

Michael Brennan's War of Independence

**by
Sixth Class**

St. Conaire's National School

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INTRODUCTION

Lieutenant General Michael Brennan died on October 24th, 1986 at the age of 90. He had a long life of service to Ireland. Michael Brennan's story is very interesting. It is also very important because he was part of the War of Independence in Clare. Michael Brennan also contributed to the building of a free Ireland after independence from Britain. Our sixth class decided to study Michael's life because of his connection to Shannon.



Figure 1 Michael Brennan, Courtesy National Library of Ireland

EARLY YEARS

Michael Brennan was born in Meelick, Co. Clare on February 2nd, 1896. His parents had a small farm and Michael attended school locally. He knew the area around Meelick and Cratloe very well. When Michael was a boy Ireland was still governed by Britain. Ireland had been looking for Home Rule but did not yet manage to get it. Michael went into Limerick to attend secondary school at St. Munchin's College. By 1912 the British government promised Home Rule for Ireland. However, the Unionists objected and Home Rule was stopped. A world war broke out in 1914 and lasted for four years until 1918. Millions of people were killed.

Irish Nationalists were upset with the British government and started campaigning for independence. When he was 15 Michael joined Fianna Éireann which was a movement like the scouts. His brothers Patrick and Austin were in the Fianna before him. In 1913 Michael helped set up a branch of the Irish Volunteers in Limerick. This was the start of his work for Irish freedom. The following year, in 1914, Michael moved to Dublin to study wireless telegraphy because he hoped to become a ship's radio operator. This was an important move because Michael then met other men who also wanted Irish freedom.

1916

1916 was very important for Michael and for Ireland. Michael heard that the police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, was going to take the shotguns off the local Irish Volunteers in Clare. He was very annoyed about this and he said the Volunteers should "shoot anybody who attempted to seize their arms." He was arrested and was charged with "inciting to rebellion". The judge did not want to send Michael to prison because he was very young but, in the end, he was sentenced to three months of hard labour in Limerick Jail. This showed that Michael had a very strong will and he was a confident leader.

Michael Brennan's Witness Statement to the Bureau of Military History tells us what he did later in 1916 during and after the Easter Rising. At first, the Rising was a failure and Michael was arrested again. He was sent to a special prison called an internment camp in Frongoch in Wales. Our class went to the Clare County Museum in Ennis to learn more about 1916 and the War of Independence.

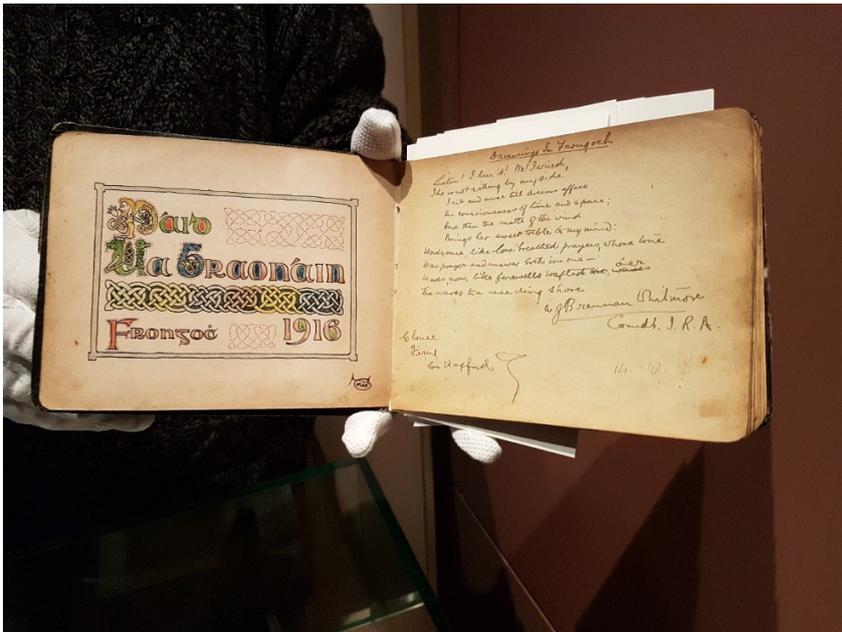


Figure 2 Patrick Brennan's Autograph Book in Clare County Museum

We were able to see Patrick Brennan's Autograph Book on display. Michael autographed his brother's book. This book is a very important part of Irish history. Michael was released at the end of 1916 and returned to Ireland. He started campaigning for Sinn Féin in Clare as well as working for the Volunteers, now called the IRA. He was arrested again and even went on hunger strike. Fighting for Irish freedom was now Michael's full-time work.

