

A Brave Castlebar Soldier

Many local people will recall John "Botha" Roach, who lived at McHale Road, Castlebar. He was one of the town's great characters, a strict disciplinarian with a distinct military bearing.

In later years he walked with the aid of a stick and as youngsters we were in awe of him as he kept the queues at the County Cinema in Spencer Street in order. No one stepped out of line when "Botha" was in charge.

In his younger days he was a fine cut of a man, tall and handsome, and he was popularly known as "Botha," a nickname given to him after General Botha, one of the central figures in the Boer War at the turn of the century.

John Roach served with distinction in World War I and showed gallantry and bravery far beyond the call of duty. His bravery in the face of enemy fire was recognised when he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1918.

The presentation made by Colonel Meldon, R.M.

Also present at the ceremony, which was held on the steps of the Courthouse, Castlebar, were County Court Judge Doyle, K.C.; A. C. Larminie, J.P., and M. Horan, J. P.

A company of soldiers from Castlebar Military Barracks were in attendance as well as members of Comrades of the Great War and hundreds of local people.

Making the presentation, Colonel Meldon said he had been asked to present a medal for distinguished conduct on the field to Private John Roach, late of the Connaught Rangers. It was always a pleasure for him to pay tribute to a fellow soldier for gallantry on the field. Private Roach had been an outstanding soldier, extremely brave in the face of enemy fire and had shown great resolve and commitment.

The particular act of bravery by Private Roach was set out in the "London Gazette" of the 29th August, 1917:

"Private John Roach, Connaught Rangers, awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for conspicuous gallantry in action. When all the bombs of his party were expended and the bomb carrier killed, he volunteered to go back for more bombs. He brought these up across the open under heavy fire. On finding that the enemy had reoccupied part of the trench, he reorganised fresh bombing parties on his own initiative and proceeded to attack it. He only retired when ordered by his superior officer."

Colonel Meldon said it had been a most gallant act by a soldier who had put his life at risk so that others could be saved.

Mr. A. C. Larminie said he had known John Roach and his family for many years, and they were decent, hardworking people.

Many other Castlebar people served with distinction in the first World War. Most of them joined for economic reasons; others for a sense of adventure. Many endured great suffering, particularly from the after-effects of gassing. Their bravery can never be doubt in what they regarded as a just cause. Thank God we have lived to see the day when those who lost their lives in all wars are now being officially recognised and remembered.

The most amazing thing about this story is that Pte John Roach, who was undoubtedly a brave world war hero, has lain in an unmarked grave in Castlebar old cemetery, since he died at a relatively advanced age. The actual grave site was recently located and identified by local historian Mr Ernie Sweeney, who is also a leading member of the Mayo Peace Park development committee, since that time a number of relatives have now come forward to finally erect a suitable headstone

The Mayo Peace Park committee are actively engaged with this project . working in whatever way they can to assist , they are also assisting with the erection of U.S .Military headstones on the graves of the Rev, Fr, Patrick Gallagher O.S.A. from Errew, Castlebar, who was a chaplain to the American forces in world war one and whose body was repatriated to Ireland after the war and buried in Elm Hall Cemetary , Belcarra, once again in an unmarked grave , the U.S. Authorities have now sent on a proper military headstone for Fr Gallaghers Grave and also for the grave of Private Martin Cooney from Achill, who was also in an unmarked grave in Kildownet Cemetary

The man most responsible for obtaining the American headstones is a great friend of Mayo a man by the name of Pat Gorman from Dixon , in the United States, Pat has put in a huge effort with the Mayo Peace Park Chairman Mr Michael Feeney to have this very unfair and sad affair put right , and to give honour and respect to those men who fought and died in that terrible world war.

Pat Gorman has visited Castlebar and Mayo on a number of occasions and he has hosted and worked with many Officials of Mayo County Council and Castlebar Town Council when they have visited his home town of Dixon. I believe that Pat Gorman deserves to be awarded some civic recognition for his unstinting work and efforts.

Michael Feeney October 2007