving New York.<sup>22</sup> While that campaign was unsuccessful, the Westmeath Men's Association under Brennan's direction would go full speed ahead into politics and remain under his control until 1923.<sup>23</sup> Without his involvement in what followed, a detailed report on the Association's history would hardly be warranted.

The first major American political initiative that the Association was involved in was the New York City mayoral race in 1913. That's because a peer that Dr.

Brennan had met through the UILA, was gaining momentum as a viable third-party candidate. His name was John Purroy Mitchel, the grandson of famed Irish patriot John Mitchel, and one of the most recognizable names and figures in Redmond's Home Rule lobbying network in America. Mitchel, for example, had traveled across the United States in 1903 with IPP member Joseph Devlin to set up branches of the UILA.<sup>24</sup> Although Mitchel had strongly disappointed members of Clan-na-Gael by doing this, since they believed complete independence was the preferred option over "self-government," Mitchel's ancestral relation made him immensely popular in the heavily Irish city of New York.

Sensing an opportunity to make history, several of the county associations again banded together and formed the Mitchel Irish Counties Campaign Committee. They elected Dr. Brennan as its president.<sup>25</sup> This organized support did not go unnoticed. When Mitchel won the election in a landmark victory, he personally attributed much of the Irish vote to the efforts of Brennan and his friends. Consequently, Brennan became Mitchel's unofficial advisor thereafter on all things Irish, which made the county association for Westmeath potentially the most influential in New York. Later, Mitchel would even make Brennan a Commissioner of Education.<sup>26</sup>

As Mitchel's term began in 1914, however, a series of events in Ireland, which included an anti-Home Rule militia assembling in the northern counties, caused Redmond, a preacher of peace, to consider the necessity of backing up his campaign with an armed defense force to limit the prospect of a mutiny by *Unionists* should his Home Rule campaign be passed into law. Rather than start a network to do this from scratch, Redmond effectively co-opted an existing defense movement, known as the Irish Volunteers, which had been founded less than a year prior, and he used this position to communicate to all of the UILA branches in America that their mission going forward was to raise funds for the Volunteers.<sup>27</sup>

That such a directive came from Redmond meant that for a limited time, the Home Rulers and Clan-na-Gael in America were almost perfectly aligned in a cause, arming an Irish army. While the Westmeath Men's Association passed resolutions supporting Redmond in this regard, they also took the unique step of formally enrolling the Social & Benevolent Association itself as an Irish Volunteer branch, meaning that it directly raised funds for the defense force. They were unique in doing this.

The circumstances became complicated, however, when the British entered the Great War against Germany in August 1914. Momentum around Home Rule in parliament languished and a split developed when Redmond signaled to the British government that the Irish would rally behind them in their war. While Redmond's sentiment was relatively popular in Ireland at the time (in the beginning), many Irish living in America were outraged by it from the start. Although the New York City chapters of the UILA remained firm in their commitment to Redmond, chapters just about everywhere else in the United States, including the national UILA leadership, rushed to publicly voice support for Germany.<sup>28</sup>

Home Rule did eventually pass on September 18, 1914, but the caveat of it not going into effect for at least one year or at the conclusion of the war with Germany, whichever came last, was a condition that the IRB in Ireland and Clan-na-Gael in America could not bear. Consequently, Redmond's role with the Irish Volunteers came to an end even though he still had many supporters.

For example, when Redmond rushed to form a parallel organization called the National Volunteers<sup>29</sup> to compete with the Irish Volunteers, 37 of the 43 Irish Volunteer branches in Westmeath followed him.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the Irish Volunteers had their own newspaper in Ireland, the National Volunteers launched their own, aptly called the National Volunteer. With the appearances of county-wide support, not to mention support from their favorite newspaper, *The Westmeath Examiner*, owned by IPP member John P. Hayden, who sang Redmond's praises, the Westmeath Men's Association in New York felt confident that backing Redmond was what their families back home wanted and thus believed their work going forward was to support them.<sup>31</sup> The fundraising environment for Redmond, however, suddenly faced steep challenges. While a third of all the initial funds raised to finance the National Volunteers came from the United States in October 1914, one percent of all those American funds were directly attributable to the relatively small Westmeath Men's Association in New York.<sup>32/33</sup>

To fix that, Redmond himself had planned to personally travel around the United States in late 1914 to rally his base but as he became increasingly concerned by the discord there and distracted by the war in Europe, he cancelled. Without anyone from the IPP coming over to help, Redmond supporters in New York looked to Brennan and his colleagues to rally the base on their own.