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE BEGINS

In 1918 Sinn Féin won most of the seats in the general election. Éamon de Valera was one of the most popular leaders of Sinn Féin. The new Sinn Féin Members of Parliament refused to go to Parliament in Westminster and started their own parliament in Dublin. This new Irish parliament was called Dáil Éireann and it met in the Mansion House in Dublin on January 21st, 1919.

On the same day in Co. Tipperary, IRA volunteers ambushed and killed two RIC policemen escorting gelignite to the quarry at Soloheadbeg. The ambush was the start of the War of Independence in Ireland. This war would last for two years.

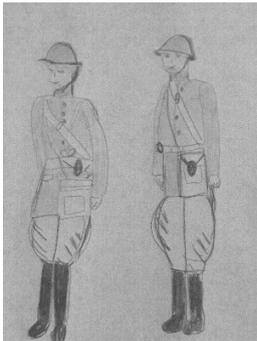


Figure 3 Black and Tans by Geraldine

The Irish War of Independence was a new kind of war. In World War 1 large armies fought each other on large battlefields. In Ireland, the IRA did not have many weapons, so they had to steal them from RIC barracks and farmers. Also, the IRA were volunteers while the RIC were an armed police force. The RIC was larger than the IRA and the British Army would help the RIC. The RIC and the British Army had a big advantage because they were larger and had more and better weapons. So, the IRA invented a new type of warfare called “guerrilla warfare”.



Figure 4 Michael Collins, IRA leader, by Niamh

The IRA Volunteers set up ambushes on quiet roads, stole weapons and forced the RIC to stay in their barracks. For example, the IRA in County Clare attacked the RIC barracks in Newmarket-on-Fergus with the help of local people. They stole guns and ammunition. Actions such as this happened all over Clare from 1919 to 1921. In East Clare, the local brigade of the IRA was led by Michael Brennan.

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE IN EAST CLARE

41-1-068

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY
No. W.S. 1068

ROINN COSANTA.
BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.
DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1068

Witness
Lieut.-Gen. Michael Brennan,
Simonscourt House,
Simonscourt Road,
Bellshbridge,
Dublin.

Identity.
Brigade Adjutant East Clare Brigade;
" Commander do.
Column Commander East Clare Flying Column.

Subject.
National activities, East-Clare,
1911-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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File No. S.257 Form B.S.M. 2

Figure 5 Cover page of Michael Brennan's Witness Statement to Bureau of Military History

In 1955 Michael Brennan gave a long statement to the Bureau of Military History. This statement is one hundred and twenty pages long. Michael signed the Witness Statement on January 11th, 1955. In this statement Michael tells the story of what he did between 1911 and 1922. The statement contains a lot of information about his involvement with “national activities” at this time. In 1980, he published his statement in the book *The War in Clare 1911-1921*. He tells some exciting stories about his time; he often travelled in disguise just like Michael Collins, the IRA leader.

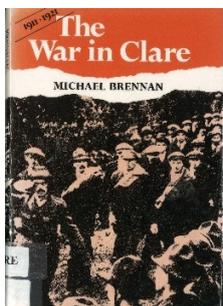


Figure 6 Michael Brennan's Account of *The War in Clare 1911 – 1920*, Courtesy Shannon Library

IRELAND IN 1920

In the war in Clare, Michael led ambushes on the RIC and British forces. Life was hard in Clare in 1920. Many families on both sides of the war lost loved ones and friends. People could not move around freely. Many people were arrested too. The IRA organised flying columns to attack police or soldiers and then they left quickly to go into hiding. A flying column never stayed in one place. Michael Brennan led an ambush near Meelick in early 1920. In his book he describes how the ambush was set up:

The lorry moved into the position and I saw it was occupied by the Black and Tans. The whistle brought a burst of fire from front and side. My party all aimed at the driver, but though they knocked off his cap and hit nearly everybody else on the lorry, he was unscathed. His steering column was broken though and the lorry went out of control, rolling in against the wall where we were standing. The driver jumped clean over the bonnet and bolted, pursued by one of our men. Very few shots were fired at us as most of the RIC men were down and the survivors threw away their rifles and ran for it. They were being pursued, but I recalled all our men as we had our rifles. A check-up showed that a District Inspector and five of his men were dead, four got away, but two of them were wounded. (The War in Clare, page 69)



Figure 7 Memorial at Meelick, County Clare

Michael and his brothers spent much of 1920 on the run from the police and army. They would be arrested or maybe even killed if they were found. Life on the run was hard and the volunteers slept outdoors or in sheds. They were fed by farmers and their families. Michael tells us what the men in a flying column would do:

We very quickly discovered that moving around in a group gave much greater security and without any actual orders being issued other men on the run drifted to us and our numbers grew. Quite a number of men whose houses had been burned by the British came along. All the best known men were certain of being shot by Black and Tans if they were found, so they naturally preferred to be always armed and in a position to hit back. . . . When an operation was intended, as many extra men as were required were summoned from the nearest battalion area, e.g. about ten men from the Newmarket-on-Fergus area joined us at Glenwood, for a later trip to Galway extra men from Scariff-Feakle district went with us. (The War in Clare, page 71)

A VERY SPECIAL PRISONER

On June 26th, 1920 three British officers were captured by the IRA while fishing on the River Blackwater near Fermoy in Co. Cork. There was a struggle and one of the officers was shot. The IRA left the wounded man and his friend behind. They escaped with Brigadier General CHT Lucas. General Lucas was moved around Co. Limerick for a few days. He was then taken across the River Shannon to County Clare. The British Army were searching everywhere for their missing general. The East Clare Brigade had the job of hiding General Lucas. This is how Michael Brennan met General Lucas.



Figure 8 General Lucas and his guards, Michael Brennan is on the right at the back, Courtesy Olive Carey

The IRA kept their very special prisoner in a small farmhouse called Hastings Cottage. Today, this farmhouse is a ruin and is in the town of Shannon. It is very close to our school. Our class went on a field trip to see it. You can see the layout of the cottage still today. It is protected by Dúchas na Sionna. We were met by local historian, Olive Carey, who told us the story of the capture of General Lucas.



Figure 9 Hastings Farmhouse today

General Lucas was kept hidden in a small room in Hastings Cottage. He got on very well with his guards and they treated him well. Michael Brennan felt very sorry for General Lucas because his wife, Poppy, was left behind in England. She had already been separated from her husband because he had fought in the Great War in France. In fact, Mrs. Lucas gave birth to a baby boy while her husband was captured in Clare. General Lucas kept a secret diary while he was captured. Also, he was allowed to send letters to Poppy. General Lucas loved fishing. He was once taken fishing by the river bailiff for this area. He found this very funny because it was illegal. He liked to drink whiskey and Michael Brennan wrote about General Lucas:

In addition, he was an expensive luxury as he drank a bottle of whiskey every day which I hated like hell to pay for. I was very sorry for him and more so for his young wife in England, who was very ill partly after a baby, but mostly, I imagine, from shock. Through Jack Coughlan, who worked in Limerick Post Office, I arranged a system whereby Lucas wrote to his wife and got a letter from her every day. I put him on his

honour that would make no use of this facility to harm us or to escape and I gave him his letters unopened. He could understand being able to send letters, but receiving them impressed him very much with the machine we appeared to control. He was keen on exercise and he spent most of his day saving hay, while he played bridge every night until about 2 a.m. ((The War in Clare, page 54)

General Lucas was released in County Limerick by the IRA and went home to his wife and son. He had been treated well and did not give much information away about those who had captured him. One of General Lucas's granddaughters sent our class a special e-mail telling us about her grandfather's time in our local area. She told us that his only complaint was boredom!

AFTER THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

The War of Independence ended in July 1921. A peace treaty was signed and the fighting stopped. The British army went home. A new country called the Irish Free State was set up. Michael Brennan joined the Free State army and became an officer in that army. Michael stayed in the army and took part in the Irish Civil War. He became Chief of Staff and retired from the army in 1940. He was a lieutenant-general which is the highest rank an Irish soldier can become. After his retirement he worked in the Office of Public Works until 1961.

AN OUTSTANDING LEADER



Many important people attended Michael Brennan's funeral in Dublin in 1986. He was buried with full military honours which is a sign of great respect. Michael was a leader from a very young age. He believed in Irish freedom and he fought for this. He was very effective in the East Clare Brigade during the War of Independence. He took part in many ambushes and attacks. However, he also treated General Lucas with great kindness. He helped set up the Irish Army and became its most senior officer. Finally, Michael Brennan was an outstanding leader who showed bravery and kindness.

*Figure 10
Lieutenant General
Michael Brennan,
from the Limerick
Leader October
1986*

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The Capture of Brigadier General Lucas by Aideen Carroll and Tom Toomey, Atlas of the Irish Revolution

Talk to 6th class in Clare County Museum by Curator John Rattigan, February 12th, 2020

E-mails from Olive Carey, Dúchas na Sionna, March 5th, 2020

E-mail to Sixth Class from Ruth Wheeler, March 11th, 2020

Drawing of the Black and Tans by Geraldine

Drawing of Michael Collins by Niamh

Photograph of Meelick Memorial taken in January 2020

www.scoilnet.ie for history information

Obituary of Michael Brennan in The Limerick Leader, October 1986 (“Death of Limerick and Clare freedom fighter”)

Thank you

We would like to thank Olive Carey, John Rattigan, Ruth Wheeler, Dominic Haugh and Shannon Library for their help with our project.