

Éamonn Ó Modhráin

1881 - 1954

A Revolutionary Journey

Supported by
Kildare Decade of Commemorations
Committee and Kildare County Council

Courtesy of The Ó'Modhráin Family
and Robert Doyle

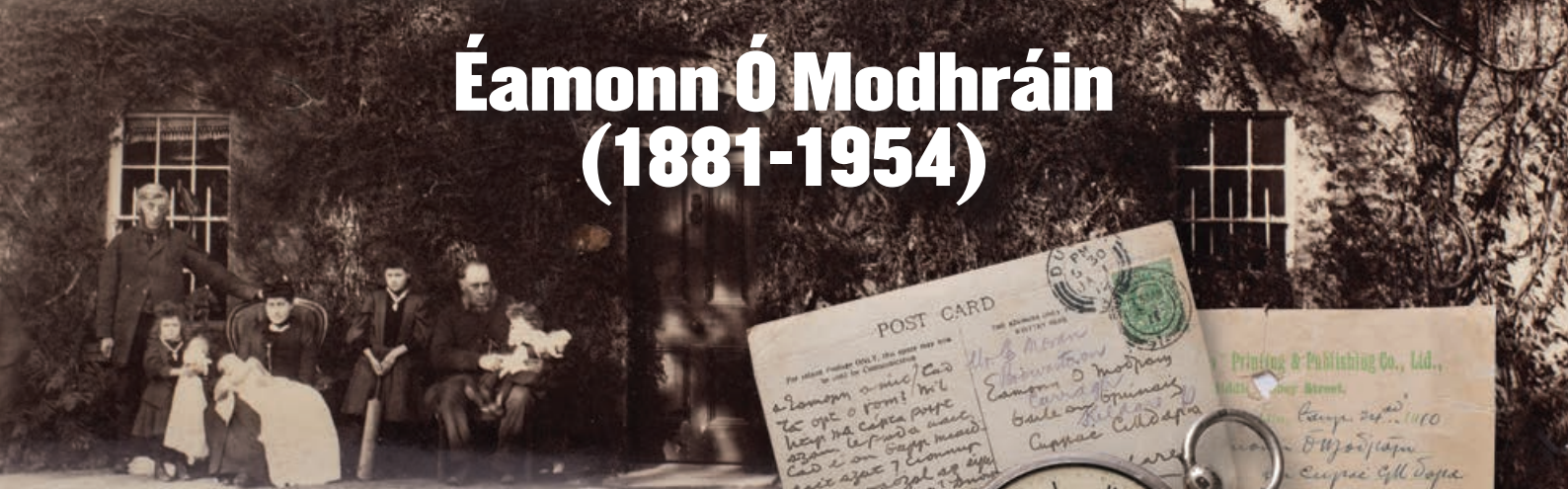


An Roinn Cultúir,
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Department of Culture,
Heritage and the Gaeltacht



Kildare County Council
Comhairle Contae Chill Dara

Éamonn Ó Modhráin (1881-1954)



Éamonn Ó Modhráin (1881-1954) was a prominent nationalist and battalion commander of the Irish Volunteers in South Kildare during the early years of the 20th century.

The son of middle class Catholic farmers on the Curragh, James and Mary Moran, Éamonn was the eldest of nine children. The family had a long history of nationalist activities. Éamonn's grandfather and father were long-time supporters of Home Rule and Éamonn's mother was a direct descendent of Kildare 1798 hero, Captain John Doorley.

Ó Modhráin's active involvement in Irish nationalism began within the Suncroft Branch of Parnell's Irish National League, which evolved into Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League).



He served as Branch Secretary and later as Chairman. As the Gaelic revival took hold in the early 1900s, Éamonn became prominent in promoting a renewed interest in Irish culture, sports and language, in the towns and villages around Newbridge and the Curragh.

Although he initially believed that promoting Irish culture should be above politics, Ó Modhráin made the move towards militant republicanism when he joined the Athgarvan Company of the Irish Volunteers in 1914.



The Ó Modhráin Family

Éamonn's grandfather, Edward Moran married Jane Nowlan or Nolan. At the time of Griffith's Valuation in the early 1850s, Edward was resident on a substantial holding at Ballysax Great of 119 acres. In 1839 he donated a site and contributed money for the local school. Edward served as a member of the Board of Guardians of the Naas Union (Workhouse) in the 1850s. Edward and Jane Moran had 13 children baptised in Suncroft Catholic parish between 1828 and 1851.

There is a death recorded in the Suncroft parish registers of a 'Ned' Moran of Brownstown who died on 26 November 1898. It was noted that he was very old and had received the sacraments.

