

Ireland and the Great War

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The historical significance of the First World War is taken for granted in most European countries. In Ireland, however, as Charles Townshend has noted, 'the memory of the war was for a long time marginalised. A kind of collective amnesia discarded it as a British experience, dwarfed by an event that was, in physical comparison with the titanic battles on the western and eastern fronts, tiny.'⁽¹⁾ It was the Easter Rising, not the Great War, that was seen as the watershed in Irish history, responsible for rousing nationalist public opinion from its apparent torpor and revitalising separatist republicanism. This view of Irish history has undergone a series of challenges in recent years and few academic historians would now dispute the importance of the War in Irish history. It is this 'historiographical revolution' that Keith Jeffery seeks both to synthesise and to build upon his book, *Ireland and the Great War*. This is the first single-authored, academic study of the impact of the Great War on Ireland, and it performs this pioneering role admirably. It provides an essential introduction to the subject and suggests avenues for further study. It is no criticism of the author to say that he raises far more questions than he answers.

The book, which originated as a series of four lectures, does not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the Great War. Anyone coming to it seeking a sustained analysis of the impact of the war on Irish politics, or on Anglo-Irish relations, will be disappointed. Rather it provides a discursive treatment of some of the ways in which the war impacted on Ireland, and on individual Irish men and women. Indeed, it is in the use of telling examples and quotations that Jeffery is at his strongest. The book is divided into four chapters. These examine recruitment and enlistment, military experience during the war, cultural responses to the war, and finally the commemoration of the war. A brief bibliographical essay closes the work. This structure dictates a somewhat fractured and fragmentary approach. There are, however, a number of themes running through the different sections that help to bind them together. One of these is the author's belief that the Great War was 'the single most central experience of twentieth-century Ireland, not just, nor least, for what happened at the time, but in its longer-term legacy'. (p. 2) This is a large claim (more central than partition?) but it does provide a framework whereby the political divisions and divergent experiences of the war years can be integrated into one story. By this process the history of this period becomes the history of all the

people of the island, not just one part of it.

One effect of the outbreak of war in 1914 was to wrench Irish politics off-course, though whether that course was heading towards a compromise agreement or civil war is open to dispute. The Home Rule Bill received royal assent on 18 September 1914 but its implementation was held over until the end of the war, the Unionist leader, Edward Carson, having received an assurance that provision would be made for Ulster before the Act came into force. The conflict between nationalists and unionists over the position of Ulster was thus suspended but not settled. Both sides had gone partway towards achieving their objectives, but neither had obtained their ultimate goal. It was against this background that Carson and John Redmond, the leader of the constitutional nationalism, called on their respective supporters to enlist. Both leaders saw political advantages to be gained from assisting the war effort. Thus while the war appeared to offer an opportunity for the two communities to unite in a common cause, it also provided for the advancement of their own, divergent interests.

The early stages of the war saw a massive mobilisation in Ireland. 50,000 men joined up in the first six months, and while recruitment declined from 1916 (not picking up again until 1918) it did so at a broadly comparable rate to that in Great Britain. Ireland contributed over 200,000 men in total, of whom about sixty percent were Catholic. Mutual hostility and suspicion were not, however, easily overcome, either within Ireland or between Ireland and Britain. The contrast in the official attitude adopted towards the 36th (Ulster) division created out of members of the Ulster Volunteer Force, and the two 'Irish' divisions formed to accommodate Redmond's Irish Volunteers along with other Catholic recruits, reflected the perception of the two communities within the British establishment. Whereas the Ulster division incorporated the UVF command structure, the 10th and 16th 'Irish' divisions were officered predominantly by Protestants. The survival of the 'old enmity' was also evident amongst Irish prisoners of war, causing men from the 16th division, for example, to sleep outdoors rather than share the quarters with men from the 36th division. (p. 64)

Analysing the reasons for enlistment (there was no conscription in Ireland) Jeffery rejects monocausal explanations and considers a wide range of motivations: moral, political, economic, social, and psychological. He concludes that a similar range of motivations were present among those who enlisted in the British army and those who chose to join the Irish Volunteers to fight for the establishment of an Irish republic. This might not seem surprising, but it is a comparison that would have been firmly rejected in Ireland, north or south, until relatively recently. One of Jeffery's central arguments is that issues such as enlistment, mobilisation and fighting, 'actually constitute a series of "parallel texts" in which the similarities might be more significant than the differences'. (p. 2) It is only by recognising these similarities, Jeffery suggests that Irish people will be able to live in peace with their neighbours. This is in many ways a very personal work and Jeffrey is refreshingly open about his personal and political agenda. He draws upon his own family history, citing in his discussion of recruitment the case of his great-uncles, William and Robert Hackett, who enlisted in Canada having emigrated from Dublin some years previously. William was killed in France in November 1918. Robert survived the war and returned to Canada where he remained for the rest of his life. (pp 35-36) Both men took the opportunity while on leave in 1917 to revisit their family in Dublin; the war reunited Irish families as well as separating them.

