

British Journal for Military History

Volume 9, Issue 2, July 2023

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ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 31 July 2023

Citation: Timothy Bowman, 'The Disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments, 1922', *British Journal for Military History*, 9.2 (2023), pp. 143-161.

www.bjmh.org.uk



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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The Disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments – 1922

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ABSTRACT

The disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments of the British army occurred in July 1922 due to the creation of the Irish Free State and the effects of the so-called 'Geddes Axe' on the British army. Special arrangements meant that officers and men who wished to continue their service in the British army were able to transfer to other regiments and there were very few compulsory redundancies. This saw limited public concern about these regiments. The preservation of those regiments associated with Northern Ireland was, however, the subject of extensive lobbying and James Craig, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, showed considerable ability in negotiations which ensured the survival of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Irish Fusiliers.

Introduction

The decision to disband the South Irish Regiments was driven by two factors: The Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 which established the Irish Free State as a Dominion within the British Empire and the so-called 'Geddes Axe' which sought to reduce British government expenditure and particularly targeted the army for such savings. Most obvious were the five Southern Irish infantry regiments: the Royal Irish Regiment (which recruited in the South-East of Ireland and should not be regarded as the predecessor regiment of the current Royal Irish Regiment), the Connaught Rangers, the Leinster Regiment, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the Royal Munster Fusiliers which were all disbanded in July 1922. At the same time the part-time special reserve battalions of these regiments, along with the South Irish Horse, another special reserve unit, were disbanded. However, often overlooked are the curious arrangements which emerged with the infantry regiments which prior to 1921 were associated with the province of Ulster: the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Royal Ulster Rifles, and the Royal Irish Fusiliers, and the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, which were the subject of lobbying for their future by the Northern Ireland Government.

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i2.1715

There is a popular perception that in the aftermath of the mutiny in 1 Connaught Rangers in India in June 1920 the British government saw the Irish Regiments as untrustworthy and was keen to disband them on those grounds alone. However, recent academic work on the Connaught Rangers mutiny has shown that it owed little to Irish Republican feeling in the regiment and more to poor officer-man relations and a harsh training regime.¹ While Irish regiments were not deployed in Ireland during the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-21 they continued to play a full role in the British army's overseas commitments, notably in India, the Middle East and Silesia.²

Similarly, there is often some confusion about the timing of the disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments in the British Army and the formation of the Irish Free State Army. While in the later 'withdrawal from empire', British imperial forces were often the basis of the armies of newly independent states, seen most obviously in the case of India and Pakistan where some regiments transferred seamlessly from the army of the Raj to that of the new national armies, this was not the case in Ireland.³ The origins of the Irish Free State Army can be traced to the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 and the cadre being drawn from the pro-Treaty IRA, initially the Active Service Unit of the Dublin Brigade (Guards) of the IRA who first entered what could be termed 'regular' service in late January 1922. Individual officers and men from the Southern Irish Regiments joined the new army but not in any systematic fashion, nor with encouragement from the British Government.⁴

As so often in the history of Anglo-Irish military matters, wider British interests trumped purely Irish ones and British policy on the disbandment was confused and subject to various political pressures, rather than following any clearly defined masterplan. Indeed, most of those who served in the Southern Irish Regiments, and who continued their military service after July 1922, transferred to other British army

¹Mario Draper, 'Mutiny under the Sun: The Connaught Rangers, India, 1920', *War in History*, 27, 2 (2019), pp. 202-223. See also: Anthony Babington, *The Devil to Pay: The Mutiny of the Connaught Rangers, India, July 1920*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1991); T.P. Kilfeather, *The Connaught Rangers*, (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1969); and Samuel Pollock, *Mutiny for the Cause*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1969).

²Patrick McCarthy, 'The Twilight Years: The Irish regiments, 1919-1922', *Irish Sword*, 21, 85 (1999), pp. 314-335.

³Daniel Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 248-280.

⁴J. P. Duggan, *A History of the Irish Army*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), p. 75; Eoin Kinsella, *The Irish Defence Forces 1922-2022*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2023), pp. 11-55; and Eunan O'Hallpin, *Defending Ireland: The Irish State and its enemies since 1922*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 15-17.

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regiments, where pay, conditions and promotion prospects remained rather better than those in the fledgling Irish Free State Army. This extension of the careers of soldiers and officers in other regiments seems to have headed off almost all Irish Unionist concerns about the disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 came in the midst of discussions within the British government about cuts to the size of the British army. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War those service battalions which had been formed as the New Armies in 1914 were disbanded, the Territorial Force battalions were similarly demobilised, and conscription ended in 1919. Thus, by 1920 the British army was returning to its pre-war state as a voluntary force, largely responsible for Imperial garrison duty. Britain's worsening financial situation saw the creation of the Committee on National Expenditure of 1921-22 under the chairmanship of Sir Eric Geddes, and this took a particular interest in the armed services. This committee fully embraced the concept of the Ten-Year Rule which assumed that Britain could not expect to be involved in a major war until, at least, 1932. In this context the Geddes Committee felt that no real provision needed to be made for a major expeditionary force and that the army could be cut by 50,000 men by disbanding eight cavalry regiments and 28 infantry battalions. The War Office was able to resist some of these cuts and ultimately 22 infantry battalions, of which 12 were ultimately drawn from Irish Regiments, were disbanded. It should be noted that no infantry regiment in Great Britain was entirely disbanded, the cuts there coming from the reductions of the 3rd and 4th Battalions of the Royal Fusiliers, Worcestershire Regiment, Middlesex Regiment, Kings Royal Rifles Corps and Rifle Brigade.⁵ The Geddes Committee provided its first interim report in mid-December 1921, just days after the Anglo-Irish Treaty had been signed, but a special Cabinet Committee was set up under Winston Churchill, then the Colonial Secretary, in February 1922 to consider exactly how the Geddes Axe would affect the services and this allowed for a period of lobbying on behalf of particular interests.⁶

