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Ireland and the First World War: Myth, Memory and History

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ABSTRACT
The First World War is a major event in world history and in Ireland's history as well. This article demonstrates how myth, memory and history became intertwined in contemporary understandings of Irish participation in the conflict, as well as in subsequent scholarly writing. Through examples including recruitment statistics, policy decisions, the war at sea, memorialisation, unionism and Northern Ireland, and the Irish Revolution, this article demonstrates that a triangular relationship between myth, memory, and history has pervaded our understanding of the history of the war itself. A critical appreciation for how and when these phenomena intersect is therefore needed for a better understanding of Ireland and the First World War – and how we as historians continue to write its history today.

The world conflict that began in July 1914 mobilised 65 million troops and claimed 20 million civilian and military lives across the globe. It destroyed three empires – four if we were to include that of Germany – and witnessed the rise of powerful ideologies that sparked the horrors of the twentieth century. Cycles of violence convulsed much of Europe and further afield until 1923, troubling the notion that 1918 was an 'end point' in the largescale violence unleashed in 1914. During the war itself, new political 'isms' gained traction. Bolshevism and counter-revolutionary movements formed the backdrop of conflicts stretching from 'Finland and the Baltic States through Russia and Ukraine, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Germany, all the way through the Balkans into Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and even Czechoslovakia'.[1] Fascism arose and adapted to new national contexts in Italy, Germany, Britain, Ireland and elsewhere, generating powerful political movements that would in time spark another world war.

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[1]Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela 'Introduction' in Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War: 1911–1923,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.1-16, (p. 10).

What we might term anti–colonial movements, a catch-all term that does not sufficiently capture the variety within and between groups that sought to reform their relationship to empires, received a new impetus in an emerging, international order. Within the British Empire, Egypt, India, and Ireland were at the forefront of agitation. Even the so-called White Dominions, where British and Irish emigrants had become settled populations from Canada to New Zealand, now pushed in different measures for a loosening in ties of sovereignty from the imperial centre of London.[2] Across the Atlantic a new superpower, the United States of America, emerged on the international scene from 1917, further upsetting the balance of power in Europe.

This sketch of some ways in which the First World War left transformational, geopolitical impacts on the long twentieth century reminds us of the immensity of the world's first 'total war'. But how does Ireland fit this picture? This article explores the triangular relationship between myth, memory and history to demonstrate how all three became embedded in contemporary understandings of Irish participation in the conflict, as well as in subsequent scholarly writing. My aim is to suggest that particular myths and memories of the war have come to substitute our understanding of the conflict itself, often squeezing out wider, complicated dynamics in place of more narrowly defined experiences. In so doing, the lenses commonly used to view Ireland and the Irish in the First World War have made Irish experiences less relevant to understanding the major geopolitical transformations spawned in the wake of the conflict, but this need not be the case. This article makes clear that a critical appreciation for history, myth and memory is needed for historians seeking to situate Irish experiences in broader contexts.

Some points of clarity are firstly needed. By 'myth', it is not necessarily meant a fallacy, but an exaggerated or reductive sense of facets of an event that have come to substitute a more complex, historical picture. The term can also refer to existing narratives about the 'past', which are myths in a more fallacious sense, but they have made it into public and even scholarly domains to such an extent that they have taken the place of 'history'. Memory is closely related and at times indistinguishable. As with myth, certain memories of the conflict have replaced history, squeezing out complex realities and accentuating the most valuable aspects of those that remain. This can be done consciously (by state actors) and unconsciously (by mere repetition, so that over time memory comes to take the place of history, especially when repeated by governmental, media, clerical, educational and other powerful outlets). While history is seemingly more straightforward, as recovery of 'the past' is the historian's objective, to 'recover' the past is an exercise deeply wedded to the interpretative lenses and guiding principles we use to conduct our research. Our conclusions therefore are

[2]John Darwin, *The empire project: the rise and fall of the British world-system, 1830–1970,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

unlikely to be representative but subjectively partial, but they come to represent 'history' when facilitated by the various social structures that enable individual success within or outside of the academy.

Recruitment and statistics

The question of recruitment is one that has attracted different generations of people, whether one thinks of policymakers during the conflict itself, constantly preoccupied with how many men were joining up from both Britain and Ireland; members of the public interested in recruitment from localities, counties or regions; or historians, who for a long time saw this as *the* most important question in Irish history when assessing responses to the First World War, or Great War as it was known at the time.

The late David Fitzpatrick estimated that 206,000 Irish-born men served in that conflict.[3] Perhaps 27,000–30,000 were killed.[4] There had been several other approximations prior to Fitzpatrick's publication, but the main figures he sought to dispute were the figures surrounding Irish participation, cited by some military historians, such as Henry Harris and J. P. Duggan, to have been at 400,000 or even 500,000.[5] Similarly, the fatalities captured in the multi-volume edition of *Ireland's War Memorial Records*, published in 1923 as part of a wider project of remembrance chaired by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at the time, Sir John French, were also disputed.[6] In these volumes, the figure of 49,647 Irish military deaths was put forward. Considerable effort has since gone into debunking these statistics and Fitzpatrick's estimate of just under 30,000 war dead has come to stand. However, an important thing to be said in favour of the *Records* is that through listing all those who fought in an Irish regiment, the names recorded include men born outside Ireland while also including those born in Ireland who served in any British army unit. Many of those born outside Ireland were born in Great Britain, its empire, or even elsewhere, thus allowing for a wider

[3]David Fitzpatrick, 'The Logic of Collective Sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army, 1914–1918', *The Historical Journal*, 38, 4 (Dec., 1995), pp. 1017–1030, (p. 1018). Also see Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900–1922', in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, eds, *A Military History of Ireland,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 379-406, (pp. 386–9).

