THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE MAYO PEACE PARK

To say that the construction of the Mayo Peace Park / War Memorial is significant would be a gross understatement. This memorial will be as significant if not more so than the memorial in Island Bridge in Dublin which was completed in the 1930's, allowed to go into ruin, and reopened in 2000.

It is a shame, a deep shame that our dead were forgotten but thankfully they will now be remembered. The memorial in Castlebar will pay tribute to all of Mayo's war dead and will ensure that they are never forgotten. Michael Feeney's determination, energy and true grit has ensured this and his Herculean effort is an example to Mayo and Ireland of what true patriotism is. His name should also be forever etched on this memorial.

In 1912, when the 3rd Home Rule Bill was introduced, Unionists reacted and formed the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to resist it. Weapons were openly imported from Germany without any resistance from the authorities. Tens of thousands of Unionists flocked to its ranks ready to resist the Bills democratic implementation. In order to counteract this movement the National Volunteers were formed and 120,000 people joined this force. A small amount of weapons were smuggled in (again from Germany), and contrast to the UVF situation, the authorities actively resisted their import.

At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 the Home Rule Bill was put on hold for the duration of the war. The UVF quickly became absorbed into the British Army, the movement desperately anxious to demonstrate its loyalty to Britain in time of danger and anxious to be rewarded with the shelving of Home Rule at war's end. The 36th (Ulster) Division was formed and it fought with bravery and distinction and is rightly remembered with pride.

The National Volunteers were encouraged by Nationalist politicians to also enlist. They were told that if Ireland supported Britain in her hour of need that her loyalty would be rewarded at war's end by the implementation of the Home Rule Bill. Nationalists were encouraged to enlist with cries of "Fight for the Freedom of Small Nations" and "Poor Little Catholic Belgium". People from every background, creed and class flocked to the Colours. Hardly a family in Ireland was unaffected with young men being exhorted to do the right thing by their families, girlfriend, politicians and clergy. 30,000 Irish Volunteers enlisted in addition to the scores of thousands of men who were not members of this organisation. The 16th (Irish Division) was formed in addition to the already existing 10th Division. They embarked for the battlefields cheered on by their politicians, their family and their countrymen, proud to do their duty for Ireland and for the cause of Britain and the Allies. Like the 36th (Ulster Division) they marched to their embarking stations cheered on by exited crowds of Union flag waving citizens. They fought with honour and distinction and died also in their thousands. It is estimated that in all 230,000 Irishmen fought during the Great War.

Meanwhile, a minority group of the National Volunteers thought that no matter what happened, no matter what sacrifices were made, Britain would bow to the demands of

the UVF and to the minority that did not support Home Rule and that would never achieve its freedom without the force of arms. This group called itself the Irish Volunteers. Given Britain's record in these matters it was not an unreasonable assumption. They reckoned that "England's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity". A Rising was planned by a minority group within the Irish Volunteers, without the leadership's knowledge and again with German assistance. In 1916 this Rising took place, mainly in Dublin. A Republic was proclaimed and eventually the fighting was subdued. Many of the British troops in action in Dublin were in fact Irish soldiers from Irish Regiments. It was not a popular rising and, in general, people were outraged that it happened.

As the captured prisoners were being marched from their place of surrender they were attacked by Dublin mobs and were protected by their British Army escorts. Dublin was in ruins, many people had lost their jobs as s result, not to mention the casualties inflicted. Many citizens, whose husbands, brothers and sons were fighting in the trenches for "The Freedom of Small Nations" and "Poor Little Catholic Belgium", felt that they had been betrayed by the people who initiated and took part in the Rising. The insurgents were heckled, spat on and attacked as they were marched off to internment camps in Britain.

The British Government reacted harshly. The leaders of the Rising were Court-martialled and death sentences were imposed. However the hand of justice was not even. Pádraig Pearse, the leader of the Rising was executed as was his brother Willie whose offence was that he was a brother. The badly injured James Connelly, Trade Unionist and leader of the Irish Citizen Army was executed while tied to a support. These incidents, in addition to the lengthy period during which the executions took place, did nothing for public relations or hearts and minds.

This situation in fact after a while caused people to reassess what happened. After a while grudging support was given to the Rising. People reckoned on reflection that in fact it was a brave effort and respect for the participants grew. This support continued to grow in light of the lengthy detention of thousands of people rounded up and interned in the wake of the Rising. Many people, who had nothing to do with the Rising had also been arrested and interned in camps in Britain.

When eventually the remaining prisoners were released, they came back to tumultuous receptions. Flag-waving crowds (this time the Irish tricolour) cheered them home as patriots to be honoured and returning heroes. The supply of Irish recruits to the British Army dropped off and the British Government decided that conscription was the answer. It must be underlined here that the supply of recruits from the predominantly Unionist region of Ulster also plunged. This was very much attributable to the massive casualties suffered during the Somme battles. The Conscription Act was passed in Parliament (albeit was never enforced). This served to increase hostility towards Britain and support for Home Rule and independence.