It might have been thought that Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, who was Chief of the Imperial General Staff until mid-February 1922 and then Westminster MP for North Down until his assassination in June 1922, would have emerged as a stalwart defender

⁵The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th September 1922 (Cmd. 2114) (1924), pp. 6-7.

⁶Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 25-27; David French, *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement: British Grand Strategy, 1919-1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 58-60; Keith Jeffery, *The British army and the crisis of empire 1918-22*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 21-24; and Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 208-209.

of the Irish Regiments. He was Irish by birth, first commissioned into the Royal Irish Regiment (though quickly transferring to the more fashionable Rifle Brigade) and was Colonel of the Royal Ulster Rifles. However, this was not to be the case. Wilson, a convinced Irish Unionist, was essentially not on speaking terms with the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, between mid-July 1921 and 10 February 1922 over Lloyd George's decision to establish a Truce with Sinn Fein and carry out talks which resulted in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921. Over this period Wilson refused to attend cabinet meetings, sending a member of the Army Council in his stead. His farewell address given at the Staff College on the 21 December 1921 was entitled 'The Passing of Empire' and summarised his view that, by accepting the main recommendations of the Geddes Axe, the government was involved in a retreat from Empire, and left the army with insufficient forces for normal garrison duty.⁷ Wilson was therefore poorly placed to campaign for any of the Irish Regiments. He did feel that the Ulster Regiments were being treated unfairly, compared to those recruited in Great Britain, but he recognised that his poor relationship with the government meant that his intervention might well do more harm than good. He wrote to Sir James Craig, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in January 1922 stating, 'If you do wish to keep up these fine regiments in being I suggest you writing to L.G. a strong letter on the subject.'⁸ Indeed, in debates in the Commons on the disbandment of the Irish Regiments, Wilson confined his contribution to raising concerns about the safety of former soldiers who returned to live in the Irish Free State.⁹

The constitutional realities of the Irish settlement of 1921 also meant that opposition to the disbandment of the Southern Irish regiments was muted. With the Irish Free State now established as a Dominion the British army presence would vanish. One key element of Dominion status was that the Dominions decided on the nature and funding of their military forces. In no Dominion did the British army actively recruit, so to most it was obvious that a grant of Dominion Status automatically saw the disbandment of the Southern Irish regiments.¹⁰ Henry Wilson seems to have grasped this point by July 1921, writing,

⁷Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 274.

⁸Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereinafter PRONI) CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter Wilson to Craig, 4 January 1922; *The "Faugh-a-Ballagh": The Regimental Gazette of The Royal Irish Fusiliers*, XVII, 90, 1922, pp. 1-2; and C. E. Callwell, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and diaries*, (London: Cassell, 1927), vol. II, pp. 318-319.

⁹House of Commons debates, 30 May 1922, Volume 154, column 2069-70.

¹⁰Douglas E. Delaney, *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 168-180

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If the Cabinet grant what is euphoniously called “Dominion Home Rule”; but what is in hard fact complete independence, to Ireland ... we shall lose the 16 Irish battalions.¹¹

Major General J. Burton Forster, the Honorary Colonel of the Royal Irish Regiment, put it more directly at a farewell parade held in Portsmouth in May 1922, saying ‘it was impossible to retain them on the British Army List owing to the alteration of the constitution of Ireland.’¹² Such awareness of the constitutional niceties was rather lacking at the meeting of the Army Council on 9 December 1921, which simply generated 26 questions relating to Ireland. These included:

7. What is to be the future of the three Irish cavalry regiments and the 16 Irish infantry battalions (10 South and 6 North)?

14. (a.) Is recruiting for the British Army to continue in Ireland (i) in the Irish Free State;

(ii) in Ulster?

(b.) If the Irish regiments remain, will recruiting for them continue in Great Britain?¹³

When decisions were being made about other army cuts in the immediate post-war period various claims were made about the seniority of regiments and their ability to recruit. This was seen in discussions on the Brigade of Guards, and as early as June 1920, when there was a serious discussion about reforming it with three large three battalion regiments, with the two junior regiments, the Irish Guards (formed 1900) and Welsh Guards (formed 1915) to be amalgamated into the older regiments. In these proposals the Irish Guards would be subsumed by the Scots Guards who would revert to their old name of 3 Guards and the Welsh Guards would either replace the 3 Coldstream Guards or be reformed as a company in the Grenadier Guards. The Army Council decided not to make any changes, as long as recruiting for the Welsh

¹¹Letter Wilson to Rawlinson, 27 July 1921 cited in Keith Jeffery (ed.), *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson 1918-1922*, (London: Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1985), p. 290.