James, the second eldest, married Mary Malone from Yewtree, Monasterevin, in her local parish on 22 September 1880. James and Mary Moran had nine children baptised in Suncroft.

Throughout his life Éamonn Ó Modhráin was devoted to Ireland and the promotion of Irish culture. He remained committed to republican ideals and was instrumental in the erection of a wooden cross over 'the priest's grave' on the Curragh, near French Furze, around June 1938 by the National Graves Association. It marked the last resting place of Fr. O' Farrell a Carmelite priest killed at the Gibbet Rath in 1798. Éamonn was one of the guests of honour at the 150th Anniversary of the 1798 Rebellion Commemoration at the Gibbet Rath in 1948.

He continued to be active in local politics and community affairs while farming his land near Athgarvan, until his death on 27 June 1954, aged 72 years. He was buried in Carna Cemetery, Suncroft. His wife Margaret died later that year on 2 October 1954, aged 61 years.



The Lilywhite Rebel and the Biscuit Tin

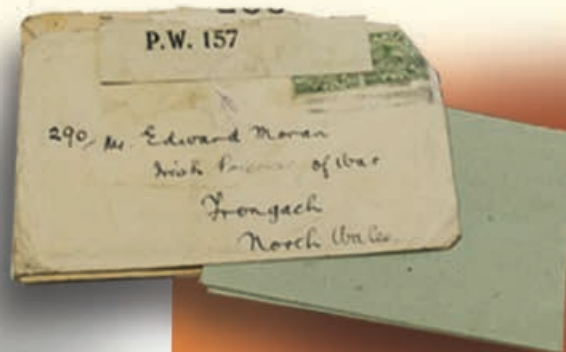
by Robert Doyle

Both lay on the bed of documents that filled the metal container.

When I was asked to clean out the box room in the home of my mother-in-law, Mairéad Ó Modhráin, I gladly accepted the task. I was expecting that there would be some personal family mementos, but it was the old books and magazines that I looked forward to browsing through. Much of what was kept in the room was to be expected – old newspapers, cardboard boxes full of miscellaneous items and some old framed photographs – but it was a large metal container at the back of the room that caught my eye. The box was heavy and well sealed, perfect for withstanding the ravages of time. Inside the box were mounds of letters and documents, along with a number of smaller boxes including a Jacob's biscuit tin with 'Prison Letters' written on the lid; a small wooden 'Cadbury's Cocoa Essence' container.

The biscuit tin was hurriedly opened. Inside were more letters, postcards and envelopes, but it was the dates and addresses that made me realise I had stumbled across a treasure trove of documentary evidence, precious primary source material relating to the family's involvement in Ireland's struggle for independence.

The wooden box was fragile, so I had to take care as I lifted the lid. Stored inside were a damaged fob watch, a small handmade Celtic brooch engraved 'Mountjoy Jail EOM' and a slightly moth-eaten cloth badge with the inscription A356 stamped on it, clearly a prisoner's number. The box also contained a few simple utensils – a knife, fork and spoon – wrapped in a sheet of white paper, and written on the top 'Used by E. Ó Modhráin in Wakefield Prison, 1916.'



Life, Language and Leisure



Éamonn Ó Modhráin became the Branch secretary of Conradh na Gaeilge (the

Gaelic League) and later its Chairman. The focus of the Gaelic League was to encourage the Irish language and customs by organising music and language events, arranging classes, hiring Irish teachers and even, on one occasion, funding jerseys for a local hurling club.

This Gaelic revival had a political element from the start. It began for many with the 1798 commemorations in 1898. Ó Modhráin's mother was a direct descendant of a Kildare rebel leader, Captain John Doorley, who had given his life for Ireland. Like many others her son's dream of an Irish Ireland subsequently took a republican and more militant direction.

The local Brownstown Pipe band featured at many key events, and both Éamonn and his brother, Lughaidh, were photographed in full Irish costume with kilt and bagpipes. A set of pipes has survived.