The Conscription Act was resisted strongly by Nationalist leaders, primarily Sinn Féin and by the Catholic Church. When a General Election was called in 1918 Sinn Fein candidates swept the board. The old Nationalist Home Rule Party was wiped out. The majority of Irish people voted for an independent Irish Republic. In 1919 the duly democratically elected Dáil convened in the Mansion House in Dublin. A Declaration

of Independence was announced. On that day also, and without authorisation, two Royal Irish Constabulary policemen were shot dead while carrying out their duties in a quarry at Soloheadbeg in County Tipperary.

The British Government declared the Dáil to be illegal and so war began. The RIC bore the brunt of the attacks initially and the number of resignations from the force increased significantly. The British Government then sought to bolster the RIC. The new recruits were in the main former British soldiers who had come home from the trenches to the dole queues, and not to 'a land fit for heroes' as had been promised them. In the British Government's haste to send them to Ireland they were issued with a combination of dark police uniform and khaki military uniform, hence the sobriquet "Black and Tans". These men who little else other than life in combat and the trauma of the Great War, were given good pay and a free rein in Ireland. 19% of this force was Irish. The Tans were for the main undisciplined and a combination of money, alcohol and the freedom to terrorise as they pleased ensured the war was ratcheted up to a very bitter level. The British Government then introduced an additional force to act independently of the RIC. The Auxiliary Division RIC or ADRIC, more commonly referred to as "The Auxies" was composed of former British commissioned officers (10% of whom were Irish) and had an even freer hand than the tans (and twice the pay). They were designed to be a mobile counter insurgency force operating at Company strength and they proved to be a very determined and formidable enemy. However, they were also ill disciplined Brigadier General Crozier, the GOC ADRIC eventually resigned, as he could not stand over their conduct.

War continued until a truce was called in 1921 and a Treaty was signed in 1922 giving Free State status to 26 counties to be known as "The Irish Free State" and a new state of "Northern Ireland" to be established in the remaining 6 counties. The Free State eventually became an independent Republic in 1949.

But what of the soldiers who came home from the Great War? What happened to the survivors? In the area that was to become Northern Ireland the troops were rightly welcomed home. They were lauded as heroes and never forgotten. The blood spilled on behalf of the Allies seeped into the consciousness of every Loyalist and Unionist in Ireland and they are correctly very much remembered to this day. Northern Ireland takes a tremendous pride in the 36th (Ulster) Division and commemorates them every year in the very powerful, evocative and emotions words;

"They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them"

And what of the 16th (Irish) Division and the 10th Division? What happened to those survivors? They can be compared to American soldiers returning from Vietnam over 50 years later. The political climate had changed, changed utterly. The returning soldiers were no longer welcome (with of course, some exceptions). No cheering crowds, no speeches of welcome, hostility and bitterness were the order of the day. Those Irishmen who gave their all, instead of returning home to a land fit for heroes, came home to suspicion and danger. The cheering crowds that waved them out in 1914, 1915 and 1916 now distrusted them as they had fought for "Britain". Many, whose idealism and belief in the freedom of small nations continued, brought their

expertise with them and joined the old Irish Republican Army. Some famous soldiers come to mind such as Major General Emmet Dalton, devoted friend of General Michael Collins, who as a Royal Dublin Fusilier Captain was decorated with the Military Cross in Buckingham Palace. Commandant General Tom Barry who as a sergeant in the Royal Artillery saw service in Mesopotamia, now Iraq. Tom Barry, who wiped out an Auxie patrol in Kilmichael, Co. Cork was later to become an enemy of Collins, but graciously unveiled a monument to him in 1966 at Sam's Cross, West Cork. Many less famous soldiers faded away like many old soldiers do.

But what of the tens of thousands of the unmentioned? Because of the bitterness and savagery of the War of Independence, the British uniform became a symbol of hatred and mistrust. Many Great War veterans were loyal to the army they served in the Great War and paid the ultimate price for it. Many were treated as outcasts in their own country. The majority kept their heads down in the new Ireland. Having survived the horrors of the Great War, they suffered in silence. No commemorative parades, no regimental reunions, no sharing of trauma and grief, no healing therapy. I remember as a boy seeing men in small contraptions, chain-wheeled by hand (many had no legs) and asking whom they were. I was told that they were British soldiers from the War. I thought no more of it at the time, as after all I mistakenly thought; they were not Irish soldiers who had fought for Ireland. They eventually went to their graves in silence remembered only by their families and disappearing comrades. Not a word of thanks, not a sound, they disappeared to their eternal award like old soldiers do. My Grandfather, whom I remember, served in the Boer War. I discovered this by chance 98 years after the event! Nobody pretended to know, if they indeed knew.

