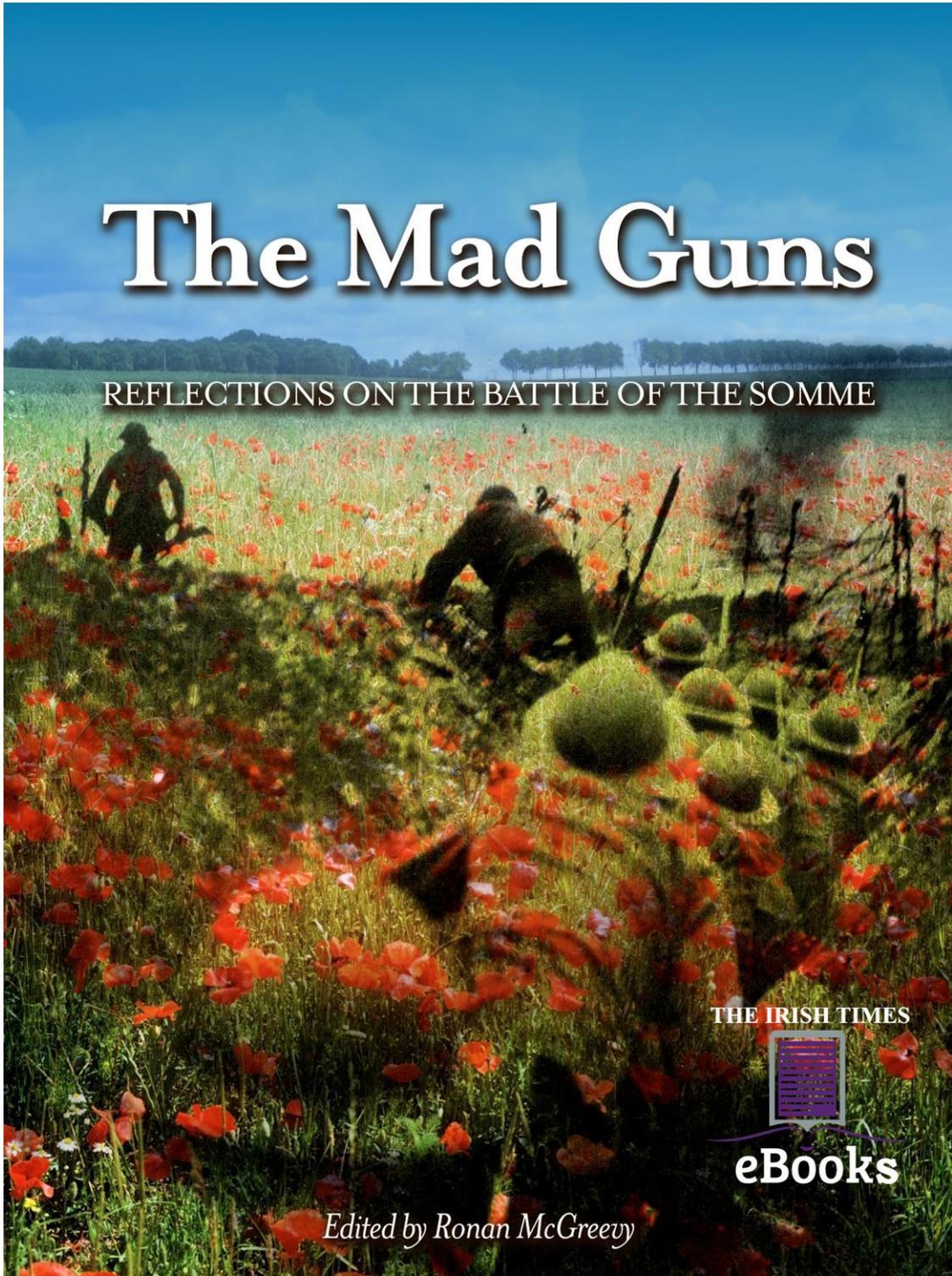


# The Mad Guns

REFLECTIONS ON THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME



THE IRISH TIMES



eBooks

*Edited by Ronan McGreevy*

**IRISH TIMES BOOKS**

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# To my daughter Betty, the gift of God

In wiser days, my darling rosebud, blown  
To beauty proud as was your mother's prime,  
In that desired, delayed, incredible time,  
You'll ask why I abandoned you, my own,  
And the dear heart that was your baby throne,  
To dice with death. And oh! they'll give you rhyme  
And reason: some will call the thing sublime,  
And some decry it in a knowing tone.  
So here, while the mad guns curse overhead,  
And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor,  
Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,  
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,—  
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,  
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.

*Tom Kettle, killed at the Battle of Ginchy, 9 September, 1916*



*The mad guns: The British expended 1.7 million shells in a week long bombardment of the German lines before the infantry went over the top on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916. "Nothing could survive the bombardment in the area covered by it," General Sir Henry Rawlinson, the man commanding the British Fourth Army, stated. Unfortunately, the area covered by the shells was too large, many of the shells were duds and the Germans had taken shelter from the bombardment in deep bunkers.*



*One of the few photographs from the first day of the Battle of the Somme show men from the Tyneside Irish brigade going over the top. By the end of the day the brigade had suffered 70 per cent casualties. "It took two years to train them and 10 minutes to kill them," one observer said.*

French general Marshal Ferdinand Foch was appointed Supreme Allied Commander in late March 1918. It was at a time when the German Spring Offensive threatened defeat on the Allies. Foch was credited with reversing the German gains and then turning potential defeat into victory. At his command, the Allies launched a 100 day offensive which finally broke the German army and led to the Armistice on November 11th, 1918.

At the request of a special correspondent for The Irish Times in Paris, Foch penned this tribute to the Irish men who died in France during the First World War.

It was published to mark the 10th anniversary of Armistice Day. The final paragraph is inscribed on a new memorial from France remembering the Irish war dead of the Franco-Prussian War, the first World War and the second World War.

The memorial in Glasnevin Cemetery was unveiled by President Francois Hollande in July 2016.

## **The heroic dead of Ireland – Marshal Foch’s tribute**

*Saturday, 10 November 1928  
From a special correspondent*

Today Marshal Foch responded to my request for a special Armistice Day message to the People of Ireland through the Irish Times with the following tribute to the heroism of the Irish race during the world war. “The heroic dead of Ireland have every right to the homage of the living; for they proved in some of the heaviest fighting of the world war that the unconquerable spirit of the Irish race, the spirit that has placed them among the world’s greatest soldiers, still lives and is stronger than ever it was.

“I had occasion to put to the test the valour of the Irishmen serving in France, and, whether they were Irishmen from the North or the South, or from one party or another, they did not fail me.

“Some of the hardest fighting in the terrible days that followed the last offensive of the Germans fell to the Irishmen, and some of their splendid regiments had to endure ordeals that might justly have taxed to breaking point the capacity of the finest troops in the world.

“Never once did the Irish fail me in those terrible days. On the Somme, in 1916, I saw the heroism of the Irishmen of the North and South, and arrived on the scene shortly after the death of that very gallant Irish gentleman Major William Redmond.

“I saw Irishmen of the North and the South forget their age-long differences and fight side by side, giving their lives freely for the common cause.

“In war there are times when the necessity for yielding up one’s life is the most urgent duty of the moment, and there were many such moments in our long-drawn out struggle.

“Those Irish heroes gave their lives freely, and, in honouring them on Sunday, I hope we shall not allow our grief to let us forget our pride in the glorious heroism of these men.

“They have left to those who come after a glorious heritage and an inspiration to duty that will live long after their names are forgotten. France will never forget her debt to the heroic Irish dead and in the hearts of the French people today their memory lives as that of the memory of the heroes of old, preserved in the tales that the old people tell to their children and their children’s children.

“I know of no better tribute to Irish valour than that paid after the armistice by one of the German High Command, whom I had known in happier days. I asked him if he could tell me when he had first noted the declining moral of his own troops, and he replied that it was after the picked troops under his command had had repeated experience of meeting the dauntless Irish troops who opposed them in the last great push that was destined to separate the British and French armies, and give the enemy their long sought victory.

“The Irishmen had endured such constant attacks that it was thought that they must be utterly demoralised, but always they seemed to find new energy with which to assail their assailants, and in the end the flower of the German Army withered and faded away as an effective force.

“When the moment came for taking the offensive all along our line, it was these same worn Irish troops that we placed in the van making call after call on their devotion, but never finding them fail us.

“In the critical days of the German offensive, when it was necessary that lives should be sacrificed by the thousand to slow down the rush of the enemy, in order that our harassed forces should have time to reform, it was on the Irish that we relied repeatedly to make these desperate stands, and we found them respond always.

“Again and again, when forlorn hopes were necessary to delay the enemy’s advance, it was the Irish who were ready for these, and at all times the soldiers of Ireland fought with the rare courage and determination that has always characterised the race on the battlefield.

Some of the flower of the Irish chivalry rests in the cemeteries that have been reserved in France, and the French people will always have these reminders of the debt that France owes to Irish valour.

“We shall always see that the graves of these heroes from across the sea are lovingly tended and we shall try to ensure that the generations that come after us shall never forget the heroic dead of Ireland.”

# Introduction

*Ronan McGreevy*

It is unlikely a battle as catastrophic as the Somme would have lasted as long as it did in the modern media age. The clamour to call off an offensive in which a vast amount of blood was expended for little gain would have been too great.

General Sir Henry Rawlinson, the general commanding the British Fourth Army, and the British commander-in-chief Field Sir Douglas Haig were the principal architects of the disaster that was the Somme.

These were the men who believed the British initial bombardment would destroy the German lines so comprehensively that the infantry could stroll through.

They were fortunate in that they were never made publicly accountable for their terrible mistakes which cost the lives of tens of thousands of men.

After the war, Rawlinson was raised to the peerage and the House of Commons passed a vote of thanks to him for his service. Haig emerged from the war as a national hero.

He received a state funeral when he died in 1928. His posthumous reputation, though, was not to survive the verdict of history. The former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George's judgment in the 1930s that Haig was a second rate commander who cared little for the lives of the men he led is the one that endures.

Haig was condemned by his own hand when his diaries were published in the 1950s. Writing in his diary on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1916, Haig observed: "The AG [adjutant-general] reported that the total casualties are estimated at over 40,000 to date. This cannot be considered severe in view of the numbers exposed and the length of line attacked."

The Battle of the Somme occurred when the public received their news from newspapers and magazines. The press was heavily censored and it also censored itself. The reporters at the front told the public what the British high command wanted them to hear.

Gains, however limited, were accentuated; the many disasters downplayed. The scale of the disaster on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in which 19,240 British soldiers were killed was not apparent for weeks afterwards.

Yet at those weeks progressed, the lengthening casualty figures published in The Irish Times and elsewhere could not lie. For subsequent generations, the Battle of the Somme became the symbol for every battle of that terrible war with its huge casualty lists, squandered lives and minimal gains.

All the nations of what was the British Empire suffered terribly in the Battle of the Somme. Ireland, then one country under British rule, was no different.

The blow of that terrible first day, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916, fell primarily on the north of Ireland. Some 2,200 men were killed with the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, but that was not the end of the province's sorrows. Four regular battalions, largely recruited in the North, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Inniskillings, the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles and 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers also suffered terrible losses.

If the first day was primarily a northern affair, the southern regiments were involved thereafter – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment at Mametz Wood, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers at Contalmaison, the 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers at the Battle of the Ancre, the Irish Guards at Lesbouefs – the list is by no means exhaustive.

We know from the splendid research of historian Tom Burnell that the first day of the Battle of the Somme was also the bloodiest day of the war for Irishmen from what is now the Republic. Some 469 were killed including 150 with the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division.

The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division's capture of the villages of Guillemont and Ginchy was a feat of arms which cost Ireland more than a thousand dead in September 1916.

Very little good emerged from the first World War, but one of its positive legacies was to stop the debased use of the words "courage", "glory" and "sacrifice".

Never again would war be seen as a glorious thing in itself. The notion that it was sweet and honourable to die for one country (*dulce et decorum est*) was denounced by the war poet Wilfred Owen as the "old lie". He was to die in October 1918 just before the war ended.

In the weeks after the first day debacle, the Bishop of Down Charles D'Arcy said of the slaughter on the Somme: "The 1st July will for all the future be remembered as the most glorious in the annals of Ulster."

Such foolish, errant talk could never be repeated after the slaughter of the Somme.

The Somme was the graveyard of a generation. There are more Irishmen lying dead in this part of France than in any other battlefield at home or abroad. Some 7,000 were killed in the Battle of the Somme, but the sorrowful association with this fertile, picturesque part of France does not end there.

Thousands of Irishmen were killed when the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) and 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) divisions bore the brunt of the German Spring Offensive in March 1918.

Their names are remembered in the little cemeteries which lie due east of the Somme battlefield and on the Pozieres memorial in the centre of the battlefield.

According to Tom Burnell's research, the first day of the German Spring Offensive, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1918, was only surpassed in bloodiness for Irish formations by the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

This eBook is based on three separate supplements published in The Irish Times to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle in 2006 and the centenary in 2016.

They take an international approach to the battle, remembering not only the Irish who died, but the combatants of all the warring nation. One hundred years on, the Somme haunts the imagination like no other battle.

In four and a half months of fighting, the combatants sustained 1.2 million casualties and yet the British only succeeded in advancing their frontline by about 10 kilometres. Each yard of ground gained cost the British 40 casualties, dead, wounded or missing and the Germans, in defence, something similar.

It was the fate of this blameless land to be the graveyard for a generation of young men from all over the world. It is its fate now to epitomise in its name, in a single word, one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes in military history.

And it remains the crucible out of which came so much change afterwards, in Europe, in France - and in the Empire. The Somme signifies for many British historians the end of the innocence, the end of blind faith, the end of communal trust in Britain's governing social class - the so-called betters who got it so badly wrong. A vast, working class body of men, both rural and urban, had been lost and society would never be the same again.

"These were the best of the nation's volunteer manhood," the military historian Richard Holmes observed, "and the merest glance at its casualty roll shows what the Somme did to the old world of brass bands and cricket fields, pit-head cottages and broad acres."

*Ronan McGreevy, July 2016*

# Casualties in Irish regiments on the first day of the Battle of the Somme

36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division (12 battalions): 5,500

\*1<sup>st</sup> Tyneside Irish (24<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers): 650

2<sup>nd</sup> Tyneside Irish (25<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers): 487

3<sup>rd</sup> Tyneside Irish (26<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers): 489

4<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish (27<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers): 550

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers (29<sup>th</sup> Division): 305

2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers (4<sup>th</sup> Division): 325

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (29<sup>th</sup> Division): 568

2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (32<sup>nd</sup> Division): (161)

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles (8<sup>th</sup> Division): 446

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers (4<sup>th</sup> Division): 400

2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment: (200)

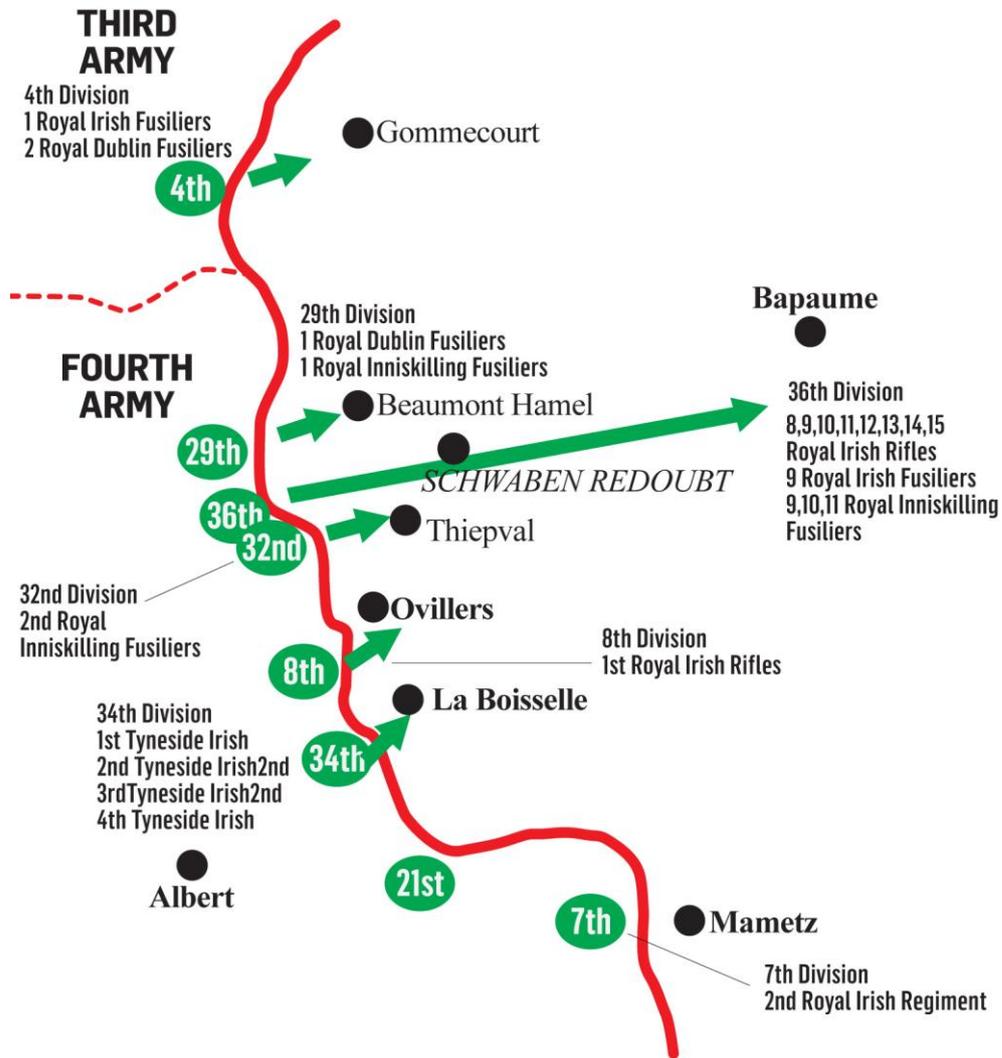
**Total = 10,080**

*\*A third were killed = 3,360*

*\*This is an approximate figure based on total casualties for the Somme. Of the 57,740 British casualties of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 19,240 (33.4 per cent) were fatalities.*

*The Tyneside Irish brigade would have been overwhelmingly English-born though most would have been of Irish descent. However, these figures do not include the hundreds of Irishmen who died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in non-Irish regiments.*

# Irish battalions in the first day of the Battle of the Somme



# COUNTING THE COST

2.4 million

Volunteers for British army, including territorial army (Conscription began early 1916. Few, if any, conscripts fought at the Somme.)

1 million+

Number of casualties on both sides at the Somme.

419,654

Number of British casualties at the Somme, including dead and wounded.

54,470

Number of British casualties on July 1st, 1916, of which

19,420

died in battle. This included

2,000+

from the Ulster Division who died. Another

2,700

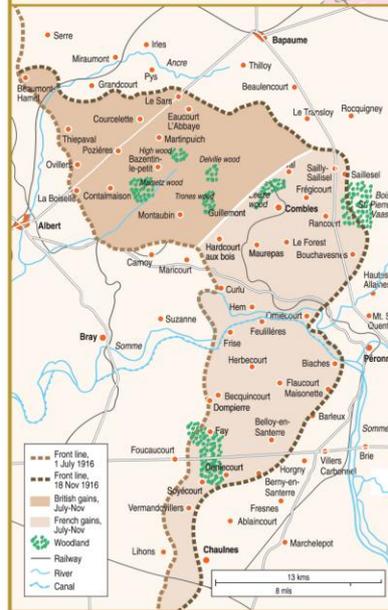
men were wounded.

500+

Battalions which suffered 500 plus casualties on the first day:

- 1st Tyneside Irish . . . . .(620)
- 4th Tyneside Irish . . . . .(539)
- Co Down Volunteers . . . . .(595)
- 1st Royal Inniskillings . . . . .(568)
- Armagh, Cavan & Monaghan Volunteers . . . . .(532)
- Leeds Pals . . . . .(528)

□ The figures quoted above for national casualties are those generally accepted by historians. In the column above, the first figure is taken from Kitchener's Army, Peter Simkins, the next four from the Imperial War Museum, and Ulster casualty figures from *The First Day on the Somme*, Martin Middlebrook.



3,190,235

The number of British casualties during 1914-18.

908,371

The number of British dead during 1914-18.

7,142,558

The number of German casualties during the war.

1,773,700

The number of German dead during 1914-18.

6,160,800

The number of French casualties during 1914-18.

1,357,800

The number of French dead during 1914-18.

7,020,000

The number of Austria-Hungary casualties

1,200,000

The number of Austria-Hungary dead

## THE TANK JOINS UP

The British high command hoped that the introduction of warfare's newest weapon, introduced to the battlefield for the first time on 15 September 1916, would help to break the deadlock on the Somme. Early tanks were slow, with a top speed of 2 mph, but were designed with the exigencies of trench warfare in mind: they were untroubled by barbed wire and impervious to rifle and machine gun fire.

The tank's promise for the British was not to be fulfilled, however. Highly vulnerable to artillery, early models were also unreliable: of the 49 available on 15 September, only 32 made it to the start line and, of these, only 21 made it into action. Mechanical breakdowns were common and many were prone to becoming ditched in shell holes and trenches. Its debut produced only small inroads into the German defences.

# How The Irish Times reported the Somme

*Joe Carroll*

The scale of the slaughter of the opening day of the Somme offensive was not immediately apparent to the editorial writer of *The Irish Times*.

“One thing is certain,” he wrote two days later, “a new confidence in our ability to complete the chosen task now fills the troops and the people of both the Western Allies.”

It took some time for the huge losses suffered, especially by the 36th (Ulster) Division, to sink home. A week elapsed before articles appeared praising the bravery of the men of Ulster.

Here is how one eye-witness described it. “I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, 1<sup>st</sup> July, as I followed their amazing attack, I feel I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world . . . When I saw the men emerge through the smoke and form up as if on parade, I could hardly believe my eyes.

“Then I saw them attack, beginning at a slow walk over No Man’s Land and then suddenly let loose as they charged over the two frontlines of enemy trenches, shouting ‘No surrender, boys’.”

Another war correspondent wrote that “it was a headlong plunge into an inferno which every moment grew in intensity. A battalion of Fusiliers were among the first to gain the front line of enemy trenches while their comrades on their flanks in their onward rush drove the Germans headlong from places which the Ulstermen had christened Enniskillen, Strabane and Omagh.”

Alongside the lengthening “Roll of Honour” of killed and wounded, the newspaper carried the tributes from the commanding officer of the division, Maj Gen Nugent, Sir Edward Carson and the Church of Ireland Primate.

The Bishop of Down, Dr D’Arcy, in a message, said: “The 1st July will for all the future be remembered as the most glorious in the annals of Ulster. Terrible, indeed, are the losses we have sustained. Many of our noblest and best young men to whom we looked for help and leadership in the time to come, have given their lives in the service of their country and for the welfare of humanity.”

Editorially, *The Irish Times* put the losses of soldiers from the north and the south of Ireland in the context of the recent proposal by the British government to exclude six counties of Ulster from the Home Rule Act of 1914. The sweetener for the nationalists was that Home Rule would enter into force immediately for the 26 counties instead of waiting for the end of the war.

This Partition plan was denounced from all quarters, including *The Irish Times*, which was the voice of unionists in southern Ireland now threatened with being cut off from their northern brethren.

In an editorial of July 6th, the newspaper praised the bravery of the Ulster division whose “young soldiers have now earned their place beside the veteran Dublins and Munsters and Inniskillings”.

The editorial writer was moved by a vision of the Somme where “these Irish soldiers from all the provinces are not merely crushing the might of Germany; they are laying the foundations of a new Ireland on the plains of France.”

The writer conceded that “the Ulster soldiers would have agreed to the exclusion of the whole of Ulster before they went to the war: but nobody has any right to assume that, having discovered the essential unity of Ireland in the trenches, they would agree today to the exclusion of all Ulster – much less to the partition of Ulster. We refuse to believe that our Nationalist soldiers would agree today be divided permanently from their fellow soldiers of the North.”

But it was only two months since the Easter Rising. While the rifles of the 36th and the 16th Divisions, firing together towards Berlin, call for unity in Ireland, their sound has been overpowered by the crack of the rebel rifles in Dublin,” the editorial commented sadly.

Another reminder of the Easter Rising was the reports of the trial for high treason of Sir Roger Casement which culminated in his execution on August 3rd in London.

The heavy casualties of the three Irish divisions (the 10th had served in Gallipoli and was now in Salonika) had by August led to a recruiting crisis as the numbers volunteering had fallen off sharply since the euphoria of August 1914. Now the numbers would have to be made up by non-Irish soldiers and there was the possibility that the Irish divisions would lose their character and even suffer “miserable extinction”.

The prospect aroused the indignation of *The Irish Times*. It denounced “our laggards throughout the four provinces” who were staying at home instead of joining up.

“The upper and professional classes and the working classes in the towns have done their share. They formed the three Irish Divisions. There are yawning gaps in these divisions now and there are tens of thousands of young countrymen in Ireland who could fill them if they choose.”

The editorial went on to accuse the British government of lacking the nerve to introduce conscription in Ireland as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

For its news coverage of the Somme, *The Irish Times* relied mainly on Press Association dispatches, the communiqués from the British high command and articles from the London *Times*. The paper did not appear to have a staff correspondent in France. Early in July it described how the war correspondents worked. At the start of the war they had been allowed roam around Belgium and had even run into German cavalry patrols but since the opposing trench lines had been established there was a new system.

“A few correspondents were admitted to the Army headquarters. They used their privileges with discretion and were trusted by the Army staffs.” The trusted correspondents “were allowed to be on the spot when the attack was launched between the Somme and the Ancre on Saturday and were told beforehand when it would begin . . . They are still on the spot and send their messages from a Press camp close behind the line of the present fighting.”

Of course, all dispatches had to be cleared by the military censorship. *The Irish Times* also published brief communiqués from the German high command giving its version of the latest fighting. On July 10th, the big headlines were given to the news from the British side on the “Further progress by British and French armies” but there was also a single column “German Report”.

It began: “On the Somme, the heroism and perseverance of our troops gave the enemy a day full of disappointment. Repeated attacks were repulsed and countless English dead cover the ground in the Orvilliers, Cantalmaison, Basentin le Grand sector.”

There was reference to the “destructive effect of our artillery, machine gun and infantry fire”. The paper carried graphic accounts of the damage done by the German machine guns. A major with his arm in a bloodied sling described how the “Boche kept up a slow machine gun fire during the last half hour of our intense bombardment preceding our assault. He knows we are coming then, I thought.

Sure enough when our smoke clouds had gone forward and we rushed over our parapet he simply filled the air with rapid machine gun fire. His guns did the Boche priceless service.”

In another account, a corporal of the Royal Irish Fusiliers described a dash to the German lines “through a fiery furnace”. “We took it out of the Huns for what we had gone through on the way across. We stabbed and prodded at them with our bayonets until we drove them in wild rout from the first line of trenches and then we swept on to the second line.” *The Irish Times* also reported on what it called the “latest German atrocity”. This was the execution of Capt Charles Fryatt. He was in command of a non-naval ship called *The Brussels* which had been captured by the German navy. The Germans had read reports of how Capt Fryatt when in charge of another ship had tried to ram a German submarine.

Announcing his court martial and execution, the Germans pointed out that as Capt Fryatt was “not a member of a combatant force” he deserved the death penalty.

# An Irishman's Diary

*Friday 5 July 1996*

*Kevin Myers*

EIGHTY years after the Somme, 80 years after the Easter Rising, and this State publicly commemorates nothing. Is that what we want, a country without public memory, in which history is merely a ladder which got us this far, and can be pushed away at our convenience?

It doesn't work like that. Because we can't manage it, no matter how we try. We push at the ladder, and it clings to our feet, causing us to land where we do not choose to. Certain rungs are evident, big rungs which are indisputable in their effect on us and how we reached this point, this past, this present. We are in Europe; and Europe is in us.

This is not new. We have been a European people for one and a half thousand years. We have taken waves of different peoples, and sent fresh waves - out in return; and none went so catastrophically, or so forgotten in this State as the people who 80 years ago began their journey into the heart of Ulster Protestant mythology, and who now are as officially forgotten in this State as are the men of Easter 1916.

One set of myths, around which this State was formed, now embarrasses the other remains too closely embedded in the identity of the British of the Ulster loyalists for us to embrace with comfort. We prefer agnostic amnesia to the perils of commemoration.

Myths not told at the hearth gain no currency in adulthood, no matter how often repeated and the story of the Ulster Protestant Henry Gallagher is certainly unknown. For he was the wrong kind of Ulster Protestant.

He was from the Ulster which lost the sundered three counties, betrayed by greater loyalty as the nationalists of Northern Ireland were abandoned by the greater Irish nationalism.

Henry Gallagher was company commander of the old Ulster Volunteer Force in Manorcunningham, and was commissioned into the Inniskilling Fusiliers in 1914.

Despite the Six County myth which has been perpetuated about July 1st 1916, many of his men were from Donegal, Wicklow and Dublin (including Andrew Fox the great uncle of Mildred Fox TD for Wicklow).

All his fellow officers were killed or wounded early on the first day of the Somme battle in 1916, leaving Henry to carry on alone. Noticing German snipers firing on his wounded he took a rifle and shot six of them. By the time he reached his objective, the appropriately named Crucifix, only nine of his platoon were still with him. He erected a barricade, and went out to no man's land to collect wounded men. He came across several parties of German and was able to kill or capture them all, bringing back the prisoners and wounded to safety.

He was relieved at the Crucifix by his commanding officer, Major Peacocke, from Cork, and by an officer from Belfast, Major Gaffikin - whose contribution that day was as much to myth as it was to war. Henry Gallagher then carried a wounded officer back from the German wire to his own lines.

This account is bald. It does not convey the appalling violence that was consuming lives in vast number all around him. Twenty thousand British soldiers - at least 2,000 of them Irish, including Richard Fox - died on the front where Henry Gallagher had spent the day in combat and rescuing wounded men.

Two nights later he offered to rescue the men who were still stranded, screaming and in despair in no man's land. He led a small party of volunteers into that terrible place and rescued 28 wounded men.

Amongst the dead was Major Gaffikin. The colour of his company of about 250 men - happened to be orange. Like a tourist guide today, to keep his men in touch with him, he waved a large orange cloth. According to the survivors quoted in Philip Orr's splendid account of the 36th Ulster Division, none of the men were aware that July 1st, before calendar changes, was the date of the Battle of Boyne.

Major Gaffikin's orange pennant was transformed by the myth machine, whispered at the hearth and crooned over the cradle, into an orange sash and the orange sash was mythologised into hundreds of sashes, until the legend came to exist as it stands today, imperishable and enduring, of the men of the 36th Ulster Division proudly wearing their sashes as, in their loyalty to their crown and their creed, they went to their deaths.

Our witness to the untruth of this was Henry Gallagher. He wrote home in reply to queries from his family in Manorcunningham, saying he certainly had not seen any sashes, and if anybody had been wearing them, he would have known about it.

That part of the letter bears upon history. The rest of it bears upon the man he was, the Irish farmer asking about the Donegal fields, and wondering how the crops were coming on. He made no mention of what he had done, of his journeys into no man's land to rescue dozens of wounded.

He was recommended for a Victoria Cross, but the 36th Division had already won four posthumously. There was a ration to these things, and another would have been above the quota, though his deeds matched or exceeded in bravery anything known during that battle or that war.