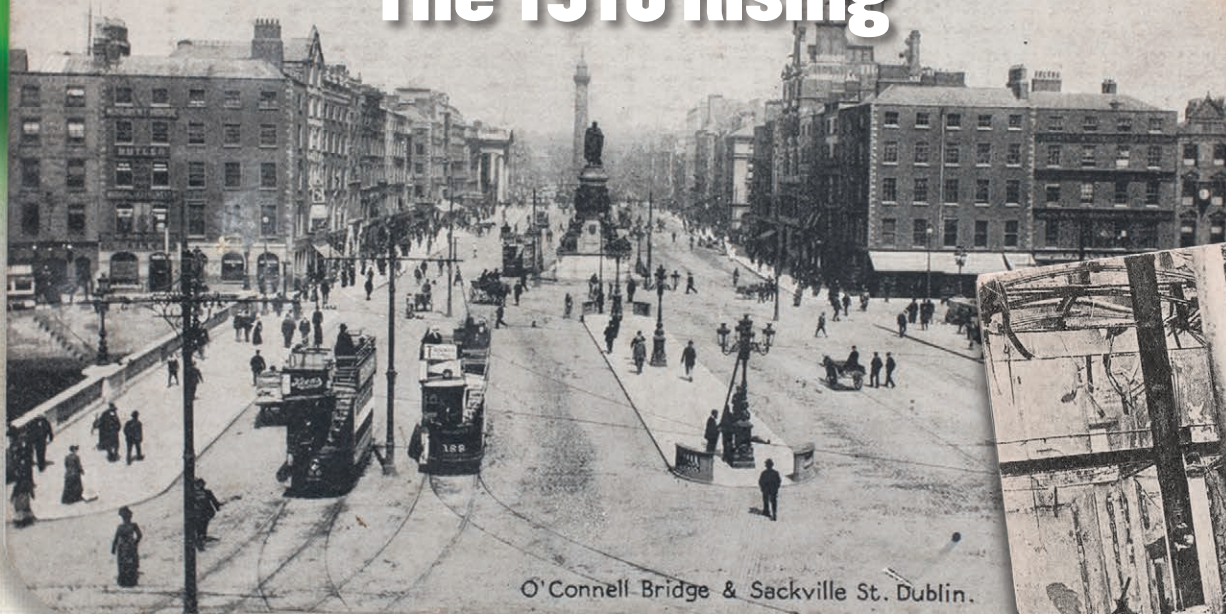
The band featured at a great meeting of the Irish Volunteers at the Gibbet Rath, on the Curragh, in 1914 and at the grave of the United Irishman, Wolfe Tone, at Bodenstown, Co. Kildare, in 1914 and 1915; meetings presided over by Thomas Clarke. Here again paraded the might of republican Ireland – the Irish Volunteers, National Volunteers, Cumann na mBan, the Citizen Army and na Fianna Éireann.

A love of the Irish language and the promotion of Irish culture served men like Éamonn well in prison as they set about organising classes and training. One treasured memento of the Ó Modhráin family is a Celtic brooch which Éamonn made in Mountjoy Jail.

He devoted his life to the promotion of an independent Ireland. The local Gaelic Hall in Newbridge, now in ruins, is still known as Ó Modhráin Hall.



The 1916 Rising



The 1916 Rising, which began on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, was an armed insurrection organised by the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). With superior numbers and artillery, the British forces suppressed the Rising, and the rebels surrendered on Saturday 29 April. Most of the leaders were executed as public opinion changed in favour of the Rising. Some 3,500 men and women were arrested including two dozen from Kildare; many had little or nothing to do with the Rising.

Éamonn and his siblings played important roles in the preparation for the 1916 Rising. They were involved in the transport of explosives to Newbridge, Co. Kildare to blow up the railway bridge at Sallins.

Úna and Treása, as members of Cumann na mBan in Dublin, helped prepare First Aid kits for the Volunteers who saw action during Easter Week.

On Easter Sunday, 23 April 1916, Éamonn received an order at his home in Ballysax from Eoin MacNeill, Chief of Staff of the Irish Volunteers, prohibiting Volunteer actions for that day.



Arrest and Imprisonment 1916

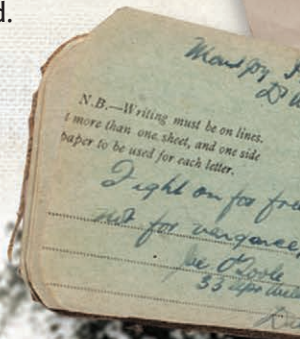
Éamonn and Lughaidh (Louis) Ó Modhráin were among a number of Kildare activists arrested on 29 April 1916 in the wake of the Rising and held at the Curragh Camp. The men were brought via Kildare Railway Station to Richmond Barracks, Dublin, on 8 May before being transported to England on 13 May.

Many Irish prisoners were held in Wakefield Prison, West Yorkshire, which had recently been converted to a military detention barracks. The Irish rebels were housed in individual cells and treated as military prisoners. Éamonn was allotted the prisoner number A356.

Wakefield Prison, Yorkshire.

Internment mainly consisted of solitary confinement. Doors to the cells opened at 6 a.m., followed by slop out and breakfast. Prisoners were then allowed half an hour to exercise when they had an opportunity to speak to one another.

In a letter home, Éamonn thanked his mother, Mary, in Ballysax, for sending newspapers, and told her about the conditions in Wakefield.



Prisoner
Badge
No A356.