Under the name of the United Irish League of New York, Brennan and the Home Rulers put on a large convention for 500 delegates on December 15, 1914, but it had been infiltrated by spies working for Clan-na-Gael leader John Devoy and his local Gaelic American Newspaper. At the time, Clan-na-Gael had gained considerable fundraising momentum for the original Irish Volunteers and they attended the convention under false names as an opportunity to assess their rivals. To counter the convention's effectiveness, Clan-na-Gael planned its own convention, an anti-Redmond one, a mere two days later, also in New York.

While the Clan's convention had much larger attendance, the Home Rulers may have also sent in their own spies. Somebody had tipped off the organizers that a plot had been hatched to sabotage the convention into a riot, for example. During the proceedings, a suspected saboteur was wrangled from the gallery after a fight broke out and he was dragged on stage to be questioned by all in attendance. When forced to identify his origins, he claimed to have been born in Athlone in County Westmeath.<sup>34</sup>

Though it was never proven, Clan-na-Gael suspected Dr. Joseph P. Brennan and his band of Westmeath Men to have been behind the plot. To try and humiliate them, the Clan posted photocopies of the name-cards that Brennan had signed that allowed the Clan's spies into his convention as part of a frontpage story in the Gaelic American that mocked the Home Rulers.<sup>35</sup> As one might imagine, this only hardened the resolve on both sides and inevitably roped an Association that was supposed to be about benevolence into a brewing international conflict.

The result was a battle of words where insults were exchanged through newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. Redmond's National Volunteer newspaper in Ireland featured several columns just for the Westmeath Men's Association of New York where they reiterated that 100% of their growing membership—then eleven hundred members strong—were emphatically loyal to Redmond. These included headlines like Westmeath Men in New York: Loyalty to Mr. Redmond,<sup>36</sup> Protest by Westmeath Men in New York,<sup>37</sup> and Westmeath Men in New York Congratulate Mr. Redmond.<sup>38</sup> And then a column titled Westmeath Exiles, Loyal and True to Irish Leader,<sup>39</sup> submitted by Raharney Rover to The Westmeath Examiner, made plain in January 1915 that they repudiated anyone purporting to represent the Volunteers outside of Redmond's Volunteers and further proclaimed that that

they were wholly unsympathetic to anyone supporting an alliance with Germany on the basis that the German army had murdered innocent Catholics in Belgium.<sup>40</sup>

When German submarines began sinking civilian ships holding American passengers, particularly with the Lusitania on May 7, 1915, American sentiment toward Germany became increasingly negative.<sup>41</sup> This posed a major problem for Clan-na-Gael. Nevertheless, anti-British attitudes were given a boost after the long famous Irish rebel Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa passed away and Patrick Pearse gave his famous "The Fools, the Fools, the Fools" speech on August 1, 1915 at his funeral.

The split in Irish New York, however, was laid bare for all to see during the 1916 St. Patrick's Day parade when two different groups each individually applied for the city permit to organize it. Mitchel, who had long been a Home Ruler, sided with the group his friends were in, which represented the smaller of the two factions. The larger group filed a lawsuit, claiming their rivals that obtained the permit were nothing more than outlaws. But when the case was brought in front of a Jewish judge, all he saw were a bunch of Irish guys. "It's a case of Tweedledum and Tweedledee," he mused, and allowed the outlaws to keep the permit.<sup>42</sup>

While the St. Patrick's Day parade historically had up to 50,000 marchers, it had only 2,000 – 2,500 in 1916 because of the division.<sup>43</sup> The Westmeath Men's Association, who conspired with the outlaws, were among the organizations that marched.<sup>44</sup>

When the Easter Rising took place the following month, the Home Rulers in New York blamed John Devoy and Clan-na-Gael for not only having fomented it, but for having broken American neutrality policy, for the loss of Irish lives, and for having irreparably damaged the momentum made with the British on Home Rule. Those hardline feelings started to waver, however, when the British began executing the leaders of the Rising.

