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IRELAND AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR**



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**THE SURE CONFUSING DRUM:
IRELAND AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

Inaugural Lecture

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by

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UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA
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of Neo-Nazism in parts of Germany, and, in my own field of inquiry, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement - which, by the way, I failed to predict even when I knew all about it. The former American ambassador to Dublin told the entire membership of a conference in Cornell about it six weeks before its public disclosure. Unfortunately for my place in history, I did not believe him, since it is (I presume) unusual for a former ambassador to disclose top secret negotiations and documents to the likes of me. Had I, as the saying goes, blown it, I would have earned my place in the history books of late 20th Century Ireland; but, alas, I did not, and so fell back into well-deserved political obscurity.

My positive exhortation again relates to my own special area of inquiry. It is not only hard, it is impossible to understand the politics of contemporary Ireland without taking a long, and deep, look at, not only her past, but that of her sister country, England - and of Scotland and Wales as well. Yet, until very recently, the history of Ireland was consigned to some category of 'commonwealth studies', if it was consigned to anything at all. When I and my fellow research students were job-hunting, as we all do, we could not help noticing that the student of Romanian history could be called an 'historian of Europe'; the historian of Ireland was, however, denied his place as in any way an historian of Britain. Yet we have only to study the career of W E Gladstone to realise that Ireland was of vital importance in the life and career of that singular man, and in the political history of the British Isles.

I want to take one example tonight to explain the importance of the historical approach to politics, and to show its enduring significance in the politics of Ireland and of Anglo-Irish relations.



Consider Captain Blackadder: when Blackadder went forth. Here was a rather black comedy set in the Great War, with Captain Blackadder and Lieutenant George coping as best they could with the follies and absurdities of the General Staff. Despite the fact that it was set in a war which ended nearly seventy five years ago, a TV audience, consisting almost entirely of people whose memories do not stretch back that far, could instantly identify with the image of the Great War projected in the programme: moustachioed, past-their-time generals and field marshals whose chief aim was, as Blackadder put it, to launch costly offensives that would move General Haig's drinks cabinet a few yards nearer to Berlin. The script writers could take something for granted; they could assume that the audience possessed some general, if hazy, notion of the war, of its character, with even some knowledge of the 'Chateau Generalship' that has made the war notorious.

The point here is that there is in Great Britain still a kind of folk memory of the war; and the incongruity between the war the soldiers fought, and the war the generals fought, offers scope for comedy, since incongruity is one of the prime ingredients of humour. But here I come to the different perception of that war in Ireland. There, it is not a conflict that helps bind a nation together through some kind of folk memory; it is not a conflict where courage and self-sacrifice could be honoured even if folk memory has it that these qualities were squandered by the brass-hats, or, rather, that memory does not act uniformly throughout Ireland. It is divisive; it is a subject of controversy: there is no consensus about the war. Let me illustrate my point through another quotation. Here is one, Dr Hearty, Archbishop of Cashel and Emly, unveiling a Celtic Cross on 22 December 1922 to the memory - but let him speak for himself: 'They were men who freely gave their lives in defence of their hearths and homes. To these men we are paying a nation's tribute of respect. To their memory we

here raised this glorious monument. Their names will never be forgotten and that memory will help to hand on to future days the memory of men who did not fear the common foe.'

This tribute of respect was not to the men of 1914-1918, but to those men of the East, Mid and West Limerick Brigade, IRA, 'killed in action against the British in the war of 1920-1921'.

Well, does this matter? Yes it does. In 1966 two Irish anniversaries were celebrated, that of the 1916 rising in Dublin, a republican rising to throw off British rule and arouse the nation from its political inertia; and the anniversary of The Battle of the Somme, in July 1916, which, as I shall explain later, Ulster Protestants have always taken as a key and symbolic event in their emergence as a distinct people with a special history, one almost guided by a providence. The celebrations provoked controversy, and the preparations for the Somme anniversary caused rancorous divisions among nationalists and Unionists in Ulster, even in 1966 when the 'golden age', however illusory, of the Terence O'Neill era was still shedding some of its glow. But as always with historical anniversaries, the dog (as Sherlock Holmes remarked) that did not bark is as important as the dog that did bark. The Somme anniversary went by with no mention, no commemoration, in the Republic of Ireland. That piece of history was extracted from the public mind. National amnesia held firm. Cultural suppression made that sure. The many thousands of Irish soldiers who fought in the Great War were forgotten, their cause and motives ignored, and the whole concept behind that great commitment - that Ireland would take her place as a home rule government in the United Kingdom, and as a nation at one with the other nations of the British empire, was regarded as almost a form of treason. The 13 rebels executed by the British after the Rising

were remembered; the thousands who died in France and Gallipoli were not. Thus the Great War, and especially the Somme battle, were captured by the Unionists for the Unionist tradition; they contributed to the Unionist myth that between 1910 and 1921 there emerged in the north of Ireland a solid, united, self-reliant and successful Ulster movement, which made good its claim to statehood, if not nationhood, and whose claim was sealed in blood: the blood of the men at the Somme.

Ulster is full of barking dogs, but travelling throughout Ireland, the observer will note some discordant objects, some odd juxtapositions. As he or she approaches the strongly Republican town of Dundalk, near the Northern Ireland border, he or she will spot a war memorial to the men who died for freedom: not in 1916, nor in the War of Independence of 1919-21, but in the war of 1914-1918. A memorial is to be found in Cork city, a short distance away from a memorial to nationalist heroes of the struggle against Britain. A memorial - possibly the only one - to the Catholic 16th Irish Division, is a stained glass window in the historically Protestant Derry Guildhall. Yet, until recently, Irish history text-books were silent about the reason why they were there at all. Indeed, the word 'why', the question, was not asked, irrespective of the answer that might be given. An empathy exercise in a school history pack asked pupils to imagine that they were runners for the Irish Volunteers in the Post office in 1916; no one thought of asking to empathise with a runner in the trenches in France in 1914-1918.