[4]David Fitzpatrick, 'Irish consequences of the Great War', *Irish Historical Studies* 39, 156 (2015), pp. 643–58, (p. 645).

[5]See Henry Harris, *The Irish regiments in the first world war* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1968), p. 32; J. P. Duggan, *A history of the Irish army,* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. 328. Cited in David Fitzpatrick, 'The Logic of Collective Sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army, 1914–1918', *The Historical Journal*, 38, 4 (Dec., 1995), pp. 1017–1030, (p. 1018).

[6]Committee of the Irish National War Memorial, *Ireland's War Memorial Records, 1914–1918: Being the Names of Irishmen Who Fell in the Great European War, 1914–1918,* 8 vols, (Dublin: Maunsel and Roberts, 1923).

definition of 'Irish' than Fitzpatrick's figures, as his 'Irish' composition was based on correlating deaths recorded by the Registrar-General for Ireland with government mortality figures within Ireland.[7] A 'born in Ireland' designation was crucial to his estimation of the Irish war dead based on the sources consulted, therefore excluding what he termed 'non-Irish members of 'Irish' regiments', as well as natives of Ireland who joined units in Britain, the colonies and the USA.'[8]

The *Records* undeniably had faults – for instance, the inclusion of men from Great Britain with no Irish connections whatsoever who served in Irish units – but they did represent a broader conception of *who* was Irish in the Great War than Fitzpatrick came to use. This wider conception of Irish military participation – one that spanned Great Britain as much as it did the Dominions, the USA and elsewhere, only somewhat accounted for in the *Records* – would be erased from later historiographical and popular accounts. Fitzpatrick's figures have become the standard metric for citing Irish recruitment in the Great War.[9] The result has been the narrowing of 'Irishness' to the island of Ireland, a fallacy in itself given persistently high rates of emigration that pre– and post–dated the Famine of 1845–52, and the importance of Irishness to first – and second – generations, as discussed below. Such a restrictive definition of *who* was 'Irish' has in turn created a myth that military service almost exclusively came from Irish-born men who joined up in Ireland itself.

Yet the reality was more complex, as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database demonstrates.[10] It does not always record where a soldier was 'from' (that is dependent on information provided by relatives), but where that information is included, it shows that Irish recruits joined a range of military units, many of which were not raised in Ireland *at all*. To take three towns at random – Kilrush, County Clare; Dundalk, County Louth; and Randalstown, County Antrim – all reveal considerable variety in both recruitment and war deaths at the local level. In Kilrush for instance, the database records 43 war dead. 25 were men who served in various Irish regiments while 18 served in non-Irish units. In Dundalk, there were 170 war deaths. Only 58 died while serving in Irish regiments. A large proportion of the remainder (which includes one woman) died elsewhere, predominantly in ships sunk by German U-Boats. Even in unionist-dominated Randalstown, 12 out of 48 men died

[7]Fitzpatrick, 'Irish consequences', p. 645. See footnote 6 for how Fitzpatrick estimated deaths of Irish servicemen.
[8]Fitzpatrick, 'The Logic of Collective Sacrifice', p. 1018.
[9]See for instance their use within Timothy Bowman, William Butler and Michael Wheatley, *The Disparity of Sacrifice: Irish recruitment to the British Armed Forces, 1914-1918,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 2.
[10]Commonwealth War Graves Commission, available at www.cwgc.org. Accessed 5 July 2023.

in other units. This messy picture of war dead was replicated throughout towns and villages across the island.

The other units in which Irish men served differed tremendously. Some troops with specialist skills joined corps such as the Royal Army Medical Corps and others joined tactical units including the Royal Engineers, Royal Garrison Artillery and Machine Gun Corps. The Royal Navy and Mercantile Marine rank highly in recruitment preferences among coastal populations. But the bulk of other units comprised infantry units outside of Ireland, including the Seaforth Highlanders, Canadian Expeditionary Force, York and Lancaster Regiment, King's (Liverpool Regiment) and many others. It is unclear to what extent any of the men listed on the CWGC database joined UK units in Ireland and therefore made it into Fitzpatrick's estimates of the war dead, or whether they enlisted outside of Ireland and therefore never made it into the final tally. Information in the *Soldiers Died in the Great War* records often does not include place of enlistment, and it is never included in the accompanying *Officers Died* records.[11] We can be certain that those who joined non-British units would not have been included in his totals for Irish fatalities. While this picture differed by locality and no single interpretation of recruitment can be drawn that best describes the 'Irish' experience, it reminds us of two important points: the imprecision in accurately accounting for Irish recruitment and fatalities during the First World War, and that there was never one typical Irish recruitment experience. There were only experiences, and in the cases above, recruitment to non-Irish units from Irish-born men could make up anywhere between 25 to 66 per cent of war deaths in a given locality.[12]

Looking anew at recruitment statistics forces historians writing about military service to think about a more profound problem: how the statistics they employ to portray Irish recruitment, and the associated experiences of military service, implicitly draw boundaries around *who* was an Irish serviceman during the First World War. Place of birth has been a useful criterion upon which to get some sense of scale, especially given the habit of authorities to label the Irish troops 'British'. Large numbers of Irishmen who enlisted in Great Britain for instance were therefore counted as English, Scottish or Welsh recruits.[13] But on the other hand, this narrow definition of Irishness

[11]Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919, available via online database www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1543/. Accessed 5 July 2023.