Henry Gallagher was killed at Messines Ridge the next year, the same day and place as the Irish nationalist Willie Redmond MP. The by-election in Clare which followed Redmond's death was won by Eamon de Valera; fresh myths were being minted, ones which were to exclude Willie Redmond, Warren Peacocke, murdered by the IRA in Inishannon in 1921, and the extraordinarily brave Henry Gallagher, rescuer of over 30 men before Thiepval Wood, and now totally forgotten in his native county of Donegal.

# The Irish Times editorial

*Saturday, July 6, 1996.*

Eighty years on, the poignancy of the Battle of the Somme has not lost its evocative power. Politics, culture and society have changed so radically that it is barely possible to envisage the mixture of heroism and intimidation, class structures and social solidarity that made possible a war of utter degradation in the trenches, punctuated by bouts of ritual slaughter. Consequently it is difficult to make value judgments based on entirely different ideas of order and rights, though the image of an essentially innocent generation immolating itself on the battlefields of France is still the stuff of epic tragedy.

It is a different matter where politics is concerned. Many hundreds of thousands of Irishmen from both sides of what is now the Border served in the British forces, and the grandfathers and great grandfathers of a large proportion of the present population of this island were among those who scrambled over the parapets on the Somme 80 years ago this week, or took part in other battles during the four years of war. No doubt most were remembered privately by their relatives over the years, and in some families without connections with the Anglo Irish ascendancy, a tradition of joining the British army has been continuous since before the foundation of the State. But it is only in the North, and there largely because it fitted in with the local political myth, that the memory of the blood sacrifice has been perpetuated.

For similar reasons, nationalists found it convenient to forget, or worse still to denigrate.

In the last few years, there has been a change, encouraged by a greater self confidence in Irish society, that makes it possible to see history as events in the past, arising out of circumstances that have changed, rather than as a continuum of political confrontation. President Robinson and the Taoiseach, Mr Bruton, have led the way in breaking the taboo by explicitly acknowledging the role of Irish men and women in the British forces during two World Wars, instead of adopting the formula of commemorating all who died in conflict of whatever kind. It is psychologically important to confront reality, historical and otherwise, and acknowledgment is part of a healing process.

This generation has begun to make amends. But the view of history that was allowed to grow up was a kind of ethnic cleansing whose focus was less often on physical

expulsion than on elimination from the mind. It has helped to nourish an inflexible view of politics whose perverse and damaging influence is a part of the current political reality. Attempts to negotiate political change have always fallen foul of the refusal to question or give up the inherited myth which inevitably contains only a small and selective part of history.

The current peace process has illustrated that fact once again. The men of the Somme may not be a major element in the vast array of history that needs to be put in order, but rejecting them on the one hand and deifying them on the other, are symptoms of a mutual exclusion that must be dissolved. Seeing them as they were tragic victims of one of humanity's greatest collective tragedies - is the beginning of hope.

# Death of daughter of poet Thomas Kettle

*Monday 23 December 1996*  
*Patsy McGarry*

The death has taken place of Mrs Elizabeth Dooley, only child of the poet Thomas Kettle, who was killed at Ginchy on the Somme in September 1916.

Mrs Dooley, who died on Friday, was in her early 80s. She had been ill for some time and had lived at the Verville retreat home in Clontarf for the past 20 years.

Her father dedicated his poem *To My Dear Betty, The Gift of God* to her. It is, in part, an explanation of his reason for taking part in the war.

It is believed to have been written shortly before his death. Mrs. Dooley's first cousin, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, said yesterday that Kettle may never have seen this daughter. He died on September 9th, 1916, while in action with the Dublin Fusiliers on a beet field outside the French town. His body was never recovered.

The previous day he had written to his brother saying how desperately he wanted to live.

A bust of Kettle was erected in St Stephen's Green in Dublin 20 years after his death. He is described as "poet, essayist and patriot" on the plinth, on which the last three lines of the poem to his daughter are also inscribed.

The poem reads:

*In wiser days, my darling rosebud, blown*

*In that desired, delayed, incredible time,*

*"You'll ask why I abandoned you, my own,*

*And the dear heart that was your baby throne,*

*To dice with death.*

*And Oh! they'll give you rhyme*

*And reason: some will call the thing sublime,*

*And some decry it in a knowing tone.  
So here, while mad guns curse overhead,  
And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor,  
Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,  
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor  
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,  
And the secret Scripture of the poor*

Mrs Dooley's funeral Mass will take place at 10 a.m. today at the Church of St John the Baptist in Clontarf. It will be followed by burial at Swords Cemetery.

# How the First World War began

*Tuesday 27 June 2006*

*Kieran Fagan*

The Great War began because the great powers of Europe, Britain, France and Russia were ranged against the might of Germany. Ostensibly the 1914-18 war - it did not become the first World War until a second came along in 1939 - began because Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian (Hapsburg) throne and his wife Sophie, were shot in Sarajevo on June 28th, 1914.

This prompted war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia on July 28th, 1914; became a general European struggle by Germany's declaration of war against Russia on August 1st, 1914; and eventually became a global war involving 32 nations. The United States became involved reluctantly towards the end.

The real causes of the first World War were the rise of nationalism, and fear of Germany. Since 1871 Germany had established itself as a great world power.

When Germany invaded Belgium on August 3rd, and started to cut a swathe down towards northern France, Britain swiftly declared war.

Ireland too had caught the nationalism "bug" but Home Rule was effectively on the backburner until the conflict in Europe was resolved. Many Irish soldiers joined the British army and there was an expectation that all the combatants, except the defeated Germans, would be home for Christmas (1914).

Instead the armies of Britain, France and Germany got bogged down in trench warfare across the north of France and Belgium for four years. Thousands of lives were sacrificed to gain a few yards of territory, only to be lost the next day, week or month.

A "Big Push" was planned for 1916. The French army was largely committed to defending the fort of Verdun, though forts belonged to an outdated concept of warfare. The British volunteer army was the main instrument deployed to drive the Germans back at the river Somme.

And the 36th Division, composed of the Ulster Volunteers originally formed to resist Home Rule in the north of Ireland, was to the forefront on day one, July 1st, 1916.

In the first two days the Ulstermen took terrible losses. In 1917 the survivors fought at Messines alongside the Irish Catholics of the 16th Division formed largely from the National Volunteers. In Ireland, the National Volunteers had been promised Home Rule, while the Ulster Volunteers resisted it with the threat of force.

As the Battle of the Somme began, six German divisions held the line, with another three in reserve. The British attacked with 15 divisions. Failure to make a decisive breakthrough on the opening day resulted in close and bloody fighting during July and August.

On September 3rd, the 47th (Irish) Brigade, composed largely of Redmond's National Volunteers, captured the village of Guillemont. Britain piled the pressure on the Germans. Operations on the River Ancre continued with some gains.

On the battlefield's extreme right, Britain's Fourth Army was edging towards le Transloy, capturing le Sars, but rain was turning the battleground into a quagmire. In deteriorating weather, major operations ended on November 18th, 1916.

The German line had been pushed back about 8km in the centre area at a dreadful cost. The Battle of the Somme was over.

# Preparing for the 'Big Push'

*Tuesday 27 June 2006*

*Shane Hegarty*

On June 24th, 1916, midsummer's day, the Somme valley was in full bloom. On either side of the river meadows the chalky soil had sprung vivid yellow ragwort, tall red poppies, blue cornflowers.

Hares sat in the long grass, while moles would occasionally burrow into air where they expected earth. Dug into the valley and facing off against each other - at one point less than 50 metres apart - were soldiers of the German, British and French armies, numbering hundreds of thousands. They occupied a vast, jagged network of trenches that scarred countryside crossed by two rivers, the Somme and the Ancre. The Germans had reached the area first on a misty morning in September, 1914, with the first casualty a local farmer shot by a nervous French soldier.

The invaders tunnelled deep into the high land, the hills and villages of the area, from where they and their guns had a fine view of the line of French and British trenches that followed.

By the spring of 1916, however, the British had won control of the air, and across the line Royal Flying Corps aeroplanes buzzed, while tethered balloons recorded every visible inch of the German defence.

And below the balloons were the soldiers. In this sector, the men of the British army were largely volunteers, the first to answer Lord Kitchener's call and rush to the recruitment offices and build the New Army. Some of them had walked in en masse, leading to the creation of "Pals Battalions".

Serving together were groups of gamekeepers, brewery workers, labourers, farm hands, rugby players. One battalion had a phalanx of professional golfers and their assistants, as well as a handful of semi-professional footballers.

Many on the front line were Irish, most contained within the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division, created under different motivations but here facing the same enemy.

Since taking control of an 18-mile length of the line from the over-stretched French, these soldiers had become hardened by the rigours, and tedium, of trench life, but most had not yet faced a serious action.

Compared to battles raging elsewhere along the Western Front, the Somme had been a relatively quiet line. Nevertheless, through the winter of 1915, into the spring of 1916, life for the average Tommy on the front line was exhausting.

Pte Anthony Brennan, for instance, was stationed with the 16th (Irish) Division where “we had to live in four foot of slimy mud and sleep in dugouts which were dry on the rare occasions when we were lucky, and were unfailingly rat-infested, and lousy.”

As the winter advanced and the rainy season descended upon us, conditions in the trenches became worse and worse. Our beautiful brick-fashioned structure of sand bags, so nice to look upon during the dry summer days, collapsed ignominiously after a few days’ heavy rain.

All along the front traverses fell in, usually at about 2am, and tired men, just settling down to a couple of hours’ sleep after a wearisome ration party, or a spell of sentry duty, were hauled out to dig a way clear from fire-bay to fire-bay before daylight made the task impossible.

During duties of four to eight days on the front line, the average day would begin with a “stand to”, when soldiers would fix bayonets, man the trench’s firestep (from where shots were fired) and ready themselves for a possible enemy attack.

It might then be accompanied by what was called a “morning hate” during which either side would fire off shells and machine guns in case the enemy was lurking in the mist.

Once done, the men would have breakfast and start another day of digging, repairs, or trying to catch some sleep, all the while hoping not to get hit by an opportunistic shell.

As one Ulsterman put it: “The most important thing I learnt in that first few days in the trenches was how to open a tin of bully beef with a bayonet without taking the edge off the bayonet or getting oil in the beef.”

On the line, illness was a constant worry and medical supplies at the first-aid posts might be unsanitary. Snagging a finger on barbed wire could be extremely dangerous - if it turned gangrenous a man could lose not just his finger but part of his arm. Trench foot became so prevalent, according to Pte Brennan, that men were split into pairs, with each being responsible for the state of the other’s feet.

Fleas and lice were rampant, and the anti-infestation powder almost as uncomfortable. Gas attacks were also a fear, with the gas masks uncomfortable and difficult to breathe in. But more obvious items only came later.

Until the spring of 1916, soldiers did not wear steel helmets, but soft caps. Many British troops could see only the slope up to the German lines, and not the line itself, and the two sides seldom glimpsed each other. However, with little ground given in some stretches, there was occasional fraternisation. It was not unknown for a sing-song to drift across No Man's Land, accompanied by applause and even banter. There were closer encounters. When one West Belfast volunteer, Pte A.V. Wilson, went to the river Ancre for water he met a couple of Germans doing likewise.

"One of them spoke good English, he had been a miner in Durham. He said, 'This war's no bloody good'. We had our rifles; they didn't. We could have taken them prisoner but we let them go."

A story has even been told of a Munster Fusilier who, while fixing wire defences, borrowed a mallet from on-looking Germans.

Informal communication was not always so convivial. During Easter 1916, for instance, German soldiers taunted soldiers of the Royal Munster Fusiliers by holding up a placard that read: "Irishmen! Heavy uproar in Ireland. English guns are firing at your wives [SIC]and children."

That night, a raiding party was sent out and returned with the offending item. At dusk, there would be a repeat of the morning's 'stand to' and sometimes an 'evening hate', before the night duties would begin.

Sentry duty was vital, with sleeping on the job severely punished. Under the cover of darkness, patrols would go into No Man's Land to fix gaps in their defences, cut the enemy's wire, listen in on sentries or raid an opposing trench.

Alongside bursts of machine gun fire, flares would light up, at which moment it was best for a soldier to freeze or find a shell-hole. Those tempted to crawl no farther than out of sight of their commanding officer were often discouraged by the expectation that patrols return with a bit of German wire or some other evidence that they actually reached the enemy lines.

Depending on the attitude of the commanding officer, the Tommy would receive a nightly rum ration (the Germans got beer). And once their tour was complete, it was time to go back behind the lines to a town such as Amiens where, when not engaged in seemingly endless drills and marches, they could get a decent meal, a haircut and

shave, a makeshift bed (even if it was in a barn), occasionally some female comfort and a chance to spend their pay.

It was when their officers encouraged the men to enjoy such delights that many of the men stationed on the Somme realised that “the Big Push” was imminent.

Men and equipment had been pouring into the line for weeks, and patrols had been ordered to raid German trenches and grab prisoners for interrogation. But when an offensive grew obvious, Tommies spent their pay on champagne and decent food. They gambled, even though this was strictly forbidden. And they watched those who were suddenly far busier than they had been - those digging graves waiting to be filled.

The artillery fire opened up on midsummer’s morning. Five days before the original Zero Hour of June 29th, French and British guns began pounding the German front line with 150,000 shells every 24 hours.

The noise could be heard as far away as London. The aim was to destroy the enemy defences and to shred the wire. Temperamental guns, often operated by inexperienced men, fired shells that needed to be precisely timed to explode 20 feet in the air and scatter a hail of bullets that would tear the enemy line apart and allow the infantry to ease through.

Underground, sappers dug mines that were intended to detonate under the German positions in the final minutes before the attack. Aside from their destructive power, the hope was to create a crater lip from which the British could fire down on German positions.

To the north, near the village of Gommecourt, the British Third Army engaged in a series of deceptions intended to convince the Germans that they would actually attack at this point.

Raiding parties were sent out to cut barbed wire, artillery pounded German positions. Dummy trenches were built, sometimes only 18inches deep, and sandbags on sticks were placed in them to give the impression of an army waiting to pounce.

In the heat of battle novel methods of communication would be needed, so in the weeks before men were trained in semaphore, the use of flares, Morse code and signalling lamps. There would be runners to dash back with messages. Other men would carry homing pigeons.

Two signallers in the Tyneside Irish were given bags of paper, so that they could lay a trail for the communications wire to follow.

In the German trenches there was an anticipation of the attack that was about to come. They had watched the mobilisation and knew from captured British soldiers that a large attack was imminent.

During the bombardment, troops either dug in and watched through periscopes, or were moved back to secondary trenches.

While the German casualty rate was not high, the troops still suffered under the assault. Many were left shell-shocked wrecks by what they called *trommelfeuer* ("drumfire").

One soldier, *Freiwilliger Eversmann*, wrote in his diary. "It is night. Shall I live to the morning? Haven't we had enough of this frightful horror? Five days and five nights now this hell concert has lasted. One's head is like a madman's."

By the time Eversmann wrote that, the barrage should have been coming to an end. However, on June 28th, 21 hours before the attack was planned, bad weather forced a postponement of 48 hours.

It would instead begin on July 1st. Under hot skies, brilliant sunsets and clear nights, the masses of the British troops finally began to move into the line.

The human traffic swelled the trenches, men shuffling into position as 66,000 soldiers lined up for the first wave. They rested, prepared, wrote letters home or completed their wills.

Some were optimistic that the bombardment had been successful and that it would be a walkover; others fearful after patrols returned all week with reports of largely unbroken defences.

Several men couldn't face the possibility awaiting them and wounded themselves before the enemy could. At Aveluy Wood, where the Ulstermen were gathering aware that the "Big Push" would coincide with the original anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, Pte David Starrett watched as officers "joked the men as if what was ahead was a First of July picnic to Bangor County Down. Some of us strolled about, some tried to write hasty notes to their kinfolk. Birds sang. There was a peaceful air in that wood, but a strange peace at that."

As light crept into the sky on the morning of July 1st, it revealed a torn landscape and a layer of white chalk dust that had settled on the German fortifications.

The attack would go ahead at 7.30am. It wasn't known then, of course, but fate would determine that the Battle of the Somme began on the middle day of the middle year of the Great War.

# Divisions in the army

*Tuesday 27 June 2006*

*Kieran Fagan*

Irish soldiers in the British army were organised into three divisions. The 16th (Irish) Division, was largely from the south, and the 36th (Ulster) Division was from the north.

The 10th (Irish) Division took no part at the Somme. However many Irishmen joined “non-Irish” regiments, and they do not appear as Irish in official recruitment or casualty figures.

At the Battle of the Somme, the 16th (Irish) Division was:

## **47th Brigade:**

6 Royal Irish,

6 Connaught Rangers,

7 Leinster

8 Royal Munster Fusiliers.

## **48th Brigade:**

7 Royal Irish,

1 Royal Munsters,

8 Royal Dublin fusiliers,

9 Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

## **49th Brigade:**

7 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers,

8 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers,

7 Royal Irish Fusiliers,

8 Royal Irish Fusiliers.

The Ulster Division included the following:

**107th Brigade:**

8 Royal Irish Rifles,

9 Royal Irish Rifles

15 Royal Rifles

**108th Brigade:**

11 Royal Irish Rifles,

12 Royal Irish Rifles,

13 Royal Irish Rifles,

9 Royal Irish Fusiliers

**109th Brigade:**

9 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers,

10 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers,

11 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 14 Royal Irish Rifles

Pioneer: 16 Royal Irish Rifles.

The regiment was the basic unit, often based on a county, size governed by the catchment area. Thus the Inniskillings were recruited from Fermanagh, Derry and Donegal. A typical regimental formation was as follows: The first and second battalions were regular, professional soldiers.

The third battalion was usually a regular reserve battalion. The 4th, 5th and 6th were often Territorial Army battalions (part-time) and they often had second line battalions, numbered 2/4th, 2/5th etc.

The 7th to 12th battalions were initially volunteers who answered Lord Kitchener's call to arms - your king and country needs you!

Each battalion consisted of a headquarters company and four companies totalling about 800 men when on active service.

In the Royal Artillery, the typical field battery had about 200 men and six guns. A typical infantry division consisted of three infantry brigades, each of four battalions, four field artillery brigades each of four batteries, and one heavy artillery battery.

In addition there was a squadron of cavalry, ambulance units, supply and ammunition trains, and engineers, nominally totalling 18,000. The regular army divisions were numbered 1st to 8th and 27th to 29th.

The Kitchener new army divisions were numbered 9th to 26th, and 30th to 41st. Territorial army divisions were numbered 42nd to 74th, except for the 63rd originally formed from "spare" naval reservists.

The geographic pattern of recruitment was carried thorough to the formation of "Pals' units".

For example, the president of the Irish Rugby Football Union, FH Browning, issued a circular to Dublin clubs in 1914 encouraging members to join up. An IRFU volunteer corps was formed.

Almost 200 enlisted at Lansdowne Road, in D company of the 7th battalion of the Dublin Fusiliers. Major Irish companies, including Guinness and Bank of Ireland, released staff who volunteered to serve in the war, and subsequently maintained rolls of honour recording their names, and often their deaths.

There were specific battalions and brigades formed in major British cities to recruit men with Scottish and Irish connections such as the Tyneside Irish.

As casualties mounted, units were amalgamated and new recruits assigned at random. Salvation Army bandmaster Charles Daniels from Kent had no known Irish links, but served king and country in the uniform of the Munster Fusiliers.

# Why we remember

*Tuesday 27 June 2006*

*Fintan O'Toole*

You can still see the crater, 40 feet deep and 300 feet wide. And you can see what caused it in the film that is used in almost every documentary about the first World War.

The camera was set up to record the moment when the glorious victory was to begin, the explosion of one of a series of huge mines that signalled the start of the joint British and French offensive against the Germans.

This one went off ten minutes early, at twenty past seven on the morning of July 1st, 1916, making it the inadvertent herald of the apocalypse that was to come: the Battle of the Somme.

The film captures the pure, primal energy of destruction. The terrible rumble of the earth and the rising pall of atomised earth have the same awful resonance as the images of the first nuclear explosion in the New Mexico desert. The famous words uttered by Robert Oppenheimer on that latter occasion would, in retrospect, have been even more apt on July 1st, 1916. The verse from the Bhagavad-Gita from which Oppenheimer quoted reads: "I am become death, the destroyer of the worlds, who has come to annihilate everyone. All those arrayed in the two opposing ranks will be slain!"

The Somme, along with the wider world war of which it is the epitome, was more than an episode of extreme violence. It changed the way the human species thinks about itself.

The optimism of the 19th century, the belief that progress was inevitable and that humanity was on a straight road to civilisation, was blown apart in those explosions, sunk in the blood-soaked mud of the Somme, caught on the barbed wire of massive, pitiless and futile slaughter.

Before the war, Sigmund Freud suggested that the basic human instinct was the sexual impulse, Eros. After it, he felt compelled to revise his theories and include a second, equally potent instinct, Thanatos - the death-wish. How, other than through some quirk of human nature that made us desire our own destruction, could the Somme be explained?

How was it possible that, after the carnage of the first day, when rank after rank of men walked towards the German machine guns and were mown down like grass, other men would repeat that walk of death day after day, week after week, until the middle of November, when the battle was stopped, not by the dawning of reason and humanity, but by the weather.

How could well over a million men be killed or wounded for the taking of a few kilometres of ground? The nihilistic answers that proposed themselves - that violence and obedience were essential human traits - in turn went on to shape much of the 20th century, with its industrial murder, its cults of dictatorship, its life-and-death struggles, its gulags and its concentration camps.

By discrediting the claims of enlightenment, democracy and civilisation, the Somme and its counterparts left an open space for barbarism to occupy. Because it had such a huge impact on human self-understanding, the Somme ought to have been a part of Irish official memory, even if not a single Irish soldier had taken part.

That in fact Irish involvement in the Somme was at least as prominent in proportional terms as that of any of the other combatant nations ought to have assured it a prominent place in our sense of our collective past.

Yet, for at least 70 years, the memory of the Somme gave way to other battles of remembrance, as competing versions of Irish history dug their own trenches. As so often, those apparently opposed versions in fact offered mutual reinforcement.

The Somme, and especially that first day when the 36th (Ulster) Division took 5,000 casualties, did of course become a central part of the Ulster Protestant self-image.

But it was absorbed into a partial and sectarian exercise in selective memory that was itself a kind of forgetfulness. How many of those who made their stand at Drumcree church in Portadown in the sectarian cold war of the 1990s remembered that the parade was supposed to be a commemoration of the Somme?

In some ways, the Somme posed as many challenges to Unionist as it did to nationalist orthodoxy. In order to remember the battle as a glorious sacrifice (contrasted to the stab-in-the-back of treacherous Catholics in the Easter Rising), it was necessary to forget its essential obscenity. In order to use the memory of the Somme to bolster obedience to authority, it was necessary to forget that the courage and self-sacrifice of the troops was betrayed by the folly of their leaders.

In order to use the Somme as a marker of Protestant character, it was necessary to forget, not merely the presence of Catholic nationalist divisions, but also the fact that the Ulster Division had fought in what was seen as a typically "Irish" way. It lost

so many men because those men ran with reckless zeal into the German lines, and were then forced to beat a bloody retreat.

As Fran Brearton has pointed out, “The stereotype of the martial Irishman - valiant, aggressive, heroic, with a daredevil spirit -is seemingly remote from the stereotype of the Ulster Unionist - entrenched, defensive, immovable. The first of July points up the inadequacies of those stereotypes.”

But nationalist orthodoxy was happy to leave the Somme to the Unionists, and to define it as an essentially British concern. This was not just amnesia, it was deliberate oblivion. When Ireland’s most popular dramatist, Sean O’Casey wrote a play about the first World War, *The Silver Tassie*, in 1928, it was rejected by the Abbey.

When the descendants of Thomas Kettle, a prominent nationalist intellectual and MP killed on the Somme, proposed the erection of a small monument to his memory in St Stephen’s Green in Dublin, the project was delayed for 20 years because the Commissioners for Public Works would not countenance three simple words: “Killed in France”.

Yet those words are written on the hearts of hundreds of millions of Europeans and hundreds of thousands of Irish people whose ancestors slaughtered each other on the Somme.

We, who remember so much that is trivial and useless cannot afford to forget them, for they give us a vital warning of the consequences of big-power games, fanatical nationalisms, and the abuse of human courage.

If we can forge a common clear eyed memory of the Somme, we make it, not just an exemplar of those poisonous forces, but an antidote to them.

# The trouble at home

*Tuesday 27 June 2006*

*Stephen Collins.*

On the outbreak of the First World War in August, 1914, John Redmond was almost universally regarded as the political leader of Irish nationalism. He may not have had the charisma of Parnell or the majesty of O'Connell but he had done something both of them had failed to do; he had delivered Home Rule for Ireland.

In August and September of 1914 he made a political miscalculation that destroyed his party, his reputation and contributed to his relatively early death but neither he nor his opponents had any inkling then how things would turn out.

Redmond's response to the outbreak of war was dictated by the political circumstances of the day and, like everybody, he assumed the war would be over in months.

The main obstacle to Home Rule in the run up to 1914 was the implacable opposition of Ulster unionism, aided and abetted by the British Conservative party.

The emergence of the armed Ulster Volunteer Force, pledged to fight Home Rule had prompted the foundation of the rival Irish Volunteers by Eoin MacNeill in 1913. Redmond was unhappy at the resort of nationalists to arms but once it had happened he moved to take control of the Volunteer movement.

When the Home Rule Bill was passed in May, 1914, it threatened to provoke civil war in Ireland and undermine democratic authority across the United Kingdom with the Army threatening to defy the Liberal government's orders to impose the law on Ulster. King George V intervened and called a conference at Buckingham Palace in July 1914 in an attempt to find a solution.

The conference failed to get agreement between nationalists and unionists on Home Rule, but when war was declared a few weeks later Redmond thought he had the ideal solution. After the Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, made his famous speech in the Commons about "the lamps going out all over Europe" Redmond intervened in the debate:

"To-day there are in Ireland two large bodies of Volunteers. One of them sprang into existence in the North. Another has sprung into existence in the South. I say to the

Government that they may tomorrow withdraw every one of their troops from Ireland. I say that the coast of Ireland will be defended from foreign invasion by her armed sons, and for this purpose armed Nationalist Catholics in the South will be only too glad to join arms with the armed Protestant Ulstermen in the North.

“Is it too much to hope that out of this situation there will spring as result which will be good, not merely for the Empire, but good for the future welfare and integrity of the Irish nation.”

The speech electrified the Commons and Redmond was applauded on all sides. If he had left it at that, all might have been well, but a month later he went a step further. In September 1914, when the Home Rule Act was formally placed on the statute book he made a speech at Woodenbridge in Co Wicklow pledging the Volunteers to the war effort.

“The war is undertaken in the defence of the highest principles of religion and morality and right and it would be a disgrace for ever to our country, and a reproach to her manhood, and a denial of the lessons of her history, if young Ireland confined their efforts to remaining at home to defend the shores of Ireland from an unlikely invasion.”

The belief that involvement in the war would lead to Irish unity was clearly a strong motivating factor in Redmond’s call to arms, but it was not the only one. Like many middle class Irish nationalist he was deeply upset at the atrocities perpetrated by Germany on the Catholic people of Belgium in the early days of the war. His niece, who was a nun in Belgium, gave him a first-hand account of the suffering inflicted on the population and he was deeply moved.

Redmond also believed that, by defending the right of a small nation like Belgium to exist against the power of Prussian totalitarianism, Irish soldiers would vindicate the right freedom for their own country.

“I am speaking the truth when I say of the Irish race as a whole that they would feel covered with humiliation if when this war is over they had to admit that their rights and liberties had been saved by the sacrifices of other men while Irishmen remained safe at home and took no risks,” he said.

He also fatally underestimated the potential of his opponents dismissing Sinn Féin as “a handful of pro-German shirkers”. While the vast bulk of the Volunteers backed Redmond’s stand, a small but highly motivated minority rejected it.

The Irish Volunteers led by Eoin Mac Neill, but in the effective control of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, opposed Irish involvement on the British side and became involved in a conspiracy with the Germans.

Redmond, meanwhile, had to deal with an ungrateful British response to his support for the war effort. While the UVF was effectively incorporated into the Ulster Division with its chain of command left largely intact, the National Volunteers were treated very differently.

The British army wanted its men but not under their own officers. Many Volunteer leaders were not given commissions as a deliberate policy. Stephen Gwynn, a prominent Irish Party MP, was refused a commission and enlisted in the ranks like other Volunteers.

While the Liberal Prime Minister, Asquith, was unhappy at the treatment of the nationalists, the British army establishment was determined to prevent the creation of what it believed would be an Irish army.

In 1915 the British political situation changed with the creation of a coalition government to prosecute the war. Asquith was still prime minister but the pro Irish Liberals were no longer in control.

The Ulster Unionist leader, Edward Carson, joined the cabinet and became an influential member. Asquith did offer a cabinet post to Redmond but he refused it in the belief that it would undermine his authority as the leader of Irish nationalism.

Redmond was undoubtedly right in his assessment, but his position was undermined in any case. Although he had achieved a political victory by having all of Ireland excluded from the imposition of conscription, the public became steadily more disenchanted with the war as it dragged on through 1915 and into 1916.

The Easter Rising was not initially popular but it marked the end of Redmond's authority. As the London Times noted the Sinn Féin movement "from the first was directed as much against Mr Redmond and the Nationalist party as against Great Britain".

By the opening day of the Somme, Irish politics had changed utterly and tens of thousands of men who had gone to France at the urging of Redmond were about to be disowned by the new leaders of nationalism.

# Soldiers' stories

*Enlisted at 16, dead at 19  
Tuesday 27 June, 2006*

John McLoughlin, was born at 13 Townsend Street, Dublin on December 7th, 1898. The only son of George and Elizabeth McLoughlin he was educated by the Christian Brothers at Westland Row, before following in his father's footsteps and becoming an apprentice in the painting trade.

With two cousins already serving in France as regular soldiers with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, McLoughlin was 16 when he enlisted at a British Army recruiting office in Great Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street) in Dublin.

The minimum age for enlistment was 18, but like so many of the time he lied about his age, although this was sometimes done with the implicit understanding of the recruitment officer.

After training, he was transferred to the 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, a regular unit of the British army already serving in France and which had seen action at Mons in Belgium.

On July 7th, 1916, at the end of the first week of the Battle of the Somme, McLoughlin and his battalion took part in an attack out of the trenches at La Boisselle.

While the battalion held the line throughout the day, it did so at the cost of 30men, with a further 17 missing and 117 wounded.

Among the wounded was McLoughlin. As his battalion had moved forward to attack, he was hit and shrapnel lodged in his spine. It was a devastating injury. He was moved to a nearby casualty clearing station, then to a hospital in Rouen.

A month later he was transferred to a military hospital in Glasgow and then, finally, in February, 1917, he came home to Dublin's Richmond Hospital. On September 22nd, 1918, over two years after being wounded, Pte John McLoughlin died aged only 19 years.

# Soldiers' songs

*Tuesday, 27 June 2006*

*Ruadhán Mac Cormaic*

When the first World War poet Siegfried Sassoon lay dying in 1967, one of his admirers tried to find meaning in his passing. "If Sassoon dies," he said, "the Somme is over."

As it happened, the prophecy was not to be fulfilled: the Battle of the Somme may have come to a bloody and inconclusive end on 18 November 1916, but not only does the first World War refuse to recede from popular consciousness, it is haunting us with a renewed intensity.

For many, the standard, iconic imagery of the Somme, Verdun and Ypres are those of the war itself: the mud-soaked battlefields, the moonscapes of craters, the bare shapeless tree trunks jutting forlornly from the ground, the indistinguishable grey faces trudging in procession to their deaths.