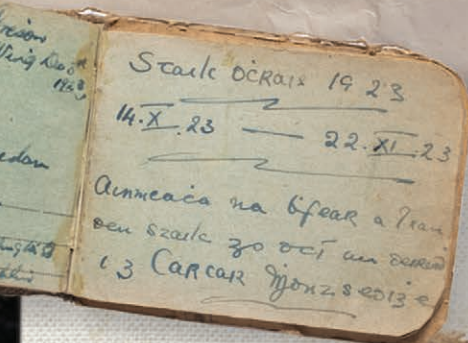




Spoon, knife & fork given to Éamonn by lady visitor when in Wakefield Prison, 1916.

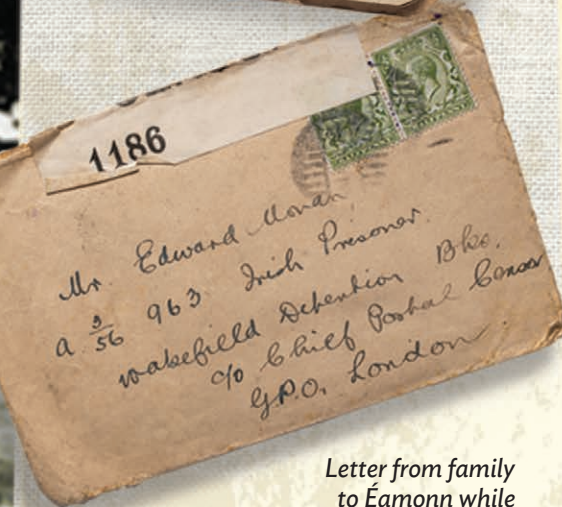
Spoon knife & fork
given to Éamonn by lady visitor
when in Wakefield Prison 1916

“Don’t send any more tobacco for a bit. But send cigarettes and matches,” he wrote, saying he had just received letters from three other relatives. “Gus seems to think we are downhearted here. We’re not a bit, quite a jolly crowd, but, of course, would give a lot to be in Ireland.”

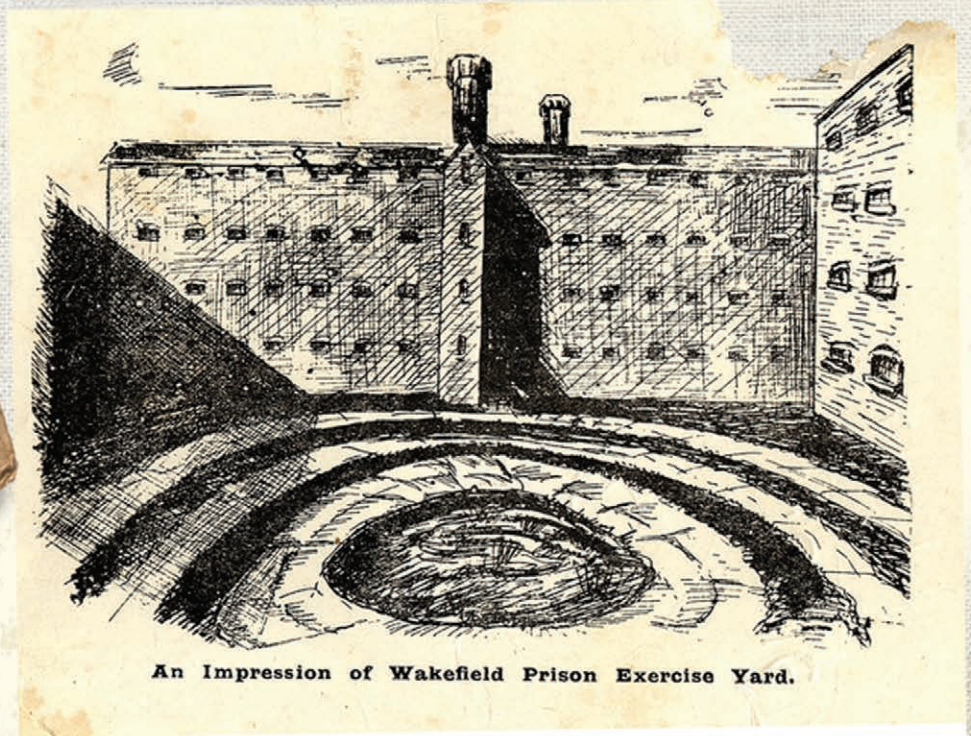


Prison
Autograph book

Lughaidh Ó Modhráin was released on 3 June and returned home while Éamonn was transferred to Frongoch Internment Camp in Wales.



Letter from family to Éamonn while in Wakefield Prison, 1916.