[12]The vast bulk of these men were Irish-born judging by records listed for their parents and where they lived, but herein lies another problem. A handful of records are misplaced (e.g., see one D. D. Gillies from Dundalk, who is listed as 'Son of Rachel Davis Gillies, of Dundalk, Ontario, and the late James Gillies.'). And given the habit of British authorities to synonymise place of enlistment with nationality, it is possible that non-Irish recruits who joined up in Ireland are mistakenly included in the returns.

[13]Bowman et al, *Disparity*, p. 10.

is out of tune with a country where emigration and migration were facts of life. In 1911, just a handful of years before the war began, over one third of Irish-born people lived outside Ireland.[14] An unpublished document from the Department of National Defence in Canada suggests that 19,327 soldiers from Ireland served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and Mark McGowan has suggested that that number is even higher, as 51,426 Catholics had enlisted in the CEF by 1 June 1917, most of whom were Irish, though that figure likely included non-Irish-born men who were later generations of Irish settlers.[15] Jeff Kildea has added another 7,000 or so Irish-born men to the Australian count.[16] We don't have figures for New Zealand or the most obvious case of the USA, and whilst impossible to measure enlistment in Britain, we can assume that this is probably one of the highest cases of recruitment outside of Ireland given high levels of migration and settlement.[17] Clearly many Irish-born men joined units outside of Ireland; to exclude them from the typical military statistics cited in relation to the Great War seems to make little sense.

One could interrogate this further. Why is Irish-born a pre-eminent criterion for who was 'Irish' in the First World War, especially given persistent emigration and endurance of Irish communities throughout the British Empire and USA? One needs only look at the importance of 'Irishness' in recruiting efforts throughout the Empire, such as in Canada, especially in urban centres such as Montreal and Toronto, or even in Irish America, to demonstrate that Irishness mattered to later generations, and was perceived to matter, in the push to attract more men to the forces.[18]

If historians are to restrict themselves to the murky business of 'Irish-born' for determining military participation, not least for the primordial and territorial elements it suggests which have long since been dismissed by scholars of nations and nationalisms, then a double exclusion is implicit within much of the scholarship. Irish-

[14]Joseph P. Finnan, *John Redmond and Irish Unity 1912–1918,* (New York: Syracuse, 2004), p. 155.
[15]*The Irish Times*, 1 August 2014; the implication in McGowan's work is that most English-speaking Catholics who joined up were Irish Catholic, and there was a strong correlation between English-speaking Catholics and the Irish. See Mark G. McGowan, *The Imperial Irish: Canada's Irish Catholics Fight the Great War, 1914-18,* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), pp. 105–162, p. 108.
[16]Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland,* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007).
[17]For further discussion, see Niamh Gallagher, *Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History,* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2019), p. 107ff.
[18]The following recruitment posters demonstrate the point. For Canada, see www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/31032. Accessed 5 July 2023. For the USA, see www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.08405/. Accessed 5 July 2023.
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born men who enlisted in Ireland in British (and to be more precise again, largely UK) units have become the benchmark upon which scholarly and popular understandings of recruitment have been based. These have generated myths about Irish recruitment and its related cousin, the question of Irish 'support' for the war effort, as the two have been commonly linked. Irish-born men who enlisted outside of Ireland, or first– and second–generation Irishmen who enlisted elsewhere, are not considered sufficiently 'Irish' to have made it into the commonly cited statistics and therefore have had no bearing on the contentious debates surrounding nationalist and unionist 'support' for the war effort. And the question of recruitment, as the author has argued elsewhere, is surely only one strand of experience that enables us to assess support for the war effort *in toto*.[19]

Myths surrounding recruitment were also present during the war itself. Some authorities spent considerable energy trying to highlight the supposed slackers in Ireland who were avoiding military service. In March 1918, John Pretyman Newman, an Irish-born officer and Conservative politician, asked Henry Duke, Chief Secretary of Ireland, about what might be done to remedy the general slackness which Irish towns were supposedly fostering towards joining up, a problem '… owing to the presence of numbers of non-Irish, both Britishers and aliens, of military age who are evading military service by taking refuge in Ireland.' Duke replied that the police were aware and in cooperation with the recruiting authorities who would facilitate the 'arrest and removal of men who are absentees'.[20] The perception that Irish men, especially single men, were shirking their responsibilities, was a concern often raised in parliament from 1916, especially by Right-leaning politicians.[21] It was an important reason why conscription was introduced in 1918. Though never formally imposed on Ireland, Adrian Gregory has argued it was passed to pacify British public opinion.[22] Ireland was to 'step up' to its military responsibilities having so far avoided the draft, but it seemed only fair to those in favour of the Bill that Ireland be included now that the age range of British men was to be further extended in light of the German spring offensives.

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[19]Gallagher, *Ireland*, pp. 17–30.

[20]Parl. Deb. (HC) 14 March 1918 vol. 104 col. 452.