The Great War was a crucial episode in the history of modern Ireland. When it broke out, in August 1914, Ireland and indeed Great Britain appeared to be on the brink of civil war, as the Liberal Government sought to impose home rule on the Protestants of Ireland; an

attempt resisted by the British Conservative party, and by the Unionists of Ireland, and especially Ulster. Ulster Unionists relied, not only on the British Conservative party but on their own strength, as they saw it, and especially on the Ulster Volunteer Force, a military organisation created to defend Unionist Ulster against home rule. This organisation was armed from April 1914, thanks to a gun running episode worthy of a great spy novel; and what made the predicament more ominous was the fact that the Irish Nationalists, who supported home rule, founded a counter organisation, the Irish Volunteers. This did not have the sanction of the leader of the Irish Parliamentary party, John Redmond; but he was able to use his influence to take control of it. Nevertheless, there was the probability of a clash between: the UVF and the IVF; the British army and the UVF; the British army and the IVF, and even mutiny in the British army, as the Curragh incident revealed in March 1914, when officers of the Third Cavalry brigade vowed to refuse orders rather than coerce Ulster into home rule: a ripple that shook all the assumptions about the non-political British army tradition to the core. Well, in the Asquith papers there are maps: maps coloured green, orange, striped, dotted, crossed, as the Liberals sought some way out of the impasse; no wonder Asquith greeted the outbreak of war with a heartfelt sigh of relief. Nothing, not even European war, could be as bad as the Irish tangle. Asquith placed the Home Rule Bill on the Statute book, suspending its operation for six months, or until the war should end.

Sir Edward Carson for the Unionists, and Redmond for the Nationalists, offered at first a cautious response. Carson would only send his UVF to fight for Britain if the British Government played fair with the Unionists (it did not); Redmond offered the IVF, but only to defend the shores of Ireland (against what, or whom, cynics asked?). But both men soon found themselves committed to the war in full. Carson, as a highly patriotic leader, could not

but advise the UVF to fight in France; Redmond, now seeing the chance to demonstrate Ireland's true nature, and win for himself the affection of the British people, made a famous speech at Woodenbridge, Co Wicklow, in which he urged the IVF to go 'wherever the firing line extends'. And there is no doubt that the general public, Nationalists and Unionists, responded, as everyone did in the early months of the war, with a naive enthusiasm for war that now seems almost incomprehensible. Three Irish divisions were formed: the 10th and 16th Irish (almost exclusively Catholic) and the 36th Ulster (almost to a man Protestant). They were trained, shipped to France, or Gallipoli, and duly met their fate.

A new era; a new hope. The sending of the divisions to France created - perhaps - new possibilities for the political development of Ireland. Surely if men fought and died together, then - as Redmond believed - the history of Ireland, that history of strife and division, would be forgotten. There would be a new atmosphere - a reality of comradeship, out of which new and lasting bonds of friendship would be forged. The Irish Nationalist party had shown sympathy to the enemies of England in her last great struggle - the Boer War - but, as the contemporary song went:-

You used to call us traitors, when we were agitators,
But you can't call us traitors now.

When the first Irish VC was won, by Guardsman Michael O'Leary, his rapturous reception in Dublin was only surpassed by that in the British newspaper press, with such statements as: 'How Michael O'Leary VC kills eight Germans and takes two barricades'; 'The wonderful story of Michael O'Leary VC' - a phenomenon which the Irish Nationalist, Michael

MacDonagh, compiler of *The Irish at the Front* (1916), ascribed to his name ' which sounds so musically , and so irresistibly suggests the romance and dare-devildom of the Irish race'.

Soldiers are traditionally regarded as different from politicians. They are above politics. At least the rank and file are. Irishmen had served in the Victorian army in large numbers, the peak period being round about 1830, when 42.2% of the British army was of Irish birth. These were long term, long service, hard professional soldiers, and though they might indeed sing rebel songs as they marched through Bombay or Calcutta, they were men with only one real home: their regiment. But the new armies of 1914-1916 were different: they were people's armies, citizens' armies, volunteers. Precise figures of the number of Irishmen who volunteered between 1914 and 1918 are hard to get, but the best calculation is some 116,972, of whom about 65,000 were Roman Catholics and 53,000 Protestants.

This religious breakdown is not without significance, if only because Nationalist and Unionist MP's vied with each other in Parliament in contrasting their side's recruitment figures with the other side's. It affected the character and identity of the Irish Divisions. The 36th Ulster Division was noted for its solidly Unionist sentiments. J L Stewart-Moore, who in September 1914 enlisted in the 12th Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles (mainly recruited in Belfast) found that his company was drawn from various parts of Co Antrim. They were, the vast majority, 'working class lads who had left school at the age of twelve and had never been away from home before, never slept out of the family bed'. They were all UVF men with a basic training. Stewart had been a student at Trinity College, Dublin where religion and politics were discussed; but now

'I found myself in a camp of 4,000 men where no such debates were possible because everybody thought exactly alike; Protestant fervour was at its height ... the tents were decorated, many of them, with Union Jacks and Orange emblems and at night the overflowing enthusiasm of the men found its outlet in song. For the first week or so I went to sleep every night to the strains of Orange ditties such as

'Come back to Ireland those who are over the sea
Come back to Ireland and fight for liberty.
They are flying the flag, the harp without a crown
So come back to Ireland and keep popery down'.

On 12th July 1915 the same officer was woken by a skirl of bagpipes, and saw the whole battalion, less the officers, on the parade ground 'led by a soldier representing King William in khaki, and of course riding a white horse'.