It was as if all these Irish soldiers never existed. And yet how many families in the Republic did not have someone who served in the British Army? Wellington's Peninsular Army was majority Irish. The 19th Century British Army was 40% Irish for many years. The 20th Century British Army had massive Irish troop numbers in both world wars and the tradition continues into the 21st Century. We are reminded of this when we remember Lance Corporal Ian Malone RIP, Irish Guards, who lost his life in Iraq. His funeral in Dublin did so much at so many levels for reconciliation in these islands. The legacy of the War of Independence, the Civil War and the subsequent *head in the sand* isolationist policies, where defence was never a priority and defence budgets constituted miserable tokenism, ensured that matters military were kept firmly in the background. Defence matters (other than the WW2 period which will not be addressed here) did not rate serious mention in the Dáil in general. The Irish soldiers who gave their all, as is their norm, in the Great War were not mentioned much until 1966 when the then Taoiseach and 1916 veteran Sean Lemass, paid them public tribute. He called on the people of Ireland to acknowledge the sacrifices that they had made. He admitted that he had been guilty of wrong thinking and that they had enlisted for the highest of ideals. His call fell on deaf ears.

Finally, towards the end of the 20th Century, things began to change. A genuine breath of fresh political air swept across the country. The self imposed (or government imposed) isolationist wagon circle was broken. We came into the EU. Society in general was sickened by the continuing violence in Northern Ireland. A more free and tolerant society emerged in the Republic and new horizons dawned. People in these islands began to question the one sided versions of history that we all had been fed.

The realisation of the sacrifices made by the WW1 Irish soldiers finally began to dawn. The dreadful injustices that the people of Ireland visited upon them and their families began to be realised. Regimental associations, to preserve the memories began to spring up. First with the Munsters and then the Dubs, followed by the Connaughts and the Leinsters. These and other ancient and proud Irish regiments were disbanded in 1922, their Colours hanging ever since in Windsor Castle in England. Many soldiers on disbandment reckoned that they would continue soldiering in the new National Army of the Free State. They brought their expertise, discipline and tradition with them to the new fledgling army, fought in the Civil War and were again disbanded with the massive strength reductions in 1924.

Problems continue to remain. The Unionist Community, whilst remembering the deeds of the 36th (Ulster) Division do not in general remember the I6th (Irish) Division or the 10th Division. The uninformed might be inclined to think that only Unionist troops fought at the Somme or in WW1. The Poppy, which is an emblem of remembrance for all troops, and from which the proceeds go to the charitable relief of veterans who are disabled or who fell on hard times, has become a “British” symbol. This interpretation is not discouraged by the unionist community in general. It is shameful that this symbol has turned into a political football. The memories of those who sacrificed life and limb should not be treated in this way. It is gravely wrong. In the Republic was not worn for many years and still is not worn by 95% of the population. It is seen as in some way as being treacherous, as supporting Britain and her soldiers and those who fought against us in 1919-1921. This thinking is just as wrong and just as shameful. The funds collected by the sale of Poppies in the Republic go to the charitable relief of veterans of the British Forces living in the Republic, the vast majority of them Irish, Irish soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought against fascism and tyranny.

It is time to change our collective thinking on this island. The Somme was not a Unionist battle, the Great War was not a Unionist war. Irishmen- Unionists and Nationalists, Catholic, Protestant and dissenter- fought and spilled their life’s blood in the Allied cause, the British cause, the Irish cause and a myriad of other causes. Whatever the cause, they fought for you and me, for your children and my children, for your parents and your parent’s parents. A whole generation was wiped out. As regards the Republic, never in the annals of human history did a nation intentionally and deliberately and maliciously write out of history a generation of soldiers that fought and gave their all for them. History is written by the victors, but rarely if ever have victors betrayed their own in such a manner. We ought to hang our head in shame and beg forgiveness from these soldiers and their families and their descendents.

As regards the future we, all of us on this island are waking up. History is what happened. We may not like some of it, it might suit our notions, but happen it did. Britain, our nearest neighbour, our biggest trading partner, our biggest contributor to tourism and our biggest refuge for employment for generations before and after independence did not behave well or cover itself in glory in Ireland. It was a long and sad episode. We have our differences and will continue to have, but like it or not, we have a deep and shared tradition and military tradition on this island and in these islands. We have much in common. We are proud and cosmopolitan, independent and

unafraid in the corridors of Brussels and on the street of Sydney, London and New York. We have to finish getting over our post-colonial angst and shedding of our inferiority complex. We have to stand back and see how our history was manipulated and how we were manipulated with it.

It is time to look at the facts. We are progressing and maturing as a nation, able to see the bigger picture. The proof of this is manifested in this War Memorial / Peace Park. The recognition of our fallen was not politically acceptable up to very recent years, strange and all as this statement may seem. A memorial like this would have been unheard of, and if it was heard of a myriad of people would find valid and vociferous reasons to object to it and people would have their lives put on the line.

Michael Feeney has shown true patriotism and guts by conceiving this project and unbelievable determination by carrying it through. He deserves every support and appreciation. Now, in Mayo, our fallen will be remembered. The list of the fallen can also be found in the amazing book “Mayo comrades of the Great War” that Michael co-authored with P.J. Clarke. These fallen are our fallen and will be remembered now. A terrible injustice is being put right at last. We must never forget. We will remember!

Captain Donal Buckley MA (Hist)
Irish Army (Retired)
Military Heritage Tours.