

Caves, Guerrilla Warfare and the Irish Revolution

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A hitherto overlooked aspect of guerrilla tactics during the Irish revolution was the use of caves as hideouts or as places to stash arms. At present twenty-four natural caves have been identified; a further seventeen sites have been described in various sources as ‘caves’, but further fieldwork is necessary to confirm whether these are natural caverns, artificial structures or earthen dugouts. In Ireland natural caves almost always occur in limestone, with the exception of sea caves, which can be found in various geologies. Those caves used during the War of Independence and Civil War are located in remote parts of the landscape, such as along the coast, or in uplands, boggy areas and marginal scrubland. In general, caves were used to a greater extent during the War of Independence than in the Civil War, as their locations during the earlier conflict were not usually known of by the British army, whereas in the latter conflict individuals from opposing sides had a shared knowledge of their locations, thereby making them of less use to either side.

Caves provided ideal places in which to store arms and ammunition, particularly those with inconspicuous entrances that led into large subterranean systems. In 1925 caver Ernest Baker discovered arms hidden in Pollnagollum, County Clare, this discovery leading to the naming of the chamber as ‘Gunman’s Cave’; at sixteen kilometres in length, Pollnagollum is the largest cave system in the country. In 1934 caver Jack Coleman found arms

stashed in a butter box in Ovens Cave, County Cork, including a Lewis machine gun and a Lee–Enfield .303 rifle. He also discovered six rifles and a bayonet in a cave at Carriagour in the same county. Cloghermore Cave, County Kerry is locally known to have been a hideaway for ammunition and weapons during the War of Independence. The shell of a hand grenade was discovered there during archaeological excavations in 1998–99. In the 1980s cavers discovered an arms cache in an isolated cave in the Glenaniff Valley, County Leitrim. Documentary sources reveal that a cave on the coast at Bunmahon, County Waterford was used to store arms during the War of Independence; local members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) oiled and cleaned guns in this cave. Rifles taken by the IRA from a Royal Irish Constabulary barracks at Ballycastle were hidden in a cave on Fairhead, County Antrim.

The secrecy caves offered for stashing arms was similarly advantageous for concealing people. Lake Cave, Carrigacrumph, County Cork; coastal caves at Dunowen and Dunnycove in west Cork; Copper’s Cave, County Galway; ‘The Rabhach’s Cave’ and a cave at Fehanagh, County Kerry; ‘The IRA Cave’ on Benbulbin Mountain; and caves at the foot of Sheemore Mountain were all used as IRA hideouts. Perhaps the best-known cave refuge is Ó Máille’s Cave in the Maumturk Mountains. Here, a natural cave or fissure was artificially enlarged, a wall breached by a doorway and window was built across the entrance, and the interior was fitted with a bed and fireplace. This was the secret retreat of IRA activist Pádraic Ó Máille, founder member of the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin. He spent Christmas night 1920 here. A cave at Glencar, County Sligo served as an IRA hideout for thirty-four men (including ‘Sligo’s Noble Six’) over six weeks in 1922; its location continues to be guarded with a level of secrecy. Shattered glass and pottery fragments presently strewn about the cave floor probably relate to the 1922 occupation. Similarly, a leather shoe embedded in the mud floor of Tully Cave several kilometres to the south may relate to its use as an IRA hideout during the ‘Troubles’. In terms of material culture, documents confiscated from Mallow Income Tax Office by the IRA during the War of Independence were burned in a cave at Lover’s Leap, just outside the town.

While Commandant John Fahy, Captain Martin Fahy, Captain Thomas Fahy and William Howley were billeted in a cave at Doonally outside Gort, they could see and hear British forces combing the mountain while searching for them, but their hideout went undetected. Caves such as this were highly effective refuges,



Fig. 1 A Lewis machine gun and a Lee–Enfield .303 rifle resting on a butter box, seventy-five metres inside the entrance of Ovens Cave, County Cork. [Source: Photo by Jack Coleman, reproduced courtesy of the Speleological Union of Ireland]