Captain Cyril Falls, who served with the Division, and was himself an Ulsterman, and who later held the Chichele Professorship of the History of War in Oxford University, noted what he called the 'old covenanting spirit, the old sense of the alliance of "Bible and Sword," 'reborn' in these men. He bore personal witness to the 'not uncommon' experience of finding a man 'sitting on the fire-step of a front-line trench, reading one of the small copies of the new Testament which were issued to the troops by the people at home'.

The Protestant character of the Ulster Division had its counterpart in the Roman Catholic character of the 10th and 16th Irish Divisions, into which Northern Catholic Nationalists were

recruited also. Whereas Cyril Falls' Protestant Ulstermen were 'sometimes a little startled and pained at first on finding a countryside so liberally bespeckled with shrines and crucifixes'; the two Irish Divisions were noted for their Catholic piety, and their attention to their Catholic devotions, a mood caught beautifully by the Italian war artist, Fortunino Matania's painting 'The Last Absolution of the Munster Fusiliers at Rue du Bois'.

What were the British army's Catholic soldiers in France to achieve? What did Ireland's new armies join up to fight for? For a whole host of reasons, personal, financial, of course: farmers' sons were the most reluctant to join; it was what one contemporary called 'mainly the poor people from the towns, who had nothing much to lose anyway The labouring people were awful poor in those days. I think most of them went for the excitement of it all. It was better than staying here.' Some joined as 'Pals battalions', as they did elsewhere in the British Isles: The Irish Rugby Football Union's company of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers, for example. Some joined because their fathers had soldiered in the Boer War or their grandfathers in the Crimean War. But there was always a special political dimension to the new Catholic, as well as the new Protestant, armies.

The war was seen by John Redmond as a means of securing Ireland's place in the British Empire, of gaining home rule for Ireland, and of making Ireland the South Africa of the British Isles, presided over by himself, as the new Smuts or Botha. He argued that Irish nationalism was being vindicated in the war; that the war was a sacrifice that would tell the British and the world that Ireland was at last a nation, for 'no people can be said to have rightly proved their nationhood and their power to maintain it until they have demonstrated their military prowess'. In his *Irish at the Front*, Michael MacDonagh told tales of Irish

gallantry and loyalty to the British cause to endeavour to prove that Ireland was indeed worthy of taking her place among the nations of the British Empire. In *Trench Pictures from France*, published in 1917, Major William Redmond, John Redmond's brother, described, in a chapter called 'The Square of Empire', how officers from all the nations of the Empire gathered in a 'fair sized French town', representing as they did 'almost all parts of the world-wide empire of Britain and constituting, so to speak, an informal but very cheery Imperial military conference at tea'. As late as 1937 Henry Harrison, the veteran Irish Home rule MP, wrote a book arguing Ireland's case in the Anglo-Irish conference on economic and political matters that was then about to take place in London between de Valera's and Austen Chamberlain's governments. He devoted a chapter to extolling Ireland's contribution to the war effort, taking pains to compare the Catholic and Protestant contributions, quoting *The Times*, (rather stereotyped) description of the Irish Catholic soldiers as 'the finest missile troops that we possess' and complaining about anti-Irish propaganda that 'sought and still seeks to suppress Ireland's magnificent part in the war effort'. Imperialist nationalism was fostered by the Great War, with John Redmond as its exemplar.

It was also an essential point of nationalist interpretation of the war to stress that in the trenches, the political differences between Nationalist and Unionist, Ulsterman and Irishman, quickly vanished so that, as Willie Redmond put it in his *Trench Pictures from France*,

'These young men came from the North of Ireland and from the South, with the famous Irish regiments they professed different creeds; they held different views on politics and public affairs; but they were knitted and welded into one by a common cause. They fought side by side for their country. They died side by side

In his last speech in the House of Commons in March 1917, shortly before his own death, Willie Redmond made an emotional appeal for this brotherhood of death to be transformed into one of political life. Bitter mistakes had been made; but in the face of a war that was threatening civilization, 'are we still to continue in Ireland our conflicts and our arguments and disputes about the merits of the Stuarts, about the Battle of the Boyne and the rest?' He told how one Catholic officer who served with the Ulster Division admitted that 'it had dawned upon him that they certainly were Irishmen and were not Englishmen or Scotsmen'.

Was there any truth in this? Surviving records do seem to suggest that indeed the war did have some impact on mutual perception, though sometimes it reinforced stereotypes. Stereotypes first: one English officer, who had transferred from the Brigade of Guards to the Connaught Rangers, wrote

'It is like living in a new world to be amongst these Irishmen, so great is the contrast between their natural characteristics and those of the men I have come from. They are, I should imagine, difficult to drive but easy to lead. They are intensely religious, loyal to their officers they are easily made happy. Perhaps they are easily depressed.'

The idea of the simple, but good-hearted, Irishman revealed that the officer of the Guards had confirmed, rather than altered, his prejudices. As a very pleasant elderly lady confessed to me when I visited her home in Chester to inquire about the copyright of some manuscripts I was researching, that her father, who had served at Gallipoli, found that the Irish soldiers were the best in the British army - provided they were led by Englishmen.

But there emerges, from such evidence as I have come across, a picture of men rubbing shoulders with other men whose existence they had hardly acknowledged, apart from some vague notion of what the 'other side' might be like. Here is what Bryan Cooper, a southern Protestant and Unionist, wrote from his experience of the Gallipoli landings:

'The bond of common service and common sacrifice proved so strong and enduring that Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist, lived and fought and died side by side like brothers. Little was spoken concerning the points on which we differed, and once we had tacitly agreed to let the past be buried we found thousands of points on which we agreed. To an Englishman this no doubt seems natural, for beneath all superficial disagreements the English do possess a nature in common and look on things from the same point of view, but in Ireland, up to the present, things have been very different.'