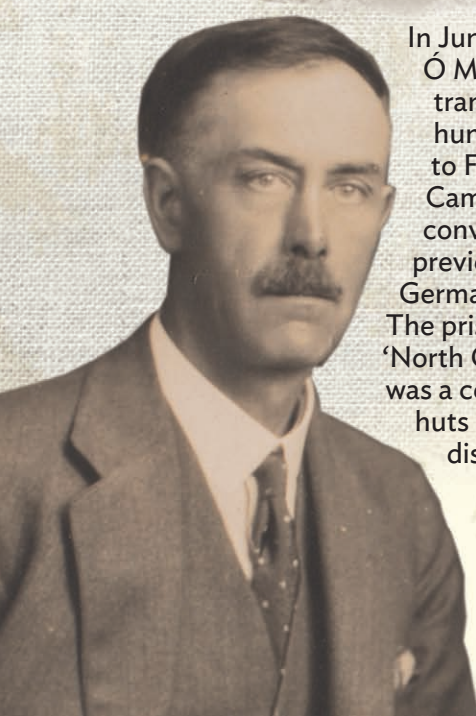


An Impression of Wakefield Prison Exercise Yard.

Frongoch Internment Camp 1916



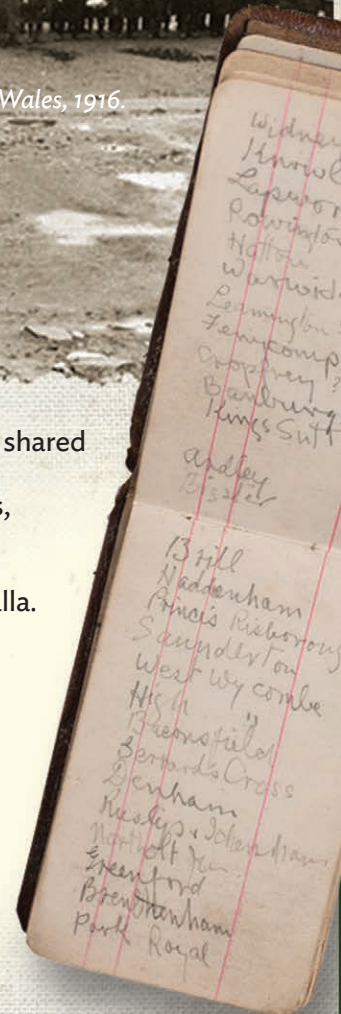
Frongoch Prison, Wales, 1916.

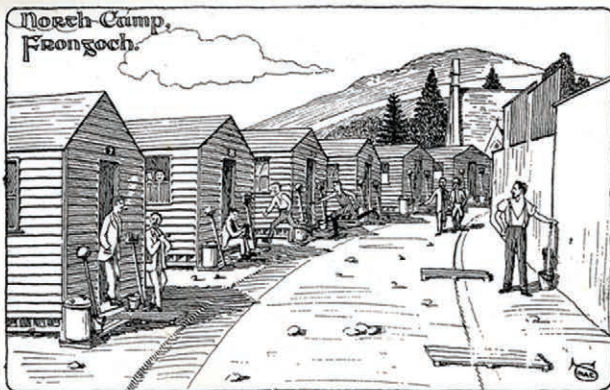


In June 1916, Éamonn Ó Modhráin was transported along with hundreds of other rebels to Frongoch Internment Camp in Wales, a converted distillery previously used to house German prisoners of war. The prison consisted of the 'North Camp' which was a collection of wooden huts and the disused distillery buildings or 'South Camp'. Both camps were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by armed British troops.

As prisoner number 290, Éamonn shared accommodation in Loft 3 of the South Camp with, amongst others, Michael Collins, Michael Staines, Richard Mulcahy and fellow Kildareman, Domhnall Ua Buachalla.

Éamonn kept a meticulous record in his notebook of all the stations he passed through en route from Wakefield to Frongoch Prison Camp in Wales.





The Huts, North Camp.



Recreation inside the Huts.

“The windows were like those usually in grain lofts and were without glass; simply iron rails and wooden shutters. The beds were of the prison variety, three loose bed boards and two trestles about six inches from the ground. We were brought to a farm haggard outside the camp and supplied with a canvas sack, the shape of a mattress and instructed to fill it with straw from a rick there. There were four rows of beds in the centre as well as a row by the other wall. There were two passages down the floor separating the four rows of beds in the middle from the rows by the walls.”

Letter from Éamonn to his family while in Wakefield Prison.

The prisoners were unofficially treated as military prisoners and appointed their own military staff to oversee discipline, fatigues, drill and the need for sanitation and personal cleanliness.