¹²Stannus Geoghegan, *The Campaigns and History of the Royal Irish Regiment from 1900 to 1922*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 137.

¹³The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO33/1003, Minutes of the 288th Meeting of the Army Council, 9 December 1921.

Guards improved and this is, presumably, why the issue of the Irish Guards was not revisited in 1922.¹⁴

The reconstitution of the Territorial Army in 1920 also saw lengthy discussions about the yeomanry, particularly as this was a prestigious county force, with a powerful political lobby behind it. The War Office initially wanted to reduce the number of mounted yeomanry regiments to 12, while converting the rest to artillery or armoured car units. Yeomanry regiments fought doggedly to be part of the select 12 who would remain in a mounted cavalry role and ultimately, after a number of confused policy decisions about seniority and the ability of regiments to recruit, 14 were preserved in this role.¹⁵ When the Territorial Force had been established in Great Britain in 1908 it had not been extended to Ireland, and the reconstituted Territorial Army formed in 1920 was also not extended to Northern Ireland until 1938. The two yeomanry regiments in Ireland, the North Irish Horse and South Irish Horse, had been formed as part of the Special Reserve which was not reformed after the Great War. The South Irish Horse was formally disbanded along with the Southern Irish infantry regiments but the North Irish Horse was simply placed in 'suspended animation' neither recruiting nor performing any duties until it was reformed in 1939 as part of the Territorial Army.¹⁶ The Northern Ireland Government came under some pressure to reform the North Irish Horse in the early 1920s but seems to have quickly given up on this cause.¹⁷

Most famously, when reductions were sought in the cavalry, a policy of amalgamations was decided upon which created the so-called 'improper fractions' such as the 16th/5th Queen's Own Irish Lancers. This was a process which involved considerable lobbying by regimental colonels and discussion in the Army Council, in sharp contrast to the

¹⁴TNA WO33/979, Minutes of the 269th Meeting of the Army Council, 14 June 1920 and precis number 1028.

¹⁵George Hay, 'The Yeomanry Cavalry and the Reconstitution of the Territorial Army', *War in History*, 23, 1 (2016), pp. 36-54.

¹⁶J. W. Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War*, (Belfast: HMSO, 1956), pp. 57-58; Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 106-146; Richard Doherty, *The North Irish Horse: A Hundred Years of service*, (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2002), pp. 1-46; Mark Perry, *The South Irish Horse in the Great War*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2018); and Philip Tardif, *The North Irish Horse in the Great War*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2015).

¹⁷PRONI CAB/4/30, Cabinet meeting conclusions, 26 January 1922 and CAB9R/7/1, Disbandment & Resuscitation of N. I. Regiments, letter Major E. C. Herdman to James Craig, 2 February 1923.

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fate of the Irish Regiments.¹⁸ It should be noted that while, in 1921, the British army had four regular cavalry regiments with Irish titles, 4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards, 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons and 8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars, these titles were historic and did not denote that they were formed from Irishmen or were actively recruited in Ireland.¹⁹ The 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons had actively recruited in Ireland during the First World War and a service squadron of the regiment was formed as part of 36 (Ulster) Division, initially recruiting in the town of Enniskillen where the regiment had first been formed in 1689.²⁰

In what could rightly be regarded as an unattractive recruiting ground for the British army, with Sinn Féin sweeping the polls in Southern Ireland in the 1918 General Election, and with an insurgency campaign engulfing the island from 1919, recruitment rates held up remarkably well, as shown in Table 1.1. Though it is worth noting that the strong position which Belfast established during the First World War continued into the immediate post-war era, while recruiting in Dublin markedly declined.²¹ Recruitment rates for the Royal Munster Fusiliers, which recruited heavily in 'rebel' Cork, remained surprisingly buoyant, which may have reflected long family traditions of service in the British army and the importance of recruitment in the social structure of traditional garrison towns. It should be noted that the British army did not note the religious persuasion of recruits in its reports, and it is possible that many of those who enlisted in the 1919-21 period were effectively refugees which may have influenced some of the regional aspects of recruitment. It should also be noted that different regiments had different recruitment quotas to fill, based on the numbers of wartime only Kitchener volunteers who had decided to continue their service as regular soldiers after 1919 which may also have shaped the regional recruiting figures in curious ways. Otherwise, the fillip in recruiting for the Royal Irish Regiment is impossible to explain. In the wider British context, it is worth noting that Irish recruits accounted for more recruits in the immediate post-war period (9.2% in 1919-20 and

¹⁸TNA WO33/1022, Minutes of the 296th and 297th Meetings of the Army Council, 13 March and 21 March 1922 and Precis Number 1091; and David French, *The Mechanization of the British Cavalry between the World Wars*, *War in History*, 10, 3 (2003), pp. 301-304.

¹⁹TNA WO33/1022, Minutes of the 296th Meeting of the Army Council', 13 March 1922 and precis number 1091; and E. M. Spiers, *Army organisation and society in the nineteenth century* in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds), *A Military History of Ireland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 335-357.

²⁰Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division*, (Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson & Orr, 1922), pp. 7 and 11.