Captain Noel Drury, a member of the Trinity College, Dublin Officers' Training Corps, now in the Dublin Fusiliers, found himself obliged to attend Roman Catholic worship on St Patrick's Day:

'Good Presbyterians like myself paraded and marched off to the tunes of the 'Boys of Wexford' and 'A Nation once Again' and went off to chapel for the first, and perhaps, the only time in our lives. What a change the war has brought over things to be sure. If anyone had told me a year ago that I would have marched off to a Roman Catholic chapel to a rebel tune, I would have said they were potty to say the least of it. It was rather disconcerting to find myself standing up and sitting down at

the wrong time through ignorance of the ritual but nobody seemed to mind.'

When our Guards officer and gentleman, Rowland Fielding, Commander in Chief of the 6th Connaught Rangers, was watching a football match between his men and soldiers of the 36th Ulster Division, he overheard a 'wag on the Ulster side' to say: 'I wonder if we shall get into trouble for fraternising with the enemy.' And when he heard of the death of Willie Redmond, Fielding wrote to his wife:

'How one's ideas change: And how war makes one loathe the party politics that condone and even approve when his opponents revile such a man as this: I classify him with Stephen Gwynn and Harrison - all three men - Irish Nationalists, too, whom you and I, in our Tory schooling have been brought up to regard as anathema: What effect will his death have in Ireland? I wonder, will he be a saint or a traitor? I hope and pray it may teach all - North as well as South - something of the larger side of their duty to the Empire.'

The news of the Easter Rising of 1916 was greeted by the Irish soldiers in France with a mixture of incredulity and shame; the efforts of Sir Roger Casement in 1915 to recruit an 'Irish Brigade' in the service of Germany from Irish Prisoners of War, and to encourage desertion from the Front, were met with scorn and derision.

We know that the unreal world of the trenches could not have any permanent impact on the fundamentals of political divisions in Ireland. Even as these Irishmen, Ulstermen and Englishmen were taking tentative steps towards each other, the UVF Headquarters Council

was seeking recruits to keep the organisation alive in Ulster, and this same organisation formed the basis of the Ulster Special Constabulary which played a significant, and at times controversial, role in the troubles of 1920-23, and subsequently. Unionists liked to claim that their soldiers loyally supported the British cause, while Roman Catholics stayed at home; and claimed also a debt of honour that must be repaid: 'Ulster will strike for England, and England will not forget'.

But, in case England did forget, Ulster Unionists were determined to keep the Ulster Division, based as it was on the UVF, together as a coherent unit, for, if ever Home Rule were to be imposed on Ulster, then 'we must be in such a position as in a very brief time to render ourselves effective against all attempts to force the Bill upon us'. Sir Edward Carson underlined the message when he said in a speech at Bangor, Co Down, in 1916:

'Some nations must go down in this war. We are not going down. There seems to be more joy in political circles of a particular character over one Nationalist that enlisted than over a whole Ulster Division. I was told over and over again that I had started regiments of rebels I always boasted that I was a chief rebel myself Yes, we have 17,000 rebels in camp now. God bless the rebels: These men who served in the trenches have given us time. How are we taking advantage of it? Today we may be able to do something; tomorrow the time may have passed. We are not a harum scarum lot of people gathered from here, there and everywhere. No, we are all brothers. They are our own Volunteers; they are men of our own religion. They are men of our own way of thinking: they are men of the great Ulster tradition.'

In 1918 Sir Edward Carson told the House of Commons that 'I passed through Belfast a short time ago a woman in the streets who roared out, "I have lost three children, Sir Edward, in the war. Are you going to get Home Rule?"' Were the Ulster Unionists the people to be sacrificed for government policy?

Sacrifice: When Captain Cyril Falls wrote his (very good) History of the 36th (Ulster) Division in 1922, he spoke of the 'very special significance' of the date of the Somme Battle (1st July) in the old calendar (thus the 12th in the new). This was the anniversary of the battle of the Boyne in 1690, and now 'the sons of the victors in that battle, after eight generations, fought the great fight A stirring in their blood bore witness to the silent call of their ancestors'. The spirit of the charge was caught in a celebrated painting, by J Prinsep Beadle, copies of which were exhibited in Unionist shop windows from the 1st July entitled 'The Attack by the Ulster Division'. As it happens, the young man at the centrepiece of the picture, Francis Thornley, was not an Ulsterman at all, but what one contemporary, J L Stewart-Moore, described as 'fresh from an English public school'. When Stewart-Moore saw the young soldier depicted on an Orange banner, some 20 years later, he mused on what the young man, with his English background, would have made of it.

Sacrifice: Sir James Craig, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, unveiled the memorial to the Ulster Division at Thiepval, in November 1921. He disclosed a memorial modelled on that of Helen's Tower in the Clondeboye Estate in Co Down, where Tennyson's lines, written in memory of the mother of the Marquis of Dufferin, were etched:

'Helen's tower here I stand,

Dominant over sea and land;

Son's love built me, and I hold

Mother's love in lettered gold.'

But at Thiepval, for the words 'Mother's love' there was inscribed instead 'Ulster's love'. Mother, Ulster; Ulster, Mother - the dedication of love, son to mother, son to Ulster, is fused, and a national myth is born.

Remember: Remembering that heroic charge, and that war, became an integral part of Ulster Unionist thinking and mythology. Orange banners depicted the battle; and the gable ends of houses in loyalist streets in the north today depict it, with the words, 'betrayed'. Ulster Unionist MPs recall it when they want to make a point, that a sacrifice was made, but is now in danger of being forgotten. Under pressure, under political pressure, such sentiments are re-made and re-fashioned, their shadows cast upon a community's collective memory.