And it is from art, not history books, that most of our popular myths (meaning widely disseminated stories, not lies) of the war come to us, images that have been found and renewed by the novelists, poets and film-makers who have led a revival of interest in the war over the past decade.

Around the character of Willie Dunne, a member of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Sebastian Barry built his successful novel *A Long Long Way*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize last year.

In taking the war as subject matter, Barry was revisiting the terrain explored in the 1990s by a succession of bestselling British novelists - Sebastian Faulks (*Birdsong*) and Pat Barker (*The Regeneration* trilogy) among them - who managed to strike a chord and find wide readerships with evocations of the western front that found individual heroism in what they deemed an essentially futile and tragic war. Alongside this new work, new editions of the classic war memoirs have been made available to a new generation of readers.

In France, where the revival has perhaps been most striking, the lead has been taken by film directors adapting popular novels for the big screen. *Joyeux Noël* (Merry Christmas), set during a 24-hour truce informally agreed by opposing frontline troops at Christmas 1914, was the most recent of a series that included an adaptation of

Sébastien Japrisot's *Un Long Dimanche de Fiançailles* (A Very Long Engagement), which became the second highest-grossing movie of 2004 in France and was nominated for two Oscars.

The soldier-poet Francis Ledwidge may be the only Irish writer whose work is considered primarily in relation to the Great War, but the war has long been a stimulus to the Irish imagination - that of Northern Irish poets in particular - and continues to be written about today.

Eighty-five years after Yeats wrote *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death*, Michael Longley was remembering the Somme, its "cracked and splintered dead" witnessed by proxy through his father.

Inevitably, Irish writers have used the war to explore broader questions: in the case of Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974), set in the Great War but concerned with the relationship between the son of Anglo-Irish landowners, Frederick Moore, and a stable boy, Jerry Crowe.

As with Frank McGuinness's play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1985), the conflict is a backdrop in relation to which questions of identity and belonging can be broached.

The cultural influence of the Great War is so deep-rooted, so every day, that we may not even see it as such anymore. JRR Tolkien served as a communications officer at the Somme in 1916 and lost almost all of his closest friends during the war, an experience that can be clearly seen to have informed *The Lord of the Rings*, with its epic, apocalyptic themes set against the pastoral idyll of the Shire, a contrast so beloved of Siegfried Sassoon and the war poets of the 1920s.

How many of us know that the song *A Long Way to Tipperary* was first popularised after a journalist heard it being sung by the Connaught Rangers as they marched through Boulogne in August 1914?

On the surface, this abiding interest in the Great War as a genre is difficult to understand. This was a conflict whose causes and direction remain largely opaque, whose dead were so numerous as to be unfathomable, and the memory of which will forever be affected by that which was to follow.

How can images of cavalry making their way to the muddy fields of the Somme remain relevant after a century that brought us the death camps and the thermonuclear cloud?

But the Great War has managed to retain a sense of immediacy due partly to the physical vestiges that are still with us. Hiroshima and Dresden have been rebuilt, the

Napoleonic wars are impossibly distant, but when authors such as Barry and Faulks write about the Western Front, they write about sites that we can visit today, where we can still see for ourselves the endless lines of cemeteries and memorials covering fields as calm as they were in August, 1914.

It was no coincidence, either, that our attention turned to the first of the 20th century's great conflagrations just as that century was coming to an end.

Ours is a culture of remembrance, of memorialisation, keenly attuned to echoes of the past in the present. Art shares the fixation, and has been helped by the very literariness of the first World War.

As the accounts of the Somme on these pages demonstrate, the first World War was a personal war, where hand-to-hand fighting took place in the trenches, where acts of personal courage could shape a mythology around events.

The notion of a football match being played in No Man's Land can take hold of the imagination in a way that remote precision-bombing never could. But while the Battle of the Somme is a lens that magnifies for us all that has changed, perhaps it is also a reminder of all that stays the same.

The dark attraction we find in these novels, poems and films lies also in their appeal as parables, as warnings, as timeless fairytale. Verdun, Passchendaele, the Somme: the names have ceased to be places on the map and instead become synonyms for something deeper: bravery, futility, heroism, perhaps, but also the industrial-scale death for which the century it inaugurated may be remembered.

Perhaps the Somme is remembered because the Somme is an emblem for all war.

# Troubled memories of the Somme

*Tuesday 27 June 2006*

*Johnny Bardon*

In June 1966 I was struck down by appendicitis in front of a class of 12-year-olds in east Belfast. I was frantic: I had just been commissioned to write five features on Ulster and the battle of the Somme for the (now defunct) Sunday News.

After the operation, the nurse urged me to walk about. There were no fewer than six Somme veterans in a ward of 12 male patients. Having collected an invaluable fund of memories, I got to the sixth man.

He told me he was Charles Currie, a Catholic who had joined what had been a temperance battalion of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

When about to go over the top on July 1st, 1916, each man was given a tot of rum. Since his fellow-soldiers had sworn off the strong drink, he drank as many tots as he could. The result was that he couldn't remember a thing about the first day at the Somme.

Until then I had assumed that all men in the 36th (Ulster) Division were Protestants, members of the UVF. Indeed, there can have been very few Catholics in that division.

Nevertheless, 75,000 enlisted in Ulster during the first World War, of which 30,000 were in the Ulster Division, and that in a province where generally as many Catholics as Protestants took the king's shilling.

Ireland in the summer of 1914 was on the brink of civil war.

Divided by the issue of Home Rule, nearly 100,000 Ulster Volunteers, equipped with modern German, Italian and Austrian rifles, were confronted by Irish Volunteers, less well-armed but numbering close on 180,000.

On July 24th, the Ulster Unionist leader, Sir Edward Carson, gloomily observed: "I see no hopes of peace; I see nothing at present but darkness and shadows . . . we shall have once more to assert the manhood of our race." But it was in a more terrible European civil war that the manhood of Protestants would be asserted.

The one bright spot in the very dreadful situation is Ireland," Sir Edward Gray, the foreign secretary, said with evident emotion in the Commons on the night of August 3rd 1914.

John Redmond, leader of the Irish Party, had just risen to his feet to pledge the support of the Irish Volunteers. Carson quickly sent a wire from Belfast also committing the Ulster Volunteers to fight for King and Empire.

Men who had been drilling in opposition to one another (in Belfast separated by only a few streets between the Falls and the Shankill) now rushed to enlist to fight for the same cause. At the war office, Lord Kitchener agreed to keep the UVF together in one Ulster Division.

The result was that almost complete battalions of the UVF were swept intact into this 36th Division, very often with their UVF officers, drawn to a very considerable extent from the northern Protestant gentry. Kitchener refused to make similar arrangements for nationalist volunteers, though the 16th and 10th Divisions were subsequently described as "Irish".

How, then, did the Somme become seared into the psyche of northern Protestants? The main reason, surely, is that the blood sacrifice of more than 5,000 was on a terrible scale and largely concentrated into just one day: July 1st, 1916.

The manner in which UVF battalions had been brought intact into the division meant that, as German machine-gunners emerged from their dug-outs to mow down line after line of advancing Ulstermen, they were killing men who had grown up together, who had been close neighbours. "There was not a dry eye on the street," many recalled after the telegrams had been delivered. One Orangeman in Lurgan wrote to a friend: "There is hardly a house in Hill Street in which at least one member of the family has not been killed or wounded. It is terrible, terrible hard news to bear with equanimity."

The concentrated impact on a tight-knit community was so profound that it could not be forgotten. Of course, on other parts of the battlefield more Irishmen had died, southern and northern, Catholic and Protestant. And the battle raged on for months.

At the close of the war the men returned from the Front to find that the political situation in Ireland had undergone a seismic change.

Catholic ex-servicemen discovered that the Irish freedom for which they had fought had not come to pass.

Sinn Féin, the umbrella separatist party which consigned the Irish Party to history in the December 1918 election, at best ignored their sacrifice and, more usually, regarded them as traitors.

In the south, tens of thousands of veterans were to be the victims of a collective amnesia which lasted almost to the end of the century. In Ulster, the numerous Catholic ex-servicemen were also marginalised. Uncertain what their political future might be, Unionist politicians did not hesitate to use the sacrifice at the Somme to press their claims.

The Peace Day celebrations in Ulster on August 9th, 1919 were turned into a Protestant triumph. The day became a massive display of unionist solidarity: 36,000 men and women who had seen war service (twice as many as took part in London) formed a procession 11 miles long and took three hours to pass the new Cenotaph at Belfast City Hall.

The occasion was essentially a non-inclusive celebration of the role of the Ulster Division. In November 1921 Unionist politicians and war veterans were at the Somme to mark the completion of the first battlefield memorial on the Western Front, the 70ft-high Thiepval Tower.

Again it was an act of solidarity used to remind the government and the British public of Northern Ireland's insistence on remaining intact within the United Kingdom.

The sacrifice at the Somme continued to be deployed to underline Ulster Protestant loyalty. Despite Captain O'Neill's genuine gestures of reconciliation to the minority, he failed to ensure that the 50th anniversary in 1966 was anything but a loyalist commemoration. The same year was the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising and surviving northern Catholic ex-servicemen remained unacknowledged not only by unionists but also in their own community.

Not until the 1990s were attempts made to rectify this situation, not least by the Somme Heritage Centre outside Newtownards, where due recognition is given to all. A letter home to Belfast scrawled in pencil by Private Herbert Beattie, aged 17, brought to me by a student in 1968, is a fitting reminder that the Somme should be remembered above all as a place of horror.

"Dear Mother. Just to let you know and I am safe and thank God for it for [WE] had a ruf time of it in the charge we made Mother don't let on to V. Quinn mother or Archers mother that they must be killed . . . tell Hugh that the fellow that youst to run along with E Ferguson called Eddie Mallon he youst to have Pigen's if Hugh dus not no him McKeown nows him tell them he was killed tell them that ther is not

another Grosvenor Rd fellow left but myself. Mother we were tramping over the dead . . . i will have something ufal to tell you if hell is any woress I would not like to go to it Mother let me here from you as soon as you can . . .”?

Jonathan Bardon OBE is the author of A History of Ulster, and served as chairman of Northern Ireland’s Community Relations Council.

# The Somme and our buried history

*Tuesday, June 27th, 2006*

*The Irish Times editorial*

National histories are framed by collective memories and political identities. They are transformed as much by changing events as by fresh historical investigation and revision.

Ireland's recent and not so recent past has provided graphic instances of this general phenomenon. They are exemplified in our recollections of, and attitudes towards, this country's participation in the first World War, out of which this State was born.

The Battle of the Somme, commemorated in a special supplement with this newspaper today, symbolises a side of that involvement which became excluded from the new State's collective memory, just as much as it was inscribed in that of Northern Ireland.

The recent transformation of relations between them and Britain through the Belfast Agreement allows this common history to be examined anew and to be publicly acknowledged in a completely different way.

This weekend a State ceremony at the War Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge, Dublin will express "the shared history and shared experiences of the people of this island, from all traditions, in the year of 1916", as Taoiseach Bertie Ahern said at the launch of a commemorative stamp on the Somme last week.

In Ireland the Somme was closely interwoven, politically and historically, with the Easter Rising in April. By the time the battle started on July 1st 1916 attitudes towards the war had undergone a decisive change in the South, in response to the execution of the Rising's leaders.

The British government's proposal to exclude six Ulster counties from the plan for Home Rule laid the groundwork for the later partition. As a result the tens of thousands of Irish people who fought and died in the battle against the German army were fighting for very different - and rapidly changing - visions of Ireland's future.

This supplement draws on recent historical research to explain this political context and how it was transformed in later years when the two new states emerged from the war.

It describes how a complex reality was simplified, distorted, its memory forgotten, suppressed and denigrated so that historical amnesia rather than recollection prevailed. It has taken courageous work by dedicated individuals and political leaders to remember it afresh in the Republic and to refocus collective memory in Northern Ireland away from a parallel political mythology there.

Ninety years on, the Somme's horrors and poignancy have not lost their evocative power. Its million casualties were victims of industrialised warfare on a scale never seen before.

The story of military attrition through mass slaughter presaged many of the 20th century's later barbarities. It was woven from a mixture of individual heroism, intimidation and suffering that is difficult for later generations to understand. This supplement is a contribution to Ireland's re-imagining of the Somme.

# Surprises at Somme commemoration

*Monday 3 July 2006*

*Lara Marlowe Somme, Picardy, northern France.*

Nothing, of course, could equal the brutal, horrible shock of German machine gun fire mowing down 60,000 young men in a single morning. But the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme was filled with extraordinary surprises.

In the intervening years, who would have imagined that the band of the British army's Royal Irish Regiment would break into Amhrán na bhFiann. Or that Eileen Paisley, the wife of the unionist leader, would wear a bright green dress, explaining: "Green is my favourite colour. It must be the Irish in me."

For all the goodwill and reconciliation, there were underlying tensions: hurt feelings when Prince Charles forgot to include Ireland in the list of countries he thanked for their part in the Battle of the Somme; an Irishwoman who complained to me that the ceremony at Ulster Tower "resembled an Orange march".

That morning, 90 years ago, was the beginning of the end of the British Empire, and it started with the song of a lark, described by the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was there.

Birdsong accompanied us throughout the day-long tangle of identity and remembering, goodwill and residual distrust. At the trench in Thiepval Wood, the birds nearly drowned out the trumpeter who played the Last Post, and the piper who played the Lament.

The British government gave the Somme Association €578,000 (£400,000) to purchase the wood, when it was threatened by a French plan for an airport. The Royal Irish Regiment recently restored one trench to what it would have looked like in 1916.

Minister for Education Mary Hanafin became the first Government Minister to attend the Somme commemoration. A small ceremony beside the trench in Thiepval Wood brought home the reality of the war for her.

A former history teacher, she stood before the gaping scar of the trench. "Teaching about the first World War using textbooks and maps is quite different to being here,"

she said. "You look at these beautiful green fields, yellow flowers, poppies . . . You hear birds singing . . . and by noon, 20,000 people were dead."

Ms Hanafin and Northern Secretary Peter Hain saw Ireland's participation in the commemorations as an auspicious omen for the North.

Ms Hanafin acknowledged that Ireland long neglected those who died in the first World War. "For the Irish people to commemorate that is hugely significant. It shows the improved relations between North and South, and between England and Ireland," she said.

"It's not so much that we are interested in history for the sake of remembering, but in history for what we can learn from it, and how we can move forward from it," she said:

"Everything like this, which says, 'We respect each other,' makes a big step forward in the healing process," he said.

"In the end, what we share in common here on the fields of the Somme is immensely much more than what divides us. Irishmen from the south and Ulstermen from the north went over the top and got mown down, or somehow fought their way through to the German trenches and conquered them . . ." But afterwards, they went home and fought each other . . ."

They did," Mr Hain admitted. "And it's that legacy we're now dealing with. Today is an important part of resolving it."

Rev Ian Paisley took credit for Ms Hanafin's presence, claiming it was the result of a speech he gave 10 years ago. It was "only right" that the war dead of Ireland be honoured by their government, he said. But unlike Ms Hanafin and Mr Hain, he believed the shared remembrance had "nothing to do with the IRA or the government of Ulster".

Would Dr Paisley be willing to attend commemorations in Dublin? "If there were proper services, and no trying to infiltrate republicanism or united Ireland," he replied. Despite the unprecedented recognition of Irish involvement in the Battle of the Somme, the main commemoration, at the 150-foot high Thiepval Memorial, was a decidedly British affair. Britain's ambassador to France, Sir John Holmes, shook hands with many of the 7,000 guests as they arrived. The Union Jack flew overhead and the standards of the Royal British Legion surrounded the red brick monument.

The only Irish tricolour I saw was on the Irish Ambassador's car. Several people fainted, waiting in 35 degree heat for the Prince of Wales to arrive with his wife

Camilla. Prince Charles said the Battle of the Somme “caused most profound shock” to Britain.

It was not just the huge scale of losses that 20,000 men died the first day. “It was also the fact that for the first time in our history, we put mere boys into an assault against the bombs, bullets and the terrible wire entanglements,” he said.

Nowhere in Britain was left untouched by the Battle of the Somme. Other countries also suffered “unmentionable losses”, Prince Charles continued, naming Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India.

Asked whether he deliberately left out Ireland, his press secretary assured *The Irish Times* that the omission was “an oversight”.

Three times on Saturday, Ms Hanafin laid wreathes with the words “On behalf of the government and people of Ireland” in English, Irish and French written on the card. They were the same, plain laurel leaves which are used for all official Irish occasions, including memorials to the 1916 Rising.

At Ulster Tower, the third ceremony of the day, one of her south Dublin constituents, Liam Dodd, told Ms Hanafin how thrilled he was to see her. “One of my great uncles, Sgt William Dodd of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, was killed on the 1st of July 1916,” Mr Dodd explained. Another great uncle, Patrick Roe, lost a leg.

A storekeeper for Irish lighthouses and an amateur historian of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Mr Dodd seemed to apologise on behalf of his ancestors. “For a lot of them, the only work they could get was with the British army,” he said.

“When my uncle Patrick came home, he was afraid of being attacked if he went around Dublin. He hid his medals under the bed. We should remember the men who fought in the first World War, as we remember those from the Rising and the War of Independence. They were all Irishmen together, they should be remembered equally,” he said.

The majority of people at the Ulster Tower wore orange sashes or red poppies. Thomas Mac Gregor Collins, a retired maintenance worker from Belfast and a member of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, told me that “Catholics and Protestants fought alongside each other in the Battle of the Somme.” So why did they fight later, I asked. “The Irish government backed terrorism,” Mr Collins said. “To be honest, I don’t trust them and I never will.”

Ms Hanafin was there “to represent the people who died in the Somme, but they were British,” he continued. “They died before partition. They were British like us.”

A few minutes later, a grey-haired woman slipped a note into my bag, then melted into the crowd before I could speak to her. "I am an Irish Roman Catholic married to a Frenchman and living here for over 30 years," the note said. "I am sad to see this ceremony should resemble an Orange march."

But like Irish officials, "E. Prévot", as she signed her letter, praised a sermon by the head of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Rev Dr David Clarke. "We have come to recognise in recent years the unsung heroism of the 16th Irish Division," Dr Clarke said. He also paid tribute to the ceremony in Dublin, adding, "God bless the President and prime minister of the Irish Republic."

The most intimate ceremony took place miles away, in the tiny village of Guillemont, liberated by the 16th Irish Division in September 1916, along with neighbouring Ginchy. It was here that Tom Kettle, poet, MP and Irish nationalist, lost his life.

"To the glory of God and the honour of Ireland," says the Celtic stone cross outside the church at Guillemont. The local French came out in force there. "All of us have an ancestor who fought," Alain Tarlier, the village postman, explained. "We are grateful to the Irish who died here." The village's usual population of 126 swelled. There was not an orange sash to be seen, and Dr Ian Adamson, the chairman of the Somme Association, gave his speech in Irish as well as English.

After the French Marseillaise, the British army's Royal Irish Regiment band struck up Amhrán na bhFiann. It was a surprise, and Ms Hanafin and the Ambassador sang along. "I felt very proud, standing there, singing my national anthem," Ms Hanafin said. "It was a perfect end to the day."

# President leads tributes to Somme war dead

*Monday 3 July 2006*

Representatives of all the main political parties, North and South, joined President Mary McAleese, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and members of the Government at the ceremony in Dublin on Saturday to mark the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme.

In the first large-scale official commemoration in the Republic of Irishmen who died in the first World War, more than 200 members of the Defence Forces took part in the ceremony at the Irish National War Memorial Park at Islandbridge.

The President laid a wreath at the cenotaph on behalf of the people of Ireland. Wreaths were then laid by the ambassadors of all the countries who took part in the battle, Britain, France, Germany, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, India and Australia.

Nigel Hamilton, head of the Northern Ireland civil service, laid a wreath on behalf of the Northern administration and Major Gen O'Morochoe laid one on behalf of the Royal British Legion in honour of the 3,500 Irishmen who died at the Somme.

All the political parties in the Republic, including Sinn Féin, were represented at the ceremony, which was televised live, as were Northern political parties the DUP, the SDLP and the UUP.

Lord Mayor of Dublin Vincent Jackson and former president Dr Patrick Hillery were among the distinguished guests in the attendance of about 1,500, which included relatives from all over Ireland of those who died at the Somme.

At the start of the ceremony, a colour guard from the Defence Forces carrying 11 flags, eight from the countries who fought at the Somme and three representing the Irish regiments who fought in the war, took up position between the cenotaph and the cross in the Memorial Gardens.

It was the first time that an Army officer formally carried a Union Jack.

The ceremony then began with the recitation of the poem *In Flanders Fields* by Comdt Peter O'Halloran. It was followed by a rendition of *Oft in the Stilly Night* by the Park Children's Choir, accompanied by the band of the first Southern Brigade.

Comdt O'Halloran then read from a tribute to the bravery of the Irish who died in the war by Marshal Foch, the French commander-in-chief. Cpl Kevin Duncan played the lament *The Battle of the Somme* on the pipes.

Following a short prayer service led by the head chaplain of the Defence Forces, Mgr Eoin Thynne, the wreath-laying ceremony commenced.

It was followed by a minute's silence, the *Last Post* was then played, the National Flag raised, followed by *Reveille* and *Amhrán na bhFiann*.

A booklet similar to that produced for the Easter Sunday commemoration of the 1916 Rising was distributed to the official guests. It incorporated a first edition of the special commemorative stamp of the Battle of the Somme.

Large screens were in place to relay aspects of the ceremony taking place in Paris as the guests arrived at Islandbridge and they were used to relay the ceremony to different sections of the crowd.

The format of the ceremony was drawn up following consultations with the Royal British Legion. Invitations were extended to military history societies and to organisations established to honour the memory of those who served in disbanded Irish regiments such as the Dublin Fusiliers, Prince of Wales Leinster Regiment and the Combined Irish Regiments Association.

In addition, representatives of veteran organisations such as the Naval Association, the Irish United Nations Veterans Association and the American Legion also attended the ceremony. Elsewhere, Minister for Education Mary Hanafin represented the Government at commemorative ceremonies at Thiepval and Guillemont in France.

It is estimated that more than 3,500 Irishmen were among the half-a-million soldiers who died in the battle, which began on July 1st, 1916. About 35,000 Irishmen died during the 1914-18 first World War.

Revisiting the Somme can help Ireland lay ghosts of war to rest.

# Re-examining Ireland's role in the Great War

*Saturday, 22 April 2006*  
*Professor John Horne*

The Easter Rising and the independence of the State have rightly been honoured. But the commemorative season is not over as the government has undertaken to mark the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, which lasted from July 1st to mid-November 1916.

The first day of the battle, with its appalling bloodshed, has always been deeply symbolic for unionists. But it seems worth asking what significance the Somme - and by extension the Great War - holds for the Republic. An exhibition that begins next week at the major museum on the Somme battlefield, the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne, suggests some new ways of thinking about this issue.

Opened in 1992, the Historial is anything but a museum of conventional military history. Its approach is cultural, seeking to understand the contemporary experience of the war as a whole, with a focus on Britain, France and Germany. The exhibition, 1916: The Battle of the Somme, an International Arena, uses symbolic objects to show how men from as far apart as Canada, French West Africa, Germany, Poland, Australia and New Zealand came to fight in the battle and were changed by it.

Ireland figures prominently, with two remarkable items that encapsulate the country's contrasting relationships with the war. Shortly after the battle, an English artist, James Beadle, painted a heroic canvas of the 36th (Ulster) Division attacking on July 1st.

"A Belfast riot on the top of Mount Vesuvius," was how one survivor described the day. Recruited in part from the Ulster Volunteer Force, the 36th Division was strongly imbued with the unionist cause and its action on July 1st became legendary.

In 1918, the UVF presented Beadle's painting to the people of Belfast where it hangs in the City Hall, a symbol of unionist identity reproduced on numerous Orange Order banners. The generosity of Belfast City Council in lending the painting has been matched by the trustees of the National Irish War Memorial (Islandbridge) and the Office of Public Works, who have contributed a less familiar but equally significant object from Dublin.

This is the wooden Celtic cross that was carved from a beam found in a shattered French farmhouse to commemorate the role of the 16th Division, made up mainly of wartime volunteers from the south.

Like most southern opinion, many of the soldiers doubtless backed Home Rule. They included nationalist activists such as Tom Kettle, poet and former MP, who believed that supporting the war would secure a measure already approved by Westminster.

On September 5th, 1916, part of the 16th Division successfully attacked the village of Guillemont, while on September 9th the entire division took nearby Ginchy.

Overall, the division won two Victoria Crosses and sustained nearly 1,500 dead (including Kettle) and 4,000 wounded out of 11,000 men. The cross was erected after the battle. Replaced in 1926 by a stone cross that is still there, it was housed in the Islandbridge memorial.

The juxtaposition of the cross and the painting highlights familiar points about Ireland's role in the Great War. The involvement of soldiers from all parts of the country was considerable. Yet the Easter Rising became the moral equivalent of the unionist exploits on the Somme, marginalising the sacrifice of the 16th Division and other soldiers from the south.

It became impossible to invest that sacrifice in Home Rule or even, owing to the War of Independence, in the new state. Growing official amnesia about the war in independent Ireland contrasted with its commemoration in Northern Ireland, where it helped legitimise a unionist version of Home Rule.

Yet to leave the matter there is to remain at the stage reached by the Irish Peace Tower inaugurated at Messines in the Belgian sector of the western front in 1998.

This consists of using the Great War symbolically to reverse divisions in Irish history, rehabilitating the men of the 16th Division and promoting north-south reconciliation.

The war itself, in which the enemy for the Irish was the Germans, not unionists or Home Rulers, is absent from such thinking. Irishmen certainly killed far more Germans than fellow Irishmen in the entire period 1914-1923. It is time to move on and consider Ireland's war in a wider context.

How this might be done is part of a cultural history of the war. Firstly, the conflict introduced the world to industrialised warfare. The violence was unprecedented though, sadly, far from unique in the subsequent 90 years.

Soldiers wrestled with an unfamiliar battlefield, victims but also perpetrators of violence. Irishmen from north and south thus participated in a defining experience of the 20th century.

Second, the violence was not just physical but also cultural. The enemy was dehumanised and the transformation of the world was sought in different ways (national, socialist, democratic, fascist) that alone seemed capable of making the war serve some purpose.

Violence spilled over from the battlefield to politics and ideology, and in this sense the Rising and subsequent conflict in Ireland were no less part of the war than the Bolshevik Revolution or fascism in Italy.

Third, the war shifted the tectonic plates of the European state system in a manner unparalleled since the French Revolution. To portray it as simply about imperialism or nationalism is to ignore the complexity of that process. It involved the bid by Germany to establish European hegemony. It also fostered the emergence of nation-states. The national project that emerged in the Free State repudiated the war effort of the nation it was leaving. But other new nation-states (Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) grounded their legitimacy in the war itself.

Finally, the experience of mass death made memory a major preoccupation of the societies concerned. How that memory was expressed and dealt with, how private mourning related to the public memory of the war, was an unsettling and sometimes explosive issue.

In inter-war France it fed a deep-seated pacifism, whereas in Germany it was exploited by the nationalist right and helped bring the Nazis to power.

Public marginalisation of the memory of the war in the Free State, followed by the absence of the south from the second World War, made it particularly difficult for survivors and society at large to negotiate the meaning of the experience.

But renewed interest in the Great War in the Republic as in many other countries indicates that the need to understand this seminal episode in 20th century history is not over.



Poppies growing in the Somme (Photos by Ronan McGreevy)



The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing is the largest British and Commonwealth war memorial in the world. It remembers more than 72,000 men who died in the Battle of the Somme and have no known grave. Almost 4,000 men from Irish regiments are on the memorial. The most famous Irish casualty of the Battle of the Somme is the former Nationalist MP, poet and academic Tom Kettle who was killed at the Battle of Ginchy on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1916. (Photos by Ronan McGreevy)



The 16<sup>th</sup> (Division) captured the Somme village of Guillemont on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1916. A stone cross erected in 1926 remembers the Irishmen who fought and died in the liberation of Guillemont and its neighbouring village of Ginchy. The Mayor of Guillemont Didier Samain said: “It it thanks to the Irish that we can live in peace in this village”. (Photos by Ronan McGreevy)



Since the Canadian poet John McCrae wrote his famous poem In Flanders Fields, the poppy has become the symbol of all those blighted lives as a result of the two world wars. Poppy season in the Somme coincides with the height of summer. This field of poppies is growing around the Ulster Tower which stands on the site where 2,000 men of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. (Photos by Ronan McGreevy)



The memorial to the Tyneside Irish at La Boisselle remembers the tragedy that befell the brigade on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. More than 600 men from the brigade were killed. The village of La Boisselle is on the main road that bisects the battlefield where the British began their attack on July 1<sup>st</sup>. (Photos by Ronan McGreevy)

# How unionists and nationalists fought side by side in the first World War

*Book of the Day*

*Friday, 4 September 2009*

*Oliver Fallon reviews Richard S Grayson's Belfast Boys*

On December 18th, 1915, 36 officers and 952 men of the Sixth Connaught Rangers arrived at Le Havre. Nearly one-third of the men in the ranks had enlisted in west Belfast.

Over the next 2½ years the Belfast men fell alongside the recruits from Ballymote, Boyle, and Ballinasloe as the battalion fought at Guillemont, Ginchy and Messines before the battalion was annihilated in the German offensive of March, 1918.

In the last 10 years interest in the involvement of Irishmen in the Great War has intensified.

In the six counties the sacrifice of the unionist population has never been forgotten and retains its significance with Remembrance Day ceremonies and vivid neighbourhood murals.

Almost universally ignored, by all sides, has been the sacrifice of Belfast men of the nationalist tradition. Richard S Grayson's book *Belfast Boys* examines the civilians of west Belfast from either side of the sectarian divide who enlisted in the British army at the outbreak of the first World War.

The author skilfully explains the huge political division that separated the working class populations around the two main roads that stretch west from the city centre at the time.

Huge numbers of unionists enlisted in newly-formed Ulster regiments. Particular attention is paid to the Ninth Royal Irish Rifles recruited from the Shankill.

Many of these recruits were already trained members of the UVF and joined up as friends, comrades and neighbours.

Fierce opposition to Home Rule continues to be cited as the sole reason for the massive enlistment among this section of the community. However, Grayson's research does point out that "there were also practical reasons for enlistment, such as unemployment and low pay".

Linen production, a major source of employment in Belfast was badly affected by the loss of some continental markets on the outbreak of war. Thus, the motivation of Belfast men, who enlisted, like men all over Ireland, is not as clear cut as we suppose.

Less well known is that on the other side of the divide Joseph Devlin, Home Rule advocate and MP for Catholic west Belfast, encouraged men of the Irish National Volunteers to answer Redmond's call.

Thousands of nationalists made their way to Mill Street recruiting office and enlisted before being sent south to swell the ranks of the Sixth Connaught Rangers and Seventh Leinsters.

Men from west Belfast were killed, gassed and horribly wounded. Soldiers and their families from both traditions shared a common cross of suffering. Pragmatists such as Major Willie Redmond saw the war as, though an evil thing, one which might unite both traditions. And these war heroes would return to a united Ireland once victory had been achieved.

Unfortunately, events at home changed the political landscape and by the time the war ended Redmond was dead, his Home Rule party no longer a viable entity and partition inevitable. Grayson covers the Belfast that ex-soldiers returned to in 1919 and how some veterans were sucked into militant groups.

Perhaps the saddest thing is that the Great War continues to be remembered with pride by one community, but has been erased from common memory in the other.

The only physical reminder on the Falls Road is the Cross of Sacrifice in Milltown Cemetery. It stands, only yards from the republican plot, over the graves of soldiers who died of wounds after being returned home.