[21]For instance, Sir Edward Carson asked Henry Forster, Financial Secretary to the War Office, 'Is it the policy of the Government to encourage men of military age in Ireland to come over and take the jobs of men in England who have enlisted in the Army?', Parl. Deb. (HC) 8 Nov 1916, vol. 87 cols 174–5.

[22]Adrian Gregory, '"You Might As Well Recruit Germans": British Public Opinion and the Decision to Conscript the Irish in 1918', in Adrian Gregory and Senia Pašeta (eds.), *Ireland and the Great War: 'A War to Unite Us All?',* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 113-132, (p. 127).

These important perceptions shaped policy responses that transformed the British–Irish relationship. Yet we now know that recruitment from Ireland was not so 'dramatically out of kilter' with Britain after all when the two islands are compared. The late Keith Jeffery found that between a quarter and a third of all available young men in Ireland served in the conflict, 'a strikingly high proportion in the absence of conscription.'[23] Agricultural regions across the UK saw significantly lower rates of recruitment than urban centres, and rural areas contributed to the war effort in other ways, mainly through agricultural production.[24] To compare recruitment across these islands means one must acknowledge the very different historical, political, and social contexts in which it took place. To suggest that recruitment should have been the same throughout both islands implies that important contextual factors do not matter, which of course they did. Not all historians would agree, however.[25] The history of Irish recruitment in the Great War is as much a battle between different interpretations of the past as it is a definitional and numerical problem.

Other myths

Other myths pervade the understanding of Irish experiences during the First World War. One might consider the conditions of the conflict itself. Mud, rats, shell-torn land, and barbed wire are just some of the well-known images we think of when we recall the conflict.[26] And they were of course very real. The brutality of the Western Front needs no revision. But we are less accustomed to thinking about other dynamics of the military campaigns: considerable movement of the various armies in 1914 and 1918 as opposed to enduring attrition; the different geographies of the conflict, ranging from coastline engagements in the Dardanelles and the desert-like conditions of the Middle Eastern campaigns to the mountainous, snowy engagements in the Carpathians and war at sea and in the air. Irishmen served in all of these geographies as Richard Grayson has demonstrated, but there were elements of the conflict that were closer to the island of Ireland that helped reinforce crucial civilian support that enabled volunteers to stay the course.[27]

Margaret MacMillan has reminded us that one of the differences between the First World War and previous conflicts was that civilians now became legitimate targets as

[23]Keith Jeffery, *1916: A Global History,* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), p. 110.
[24]Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 192; Gallagher, *Ireland*, pp. 73–82.
[25]For the opposite view to that of Jeffery and Pennell, see Bowman et al, *Disparity*, pp. 3–4.
[26]Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory,* (London: Hambledon, 2005).
[27]Richard S. Grayson, *Dublin's Great Wars: The First World War, the Easter Rising and the Irish Revolution,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

well.[28] For civilians in Ireland, the war at sea was vital for bringing the conflict closer to home, and the sinking of the *RMS Lusitania* on 7 May 1915 by a German U-Boat off the coast of Queenstown, Co. Cork was the centrepiece of this dimension. The *Lusitania* was a passenger liner on its journey from New York to Liverpool when it was torpedoed by the German U-20, killing at least 1,198 of the 2,000 people aboard. The death toll was not far off that of a much more memorable disaster, the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, which killed approximately 1,500 people. Yet the former has faded from memory whereas the latter has been at the centre of popular culture and regeneration projects in Belfast and further afield.[29]

At the time however, the sinking of the *Lusitania* had an arguably greater impact. It was immediate, noticed across the entire country and beyond its borders, and it legitimised discourses that had been in currency for some time, such as the discourse of German barbarism, which at times could be aligned with anti-Semitism. It was game-changing in terms of hardening attitudes against so-called aggressors. There was simply no going back to a pre-*Lusitania* mindset, as it became the reference point that defined acts of brutality, triggering expressions of anger, sympathy, and support for those deemed to be on the 'right' side of the war, as well as a range of suggestions for what to do about those deemed to be on the 'wrong' side. The sinking of the *Lusitania* was not an isolated example of attacks on shipping, even if it was one of the most famous. The *S. S. Dundalk* for instance was torpedoed by the German submarine U-90 on its return journey from Liverpool in October 1918, killing 17 people. Fishermen frequently fell foul of mines laid on the western and eastern seaboards, such as when the seven fishermen on *The Pretty Polly* from the village of Carna on the west coast of Galway were killed by a mine (the mine was immediately assumed to be German in origin, though in reality that was difficult to prove). And when the *RMS Leinster* was sunk by U-Boat 123 as it travelled from Kingstown to Holyhead in October 1918, the sinking of the *Lusitania* was the reference point through which understanding the attack was framed.[30] 1917 and 1918 were the worst years for German U-Boat attacks around Irish coastlines, which gradually moved from attacks on the south-western seaboard towards the east. To focus exclusively on recruitment risks undermining the very reasons that kept civilian populations behind their troops as the conflict dragged on, even when domestic politics made the prospect of recruitment much more politically difficult to condone.