How did Nationalist Ireland respond to the commitment of its regiments in the war? It might seem that the question is hardly worth asking: and that the words of Tom Kettle, Irish Home Rule MP, British officer, and devout Catholic, sum up the predicament of the Irish soldier after the Easter Rising of 1916, when the gap between soldiers at the Front, and public opinion at home, first began to appear. In July 1916, as he prepared for his return to duty, a young boy noted that, as he wrapped his puttees round his feet, Kettle looked tired; and while the grown ups talked about the rising, Kettle admitted sadly; 'These men will go down in history as heroes and martyrs, and I will go down - if I go down at all - as a bloody British officer'. The 1916 Rising, the execution of 13 of its leaders, but above all the British

Government's attempt in 1918 to combine military conscription with Home Rule, all helped fulfil Kettle's gloomy prophecy.

The war was soon perceived as the wrong war, fought in the wrong place, and against the wrong foe - a view which became political orthodoxy as Sinn Féin won a victory over the Home Rule party in the General Election of December 1918, and was set in tablets of stone when, after three years of terror and counter-terror, the Irish Free State was established on the ruins of the British administration. Irish ex-servicemen were not on the whole subject to vendettas, though some did suffer at the hands of both the Black and Tans (recruited by the British Government to fight the war against the IRA) and the IRA itself. Nor did they seek to form a special political group (though some of them joined the IRA). Most of them inclined towards Labour and Socialist politics. Their urban recruiting origin in any case rendered them marginal in an Ireland where the countryside has, at least until very recent times, shaped the character of Irish politics.

Ex-servicemen, and their cause, simply sank into oblivion, as Nationalists applied a sort of field dressing, in the shape of a national amnesia, to the Great War experience. Yet it cannot be assumed that this process was instantly successful or uncontroversial.

Between 1919 and 1931 Armistice Day was celebrated throughout Southern Ireland. The *Irish Times* reported in November 1922 that the poppy sellers in Grafton Street, Dublin, were 'literally besieged'. 'Stocks were cleared and replenished time and time again'. In 1929 thousands of veterans marched in Phoenix Park and a representative of the Free State government laid a wreath. 'God save the King' was sung. From 1933 no government

representative attended the ceremonies, for by now Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fail government was in office, and Fianna Fail was, after all, the Republican party; and the turning point came in 1939 when de Valera agreed to preside over the unveiling of a national war memorial at Islandbridge, Dublin (now neglected and overgrown). This memorial, built by a mixture of public subscription and State funding, was designed by Edward Lutyens. It was at the centre of a controversy in 1934, when the Government proposed appointing as caretaker an ex-soldier who had been implicated in the mutiny of the Connaught Rangers in India in 1920. The Irish branch of the British Legion reminded de Valera that this was not a 'Free State memorial' but an all-Ireland one. In the event, de Valera did not attend the unveiling, because in April 1939 it seemed that military conscription might be introduced into Northern Ireland. There were those in the Fianna Fail party who believed that:

'such a ceremony could be treated as symbolical of the unification of all elements of the country under an agreed democratic constitution. The gesture could hardly fail to create a good impression beyond the border and upon British public opinion.'

The gesture was not made; and the interpretation of Ireland's place in the war, if offered at all, was couched from the beginning in certain specific terms: not as part of the social, military and political history of the British Isles, nor as an attempt by Irish Nationalists to defend the rights of their small nation, but as a great mistake, a profound betrayal, one that could only be compensated for by Irish neutrality in the Second World War. Northern Ireland, by contrast, participated in that war, and this served to widen yet more the gap between the two communities' perception of themselves, their history and their destiny (despite the fact that, in the Second World War, many thousands of southern Irishmen joined

the British army). When the Ulster writer, Sam McAughtry, returned to the north from his military service in 1945, he was approached by a friend who offered him a form of application to join the Ulster Special Constabulary. When he replied that he had had enough of fighting, his friend answered: 'That's in case there's a real war'.

But the First World War, together with many other Irish historical controversies, has been receiving increased attention from historians (both professional and non-professional), and also from literary men and women. I now want to conclude by considering their impact on the interpretation of this piece of past history which is also inseparable from present politics.

Academic research on the subject is now beginning to appear in articles and books; and some of the popular assumptions about the war are being revised or challenged. Among the grievances handed down to post-war generations were: that the 36th Ulster Division was given its own special flag and emblem (a red Hand of Ulster); but the 10th and 16th were refused any special recognition; that there were hardly any Roman Catholic officers, because the War Office had a prejudice against them; that the contribution of the Irish soldiers to the Gallipoli landings was ignored in official despatches. Some of these complaints have not stood up to the test of historical investigation. General Sir Laurence Parsons, Commander of the 16th Irish Division, was simply not interested in national emblems, for, as a professional, he objected to any variation in the emblems of old and historic Irish regiments. There were more Roman Catholic officers than critics alleged, but the problem lay outside the prejudice of the British, and was attributable to the fact that few Catholic schools had Officer Training Corps organisations: those which did, like the Jesuit schools, produced an officer class. Lord Kitchener, who was accused of failing to sanction a special Irish

Divisional badge, did in the end sanction one, but Parsons thought the idea a 'silly' innovation. Kitchener also sanctioned the gift of an Irish wolfhound to Redmond as a mascot for an Irish regiment. John Redmond's son, Archer Redmond, was secured a commission in the army, though not without some delay, due to Parson's dislike of the use of political influence in the army. Parsons always maintained cordial relations with Nationalists, and strongly supported the full provision of Roman Catholic chaplains for the division. On the other hand, there was a tendency, when things went wrong at the Front, to emphasise the inexperience of non-regular soldiers, of contingents from Ireland (and Australia) and to overlook their particular contribution when things went right: in a 'people's war' the battlefield has always a political dimension.