Belfast Boys is provocative, meticulously researched and referenced. It examines the thousands of men from both communities, including names and addresses, who fought and died in first World War.

Most importantly, it illustrates how history can often be shaped by the elevation of one set of heroes at the expense of others with the common, unspoken consent of both sides.

Oliver Fallon is a military historian and researcher for and founder member of the Connaught Rangers Association. [www.connaught Rangersassoc.com](http://www.connaught Rangersassoc.com)

# An Irishman's Diary

*Tuesday, 7 June 2011*

*Brendan O Cathaoir*

On the first day of Queen Elizabeth's Irish visit, with synchronicity a group assembled at the grave of Willie Redmond in Flanders Fields. We read part of his last speech in the House of Commons, which was an impassioned plea for reconciliation. It can be said that he sacrificed his life for North-South unity and Anglo-Irish accord.

Though his health had collapsed and he was aged 56, Maj Redmond insisted on going over the top with his men at the battle of Messines Ridge on June 7th, 1917.

The 16th (Irish) Division attacked alongside the 36th (Ulster) Division. Wounded by shellfire, he was carried from the field by Ulster troops and died that evening in their division's field hospital.

He was buried in a convent garden at Loker. Despite attempts by the authorities at re-interment in a Commonwealth war cemetery, his body is still there.

According to Willie Redmond's biographer, Terence Denman, the Easter Rising "shook him terribly and he realised that constitutional nationalism had taken a wrong turn in supporting the war".

Brother of the Irish Party leader, he had been MP for east Clare. The parliamentary vacancy caused by his death was filled by Éamon de Valera.

In 1914 no one knew how to avoid disaster. The European powers blundered into a war which resulted in an estimated nine million soldiers killed, about 20 million maimed, at least three million widows and six million fatherless children.

Expectations of a short decisive war proved false, as a deadlocked Western Front was drawn from Switzerland to the sea. Pope Benedict XV appealed in vain for an end to the "revolting human slaughter".

Today this brooding land contains the dust of 510,000 unidentified British and Commonwealth soldiers. The remains of many were gathered into the official war cemeteries; their headstones state: "known unto God".

The Thiepval Anglo-French memorial (designed by Edwin Lutyens) lists the names of 72,000 missing, including Tom Kettle.

The poet-soldier, Francis Ledwidge, was killed in action on July 31st, 1917. A Welsh-speaking poet died on the same day and is buried also in Artillery Wood cemetery: Ellis Humphrey Evans used the pen name Hedd Wyn (white peace). Canadian medical officer John McCrae wrote *In Flanders Fields* while serving at Essex Farm dressing station.

In the adjoining cemetery, Gearóid O'Sullivan led us to the grave of his uncle: Patrick O'Sullivan, of Ballyledden, Beaufort, Co Kerry, was killed aged 19.

A chaplain wrote to his mother on July 6th, 1916: ". . . you need not be anxious about the safety of his soul . . . He was at holy communion the day before they went to the trenches. May God comfort you in the thought of meeting your dear son in heaven . . ."

A panel at the Ireland Peace Park near Messines Ridge contains this narrative by Francis Gleeson, chaplain, Royal Munster Fusiliers: "Spent all night trying to console, aid and remove the wounded. It was ghastly to see them lying there in the cold, cheerless outhouses on bare stretchers with no blanket to cover their freezing limbs."

Willie Redmond's chaplain said he was "absolutely convinced he was dying for Ireland". The 16th Division memorials at Guillemont and Wytschaete bear the inscription: "Do chum glóire Dé agus onóra na hÉireann."

But the Civil War left Ireland bitter, insecure and drained of generosity: Irishmen who had served in the British army were treated with condescension.

Two letters from the Western Front to my mother (aged eight in 1915) have survived. "My dear cousin Nancy," Matt Burke began, "I wish this damn war was over. We are all very tired of the business and life is very uncertain. We have a very anxious time. God is good . . . If I am killed, I will die in a good cause."

(Paradoxically, two years later Thomas Ashe, the first republican prisoner to die on hunger-strike, immortalised the phrase: "I die in a good cause.")

Burke wrote again on November 5th, 1918. He hoped the influenza epidemic was keeping away from Co Clare. "We are in great glee expecting a finish. Victory in sight. Four terrible years of destruction." Otto Dix, a German artist and veteran of the first World War, was haunted by the brutality of mechanised warfare long after the guns fell silent. (When the Nazis came to power he was dismissed as a "degenerate artist" from his post at Dresden Academy.)

He wrote: "Lice, rats, barbed wire, fleas, shells, bombs, dug-outs,/ Bodies, blood, alcohol, mice, cats, artillery, filth, bullets,/ Deaths, fire, metal. That's war. It's the devil's work."

Dix overlooked one barbarity - poison gas developed by a Jewish German chemist, Fritz Haber. The still sad music of humanity can be heard too in the Jewish headstones among the

lines of iron crosses in Fricourt German cemetery. As we approach the centenary of the catastrophic Great War, it seems to this diarist that the most appropriate way to remember those brave men is to reflect on the futility of war.

Dying aged 25, the poet Wilfred Owen came to represent a generation of young men sacrificed by generals, politicians and war profiteers. Recalling a comrade killed by poison gas, he wrote: "If in some smothering dreams you too could pace/  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin . . . /  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest,  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori."

# Letters from Willie Redmond reveal pride in Irish at Somme

*Friday, 23 May 2014*

*Ronan McGreevy*

Rediscovered letters from the front from Major Willie Redmond reveal his pride in his fellow Irish soldiers and his frustration at not being allowed to fight alongside them. Redmond, an MP for Clare and a brother of Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond, was one of the most famous Irish casualties of the First World War.

He was killed during the first day of the Battle of Messines on June 7th, 1917. His death was the subject of widespread mourning in both Britain and Ireland.

Last December both the Taoiseach Enda Kenny and the British Prime Minister David Cameron visited his grave which is in the garden of a convent near Messines.

Redmond's letters are in the Taylor/Monteagle collection which was launched last weekend at the Foynes Flying Boat museum in Co Clare. The Monteagles were an old Irish aristocratic family and the correspondence is to Liberal peer Lord Monteagle and his two nieces, London-based socialites Ida and Una Taylor.

The letters are sent from the front in 1916 when the 16th (Irish) Division were in France. On September 17th, 1916, Major Redmond wrote to Una Taylor expressing his admiration for his fellow Irish soldiers who had taken Guillemont and Ginchy during the latter stages of the Battle of the Somme.

"The Irish captured Guillemont and Ginchy in most glorious fashion," he wrote. "Nothing could be more splendid. I saw enough of it though at headquarters to be lost in admiration at the bravery of these Irish soldiers and they never forgot Ireland but sang her songs all the time.

"Everyone agrees that the Irish troops could not have done better. The losses were of course comparatively heavy. So many dear young boys dead. I never regretted feeling old before. I wish I could have done more."

Major Redmond was 52, over-age and out of shape when war broke out in 1914. Nevertheless, he was determined to fight believing, like his brother, that joining the British war effort would hasten Home Rule and help reconcile Protestant and Catholics in Ireland.

Because of his age, he did not serve in the front lines in the first part of the war. Instead, he was based at army headquarters and was frustrated by not being closer to his men. In February 1916, he wrote to Una Taylor of the deprivations of the trenches.

“It is a very strenuous life here and a great novelty for me I need hardly say. The men are awfully good and bear with all discomfort and hardships without a murmur.”

He finally got his wish to command the men in the 6th battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment during the Battle of Messines, but was hit immediately on going over the top and then fatally wounded after being shot in the leg.

The collection also includes a letter from Major Redmond to Una Taylor a week before the Battle of Messines asking her to pray for the Irish troops. The Taylor/Monteagle collection also includes correspondence from Michael Davitt, Charles Stewart Parnell, Henry Grattan and John Redmond.

# 1916: A Global History review: Keith Jeffery

*Saturday, 16 January, 2016*  
*John Horne*

If the Great War were a play in five acts, one for each year from 1914 to 1918, then 1916 - act three - would represent its climax. Yet in history as in theatre, space matters no less than time.

Like many of Shakespeare's dramas, the war played out in numerous settings on what became a truly global stage. Making sense of time and space at the midpoint of the first World War is the challenge to which Keith Jeffery rises triumphantly in this sparkling history.

In doing so, Jeffery stands at the forefront of the newest trend in the history of the war by emphasising both the local and global dimensions of a conflict that engulfed the lives of millions.

Combining sharp analysis with superb storytelling and using a gallery of extraordinary characters, he discusses 1916 in 12 scenes.

The first 10 focus on different battles, fronts and regions, including Asia, Africa and the Middle East as well as Europe. The last two point to the shifting action of 1917 (American entry and the Russian Revolution) and the war's denouement in 1918.

While rejecting the common obsession with the "mud and trenches of the western front", Jeffery does not neglect Verdun and the Somme. He knows that these great battles of attrition drove the destructive dynamic of the war in 1916.

But he declines to endorse the verdict that they were a "learning curve" leading to victory. "If victory there was," he notes of the Somme, "it was undoubtedly pyrrhic." Jeffery is more interested in exploring the ramifications of stalemate on the western front for the war's other theatres.

The year opened with the Allied withdrawal from Gallipoli and concluded with fighting in Macedonia, where by the end of the year half-a-million British, French and Serb troops confronted the Bulgarians in another deadlock.

In between, the Russians recovered from their huge retreat in 1915 and under their most gifted general, Aleksei Brusilov, drove the Austro-Hungarians back across southern Poland before the Germans halted them.

This forced the Austrians to call off their “punishment expedition” against Italy in the Alps, encouraging the Italians to renew their own unsuccessful offensives against the Austrians on the Isonzo river. Eventually, some 600,000 Italian soldiers died in the war, proportionately nearly as many as British.

The Ottoman Empire’s participation activated imperialist rivalries across its former and current Arab provinces, from Libya to Iraq, as the Allies struggled against their German-backed Ottoman foes.

In 1916, this resulted in more fluid campaigning that resembled 19th-century colonial warfare yet also imported the latest techniques (aircraft, heavy artillery) from Europe.

Colluding with each other in the secret Sykes-Picot accord, the French and British divided up the future Middle East. Yet the British fanned the Arab Revolt (under TE Lawrence) with promises of independence while favouring Zionist interests in Palestine, thus sowing the seeds of enduring conflict.

Military stalemate, however, did not mean that the conflict was static. On the contrary, Jeffery identifies key developments that altered the nature and tempo of the war precisely because of the stalemate. Prime among these was the naval war.

As the author shows, Jutland, the major naval battle of 1916 between the British and German fleets (yet another standoff), was less important than the broader economic war in which the Allies blockaded the Central Powers while the Germans attacked Allied shipping with submarines.

The result was vital since the side that won (the Allies) could ultimately bring more men and material to bear on breaking the stalemate.

He also shows how the relentless need for labour (military and civilian) led each camp to ruthlessly exploit their most vulnerable pools of manpower: the German-occupied populations in Belgium and eastern Europe, the Russian Empire’s Muslims in central Asia, and the British and French in their non-white colonies.

The result was major revolts against conscription in central Asia, Algeria and elsewhere, as imperial structures buckled under the needs of war, with consequences for the future. The war both propelled the colonial empires to their zenith and undermined them.

As the pressures of a Euro-centric war were translated to the farthest reaches of the globe, the consequences could be devastating. In the case of Africa, dragged into the war by its colonial masters, indigenous soldiers served in Europe and Africa.

The German commander, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, fought a brilliant irregular campaign against the Allies around German East Africa, only surrendering a fortnight after the Armistice in November 1918. Together with the impact of the war on frail subsistence economies, some 200,000 Africans perished as a result of combat or famine.

Yet for the first time, large number of Africans went to France to fight or to work and saw their colonial masters with new eyes - and new demands for reform.

Jeffery gives Ireland its due place, arguing cogently for the global significance of “Ypres on the Liffey” during Easter Week 1916.

But he relates this to the experience of “nationalist” and “unionist” soldiers in the Battle of the Somme, and embroiders an Irish thread across many of the far-flung regions he deals with.

Irish figures include Flora Sandes, who went to Serbia as a nurse and ended up fighting in the Serb army. Indeed, with his eye for colourful characters and telling anecdotes, Jeffery brings his drama alive at every stage with participant accounts, making particularly good use of nurses, newspapermen and spies.

The author makes an excellent case that 1916 was act three of the Great War. The year saw the conflict transformed in numerous regards, such as the cost of the military deadlock for ailing powers such as Russia, the terms of colonialism and, most fatefully, the rejection of peace and deepened commitment by both camps to military victory at (almost) any cost.

Of course, history is not drama, and each year of the war was its own turning point. But for breadth of scholarship, vivid and accessible writing and a pace that never flags, 1916 is the ideal book to read in order to place this year’s commemoration in a global and truly illuminating perspective.

John Horne is emeritus fellow of Trinity College Dublin and visiting fellow at Balliol College Oxford

# Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, by Frank McGuinness

*Saturday, 19 March, 2016*

*Fintan O'Toole*

In 1985, as the Troubles ground mercilessly on, the memory of the first World War was still a source of division. In the Republic there was a willed amnesia about the vast level of participation in the war by ordinary Irish nationalists.

In Northern Ireland the war was largely “owned” by the Protestants, for whom the sufferings of the largely loyalist 36th Ulster Division counterweighted nationalist myths of blood sacrifice.

Those divisions would be dramatised in the most appalling way when the IRA bombed a Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen in 1987, killing 11 people and injuring 63, all of them Protestant.

In this context it was remarkable that the Abbey Theatre would stage a play by an Ulster writer from a Catholic background - a play, moreover, that attempts to understand the motivations and mentalities of a group of loyalist soldiers in the 36th who go over the top to their doom at the disastrous Battle of the Somme on July 1st, 1916.

As Frank McGuinness, its writer, put it: “It was an eye-opener for a Catholic republican, as I am, to have to examine the complexity, diversity, disturbance and integrity of the other side, the Protestant people.”

McGuinness, who is from Buncrana, Co Donegal, came to prominence in 1982, when the Abbey staged *The Factory Girls*. It followed a group of shirtmakers through their protest occupation of a factory. Although *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* feels very different, its form is not dissimilar: a same-sex group under the pressure of a conflict.

*Observe the Sons*, though, is a more mature and complex work, ditching the realism of the earlier work and using the stage with a fluidity that allows for multiple locations to exist at the same time.

McGuinness was clearly conscious that, in dealing with the contested memories of Irish history, memory itself had to be on the front line.

The play takes place in the mind of Pyper, the sole survivor of the group, now an old man.

It is essentially a ghost play: the dead appear to him at the start, torturing him with memories. "Why does this persist? What more have we to tell each other? I remember nothing today. Absolutely nothing . . . I do not understand your insistence on my remembrance."

Pyper knows that memory, as in the work of Brian Friel (see the entry in this series for 1979), is partly fiction:

"Invention gives that slaughter shape. That scale of horror has no shape." Yet he cannot escape the imperative of remembrance. The dead come back to life and occupy the stage. It may be no accident that there are seven of them - the iconic number of the other 1916 sacrifice.

McGuinness's anxiety to do justice to the "integrity" of the cause for which these men give their lives does not give way to sentimentality or any easy endorsement of what they stand for. Pyper is a dark figure, scathing and self-destructive.

Sexual unease (especially in relation to Pyper's love for Craig, a young recruit), sectarian hatred, internal class differences and a sense of despairing futility vie with courage and loyalty.

The shattering effects of the war on the men's bravado and brave fronts are traced with compassion and delicacy. The realisation dawns, as one of the men, Anderson, puts it, picking up on a line from Rudyard Kipling: "We're not making a sacrifice. Jesus, you've seen this war. We are the sacrifice."

Bitter as that realisation is, the play, as an act of imaginative generosity, at least held out the hope that the sacrifice need not be repeated forever. Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks is a collaboration between The Irish Times and the Royal Irish Academy. Find out more at [ria.ie](http://ria.ie)

# Love letters from the front inspires 137-part radio series

*Saturday, 17 April 2016*  
*Ronan McGreevy*

Love letters between a British soldier and his Irish sweetheart have been turned into a radio drama which will run for the next five months. \*The letters were between an English soldier Eric Appleby from Liverpool who was a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery.

He was sent for training to Athlone and it was here that he met local girl Phyllis Kelly at a dance in March 1915. Eric was later moved to the Western Front but they kept in touch in a series of extraordinary letters.

Before he was posted to the front they wrote about “love days” but they were only together four times after he completed his training. He was posted to the Western Front and was eventually killed at the Battle of the Somme in October 1916.

“Oh, Lady isn’t it just dreadful to think that a whole year has gone and that we had only twelve days in it together,” he wrote to her. “May God grant that it shall not be this again this year. I want every day in every year to be ours. OH! When will this wretched war be finished?”

Mr Dougan said he had fallen for her “hook, line and sinker” but his ardour was initially not reciprocated though she eventually relented. His letters shows the full horror of the front.

“We are really in it now. Quite close to our guns, there is a shell hole 40 foot deep. It is appalling to look at.”The letters grow steadily darker as the horrors of the front are visited on Appleby. He becomes more unhinged and desensitised at the front.

He cuts off the lapels of a German soldier and send them to her. Mr Dougan said the letters show how the war affected both those at the front and those left behind. Phyllis Kelly lived until 1991 and there are contributions in the documentary from her nephews Tom and Patrick Kelly. Her last unsent letter to Appleby states: “Dear one, surely God won’t take you from me now.

It will be the end of everything that matter because, oh Englishman, you are the world and life to me. But I must be brave like you, dear, but the words of your Dad’s telegram will keep ringing in my ears and squashing out hope.”Love Letters From The Front began on Sunday at 12.30pm on BBC Radio Ulster and BBC Radio Foyle and carries on for 137 consecutive days.

The letters will be read out in self-contained short episodes which will be broadcast from Thursday April 21st at 11.55am and again at 11.50pm up until the end of October of this year. Each episode lasts five minutes.

# The Somme battlefield: the longest 10 miles in history

*Wednesday 18 May, 2016  
Ronan McGreevy*

The Somme battlefield is bisected by the old Roman road between Albert and Bapaume. In 1916, Albert, an attractive cathedral town, was behind the British lines, the last vestige of civilisation before the Tommies entered the mouth of hell. Bapaume was behind German lines, and an objective of the initial July 1st assault.

British commander Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig envisaged the artillery barrage that preceded the infantry assault would destroy the German front lines and the infantry would walk through.

In such circumstances, his beloved cavalry (he was originally a cavalryman) would push through to Bapaume on the first day or some days after that.

The artillery barrage did not work, and the British army suffered almost 60,000 casualties of whom more than 19,000 were fatalities in a single day.

The distance between Albert and Bapaume is 15 kilometres or in the old imperial measure better known to the soldiers of the time, it is 10 miles. It was, according to the late military historian, Prof Richard Holmes, the longest 10 miles in British military history.

Four months later and having sustained 420,000 casualties, the British still had not reached Bapaume. This vast expenditure of blood and munitions only succeeded in moving the front line 11 kilometres (seven miles) forward from the July 1st starting point.

As one travels out of Albert, the road heads steadily uphill. Three kilometres outside the town, there is a sign marking the British front line on July 1st.

Beside it is the first of hundreds of British memorials in this most evocative of battlefields. Here there is a carved stone bench and tranquil garden dedicated to the Tyneside Irish and Tyneside Scottish regiments.

The inscription in English and French reads: "Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friend. In front of this monument on 1/7/16 the 'Tyneside Scottish' and the 'Tyneside Irish' brigades attacked the enemy.

For many hours the fortunes of arms fluctuated but 'ere night had fallen the two Tyneside Brigades with the aid of other units of the 34th Division attained their objective."

It is often assumed that the 36th (Ulster) Division was the division which suffered the most casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. But the melancholy distinction of being the worst affected division belonged not to the 36th (5,500 casualties) but the 34th Division (6,380 casualties) on July 1st, 1916.

The 34th Division's frontline was astride the Albert-Bapaume road in the centre of the battlefield. One of the three brigades within the 34th Division was the 103rd, better known as the Tyneside Irish Brigade.

This brigade, made up of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Tyneside Irish battalions, suffered some of the worst casualties of the first day of the Somme.

But for the obduracy of the War Office and the appalling snobbery of Lieutenant Gen Lawrence Parson, the commanding officer of the 16th (Irish) Division, the Tyneside Irish might have been fighting with those with whom they had common kinship.

In late 1915, the Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond proposed that the ranks of the 16th (Irish) Division should be filled up with recruits from the Irish in Britain or those of Irish extraction.

Recruitment in rural Ireland had been slow. The War Office would not countenance helping Redmond who had committed to, but had not succeeded in meeting the targets he had set himself. Parsons was even more dismissive.

He would not countenance having "slumbirds" drawn from English cities in his division. He wanted only "the clean, fine, strong, temperate, hurley-playing country fellows".

The brigade was made up of Irish-born and those second and third generation emigrants many of whom could trace their ancestors back to the famine. To be Catholic at that time was to be regarded as Irish even if one was a born and bred Geordie.

In the social pyramid of the industrial north-east, the Irish started out as the lowest of the low.

"It is perhaps a sad reflection on the state of things in Ireland that so many left and came to live in England where they would be despised and treated with contempt," observed John Sheen in his regimental history Tyneside Irish.

The impetus for the raising of a Tyneside Irish brigade came from the Mayor of Newcastle, Cllr John Fitzgerald, a brewer born in Co Tipperary, and his predecessor, Johnstone Wallace, an Orangeman from Co Derry.

Both men were keen to emphasise their loyalty to the British war effort. For Fitzgerald, this would come at a terrible price. His son, Gerald, was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The Irish in Britain also raised regiments in London and Liverpool, but the most successful recruitment was on Tyneside. Four battalions, more than 4,000 men were raised, by early January 1915.

The Tyneside Irish and Scottish communities engaged in a period of competitive recruitment and the Irish won by a couple of days.

Recruitment posters appealed to the ancestral patriotism of the Irish race. One read: "Those who are inspired by that love of freedom dominant in the Irish race, and which is threatened by Germany's lust for power, should enrol themselves in the TYNESIDE IRISH BATTALION and preserve for themselves and their children that glorious liberty so dear to the heart of every Irishman."

Irish-born officers were drafted into the Tyneside Irish battalions. They included Lieut Maurice O'Connell, a grandson of the Liberator, VC winner Sergeant Michael O'Leary and Lieut Gerald Neilan, who would go on to become the first British officer to die in the Easter Rising.

It was said of the men of the 34th Division that it took two years to train them and 10 minutes to kill them. Many of the Tyneside Irish never even got to their own frontline.

On July 1st, they were supposed to consolidate the gains made by the Tyneside Scottish, but a listening post had picked up a telephone message at 2.45am from one indiscreet Tyneside Scottish officer to brigade headquarters indicating that the attack was imminent.

This would have dire consequences for the Tyneside Irish too. The area in which the Tyneside Irish assembled for the attack, a mile behind the front lines, had names redolent of the ancestral homeland. One side was named the Tara Hills; the other the Usna Hills.

The open ground they crossed as they moved forward was the Avoca Valley. The German machine guns in the village of La Boisselle, that were to be silenced by the Tyneside Scottish kept up their deadly chatter, when the Scots fell back.

Having repulsed the Scottish, the Germans then trained their machine guns on the Tyneside Irish.

The regimental piper played The Minstrel Boy as the men rose from their rear trenches towards the front-line trenches vacated by the Tyneside Scottish.

The Tyneside Irish were ordered to advance on a two-company front with each company in a column of platoons (approximately 50). There would be 150 paces between each company.

They marched line abreast - each man about an arm's length away from the next. They presented an easy target. Sergeant John Galloway of the 3rd Tyneside Irish recalled: "I could see, away to my left and right, long lines of men. Then I heard the 'patter, patter' of machine guns in the distance. By the time I'd gone another ten yards there seemed to be only a few men left around me, by the time I had gone twenty yards, I seemed to be on my own. Then I was hit myself."

An unnamed Tyneside Irish officer told the Northern Echo. "The fighting was of the fiercest description, unsurpassed during this or any other campaign. The Irish advance never ceased, in spite of all the unadulterated hell they were going through,"

A few men heroically reached the village of Contalmaison, the ultimate objective of the 34th Division two and a half miles from the front line positions, but were taken prisoner.

The Tyneside Irish had advanced further than any other brigade that day, but their losses were catastrophic.

The brigade sustained 2,171 casualties with at least 599 deaths, amounting to a 70 per cent casualty rate. Others would succumb to their wounds later.

One of the few authentic images from the first day of the Battle of the Somme is a long-angled lens view of the Tyneside Irish advancing across no man's land. They are tiny figures set against a big horizon. For many this enduring image would symbolise the vastness of the Somme and the insignificance of the individual soldier.

A total of 7,325 men would serve in the Tyneside Irish in the war - 1,949 were killed. This amounted to more than one in four of those who served. The average rate of fatality in the British Army was one in seven of those who served during the first World War.

# Verdun: hell and patriotism

*Wednesday, 18 May 2016*

*Gearóid Barry*

In a train journey across north-eastern France during the first week of August 1926, Joseph Probst, a German Catholic peace activist from the Baden region, observed: “Our hearts are rent as we traverse the front.” Verdun, the great killing field, with the poignant memory of its forts, Vaux and Douaumont, flashes across the screen of our memory; the most awful hours of the war, whose anniversary, to the day, it was.”

Intriguingly, Probst was on his way to a large Franco-German and international peace congress hosted by Christian Democrat politician Marc Sangnier at the village of Bierville near Paris that month.

His meditation, published in French later in the year, was remarkable for a German because, when Germans wrote of the Western Front at this time, they more usually referenced the Somme as a touchstone of sacrifice.

For the French, Verdun was and remains synonymous with patriotism certainly, but also with “hell”.

Irish visitors to Paris will be familiar of course with the Arc de Triomphe and probably also with the tomb of the Unknown Soldier who has lain there under its arches since November 11th, 1920, its perpetual flame ceremonially rekindled every evening in a ritual inaugurated in 1923.

How many Irish visitors will know, however, that this anonymous soldier died at Verdun in 1916?

On November 10th, 1920, at the Citadel, the fortress in the heart of the town of Verdun, a place of relative respite for French soldiers during the battle itself, a young corporal of the 132nd regiment, Auguste Thin, stood in a room with a row of eight tricolour-draped coffins, each one holding the remains of an unidentified (or unidentifiable) victim of the massacre.

As bid by his superiors, he placed flowers on the bier of the one he chose to represent all of France’s war dead, including the disappeared. How was a man to make such a choice freighted with emotion?

Thin fell back on a very practical logic, adding up the numbers of his unit regiment 132 to get six before placing the flowers on the sixth coffin.

These were the remains that made the train journey to the capital that evening for burial with pomp and pathos - complete with a fictive family of real widows and orphans in the procession - on Armistice Day, the next day.

During 1916 itself, the bloodletting at the forts and hills around Verdun was understood straightaway by the French public as epic.

Verdun was neither the costliest nor most decisive French battle of the war. In fact, 50 per cent of the Frenchmen who died in the Great War were already dead by the end of 1915.

However, Verdun was the most universalised experience of the war due both to its length and, most of all, due to Gen Pétain's decision to rotate as many units as possible through the sector in order to preserve unit cohesion.

Thus, over 70 per cent of the French Army served at Verdun. Beyond its limited military value, Verdun was a great defensive battle where the French were doing nothing more, and nothing less, than keeping France in French hands.

Stories of desperate resistance and heroic death fired the popular imagination. Solidarity only went so far though. One soldier-diarist who was unimpressed in 1916 by the "whitewashed nonsense" of some semi-official instant bestsellers on Verdun was socialist barrel maker Louis Barthas of Narbonne.

Barthas was one of the poilus, the French term unanimously applied to the soldiers as an affectionate and knowing reference to "the unshaven" hairy soldiery. Published in France in 1978, and now available in English translation under the title *Poilu* (2014),

Barthas' improvised diary - he turned his notes into a coherent narrative during his leave back home in the south - includes an account of a harrowing fortnight in "the charnel house" in May 1916.

Home and fighting fronts held on though. Pétain's messages of defiance - "Courage, on les aura!" and "They shall not pass" - entered French popular culture where they have remained lodged ever since.

Later, Jules Romains' influential novel *Verdun* (1938), wrought as a kind of total account of the battle around the story of two French student friends Pierre and Jean emphasising humanity through hell, reinforced the mystique.

Before it was a "site of memory" though, Verdun was an all too real and literally gut-wrenching experience in which modern artillery -23 million shells in the first six months alone - eviscerated not just fortifications but men.

Already in the winter of 1916-17 Corporal Robert Perreau wrote that the summit of the Mort Homme hill "resembled in places a rubbish dump in which there had accumulated

shreds of clothing, smashed weapons, shattered helmets, rotting rations, bleached bones and putrescent flesh”.

As Verdun was never really a quiet sector, no recuperation could begin before 1919. Local Catholic bishop Charles Ginisty was appalled at the prospect of “sacred remains [BEING] abandoned to this desert” and spearheaded a cross-community war charity to give fitting homage to the [FRENCH]war dead.

It began with clearing up the ghoulish mess of disembodied men blown apart by exploding shells.

The Douaumont ossuary, the largest and best known of a range of memorial sites around Verdun, a major portion of which was inaugurated in 1927, houses the bones of at least 100,000 men. These are glimpsed through glass apertures in the floor of the 450ft-long vaulted hall which is mounted in the middle by a lantern tower.

In this context, the torch-lit silent marches of veterans of the 1920s seem like a fitting response. With the brief “Locarno honeymoon” of the mid-to-late 1920s, the period of official detente between France and Germany ushered in by their peace pact of 1925 (for which foreign ministers Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann shared the Nobel Peace Prize), it was even possible to invite the German there under the banner of “no more war”.

Such “patriotic pacifism” also marked a stunning silent movie Verdun, visions d’histoire produced by Léon Poirier in 1928. It was filmed over 11 months on location at Verdun and the director got use of French troops stationed at Verdun but also assembled veterans to re-enact the battle.

The film left French audiences dumbstruck and moved by the first real depiction on screen of soldiers’ suffering.

After 1930, though, with the Depression rampant and Hitler on the rise, what were veterans to do with such noble sentiments now, especially when the new German leader himself cannily appealed to veteran solidarity by sending a delegation to Verdun’s 20th anniversary in 1936?

In the 1930s, Verdun was not just history therefore but an oblique presence in politics. The cults of Pétain and of defensive warfare were two examples of this. Veterans - in other words, most of the adult male population - had generally spent some time under Pétain’s command at Verdun and held him in high esteem.

Philippe Pétain was a national hero and the poilus’ friend. France, a country with a rural majority up to the middle of the 20th century, had been saved at Verdun, in one popular version of the story, by the grit of the French peasants - the true France - who appreciated Pétain as one of their own, a man who valued work over talk, unlike the Paris politicians.

As Pétain would tell the French in a famous radio broadcast in 1940, calling for old-time values: “The land, it does not lie.” Briefly minister of defence in the early 1930s, Pétain inherited from a previous minister, André Maginot - an injured veteran of Verdun - the policy of building the defensive Maginot forts.

Pétain’s upstart subordinate Charles de Gaulle who, at the age of 26, had been taken prisoner at Verdun in 1916, fell out with his mentor in the 1930s on this question of strategy.

By 1945, as is well known, roles were reversed. The second World War undid Pétain who, aged 84, took over as prime minister in a national emergency in June 1940 such was his prestige.

His government authorised negotiations for an armistice which set in train a course of events that partitioned France into occupied and unoccupied zones, ended democracy and made Pétain the titular head of the notoriously compromised (and collaborating) Vichy France regime.

