Honouring the Mayo men who died on the battlefields of Europe and beyond has become a labour of love for Michael Feeney.

Mayo News – Wednesday September 14 2005

MORE than a thousand young men fro m Co Mayo were killed in action in World War 1. They fought in the uniforms of America, Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. Flung into the breach, they fell in the battlefields of Austria and Belgium and France and Turkey, in Palestine and Africa and Mesopotamia. Some, still in their teens, were cut down on the scorched plains of Flanders and Ypres, and in the stinking trenches of Gallipoli and The Somme. In those killing fields some died instantly, others agonisingly, their screams muted by the exploding shells of enemy artillery. They were someone's husband, someone's son, fighting a savage war in appalling conditions. For them, few words of sorrow were ever publicly expressed. No memorial to their bravery was erected. They were the forgotten heroes of an horrific war, unsung, unloved, anonymous...airbrushed out of history

Recurring visions of those slain men of Mayo haunted Michael Feeney. From his mother he had learned of his grandfather's death in the Great War. Patrick Feeney was killed in action in France on July 22,1915. Michael's mother had in her possession Patrick's medals together with the letter from the War Office conveying the news of his death. Other people added to Michael's curiosity. Some who had survived the war lived around him in Castlebar...John Roche, Peter O'Malley, Jimmy Mee, Paddy Horkan, Dan Callaghan. As a youngster he listened to Dan relating his exploits in France, the conditions in which he fought, the terror, the hardship, the heroism, the cruelty. But that was faraway, another era, another country's war...and too few wanted to know.

"I knew my grandfather was killed, and wondered how many more from Mayo had met a similar fate. If there was nothing about his death, how many more were forgotten? I searched the library and found nothing about those killed. I learned a lot about the war but nothing about Mayo's involvement in it," says Michael. His interest deepened and his research intensified. In the Library he scanned the local newspapers. Protestant churches, many of them now dilapidated, were a significant source of reference. Plaques erected inside the buildings bore the names of members of those churches killed in the war. Unlike other countries, no memorial was ever erected to those men here. "I have travelled extensively to different countries, and no matter what town or village you entered there was a war memorial. There might be only two names on it, but it was a decent memorial. And rightly so, for young men who laid down their lives. I always believed there should be something in each county by which to remember these men."

As news of Michael's project spread relatives of men who fought and died on the front made contact. By 1999 he had gathered the names of 370 Mayo men killed in that savage conflict. In November of that year Michael arranged with Canon Curran the first ever remembrance Mass for all of those killed. It coincided with the anniversary of the Armistice on November 11, 1918. Unknown to him PJ Clarke had embarked on a similar project in Ballina. They joined forces, combined their research, took days off

work to peruse records in University College Galway, and soon a dossier of the dead was built up...enough to convince them to write a book about this tragic era in Irish history. The book will contain the names of over a thousand who lost their lives, stories surrounding their deaths, where they enlisted and where they fell. Tales and thoughts of survivors, and many other articles about the war will also be included:
From Castlebar alone they counted 120 killed. "I do not think there is a village in Mayo that has not lost men in the first World War. Nobody had known anything about these men. We now have over 1,000 names collected." Who will have remembered Pvt Thomas McGinn of the1st BnGrenadier Guards, aged 31, who died at the Somme on September 13, 1916, son of James and Mary McGinn, Ballinamarogue, Islandeady, Castlebar? Or his brother Lance Corporal Michael McGinn, killed December10, 1915 at Salonika? Or Martin McCarthy, Pvt 2nd Batt Scotts Guards No 8357, who enlisted in Glasgow, was born and resided in Westport, brother of Mrs. Bridget Lovelle, Glasgow, age 24whenkilled in action on the May 16,1915, at France and Flanders?

