

# *Green Fields of France*

IN THOSE days before television and the family car syndrome, my contact with the world outside Ireland was mainly through books, radio and cinema. There was, however, a less well known medium of communication . . . the many Castlebar men who had fought in and survived the Great War, World War I . . . "the war to end all wars."

To many of us as impressionable children, and in a neighbourhood that radiated with a couple of great characters, those men were somehow different. Those war veterans could relate stories, sometime glamorous, sometimes horrific, from far-flung places like Palestine, Egypt, France, Belgium, Transvaal, South Africa.

In regiments like the Connaught Rangers, they had travelled to many parts of the world which, in those days, not very many would see were it not for the Army. Why did they join up? Some wanted travel, excitement and adventure, no doubt. But it is fair to say that for many there was little choice.

Remember that in the early part of this century memories of the famine and starvation were still vivid. Ireland, by all accounts, was a rejected nation, an undeveloped country. Where work was available, the wages were paltry. Poverty, deprivation and suffering were rampant. For young men living in the West of Ireland, the opportunity to join the Connaught Rangers at least offered a regular wage and meals on the table for their families. If the worst happened, the Army pension offered security for those left behind.

In spite of all this, for many men the decision to enlist was reluctantly taken as they had to leave everyone and everything they loved and cherished behind. But the stark reality was that for many working class people without any special skills, money or education, the Army at that time was an attractive proposition. Hence so many Irishmen in the prime of their lives went and took the King's shilling and paid the price. ". At the outbreak of the First World War many thousands of them were slaughtered. The lucky ones escaped and returned home after the war.

A number of Castlebar men died in the conflict, but those who survived had stirring tales to tell. AS youngsters we often gathered in Martyr McGough's house to listen to veteran Dan Callaghan tell of his exploits in France, the people he had met, the gruesome conditions and strange places in which he had been . . . a far cry from the peace and quiet of Castlebar. Dan often told us of John Roach's heroism in the face of enemy fire, of my own grandfather's death in France, where he was a comrade or Peter O'Malley, later to establish a shop in McHale Road, a business now carried on by his son Kevin. Our next door neighbour, Jimmy Mee, was in the Royal Flying Corps, the forerunner of the Royal Air Force.

What a character Jimmy was . . . a man with a tremendous sense of humour, always ready with the wisecrack. AS mentioned, my own grandfather never returned from the war. He was killed in action on July 22, 1915, and is buried in the Royal Irish Rifles graveyard in Laventie, France. Many of the youngsters I grew up with had a father, grandfather, uncle or relative in the Connaught Rangers. The exploits and action of the Irish battalions were many. They fought in some of the 'bloodiest' areas of France, Belgium, Palestine and South Africa with valour and distinction. The greatest and most tragic irony of this was those who returned were frowned upon. They never received any acclamation in Ireland.

And to add insult to injury, they received very little recognition from the British authorities either. On a visit to France and Belgium; three years ago I went out to view the battlefield areas of the Somme and walked through seemingly endless rows of neatly-kept graves. Here many were buried where they fell. The cemeteries stretch mile after mile. It sobering to read the list of Irish surnames. . . Sullivan, Joyce, Walsh, Mahony, O'Connor, Farrell, Fagan, O'Hanlon, Burke, Nolan. They came from all parts of Ireland and lie side by side with their English, Welsh, Scottish, French and Belgium comrades.

They fell in the cause of world peace, fighting to free Europe from enslavement. Now, in the words of the song, 'they are long forgotten heroes of a long forgotten war.' The flower of manhood, dying so far from home, are now at rest forever. But in the town of Ypres (pronounced Wipers), which was completely destroyed in World War I, they do not easily forget those brave young men.

The museum in Ypres contains a vivid reminder what the conditions were like. The local people collected rifles, documents and equipment after the cessation of hostilities and they are on public display in the museum. On a huge memorial are inscribed the names of many thousand of men who fell in battle. In this area, each evening everything comes to a standstill for the sounding of the Last Post. There is a stillness in the area as the bugle renders this daily tribute. Young and old bow their heads in respect. .

When I stood there I was reminded of the words of that beautiful ballad by Finbar Fury, "The Green Fields of France". . . . "Do those who lie here know why did they die?" The significance of the words hit very hard. The sounds of the bugle ebb away and die, leaving many a tear-stained eye. What a pity many of the Irish war veterans have never been present to catch the magic of that moment and to appreciate the gratitude of those European nations.

I have often pondered and reflected on the manner in which many of the Irish survivors were treated at home. By all accounts they were poorly treated, often taunted by public house patriots. The insular view-the attitude that those men had somehow betrayed: their country-can now be seen for , what it was-the height of nonsense.' Surely in 1988, with Ireland now a member of the EEC, standing proudly shoulder to shoulder with our' European partners, it is time to honour those thousands of Irishmen' who fought for the liberation of' Europe, and indeed the world, in both World Wars.

Will the day soon arrive when a lasting memorial can be raised to honour those unsung heroes? We should show our EEC partners that Ireland did make a positive contribute in the lives that were sacrificed so unselfishly so that the world would be a better place in which to live. Those young men sleep forever beneath " The Green Fields of France," separated, as they were, from their loved ones and friends. They are gone but , hopefully, not forgotten.

## *Soldiers revolt*

Three-quarters of the men of the Connaught Rangers at Simla laid down their arms on receipt of the mail giving news of Irish events. They are now in charge of another regiment. Another detachment at an out-station attempted 'to seize arms, but were fired upon, two men being killed and one wounded, while the remainder of the men here, about thirty, were arrested.

The men, it is stated, were entirely respectful to their officers; but expressed their regret at their inability to perform their duties, declaring, that their sympathies were with their friends at home.

*(June 10a; 1920)*

# Son Wounded

Mrs. O'Donnell, Chapel Street, Castlebar, received a letter from a priest in France on Thursday last that her son, Lieut. Martin O'Donnell, of the 4th Dragoon Guards, had been wounded in action.

*(May 22nd, 1915)*

## ***Recruiting in Ballinrobe***

Major Balfe, who is at present engaged in addressing meetings in the West of Ireland, was accorded an enthusiastic reception at the Town Hall, Ballinrobe, on Sunday and at the close of the meeting twenty-seven names were taken for the Irish Brigade.

Major Balfe, addressing the meeting, said quite recently 2,000 of the Irish National Volunteers had joined for training and he had no doubt that the 16th Division would rival the traditional glory of Ireland's Brigade of foreign service in the past.

*(February 20th, 1915)*

## **"The Savages"**

A former employee of the "Connaught Telegraph", Mr. Tommie Walsh, son of Mr. James Walsh, Davitt's Terrace, Castlebar, writing to his parents from Montevideo, France, says- "I am all right so far. I was in two engagements and escaped unhurt.

It was terrible. Our soldiers fought bravely against overwhelming odds. The Germans don't respect the Red Cross. They give no quarter, "the savages".

*(September 14th, 1914)*

## **Achonry priests volunteers**

The Very Rev. Dr. Henry, chaplain of St. Louis Convent, Kiltimagh, having offered his services to the war office has been appointed to a chaplaincy in the East Lancashire Regiment, and will shortly leave with a detachment of it for service in one of the war zones.

Dr. Henry, who, until recently, was a Professor in the Diocesan College, Ballaghaderreen is a gentleman of great erudition and one of the most genial and proper priests in the Diocese of Achonry.