Trying to limit the reputational damage done by his public handshake with Hitler at Montoire in October 1940, a Vichy propaganda poster asked sceptics “Are you more French than he is?”, clearly banking on the deep respect for the “saviour of Verdun” to assuage doubts.

De Gaulle, the rebel who saw German occupation as domination and not a new dawn, and denounced Vichy accordingly, returned to France as head of Free France in 1944 and it fell to him, in 1945, to commute Pétain’s death sentence for high treason to life imprisonment.

The gesture reminds us that many in the Resistance found it hard to jettison respect for Pétain completely. He died in 1951 in internal exile and never got his wish to be buried with the poilus at Verdun, though not for want of trying.

There was at least one foiled attempt by hardline sympathisers to dig up his remains on the Ile d’Yeu and bring them to the hallowed ground.

The moral and military catastrophe of Nazism meant that, after the restoration of sovereignty in 1949, the only politically acceptable way for Germans to approach Verdun, with its awful losses and effective German defeat, was through the prism of Franco-German reconciliation within the European family.

This has been a constant ever since within the European political project. The French are in the slightly more ambiguous position of both holding hands with the Germans - absolutely sincerely - to say “never again” while also honouring the French dead as patriots who endured or were eviscerated to achieve a great defensive victory for France against Germany, albeit at a hellish price.

“Holding hands” is not just a folksy metaphor: famously, at Douaumont in September 1984, and in an apparently spontaneous gesture that made for an iconic photograph, French president François Mitterrand and German chancellor Helmut Kohl were moved by the occasion to hold one another’s hands during the playing of the anthems.

On May 29th, 2016, President Hollande and Chancellor Merkel opened the redesigned Mémorial de Verdun at Fleury-devant-Douaumont, the site of one of nine villages morts pour la France which were abandoned after the war. The Mémorial originated with a group of French veterans led by writer Maurice Genevoix who, in 1967, feared that, as their generation died, the next generations would have no access to what Verdun “was really like”.

The resulting Mémorial used French veterans’ testimony and assembled artefacts to tell the story without rancour - but from one side. Cognisant of the internationalisation of the scholarship of the first World War, the Mémorial’s trustees consulted widely and have, for 2016, managed not alone to redesign the museum - adding a top floor encased in glass from which to view the actual battlefield and its still visible “stigmata” - but also rethought its mission, now including the German perspective and tagging displays in French, English and German.

It has taken over two years and has cost €12.5 million but the revamped Mémorial is careful to tell its own history too lest there seems to be a disrespectful rupture with the founders’ mission of 1967.

There have been internal tensions, inevitably, about the resulting balance. Proposals to add German names at the nearby ossuary - where there surely are German bones too - remain a step too far for some on the Mémorial’s board.

Beyond Verdun, local initiatives flourish too. Here, the State co-ordinating body Ireland 2016 collaborated with RTÉ to produce a series of affecting short films on “our” 1916 called Every County Has A Story.

In France, judging from the regional daily newspapers in particular, every commune (little and great) has a story too, be it of of locals’ time in Verdun, present-day schoolchildren’s tributes and even “rugbymen’s” pilgrimages to Verdun remembering lost lives of clubmen and forebears.

Alistair Horne, the prolific author on French history now aged 91, wrote the acclaimed Price of Glory in 1963, a book which framed English speakers’ take on Verdun for a long time.

In it, he claimed that after repeated research visits to Verdun it was a place where he - and his companions - never heard birds sing. It’s an unsettling thought and an odd counterpoint

to the title of Sebastian Faulks' novel *Birdsong* where it is the stubborn or blithe persistence of nature's chorus that makes the Tommies' experience of the Somme even more forlorn.

For mothers, and for so many others, Verdun produced a staggering weight of grief. Perhaps now nature will heal itself and the birds may sing again. Dr Gearóid Barry teaches modern European history at NUI Galway. His book *The Disarmament of Hatred on pacifism and the first World War* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2012. He is co-editor, with Róisín Healy and Enrico Dal Lago, of *Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War One* (Brill, 2016)

# School project honours Irish fallen in first World War

*Wednesday, 18 May, 2016*

*Gerry Moore*

I teach history in St Columba's Comprehensive School in Glenties, Co Donegal, and am the founder and director of a project called "My Adopted Soldier", which commemorates soldiers from the island of Ireland who died in the first World War.

In the summer of 2015 a group of 32 students from both Northern Ireland and the Republic "adopted" a soldier from their individual counties and spent three days visiting the Somme battlefields area of northern France.

In the early 1990s I was given an old photo of my granduncle who died in the first World War. Nobody seemed to know much about him, so I began doing some research.

Anthony Gallagher was from west Donegal, and I found out that he had joined the First Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in 1915. He first saw action in Gallipoli in August 1915 and spent the next few months fighting there in atrocious conditions, but survived.

After a couple of months Gallagher and the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers were all transported back to France to a town called Albert in the Somme region.

They stayed there for a couple of weeks, as preparations began for a huge new Allied offensive. On the morning of the July 1st, 1916, Allied forces attacked the German front lines.

Gallagher and his battalion were among them. They ran headlong into a barrage of machine gun fire that mowed them down as they advanced. Within a couple of hours Gallagher and thousands of other allied troops lay dead in no man's land.

His body was never recovered and his name is now one of the 73,000 on the Thiepval memorial to the missing of the Somme. In the late 1990s I began to realise more and more just how many Irish-born soldiers died in the war during my visits to the battlefields of the western front.

I organised visits for my students in Glenties, and in order to make the trips more meaningful I decided to get each student to "adopt" a soldier from Donegal who died in the war and to undertake some research.

I was fortunate to have the wonderful Donegal Book of Honour by Paddy Harte as my guide.

As this worked so well and made such an impact on the students, I decided to do it on a national level and the planning began in 2014. One student was chosen to represent each county and each was given the name of a soldier who died in the battle of the Somme from a database that I had already created.

Students were asked to carry out research on the family background of the soldier and his military career. We also encouraged students to make contact with living relatives of the soldiers.

Leslie McCarthy from Tralee researched the story of Charles Francis Conway and made contact with relatives during an interview on Radio Kerry.

Beibhinn Breathnach from Kilkenny adopted Pte Patrick Delaney and also met his relatives. Each student gathered as much information as possible, which is now online on the website archive page.

When we arrived at the Somme we visited many cemeteries and each student placed a small piece of soil from Ireland on the grave of their soldier. All found it to be a very moving experience, as they all felt they knew their soldier so well by the time they got there.

One of the highlights was the time the students spent at the Thiepval memorial to the missing of the Somme. Each laid a rose at the foot of the cross of sacrifice in memory of a soldier from their county who is commemorated on this memorial.

Dublin student Katharine Woods read a poem by Thomas Kettle. Donegal student Ryan Craig read a poem by poet and writer Patrick MacGill, a soldier in the war.

David Moore sang a song written by David Dunlop in memory of Pte Anthony Gallagher called The War to End All Wars.

Donegal student Manus McDyer played a hauntingly beautiful slow air on his fiddle in memory of all the Irish soldiers whose bodies were never found.

The next "My Adopted Soldier" trip is now being planned for the summer of 2017 to remember the soldiers from the island of Ireland who died in the battle of Messines in Flanders, Belgium.

During this battle the 16th Irish Division and the 36th Ulster Division advanced together against the German front line near Ypres in Belgium.

From the start I was lucky to be able to work with a very dedicated group of individuals who helped make the project a reality - Angela Hanratty, Melissa McManus, Mary McLoughlin, Ruth Galbraith, Michael Collins, David Dunlop and Michael Naughton. Marian Harkin MEP

secured funding and we received sponsorship from EU travel company Saffron Travel and Raudon Teoranta.

The History Teachers of Ireland promoted the trip in schools nationally. Aidan Rafferty created our website ([myadoptedsoldier.com](http://myadoptedsoldier.com)). Eileen Magnier of RTÉ was interested from the start and joined us in the Somme with cameraman Brian McVeigh. This resulted in a two-part Nationwide special, which was broadcast in November 2015.

# Maj Gen Oliver Nugent: The suspect unionist

*Wednesday, 18 May, 2016*

*Philip Orr*

The correspondence of the soldier who commanded of 36th (Ulster) Division at the Somme makes for fascinating reading. During active service in the Great War, Maj Gen Oliver Nugent wrote several letters each week to his wife Kitty.

They often reveal his frustrations with military colleagues and politicians. They also enable us to see some of the difficulties involved in commanding such a highly politicised unit within Kitchener's New Army.

The Ulster Division's commander had been born in 1860 into a landed family which possessed ancient Norman origins. By the latter part of the 18th century, the Nugents of south Cavan were fully integrated into the Protestant Ascendancy and in a fashion that was typical of Anglo-Irish gentry, they had sent several family members into the armed forces in order to guard the ever-expanding territory of the British Empire.

Oliver Nugent followed suit and by 1914 he had served in locations as various as Bermuda, South Africa and India, rising through the military hierarchy to occupy the rank of colonel.

As the crisis over the 3rd Home Rule Bill intensified in 1914, Nugent left full-time army service in order to focus on the political conflict in his native Cavan.

He was involved in raising a volunteer militia made up of local Unionists who were prepared to resist the Liberal government's legislation.

However, being located in the southern-most part of rural Ulster where Protestants were a small minority, he clearly felt little solidarity with the more aggressive Belfast leaders of the Unionist Club movement.

It was a movement which had been shaped by them into a well-armed Ulster Volunteer Force. (UVF).

Shortly after the British Empire went to war in August, Nugent was given a role in British home defence but by May 1915 he had been placed in charge of an infantry brigade in the 14th Division which was fighting in Belgium.

After four months with this unit, he was chosen to replace Maj Gen Sir Charles Powell as commander of the 36th Division. Powell was considered unfit for the challenges of the battlefield to which the Ulster soldiers would head in October on completion of their training.

In the early months of his new command, Nugent was determined to get rid of any senior staff he thought to be incompetent, including men who had been senior figures in the UVF. He was also forthcoming in his correspondence with Kitty about the “military incompetence” of several battalions of his division.

On October 26th, 1915 he wrote to her that: “The Belfast Brigade is awful. They have absolutely no discipline and their officers are awful. I am very much disturbed about them. I don’t think they are fit for service.” He added a warning: “Don’t breathe one word of this to a living soul please.”

Nugent’s concern that his criticisms would become a source of conflict with senior Ulster Unionists was a constant theme during the months that lay ahead. The letters of Captain Wilfred Spender, who was the division’s general staff officer and had been a senior figure in the UVF, offer a vista of this conflict between the “Belfast Brigade” and their commander.

In November, when the brigade were sent to gain experience in the front-line trenches with another division, Spender reported that “they have gone off . . . swearing that they don’t want to come back and will do their best not to if he commands.”

Nugent’s relationship with men like Spender, who had been at the forefront of self-confident, militant unionism in Belfast, was coloured by his own very different sense of identity.

He was from a family with an attachment to the Irish midlands rather than the “Orange” north-east. He referred in his letters to “these narrow, intolerant Ulster Presbyterians” and was amused in January 1916 when he received a medal from the Pope as a reward for his strict enforcement of the respect that Protestant soldiers must show to Catholic churches in France.

However, shortly after the medal arrived, he wrote glumly to Kitty, expressing his fear that “there will be plenty of people in the north of Ireland who will quote the Pope’s medal as a proof that I am a traitor and a RC.”

He went on say that he had little “sympathy with the narrow-minded outlook of the extremists up in the north” just as he had precious little time for “Sinn Féiners”.

Later in that month he reminded his wife that “the Nugents were for James and against William in the days when the North was founding itself . . . it is merely a geographical accident that we live inside Ulster”.

He believed he was an unwelcome figure at the head of a dominantly Unionist body of men. He feared he was “suspect as to my politics . . .” and he now believed he should have “refused to have anything to do with” armed unionists in the pre-war years.

Throughout the first winter in France, Wilfred Spender kept a close watch on Nugent. Writing to his wife, Spender noted that Nugent had “quite different convictions to the stalwarts of the Covenant”.

He believed the commander of the Ulster Division hoped for accommodation between unionism and nationalism. As a result, Nugent would clearly “want watching later after the war”.

Spender was also concerned about rumours that the heavily nationalist 16th Division might soon be placed in the same Army Corps as the 36th. He was opposed to such “experiments in political fusions” as he suspected that they were meant to prefigure an all-island accommodation in Ireland.

A subject which irritated Oliver Nugent was the sectarian argument in Ireland over the provision of gifts for soldiers who had become prisoners of war. The “Ulster Women’s Gift Fund”, run by powerful unionist women, was unhappy with the approach of the Irish Women’s Association, which wanted to present gifts to all Irish prisoners, including Ulstermen from the 36th Division.

Given that John Redmond’s wife was involved in this body, it seemed to these influential unionist ladies that yet another attempt was being made to further the nationalist agenda. Nugent wrote to Kitty, expressing his anger at the way these “Ulster ladies” were behaving.

Lady MacDonnell of the Irish Comforts Association did send £500 to the Ulster Division and Nugent was happy to receive the money. On June 1st, he wrote to his wife expressing his belief that some people at home would have liked him to hand the money back along with a letter which registered his scorn for a gift that emanated from “a nationalist woman”.

However, there were more important things than this to consider by April 1916. The Easter Rising had broken out when Nugent was in England on leave. He spent the time with his wife and so the archive of his correspondence in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland contains no letters to Kitty from this period.

However, in May and June, after his return to the front, there were several comments on the Irish rebellion. He mostly expressed his sorrow rather than deep anger - “Poor wretched Dublin, what a country and what a people” he wrote on May 14<sup>th</sup>. However, he also deplored John Redmond’s “audacity” and “impertinence” in calling for leniency with regard to the execution of rebel leaders.

His reactions do in fact mirror those of the unionists in the north of Ireland whom he so deeply distrusted - he told Kitty that it was Augustine Birrell, the Irish Chief Secretary, who should be chosen for execution due to his complacency in recent months with regard to the looming separatist threat. And he suggested that Birrell was "as directly responsible for the destruction and murders as if he had planned them" and that he was nothing better than a "miserable buffoon".

As Lloyd George and Herbert Asquith travelled to Ireland in the aftermath of the Rising, there was fresh talk of Britain's willingness to negotiate an Irish settlement. Inevitably, this meant the thorny issue of partition was on the agenda.

This prospect disturbed him and his earlier doubts about the wisdom of the pre-war Ulster Volunteer project began to resurface. On June 6th, even as his Ulster Division was preparing for action in the Somme offensive, he wrote to Kitty: "I always maintained that the physical force movement was a mistake and the arming of Ulster a still greater mistake. It gave the other side a lead and now neither side will disarm and we have no government strong enough to enforce disarmament."

Two days later he re-iterated his fear that the "Irish question is to be settled by the exclusion of Ulster, except Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal". However, the letter also expressed his intense disapproval of the leaders of the rebellion, suggesting breezily that "a little more shooting wouldn't do them any harm".

On June 9th he wrote once more to his wife, boiling with anger at "the Belfast people" who supported a six-county settlement and "want us to be handed over in order to save themselves".

On the following day, he began his letter by telling Kitty, sardonically, "you and I may as well join the Sinn Féiners at once". On June 18th, he also expressed grave doubts about Sir Edward Carson's negotiating powers in the current political storm. He suggested that Lloyd George had "fooled" Carson in recent talks about the Home Rule Bill.

He offered the opinion that the unionist leader had "lost some of his mental power". However, in the last few days of June, preoccupation with the Somme campaign would be the major feature of Nugent's letters. On June 23rd, he assured Kitty that the Ulster Division was now as "fit and as keen as men can be".

Then on the morning of July 1st, the assault at Thiepval began. The division which he commanded crossed No Man's Land and broke through the German defences although it did so at a terrible human cost. On the following day, the 36th Division would be withdrawn from the line, having suffered 5,500 casualties, including 2,000 fatalities.

When the commander of the Ulster Division wrote to his wife in the course of July 2nd, the last Ulstermen were still hanging on desperately in some of the German trenches, awaiting relief by another division.

Understandably, he was still in a state of deep shock. Nugent was faced with the horrifying reality that - as he put it - "the Ulster Division no longer exists as a fighting force".

The questions he had posed about the discipline and skill of the men in previous months seemed no longer valid. He assured his wife that the Ulstermen had proven themselves, saying, "I did not believe that men were made who could do such gallant work under the conditions of modern war."

Nugent continued to praise his men in the emotional letters he sent home during the following week, even as his surviving men were moving north to Belgium for recuperation and redeployment. Soon, an influx of new soldiers would begin. Many of these troops were conscripted soldiers from various parts of the British Isles. Voluntary recruitment in unionist Ulster, whilst not at a standstill, had dramatically declined.

Nugent's irritation with political unionism remained. He continued to be critical of some of the higher-ranking Ulster women with whom he had had dealings. On July 15th, he told Kitty dismissively that these ladies were "the most self-centred people I have ever met. If . . . you do not subscribe to every Ulster prejudice and if you are not as intolerant as they are, they will have nothing to do with you."

By now, Nugent was aware of public criticism in Ulster that he had persistently pushed his men onwards into danger during the course of July 1st, rather than withdrawing them. The divisions on either side of the 36th had failed to make a breakthrough, thus leaving the Ulstermen exposed to German fire from three directions. Withdrawing the men, it was said, would have saved many lives.

Adding to his torment was the fact that Wilfred Spender had written a letter to a prominent fellow-unionist which had been published in the local press. It had expressed Spender's opinion that the bloody events of the Somme had convinced Nugent at last of the quality of his men.

Spender suggested that "the General now knows he has commanded the best troops in the world and confesses it". Nugent was appalled at Spender's "impertinence" and his "disloyalty" towards himself as commander.

He was glad to see him move to another division shortly afterwards. Oliver Nugent remained with the 36th Division until the summer of 1918. Then he was sent as a divisional commander to India, where he remained until 1920 before returning home to Ireland.

The War of Independence was now underway, yet despite his role as a senior military man and his avowed opposition to the Rising, he remained unharmed during the IRA's military campaign. Nugent was soon involved in several projects that focused on the 36th Division's post-war legacy.

These included the erection of the memorial structure known as the Ulster Tower on the site of the Thiepval offensive. He opened many war memorials in Ulster and was always at pains to point out the need for an inclusive approach to commemoration, despite the political chasm which had opened between many battlefield comrades.

Nugent died in 1926 and his funeral service was held in St Anne's Cathedral in central Belfast. Although numerous old soldiers turned up at this service, there was no official representation from the Northern Ireland government.

Ten years before his death, when the leader of the 36th Division was still counting his terrible losses at the Somme, Oliver Nugent had expressed the hope that "the politicians won't try and make political capital out of us".

It was a naive thought, given that military victories and defeats have both played a key role in political narratives throughout history. Warfare involving Irishmen at the Somme would prove to be no different and it is not surprising that the charge of the Ulster Division at Thiepval still possesses huge resonance for loyalists and unionists, in times of cultural uncertainty.

The fact that Nugent was a critic of Ulster unionism will not rob the Somme story of its mythic power for those who see the deaths at Thiepval as a crucial sacrifice.

However, the Nugent correspondence, when complemented by that of Wilfred Spender, does shed light on the fraternal yet vexed relationship between the British armed forces and militant unionism, which would exist after the Great War was over, just as it had existed during the tumultuous years of the Home Rule crisis.

I am indebted to Nicholas Perry, whose judiciously edited selection of Nugent's letters supplied much of the evidence for my argument: Perry, Nicholas (ed.) "Major-General Oliver Nugent and the Ulster Division 1915-1918" (Army Record Society, 2007)

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# One for all, all for one: first World War Allies agree military strategy

*Wednesday, 18 May, 2016*

*David Murphy*

In late 1915, Allied leaders met to decide their strategy for the following year. It had been a year of disappointments characterised by high casualties, shortages in war materiel and growing political and public discontent about how the war was being conducted.

Large-scale offensives on the Western Front had failed while an alternative strategy to take the Ottoman Empire out of the war had resulted in the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. A further Allied expedition to Salonika, initiated in October, was currently stalled while there were also setbacks in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq).

This lack of success came with casualty figures that were simply staggering. By the end of 1915, the French had had more than two million killed, wounded, prisoners and missing while Britain had had more than 600,000 casualties. Russia had suffered more than 3.8 million total casualties.

On December 4th, 1915, Lord Kitchener, the British minister for war, and General William Robertson, chief of the Imperial General Staff, met the French premier, Aristide Briand and General Joseph Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, at Calais.

It was intended that this meeting would sort out French and British priorities for 1916 but the main focus became the Salonika operation. After some debate, it was decided to suspend operations on that front.

Just two days later, however, a further conference was held at Chantilly and it was decided to continue operations in Salonika.

This decision signalled the final death knell for the Gallipoli campaign as it would be impossible to continue operations there while also reinforcing the Salonika front.

In attendance at this meeting was also Lord French, who was then British commander-in-chief, but he was soon to be replaced by Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. Representatives from Russia, Serbia and Italy also attended.

A broad strategy of co-operation was agreed upon with plans made for offensives on the Western Front, the Eastern Front, Italy and Salonika during 1916.

The Russian representative, General Yakov Zhilinski, complained about the lack of coordinated efforts in 1915, pointing out how Russia had been left to face the Central Powers' "Triple Offensive" in the summer of 1915, without its French and British allies mounting diversionary offensives on the Western Front.

As a result of these debates, each Allied nation agreed to mount an offensive of its own if one of the other allies should become the target of a German or Austro-Hungarian attack. It was a crucial decision and this agreement would dominate how military operations unfolded in 1916.

While the Allies were discussing their plans for 1916, the Central Powers were, obviously, doing the same and they seized the strategic initiative early in the year.

Their plans were driven by similar pressures as public discontent was growing in Germany about the conduct of the war while the casualty figures mounted.

By the end of 1915, the Germans had suffered more than 2.8 million casualties whereas the Austro-Hungarians had lost more than 2.5 million. Their land operations had failed to bring victory and while U-Boat and Zeppelin operations were challenging the Allies, the Central Powers needed a decisive victory.

The German chief-of-staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn, conceived a plan that would end the war with a German victory, and he outlined his intentions in a letter to Kaiser Wilhelm, sent on Christmas Day 1915. Russia, Falkenhayn argued, was on the verge of collapse while Britain should be made the target of a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare.

The main focus of offensive operations should be against France in the belief that, if France was taken out of the war, Britain would have to pursue a separate peace. His plans were given broad approval and Falkenhayn decided to focus his efforts against the fortified city of Verdun - a target that the French would feel obliged to defend.

In drawing the French into this attritional contest, Falkenhayn believed that he could "bleed France white" and thus end the war. For some reason, Falkenhayn does not seem to have factored in the attrition that would be inflicted on the German army.

The Battle of Verdun began on February 21st, 1916, and continued until December 18th, arguably making it the longest battle in history. For the initial attack, the Germans assembled vast artillery assets and opened the offensive with a 21-hour bombardment that fired more than one million rounds into the French defences.

The German Fifth Army, under Crown Prince Wilhelm, consisted of around one million troops while the French had only 200,000 defenders in place. Furthermore, the city's defensive forts had been stripped of many of their heavy guns.

Despite their local superiority, the Germans found the going far from easy. Early successes pushed the French back to their second line of defences and the fort of Douaumont fell on February 25th. The loss of this fort, despite being an obsolete concept in the context of the first World War, served to galvanise France.

The French government, army and people were determined that Verdun could not be allowed to fall and the stage was set for the titanic struggle that unfolded during 1916. General Pétain was given control of the Verdun sector on February 24th and by concentrating his artillery reserves, he managed to halt the German advance.

Thereafter, the battle continued in phases throughout the spring and summer with occasional lulls as both sides ran out of both men and materiel to continue the battle.

As part of the wider German strategy, the German Imperial Navy sortied its fleet in late April for the “Lowestoft raid” and again on May 31st for an operation that would result in the Battle of Jutland.

While Jutland had significant strategic potential, it ended inconclusively and these efforts to put the British navy under pressure had little impact on affairs at Verdun as the battle developed into what veterans later referred to as “the meat grinder”.

In an effort to protect his units from long-term attrition, Pétain devised a system to rotate French divisions quickly in and out of the battle. It was later calculated that, of the 330 infantry regiments in the French Army, 259 of these fought at Verdun.

For the French army and the French nation, Verdun became the defining battle of the war. Positions such as Mort Homme Hill and Fort Vaux became the focus of desperate defences by the French and, having lost them, even more ferocious counterattacks.

Supreme efforts were made to maintain the embattled French army by ferrying fresh troops and supplies along a single route that came to be known as the “Voie Sacrée”; this was the first time that an army was sustained in the field by lorried transport.

The character of the battle was particularly brutal, with intensive artillery and also use of flamethrowers and gas. Some units, on both sides, were simply shelled into oblivion while the fighting within the forts was hellish during the sweltering summer months.

During July, the battle petered out due to heavy losses and also the manpower demands of offensives elsewhere, including the Somme. In August, the German high command ruled out any further major attacks at Verdun while the French mounted major counterattacks during the rest of the year, retaking Forts Douaumont and Vaux in October and November respectively.

By the time the battle finally ended on December 18th, in the midst of a worsening winter, the German army had gained a few kilometres along a 35km front.

Both armies had been dreadfully damaged. Final casualty figures vary but it is estimated that the French lost more than 550,000 casualties while the Germans lost 434,000, with about half of this number being killed.

In a real sense, there had been no strategic or tactical gains on either side and for the remainder of the year, the German army reverted to a defensive posture on the Western Front.

From a French perspective, General Robert Nivelle, having retaken Forts Douaumont and Vaux, emerged as a national hero and was made commander-in-chief.

This was to have long-term negative consequences as Nivelle's plans for a decisive offensive in 1917 would end in disaster. The fact that the Germans had attacked the French in February put the other Allies under pressure to meet the agreement reached at the Chantilly Conference - to mount an offensive if any of the Allied nations were attacked.

Joffre put his fellow Allied commanders under pressure to come to France's aid and this resulted in the various offensives that unfolded over the course of the year as the Russians, British and Italians mounted offensives to take the pressure off Verdun.

The first to respond were the Italians, who began the Fifth Battle of the Isonzo on March 9th. This attack would be followed by four more offensives on the Isonzo during 1916, the last one taking place in November.

The Italian generalissimo, General Luigi Cadorna, was, without doubt, one of the worst generals of the war. The Isonzo offensives were characterised by massed infantry attacks over difficult terrain, poor artillery support and high casualties.

They also brought no strategic gains. On May 14th, the Austro-Hungarian army began an offensive against the Italians; the Trentino Offensive. This would run on until early June, putting the Italians under further pressure. Faced with near-collapse along their front, the Italians in turn begged their Russian and British allies to launch offensives to take the pressure off them.

The Russian Northern Army Group of 350,000 men under General Alexei Kuropatkin launched a major offensive on March 18th in the direction of Lake Naroch (in modern-day Lithuania).

They were faced by about 75,000 German defenders. Despite the superiority in numbers and the fact that the attack was preceded by the largest artillery barrage yet seen on the Eastern Front, the offensive bogged down.

Pre-offensive reconnaissance had been poor and the attack was poorly-timed, coinciding with the start of the spring thaw.

The battlefield became a mud bath and inadequate training led to Russian troops bunching up, making them targets for German machine gun crews. By the end of the battle, the Russians had lost more than 100,000 men and had failed to draw German forces from the Western Front or, indeed, to aid the flagging Italians.

Due to the continued difficulties of both the French and the Italians, the Russians mounted a further major offensive on June 4th. This is commonly-known as the “Brusilov Offensive” after the commanding general, Alexei Brusilov but was also known in Russia as the “June Advance”.

It actually encompassed a series of offensives that ran until September in the Galicia region. Brusilov’s Southern Army Group of more than 600,000 men enjoyed considerable success, over-running about 25,000sq km of enemy territory in a series of simultaneous attacks along the front.

Artillery preparation was more focused and effective than previously and the Austrian-Hungarian Fourth and Seventh Army were effectively demolished, with more than 1.5 million casualties of which about 400,000 were taken prisoner.

By WW1 standards, Brusilov’s success was nothing short of spectacular and came near to taking Austro-Hungary out of the war.

Consolidating initial successes proved impossible as the later phases of the operation overstretched the Russian logistical system.

While this Russian success encouraged Romania to enter the war on the Allied side, this also created no long-term strategic opportunities.

It was against this backdrop of wider offensive action that the plan for the Somme offensive was developed. Planning for a major Allied offensive in this sector had begun in late 1915 and it was originally intended to be a major French effort with British support.

Ironically, Joffre conceived it as an attritional battle in the hope of destroying German reserves and also gaining some territory.

The onslaught at Verdun resulted in it becoming a predominantly British offensive with only one French army, the Sixth, taking part in the initial phase.

In retrospect, the objectives were wildly optimistic and planning made little allowances for the actual operational realities on the Western Front at that time.

Haig, who would have preferred to attack in Flanders, completed his preparations slowly, much to the irritation of Joffre. The final force assembled consisted of more than 750,000 men supported by about 3,000 British and French artillery pieces.

However, the majority of British troops were wartime volunteers formed up in Kitchener or "Pals" battalions. They had little military experience and were totally unprepared for what would subsequently unfold.

Initially planned for August 1st, French pressure resulted in the attack opening a month earlier on July 1st. Despite the rushed nature of the final preparations, Haig and his staff felt confident that the eight-day preliminary bombardment would destroy German defences and, indeed, the majority of German troops.

Taking place across a 30km front between Amiens and Péronne, the northern wing of General Rawlinson's Fourth Army was expected to break through and exploit while troops in the southern wing would move forward, heavily-laden with entrenching supplies, to consolidate their gains.

Cavalry was massed with the intention of exploiting the eventual breakthrough. Not without reason, the Somme has become a metaphor for military failure and incompetence.

The preliminary barrage failed to break the German wire and adequate German defenders survived in heavy concrete bunkers to repel the British attack.

The British troops who advanced at 7.30am on July 1st were met with a hail of fire. By the end of the day, they had suffered about 58,000 casualties, of which more than 19,000 had been killed.

A small number of divisions, including the 36th Ulster Division, made some initial success. The French attack also made good progress but all along the line, the attack faltered.

Despite the high casualties, Haig persisted in this offensive over the coming weeks and various methods were used to get this stalled operation moving. A night attack on July 13th-14th made limited gains and Australian troops captured Pozières, seen as a key location, on July 23rd.

The French Tenth Army joined the attack in September, a sign that pressure had eased at Verdun and, indeed, that the Germans had moved some troops to defend against attacks on the Somme.

On September 15th, tanks were used for the first time, creating short-lived panic among German troops. Yet overall, the history of the Battle of the Somme makes for grim reading as Haig persisted in attacks on secondary objectives throughout the months that followed.

These included operations in September against German strongholds at Guillemont and Ginchy, which involved the 16th Irish Division. Haig is often criticised for continuing with the Somme offensive but it can also be shown that he was under considerable political pressure to continue the operation in light of French difficulties at Verdun.

The offensive was finally called off on November 18th. By that time, the British had suffered 420,000 casualties while the French had sustained 200,000. German casualties are estimated at about 500,000.

At the end of the offensive, the maximum depth to which the Allies had advanced was 12km, with no strategic advantage.

Among Allied politicians and generals there was a faction referred to as “the Easterners”, who advocated for operations on other fronts in order to take Turkey or Bulgaria out of the war. It was thought that the Salonika operation, based at modern-day Thessaloniki in Macedonia, offered such an opportunity.

While Greece did not actually declare war on the Central Powers until June 1917, their army was mobilised due to perceived threats from Bulgaria and Turkey and also to provide some support to Serbia. In October 1915, the first contingent of French and British troops arrived in Salonika and the operation would be expanded to include four French and one British division.