Memory

Most of the historical work on memory has helped us understand the wider dynamics of the conflict between unionism and nationalism, the two opposing 'isms' that have dominated research on modern Irish history. Indeed, it is the attempt to further

[28]Margaret MacMillan, *War: how conflict shaped us,* (London: Profile Books, 2020).
[29]Gallagher, *Ireland*, p. 64.
[30]Gallagher, *Ireland*, pp. 60–90.

understand the wedges between these polarities that continues to attract considerable attention in historical writing about the First World War. The nationalist desire for Home Rule, in train since the 1880s, had generated opposition under the banner of unionism. By the time of the First World War, unionism had taken on a powerful northern dimension through the province of Ulster. The polarities were somewhat reflected in the construction of two Irish divisions, 16 (Irish) Division, which was more nationalist in its makeup, and 36 (Ulster) Division, which was largely unionist. 10 (Irish) Division, the first to be formed from Kitchener's New Armies, was a mixture of all political persuasions, comprised of men most eager to join up.[31] The study of memory has largely bolstered research on the political extremities in Ireland, but such a lens has obscured our understanding of the past as much as it has enlightened it.

David Fitzpatrick, John Horne, Guy Beiner and others have all helped us understand how particular memories that served political agendas were built into the war from almost as soon as it began.[32] In Ulster, unionists remember the actions of the Ulster Division on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Over 5,000 Ulstermen were wounded, killed, and went missing on one day alone. There is no doubt surrounding the personal impact of such losses on families and localities. But is also clear that the meaning of this one day on the Somme took on interpretations other than loss. It helped sustain a 'creation myth' of sorts that marked out unionist Ulster as distinct from the rest of the island, fitting into the anti-Home Rule protests that had been at the centre of political Unionism since the 1880s. Scholars have argued that the Somme came to legitimise the connection with Britain and the wider Empire.[33] The notions of territorial defence, politico-religious exclusivity, the big words of patriotism/citizenship and heroism, and a strong dose of politicised masculinity through blood sacrifice were additional elements injected into the developing collective memory that came to stand for the reasons why men gave their lives. Though the division later served at Cambrai, Messines, Passchendaele and other iconic battles, including not least the rest of the Somme, they became insignificant in comparison to the 1 July. The creation of Northern Ireland mapped new meanings onto an emerging collective memory articulated by Ulster Unionist representatives. In a speech given by

[31]Philip Orr, *Field of Bones: An Irish Division at Gallipoli,* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press).

[32]David Fitzpatrick, 'Historians and the commemoration of Irish conflicts, 1912-23', in J. Horne, ed., *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in war and revolution 1912-1923* (2013), pp. 126-133; Guy Beiner, 'Between Trauma and Triumphalism: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Crux of Deep Memory in Modern Ireland', *Journal of British Studies*, 46:2 (2007) pp. 366–89.

[33]B. Graham and P. Shirlow, 'The battle of the Somme in Ulster memory and identity', *Political Geography* (2002), 21, 7, pp. 881–904; Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry, eds, *Remembering 1916: the Easter Rising, the Somme and the politics of memory in Ireland,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

the Northern Ireland Prime Minister James Craig in a ceremony for the unveiling of a war memorial in Coleraine in November 1922, Craig declared that, 'those who have passed away have left behind a great message… to stand firm, and to give away none of Ulster's soil.'[34] Defence, protection, and the threat that what had been gained might be taken away, were new messages reflecting the present political context in which Craig found himself, with the Boundary Commission, appointed under the Anglo–Irish Treaty in December 1921, still waiting to precisely adjudicate on the new boundaries of Northern Ireland. These notions of defence, blood sacrifice, protection, and an enemy that threatened territorial integrity would intertwine in the new politics of the region and leave a long shadow on Northern Ireland's first Stormont administration.

But a preoccupation with the polarities between unionism and nationalism, between Ulster and the rest of Ireland, obscures evidence that does not align with this picture. As with national portrayals of recruitment, the picture of two groups contributing to the war effort for diametrically opposed reasons is also challenged by evidence at the local level. For instance, in largely unionist Coleraine, County Londonderry (1,496 Catholics/7,792 persons), the war memorial shows a bronze sculpture of a soldier with a rifle and a cape on a stone plinth.[35] Underneath him however is the female figure of Erin, holding a wreath in her outstretched hands, the symbol of the goddess of Ireland.[36] Including this symbol on a war memorial in largely unionist Coleraine in 1922 demonstrates that a symbolic attachment to Ireland was still important for those involved in its construction. It was seen as an appropriate symbol for honouring local Ulstermen, many of whom had fallen at the Somme. This connection with Ireland would later be forgotten, or considered less important, than the memory that 'unionist Ulster' effectively stood alone in the war. This is where history can diverge from memory; the urge to focus on changing meanings of the Somme and how it supported the evolution of Ulster unionism can help us in many ways, but it obscures the more complicated expressions of place, nationality, mythology, and territory rendered at the time.