The timing of these events made collaboration between county associations increasingly challenging, but they tried. The old ICAU, for example, was in the middle of a rebrand to become the United Irish Counties Association of New York (UICA), and in order to succeed they vowed to remove politics from the platform.

Ironically, when it came to being able to bring all sides together, they elected an officer of the Westmeath Men's Association, Christopher J. Murray, in the dual role of corresponding secretary and recording secretary.<sup>45</sup> Though Murray emphatically supported Brennan in all of his efforts, he maintained friendships with the groups that they were in active disagreement

with. For example, he helped put on a successful Irish Ball for the UICA in January 1917 where all sides seemed to check their grievances at the door to celebrate shared fortune and Irish culture.

When the United States officially allied with the British to join the Great War in April 1917, Clan-na-Gael's long-running campaign to support Germany became a liability. They expanded their brand into an organization known as the Friends of Irish Freedom (FOIF) whose objective was to support any movement that would bring about Irish independence.<sup>46</sup> Irishmen who held such views were colloquially referred to as Sinn Féiners, which was named after a small political party in Ireland that was motivated by independence. Under the FOIF banner, they joined forces with the anti-war movement in an attempt to encourage President Woodrow Wilson to change his mind about having joined the war. To accomplish this, they coordinated large protests across the city to create the appearance that the war was deeply unpopular.<sup>47</sup>

As thousands of Irish faces decried an alliance with the British on the streets of New York, they inevitably ran afoul of an obsessively American mayor. Mayor John Purroy Mitchel, channeling the fiery patriotism of his grandfather but applying it to the native country of his birth, America, believed that the Irish in New York, just as any other American citizen, ought not to be protesting the war but rather volunteering to fight Germany themselves. All Irish issues, as much as he sympathized with them, were supposed to be sidelined out of respect for the country they had the privilege to become citizens of.<sup>48</sup>

That, however, was not a great platform to run on with a heavy Irish constituency while campaigning for re-election, especially in the wake of the Rising's executions. And worse yet, that election was right around the corner on November 6, 1917. Seeing an opportunity to stick it to Mitchel, the Sinn Féiners resolved to make him lose. It was up to Brennan, the Westmeath Men, and the old Home Rulers then to try and prop Mitchel up, who they considered an ally on both Irish and domestic affairs. Brennan, Murray, and a few other members set up a parallel campaign organization called the Westmeath Men's Patriotic and Social Club<sup>49</sup> to match Mitchel's tone of American loyalty while Brennan himself also led another joint-county association venture called the Irish-American league that was used to blanket the city with pro-Mitchel marketing.<sup>50</sup>

Over the ensuing months, the city experienced numerous confrontations and riots related to the Irish

dispute that filled the papers with headlines so sensational that some reported exaggerated claims that Mitchel had deployed a tank on the streets to run over his enemies.<sup>51</sup>

Because of his unyielding America-first attitude and a personal feud he had entered into with John Devoy along the way, Mitchel lost the election in a landslide. Mitchel thanked Christopher J. Murray for his campaign efforts on his way out of office by making him Commissioner of Weights and Measures,<sup>52</sup> a position that came with a badge and a gun. It was the final parting gift to the Westmeath Men for their help. Mitchel then joined the Aviation Corp of the army to prove his point about American patriotism and paid the price. He died during a training exercise in Louisiana on July 6, 1918. John Redmond also died, having passed away on March 6, 1918. And so with Mitchel and Redmond both completely gone in the span of mere months, Brennan attempted to hold the line all by himself. A June 11, 1918 New York Tribune article, for example, said that Brennan was leading a nationwide movement of 75,000 Irishmen to combat Sinn Féin ideas.<sup>53</sup> Those "ideas" were characterized as placing Irish interests above American interests and broadly reinforcing a stereotype of Irish immigrant in the national discourse that they preferred a physical fight versus a peaceful resolution to a problem. In short, that their actions put their Americanness into question with fellow citizens during war time because they could not restrain themselves. And it wasn't just the Irish that had to manage negative perceptions since German-Americans naturally faced constant suspicion from the public at large. That caused a strain of hyper-Americanism from both groups and such outsized responses were demonstrative of their attempts to prove themselves. Of course, in the case of Brennan, it was also part bitterness borne out of losing the two political leaders that he had latched onto for his influence.