²¹Timothy Bowman, William Butler and Michael Wheatley, *The Disparity of Sacrifice: Irish recruitment to the British armed forces, 1914-1918*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

9.0% in 1920-21) than Scotland (8.0% and 8.6% respectively), even though Scotland's share of the United Kingdom population was approximately 10% while Ireland accounted for 9%.²²

Regimental Area	1912-13	1919-20	1920-21	1921-22²³
Royal Irish Regiment (18 Tipperary, Waterford, Kilkenny, Wexford)	257	652	400	143
Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (27 Donegal, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Tyrone)	58	357	131	69
Royal Irish / Ulster Rifles (83 Antrim, Belfast, Down, Louth)	416	604	716	163
Royal Irish Fusiliers (87 Monaghan, Cavan, Armagh)	134	331	241	115
Connaught Rangers (88 Galway, Mayo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo)	115	229	228	97
Leinster Regiment (100 King's, Queen's, Meath, Westmeath, Longford)	186	254	135	105
Royal Munster Fusiliers (101 Clare, Limerick, Cork, Kerry)	504	641	578	242
Royal Dublin Fusiliers (102 Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare, Carlow)	985	653	428	371
Total	2,655	3,721	2,857	1,305

Table I.1 Irish recruitment by regimental area, 1912-13 and 1919-22²⁴

²²Keith Jeffery, The post-war army in I. F. W. Beckett and Keith Simpson (eds), *A Nation in Arms: A social study of the British army in the First World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 211-234.

²³Recruiting for Irish Infantry Regiments ceased on 15 December 1921. It restarted for the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Ulster Rifles on 20 February 1922 and for the Royal Irish Fusiliers on 22 September 1922.

²⁴Figures abstracted from, The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th September 1913 (Cd. 7252) (1914), p. 47; The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th September 1920 (Cmd. 1610) (1922), p. 37; The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th

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Recruitment for the Irish Regiments of the British army, with the exception of the Irish Guards, ceased, in the whole of Ireland on 15 December 1921, with all organised recruitment to the British army in Southern Ireland ceasing on 4 February 1922.²⁵ At a Cabinet meeting in January 1922, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans, the Secretary of State for War, noted that recruitment for the Southern Irish Regiments had ceased and that he had gained agreement from Sir James Craig about the arrangements for the 'Northern Ireland Regiments'. In a brief minute, it is noted, 'That there was no objection to the disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments being announced.'²⁶

Some concerns about the fate of the Southern Irish Regiments were raised in the House of Commons, but these were very muted. Sir Maurice Dockrell, the Unionist MP for Rathmines, Dublin County was a lone voice, as the only representative of Southern Unionists in the Commons, apart from those elected for Trinity College Dublin. The concerns he raised were simply over the memory of the regiments, particularly whether any of the historic traditions of the Irish Regiments could be retained in another regiment and if the regimental colours and trophies would be properly preserved. The Secretary of State for War assured Dockrell that the flags and trophies would be carefully preserved but thought the incorporation of regimental memory in other units impractical.²⁷

Some British Unionists were more vocal but they clearly represented a minority view. During the debates on the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Rupert Gwynne, the Unionist MP for Eastbourne, was scathing of the Secretary of State for War and assumed that the Irish regiments were to be sacrificed. Lord Sydenham voiced his concerns more directly: 'There is very much that is left quite vague in this stupendous surrender, are the historic regiments of Southern Ireland, with their long record of world service to be disbanded and broken up?'²⁸ Viscount Wolmer, Conservative MP for Aldershot, asked, in the Commons in March 1922, if the Royal Dublin Fusiliers could be reprieved, noting that they were one of the oldest regiments in the army, with a history stretching back

September 1921 (Cmd. 1941) (1923), p. 33; and The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th September 1922 (Cmd. 2114) (1924), p. 27.

²⁵ The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th September 1922 (Cmd. 2114) (1924), p. 6.

²⁶TNA CAB 23/29/5, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, 27 January 1922.

²⁷House of Commons debates, 15 February 1922, volume 150, column 1018; and 21 February 1922, volume 150, column 14; and

<https://www.dib.ie/index.php/biography/dockrell-sir-maurice-edward-a2648>.

Accessed 21 March 2023.

²⁸House of Commons debate, 15 December 1921, volume 149, column 251; and House of Lords debate, 16 December 1921, volume 48, column 145.

250 years. Wolmer was concerned about the disbandment of all the Southern Irish Regiments given the 'present disorder' in India, Egypt and Ireland, and sought assurances that disbandment would not take place until a 'final settlement' had been reached on the Irish question.²⁹

More practical concerns regarding the future careers of officers and men of the disbanded Southern Irish Regiments were also raised in parliamentary debate. MPs were assured by the Secretary of State for War that the majority of officers were not going to be forced to retire and most would be given a choice of five other regiments to transfer to. The only other ranks to be compulsorily retired would be a small number who had enlisted under the special short service scheme.³⁰ Of 72 regular officers serving in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers on disbandment, the regimental history lists 67 who transferred to other units of the British army.³¹

