

Mayo Peace Park to remember county casualties of every war

by Fiona McGarry

“Ballina lost more men to the conflict in World War I, per head of population, than any other town in the British Isles. And the most shocking thing about it, is that they were all forgotten about when our history was written, and we never learned about them in school.”

Michael Feeney’s voice shakes with emotion as he recounts just one of the moving statistics he has uncovered about the role of Mayo men and women in the great wars of Europe. The Milebush man has certainly played his part in honouring and commemorating Mayo’s war dead. Together with Ballina native PJ Clarke, Michael has produced the widely acclaimed *Mayo Comrades of the Great War, 1914-1919*. Now, standing on the site of the new Mayo Peace Park, on the Lower Westport Road in Castlebar, Michael is on the verge of realising the second part of a lifelong dream. The site borders the oldest and newest parts of Castlebar; nestling between the old graveyard and Casey’s Centra. With a donation of lands from the Mayo County Council and businessman Gerry Casey, and the signing of contracts last month, the diggers are on site and a permanent memorial to all Mayo people who died in war is becoming a reality.

Family ties

According to Michael’s research more than 1,000 Mayo men died in World War I alone. Men and women from the county are also among the casualties of WWII, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnamese and Korean wars, and UN tours of duty. Michael, originally from McHale Road in Castlebar, has always had good reason for his interest in Mayo’s part in the world wars. “I’m from McHale Road originally. My grandfather was killed in World War I. He was 34. We had neighbours who were also involved in that war. A lot of local families would have had people that were lost, grandfathers, uncles, whatever. As well as that, there were families who had lost their parents — who died within ten years of the war, as a result of injuries or gassing, or whatever. It was a big situation but it wasn’t learned in school. It wasn’t considered proper to talk about it. They were never commemorated. There wasn’t a ribbon to them.”

Accepting that Irish people fought on the side of the British Empire was too difficult when the country was struggling to break away from the imperial power, Michael believes. The fact that the 1916 Rising happened in the heart of WWI was also a critical factor. “The young Mayo men who joined up were paraded to the train stations to go to war. The bands lead them to it.

Everyone was in favour, the Church, the State. Holy water was thrown on them, but they came back to a different country. It was totally changed after 1916.” Those who joined the war effort also did so for a variety of reasons. “Poverty was the biggest one,” Michael says. “They didn’t have much work, and their parents would have a pension if they were killed. Some went for adventure. Others were career soldiers. But an awful lot of them too were motivated by the highest ideals. They went to war thinking they were fighting for the freedom of small nations.”

The research carried out by Michael Feeney and PJ Clarke in identifying those who fought and died was as painstaking as it was ground-breaking. “We searched every page of every local paper from 1913 to 1921. We did it week after week, took time off work. We went to the special collections unit at the library of NUI, Galway. We got loads of resources from the regiments of the British Army. The men of Mayo were in more than just the British Army, they were in the Canadian services, the American services, the Australian, New Zealand’s, and the South African — Mayo men fighting in the allied armies.”

Castlebar war heroes

The stories unearthed by Michael and PJ are moving, inspiring, and always complex. One of the most intriguing is that of Castlebar-man Paddy Horkan who was decorated by the British Army for his services as a stretcher-bearer in WWI. He survived the war, demonstrating outstanding bravery, then came home and then joined the Free State Army, fighting against the British. “Paddy Horkan was in the Worcestershire Regiment in World War I. He was decorated three times for pulling in bodies from No Man’s Land. Now he came home and he joined the IRA, and fought against the British. The family has a full set of medals from the British for bravery. Then he fought with the IRA against them, and got a full set of medals for fighting against them. That was the complex history we had at the time. It has changed, there’s a great awakening in the understanding of history.”

As well as thoroughly researching all Irish and international records, Michael Feeney began a series of commemorative events for the county’s war dead. The flood-gates on a hidden aspect of our history suddenly opened. “In 1999 when I organised the first Mass. The families came and it was amazing to see this outpouring of joy. I was getting phone calls every day with peoples’ memories. People told me this was the first time there was a public acknowledgement of their existence,” Michael

says. "Kathleen Collins from Castlebar was the first person to give me a donation to start the park off — in memory of her father. It's that kind of generosity that has got this started. Another woman in New York sent me \$1,000 to honour her father who fought in the Second World War as part of the American Forces."

Funding efforts

Together with treasurer Henry Moroney and PRO Ernie Sweeney, Michael has brought the peace park project to within months of completion, but Government funding and support is needed. "We have in the region of about €70,000. This is all local donations from Mayo County Council, Castlebar Town Council, the parish council, and the rotary club. Different people around the town have made donations out of the blue. Michael Walshe from Balla drew up the plans and gave his services for nothing. We deeply appreciate his work. All of the local support is great, but we really have to get Government aid to do a first class job with the park. We have a few definite lines, and we are hoping that the politicians will, this year, get the finger out and help us," Michael says. "If we got the proper Government aid we could maybe think about getting the names of the dead inscribed. That kind of work is very intricate and it's huge money."

Mayo Peace Park has already attracted major international attention, with the Irish-American community expressing an interest in backing the project. In May the Belgian ambassador to Ireland will visit the park site to express the gratitude of his government for Mayo's role in its war efforts. "During World War One, a Belgian priest, Fr Bohy, fled to Ireland and spent his time going from Glenisland to Castlebar to Crossmolina. In every town in Mayo, there was a Belgian aid relief fund. They were running hops and whist drives to send money to aid the Belgians. Families came from Belgium to Mayo and they were put up here, Belgian soldiers were rehabilitated in Mayo. This too will now be remembered," Michael says.

"World War I was a terrible war, and it is terrible to think that Mayo's dead were forgotten. What waste of life. This peace park will honour their lives, and make sure they are remembered for generations to come."