

# The price of peace

## By Fiona McGarry

On a summer night in 1944, a young Mayo woman was forced to make a choice between fleeing a German bomb attack and standing by 11 patients in the London hospital where she worked as a nurse.

Bridget Quinn was just 25 when she died in the bombing of the Hospital Nervous Diseases in Regent's Park. Ten years later the hospital was rebuilt and a ward was named after the young Tourmakeady native who had refused to desert her patients in the face of certain death. A plaque was unveiled in memory of Bridget and two of her colleagues so that, in the words of the Mayor of Westminster Alderman Patrick Stirling, "her sacrifice will be remembered for all time".

Mayo's war dead were not so well commemorated in their own country. In the struggle for national identity, the Irish who died serving the British Empire did not quite fit into the history books. It was not until we achieved some kind of security and confidence in our nationhood that the hundreds who gave their lives in the great European wars came under the spotlight.

Frank McGuinness, in his 1985 play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, was among the first to lift the lid on the then unpalatable truths that Irish men fought for Britain, motivated by the highest ideals and by economic imperatives. In Mayo it took years of work by PJ Clarke and Michael Feeney to give names to the forgotten dead, and a release to the lingering grief of generations of surviving relatives. Through the very act of naming the 1,053 Mayo people who died in World War One, *Mayo Comrades of the Great War* has done a huge service to everyone in this county. We hope never to know the horror of armed conflict, but if we do not remember our history, we could be doomed to repeat it.

That is why the Mayo Peace Park will be a monument to the future as well as the past. The careful design by Michael Walshe of Balla has created a fitting memorial to the Mayo men and women who died in both world wars, the Spanish Civil War, the conflicts in Vietnam and Korea, and on UN peace-keeping duties. It is a dignified reminder of the bravery of soldiers, and the obscene waste of life in every war. The park is a monument to a peace, which given our own country's history we must never take for granted.

Mayo Peace Park is also a tribute to individual perseverance and community action. Michael Feeney has been pursuing the project with the relentless energy of someone who understands that his goal is a landmark in history. Together with the committee treasurer Henry Moroney and PRO Ernie Sweeney, Michael Feeney has harnessed massive community goodwill as well as the backing of the business community and the local authorities. All that remains now is for our political representatives to prove their support and secure the remaining funding that the peace park requires. The committee has been given a number of promises which, as yet, have not been fulfilled.

We can't put a price on peace and the memory of Bridget Quinn and her contemporaries deserves more.