These limited parliamentary protests saw Army Order 78, issued on 11 March 1922. This was entitled, 'Reduction of Establishment' and noted that the King had approved, 'with great regret' the disbandment, 'as soon as the exigencies of the Service permit', of the Royal Irish Regiment, the Royal Irish Fusiliers, the Connaught Rangers, the Leinster Regiment, the Royal Munster Fusiliers, and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. This disbandment was to include the regular and what were termed the 'militia' battalions of these regiments though, of course, since the Haldane Army Reforms of 1908 these had actually been Special Reserve battalions.³²

A few political rear-guard actions were fought to attempt to preserve the Southern Irish Regiments. In April 1922 Winston Churchill, as Secretary of State for the Colonies, suggested delaying the disbandment of the Irish Regiments due to the number of responsibilities which the British army retained in the Empire. However, the Army Council decided that the disbandment should proceed as planned.³³ In June 1922 Stephen Gwynn, who had been a longstanding Irish Parliamentary Party MP for Galway City, until he broke with mainstream nationalism over his support for conscription, and had served as a captain in the Connaught Rangers during the First

²⁹House of Commons debates, 7 March 1922, volume 151, column 1048; and *Irish Times*, 8 March 1922.

³⁰House of Commons debates, 21 March 1922, volume 152, columns 207-208; and Volume 155, 27 June 1922, volume 155, column 1841.

³¹H. C. Wylly, *Crown and Company: The Historical Records of the 2nd Batt. Royal Dublin Fusiliers*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1926), volume II, pp. 212-14.

³²F. E. Whitton, *The History of the Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians)*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1926), volume 2, pp. 544-545; and H. C. Wylly, *Neill's "Blue Caps"*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1924), volume III, pp. 144-146.

³³TNA WO33/1022, Minutes of the 299th Meeting of the Army Council, 11 April 1922.

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World War, wrote to Lord French, the former Lord Lieutenant for Ireland, suggesting that the cadres of the Southern Irish Regiments should be preserved, allowing them to be transferred to service under the Irish Free State. Field Marshal Lord Cavan, the CIGS regarded this proposal as 'quite impossible' which appears to have ended any discussion of it.³⁴ Wittingly or unwittingly Sir Francis Vane, who had served in 9 Royal Munster Fusiliers during the First World War, wrote publicly, from his home in Italy, advocating the retention of the Southern Irish Regiments in the service of the Irish Free State. His letter, commenting not only on the fine battle performance of the regiments in the Great War, but in the South African War, which had been almost uniformly opposed by Irish Nationalists, can have done nothing to gain support for this idea.³⁵

The most extreme Unionist objection to the disbandment of the Southern Irish Regiments appears to have come from Major General Arthur Solly-Flood, the Military Adviser to the Northern Ireland Government, who wrote to James Craig, outlining his concerns, 'I am not clear as to how the matter of the DISBANDMENT of the IRISH BATTALIONS now stands. It is patent on the face of it, however, that if this is proceeded with at the present juncture the I.R.A. will in all probability receive some thousands of well-trained potential enemies to Ulster.' Solly-Flood's solutions were either for the disbandment to be postponed or, in a quite incredible suggestion, 'the men being sent en bloc to join the Royal Ulster Special Constabulary'. There is no evidence that Craig entertained this suggestion or raised Solly-Flood's concerns with anyone in Westminster.³⁶

There were a number of disbandment parades held by Southern Irish Regiments in various garrison towns throughout Britain and the Empire and these culminated in King George V receiving the regimental colours of the Southern Irish Regiments at Windsor Castle on 12 June 1922. The King gave a speech on this occasion, which one regimental history noted as being 'of a private – almost of an intimate character',

³⁴TNA CAB 24/137/46, letters Stephen Gwynn to Lord French, 14 June 1922 and Lord Cavan to E. H. Marsh, 17 June 1922; Colin Reid, *The Lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish Constitutional Nationalism and Cultural Politics, 1864-1950*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 164-193.

³⁵*Irish Independent*, 24 June 1922. While Vane had served as an officer in the British army in the South African War he regarded himself as a radical social reformer and had supported the formation of the Irish Citizen Army;

<https://www.dib.ie/index.php/biography/vane-sir-francis-patrick-fletcher-a9804>.

Accessed 15 March 2023.

³⁶PRONI HA/5/899, Armagh Chamber of Commerce: resolution protesting against the disbandment of the Irish regiments, letter Arthur Solly-Flood to James Craig, 26 May 1922.

We are here to-day in circumstances which cannot fail to strike a note of sadness in our hearts. No regiment parts with its colours without feelings of sorrow.

A knight in days gone by bore on his shield his coat-of-arms, tokens of valour and worth. Only to death did he surrender them. Your colours are the record of valorous deeds in war and of the glorious traditions thereby created. You are called upon to part with them to-day for reasons beyond your control and resistance. By you and your predecessors these colours have been revered and guarded as a sacred trust – which trust you now confide in me.