Midday meal consisted of stew of varied assortments of inferior meat including horse flesh, and potatoes which were never of the table variety. A large round pan of haricot beans was supplied to each mess. It was the only item on the menu really fit to be eaten, but as it was supplied every day it was gradually getting monotonous. Some of the prisoners got tired of it, but it was gratefully consumed by the men who had better appetites for it. The camp rations were supplemented by parcels from home and friends of the prisoners. In each mess little groups were formed who pooled the contents of their parcels and occasionally supplemented them by items bought in the prison canteen. Eamon Moran was in charge of a small group in our mess which allotted these items.

Éamonn's record of mealtimes and life in Frongoch prison

Frongoch Internment Camp 1916



Republican Prisoners in Frongoch Prison Camp.

Éamonn Ó Modhráin wrote many letters home during his internment and it is clear from his correspondence that Frongoch was used by the republican movement to educate and train the prisoners. To alleviate the boredom of camp life and to make better use of their time, the prisoners instituted instructional courses in telegraphy, book-keeping, mathematics and shorthand, as well as classes in the Irish language, history and military tactics. There was no shortage of teachers interned and Frongoch became known as *'Ollscoil na Réabhlóide,'* *'the University of Revolution'* or sometimes the *'Sinn Féin University.'*

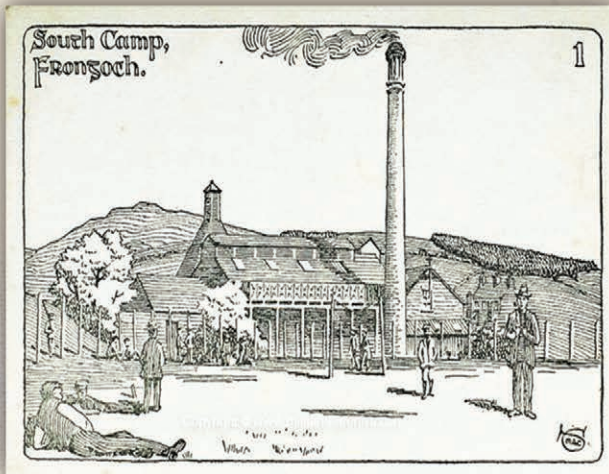
Gaelic football was also a focal point of the prisoners' recreation and their playing pitch was known as *'Croke Park.'*

Due to increasing public and political pressure from Ireland an Advisory Committee was set up, in June 1916, to review the issue of prisoners' confinement.

Internees were brought individually before the Committee and would put forward their case for release. The Advisory Committee recommended the continued internment of about 600 prisoners, while hundreds more were released. Éamonn was discharged on 22 July 1916.

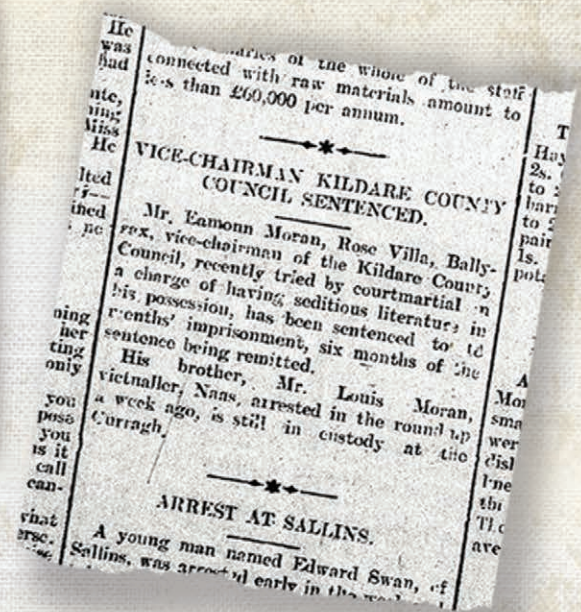


Frongoch
Prison, Wales,
1916.



Ó Modhráin had been against the 1916 Rising from the beginning, describing it as “a farce from beginning to end”. But, whatever about his reservations on participating in the Rising, after his stint in Frongoch

he came back with a deeper conviction and had no doubt about the necessity of using military force to gain Irish independence. Back home in Co. Kildare he would put to good use the skills and strategies he had learned in Frongoch.



Details of
Éamonn's arrest
in the Kildare
Observer

290. Éamonn O'Mordhain
Frongoch
an bpeasain beag
1916.

Éamonn
O'Mordhain's
prison Diary
from Frongoch



Republican Prisoners in Frongoch Prison Camp.

War of Independence 1919-1921



The Irish War of Independence or Anglo-Irish War was fought from 21 January 1919 to 11 July 1921 between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British forces in Ireland.