The Irish social, political and military contribution to the war effort, and the impact of the war on Irish society, is now the subject of some important new work. The Trinity College, Dublin, History Workshop has produced a book setting out some of the results of recent research. Important PhD theses have been written. Two new studies of the Irish regiments have been published. A selection of letters written by men of the 36th Ulster Division has appeared, allowing men of the Division to tell their own story in their own words. Phillip Orr, the editor of this anthology, not only contributed to the 'Everyman at War' approach to war studies; he was bold enough to declare that men of the Division did break ranks and run (and who can blame them), and to declare that 'Ulstermen's natural fire and aggression' were not the reason for the Division's initial success; this lay in the more mundane, but militarily significant fact, that the Ulster HQ decided to send the Division into no man's land before the artillery bombardment lifted, and got to their objective before the Germans could prepare to meet them with machine gun fire - as happened also with the 18th Division. He expressed

the hope that readers of his anthology would value these individual testimonies rather than simplistic and supremacist versions of their collective past.

But an exploration of the place of the Great War in national memory - or I should say national memories - cannot be confined to the history archives alone. That war, more than any other, has been the subject of a deep and sustained literary reconstruction, one indeed that has properly earned the criticism of military historians as having shaped only too vividly the mental picture we have of the war - so much so that the idea of loss, sacrifice and useless slaughter caused someone to observe in a TV debate on the public schools that the British class system had 'Lost us the Great War'. But whether we like it or not, history, literature and politics are inseparable, certainly in Ireland.

There is no Irish equivalent of the English literary output that followed the Great War.

W B Yeats wrote a poem about his decision **not** to agree to write a war poem.

'I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right.'

But he did write the poem - 'An Irish airman foresees his death' - which, however, is a poem about the Anglo-Irish predicament in the twentieth century.

'I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;

Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.'

It addresses that, and also shows how the **lack** of community constraint releases the individual, sets him free to discover a more intense appreciation of life, though gambling with death: certainly not an orthodox war-poem.

Ireland did have her own soldier-poet: Francis Ledwidge, a young Nationalist from Co Meath, an Irish Volunteer, who originally opposed the Irish Volunteers joining the British army, but who enlisted in the Royal Iniskilling Fusiliers in October 1914, and who was killed in July 1917. Ledwidge - to whom I shall return - was at one and the same time - a British soldier, an Irish Nationalist, and a sympathiser with the Easter Rising in Dublin. His poems

are evocative, gentle and poignant, filled with a deep love of the Irish countryside, and utterly devoid of hatred, violence or even any sense of soldiering, but expressing an underlying sense of the moral rightness of his decision to enter the war. But these, though published in 1919, made no appreciable impact on an Ireland soon to be preoccupied with another, more intimate, kind of conflict. Sean O'Casey wrote his play 'The Silver Tassle', to, as he put it, 'set down without malice or portly platitude the shattered enterprise of life to be endured by many of those who, not understanding the bloodied meaning of war, went forth to fight, to die, or to return again with tarnished bodies and complaining minds'. This was the play rejected by Yeats on behalf of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on the grounds that O'Casey wrote about what he did not experience, and thus failed to achieve his artistic goal. But from our point of view it had the opposite effect to that of Yeats' poem on the Irish airman. Yeats' poem is too individualistic to express a community's memory. It derives from the Anglo-Irish experience. O'Casey's play is too general, even though the soldiers whose lives are shattered by the war are very typical O'Casey Dubliners. Which is not to deny, of course, that Irishmen underwent precisely this same experience as Englishmen, Welshmen and Scotsmen, Frenchmen and Germans, Russians and Turks. In that sense, Robert Graves wrote for his generation, when he wrote that highly influential, if in many ways misleading, book, **Goodbye to all That**. But within that general experience there is a specific Irish experience, or experiences, which O'Casey does not explore, and does not seem to be aware of.

What provoked a renewed interest - or, rather, the first interest - in Ireland and the Great War amongst writers was, I think, the troubles that engulfed the north of Ireland from the late 1960's. These provoked new explorations of Irishness, and the Great War was now perceived, rightly, if belatedly, as central to the forging of Irish identities. These literary

explorations ranged widely, and in many respects, with insight.

Jennifer Johnson is a novelist who has been widely praised in Dublin and London. She did not begin to write until her late thirties, but soon won various literary prizes. Her novel, published in 1974 - **How many miles to Babylon** - is set in France in the time of the Great War. Johnson manages to be both a republican in politics and a southern Irish protestant, and her novels explore the predicament of the southern protestant minority, or Anglo-Irish 'big house' society. 'I am focusing on a dwindling way of thinking about Ireland', she said in 1984. 'I would also like to feel that there's a bridge being built there because I think that there are such fantastic misunderstandings'. 'The two cultures in Ireland cannot live without each other'. Her decision to write a novel about the Great War was inspired, as she herself put it, 'as a metaphor for what is presently happening. I was trying to write about human relationships with the undercurrent of violence'. She was also aware that

'the First World War seemed to be happening on everybody's back door every single person in Ireland must have lost someone in the war I think a rather sad thing has happened in Ireland about that war. Those men and what they did, without understanding what was happening at all, have now been turned into some sort of treachery. When they were making the film **How many Miles to Babylon?** they had a hundred Irish soldiers marching around County Wicklow, dressed up in British uniforms, looking like all the photographs you've seen of those kids going out to the Somme. I was talking to some of them, and I asked if any of their grandfathers fought in World War I. There was a very long silence while they all looked at me, and then one of them said, Yes, my grandfather was a Connaught Ranger. Another

said, I had a great uncle, and somebody else said he had somebody in it. Suddenly you realised that they wouldn't admit it to each other. Of course they all had connections with the Great War. It didn't mean that their grandfathers were worse or better Irish men. It meant that they were, in their own way, small heroes.'