As your King I am proud to accept this trust. But I fully realize with what grief you relinquish these dearly-prized emblems; and I pledge my word that within these ancient and historic walls your colours will be treasured, honoured, and protected as hallowed memorials of the glorious deeds of brave and loyal regiments.³⁷

In addition to this speech, King George V handed a letter to the colonels, specially addressed to each regiment. That to the Royal Dublin Fusiliers was interesting as, while the King's speech had been enriched with medieval concepts of chivalry, the letter made much of the Imperial service of the regiment, noting its long service in India and more recent combat experience in South Africa. The letter to the Royal Munster Fusiliers similarly focused on their long service in India, noting that Robert Clive had been their first Colonel. The Royal Irish Regiment were commended for almost 240 years' service and their role in the campaigns of William III and the Duke of Marlborough. The Connaught Rangers were praised for the fine fighting record which they established in the Peninsular War, especially at Bussaco and Badajoz.³⁸

The parade and the laying up of colours at Windsor Castle in June 1922 was not quite to mark the end of the Southern Irish Regiments. It was to be 31 July 1922 before the remaining cadres of the regiments were disbanded and the fact that the *Irish Times* later informed its readers that this date was the official disbandment date, suggests that some loose ends still required to be tied up.³⁹ Indeed, while the *Army List* for

³⁷Whitton, *History of the Leinster Regiment*, volume 2, pp. 545-548. See also Wyllly, *Crown and Company*, volume II, pp. 152-153.

³⁸Geogheagan, *History of the Royal Irish Regiment*, p. 141; Jourdain and Fraser, *The Connaught Rangers*, Volume I, p. 578; S. McCance, *History of the Royal Munster Fusiliers: Vol. II From 1861 to 1922 (Disbandment)*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1927), pp. 90-91 ; and Wyllly, *Crown and Company*, volume II, p. 154.

³⁹Wyllly, *Crown and Company*, volume II, p. 155; and the *Irish Times*, 19 September 1923.

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January 1923 noted each of the Southern Irish infantry regiments as disbanded, they showed a handful of officers still serving in them. Mostly, these were officers in the militia battalions, six in the Connaught Rangers, three in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and four in the Leinster Regiment, whose ranks were purely honorary by 1922, although the case of Major J. T. Gorman of the Connaught Rangers demonstrates just the sort of 'loose ends' which it took some time to tie up. He was seconded to the School of Cookery in Poona, India and being close to retirement, it was presumably felt that it was better not to transfer him formally to another regiment.⁴⁰

While the Secretary of State for War had engaged in discussions with Sir James Craig, over the 'Northern Ireland Regiments' between December 1921 and February 1922, it took some time to resolve which of these regiments, or rather battalions, would be preserved. The problem was that no regiment was entirely 'Northern Ireland' based, with all having some historic recruiting area in the territory of what became the Irish Free State. The Royal Ulster Rifles (renamed from the Royal Irish Rifles on 1 January 1921) had a recruiting area based on Belfast and Counties Antrim and Down, although County Louth had also been regarded as part of their recruiting area until, at least 1908, when the Royal Irish Rifles were disbanded. The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers with a recruiting area taking in Derry City and Counties Londonderry, Fermanagh and Tyrone was also seen to be a viable regiment, having lost only Donegal. However, the Royal Irish Fusiliers, with a recruiting area based on Counties Armagh, Cavan, Louth and Monaghan was seen as particularly vulnerable as only Armagh was part of the new Northern Ireland state.

The Government of Ireland Act established a devolved government in the six counties of Northern Ireland but left this government with very limited powers. The British army remained a reserved service, run directly by the government in London, to which Northern Ireland made a small Imperial contribution. The complex financial arrangements, calculated in 1919-20 when the economy in what was to become Northern Ireland was experiencing a post-war boom, but became increasingly problematic by 1922-23. Thus, while James Craig was to emerge as a dogged defender of the three Ulster-based infantry regiments and the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, he was placed in the position of a supplicant in his dealings with the War Office. The complex security problems of 1921-22 meant that he was scarcely in a position to cajole the British government given that the large Ulster Special Constabulary relied increasingly on grants from the British exchequer.⁴¹

⁴⁰*Army List*, January 1923, columns 1505-12, 1529-36 and 1545-52.

⁴¹Patrick Buckland, *James Craig: Lord Craigavon*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), pp. 67-93; Patrick Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland 1921-39*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), pp. 81-91 and pp. 179-205; D. S. Johnson, *The Northern Ireland Economy, 1914-1939* in Liam Kennedy and Philip 155

As early as January 1922 James Craig assured the Annual General Meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council that he had secured a promise that the three Ulster regiments would be retained.⁴² He outlined the situation in more detail to his Cabinet, with the relevant minute noting, 'It had been the intention of the British Government to disband all Irish Regiments, but the Prime Minister hoped that his representations would lead to the retention of the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, of four out of our six Battalions, of two Militia Battalions, and possibly of the North Irish Horse. The matter was still sub judice.'⁴³

In reality, War Office policy regarding the fate of the regiments which recruited in Northern Ireland was hopelessly confused. This is made particularly clear by two letters from the Secretary of State for War, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans to James Craig. In the first of these, of February 1922 it was stated,

I have been considering your letter of the 17th regarding the disbandment of the Royal Irish Fusiliers.