Alas, Brennan's defiance was the last hurrah. Most of the Home Rule holdouts had pledged from the beginning that they would ultimately be in favor of whatever the Irish in Ireland wanted and when the drive toward complete independence took root as the overwhelming objective, just about all of the Irish in New York decided to accept Sinn Féin, including the Westmeath Men's Association (Except for Brennan).

When Germany surrendered on November 11, 1918, America's patriotic fervor subsided. Marking a split within a split, when a rally was thrown for the visiting

Éamon de Valera, then the leader of Sinn Féin, at the Irish ball of 1920 in New York, Brennan's name was absent from the roster of noted guests and he did not march with other county association presidents, while Murray served on the official press committee to promote the event. This contrast was made even starker when Murray's live-in sister-in-law Emily Casserly from Hill of Down, County Meath (his wife had just passed away) was selected as the Chairlady of the Ladies Auxiliary<sup>54</sup> to escort de Valera around the arena for the opening ceremony.<sup>55</sup>

Inter-Irish relations had frayed significantly during all these years, however, and the county associations lost their strength in the 1920s with several dropping their affiliation with the UICA or disbanding altogether.<sup>56</sup> Prohibition cooled the social events, flight to the suburbs began to redistrict the neighborhoods, and the Great Depression later devastated the communities. What had once been a great city of Irish sport and culture devolved into poverty, disarray, and distrust. Although the Westmeath Men's Association persisted, it had strayed very far from its original intent. When the Irish in New York wondered in the early 1930s if they could ever rekindle what had been lost, a young man named Matthew J. Troy from Westmeath appeared with an answer.

Troy, originally from Ballynacargy, moved to the United States in 1910 when he was 18 years old. In New York, he worked various jobs like hotel busboy, freight elevator operator, and grocery assistant. When he enrolled in college, he worked nights in the docks checking freight. Eventually he went to law school and became a lawyer. He joined the Westmeath Men's Association and was considered to be a top contender for mayor of the city one day.<sup>57</sup>

But it was the UICA that took particular interest in Troy, which Dr. Brennan was vice-president of in 1931.



very well received and in 1932 he was elected President of the UICA.<sup>59</sup> The United Irish Counties Association of New York Inc. was then officially re-incorporated in New York on May 24, 1932.<sup>60</sup>

"The choice of Mr. Troy was a master stroke," wrote Murray. "He has all the attributes of a great leader and on more than one occasion has demonstrated that he combines organization and executive ability with a necessary degree of caution."<sup>61</sup>

As president, Troy spearheaded the revival of an annual Irish ball, which in 1932 drew in more than 3,500 attendees.<sup>62</sup> He also succeeded in the formation of an Irish Welfare Bureau, which Murray was put in charge of.<sup>63</sup> By the end of Troy's statutory max two-year term as president, all 32 Irish county associations had re-affiliated with the UICA, an astounding achievement that reunified the Irish in the city. As Troy represented Westmeath in this effort, his association was also credited for this.

When prohibition finally ended, the Kilbeggan distillery's chief secretary Joseph Cooney traveled to New York and was received as a guest of honor by the Westmeath Men's Association on May 11, 1935. Jennings, Brennan, and Murray were all there and gave speeches.<sup>64</sup>

With the blessing of all the old-timers to have Troy try and rebuild the UICA, Troy emphasized that if he were to do so the mission would have to stay focused to succeed.