Johnson's novel is concerned with what she agreed was the lack of ability of people, not merely to understand, but to make implicit bonds with each other, and with Irish dimensions of this theme. She explores the relationship between the son of Anglo-Irish gentry, Alec Moore, and a Roman Catholic stable boy, Jerry Crowe. Alec's father is something of a home ruler, endowed with a love of the land and a strong sense of his own Irishness (or at least is non-Englishness), yet the family live in fundamental isolation from their Catholic neighbours: they are neighbours yet strangers. Alec's isolation is felt the more keenly because he finds little affection from his mother, and his father is unable to convey the affection that he feels for his son. When war breaks out, Alec and his boyhood friend, Jerry, enlist in the army, but for very different reasons: Jerry to learn the trade of war, the better to use it to fight for Irish independence; Alec because his mother reveals that his father is not his real father at all. Their friendship comforts them at the Front, despite their difference in rank, religion and class. Jerry protests that in the new independent Ireland 'We need each other, though. Your kind and mine. You'll see'. This sense of identity is reinforced by the attitude of their commanding officer, Major Glendinning, an Englishman who has, to his eternal shame, been posted to an Irish regiment. 'You are all amateurs', he complains, 'I will make you professionals I never asked for a bunch of damn bog Irish. I must make the best of it'. The closeness of the bond between Roman Catholic, peasant Sinn Feiner, and gentry Anglo-Irishman is symbolised in two acts. The first, when Jerry removes Alec's shoes and bathes

his painful and swollen feet. Then, shortly afterwards, Jerry temporarily deserts, to find out what has happened to his father, also a British soldier - to help him if he is wounded or to secure his mother's pension rights if he is dead. When Jerry returns and is arrested, Glendinning orders Alec to take charge of the firing party which will execute the deserter. Alec's act of self-sacrifice is a fatal one: he uses his revolver to shoot his friend, thus sparing him the ignominy of the firing squad, knowing that he, Alec, is also sacrificing his own life. And so he awaits his death by firing squad: 'they will never understand'.

The novel explores how the mutual estrangement of Jerry and Alec is symbolic of the estrangement between the Anglo-Irish and the Catholic Irish, how this has damaged Ireland, and each other. Yet they are, or could be, united by two bonds: love of the land, and mutual, individual concern that transcends political and religious division. Both men sacrifice their political (in Jerry's case) and social (in Alec's case) beliefs for friendship; both find their common Irishness in the trenches, and in opposition to the uncomprehending Major Glendinning. The novel leaves key questions unanswered: would this mutual sympathy have survived a return to Ireland? Would Jerry's projected 'war of liberation' - one, he admits, where 'every town, every village will be the front line' - have spared Alec or his ancestral home? In what way could their very different social circles be reconciled? Was it only in death that they were not divided? The novel is, in this way at least, trite. But Johnson's motives for writing it make it interesting. She is searching for common ground.

My second example is the play by Frank McGuinness, an Ulster Catholic from Donegal, whose university career was terminated by the salutary shock of early redundancy (he was a lecturer in Medieval English Language at UCD). He wanted to write a play about that most

central event in Unionist history: the Battle of the Somme. The ghosts of this battle are real. As Dr Edna Longley points out, English writers who concern themselves with the past (such as Thomas Hardy), see the pastness of the past; Irish writers are more aware of its irreversible presentness. Frank McGuinness in his play, 'Observe the Sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme', chooses a theme which, as an Ulster Catholic he could **not** respond to with instinctive sympathy, but which enabled him to explain how a character in his drama could say 'I love my Ulster' with as much difficulty as McGuinness himself felt in articulating these words. This enables him to explore this vital moment in the construction of one of the sustaining myths of Unionist history.

The first part of the play is entitled 'Remembrance'. Kenneth Pyper, now an old man, still sees the ghosts of the soldiers with whom he went to war, and the use of ghosts is itself significant - the past returns to haunt, to disturb - it will not go away. Pyper is in fact the most cynical, detached, and - as he thinks - untypical of the Ulster Protestants with whom he finds himself as a young man. Yet because of the shared experience of the war, and the fact that he is the best educated, most self-reliant of the men, he finds himself becoming, almost against his will, their leader, and their comforter. Before the Somme, on its very dawn, the soldiers have a mock reconstruction of the Battle of the Boyne. Millen, who has been chosen to play King James' horse, asks plaintively, 'Why do we have to be King James? He has to get beaten'. McIlwaine replies 'Because somebody has to be King James. And, anyway, you're only his horse'. Says Millen 'This is not a fair fight' to which Anderson remarks 'What fight is ever fair. Are you right. Let battle commence. And remember, King James, we know the result, you know the result, keep to the result'.

But seconds before the real battle the soldiers' prejudices are elevated above mere prejudice. Pyper, the cynic, the outsider, reminds the men of their homeland. The river Somme, which the men can smell, is bringing us home, says Pyper. 'We're not in France. We're home. We're on our own territory. We're fighting for home. This river is ours. This land's ours. We've come home'.

Another soldier, Anderson, hands Pyper an orange sash to wear. 'It's not mine' says Pyper. 'It is now. It's a gift. From us'. Pyper takes it. He has embraced his destiny. The men sing a hymn. And Pyper says a last prayer:

'Save us. Save our country. Destroy our enemies at home and on this field of battle. Let this day at the Somme be as glorious in the memory of Ulster as that day at the Boyne, when you scattered our enemies. Lead us back from this exile. To Derry, to the Foyle. To Belfast and the Lagan. To Armagh. To Tyrone. To the Bann and its banks. To Erne and the islands. Protect them. Protect us. Protect me. Let us fight bravely. Let us win gloriously. Lord, look down on us. Spare us. I love (He pauses. He finds the words that throw a shadow permanently on the screen, that make a myth) - observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme. I love their lives. I love my own life. I love my home. I love my Ulster.'