I am afraid that as the disbandment of the six regiments [i.e. the five Southern Irish regiments and the Royal Irish Fusiliers] was definitely and formally a Cabinet decision it must be considered as a chose jugée [final judgement]. No action was of course taken until I had submitted the Cabinet decisions to His Majesty with a full explanation ... I am exceedingly afraid that it would be quite wrong of me to suggest in any way that this decision is likely to be revoked; it is fairer to say on the contrary that I think no purpose will be served by pressing a request for its revocation.⁴⁴

By the following month the situation had, in fact, been reviewed, with Worthington-Evans writing,

I am glad to be able to let you know that the Cabinet have decided that in spite of the reductions consequent on the Geddes report, Ulster is to retain at any

Ollerenshaw (eds), *An Economic History of Ulster 1820-1929*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 184-223; and R. J. Lawrence, *The Government of Northern Ireland: Public Finance and Public Services 1921-1964*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 38-42.

⁴²*Fermanagh Times*, 2 February 1922.

⁴³PRONI CAB/4/30, Cabinet meeting conclusions, 26 January 1922.

⁴⁴PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter Worthington-Evans to Craig, 23 February 1922.

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rate for the year 1922/23 four battalions instead of the two which I was afraid was all that would be possible.

I was instructed by the Cabinet to discuss with you which these four battalions should be, and I should be glad to have your views. In my opinion it would be best to retain the two battalions of the Ulster Rifles and one each of the Inniskillings and the Royal Irish Fusiliers, and to treat the two latter as linked regiments. This would have the result of keeping alive the Royal Irish Fusiliers at any rate for the present.⁴⁵

Craig ultimately concurred with the War Office decision that the Royal Ulster Rifles would remain a two-battalion regiment, with one battalion each of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Royal Irish Fusiliers. The fusilier battalions would retain their old regimental names but, essentially, work as sister battalions under the Cardwell-Childers regimental system.⁴⁶

This 'final judgement' of February 1922 was overturned due to considerable lobbying by James Craig of various cabinet ministers, including Austen Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Craig was also apparently undaunted by the tone of Worthington-Evans' initial letter and raised considerable objections to the reduction of the 'Ulster Regiments'. He noted that these regiments were being treated entirely differently to two battalion regiments in England and Scotland, where no reductions were envisaged, stating, 'I consider it unfair that Ulster Regiments should be differently treated, as Ulster remains part of the United Kingdom for Army purposes as much as Yorkshire or London.' Craig continued by stressing the very good recruiting record of the regiments, which he claimed was better than most English Regiments. On the issue of regimental seniority, Craig noted that the third battalions of the Grenadier and Coldstream Guards 'are only of very recent origin' and should be disbanded rather than any of the Ulster Regiments. Craig proposed that the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Irish Fusiliers should retain a part-time militia battalion as a second battalion, but the government's decision not to reform the militia in the aftermath of the Great

⁴⁵PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter Worthington-Evans to Craig, 27 March 1922.

⁴⁶PRONI CAB/8/R/3, 'Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments', letter Craig to Worthington-Evans 30 March 1922; *Fermanagh Times*, 6 April 1922; Marcus Cunliffe, *The Royal Irish Fusiliers, 1793-1968*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 369-371; and Frank Fox, *The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in the Second World War, 1939-45*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1951), p. 3.

War saw no action on this.⁴⁷ The promises made by Craig regarding recruitment were coming to fruition as early as 1923, when it was reported that recruitment in Northern Ireland was, 'very satisfactory' due to the improved political situation.⁴⁸

Craig's lobbying on behalf of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Irish Fusiliers received strong approbation from some. The Armagh Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution against the disbandment of the Royal Irish Fusiliers which essentially endorsed Craig's solution of them surviving as a single battalion regiment.⁴⁹ Similarly, Dr Edward Thompson, a resident of Omagh, reproduced the correspondence he had with Craig and Lieutenant Colonel Wilfrid Spender, the Northern Ireland Cabinet Secretary, reflecting on Craig's, 'almost superhuman efforts ... to preserve even the 1st Battalions of these glorious regiments.'⁵⁰ However, other elements within civic unionism and the regiments themselves were less than impressed by Craig's efforts. William Copeland Trimble, editor of the *Impartial Reporter*, who had written a brief history of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, addressed the Enniskillen Urban Council speaking of the, 'disaster to the traditions and spirit of the Inniskillings' which the loss of one battalion would cause. Councillor Clarke spoke of the need for further agitation on this issue and gave his opinion that if the Second Battalion was disbanded, the first would soon follow.⁵¹ The Guardians of the Poor Law Union of Clogher, the Rural District Council of Clogher, the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, the Grand Jury of County Fermanagh and the Grand Jury of the County of the City of Londonderry similarly passed resolutions protesting against the disbandment of 2 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, with the Commissioner of Cookstown Rural District Council also lodging an official protest.⁵² Wilfrid Spender was convinced that a group of officers in 2 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers had engaged in a political campaign to have their battalion saved. This involved lobbying various Northern Ireland Cabinet ministers, including Sir Richard Dawson Bates, the Minister for Home Affairs. Spender

⁴⁷PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter Craig to Worthington-Evans, undated but circa 1 March 1922.

⁴⁸The General Annual Report on the British Army for the year ending 30th September 1923 (Cmd. 2272) (1924), pp. 6 and 27.

⁴⁹PRONI HA/5/899, Armagh Chamber of Commerce: resolution protesting against the disbandment of the Irish regiments, 28 February 1922.

⁵⁰*Fermanagh Times*, 28 September 1922. The original letters are preserved in PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments.

⁵¹*Fermanagh Times*, 6 July 1922.