This force included the 10th Irish Division, which was transferred from the Gallipoli front. The French commander, General Maurice Sarrail, initially found himself on the defensive and had to fortify his positions around Salonika, using a complex defensive zone.

Having decided to maintain and expand the operation at the Chantilly Conference earlier in the year, Sarrail’s force was increased to more than 160,000 troops by January 1916.

Due to the complicated operational and political backdrop, they remained largely on the defensive, earning them the derisory nickname of “the gardeners of Salonika”.

Planned offensive actions were delayed and although Monastir was captured in November, further major actions were postponed until 1917. The Salonika force would later number more than 600,000 troops, including Italian and Russian formations and, in that sense, it was a truly Allied operation.

The campaign was also a notoriously unhealthy one with more than 450,000 cases of malaria among the troops by 1918. As a means of occupying Bulgarian forces, it was a success but hopes that the operation would provide a knock-out blow to Bulgaria were to prove optimistic.

Alongside these major operations there was further military activity in the Middle East and also Africa. Yet, as both the Somme and the Verdun battles wound down in the winter of 1916, neither side had forced a decisive victory.

For the Allies, so much had been driven by the agreements reached at Chantilly earlier in the year. The German attack at Verdun had resulted in a chain reaction of offensive action in an effort to dissipate German efforts or leave the Central Powers operationally overstretched. However, despite some initial success with the Brusilov Offensive, battlefield conditions on all fronts made a decisive breakthrough impossible.

As the year drew to a close, the hopes of securing a strategic advantage remained unrealised. A series of costly offensives may eventually have relieved the pressure at Verdun but they had brought the end of the war no closer.

Allied leaders had to meet in late 1916 to decide on plans for the coming year. There was another military conference at Chantilly in November 1916, followed by an Anglo-French conference in London in December. Rather depressingly, the assembled politicians and generals drew up essentially the same plan that they had agreed upon 12 months previously.

The new French commander-in-chief, General Nivelle, planned for a war-winning offensive on the Western Front and there would be supporting attacks in Italy and Russia.

Ultimately, none of this activity would result in Allied victory. By the end of 1917, Russia was effectively out of the war and all of the Allied nations were experiencing political upheaval and public discontent as the war dragged on and the losses mounted still higher.

Peace movements on all sides pressed for an end to the war in 1917. But peace, without victory, was simply not an option for any of the belligerent powers. The fact that political and military leaders on both sides convinced their populations of the rightness of such a mindset ensured that the war continued.

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# Otto Dix, artist on the front line

*Wednesday, 18 May, 2016*

*Eileen Battersby*

The German artist Otto Dix went to war, willingly. Unlike many who fought, he had no misgivings, not initially. Not for several years in fact. Patriotism was only a small part of it; at the age of 22 he craved a life-affirming experience.

He volunteered in 1914 and spent much of the next four years as a non-commissioned officer, a heavy artillery gunner, on both the western and eastern fronts.

He was decorated with the Iron Cross, second class. Wounded on several occasions - once almost fatally, in Flanders, when shrapnel entered his neck close to a main artery - he endured, horrified at what he saw, yet also fascinated, absorbing it all.

He drew daily, and also kept a diary. "Even war must be regarded as a natural consequence," he wrote. "Corpses are impersonal." In the context of his later responses, expressed through his images of the conflict, among the most harrowing ever created, including the *Der Kriegseries*, Dix seems an odd man out.

The natural revulsion and despondence appear to be missing. He had discovered the writings of Nietzsche in about 1911, when he was 20. His reading gave him, a working-class lad, by then studying at the Dresden School of Arts and Crafts, not only the impetus but the confidence to break away from the narrowness of the provincial world into which he had been born and to take part in what seemed an exciting intellectual adventure: the remaking of Europe through the collapse of traditional belief systems, the death of God.

Man as superman beckoned. Nietzsche had died in 1900, and by 1912 the young Otto Dix had created what was to be his only sculpture, a bust of Friedrich Nietzsche.

In 1914, Dix, not a particularly bookish young man, owned seven of the philosopher's major works in cheap paperback editions. Nietzsche had become a cult figure for German youth.

Dix was a tough, an image he cultivated, and also an outsider, not part of the Berlin arts scene. Whereas fellow artists, such as Ernst Kirchner (1880-1938) and George Grosz (1893-1959) regarded the mobilisation process as an erosion of individuality, Dix revelled in it.

"I had to go to war," he said in an interview not long before his death in 1969. "I had to live through it. I had to experience what it was like when someone near me was suddenly hit by a bullet and fell . . . I am such a realist, I had to see it all with my own eyes . . . the hunger, the fleas, the mud, the s\*\*tting in one's pants with fear . . . To be crucified, to experience

the deepest abyss of life . . . If you want to be a hero, you also have to affirm the s\*\*t; only through being there and experiencing for yourself can you become a hero.”

A few years earlier he had conceded that war was a dreadful business, “but nevertheless very powerful. I couldn’t possibly miss it. In order to know something about men, you must have seen them in this unfettered state.”

Reading some of his thoughts and his obvious fascination with what he saw as “the strange beauty of it all”, it would be easy to consider him voyeuristic. Except that he was there facing death and he witnessed horrors, the same ones that caused writer Siegfried Sassoon, another artist who in the beginning felt he was about to embark on a grand adventure, to challenge the British authorities; the same horrors that stalked the imagination of JRR Tolkien, who, like Dix, saw action at the Somme, the battle that saw the introduction of tanks.

On the outbreak of war in August 1914, Dix volunteered and was assigned to a field artillery regiment in Dresden. Early in 1915 he was sent to Bautzen to train as a gunner. He was keen to go to the front and took part in the autumn campaign in Champagne, near Rheims, in northern France.

By the following year he was on the Somme and was involved in several battles before moving on to Flanders. Pity and the betrayal of youthful idealism do not appear to have affected him.

Instead he was open-eyed, responding to the energy of the turmoil around him. In this, he shares the response of another painter, the Hungarian Béla Zombory-Moldován, whose eerie memoir, *The Burning of the World*, which was published for the first time in any language last year, was dominated by the visual images emerging from the chaos.

Throughout the war Dix sent about 300 postcards to a friend back in Dresden. Helene Jakob was the daughter of the caretaker of the School of Arts and Crafts.

Her father had helped him out by pointing him toward commissions, while Helene sent him food and drawing materials. Overall, he produced a huge number of images, more than 600 drawings and gouaches, which he dutifully sent home to his family, a record of war as seen through the eyes of a soldier.

About the best way of grasping Dix’s unemotional, impartial reporter’s attitude while at the front is to think of the detachment of young Jim in JG Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun* (1984).

One of the things soldiers often recall about war is the waiting, the long stretches of silence. Dix drew all the time, intent on recording the experience. His drawings are impersonal reports, and while he did draw the dead, his central preoccupation while at the front was the transformation of the physical landscape. Barbed wire and ruins, not maimed soldiers,

dominate. It was as if during that period he viewed war as little more than a natural phenomenon. Far more was to follow. Born on December 2nd 1891, Dix was the eldest son of Franz, an iron worker and Louise, a seamstress. They had three younger children. Home was Untermhaus, a village near Gera in Thuringia.

The family was working class but not poor. There was no financial hardship and the young Otto had an early introduction to art through his cousin, Fritz Amann, a landscape painter who had a studio.

In later life, Dix used to claim that it was the smell of paint in his cousin's studio that drew him to art. His formal education ended in 1905, yet he had been lucky in having a good art teacher, Ernst Schunke, who recognised his ability.

Between 1905 and 1909, Dix completed an apprenticeship with a decorative painter in Gera. With the support of a grant he was then able to study in Dresden, where he arrived in the autumn of 1909.

It is interesting that his course was geared to learning the techniques and motifs of interior decoration. While at the School of Arts and Crafts he was not taught painting, yet he did sketch and continued his painting under Schunke's supervision.

Dix's earliest works are Impressionist in style. Even as early as 1911, however, his allegorical approach as an artist was already evident, albeit heavy-handedly. *Growth and Decay* is a traditional still life executed in oil. A vase of picked and fading flowers is depicted, along with a skull. Soon after this he completed *Self-Portrait with Carnation* (1912), in which the young artist glowers at the viewer in much the way Dix conducted himself beyond the canvas.

The flower held between his fingers suggests an ironic touch. In an interview, he said his idea had been to "paint like the masters of the early Renaissance".

He would paint many self-portraits throughout his career, and two of the most telling date from 1914. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* depicts his newly shaven head thrust at an aggressive angle and echoes the lines from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "The man consummating his life dies his death triumphantly."

Far less defiant is the subject's demeanour in *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet*, in which there is an apparent suggestion of apprehension, perhaps fear, in the face beneath that great symbol of German military might, the Prussian spiked helmet.

By the following year Dix had consolidated his vision of war in a remarkable Futurist work, *Self-Portrait as Mars*. Using a bold palette, he painted it while he was still in Dresden, completing his artillery training. Imagined scenes of war are superimposed upon a face determined to meet the onslaught.

Soon after arriving at the French front in the autumn of 1915, much of his mythologising had disappeared. *Self-Portrait as a Practice Target* creates the impression of how the subject would appear through the sights of an enemy gun.

It is a study of resignation and dread, the soldier as cannon fodder. There are four pictures in particular, all gouache on paper, completed during the war, which highlight his genius for evoking mood.

*Trenches (1917)* is possibly the defining study of no man's land. Grey and black trenches reflecting a setting sun - or it could be the glow of distant bombardment - possess a measured eloquence.

The only trace of man is the damage done and some crosses marking graves. It is a powerful work, chilling and assured. *Evening Sun, Ypres (1918)*, dominated by a blazing sun, reveals human beings as insignificant.

More symbolic than abstract, it apparently dismisses the relevance of war. *Awakening (1918)*, in which a cavalry unit prepares the horses, takes resurrection as its theme.

There are echoes of Wassily Kandinsky and also of the German expressionist Franz Marc, who died at Verdun in 1916. *Soldier with Pipe (1918)* reveals Dix exploring Cubism and returning to the Futurism of *Self-Portrait as Mars*.

On paper at least, it seemed that Dix had a good war. He had remained active as an artist throughout and returned intact, at least in body. During the closing months he was transferred to Silesia, where, after he had recovered from the serious neck wounds suffered in Flanders, he was transferred to be trained as a pilot.

He was still in training as the war ended. Many of his more ideologically inspired fellow artists criticised him as apolitical; elsewhere, he was denounced for his concentration on relentless ugliness, which he would use to satiric effect in his studies of German society in the years following the Great War.

Yet the Dix who had gone to war and survived was far more damaged than he had realised. He began having nightmares about crawling through bombed houses. What he had gone through suddenly began to prey on his mind.

The result was *Der Krieg (War)*, a sequence of 51 etchings which, since its first appearance in 1924, has become recognised as a definitive rejection of war.

It offers a profound and sustained insight into what it was like: dead and rotting corpses, devastation, and menace. Dix the returned survivor is saying: "This is what man can inflict and this is how he suffers." Nothing else in graphic art approaches its intent.

Dix looked towards Goya's *The Disasters of War*, a series of 82 completed prints between 1810 and 1820, and took the theme to darker, more ghoulish depths.

For Dix, war had gone beyond an experience; it had become a lasting trauma. He had returned to Dresden and, by 1920, had begun to make clear his new direction. *Skat Players* (oil on canvas) is a parody of Cézanne's *The Card Players*.

Dix's trio are horrifically disfigured. The injuries are based on photographs of men who returned from the front maimed for life. One of them has a mechanical jaw. The replacement body parts appear to be made from the debris of war. In subsequent works, veterans are depicted as beggars shunned by the public, their heroism ignored.

In ways, Dix's cathartic response was mirrored by Erich Maria Remarque in his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

Yet far closer to Dix's brutal realism is that of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, also published in 1929. In that novel, there are no idealist young dreamers such as Remarque's young Paul Bäumer.

Instead an angry everyman, Franz Biberkopf, who was once an ordinary soldier, just a soldier, and is now a petty criminal, is adrift in a city as unforgiving as war.

Dix's pictures of war, with their images of dehumanised soldiers lurching forward in gas masks, of corpses, of worms wriggling through the empty eye sockets of a skull, and of bewildered spectres, invites us to look at the destruction it causes.

Denounced as a degenerate artist by the Nazis, Dix, who would not abandon the subject because he feared people would repeat its horrors, completed his great *War Triptych* paintings in 1932.

That work and his painting *Trench Warfare* - believed to have been destroyed during the bombing of Dresden - cost him his teaching post. In one of the many ironies that stalked him throughout his life, Dix, having served briefly in the German army in the second World War, then became a prisoner of war.

His work was not done in search of release. "It's not true that you do that for the peace of your soul . . . the reason for doing it is the desire to create," he said.

Most crucial, though, when considering Otto Dix, is the fact that he does not actually blame anyone. True to the essential ambivalence of the best art, this acclaimed anti-war artist sees conflict simply as a catastrophe, which explains why he never adopted a political stance. He died in 1969, and to the end insisted he could never forget being a soldier at the front.

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# There is no village now, just a hole in the ground

*Wednesday, 18 May, 2016*  
*Ronan McGreevy*

Not since the great Home Rule rally of March 1912 had the streets of Dublin seen anything like it. The crowd assembled in College Green spread like tributaries of humanity into adjoining streets and lanes surrounding Dublin's great gathering point. It was the middle of November, yet extraordinarily mild.

Crowds clapped and cheered as ex-British servicemen marched in two directions to converge on College Green. One group left from, of all places, the General Post Office (GPO) now rebuilt after its role as the birthplace of the Republic in 1916. The other contingent came from Dame Street. The Union flag flew from Trinity College Dublin and from other buildings – though no longer the national flag.

The veterans marched proudly or limped. All wore their medals from the first World War. One old veteran wore his from the 1882 Nile campaign; others were just children wearing their father's medals.

Big crowds had turned out for a victory parade in Dublin in 1919, before independence. The crowds that descended on the centre of Dublin for Armistice Day 1924 took everyone by surprise, not least the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) which had no traffic contingency plan in place. It anticipated a small attendance.

But a crowd estimated at 50,000 turned up on a normal working day. Many stayed until late that night. They had kept silent and their grief to themselves, but now seized of the opportunity to make a public display of their sorrow, they did not want to go home.

The war had left a terrible legacy of suffering in Irish households. AP Connolly, the head of the British Legion in Ireland, estimated that 165,000 Irish children had lost a parent, mostly a father, during the war period, 35,000 men had lost a leg or arm, 6,450 men had gone insane and were detained in "lunatic asylums" and 3,150 were suffering from epilepsy.

It was eight years after the Easter Rising. It was less than three years since the foundation of the Irish Free State. Yet here was nationalist Ireland paying tribute to the men who fought in British uniform during the first World War.

Many in nationalist Ireland were apt to remind those who had fought in British uniform of what had been achieved by fighting against and not for the British and previous Remembrance Day services had been the subject of clashes between republicans and unionists, but it was an altogether more sombre, subdued crowd on Armistice Day 1924.

The object that had prompted this national outpouring of grief and remembrance was a large Celtic cross, 13ft 6in high made of solid granite and weighing three tonnes. It was enclosed by a metal railing measuring 15sq ft. At its base was an inscription in Irish and English: “Do chum Gloire De agus Onora na hÉireann” (To the Glory of God and Honour of Ireland).

“In commemoration of the victories of Guillemont and Ginchy Sept 3rd and 9th 1916 in memory of those who fell therein and of all the Irishmen who gave their lives in the Great War RIP.”

A wreath was laid by Senator Col Maurice Moore, formerly of the Connaught Rangers. It read, “O Rialtas Saorstát Éireann i gcuimhne na nÉireannach uile a fuair bás son choga mór (From the Government of Saorstat Éireann in memory of all the Irishmen who died in the Great War).”

One wreath came from Mary Kettle, the wife of Tom Kettle, who was killed at the Battle of Ginchy on September 9th, 1916.

It was the high watermark of Free State remembrance commemorations. In 1925, Republicans, angered by the Border Commission’s decision to confirm the borders of the Free State, threw smoke bombs into the crowd. Within two years it was moved to the relatively peripheral Phoenix Park, though huge crowds still attended. The League of ex-Servicemen wanted to place a permanent Irish war memorial in Merrion Square, opposite Government Buildings but the Free State was vehemently against something so close to the seat of power.

A beautiful if peripheral location was eventually found for the Irish National War Memorial in Islandbridge.

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The 16th (Irish) Division spent almost three years in France from the autumn of 1915 to the autumn of 1918, only being out of the line for three weeks in all that time. Its involvement in the attacks on Guillemont and Ginchy were its first operations in the Somme and its first major offensive operation.

These two unremarkable villages are just two kilometres apart, but the road between them is all uphill and soaked in the blood of friend and foe.

The division arrived on the Somme in late August 1916. The battle, the biggest of the first World War, was nearly two months old and went on despite the horrors of its first day.

The attack north of the Albert-Bapaume road, which included the assault of the 36th (Ulster) Division on the first day, was a complete disaster, but Haig saw enough progress south of the road for the battle to resume. This sector would consume most of the energies of the British Fourth Army for the summer.

In particular the woods in this area would cost the lives of thousands of men – High Wood, Delville Wood (known as Devil's Wood), Mametz Wood, a place of sorrow for the Welsh.

It took two months of attritional warfare for the British eventually to take High Wood, once described by the military historian Richard Holmes as “ghastly by day, ghostly by night, the rottenest place on the Somme”.

This deadly slogging match in July and August 1916 would suck in all parts of the Empire.

On the road between Albert and Bapaume is the village of Pozières. On July 23rd, 1916, the 1st Australian Division made an attack on the fortified village and captured it, the beginning and not the end of their ordeal.

The Germans shelled it day and night. The Australians sustained 23,000 casualties during the Battle of Pozières.

It was into this maelstrom of slaughter that the 16th (Irish) Division arrived on the Somme. They had spent months recovering from the three days of horror in late April when they were subjected to the gas attacks at Hulluch. But they were not permitted much respite. The men were constantly involved in raiding enemy trenches, dangerous work of dubious military value. Some 380 died and 2,670 were injured in the time between the Hulluch gas attacks and moving to the Somme.

The 16th Irish Division was withdrawn from the Hulluch sector on August 24th, 1916, transported in cattle trucks to Amiens and then marched the 22 miles to Bray-sur-Somme. It was allocated to XIV Corps, in turn part of the Fourth Army.

The division was needed for the attack on Guillemont and Ginchy to the extreme right of the British line. These two villages were on a hilltop overlooking both the British and French lines. The ultimate goal was Ginchy, but Guillemont blocked the way to it.

Neither village stands on a great elevation, but it was enough to command panoramas of the eastern end of the British section of battlefield. The previous captures of Delville and High Wood at such a colossal loss mostly to Welsh, Australian and South African forces would ultimately be in vain if German machine guns and artillery could still use the heights to block any further British advance.

To the east of Guillemont lay the cone-shaped Trone Wood, another deadly abode.

Repeated attempts to take it cost thousands of lives but it was eventually captured on July 14th, opening the way for an assault on Guillemont. But, once again, the village would not be surrendered cheaply by the Germans. The 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers entered the village on July 30th but were all killed or taken prisoner. The battalion suffered a horrendous 650 casualties. The next attempt, on August 8th, was by the 55th (West Lancashire) Division which included the Liverpool Irish of 164 Brigade. The attack failed. The village was ruined but the Germans were carrying on a deadly underground battle.

“[THE VILLAGE] was simply a very strongly defended position,” explains Michael Stedman in his book Guillemont. “The depth of dugouts and the many interconnected tunnels meant that any limited British infantry advance into the village could then be isolated and dealt with as the German defenders emerged to take these units in the rear.”

The attempt to take Guillemont cost the 55th Division 4,100 casualties. The 55th Division was replaced by the 3rd Division. It and the 24th Division renewed the assault on August 18th.

The 3rd Division included the 2nd Leinster Regiment. In his brilliant memoir *Stand To!*, Colonel Francis Hitchcock observed the bombardment of Guillemont.

“Shell-fire was hellish all afternoon. Box barrages were put down all round and the earth was going up like volcanoes completely smothering us. During a bombardment one developed a craze for two things: water and cigarettes. Few could ever eat under an intense bombardment especially on the Somme, when every now and then a shell would blow pieces of mortality, or complete bodies which had been putrefying in no man’s land and slap into one’s trench.”

On August 23rd Guillemont Station, to the east of the village, was captured. By then the British surrounded Guillemont from the west and south, but the Germans still blocked the advance to Ginchy.

The assault was repeatedly delayed by bad weather but it was agreed to go ahead on September 3rd with the 20th (Light) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division attempting what had been previously a failure.

The 16th (Irish) Division arrived in the Somme in good heart. The 8th Munsters carried a beautiful banner of the Sacred Heart made for it by local Limerick women and the nuns of the Good Shepherd convent in Limerick. The men were assured that those who carried the banner “would have victory with them”.

The men lay down in their shallow trenches from 4am waiting for the assault. The regimental pipers were busy from early morning. They played Brian Boru's March, The White Cockade, The Wearin' o' the Green and A Nation Once Again.

Months of shelling had reduced Guillemont to a spectral shell.

German soldier Ernst Jünger, whose book *Storm and Steel* is a classic of war literature, knew he had arrived in what had once been a village because of the colour of the earth. "The shell-holes there were of a whiter colour by reason of the houses which had been ground to powder. Guillemont railway station lay in front of us. It was smashed to bits like a child's plaything . . . You could search in vain for one wretched blade of grass. This churned-up battlefield was ghastly. Among the living lay the dead. As we dug ourselves in we found them in layers stacked one upon the top of another. One company after another had been shoved into the drum-fire and steadily annihilated. The corpses were covered with the masses of soil turned up by the shells, and the next company advanced in the place of the fallen."

The Germans turned the cellars of bombed-out houses into death traps for attackers. Yet this abyss had to be taken. The men of 47 Brigade from the 16th (Irish) Division had to wait eight hours for the bombardment to begin at midday. The delay was to give the Germans less time for a counterattack. On the northern side of Guillemont village, the 7th Leinsters lay down in trenches so shallow that if they even sat up they could be fired upon.

The Irish battalions involved in the Battle of Guillemont were the 7th Leinsters, the 6th Connaught Rangers, the 8th Royal Munster Fusiliers and the 6th Royal Irish Regiment.

The assault was to be made via a creeping barrage with the infantry following on at precise intervals. The 10th Kings Royal Rifle Corps from the 20th Division led the attack followed by the 6th Connaught Rangers. The Connaught Rangers suffered 200 casualties from friendly fire as a result of misfired shells before they joined in the attack.

Their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel John Lenox-Conyngham, was killed as soon as he stood on the parapet to wave his men on. Undaunted, they pressed ahead. Within minutes, the German's front positions in the village were overrun.

The 7th Leinsters dashed for the German lines as soon as the artillery barrage was lifted and surprised the Germans. The men of the 20th (Light) Infantry 59 Brigade reinforced by the 6th Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and the 7th Somerset Light Infantry took their second positions on time. The soldiers of the 6th Connaught Rangers were "leapfrogged" by the 8th Royal Munsters.

At 2.50pm, the advance to the third objective the Maurepas to Ginchy Road outside the village was made by the 6th Royal Irish Regiment, who moved forward to their sound of their battalion pipes.

The British captured more than 700 wounded and unwounded Germans. Guillemont was in British hands.

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Preparations then began for the assault on Ginchy. The first attempt to take Ginchy occurred on September 6th, but was beaten back. The attack was rescheduled for September 9th and would be preceded by a long preliminary bombardment lasting from 7am.

The 48 Brigade of 16th (Irish) Division would lead the assault with the much-depleted 47 Brigade guarding its right flank. It moved forward at 4.45pm precisely. The 47 Brigade was held up by fire from the enemy trenches southeast of Ginchy. A trench which the Connaught Rangers hoped was empty was full of Germans manning machine guns.

The 8th Munsters and the 6th Royal Irish Regiment were met with withering fire. Of the 1,328 men the brigade could muster for the attack, 448, a third, became casualties. The 7th Leinsters following on behind advanced over the broken bodies and dismembered corpses of their comrades.

The 48 Brigade, however, had a much better outcome. The brigade's lead battalions were the 1st Munsters and the 7th Royal Irish Rifles who were so depleted from friendly shelling that they needed the 7th Royal Irish Fusiliers as support. The 1st Munsters were already severely depleted from the battle of Bernafay Wood on September 4th and had an effective fighting force of just 408 men. Together the two battalions assaulted the enemy front lines. The shelling had shaken the Germans so badly that they surrendered en masse.

The follow-on battalions, the 8th and 9th Dublins, consolidated the hold on Ginchy. When night came, the Germans opened up an artillery barrage on the men occupying Ginchy, who dug in as best they could. The men found the village well-stocked with provisions including cold coffee, bread and sacks of apples and augmented food supplies with the rations from dead enemy.

Early on September 10th, the 16th (Irish) Division was relieved by the 3rd Guards Brigade. The 16th had suffered the worst that the Somme could offer. And Ginchy had been all but wiped off the face of the earth. "There was no village there now, only a hole in the ground," one private put it.

Two Victoria Crosses were awarded to Irishmen at Guillemont. Private Thomas Hughes from Castleblayney, Co Monaghan, was with the Connaught Rangers. He was initially injured, but

had his wound dressed and returned to battle. He singlehandedly disabled a German machine gun post.

The other VC went to Lieutenant John Holland of the 7th Leinsters, the son of a vet from Model Farm, Athy, Co Kildare. He showed extraordinary dash in leading his men on a bombing party which cleared German trenches and captured some 50 prisoners.

The 16th (Irish) Division paid a terrible price for its heroics in the capture of two ruined villages. Of the nearly 11,000 officers and men who arrived there on September 1st, more than 4,300 were casualties. The number of dead amounted to 1,067.

Throughout the 16th (Irish) Division's travails on the Western Front, the 11th Hampshire had been its faithful pioneer (engineering) battalion, building roads, repairing trenches and generally making life bearable for the men at the front.

After the Battle of Ginchy, the pioneers came across oak beams from a ruined farmhouse. They fashioned the timber into an impressive cross approximately 20ft tall. The cross stood forlorn in a field between Guillemont and Ginchy, anchored to a base of stones and concrete. On its base was inscribed the words: "To those who fell at the capture of Guillemont and Ginchy, September 1916, RIP."

In 1923 Major-General Hickie and Major General Bryan Mahon, both senators in the new Free State, made a public appeal through the newspapers for money to provide permanent memorials to the Irish who fought in the first World War.

There were three crosses in total, the first for Guillemont, the second remembered the 16th (Irish) Division's liberation of the Flanders villages of Wytschaete and a third was erected in the mountains of Macedonia to remember the 10th (Irish) Division and their involvement in the Salonika campaign on the Eastern Front.

The Ginchy cross is now housed, and only available by appointment to see, at the war memorial gardens in Islandbridge.

The memorial party which arrived in Guillemont on August 23rd, 1926, had been moved and upset by a tour of the old battlefields, starting with the cross that was unveiled at Wytschaete near Ypres. They arrived in Albert to find the little town had been substantially rebuilt save for the cathedral. Corn meadows and fields full of poppies had replaced the trenches and the shell holes.

The locals of Guillemont had prepared a banner across the main street that proclaimed, Viva l'Irlande. The local fire brigade turned out in uniform; children picked wild flowers from the fields and placed them at the base of the Celtic Cross which was located next to the rebuilt Catholic Church.

The principal guest was Marshall Joseph Joffre, the acclaimed saviour of France and the victor of the most important battle of the war, the Battle of the Marne in September 1914 .

The Battle of the Somme continued for two months after the Battle of Ginchy.

This is taken from *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front* published by The History Press, priced €20.

# Thomas Michael Kettle: an enduring legacy

*Wednesday, 18 May, 2016*  
*Frank Callinan*

Thomas Michael Kettle (1880-1916) is a person of another time. His memory is shrouded in the fog of the Great War in which he lost his life, and of whom our view is occluded by the iconostasis of the rising of 1916. Yet his myth and memory has been enduring. The beleaguered Irish party ran the memory of Kettle, and that of William Redmond, the brother of the leader of the party, as martyrs of the war in unavailing opposition to the rapidly emerging cult of the executed leaders of the rising.

His myth became in the new State the vessel of discreet nationalist middle class dissent, less from the rising than its sacralisation.

It was infused by the romance of Kettle's persona and his lost promise. Terence de Vere White, reviewing the Centenary History of the Literary and Historical Society of UCD of which Kettle had been auditor in this paper in 1957 wrote that "I always saw Kettle through a golden haze".

Kettle's promise was in fact forfeit well before the outbreak of the war, and the rising which represented for him a culminating catastrophe, political and personal.

Considered in University College a prospective prime minister of a home rule Ireland, Kettle remained insistently loyal to the idea of home rule as support for the Irish party began to fall away.

The first World War was the doom of the Irish party. Part of the fascination of Kettle is that while the struggle against Germany did in one aspect present itself to him as a moral and spiritual affirmation of the democratic pursuit of home rule, his support of the allied cause was finally independent of the promotion of home rule or conventional Anglophilia. He had written long before, in his most famous lines, "my only counsel to Ireland is, that in order to become deeply Irish, she must become European".

Kettle, the Irish-European, Francophile but steeped in German culture, believed Germany had to be defeated. This intensity of intellectual engagement found expression in his renunciation of Nietzsche ("This 'big blonde brute' stepped from the pages of Nietzsche out

on to the plains about Liege”), his condemnation of Trietschke and “the babbling savants”, and even of “the cloudy intoxication of Hegel”.

Kettle had a famous public encounter with Patrick Pearse at a Thomas Davis centenary meeting on November 20th 1915, held in the Ancient Concert Rooms when Mahaffy as vice-provost of Trinity banned it taking place there on account of the proposed presence of “a man called Pearse”. Kettle, in army uniform, arrived a little late, and in Desmond Ryan’s phrase “gloriously drunk”.

Yet the person with whom Kettle had the most perfect symmetry in disagreement was Roger Casement. They did meet, and the memory of the meeting rankled with Casement and he referred to it bitterly in his copious writings in prison.

Casement was executed a little over a month before Kettle fell in battle. If a play was to be written in the Tom Stoppard manner on conflicting views on the European war in Ireland, it might feature Kettle and Casement.

Thomas Michael Kettle was born on February 9th 1880. His father Andrew Kettle farmed at St Margaret’s in north Dublin.

Prominent in the Dublin Tenants Defence Association, he entered Parnell’s orbit. Andrew Kettle was independent-minded, and remained staunch to Parnell in the split, having first characteristically told Parnell he disapproved of his relations with Katharine O’Shea. He was Parnell’s candidate in Carlow in the last election Parnell fought.

He died at St. Margaret’s on September 22nd 1916, within a fortnight of the death of his son. Tom Kettle was sent to the O’Connell School in Richmond Street, and thereafter to Clongowes.

He arrived in University College in 1897, and quickly won a glittering reputation. He was however prone to episodes of depression, and travelled and spent a year in the University of Innsbruck before taking his degree in 1902.

Called to the bar in 1903, he practised briefly, before turning to journalism. In November 1904 Kettle, along with Francis Skeffington and Frank Cruise O’Brien, founded the Young Ireland Branch (the “Yibs”) of the United Irish League, the organisation of the Irish parliamentary party. All three were to marry daughters of David Sheehy, a member of the Irish party close to John Dillon: Kettle’s marriage to Mary Sheehy took place in September 1909.

The Yibs advocated a more single-minded pursuit of home rule, without much impact on the leadership of the Irish party. Kettle was elected by a slender margin for East Tyrone at a by-election in July 1906. He had a successful if brief parliamentary career, coining the lethal

aphorism that “when in office, the Liberals forget their principles, and the Conservatives remember their friends”.