This is not to say that later decades are unimportant or that the study of memory is somehow inferior to that of history. Indeed, the two are so intertwined that it can be difficult to separate one from the other, as we saw earlier in the case of the *Lusitania*, which became the reference point for comparing later attacks on shipping. The problem is amplified when the First World War is considered beyond the war years,

[34]*Coleraine Chronicle*, 18 November 1922.
[35]The National Archives of Ireland, 1911 census, available online at http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie. Accessed 5 July 2023.
[36]Available online https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/180049/. Accessed 5 July 2023.

as memory came to replace some of the histories of the conflict, generating its own perceptions of the past in turn. During the Troubles for instance, there was a proliferation of murals depicting the 1 July 1916 alongside the loyalist paramilitaries of the 1970s and 80s. Jonathan Evershed has demonstrated how the Orange Order and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) seized on the battle in both rhetoric and imagery.[37] The Somme became part of the politics of loyalism, taking on class dimensions that became part of the self-expression of loyalist identity. It also took on a new sense of purpose reconfigured to aid the paramilitaries during that conflict. It reminded them of their connection to the UVF of an earlier age and their resistance to Home Rule, replaced in the decades following Northern Ireland's creation with resistance to the Catholic 'South'. It embodied the politicised masculinity of the 'real men' of the Somme who the UVF members of the Troubles-era were being asked to emulate. The IRA bombing of the Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen in 1987 demonstrated how far the First World War had been condensed into the 1 July 1916. The successful purging of the more complicated history of the War, and condensing it into memories that fitted political imperatives, had a very real effect that is now the stuff of historical enquiry. Specific myths had come to replace the history of the War itself, creating their own histories as a result.

In 1967, F. X. Martin wrote of the amnesia that existed in the Republic of Ireland over Irish nationalist participation in the First World War. Emigration, the memory of new wars, different governments with different nation-building agendas, and the passage of time, had all contributed to the relative scarcity of public memory surrounding the war that Martin was trying to capture.[38] However, it has now been firmly disputed that there was collective amnesia towards the war in the decades following independence, even if by the late 1960s public memory of the conflict was more difficult to find. Images of mass remembrance in College Green in Dublin in 1924 and the South Mall in Cork in 1925 firmly throw out the myth of Irish nationalist 'apathy' towards the conflict, which for a time became entrenched in historical scholarship. The various meanings mapped into episodes of remembrance could vary greatly. The Great Southern and Western Railway Company at Heuston station in Dublin commemorates, for instance, 'those who laid down their lives for their country in the Great War.' In Cork, the memorial is dedicated to those who 'Fell in the Great War fighting for the freedom of small nations.' Here we can see particular interpretations of war service mapped into the memorialisation process. Patriotism, sacrifice, defence of Ireland, defence of European liberty, and a dialectic between the domestic and international were deemed worthy of remembrance – grand ideals for which

[37]Jonathan Evershed, *Ghosts of the Somme: Commemoration and Culture War in Northern Ireland* ,(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).
[38]Francis Xavier Martin, '1916 – Myth, Fact and Mystery', *Studia Hibernica* 7 (1967), pp. 7–126.

honoured men gave their lives. There is no mention on the memorials of getting a job, a desire to travel, to fulfil one's role as a man, to hold a gun, to help my friends, or any of the other mundane reasons that equally inspired enlistment across belligerent countries.[39] Just as memorialisation in the North came to squeeze out all of the other military engagements in which unionist Ulstermen participated and condense those reasons into particular politicised narratives, so too did memorialisation more generally narrow the picture, both North and South, as happened elsewhere in Europe.[40]

The First World War and the Irish Revolution

These various myths and memories have had their own impact on historical writing about the war years. Though historians have certainly helped our understanding of the multiple dynamics of the conflict, and in more recent years have reminded us that the war could not have happened had it not been for the involvement of various groups outside the military itself – groups in which women played important roles – there is a question to be asked here about how the war is viewed in relation to the revolutionary events it accompanied.[41]

The First World War still sits uneasily in the historiography of the Irish Revolution. It is dropped into the sequence of events that make up the revolutionary record as if it were happening in the background while the main events got underway. Whatever starting point one chooses, whether it be the political downfall of the Irish nationalist leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, fostering divisions within the constitutional Irish nationalist movement from the 1890s to the 1910s that were never healed; the radical networks fostered in the 1890s that spawned forms of thinking and action that inspired more revolutionary forms of Irish nationalism; the unionist opposition to Home Rule that crystallised in Ulster from 1905 and later, the Ulster Covenant and formation of the UVF; or the 1916 Easter Rising itself, it seems as if the story of Ireland's Revolution can be told without including the war. Therefore, do we need it?

[39]For further discussion of memory, see Gallagher, *Ireland*, pp. 177–184. For recruitment motivations, see p. 26ff.

[40]Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998).

[41]Some of the most important volumes include Gregory and Paseta, eds, *Ireland*; John Horne, ed., *Our War: Ireland and the Great War,* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2008); and scholarship including Paul Taylor, *Heroes or Traitors? Experiences of Southern Irish Soldiers Returning from the Great War, 1919–1939,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); and Fionnuala Walsh, *Irish Women and the Great War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