By the time the war was over, the political scene in Ireland had been altered beyond recognition. Constitutional nationalism in the form of the Irish Party had been replaced as the dominant force in Irish politics by the republicanism of the reconstituted Sinn Féin. Divisions within Ireland between nationalists and unionists were even deeper than they had been prior to the war. Having so conspicuously demonstrated their loyalty to King and country, Ulster Unionists were in a stronger position to resist their inclusion in a settlement which would hand power to the very people who had not only refused to support the war effort, but had sought assistance from Britain's enemies. These developments are perceptively discussed in this book. But if politics within Ireland were transformed, so too were international relations and in ways that had important ramifications for the Irish situation. Before the war the concept of a balance of power in Europe had dominated the thinking of the great powers. Linked to this concept was the assumption that Europe should be made up of a small number of large states. Even before the war ended, the balance of

power idea had been largely superseded by self-determination as a guiding principle. This had implications for both nationalists and unionists since the principle of self-determination could clearly be applied to both groups. (2) Jeffery has nothing to say about these issues and there is no attempt to locate Irish experience within a larger international or European context. I wondered, for example, how far 'the common factors and impulses' (p. 2) that motivated Irish people, nationalist and unionist, during the war years, were common to all those involved in the war, not just to those in Ireland.

Perhaps the most original chapters in the book are those on imagination and commemoration. These provide a wide-ranging discussion of literary and visual representations of and responses to the war. Both contemporary and modern works are examined, and care is taken to place each work and each artist in their social, political and artistic context. This provides some fascinating insights and illuminates many of the themes highlighted in the previous chapters. Thus the theme of collective amnesia about the war is neatly illustrated by the fate of Mainie Jellett's prize-winning painting of 1920. The picture, which depicts the painter's two sisters together with two other young women relaxing on a beach, was originally exhibited under the title *Peace*, but was subsequently renamed *The Bathers' Pool*. In retrospect, the clouds shown bubbling up on the horizon provide a prophetic signal of the uncertain future of Jellett's family and class. 'Jellett's painting', Jeffery, observes, 'encapsulates the last peaceful summer of Ascendancy Ireland: a unionist (and female) vision of tranquillity'. (pp 72-73)

The author's comments are generally instructive but there are some odd throwaway remarks which, while they might provide light relief in a lecture, require further elucidation in print. Referring to Sir John Lavery's triptych, *The Madonna of the Lakes*, Jeffery notes that with this work, 'Lavery, though he was no bigot, clearly identified himself with Irish Catholicism'. (p. 77) Are we to assume that the adoption of Catholic religious imagery and Celtic motifs inevitably invoke the spectre of bigotry? Similarly, in the midst of a discussion of William Orpen's painting, *Armistice Night, Amiens*, we are reassured that Orpen was 'no prude or misogynist, far from it'. (p. 81) Amiens functioned as a 'rest and recreation' centre, the most popular forms of recreation being drink and sex. Orpen regarded both as dangerous to the health of soldiers. His description of officers and men being preyed on by 'strange women - the riffraff from Paris, the expelled from Rouen, in fact the badly diseased from all parts of France', (p. 81) reflected a common middle-class anxiety regarding the link between prostitution and disease. Prostitutes were widely believed to pose a threat to men, and particularly to soldiers, as carriers of disease, polluting not only their clients but also society. That the reverse might also be true was rarely considered, and clearly had not occurred to Orpen however free he may have been from prudery or misogyny.

Jeffery's account of the building of the Irish national war memorial, eventually sited at Islandbridge, across the River Liffey from Phoenix Park, is particularly moving and poignant. The project was delayed for so many years that plans for an opening ceremony in 1939, to be attended by representatives from both parts of Ireland, were abandoned on account of the 'tenseness of the international situation' and the 'consequent ferment' in Ireland. (p. 123) The tortuous history of the memorial provides ample evidence of the reluctance of Free State ministers to adopt wholeheartedly the 'policy of appeasement and reconciliation' urged upon them by those like William Archer Redmond, son of John, whose political and personal loyalties lay with the dead. Public acknowledgement was nevertheless given to the sacrifice and patriotic motives of those who had served in the British Army during the war. To expect the Free State to have done more is to ignore the circumstances in which it came into being. For, as Kevin O'Higgins pointed out in a Dail debate on the national war memorial in 1927, while no-one denied the sacrifice of those who had fought in the war, it was not 'on their sacrifice that this State is built'. (p. 114) That some official ambivalence should be displayed towards the commemoration of Ireland's Great War dead was perhaps inevitable; more surprising is the slow and partial progress made towards commemorating those who died in the fight for the Irish republic. A Celtic cross was erected on the lawn of the Irish parliament building (Leinster House) in 1923 as a memorial to Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, but this was only a temporary structure and was removed ten years later. It was eventually replaced in 1947 by an obelisk, whose 'discreet height' and 'position behind an elaborate railing make it almost invisible'. Thus, as Jeffery tellingly observes, 'in a curious way, this national monument reflects the public invisibility of Lutyens's garden in distant Islandbridge'. (p. 125)