In October 1909, he was appointed Professor of National Economics at the newly constituted University College Dublin, in what was seen as an act of patronage, though Kettle read widely and acquired a certain fluency in the idiom of economics.

He held his seat in the first election of 1910, but did not contest the second. He remained a public figure. He continued to write on home rule, and published essays of remarkable poise and plangent intelligence collected as *The Day's Burden* (1910).

In his writings on home rule finance, he was drawn into increasing controversy with Arthur Griffith, with whose policies he had professed a highly qualified sympathy in an article in the *New Ireland Review* in February 1905, which was a predictably unsuccessful attempt to draw the more nationalistic of his generation towards support of the Irish party.

A graceful essayist, Kettle was a poor controversialist. Kettle's depressive streak was now accentuated by heavy drinking (it was said that he did not drink until prevailed upon to do so after dining as a student of the King's Inns).

Kettle, who had unsuccessfully sought to broker a settlement of the 1913 lock-out through a peace committee, became involved in the formation of the Irish Volunteers later that year in response to the Ulster Volunteer Force.

Of all the publicists of the Irish party he was perhaps the most extravagantly dismissive of Ulster loyalism. He was in Belgium procuring arms for the Irish Volunteers when the war broke out. Some of the journalism he wrote, and later reflections, were collected in the posthumously published *The Ways of War* (1917).

“In Brussels on Tuesday, August 4th, we came aware that some terrible darkness had come upon the sun. Nobody who was there will ever forget the torrential and swirling crowds before the Gare du Nord, the fierce cheers and the foreboding silence.

“Honour and the law of Europe had summoned Belgium into the red ways of war; she went singing and unafraid, but the vision of blood was not hidden from her or from us.

“As we stood on the cafe tables roaring “La Brabançonne” we knew that there was a midnight to traverse before the dawn. But we did not know that the upbuilding of three generations of human labour was to be broken by three months of scientific brutality. We did not know that Belgium was passing into her Gethsemane.”

Thus Kettle in Brussels had found a second cause that converged with his first, which was home rule. In Ireland he threw himself into support of the war. He was first denied a

commission on health grounds, but finally granted the rank of lieutenant, and given recruiting responsibilities.

He became a target of obloquy among Sinn Fein supporters and republicans.

His priggishly progressive brother-in-law Francis Sheehy Skeffington, from whom he was now politically estranged, deplored "Kettle's contemptible selling of himself", and accepted the notion that "a bullet at the front" would be 'the best end for him'.

Kettle's drinking was increasingly out of control, as Senia Paseta's trawl of the military records for her Thomas Kettle establishes. A target for taunts that he was "a platform soldier", he was desperate to gain active service.

A terrible measure of Kettle's crisis is that his brother Larry was driven to write to Gen Hammond, the Chief Staff Officer of the 16th (Irish) Division, in April 1916 that "Tom's one chance of putting himself right and starting a new page is to remain in the army and go out to the front with his men".

Finally Hammond, whom Kettle assured he had ceased drinking (a course to which he appears to have held), agreed to send him on active duty with the 9th Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

Kettle was in Ireland, first in the barracks in Newbridge, and then with his family in Dublin, when the rising broke out. What Kettle regarded as a political calamity was touched by personal tragedy, in the killing of his brother in law Francis Skeffington in Portobello barracks.

Kettle wrote of the pacifist, non-combatant Skeffington: "This brave and honourable man died to the rattle of musketry; his name will be recalled to the ruffle of drums".

If Kettle was implacably opposed to the rising, he was quick to grasp the implications of the rising and of the government's response. He gave evidence in favour of Eoin MacNeill at the latter's court martial.

In his Political Testament he wrote: "Had I lived I had meant to call my next book on the relations of Ireland and England: The Two Fools: A Tragedy of Errors. It has needed all the folly of England and all the folly of Ireland to produce the situation in which our unhappy country is now involved."

On 14 July 1916 Kettle sailed for France, destined to partake in the battle of the Somme. If he had advocated enlistment, and more uncertainly conscription, he was under no illusion about the atrociousness of the Great War for which the governments of Germany and Austria - "the Blood-and-Ironmongers" - bore responsibility.

"Nations are at war on land and sea, and under and above both usque ad coelum et infernum. (For whoever owns the soil, it is theirs up to heaven and down to hell).

“Millions of men have been marched to this Assize of Blood to be torn with shells and bullets, gutted with bayonets, tortured with vermin, to dig themselves into holes and grovel there in mud and fragments of the flesh of their comrades, to rot with disease, to go mad, and in the most merciful case to die.

“It is this intimation of barbarism that renders it apt that Patrick Healy’s translation of *The Last Days of Mankind*, the vast apocalyptic play by the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, published earlier this year in Amsterdam, should be dedicated to Lieut Kettle.”

His contemporary Arthur Clery, quick to compare Kettle unfavourably to the executed leaders of the rising, wrote of him a few months after his death that “the idea of final sacrifice was as much a haunting desire with him as it was with Patrick Pearse”.

Kettle had no death-wish. He did have a marked presentiment he would not come back. In Dublin he made his adieux, and despatched further valedictions from the front. In his last letter to his brother Larry he wrote “I am calm and happy but desperately anxious to live,” he asked that his wife would write a memoir of him to serve as a preface to his war book.

What attests to Kettle’s strength of character was not simply his gallantry in combat, and the love he bore his men, which was mutual: “I have never seen anything in my life so beautiful as the clean and so to say radiant valour of my Dublin Fusiliers”.

It is the incorrigible serenity of his prose in *The Ways of War*. In the most grotesque situation, he never ceased imaginatively to muse, and to write with a pathos edged with wit and self-irony.

Of the phase of the war he termed “the Long Endurance”, he wrote of the trenches : “But this nibbling process works both ways. We nibble; they nibble. They are nibbled; we are nibbled. A few casualties every turn, another grating of the saw teeth of death and disease, and before very long a strong unit is weak”.

The metaphor is carried forward in “Rhapsody on Rats”. “You lie in your dug-out, famished, not for food (that goes without saying), but for sleep, and hear them scurrying up and down their shafts, nibbling at what they find, dragging scraps of old newspapers along, with intolerable cracklings, to bed themselves.

“They scurry across your blankets and your very face. Nothing suppresses their numbers...” Men die and rats increase. I see just one defence that they can make: it is not they who invaded our kingdom, but we who invaded theirs. We descended, we even dug ourselves down to their level.”

Kettle deferred acceptance of a position back from the frontline. On December 8th he was ordered to take up position with his men opposite Ginchy, a village on a height of 500 feet near Delville Wood.

He wrote that day to his brother: "Somewhere the Choosers of the Slain are touching, as in our Norse story they used to touch, with invisible wands those who are to die". The offensive began at five o'clock on the afternoon of September 9th 1916.

Within 30 yards of Ginchy, which was successfully taken, Kettle was hit by a bullet that struck him in the upper chest, and possibly a second bullet as he tried to rise. He was buried by the Welsh Guards in an unmarked grave.

# Hollande and Merkel heed lessons of Battle of Verdun

*Sunday, 29 May, 2016  
Lara Marlowe*

President Francois Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl created the most enduring image of Franco-German reconciliation when they clasped hands before the white crosses of Douaumont cemetery on September 22nd, 1984.

It was, Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Sunday, “a gesture worth a thousand words”. The greatest challenge facing Volker Schlöndorff, the German film-maker who orchestrated Sunday’s centenary of the Battle of Verdun, was to find an equally powerful image.

Schlöndorff had 3,400 French and German children, all born after 2000 to symbolise the 21st century, run out of the woods, feign combat, death and resurrection.

As the Republican Guard played Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, the youths echoed Kohl and Mitterrand’s gesture, holding hands among the tombstones.

Earlier, when Merkel and president Francois Hollande reignited the flame inside the Douaumont ossuary that holds the bones of 130,000 unidentified French and German soldiers, Merkel looked particularly moved.

The leaders embraced several times throughout the day, but the fervour with which they grasped each other’s hands before the flame was most memorable.

Their speeches conveyed a shared diagnosis of Europe’s troubles, and shared anxiety over its future. “War is possible,” Merkel warned. “We must remain vigilant to avoid it . . . All these dead are the victims of nationalism, of stubborn blindness and the failings of politicians.”

Whether it was a question of economic crisis, refugees or other challenges, the German chancellor continued, “If we reason in national terms we cannot advance. We cannot defend our values.”

France and Germany “have a special role to play in the heart of Europe”, Merkel continued. “The Battle of Verdun gave the impression that the heart of Europe was going to stop.”

Hollande appeared to allude to the Brexit debate, as well as the rise of extreme right-wing populists. "Disenchantment has given way to bitterness, doubt to suspicion and, for some, rejection or even separation," he said.

Inward-looking forces were at work, Hollande continued. "They are cultivating fears and instilling hatred. Exploiting weakness, delays and errors, they denounce Europe as the cause of evil, forgetting that Europe was born of misfortune. Our sacred duty is written in the ravaged earth of Verdun . . . to protect our shared house, Europe."

Europe remains fragile, Hollande warned. "It would take infinitely less time to destroy it than it did to build it."

The Battle of Verdun began on February 21st, 1916 and ended on December 15th, 1916. France chose May 29th for the centenary because it was the day Gen Charles de Gaulle celebrated the 50th anniversary.

France's rival leaders in the second World War both fought at Verdun. Marshal Philippe Pétain became the leader of collaborationist Vichy France on the strength of his reputation as "the hero of Verdun". The younger De Gaulle and his unit had been taken prisoner there.

For France, Verdun encapsulates the first World War, much as the Battle of the Somme symbolises the conflict for Britain.

It was statistically the battle in which the most French fought. By the war's end, a majority of survivors could say, "J'ai fait Verdun." No British soldiers fought at Verdun, where a half million Germans were pitted against a half million French.

Three hundred thousand men died, nearly equally divided between the two sides. Another 400,000 were wounded. After 10 months, the French took back the positions the Germans had seized in the first part of the battle. Nothing had changed.

The drums played on Sunday were a reminder of the 60 million artillery shells that pounded an area scarcely larger than Dublin's Phoenix Park. The French adopted the expressive German term *trommelfeuer* - drumfire - for the constant din.

So many shells remain unexploded that it is still forbidden to build or cultivate the land. Hollande described the noise, blood and human remains mixed with mud.

Merkel quoted a French lieutenant who wrote "Hell could be no worse" in his diary. She also quoted a German soldier recounting how the French gave them water. "Even in Verdun, humanity did not disappear entirely," she said.

Hollande paid homage to the north African Arabs, black Africans and far east Asians who fought on the side of France. "They were humans in an inhuman world," he said. "One hundred years later, these dead have no uniforms, no religion. We do not distinguish their

nationality or origin . . . This place is our national memory transformed into the memory of Europe.”

Controversies surrounding commemorations say a great deal about one’s era. Fifty years ago, de Gaulle angered some by refusing to allow Pétain’s ashes to be brought to Verdun.

This month, the mayor of Verdun angered others by cancelling the concert by “Black M” that was scheduled to close Sunday’s ceremony. The singer, whose real name is Alpha Diallo, had in the past used a racist word for Jews and called France “a country of kuffars [INFIDELS]”.

# The green and white armies

*Saturday, 4 June 2016*

*Ronan McGreevy*

Football fans are often referred to as travelling armies. This summer tens of thousands of fans from both parts of Ireland will journey to France for a joyous festival of football. Many will be oblivious to the fact that the last time there was such a gathering of Irish in France was exactly 100 years ago.

In June 1916, two divisions, the 16th (Irish) Division and the 36th (Ulster) had taken their place along the Western Front in France for a major summer offensive. These two divisions, comprised of 25,000 Irishmen, were all volunteers, the former nationalists, the latter unionists, but both united in a common cause - the defeat of imperial Germany.

There could not be a greater distinction between these men who were in France to kill and be killed and those who are travelling this summer to express their nationalism in altogether more benign ways.

The Republic of Ireland's games against Sweden in Paris on June 13th and Italy in Lille on June 22nd will afford Irish fans a chance to go and see the melancholy landscapes where so many of their compatriots fought and died 100 years ago. The European Championships coincide and overlap for the latter stages the centenary of the Battle of the Somme - the bloodiest of the first World War.

Albert, the starting point of any visit to the Somme region, is just 160 kilometres from Paris and 80 from Lille. It is easily accessible from both Paris airports, Beauvais and Charles de Gaulle. For those travelling by car or camper van, it only amounts to a small and interesting diversion.

The Battle of the Somme is best known for its first day, July 1st, 1916, the worst day in British military history when almost 20,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers were killed.

The British assault was preceded by the blowing up of massive mines under the German lines. The scale of those deadly explosions is evident in the massive Loughnagar Crater which is still there today. More than 2,000 of those killed were with the 36th (Ulster) Division. The most visible reminder of that catastrophic day is the Ulster Tower which overlooks the hilly slopes which the Ulstermen had to traverse under murderous German machine gun fire.

The Ulster Tower is equidistant from two of the most visited memorials on the Somme. The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing is the largest British and Commonwealth war memorial in the world.

It remembers more than 72,000 men who fought and died in the Somme and have no known grave. Among them are almost 4,000 men from Irish regiments including the poet and politician Tom Kettle.

His name appears first of the 428 men of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers listed on the memorial. Across the River Ancre is the Newfoundland Memorial Park which remembers the slaughter of men from what was then a part of the British Empire on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The trench system there is preserved as it was during the war. Nationalist Ireland is represented by the Guillemont cross which stands outside the church in Guillemont, a French village liberated by the 16th (Irish) Division in September 1916. Close by is the village of Ginchy which was also liberated by the Irish. There are many places of Irish interest just 35 kilometres west of Lille centred around the old mining town of Loos-en-Gohelle.

The site of the Last General Absolution of the Munsters, one of the most famous paintings of the war, is on the Rue du Bois near the village of Richebourg. One is hardly out of sight of a memorial in this part of France which saw some of the bitterest fighting of the first World War.

A new memorial to the 532 men of the 16th (Irish) Division who died in a German gas attack during Easter Week 1916 has been erected in St Mary's Advanced Dressing Station (ADS), a war grave cemetery near the village of Hulluch.

The best known casualty buried in the cemetery is Lieutenant John Kipling, the son of the poet John Kipling, who was killed fighting with the Irish Guards during the Battle of Loos. The biggest war memorial in the area is the Loos Memorial to the Missing at Dud Corner. It remembers 20,615 men who have no known grave.

One of the newest memorials is also one of the most impressive. Some 50 kilometres west of Lille and south-west of Lens, another footballing venue for Euro 2016, is the Ring of Remembrance opened in 2014 to commemorate the centenary of the war.

It lists the names of 579,606 men who died in this part of northern France during the Great War. No distinction is made between friend and foe. It has provided the inspiration for the Glasnevin memorial wall to all 485 individuals who died during the Easter Rising.

# Epic telling of the horrors of the Great War Jean Echenoz

*Tuesday, 28 June, 2016  
Eileen Battersby*

July 1st, is the centenary of the opening offensive of the Battle of the Somme, one of the most harrowing events in human history.

The German artist Otto Dix who enlisted willingly to fight, arrived at the front buoyed up by a young man's bravado, and with ideas, shaped by no less than Friedrich Nietzsche. Dix's attitude was to change and within a decade, the extent of his trauma became obvious in his stark sequence, *Der Krieg*, 51 images surpassing the graphic candour of, Goya, who also realised the terrifying violence of which man is capable.

The Great War that had initially been expected to last little more than two weeks had begun two years earlier, 100 years ago today, on a bright June morning.

Tension in the Balkans had long been sounding the death knell of the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire and all it took were the shots fired by a teenage assassin, Gavrilo Princip, the Serbian nationalist who killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to throne, as the royal couple prepared to endure pleasantries and official speeches during a duty visit, undertaken half heartedly by the archduke.

The ironies are many and their complex legacy persists to this day. Enter the inventive, ever original French writer Jean Echenoz with a characteristically brilliant, if thematically unexpected work.

He is a master ironist firmly belonging to the Nabokov school, and in this his 14th novel, makes inspired use of a year that without doubt not only changed history, it also transformed the way wars were fought.

In our age of computerised drone warfare, it is might be easy to forget that, savagery, after all, has moved on.

The most recent wars in the Balkans were televised. Unless one is directly involved, war has been elevated to a spectator sport - as long as the cameras are in place, footage is forthcoming. It is a grotesque reality. Equally real though is the outstanding literature war has given rise to - especially in the case of the Great War.

Much of it is contemporaneous and written by soldiers who experienced action. The death of idealism and the growing awareness of the futility of war are brilliantly articulated by Erich Maria Remarque's profound lament, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

There are other classics from the period: books which influence a reader forever. Joining this distinguished company is Echenoz, a mercurial artist celebrated for his cerebral ingenuity, wit and playful lightness of touch.

The Great War seems a surprising subject for him to exercise his gifts, although he is capable of immense empathy, as is evident in his novels, particularly *Ravel* (2005; 2007) about the composer Maurice Ravel, and even more so with the utter, if unlikely, perfection of *Running* (2008; 2009), based on the rise and fall of the legendary Czech long-distance runner and Olympic hero, Emil Zatopek.

Both works, translated by Linda Coverdale, were nominated for the then IMPAC International Dublin Literary Award. Barely a novella in length, *1914*, nevertheless achieves an epic quality through a detached understatement, which is curiously detailed and always neutral. Or is it? It begins with the initial calling to arms of all able men in France following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo earlier that summer.

One Saturday in August, the central character, Anthime, is enjoying the freedom of a half day from work. The young accountant sets off on his bike, a robust model, made by a curate. Strapped to the bicycle is a hefty novel by Victor Hugo.

Nothing is random in this intense, sombre narrative which is meticulous and precise, if warmly human. It is as if Echenoz is angered despite the passage of time, by the suffering, the pointless folly.

This tone shaped by a communal awareness will resonate; after all, as he reminds the reader, we know the story. As Anthime admires the beauty of the view, a hint of menace disturbs his thoughts and what is in fact, a false sense of peace.

The ringing of church bells alerts him: "given the world situation at the time, could mean only one thing: mobilisation".

An excited crowd is gathered in the town square prepared to celebrate a great adventure. "Everyone appeared well pleased with the mobilisation in a hubbub of feverish debates, hearty laughter, hymns, fanfares, and patriotic exclamations punctuated by the neighing of horses."

For Anthime there is an additional distraction; the presence of Charles, aloof, and brandishing his camera "as usual".

The tension between the two is barely suggested yet it is sufficient. Echenoz seldom wastes a word.

Charles is adamant that the coming disruption “won’t last longer than two weeks”. Anthime is not so sure.

In one of several set pieces the action moves to the barracks where Anthime and three of his friends are getting kitted out. They may as well be going on a camping trip. Charles wants to look well in his uniform and as expected, there is a girl to be impressed.

Blanche is the daughter of the man who owns the factory, where both men, rivals and, as it transpires, brothers, work. The men go off to war. Yet “it” continues to be little more than an extended outing, a shadow lurking somewhere off stage.

“The captain, named Vayssi re, was a puny young man with a monocle, a curiously ruddy complexion, and a limp voice . . . You will all return home” he assures them. The captain does seem to harbour odd notions. “If a few men do die while at war, it’s for lack of hygiene.

Because it isn’t bullets that kill, it is uncleanness that is fatal and which you must combat first of all . . .”

Meanwhile Blanche deals with her very specific problems. Not for the duration of a sentence does Echenoz, ably abetted by his translator, Coverdale, allow his laconic narrative to falter.

Mild mannered Anthime remains intrigued by the experience of being at war as long as it continues to be largely abstract and more involved with the additional weight the rain adds to his knapsack.

Suddenly this changes; blood and exploding bodies become a reality. “Clutching his rifle, he himself now felt ready to stab, impale, transfix the slightest obstacle, the bodies of men, of animals, tree trunks, whatever might present itself: a fleeting state of mind . . . so this was the first taste of combat for him and the others.”

It had been different for Charles. Influential contacts and his showy interest in photography had secured him a place in a biplane intended for reconnaissance. But an enemy aircraft appears near them and “in the minutes that follow” the fate of Charles is decided.

Elsewhere the war gathers an ugly momentum. Death comes quickly at the end of a bayonet or when a shell explodes at your feet. Concise, often cryptic in its economy, Echenoz’s feel for detail creates an atmospheric, convincing sense of battle devoid of histrionics or sentimentality.

Anthime’s friends scatter; one is shot for treason, another is “buried anonymously in mud without anyone caring or noticing in the confusion”.

As an admirer of Echenoz I must admit this novel, which was deservedly nominated for this year's International Dublin Literary Award, approaches the strange beauty of his novel, *Running*.

The Somme emerges as a vile theatre: "You cling to your rifle, to your knife with its blade rusted, tarnished, darkened by poisoned gases, barely shining at all in the chilly brightness of the flares, in the air reeking of rotting horses, the putrefaction of fallen men . . ." He evokes the hell as well as a vivid sense of the rage and bewilderment shared by the soldiers. For Anthime salvation comes in the loss of an arm, a limb which gradually seems to haunt him.

Summoning the authority of an historian and the humanity of a storyteller, Jean Echenoz, who shares the vision of the great Georges Perec, also explores the complexity of ordinary existence with a grace which beguiles. An earlier novel by Jean Echenoz, *We Three*, in a translation by Jesse Anderson, will be published by Dalkey Archive Press, in February 2017.

# The Somme: selected stories of the Irish dead

*Friday, 1 July 2016*

*Ronan McGreevy*

**Addison Arthur Lieutenant Colonel (49)** Originally from Dublin, Addison was one of the most senior officers to be killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He was in command of the 9th York and Lancaster Regiment. Addison retired from the army in 1908 at the rank of major but reenlisted during the war. He was mentioned twice in dispatches before he died.

**Atkinson, Thomas Joyce Major (38)** Atkinson was a barrister from Ballyshannon, Co Donegal who joined the 9th Royal Irish Fusiliers at the start of the first World War. Atkinson was wounded during the Gallipoli campaign. He was one of 150 men from what is now the Republic to have been killed on the first day of the Somme fighting with the 36th (Ulster Division).

**Bethune, Douglas Private (20)** Bethune was one of twin brothers from Sandycove, Co Dublin who died during the first World War. Douglas Bethune was killed on July 1st, 1916 while serving with the Machine Gun Corps (Infantry) unit. His brother Thomas joined the 36th (Ulster) Division but took ill before going to France and died.

**Bible Geoffrey Roskell Second Lieutenant (23)** Bible was from Grosvenor Road in Rathmines and was one of the “posh pals” who signed up with D Company of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers that fought in Gallipoli. He was attached to the Machine Gun Corps (Infantry) for the Battle of the Somme and was killed during the attack on Contalmaison. Buchanan Stewart Private (19) from Burt, Co Donegal, was with the 11th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers who took some of the heaviest casualties on the first day. His brother John died serving with the Canadians.

**Burke John (20) and Burke Joseph (26)** These two brothers from Newbliss, Co Monaghan were with the 9th Royal Irish Fusiliers in the 36th (Ulster) Division. Both were killed on the first day.

**Chambers Edward Second Lieutenant** Chambers was the son of Mr and Mrs R.E Chambers of Fosterstown County Meath. He was educated at Marlborough College, Paris and Oxford before joining the army in June 1915. Chambers was killed while serving with the Lancashire Fusiliers.

**Costello, Edward William Lieutenant (19):** Costello was from a prominent banking family in Tullamore, Co Offaly. He was with the Royal Inniskilling Fusilier's machine gun corps and was shot through the head while raiding a German trench. Requiem mass was said for him at the Church of the Assumption, Tullamore a month after the battle. A local newspaper reported: "The large congregation present at the solemn function bore eloquent testimony to the general esteem in which the deceased was held by every class in the county and to the genuine sympathy extended to Mr and Mrs Costello and family in their bereavement."

**Crozier, William Magee. Lieutenant (42)** Dublin-born Crozier was a barrister pre-war and was commissioned into the 9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. He was hit twice before he reached the German wire, but continued his advance towards the German trench. He was seen to try to take cover in a shell hole, after which no more is known of his movements. He was described in The Irish Times as a "popular member of the Irish bar".

**Dockery Thady Private (21)** Dockery, who served with the 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers, is one of three men from my hometown of Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim who were killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He had been a member of the GAA club in Carrick and was also a keen boxer. The newspaper described him as "highly respected and esteemed by those who knew him in his native town."

Bernard Morahan (26) Also killed on the first day was Morahan was with the Hampshire Regiment. The Leitrim Observer reported: "He was a popular and respected young man among all classes in his native town, and the news of his death on Sunday was received with general regret."

Private William Rogers (Age N/A) Rogers died during a diversionary attack while serving with the 6th Connaught Rangers. He was the second Rogers brother to die in the war. His commanding officer wrote: "Dear Mrs Rogers,-It is very painful to me to have to write to you that Private Rogers was killed in action 1st July, 1916, and was buried in Noeux-le-Mines. It will be some consolation to you to know that he died like a good brave soldiers in the front line trenches. No better or quieter soldier have I lots, and he is greatly missed by all the section."

**Dunne, Michael Sergeant (29)** Mullingar man Dunne of the 1st Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers had already served in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. In June 1916 he claimed that a crucifix had saved his life when it deflected a shell fragment away from his heart. His luck ran out during the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He was described in the Westmeath Examiner as "extremely modest, and it was only by degrees he could be induced to say anything about himself though he spoke freely of the doings of his comrades".

**Feely, William Private (19)** 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers Feely from Patrick Street, Mullingar was a member of staff of the Westmeath Examiner. Though only 19, he was already a

veteran of the Gallipoli campaign and was wounded in the leg there. He was described as a “young man of splendid physique and kindly disposition. He was very popular in the regiment, the 1st Battalion”.

**Foley John Captain (29)** Foley was one of 28 men from what is now the Republic of Ireland to have died serving with the Tyneside Irish battalion. Originally from Charleville, Co Cork, Foley joined the colours in 1914 while living in Sunderland.

**Fox Francis Parker Second Lieutenant (22)** Fox was the son of a tax inspector from Rathmines. He was on the staff of the Royal Exchange Assurance, Dublin Branch.

He was refused enlistment in Dublin owing to short vision, but went to Belfast, offered his services there, and was accepted. Fox was with the 9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers which was part of the 36th (Ulster) Division.

He had led his platoon to the German line, and was superintending the preparation of trench to resist a counter attack he was struck and killed instantly.

**Goodwin, William Lieutenant (23)** An only son of the Kerry county surveyor and a native of Tralee, Goodwin served with the 11th battalion of the York and Lancaster Regiment when he was killed on the first day.

The Cork Examiner reported: “Deep and widespread regret and sympathy will be felt not only in Kerry but far outside its confines at the sad announcement that Lieutenant William Goodwin, only son of Mr Singleton Goodwin, County Surveyor of Kerry, and of Mrs Goodwin, Ballroe, Tralee, has been killed in action.”

**Harbord George Lieutenant (20)** Another with the 1st Inniskillings who was killed on the first day, Harbord was the son of the Rev Richard Harbord from Enniskean, Co Cork.

**Murray Thomas Private (Age n/a)** Murray was another of the “posh pals” who joined D Company of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers. He had been wounded in Gallipoli. He was transferred to the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers and was killed in action.

**O’Meara Thomas Private (19)** From Grand Parade, Co Cork, Thomas O’Meara was a tailor before the war. He enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders.

**Payne, William Joseph Corporal (22)** Payne volunteered for service early in the war was killed while serving with the Rifle Brigade. The Skibbereen Eagle reported that he was a “most popular young man in Bandon and much sympathy is felt with his parents in their sorrow”. His sister Susie served as a volunteer nurse in the war.

Payne’s parents left the following message in The Cork Examiner: “In proud and loving memory of our darling Willie who fell on the Somme on July 1st, 1916. We thank God upon every remembrance of you.”

**Rennix Robert O'Connor** Private (27) Rennix joined the 9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in June 1915 and went to France in October. Before enlisting he was a member of the traffic manager's head office staff at Westland Row Station. "He was courteous and efficient, and highly esteemed by all the chief officials with whom he had to do," the Weekly Irish Times reported. In December 1916 his mother made a public appeal for information as to the whereabouts of her son. He was reported killed in action a year after the battle.

**Richardson William Turner** Second Lieutenant (34) Richardson was from Raheny, Co Dublin. Known to his friends as Billy, he was a member of the Old Wesley Rugby Football Club. He was also a keen golfer and tennis player. He was one of the first to leave his trench, but had only reached the parapet when he was shot through the head while serving with the 12th Royal Irish Rifles. He worked in the Midland Great Western Railway.

**Topp, Richard William** Second Lieutenant (18) Topp was the son of a Bank of Ireland official. He attended Galway Grammer School and then the Cork Grammer School where he joined the Officers' Training Corps (OTC). His parents spent many months looking for him after the Battle of the Somme. His body was never found and he is remembered on the Thiepval memorial to the missing.

Taken from research carried out by Tom Burnell.

# Somme: Heroism of Irish remembered at Belfast ceremony

*Friday, Jul 1, 2016  
Amanda Ferguson in Belfast*

The heroism of the thousands of Irishmen killed at the Battle of the Somme” will never be forgotten” the Lord Mayor of Belfast said at Belfast city hall yesterday. Brian Kingston said the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division made the supreme sacrifice during the First World War.

Mr Kingston led a procession for the centenary commemoration to the Cenotaph in the Garden of Remembrance in city hall grounds, where the union flag was brought to half mast during a wreath laying ceremony, during which the Band of Irish Guards played Londonderry Air/Danny Boy and other songs. He was accompanied by the under secretary of state for Northern Ireland minister Ben Wallace, Minister for Social Protection Leo Varadkar, and church and military representatives, among others.

DUP MP Jeffrey Donaldson said the annual ceremony was particularly poignant this year. “We remember those young men who went over the top and not just the 36th Ulster Division but the men of the 16th Irish Division who gave their lives as well at the Somme,” he said.

“I think it is good to see so many people today and at the same time as events are taking place in France as well.”There has been a lot of effort put in to ensure the centenary commemorations are inclusive and respectful and I think they have achieved that,” he said.

Mr Varadkar said it was important for a representative of the Government to attend the event.”It is important to remember that 100 years ago lots of Irish people fought in the First World War from both communities and from both parts of the island,” he said.

“Some for King and country, some fighting for the freedom of small nations, and it is very appropriate I think that we come together on this day to remember them because they are an enormous part of our history. Also, I think particularly given the events of last week, with the United Kingdom voting to leave the European Union, keeping a strong relationship between Dublin and Belfast is going to be absolutely crucial.”

Each year in the planting season, the fields offer relics. Earth is turned and the past is dislodged. A boot half eaten by time, a bayonet rusted and blunt, the cap badge of a soldier who marched to his doom on the first day of July 1916.

Over three months of fighting at the Somme, Irishmen, from North and South, were killed and wounded here. They were annihilated by the same bullets and explosions, and were buried in the same earth of northern France.

In remembrance, however, they would be set apart. The men of the 36th (Ulster) Division were posthumously exalted, marshalled into the service of loyalism's myth of origin: they were the warriors who shouted "No surrender!" as they marched stoically to meet their deaths.

Lieut Col Ricardo, commander of the 9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (Tyrone volunteers), later remembered "the extraordinary sight". The Derry's, on our left, were so eager they started a few minutes before the ordered time, and the Tyrones were not going to be left behind, and they got going without delay - no fuss, no shouting, no running; everything orderly, solid, and thorough, just like the men themselves. Here and there a boy would wave his hand to me as I shouted 'good luck' to them through my megaphone, and all had a happy face."