⁵²PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments; and HA 5/899, contains copies of these resolutions and the associated correspondence.

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felt that these officers owed Craig, 'thanks for all the personal trouble that he took' in having the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers retained as a regiment and believed that the battalion Commanding Officer could not have told his officers of the political representations which had been made.⁵³

While the editors of some local newspapers, namely, J. G. Glendinning of *The Derry Standard* and Delmege Trimble of the *Armagh Guardian*, lobbied the government they did not seek to orchestrate any wider action, such as petitions. The limit of the popular campaign to save 2 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers seems to have been the publication of a statement, 'Why the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers should be preserved intact' which claimed to be, 'A resumé of the various protests made by battalions and individuals of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions, against the disbandment of a portion of the regiment' by *The Derry Standard*.⁵⁴ This emphasised the seniority of the regiment, its historic links to Ulster, its fine recruiting record and battle honours. Indeed, much was made of the seniority of the regiment over the Royal Irish Fusiliers and the fact that the Royal Irish Fusiliers recruiting area was now very small.⁵⁵

This led Craig to reopen the issue of the disbandment of a battalion of each of these regiments, despite his acquiescence in the War Office decision of March. Trying an indirect approach, Craig wrote to Winston Churchill, claiming that immediately before his assassination, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson had been making representations on behalf of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Irish Fusiliers and asking, 'if it were possible to get the last wish of the Field-Marshal carried out.'⁵⁶ This indirect approach failed however, as Churchill simply forwarded Craig's letter to the War Office and Worthington-Evans was less than pleased to see the matter reopened. Worthington-Evans reminded Craig of his agreement to the retention of four battalions, with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Irish Fusiliers as single battalion regiments and

⁵³PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letters Spender to Dawson Bates, 27 June 1922; and Spender to Commanding Officer, 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 28 June 1922.

⁵⁴The original document is a single sheet of paper which, at the bottom of the page, notes it was printed by 'The Derry Standard' - there is no indication of which issue of that paper, if any, it was circulated with.

⁵⁵PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter J. C. Glendinning to H. M. Pollock, Minister for Finance, Belfast, 22 June 1922, attaching printed statement, 'Why the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers should be preserved intact'.

⁵⁶PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter Craig to Churchill, 27 June 1922.

concluded, 'I am writing this note to ask you to do all you can at your end to act up to the decision in which you concurred in March last.'⁵⁷

Following this James Craig and Wilfrid Spender, writing on behalf of the Northern Ireland Cabinet, reminded those petitioning the Northern Ireland Government regarding the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers or Royal Irish Fusiliers that the army was a responsibility of the British Parliament at Westminster and that concerns should be raised with MPs there.⁵⁸ Charles Curtis Craig, James Craig's brother and MP at Westminster for South Antrim, wrote of the 'selfishness' of some officers of the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, noting that their campaign to save their battalion was completely at odds with the stance taken by their Colonel, Lieutenant General Sir Archibald Murray, who had agreed to the sacrifice of this battalion so that the Royal Irish Fusiliers could survive. Charles Craig concluded, 'By taking up the attitude they are doing, the Inniskillings are alienating the sympathies of all the Ulster Members here.'⁵⁹

The 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, who faced disbandment or amalgamation as a result of the Geddes Axe, was the only regular cavalry regiment which the Northern Ireland Government campaigned for. This was due to the lobbying of Sir James Craig by officers of the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons and William Copeland Trimble, who had raised the service squadron of the regiment during the Great War. Ultimately, Craig was able to intervene to have one squadron of the regiment preserved as part of an amalgamated regiment, joining two squadrons of the 5th Dragoon Guards and named from 1922 to 1927 by the inelegant title, 5/6th Dragoons.⁶⁰

There were to be curious echoes of the Southern Irish Regiments throughout the rest of the twentieth century British army. As late as 1938 the London Irish Rifles, part of the then expanding Territorial Army, announced that their companies bore the names

⁵⁷PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter Worthington-Evans to Craig, 3 July 1922.

⁵⁸PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letters, Spender to Colonel H. Irvine, 19 July 1922,

⁵⁹PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, letter C. C. Craig to Spender, 12 July 1922.

⁶⁰PRONI CAB/8/R/3, Correspondence concerning War Office proposals for the disbandment of certain Irish regiments, Disbandment of Irish Regiments, letter from Lieutenant Colonel Michael Rimington to Craig, 10 May 1922 and letter W. C. Trimble to Craig, 29th March 1922 and Roger Evans, *The Story of The Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1951), pp. 160-180.

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of the disbanded regiments and invited former soldiers of those regiments to enlist.⁶¹ When the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, Royal Ulster Rifles and Royal Irish Fusiliers were amalgamated in 1968 they were given the title of the Royal Irish Rangers, a clear reference to the long-disbanded Connaught Rangers. When the Royal Irish Rangers were, in turn, amalgamated with the Ulster Defence Regiment in 1991, the title of the Royal Irish Regiment was resurrected.⁶²

⁶¹*The Times*, 3rd May 1938.

⁶²Keith Jeffery, 'The British Army and Ireland since 1922' in Bartlett and Jeffery, *A Military History of Ireland*, pp. 431-458 (pp. 449 & 456).