As previously suggested, this is a largely inward-looking study. It examines the Great War in the context of Irish history past and present, and does so with great skill, but it rarely looks beyond Ireland. It would clearly be unfair to expect too much from one short study, but it is difficult not to be disappointed with the narrowness of the author's focus. There is, for example, no sense of engagement with some of the key conceptual questions presently exercising historians of the Great War. This is particularly striking in relation to the current debate over the impact of the war on gender relations. In Britain the initial impact of the war had the effect of emphasising and reinforcing gender divisions. Men actively supported the war effort by joining up and going off to fight. Women were required to wait passively behind. Their primary means of supporting the war was to urge their male relatives to enlist. But as the war continued and women became more actively involved both at the front as nurses and VADs, and at home as war workers, there were increasing signs of gender confusion. While some men were emasculated by their experiences in the trenches, some women were empowered by the experience of taking over male occupations and responsibilities.

It is to Jeffery's credit that he does not ignore women - he discusses women's war-related employment for example (pp 28-30, 32-33) - but he makes no attempt to use Irish evidence to engage in the broader debate over gender relations. For women throughout Europe the war saw both an expansion of opportunities, in terms of employment, education and national service, and the reinforcement of gender roles and perceptions. Women's primary role was still perceived to be that of motherhood. In countries such as Britain, France and Germany, this role acquired increasing importance as public attention focused on the need to replace those lost during the war.⁽³⁾ Women's participation in the war effort was seen as essential but also as potentially damaging to the fabric of society. Working mothers might neglect their children. Young female workers living apart from their families might become promiscuous. Such concerns are reflected in the efforts of the various states to police female behaviour. Similar efforts are evident in Ireland. Women's patrols were established in Dublin and Belfast, for example, in order to monitor women's night-time activities. In Ireland, however, the political context in which such measures were undertaken was very different from that in Britain (or elsewhere). In Britain public hostility to separation women (dependants of British soldiers) was linked to their perceived immorality. In Ireland it was their perceived lack of nationality that caused most outrage. Attitudes to motherhood were also different. Maintaining the Irish birth-rate was not a matter of concern to the British government. It was a matter of concern to the nationalist movement. Within nationalist ideology motherhood occupied a central and iconic role. Irish women found it very difficult to operate outside established gender roles, and the majority of female political activists, whether nationalist or

unionist, found themselves restricted to supporting their male colleagues largely by means of such traditional tasks as cooking and nursing. Although he refers to the 'conventional allocation of gender roles' (p. 28) within nationalist organisations such as Cumann na mBan (the female auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers), Jeffery neither explains why this was, nor discusses the broader, ideological context. An exploration of gender relations in Ireland during the period the Great War is long overdue. While Jeffery may not have been in a position to undertake such an exploration himself, it would have been helpful to have outlined the terms and parameters of the current debate and to have located Ireland within them. A book that claims to assess the impact of the war 'across the broadest range of experience' (jacket blurb), can reasonably be expected to address the role of women and of gender issues more generally.

It would be wrong to end on a negative note. This is an immensely valuable book that is certain to become a standard text. It is engagingly written, well illustrated and will be of benefit to, and enjoyed by, anyone interested in Irish history. Reflecting on the central theme of the work, the shared experience of enlistment, fighting, destruction and loss, I increasingly came to feel that the real lesson of the War may be less one of similarities previously overlooked and unacknowledged, but of the acceptance of difference. Reconciliation in Ireland surely depends not on seeing the experiences of different sections of Irish people as essentially the same, but on acknowledging the ways in which their experiences did differ, and respecting the different perspectives from which these experiences were and are viewed.

Notes

1. Charles Townshend, *Ireland: The 20th Century* (London, Arnold: 1999), p.68.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Seamus Dunn and T.G. Fraser (eds.), *Europe and Ethnicity: World War I and Contemporary Ethnic Conflict* (London, Routledge: 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For a recent analysis of these issues see Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1999).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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