Until now, no one remembered. Some served with the Australian, Canadian, American and New Zealand armies. But the vast majority joined the British Army... regiments like The Irish Guards, the Leinster Regiment , the Irish Fusiliers, the Royal Munster Fusiliers and the Connaught Rangers. Many joined from their work places in Britain. On one night in Tyneside alone, 500 Irishmen enlisted. Poverty forced many to join. There was no work for young men and in those straitened conditions Army pay helped families to survive. Some joined for the excitement, lured to the front by the promise of military glory and adventure. In the rat-infested trenches they were to find glory in short supply. Irishmen were urged by John Redmond leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party to enlist in the mistaken belief that Home Rule would be established in Ireland. The church had an input by calling on young men to defend Catholic Belgium from the German invasion. Guilt, inspired by seminal advertising in the local newspapers spurred others: "IF YOU ARE AN IRISHMAN YOUR PLACE IS WITH YOUR CHUMS," screamed one of the adverts;

"WHEN ARE THE OTHER BOYS COMING" ran another. "IS YOUR BEST BOY WEARING KHAKI?" Some of those who joined gave incorrect addresses. Others enlisted under assumed names, in case their families found out they had joined the British Army. Many Mayo people were unaware their relatives, who had emigrated before the outbreak of War, were killed in the conflict. They did not correspond and no one knew what became of them. Those who enlisted in Ireland were considered heroes leaving for the front. Crowds cheered their departure and town bands led their march to railway stations. The execution of the 1916 Leaders by the British soured the mood of Irish people at home, however. War heroism was now confined to events in Ireland.

The feats of Michael Collins and the IRA obscured the events of the Great War. Young men dying in foreign fields were spared no thought. No address of welcome greeted those fortunate to survive when they returned home. They lived out their lives as if nothing had happened. The new book, entitled Mayo Comrades of the Great War, will ensure they are remembered. The publication is being partly funded by the County Library, and Michael Feeney is loud in his praise for the help and encouragement he and PJ Clarke have received from county librarian Austin Vaughan and assistant Librarian Ivor Hamrock. The subsidy will cover less than half the printing costs, and the editors are hoping for sponsorship for the rest. At the Menin

Gate memorial at the entrance to the Belgian town of Ypres are engraved the names of Mayo men among thousands who fell in the War, and whose bodies were not recovered... known only to God. Each night of the year at 8pm thousands of people gather from different countries at the Gate where wreaths are laid and an oration read by a visiting guest. On a recent visit to the memorial, Michael Downes of Westport, Johnny Finnerty, Castlebar and Michael Feeney laid a wreath in the Mayo colours at the memorial to honour the Mayo men who gave their lives in the fields around Ypres. The oration was given by PJ Clarke, and the Last Post sounded by the Ypres Firebrigade. Eighteen of his colleagues accompanied Michael on the trip, and each was touched by the ceremony and the honours rendered to those who died. It was an emotional experience for a group whose knowledge of the War was scant.

People from Mayo and the West ought to take time off to go there, to saunter through those cemeteries, see the names for themselves, says Michael Feeney. Educational tours from Mayo to these part s should be organised by schools and historical societies. Local authorities should also be taking a greater interest in remembering those people as part of the history of their towns. Michael, PJ Clarke and their committee are doing their bit to rescue the memory of those men. In addition to the forthcoming publication of their book they are also planning a Peace Park Garden of Remembrance in Castlebar dedicated to all those Mayo people who gave their lives in the cause of world peace. In addition to those who died in the two World Wars, those who were killed in Korea, Vietnam, the Spanish Civil War and on UN duty. Ernie Sweeney brought the plot - close to the Old Cemetery - to their notice. Gerry Casey donated portion of the ground to them and the County Council the remainder, and the co-operation they received from Peter Gill and Ray Norton for the project has been welcomed.

An impressive design for the memorial has been drawn up by Michael Walsh, a retired army officer, and architect, from Balla, free of charge. How elaborate the finished monument will be depends on what amount of grant aid is made available...and the amount funds they themselves can raise. It is intended to have small sections of the park dedicated to the countries in which Mayo men fought. Michael has been in touch with the ambassador s of those countries and the response is encouraging. Belgium has already promised support. There will also be a parade area, walks and seats. A planning application is now being drawn up for the Peace Park, and the council has promised to maintain it when it is open to the public. The costs are huge, and there has been no response so far from politicians with whom Michael has been in touch about grants. Two of all the Mayo associations have responded positively, those in London and Chicago. But more help is needed if a memorial worthy of the generosity of those Mayo men who gave their lives for world freedom is to be erected.