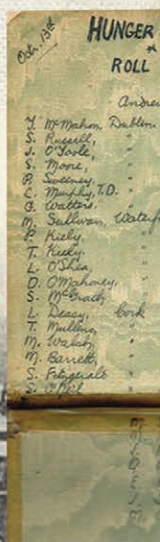
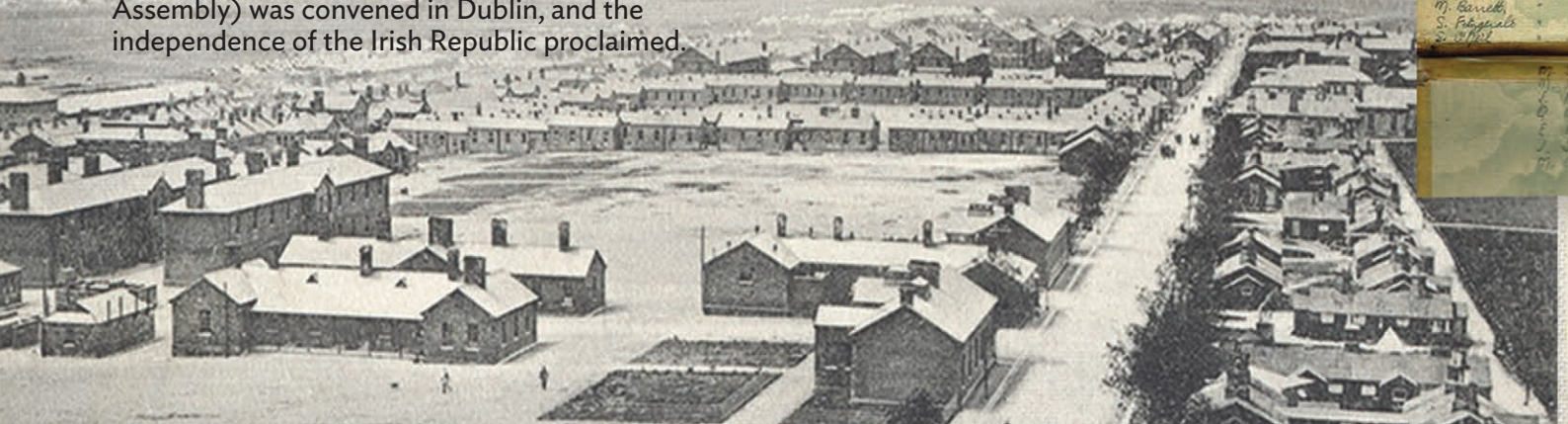
In March 1917 the Irish Volunteers reorganised in Co. Kildare. Éamonn Ó Modhráin was appointed Officer Commanding (OC) 6th Carlow Battalion which had several active companies from Kildare within its jurisdiction. Michael Smyth, OC of Athgarvan Company later recalled that on one occasion, *“Éamonn Ó Modhráin and I went to the South Longford election in May 1917 when armed Volunteers were called for, and we were on duty in Longford town until polling day.”*

In December 1918, Sinn Féin won 73 Irish seats out of 105 in the General Election to the British Parliament, but refused to take their seats at Westminster. On 21 January 1919 the First Dáil (Irish Assembly) was convened in Dublin, and the independence of the Irish Republic proclaimed.

On the same day the War of Independence began with an ambush, at Soloheadbeg in Co. Tipperary, in which two policemen were killed. In June 1920 Éamonn Ó Modhráin was elected Vice-Chairman of Kildare County Council which pledged allegiance to Dáil Éireann.

On the morning of Sunday, 21 November 1920, 14 British intelligence officers were assassinated in Dublin; in the afternoon auxiliary police opened fire on a crowd at a football match in Croke Park, killing 14 civilians and wounding 65.

Éamonn was arrested in November 1920 in the general round-up after ‘Bloody Sunday,’ court-martialled and sentenced to sixteen months for possession of seditious literature. He was imprisoned in Mountjoy Jail, where he remained until the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on 6 December 1921.



The Civil War 1922-1923



Mountjoy Hunger Strike 'Roll of Honour.'

The Irish Civil War (28 June 1922 – 24 May 1923) was fought between republicans and nationalists over the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Civil War claimed more lives than the War of Independence and left Irish society divided and embittered for generations.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty ended British rule in Ireland in 26 counties, but 6 counties in Ulster remained under direct British control. The Treaty had to be approved by the public. A special meeting of Kildare Co. Council was held on 30 December 1921 to consider the Treaty. Of the ten members who attended, Éamonn Ó Modhráin dissented and Tom Harris did not vote.