The chant, taken up by all the men, turns into a battle cry. But a cry to what end? To Pyper's loneliness, his ghosts. His home has grown cold, the province has grown lonely.

Pyper fought to maintain what they fought for, but he only believed because the men who died taught him. Yet he is not at peace. The temple of the Lord is ransacked in modern Ulster.

Ulster's culture has trapped these men, even the cynical Pyper. In the end, he is the most trapped. He is still trapped as an old man, yet the play is not merely a lesson for Ulstermen or anyone else about the blind alley that loyalties can lead a man towards. It gives a clear and moving illustration of their humanity, their fear, and the desperation of their fate. The soldier's rancorous sectarianism is lifted above rancour by their discovery of themselves, of each other, by their pairing and bonding. And by their energy. The play is full of energy and wit, and seems to me to say - this event can lead you inwards as it does Pyper; but cannot the love he develops for his comrades lead outwards? Not here; not yet; not in Pyper's contemporary Ulster. But the play invites the audience to explore traditions which they may not sympathise with, may not even understand. It has no lessons to preach, no sermons; only an invitation to examine a very complex, absorbing, at times repulsive, but always very living, political culture.

Asking questions of a culture is an essential part of the historian and the imaginative writer alike. Seamus Heaney poses some questions in his poem, 'In Memoriam, Francis Ledwidge', the Catholic soldier I have already referred to, who fought for Irish freedom in a khaki uniform, who was on leave when the 1916 Rising broke out, and who wrote a poem in memory of the rebels who were executed by men wearing the same khaki uniforms as himself. Heaney begins his poem by recalling a figure cast in bronze, a war memorial, which meant little to him as he walked hand in hand with his aunt along Portstewart promenade:

'The bronze soldier hitches a bronze cape
That crumples stiffly in imagined wind
No matter how the real winds buff and sweep
His sudden hunkering run, forever craned
Over Flanders.'

but now he recalls Ledwidge,

'In your Tommy's uniform
A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave
Ghosting the trenches with a bloom of hawthorn
Or silence cored from a Boyne passage grave.'

Heaney touches, though he does not resolve, the paradox of the Catholic soldier. He quotes Ledwidge's last political testament:

'To be called a British soldier while my country
Has no place among the nations.' You were rent
By shrapnel six weeks later. 'I am sorry
That party politics should divide our tents.'

Here is the enigma; but Heaney cannot construct anything upon it, it is a 'dead enigma', one in which:



'All the strains criss-cross in useless equilibrium
And as the wind tunes through this vigilant bronze
I hear again the sure confusing drum.

You followed from Boyne water to the Balkans
But miss the twilit note your flute should sound
You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones
Though all of you consort now underground.'

Ledwidge, unlike the men this bronze statue commemorates, was no 'true blue', but, Heaney ends grimly 'all of you consort now underground'. So has Ledwidge's sacrifice come to this incongruous end? Ledwidge, British soldier, Irish patriot, fighting to free nations. Not like other British soldiers, for Ledwidge's nation is not free; yet anxious that party politics should not stand in the way of what he, and his like, sought. Here is a set of contradictions: the bronze soldier, solid, urgent, holding the memory of war; the bloom of hawthorn on a trench, a transient image. The Catholic face; the British army uniform.

Ledwidge marches to the step of Ireland and England, gone to the wars together. But Heaney's assumptions about Ulster's political inheritance renders these dualisms unresolvable: 'True-blues' against 'twilit note'. A drum 'confusing' because in 1914, it was so sure?

In a recent essay, Heaney tries to widen the debate. He now sees Ledwidge as representing 'conflicting elements in the Irish inheritance which continue to be repressed or unresolved'.

There is, he says:

'Still minimal public acknowledgement in Ireland of the part played by Irish soldiers in the First World War, although their devotion to the ideal of independence was passionate in its day

Heaney then adds an interesting observation: 'We do now see the development of a corresponding unwillingness to acknowledge the heroic aspect of the 1916 Rising.'

This, however, is a false analogy; and one that is self-contradictory, for Heaney refers to Ledwidge as our dead **enigma**, and there was nothing enigmatic about the 1916 rebels. 1916 was a rebellion of certainties: 'In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she received her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom'. But the political stance of the Catholic Irish soldiers was ambivalent. So too, I would argue, was that of the Ulster Protestant (and southern Irish Protestant) soldiers and their tradition in ways that Heaney cannot comprehend, or will not allow, or too often takes at face value. In 1914 all confronted the question: were Faith and Fatherland compatible with King and Country? All were ambivalent about England, about each other, even about themselves, perhaps most of all about themselves.

Since this is an enduring characteristic of Irish people, all of them, and of Anglo-Irish relations since the 12th Century, it deserves our close attention. The historian, the imaginative writer, all who are interested in the past, present and future of these islands, would do well to listen carefully to the beat of that 'sure, confusing drum' of August 1914, for its echo reverberates down the history of Ireland, and is still heard today.

Finally, it is customary to offer a valedictory message on these bizarre occasions. I shall let the man whose name has cropped up from time to time this evening speak (I am sure) for us all. I quote from W B Yeats' poem 'The Curse of Cromwell'.

'All neighbourly content and easy talk are gone,
But there's no good complaining, for money's rant is on.
He that's mounting up must on his neighbour mount
And we and all the Muses are things of no account.'

There is not much time for 'easy talk' nowadays, but you can be certain that, while we in the Politics Department fully acknowledge the necessity of 'money's rant', we will also do our best to ensure that we, and **all** the Muses, are things of **some** account.

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