Soon enough the happy faces were distorted by terror. On that first day of the Somme, the Ulster division suffered 5,500 casualties. Col JA Mulholland of the 14th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles said that "nothing finer in the way of an advance has ever been seen, but alas, no sooner were they clear of our own wire when the slow tat tat of the Hun machine guns from Thiepval village and Beaumont-Hamel caught the advance."

They advanced and were driven back and were then caught between the artillery of both sides. Pte Leslie Bell was the only survivor of his platoon. A German shell exploded in the air, showering shrapnel and badly wounding him in the legs.

"Captain Robertson was running up with his platoon," Bell recalled, "and as he ran past, gave me a kick to see if I was still alive and could carry on. I was lying on my side and watched him and the others advance, until a shell burst above them and downed him and some of his men." The reality of war always runs counter to the grand heroic narrative.

The truth is in the detail of mangled bodies and mud. Capt Montgomery of the 9th battalion, Royal Irish Rifles, described the trauma of the first day: "Not a few of the men cried and I cried. A hell of a hysterical exhibition it was. It is a very small company now. I took 115 other ranks and four officers (including myself) into action. I am the only officer and only 34 other ranks are with me now out of the 115."

Yet this battle in which so little was gained, and so much lost, would become a pillar of Protestant identity. The working class men who died, and those who came home, did not see themselves as “lions led by donkeys”.

Rather, the Somme would serve as a reminder to Britain of the debt of loyalty owed to Ulster, and a warning to Irish Catholics of the lengths to which loyalists would go to protect their identity. The revisionist history of the Great War would never find favour in Ulster.

The simpler mythology of glorious sacrifice has only been challenged in recent decades by the groundbreaking work of writers like Philip Orr whose book *The Road to the Somme* gave voice to the harrowing testimony of veterans.

However, in the South there was neither mythologising or factual narrative, simply forgetting. Here, the men who fought in British uniform were ignored and marginalised. How could they compete with the nation’s official heroes, who had gone to their deaths before British firing squads at Easter 1916? The Irish Party leader, John Redmond, had urged his followers to war because he believed that nationalist sacrifice might persuade the Ulster Protestants to believe in a shared future.

At Woodenbridge in September 1914, Redmond declared: “This war is undertaken in the highest principles of religion, morality and right.” By 1916, with the true nature of the war clear, one of Redmond’s MPs, the poet and lawyer Tom Kettle, remarked to a fellow soldier at the Somme that while the executed rebels would be remembered as heroes, he would be seen as a “bloody British officer”.

When the 16th Irish Division attacked Guillemont and Ginchy on the Somme in September, nearly half of the 2,400 involved were killed, Kettle among them.

Growing up in the Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s, I was dimly aware of the Somme. This was only because the father of our closest family friend had served there with the Dublin Fusiliers. I knew Jamesie Harris of Charlemount Street had come home to a country that did not regard him as a hero. Harris marched off to war when Dublin was still a great city of the empire.

On his return there was a new national army and a new set of heroes. So he went back to war, joining Churchill’s expedition in support of the White Russians against the Bolsheviks.

Like many men who endured the trenches, Harris struggled to settle down. When the second World War began, he volunteered again. His daughter Breda, our good friend, was fiercely proud of him and would demolish any detractors of the uniform he wore.

Long before it became fashionable, Breda was visiting the graves of the Somme. “I had to show that these men were not forgotten,” she says. Last week at the Islandbridge War Memorial, I met Liam Dodd, whose great granduncle, also Liam, was killed on the first day of

the Somme with the Dublin Fusiliers. Around us families wandered through the immaculate gardens, restored now after decades of shameful neglect. Dodd grew up knowing little of his ancestor's story.

"It wasn't talked about in Ireland in those days." The economic reasons that sent many Irishmen to the ranks of the British army should not be forgotten. It was not simply a question of nationalists following Redmond's call to arms, but part of a much longer tradition of military service.

"They were working-class men who needed to feed their families," Dodd tells me. "That was a sacrifice, heading off to war to make sure your family had a roof over their heads and were fed."

He is heartened that attitudes have changed. Irish Presidents and the British royal family have paid joint tribute to the dead of wars and revolution. Irish identity is secure enough to at last embrace the forgotten dead of the Western Front.

In the Flanders village of Wijtschate, Philip Mingels, a guide who specialises in the history of the Irish and Ulster Divisions, hosts visitors from North and South.

"Both sides still come with their myths about each other, but it is better than before," he says. "I try to make sure that they both know what the other side did here." I followed him to a cornfield just outside the town. There is a small cemetery with the familiar rows of white stones. Standing apart from these is a larger stone cross. At the base, among the flowering shrubs somebody has placed a small Tricolour.

Major Willie Redmond, an MP and younger brother of John, was buried here on June 7th, 1917, after being wounded in an attack on the German lines during the battle of Messines Ridge. At Messines, Irish nationalists and Ulster Protestants fought together for the first time. As Redmond lay mortally wounded in a shell hole, he was attended to by stretcher bearer John Meek. Twice Meek refused Redmond's orders to seek safety. Although wounded himself, he brought Redmond out of the line of fire. Meek was a proud loyalist. The previous March, Willie Redmond spoke in Westminster, during his leave.

There he asked his fellow MPs: "Why must it be that, when British soldiers and Irish soldiers are dying side by side, this eternal quarrel should go on?" And it went on and on. Willie Redmond was forgotten by his country. In the by-election that followed his death, the seat was won by Eamon de Valera. Only now has Ireland begun to acknowledge the lost soldiers of the Somme.

Fergal Keane is a BBC correspondent

# The Somme 100 years on: Search the roll call of the Irish dead

*A 10-year search came up with a definitive number: 29,464 Irish deaths*

*Tom Burnell*

I first began recording the Irish first World War dead in 2006, in the beautiful village of Holycross, Co Tipperary, where I live. It was soon obvious that there were some others who had relations in the village who also perished, and these had to be included.

A road opened up in front of me, a road that had to be travelled. Our heroes must be remembered, and the only way this could be done was to collect all the databases and cross-reference them.

One of them is Ireland's National War Memorial Records, which was published in 1923, and illustrated by Harry Clarke. It lists 49,400 names who served and has been accepted as the be-all and end-all reference to remember our Irish heroes.

Still, it has a few problems. Every member of the Irish regiments in the British army were included in the nine volumes as being Irishmen, though many of them were English, Scottish or Welsh. Indeed: every man jack of them was deemed to be Irish. This was ludicrous and had to be addressed. Ten years later, all 26 counties are done.

The criteria: birth in the 26 counties, lived in the 26 counties, next of kin listed in or from the 26 counties, and buried in the 26 counties.

How could this mammoth task of finding out the proper figure for the Irish war dead be done? What have we now that did not exist in 1923, when they were compiled? Databases, digitised books, online newspaper archives and newspapers on microfiche in local libraries are now in common usage. But they did not exist when the memorial records were being compiled.

My research has found 29,464 Irishmen from what is now this State who died in the first World War.

The Irish National War Memorial Records lists 18,946. We all know the 36th (Ulster) Division suffered some 2,000 dead on the first day of the Somme.

My research confirms that the first day of the battle was also the bloodiest day for men from the South - some 467 were killed. This was followed by the first day of the German spring offensive in March 1918 (439).

Ultimately I would like to see a new and accurate book of the Irish war dead to replace the Irish National War Memorial Records. These brave men deserve no less.

The roll call of the Irish dead can be accessed here.  
<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/the-somme-100-years-on-search-the-roll-call-of-the-irish-dead-1.2705780>

# Apocalypse then: Day one of the Somme, 140 to go

***'Nothing could live under that rain of splintering steel' - but the enemy were ready***

*Friday, 1 July, 2016*

*Ronan McGreevy*

In the days leading up to the Somme offence in northern France, Gen Sir Henry Rawlinson issued a blithe communique to his corps commanders. The British guns, some 1,600 in total, had commenced the largest bombardment in history.

On an 27km (18 mile) front north of the river Somme, every gun the British could purloin was ranged against the German enemy. Some like the 15-inch howitzers fired a shell so large they sounded like express trains roaring overhead. For six days and nights the bombardment continued.

The British Tommies sheltering in deep dugouts could not sleep. The Earth rocked like a ship at sea. Rats fled terrified into no man's land. The Germans, cowering deep underground, had nothing to eat or drink, yet surfacing meant certain death. One described it like a "hellish concert".

"Nothing could exist at the conclusion of the bombardment in the area covered by it," Rawlinson, the commander of the British Fourth army, told his generals.

The complacency became infectious. One brigadier-general even told his men they could light up their pipes and cigarettes in no man's land. This presumption was at the heart of the disaster of the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The British expended 1.76 million shells in the course of a seven-day bombardment. Incredibly, it was not enough. A third were duds. A third were shrapnel shells, ineffective against barbed wire. The remainder were high explosive shells.

The area covered by the bombardment was just too vast. High explosive shells were supposed to destroy the German frontline positions and kill all the occupants.

But the German were sheltered from the worst the British could throw at them.

In late 1914, after the failure of the Schlieffen plan designed to defeat France in 40 days and avoid the necessity of a two-front war, the Germans made the strategic decision to concentrate their offensive operations against Russia on the Eastern Front.

They would stand on the defensive in the west for as long as it would take. The dry chalky soil of the Somme was perfect for building deep defences.

In 1915, the French captured an intact German dugout near the Somme. They were astounded by what they found: reinforced bunkers dug 10 metres underground, impervious to shellfire, equipped with wood panelling, electric lights and objets d'art.

They were well stocked and ventilated. Churchill would later recall that the British attacked the "most perfectly defended position in the whole world". The discovery of the intact bunker ought to have given the British pause for thought at the Somme. Scouts found the German barbed wire intact. One battalion commander reported the uncut wire to his superiors but was ignored. His men were slaughtered on the first day. Riven with remorse, he shot himself after the battle.

Despite all this awkward intelligence, Rawlinson and the British commander in chief, Gen Sir Douglas Haig, proceeded with the "big push". Too much men and material had been committed to what would be the biggest British offensive of the war.

For the first day of battle, the British had assembled 14 divisions and the often-forgotten French five. The area chosen for the assault, north of the river Somme, had no great strategic significance.

It was simply where the two armies met. It was supposed to have been a French- led initiative, but the French had been engaged for four months in the death grip of Verdun.

The Tommies chosen for the initial offensive were nearly all volunteers who left the quietude of civilian life to join Kitchener's army at the start of the war. It took two years to train these unfortunate men and 10 minutes to destroy thousands of them.

They were loaded up with 30 kilos of equipment. The infantryman's pack included 220 rounds of ammunition, an entrenching tool, two grenades, a haversack and two sandbags.

Many carried rolls of barbed wire and even pigeon lofts across the no man's lands. The soldiers were told to walk abreast of each other and not run because the defenders would all be dead. They were urged to preserve their energies for a last sprint into the German front lines in the unlikely event that a few stragglers were still alive.

On the morning of July 1st, the British bombardment reached a terrifying crescendo. Shells whistled and screamed overhead as every gun roared in union. The Germans were attacked from above and below.

The British detonated 19 mines under the German lines. One, which created the Hawthorn Crater, was captured on film; another, the Lochnagar Crater, left a gash on the rolling landscape so vast that it remains a thing of awe to this day.

High above in his scouting airplane, the author Cecil Arthur Lewis watched the bombardment and concluded: "Nothing could live under that rain of splintering steel."

And so, at 7.30am on the morning of July 1st, 120,000 British men went over the top. The morning mist had burned off. It was a beautiful day, soon to become ugly.

For years the Germans had been practising bringing their machine guns up from the deep dugouts. The training had deadly consequences. The Germans won the race to the parapet and were able to direct withering machine-gun fire at a range of 2,000 metres on the advancing British.

The Tyneside Scottish assault on the village of La Boisselle quickly broke down. The follow-on brigade, the Tyneside Irish, consisting of Irishmen and those of Irish descent from the northeast of England, were mown down before they even got to the front line.

The Newfoundland regiment suffered 91 per cent casualties. The 36th (Ulster) Division showed extraordinary courage in taking the heavily fortified Schwaben Redoubt, but could not hold on because the attack on both sides had broken down.

The story was the same all along the 27km front. Brave men were slaughtered to no obvious end. What gains were made came with such a vast expenditure of blood as to be rendered irrelevant. This was a moral apocalypse - and yet only the start: the Battle of the Somme would last a further 140 days.

The first day was by far the worst in the history of the British army. The force sustained 57,000 casualties, of whom 19,240 died. This was more battle dead than at Waterloo, the Crimea and in the Boer war; more, even, than the seven weeks of the battle of Normandy during the second World War.

It was also the worst day in Irish military history, with more than 2,000 from the 36th killed. But often forgotten are the four regular battalions from the North not in the 36th which suffered terrible casualties. At least 2,500 Irishmen were killed on the first day, of whom 469 were from what is now the Republic. But more than men died at the Somme. Hope, optimism, trust in one's betters, and in the British Empire, died as well.

"These were the best of the nation's volunteer manhood," the military historian Richard Holmes has observed, "and the merest glance at its casualty roll shows what the Somme did to the old world of brass bands and cricket fields, pit-head cottages and broad acres."

Ronan McGreevy's book, *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front*, has just been published by The History Press.

# Observe the Sons of Ulster re-enacted in Thiepval

*Friday, 1 July 2016*

In the 30 years since he wrote *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, Frank McGuinness's play has become a classic of 20th century Irish theatre.

On Wednesday night, it was performed for the first time in the place where McGuinness set the drama, facing the wooded knoll that the 36th Ulster Division attacked 100 years ago on Friday, with the loss of 2,000 lives. It was an intense and emotional, never-to-be-repeated evening.

Some 30 Irish, British and French theatre-goers joined old Kenneth Pyper, the fictional Somme veteran played by actor Seán McGinley, in communing with the ghosts of the First World War.

Over two hours, we watched eight young volunteers don green field uniforms and helmets, carry rifles and bayonets. They pair off: a cynical sculptor from a "swanky" family falls in love with a blacksmith from Enniskillen.

Two Belfast shipyard workers are haunted by the sinking of the Titanic. A baker helps his life-long buddy, a weaver, to overcome his fear. A failed preacher is kept in line by the youngest recruit, who hides the fact his mother is Catholic.

Had he been told that his play would serve as Ireland's contribution to centenary celebrations of the Battle of the Somme, and that it would be performed at the Ulster Tower, the oldest memorial on the Western Front, "I would not have believed it; I could not have believed it," says McGuinness.

From a republican family in Donegal, McGuinness wrote the play while teaching at the University of Ulster in Coleraine. Before they go into battle, he learned, Protestant soldiers exchanged their Orange sashes. That historical detail inspired him to write the play.

"It was a great act of imagination by Frank," says Fiach MacConghail, director of the Abbey Theatre. "In the South, this play was the beginning of the understanding of a part of our culture that was never explained to us."

The Abbey continues to produce plays by northern writers, in the hope of fostering understanding. "In the South, people think the problem is solved," Mac Conghail explains.

“It isn’t. Integration between the communities hasn’t happened, or is happening very slowly.”

Jeremy Herrin, the English director of the production, says epithets against “Taigs” and “Papists” are “historical realism, not shock tactics.” The love story between young Pyper (Donal Gallery) and Daniel Craig (Ryan Donaldson), seems in tune with our times, though MacConghail admits “in the past there would have been a tension about it.”

The 70th anniversary, for which he wrote the play, was barely noticed, McGuinness says. “The whole idea of commemoration has become much more popular. People are more willing to learn from the past, but also to say, ‘What courage.’ “

The five-month battle claimed as casualties 420,000 British and Irish soldiers, with no decisive effect on the outcome of the war. “But if you see only the futility, you are missing something - the astounding sense of love between them,” McGuinness says.

“If you don’t respect them, you are as bad as the generals who sent them to die; lions led by donkeys.” Joseph Zimet, who heads the French first World War centenary mission, says he is thrilled with the Irish contribution.

“Everyone else did military commemorations,” Ambassador Geraldine Byrne-Nason explains. “Ours was the only cultural reaction.”

One week after the Brexit vote, the play struck a European chord. “In the time that’s in it, it shows young Irish people understand what a European ideal was about,” the ambassador says.

The play was performed before a bigger audience on Thursday night in Amiens. The Irish-British production will now go to Belfast, Derry, Armagh, Coleraine, Donegal and the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Formal commemoration ceremonies will take place on Friday at the Thiepval monument, attended by British royalty, President Francois Hollande and President Michael D Higgins.

But no venue can replicate the power of the Ulster Tower, in the midst of the former battlefield.

In drizzling rain among white birch trees as darkness fell, the illusion of a time warp was almost complete.

In the last and most powerful act, before dawn, the soldiers prepare to “go over the top”. To ward off their fear, they joke about the Easter Rising (“this boy Pearse . . . who took over a post office because he was short of a few stamps”), play football, stage a mock battle between Kings James and William.

The hymns they sing transport one back a century."This is the last battle. We are going to die," Craig/Donaldson predicts. "Whoever comes back alive, if any of us do, will have died as well."Young Pyper/Gallery faces the German lines and exhorts the Lord to "Observe the Sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme." The cry rises up and echoes across the hills of Picardy: "Ulster! Ulster! Ulster! . . . "

# Somme 100th anniversary: Conspicuous bravery, loyally celebrated

*Friday, July 1st, 2016*

*Ronan McGreevy*

There is no more famous Ulster casualty on the first day of the Somme than Billy McFadzean, a 20-year-old rifleman who was among the 2,000 men of the 36th (Ulster) Division to die.

One of four 36th men awarded a Victoria Cross that day, Pte McFadzean was posthumously honoured for a suicidal act of courage that saved the lives of comrades.

The men of the 14th Royal Irish Rifles, drawn mostly from the Young Citizen Volunteers of Belfast, had assembled in the trenches of Thiepval Wood for the coming assault. The air was rent with artillery exchanges. The noise was deafening.

Pte McFadzean stood on the lip of the trench, ready to distribute hand grenades. The pins had been loosened to allow for quick detonation. To his horror, the grenades fell out of their box and two pins were dislodged, primes to explode within seven seconds.

In that terrifying moment, he dived on them and was blown to pieces, thus shielding his colleagues from the full blast.

Pte McFadzean has no grave; his name is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing.

The VC citation, presented to the private's father by King George V at Buckingham Palace in February 1917, reads: "He well knew the danger, being himself a bomber, but without a moment's hesitation he gave his life."

The s sacrifice has been an inspiration for generations of loyalists. His family home in Cregagh, Belfast, is frequently visited, as is Thiepval Wood. Billy McFadzean T-shirts, mugs and death scrolls still sell. His image marks gable walls. There is a well-known loyalist song, The Ballad of Billy McFadzean.

All of this makes Nigel McFadzean, the private's closest living relative, uncomfortable.

His grandfather was Billy's brother. McFadzean, who lives in Ballynahinch, Co Down, says those who misappropriate his great-uncle's memory in the name of paramilitarism

misunderstand that the VC winner was “fighting the war to end all wars”, not to perpetuate conflict at home.

Many of the 14th Royal Irish Rifles who died on the Somme were Catholics, which is often forgotten: “Many have projected on to Billy McFadzean aspirations they aspire to for themselves,” his ancestor says. Some veer towards hero worship: “You could easily say it was the paramilitaries - people of a unionist bend who don’t have much of an education or have had very poor parenting. For them Billy represents the ultimate unionist.”

During a visit to the Somme, a group of Liverpool loyalists, wearing Pte McFadzean T-shirts, looking “like a busload of Johnny Adairs”, learned McFadzean was a relative: “Honestly, I felt like I was in a boy band.”

However, the tragedy behind his death has been obscured. His family spent decades trying to find his grave.

“In a sense, they never got to grieve,” he said. “There were issues within the family which can be traced back to Billy’s death. It is hard to grieve somebody so publicly, but my father and grandfather were deeply affected by his death.”

McFadzean liked being the centre of attention. He was a “guy you’d like to go on holidays with, the guy you’d like to go to a party with, but he was a bit of a lad”.

Ballynahinch’s war memorial still omits the names of some of its Catholic war dead. Involved in a campaign to renovate it, McFadzean wants to fill in the names lost to history.

# President Higgins: Openness to others must be at heart of remembering

*Friday, 1 July, 2016  
President Michael D Higgins*

We are commemorating the centenary of two deeply interrelated episodes in Irish history: two events that unfolded in the same wider context of a European and global war; but also two events that are connected in profound and complex ways to a whole sequence of other developments in the previous and subsequent decades.

We are challenged to forge a public discourse that can accommodate both the Easter Rising of 1916, a founding moment in the Irish Republic's journey to independence; and the Battle of the Somme, a terrible loss of lives, which has acquired such symbolic centrality for the unionist tradition on our island.

How, then, should we set about publicly remembering those seminal events? My view is that commemoration must involve more than a balancing act.

What we must seek to achieve is a transparency of purpose, an honesty of endeavour in keeping open the possibility of plural interpretations of the past and of future revision of accepted truths, based not just on new historical findings, but on an innovative ethical openness to differences of perspectives.

A central dimension of what I call "ethical remembering" has been a refusal of any kind of conscious or unconscious amnesia. Indeed to reject important, if painful, events of the past, to deny those affected by them recognition of their losses and memories, would be counterproductive and may even be amoral.

Rather than any false denial of the past, then, what can be achieved through ethical remembering is, I would suggest, a certain disposition, a way of relating to the past that does not serve to form exclusive judgments or reinforce grievances, but, rather, to embrace the stories, the memories and the pains of the other.

I have described this particular disposition as "narrative hospitality", that is, an openness to the perspectives of the other carved out at the very heart of public commemorative discourse.

We are blessed, I believe, to be able to go back to the events of 100 years ago with the help of many fine historians, who have done so much to enrich our comprehension of both the

Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. This recent scholarship has both widened the lens of our understanding to include the broader political and intellectual context in which those two events unfolded, and refined our grasp of the complexity and texture of the period by drawing attention to the detail of individual experiences, including those of the marginalised.

# A hundred years on, the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division remembered in Thiepval

*Friday, 1 July, 2016  
Ronan McGreevy in Thiepval*

The men of the 36th (Ulster) Division were remembered 100 years on in the realm of death now turned into the rolling farmlands of Picardy. All around the Ulster Tower there are fields of wheat and in those fields are thousands of poppies put there by the hand of nature not men.

The weather on July 1st, 1916, was “heavenly”, as the poet Siegfried Sassoon remembered. It was too good in fact for the German machine-gunners who had the perfect view to cut down the Ulster men. It was ghastly 100 years on, with heavy rain sending the 3,000 assembled guests at the tower scurrying for shelter.

As the service got under way the sun came out briefly, casting shadows across the now abundant fields of Beaumont Hamel, another abode of death where Irish men from the Inniskillings and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers were slaughtered that July day.

The Prince of Wales and his wife, the Duchess of Cornwall, First Minister of Northern Ireland Arlene Foster and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Theresa Villiers represented the British government at the Ulster Tower.

Alan McFarland, the chairman of the Somme Association, asked those present to imagine the “sea of carnage and of devastation” that existed 100 years previously, the dead and dying lying out in no man’s land while those surviving cowered in shellholes.

Remembrance of the Somme was ongoing, he told those present. The remains of Sgt David Harkness Blakey, who died on the first day, were only found two years ago and buried in Connaught Cemetery in Thiepval. The men had gone over the top in expectation their enemy would all be dead following a seven-day bombardment. An account by Leslie Bell of the 10th Inniskillings was read out. The men were told they could light cigarettes and pipes in no man’s land. Instead, many of his comrades were killed by a shell 30 yards from their trenches.

The service at the tower remembered a division overwhelmingly Protestant in composition. Many of those present were Orangemen for whom the visit to Thiepval Wood on July 1st was an annual pilgrimage, though not on this scale before.

One by one the wreaths piled up on the Orange Order memorial to the 36th (Ulster) Division in a garden overlooking Mill Road cemetery and the old German front line. Men from loyal Orange Orders from the North, Scotland and England queued to be photographed at the monument and pay their respects.

This was very much an affirmation of the same British identity that compelled their ancestors to walk into the teeth of the German machine guns suffering, lest we forget, more than 2,000 casualties.

Norman Potts from Shankill Road brought along his 10-year-old grandson Bailey Turkington. Mr Potts remembered his grandfather, also Norman Potts, who survived the horrors of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, and incredibly, signed up to serve in the second World War as well. Mr Potts said there was a growing realisation in loyalist circles that Catholics too were involved. "You'd think sometimes that only men from the Shankill were involved," he said.

"If you were down in Thiepval Wood, it didn't matter if you were a Catholic or a Protestant." The service reflected that no part of Ireland had a monopoly on memory or suffering on the Somme. The Government was represented by Minister for Arts Heather Humphreys and by chief of the Defence Forces Vice-Admiral Mark Mellett.

The Duke of Gloucester, the president of the Somme Association, told assembled guests memories of the Somme also belonged to men of the South.

He alluded to the Easter Rising and how the aftermath of that rebellion had disenfranchised the memories of those men from a Catholic background and their families, but now they were being remembered too.

On the eve of commemorations for the first day of the Battle of the Somme, a production of Frank McGuinness's play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* played in Amiens. Church of Ireland Primate of All Ireland Dr Richard Clarke spoke of how in the play the Somme becomes an Ulster river like the Lagan, the Foyle or the Bann.

"For many people in that province, the Somme and Ulster belongs together. This connectedness is something we celebrate today." As the strong wind whistled through the poplar trees, he remembered the "courage, commitment, service and sacrifice" of those who died that day.

# Leaders unite for 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme

*Saturday, 2 July, 2016*

*Lara Marlowe Paris Correspondent*

The leaders of Britain, France and Ireland honoured the victims of the Battle of the Somme yesterday in a moving and dignified ceremony on the 100th anniversary of the worst day in British military history. Some 10,000 people gathered in intermittent rain at the monument designed by Sir Edwin Luytens at Thiepval.

Nearly twice that many soldiers were killed on July 1st, 1916, cut down by German shell and machine gunfire. The monument bears the names of 72,000 men whose remains could not be identified. Crosses and tombstones in the field behind the memorial bear the words “A Soldier of the Great War” or, in French, “Unknown”.

As President Michael D Higgins noted later, the poignancy of the ceremony derived from eyewitness accounts of the war, read by Britain’s Prince Charles, British prime minister David Cameron, French president François Hollande and others.

Ladies in high-heeled shoes, fancy hats and dresses - including Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton, carefully avoided what Prince Charles called “the infamous Somme mud”.

Men wore their fathers’ and grandfathers’ medals, engraved with the words, “The Great War for Civilisation”.

The British paraded in redcoats and bearskins; the French in plumed hats and sabres. Bay horses drew British gun carriages. Yet it was a surprisingly un-militaristic ceremony, with only two volleys of artillery fire.

Sgt Gerard White of 1 Brigade Engineer Group, the Irish Defence Forces, read a text by the Irish politician, poet and journalist Tom Kettle, who died liberating the village of Ginchy.

“The bombardment, destruction and bloodshed are beyond all imagination, nor did I ever think the valour of simple men could be quite as beautiful as that of my Dublin Fusiliers,” Kettle wrote. “I am calm and happy, but desperately anxious to live.”

Cecily O’Toole was thrilled to attend the commemoration with her sister Barbara to honour their late father Denis O’Toole. From Ballyhooly, Co Cork, O’Toole’s life embodied an aspect of Irish history that was long considered politically incorrect.

A private in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, O'Toole guarded James Connolly at Dublin Castle on April 24, 1916. "I shall be shot," Connolly told him.

"My father was a very reserved man, and a very religious Catholic, with huge respect for authority," Ms O'Toole said. "He was a Redmondite who believed that Home Rule was coming. He wouldn't have approved of the Rising."

O'Toole earned a medal for bravery, for rescuing wounded soldiers from no man's land in the Battle of the Somme. He survived the war and left the British army in 1919.

In Mr Cameron's reading, Corporal Jim Crow of the Royal Field Artillery described a glimmer of humanity in the midst of battle. A British infantryman writhed on German barbed wire, badly wounded."Major Anderton pulled his revolver out, climbed over the parapet, walked straight to this man, picked him up and carried him back," Mr Cameron read.

"The Germans never fired a shot at him. . .and they cheered him as he lifted the man on to his shoulders." The French army choir sang La Madelon, the soldiers' song about poilus besotted by a local waitress that was the equivalent of It's a Long Way to Tipperary.

President François Hollande read a text by the first World War French army doctor and author Georges Duhamel.

He described the Somme as "the balcony of hell" where "it seemed as though a troop of giants forged the horizon of the earth, pounding relentlessly amid a million sparks."

One week after the Brexit vote, the British and French flags, but not Europe's blue and gold banner, flew atop the Thiepval monument. T

he fact that Britain fought a century ago to save Europe, but now wants to leave the EU, escaped no one.

Mr Cameron looked gloomy and pensive during the wreath-laying. The message he wrote to mark the centenary managed to avoid the word "Europe".

President Hollande had planned to send prime minister Manuel Valls, but he changed his mind at the last minute, "to show we are still friends". He nonetheless wants Britain to leave the EU as quickly as possible.

"I want to drive home the European ideal, which enabled us to surpass divisions and rivalry between states, and delivered peace for the past 70 years," Mr Hollande wrote in his message.

German chancellor Angela Merkel had attended the 2014 D-Day commemoration, and the centenary of the Battle of Verdun in May. But Germany's presence yesterday was subdued, with representation by former president Prof Horst Kohler.

President Higgins declined to comment on Brexit. “The founding of the European Union was a moment of immense significance in Franco-German relations after the second World War,” he noted. But it was time to “move on”, Mr Higgins continued.

“The very last thing we want is a kind of resile to despondency or despair. . .We have to create a new moment for Europe in which people will articulate an idealism. We have to recover a connection with all its citizens, particularly the young unemployed.”

As the ceremony drew to a close, thousands of poppies and cornflowers, the British and French flowers of remembrance, drifted like red and blue confetti from the top of the monument. Children from Britain, France and Ireland laid wreathes on the graves of the unknown soldiers while a piper from the Irish Guards played the lament, The Battle of the Somme, a green plume in his beret.

The death of innocence in the Battle of the Somme, but what have we learned a century on?

They walked unflinching to their deaths across the muddy, pitted landscape into the machine guns and the intact lines of barbed wire.

# The Irish Times editorial

*Saturday, 2 July 2016*

At 7.30am on July 1st 1916, they rose from the trenches, line after line of them, all abreast, each man about an arm's length from his neighbour.

And walked, because they had been ordered to walk, unflinching to their deaths across the muddy, pitted landscape into the machine guns and the intact lines of barbed wire on which so many would be fatally impaled. 19,240 of them died that first day of the battle of the Somme; the worst day of the worst battle in human history.

By its end, 140 days later, one million would have died, been lost, or wounded in the battle that came to represent the apotheosis of a new form of warfare and industrial slaughter, and ultimately of the folly and extraordinary capacity for self-destruction of mankind.

We have a particular duty to remember and honour the 2,000 dead that day of the 36th Ulster Division. And the 599 dead of the Tyneside Irish who marched into battle behind the regimental piper playing *The Minstrel Boy*.

And the countless other Irishmen who fought and died in other British regiments on the Somme, memories of whom are still interwoven, North and South, in the complicated personal and community narratives that combine to make us what we are.

No one tradition or story is diminished or undermined by the remembering of the extraordinary self-sacrifice and courage of so many that day, or by what President Higgins has called the "narrative hospitality" that must be at the core of this inclusive decade of commemoration.

More than men died there. "Idealism perished on the Somme," historian AJP Taylor wrote. And "Innocence," Philip Larkin noted.

But have we learned?