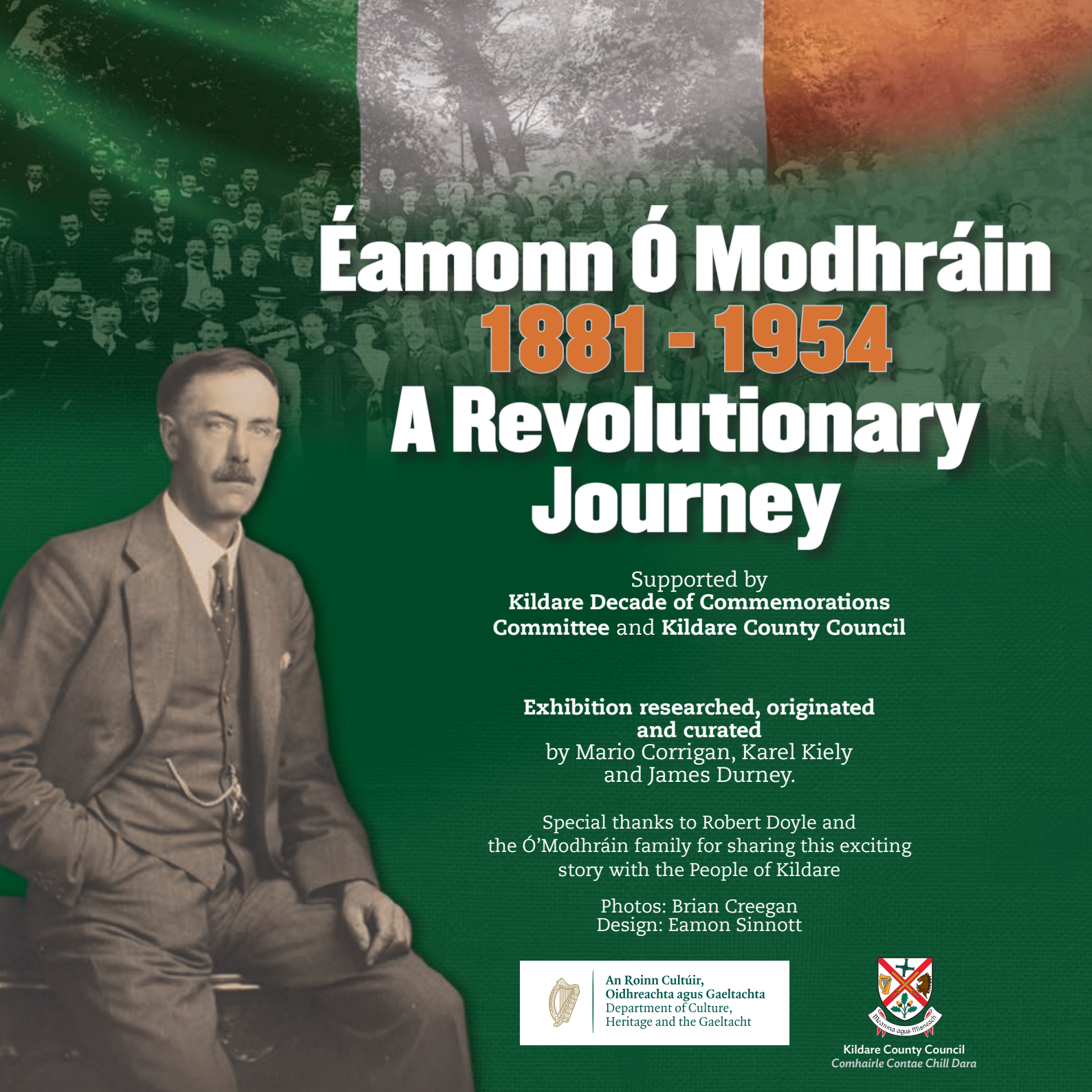
The Council voted in favour of the Treaty which was later overwhelmingly ratified by the Irish people on 16 June 1922, paving the way for the establishment of the Irish Free State.

At the annual meeting of Kildare Co. Council, on 21 June 1922, Éamonn Ó Modhráin was unanimously elected Vice-Chairman. Days later, after the outbreak of the Civil War, he was arrested by the authorities and imprisoned for a third time. Éamonn remained a prisoner in Mountjoy Jail, until hostilities ended, while the men he had once commanded fought and killed each other in counties Kildare and Carlow.

The Civil War ended on 24 May 1923 but thousands of republicans remained in jails and internment camps awaiting release. On 13 October, 420 men, including Éamonn Ó Modhráin, went on hunger strike to protest at their continued detention.

Éamonn Ó Modhráin was released at the end of December 1923. He resigned his office as Kildare Co. Councillor on 18 February 1924.





Éamonn Ó Modhráin 1881 - 1954 A Revolutionary Journey

Supported by
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**Exhibition researched, originated
and curated**

by Mario Corrigan, Karel Kiely
and James Durney.

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Photos: Brian Creegan
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