The problem with the exclusively *longue durée* approach is that it explicitly builds in the myth that events can happen outside of the vital contexts that made them. To tell the story of the Revolution without the First World War deepens the myth that it was always destined to come about in the manner that it did. Decisions, policies, people, and contingent events therefore do not matter. But how can one possibly understand the Revolution without the inclusion of these important things? The Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, which gave the military considerably more power to intervene in civilian life when military interests were concerned, was introduced because of the war. It was this very Act that allowed the military to behave in the manner that it did during Easter Week of 1916 when they responded heavily to the rebel takeover of iconic locations in Dublin, subsequently executing 15 men through military courts following the rebels' surrender. The placing of Home Rule on the statute book in September 1914 had the war built into its provision: to bring about Home Rule in the space of a year or when the war was over, with some as yet undecided amendment for Ulster. As this author has argued elsewhere, nationalist populations thus entered the war with a mixed sense of confidence that Home Rule was now a done deed. No former Act on the statute book had ever before been revoked, so there was little reason to assume that this case would be different. The jubilation expressed across nationalist Ireland helps explain the general settling into the war that can be seen in 1914 until at least early 1916. Naturally this confidence was shaken following the reinvigoration of the self-government question and worries over conscription. The conscription crisis of 1918 punctured many remaining notions that Home Rule would in fact happen, and hundreds of thousands of nationalists, led by the Catholic Church, protested the Military Service Act of 1918. Recruitment rallies became more than simply sites of enlistment, but instead became platforms through which different political opinions about Ireland's relationship with Westminster were aired. The sentiments expressed are revealing, demonstrating that there was no alignment on a preferred constitutional future for Ireland, nor was there agreement on how best men of military age should serve the Allies.[42] To negate the First World War in understanding the broad transfer of power from Home Rulers to republicans obscures the flux that existed in public opinion throughout 1918. And the war was central in demonstrating mixed attitudes towards Ireland's constitutional future.

Even the 1922 disbandment of the Irish regiments is part of the history of the Irish Revolution, yet it is almost never included. This is a missed opportunity, for Irish soldiers had served in the British Army for centuries and many even continued to do so long after partition. On 11 February 1922, it was announced by Sir Laming Worthington-Evans, the Secretary for War, that seven Irish regiments would be disbanded: six infantry and one cavalry. Most of the remaining regiments were not in Ireland at this time, serving as they were in various parts of the Empire or in the new

[42]Gallagher, *Ireland*, pp. 140–57.

conflicts that had emerged from the energies unleashed by world war. Disbandment would take place amidst the aftermath of the War of Independence and newspapers demonstrate the heated environment in which it occurred. In January, the Dáil voted to accept the Anglo–Irish Treaty by a margin of 64:57 votes. While there were many arguments for and against accepting the Treaty, Irish service in the British Army was also part of the debate. One of the major sticking points for anti–Treatyites was that Ireland, as a partitioned entity, would stay within the British Empire. It was therefore not a 32 County republic at all, negating what in their eyes had been achieved over the previous two years' campaign against the Crown Forces. Conversely, disbandment for some of those in favour of the Treaty was a reason why people should accept it. Alderman Richard Corish, Deputy for Wexford and a trade unionist, vocalised these sentiments:

> Now I think it was the second last speaker on the other side who talked of Egypt and India and he said if we were to associate with the British Empire that we would be responsible for the crushing of the Indians and Egyptians. Now I hold that under the present state of affairs we are far more responsible. Because we are sending the Connacht Rangers, Munster Fusiliers, the Dublin Fusiliers, the Leinsters and other Irish regiments into India and Egypt year after year to crush these people and we are doing this under the Republican Government… Under the Treaty all these regiments will be disbanded and no troops can be sent out of the country without the consent of the Irish Free State Government… And I believe as I said before that the proper thing for the moment for this Dáil to do is to Accept the Treaty (cheers).[43]

Corish's speech highlights how Irish service in the British Army was a symbolic problem for nationalists who supported anti–imperial movements elsewhere. But as Thomas Bartlett and Jeffery have argued, being against the symbolism of Irish military service did not strictly align with the support rendered for the men who served. Pride in Irish soldiery was vocalised during many historical conflicts even if there was mixed support for the symbolic army or the individual conflicts themselves.[44] Even Irish soldiers could hold seemingly contradictory positions. When 420 British auxiliaries left Galway on 10 February 1922, their departure heralded a confrontation of sorts with the Second Battalion of the Connaught Rangers. The battles over national allegiances through the singing of national anthems are normally seen to be a feature

[43]Dáil Éireann debate, Vol. T., No. 14, 'Debate on Treaty Resumed' Alderman Corish address, available at www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-01-06/3/. Accessed 5 July 2023.

[44]Bartlett and Jeffery, 'An Irish Military Tradition', p. 8. Also see Paul Townend, *The road to Home Rule: Anti-Imperialism and the Irish National Movement,* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

of the musical clashes between Trinity College Dublin, that old bastion of unionism, and University College Dublin, from which many leading nationalists emerged.[45] But musical rivalries were not the preserve of academic institutions and were voiced on this occasion. The departing Black and Tan Auxiliaries reportedly 'waved Union Jacks and sang "God Save the King" when they gathered on the train to leave Galway. The *Irish Independent* reported that the 'Connaughts responded with by waving Republican flags and shouting "Up De Valera".[46] The *Longford Leader* also reported the event and gave a slightly different account, reflecting the ongoing allegiances to pro and anti-Treaty divisions that had been fostered. It noted: '… the Connaughts responded by waving Republican flags and shouting "Up the Free State".'[47] Given the variety of political opinions within 1918–1922 Ireland, it is likely that what was actually sung was in the ears of the beholder. These examples help situate some Irish servicemen and their symbolic service within the British Empire in the wider national struggle that is the stuff of the Revolution.