"Politics, both foreign and domestic, would again wreck the organization and only bring dissension and ridicule," he warned, an understatement given what had occurred in previous decades.<sup>58</sup>

Troy wanted the UICA's focus to be on a central welfare bureau to assist Irish people with employment, naturalization, and general information. Troy's plan and support from affiliated and non-affiliated county associations alike, was

Meanwhile, Troy was soon after appointed City Magistrate by Mayor La Guardia in 1936<sup>65</sup> and he lived to the age of 90 and died in 1984.

Tracing back its roots to the original ICAU in 1904, the UICA still exists today, thanks to Troy's efforts. Its stated goal as of 2025 is to "organize & represent all the counties of Ireland, for social & cultural purposes, in New York." The current website says that "through the arts, social events and the NYC St. Patrick's Day Parade, the UICA is a vibrant organization promoting a positive image of the Irish in New York while supporting them and their descendants, as well."<sup>66</sup>

The Westmeath Men's Social & Benevolent Association of New York also still exists today, its chain remains unbroken although it is not nearly as large as it was in the previous century. As of 2025 its long-running president is Tommy Sheils, originally from Killucan. On top of doing regular golf outings to raise funds, Sheils, his family, and the remaining members and friends, still march each year in the annual New York St. Patrick's Day Parade, proudly carrying the banner of Westmeath for all to see.

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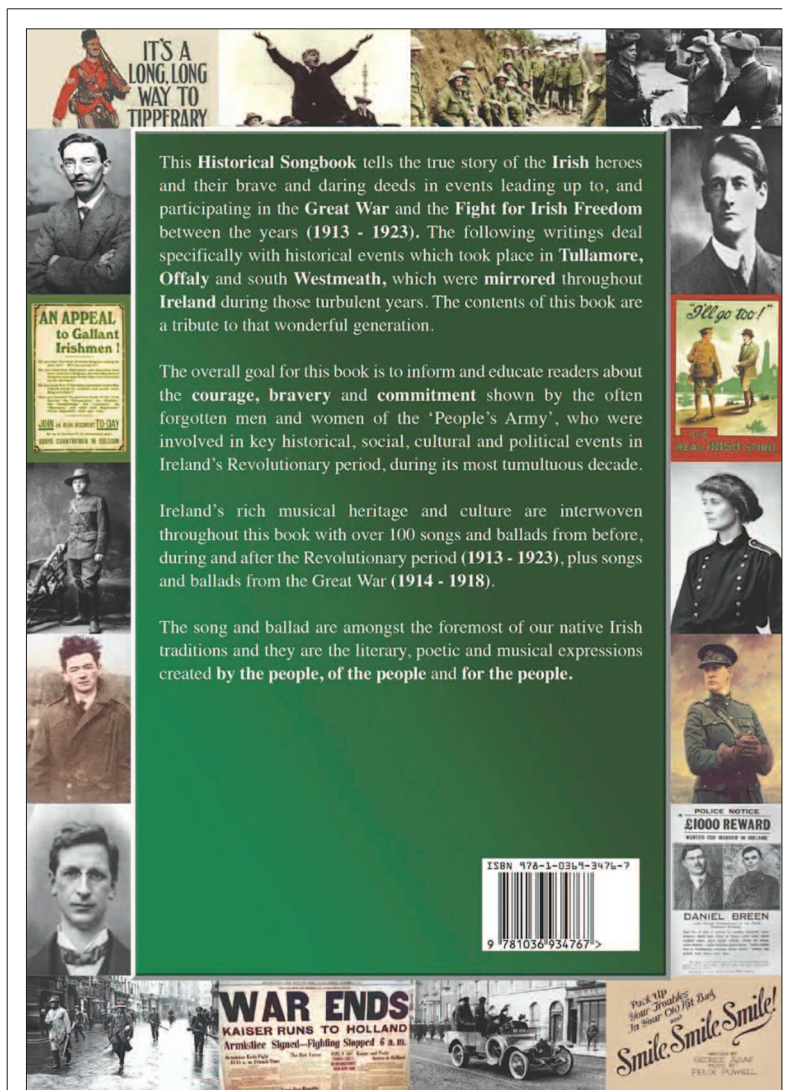
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