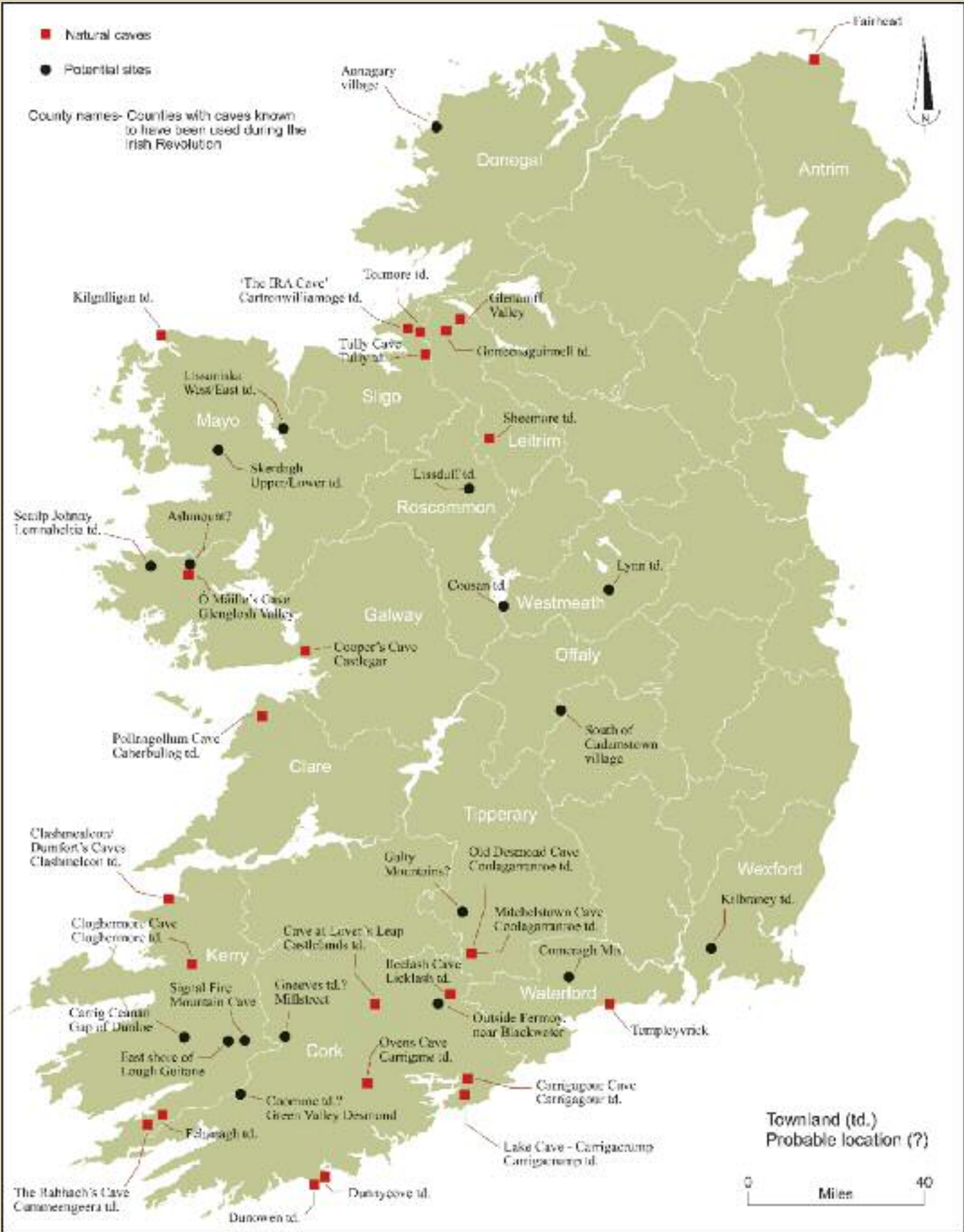


Fig. 2 Map showing natural caves associated with the Irish revolution. It also includes a number of potential ‘cave’ sites that require further fieldwork and investigation. [Source: Compiled from multiple sources by Marion Dowd]



Fig. 3 The latter stages of the Civil War in County Kerry were characterised by vicious and ruthless exchanges. A siege of six republicans took place on 16–18 April 1923 at Dumfort's cave, Clashmealcon, that resulted in the killing of two National Army (NA) soldiers, Private O'Neill from Nile Street in Dublin and Lieutenant H.D.E. Pierson from Limerick. Two anti-Treaty IRA men, Tom McGrath and Patrick O'Shea, fell to their deaths while trying to escape, while a third, Timothy Lyons (Kilflynn), was killed by NA forces in the course of giving himself up. The remaining three men – James McEnery (Lixnaw), Edward Greaney (Ballyduff) and Reginald Hathaway (Slough, England) – surrendered and were taken prisoner to Ballymullen Barracks, where they were executed. [Source: Frank Coyne. See T. Doyle, *The Civil War in Kerry* (Cork, 2008), pp. 297–300]



Fig. 4 Memorial to anti-Treaty IRA members killed at Clashmealcon Caves. [Source: Michael Diggin]

but landowners occasionally faced consequences. Mitchelstown Cave, County Tipperary – the oldest commercial show cave in the country – as well as the adjacent Old Desmond Cave provided shelter to members of the IRA flying column (3rd Tipperary Brigade) during the War of Independence. As a reprisal for sheltering the republicans, the home of the family who owned the cave was burnt to the ground.

The Clashmealcon Caves on the north Kerry coast are arguably the most famous cave hideout of the Irish revolution. In 1923 Timothy 'Aero' Lyons and five IRA Volunteers occupied the caves for three days and two nights, besieged by National Army troops. Two of the Volunteers attempted to escape by night, but fell from the sheer cliff face and were drowned. The next morning mines were detonated at the cave, followed by a gunfire and grenade attack. Eventually, Lyons surrendered. A rope was lowered down and he began climbing up, but the rope snapped, causing the National Army troops to open fire and kill Lyons. The surviving Volunteers surrendered and were later executed. The Clashmealcon Caves event is considered one of the last acts of extreme violence of the Irish Civil War.