However, there is remarkably little in the Irish press about disbandment in the months between February 1922, when it was first publicly announced, and June 1922, when the regimental colours were deposited at Windsor Castle. At first glance, this might suggest that Irish nationalists had moved on, much like later historians of the Revolution for whom the war and power transfers from the British to the new Irish authorities were deemed less consequential than the brewing divisions of civil war. Yet the lack of nationalist commentary presents other explanations, for the 1921 Treaty made provisions for the new Free State to raise its own army should it choose to do so. Disbandment was not the 'end' of Irish military service but opened up space for Irish soldiers to serve a new Irish administration. And many did precisely that. Paul Taylor estimated that 25–30,000 ex-servicemen were recruited into the new Irish army – the single greatest transfer of men to any one organisation.[48] Others like the infamous Tom Barry joined the IRA, while some even joined the Black and Tans and other British regiments. This messy picture of what happened to disbanded Irish soldiers gives us a sense of the political flux that spanned these islands in the last days of the first United Kingdom. It also helps us further understand how the resulting civil war was possible, as Irish soldiers were also participants in that conflict rather than idle passers-by.

[45]Ewan Morris, 'God save the king' versus "'The soldier's song'": the 1929 Trinity College national anthem dispute and the politics of the Irish Free State', *Irish Historical Studies*, XXXI,. 121 (1998), pp. 72–90.
[46]*Irish Independent*, 11 February 1922.
[47]*Longford Leader*, 11 March 1922.
[48]Taylor, *Heroes or Traitors?*, p. 127, n. 145.

Most of the protests against disbandment came from Southern Irish unionists and officers aggrieved by the loss of long-established regiments. Protests were framed within some of the major debates ongoing in 1922 Ireland and indeed in other parts of the Empire. One H. Vere Flint based at the Rectory in County Wicklow wrote to the local paper to champion reasons why they should be maintained: 'Will no one champion the cause of our Southern Regiments? The Irish Regiments – North and South – would form a link in the chain of National unity in the days to come.'[49] For Flint, protesting disbandment was a vehicle for airing grievances over partition, seeing the role of the Irish regiments as an enabler of future unity within the island. Other Irishmen, especially those more favourable to the Empire, dwelt on their imperial role and brainstormed ways to maintain them within imperial service by combining them with other Dominion regiments.[50] North of the border, disbandment also prompted new arguments framed around the evolving political situation. In March, the Armagh Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution appealing to the King, the Government, and the Army authorities to retain the Royal Irish Fusiliers. The Chamber argued that the Fusiliers had a strong connection with the six counties of Ulster, now in the shape of Northern Ireland, and deliberately attempted to distance the regiment from the three other Ulster counties that were now in the new 'South', Monaghan, Cavan, and Donegal, which had historically been within the Fusiliers' recruitment catchment area.[51] This provoked an interesting response from champions of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, which the Chamber proposed might be willing to lose one of its two regular battalions so that one Fusiliers battalion could be retained. Champions of the Inniskillings used the 'new Ulster' to suggest that their regiment was more worthy than that of the Fusiliers for full retention, precisely because of its 'Ulster' and 'Protestant' roots. Rear Admiral Thomas Adair, a British Royal Naval officer and Unionist MP for Glasgow Shettleston, said in the Commons:

> In a further question Admiral Adair asked the Secretary for War whether he was aware that the recruiting area of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, an Ulster and Protestant regiment since 1639, comprised three counties – namely, Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Londonderry, with a combined population of about 360,000, and that the recruiting area of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, a regiment originally raised in the South of Ireland, mainly Roman Catholic, consisted of only one county – namely, Armagh – with a population of about 120,000.[52]

[49] *Wicklow Newsletter*, 11 February 1922.
[50] Officer Commanding 1st Battalion Prince of Wales Leinster Regiment, Royal Canadians, *Freeman's Journal* 3 March 1922.
[51] *Belfast Newsletter*, 10 March 1922.
[52] Parl. Deb. (HC) 20 June 1922 vol. 155 cols 1008–9.

The Inniskillings therefore had a legitimacy that the Fusiliers lacked due to their historic recruitment from counties now in the new Ulster. The Chamber instead proposed that both battalions of the Inniskillings be kept and one of the Fusiliers be disbanded. In the end, Adair and the Inniskillings were unsuccessful. But these arguments demonstrate how the cultivation of Ulster as a six-county, Protestant entity was already underway only one year after Northern Ireland's creation, cutting off those unionists who now lay outside its borders, not to mention the Catholics within or outside them who had equally helped staff these historic regiments. And such myths were fed by supportive unionists across the UK, in this case, in Scotland. The myth that Ulster was organically Protestant and comprised of the six counties helps us better understand the Northern Ireland that came to pass and played on some of the new associations current in the region that the memory of the Somme would further inculcate.

Conclusion

To research Ireland and the First World War is to recognise that myth and memory are crucial parts of its history. In several cases, they have come to substitute the history of the war itself. This is not a call to arms to defend history from its related cousins, and this article has demonstrated that such a task might well be out of reach given the radically different lenses adopted by historians through which the conflict has been analysed and conclusions have been reached. Indeed, the adoption, evolution and perpetuation of myths and memories have become a part of Ireland's history of the Great War. We should, however, be wary of simply accepting them and substituting them for history, as it leads to crucial omissions and misinterpretations that affect historical understanding. Instead, a critical appreciation for how, when, and why history diverges from the events played out at the time, and for some of the principles guiding historical enquiry, is necessary for a fuller understanding of the history of the Irish in the twentieth century – and how we as historians continue to write that history today.