

CHAPTER 5

Home front and everyday life

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Grand-Da! What did you do during the Great War?’

‘I have remained a member of the Ballyclattery Urban Council, my child.’

This exchange decorated the cover of the *Shamrock*, an illustrated magazine published shortly after the armistice, with the caption ‘A Propheteer-Oh! who has neither fought nor fled for us’.¹ It reminds us that the Great War brought gains as well as losses to Ireland, touching every aspect of Irish life, whether personal, social, economic or political. Its most obvious personal impact was on the lives of over 200,000 men (and a few 100 women) who joined the war-time services in Ireland, in addition to tens of thousands of expatriate Irishmen who joined British, colonial or American forces.² No war or conflict had ever involved so many Irish participants, making the revolutionary events of 1916–23 appear as minor skirmishes by comparison. Think of the 1916 Rising, involving 1,600 rebels, or the War of Independence, fought with about 3,000 rifles and 80 sub-machine-guns.

The majority of Irish participants in the Great War were Catholics, even though enlistment was always sluggish from the farming sector and from the impoverished ‘Atlantic fringe’. Recruitment was most intense in the industrialised north-east, among Catholics as well as Protestants. Admittedly, recruiting fell well

short of British levels, even before the gap was widened by the exclusion of Ireland from conscription. Less than a quarter of Irishmen with non-agricultural occupations actually joined the forces. Yet there was not a parish in Ireland untouched by the call to arms, regardless of its political, religious or social make-up.

One of the most perplexing questions facing any historian of the war is why normally sane, sensible people should have thrown themselves into something so dangerous and unrewarding. Since Ireland was one of the few combatant countries never to experience conscription, every decision to join up was personal and voluntary. Few were swept up by the alleged 'war hysteria' of August 1914, and enlistment rates were much higher during 1915 when the dreadful human cost and uncertain outcome of the war were universally understood. Unqualified loyalty to king and country cannot have been a major factor, since hundreds of thousands of unionists as well as nationalists had been preparing before the war for possible confrontation with the forces of the crown. While most recruits would have had a strong sense of civic duty and patriotism, the decision to translate sympathy for the allied cause into personal participation required something stronger than sentiment. Nor was poverty or unemployment the major impulse. Whereas in peacetime the armed forces were an attractive option for young men without means or prospects in civil life, it made no economic sense to exchange poverty at home, however severe, for the misery of life in the trenches and the strong likelihood of death or disablement. In fact, the groups most likely to join up were not the unskilled or unemployed, but those with relatively secure, well-paid jobs such as skilled workers, clerks and professional men.

What drove most recruits into the war-time forces, apart from a desire for adventure and subsidised international tourism, was loyalty to their friends and families. It is, therefore, not surprising that so many recruits had belonged to paramilitary organisations, fraternities, sporting clubs, schools or universities, where each member felt under strong psychological pressure to conform to group expectations. Once the UVF and the Orange Order had fallen in line behind Edward Carson, it was easier for individual members to join the new Ulster Division than to stay at home. Likewise, John Redmond's support for the war effort soon impelled thousands of National Volunteers and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians to join the 10th or 16th (Irish) divisions. Most recruits were influenced more by the behaviour of their peers than by self-interest, preferring to face massive personal risks rather than lose the esteem of those they admired.

The fact that most Irishmen did *not* join the forces was likewise due in part to pressures applied by family, friends or fraternities. In early 1916 a recruiting canvass in Charleville, Co. Cork, revealed that most men attributed their recalcitrance not to politics or conscience but to family and business commitments. Only a few refused information ‘with violence’ or declared there was ‘nothing to fight for’.³ As republican organisations multiplied in 1917 and 1918, young men faced ridicule from their peers and even social ostracism if they joined the forces of the crown. These factors help to explain why Australia, with a population similar to Ireland’s, dispatched 330,000 men overseas in the Australian Imperial Force, not to mention 85,000 on home duties. In Australia, as in Ireland, Catholics were only slightly less likely than Protestants to enlist, and Irish emigrants showed no hesitation in serving his imperial majesty. Nearly 60,000 Australian servicemen died overseas, about twice the number of Irish fatalities.⁴

For the great majority of participants, this was their first experience of the privations (and fraternal compensations) of military life, though the fight against the Boers had given a foretaste at the turn of the century. For one in six Irish soldiers, the adventure ended in death, often caused by accidents or illness rather than enemy fire. Irish servicemen, contrary to myth, were neither more nor less likely to die than their British counterparts. Few of the survivors escaped physical or psychological mutilation; and few Irish families were untouched by the excitement, anxiety and often personal loss aroused by the enlistment of a father, son, brother, cousin or husband. The Irish, therefore, did not escape the trauma that afflicted Europe in the wake of the war, though its collective expression was muffled by the upsurge of emotion occasioned by the conflicts of 1916 to 1923.

From an early stage of the war, injured and disabled soldiers were to be seen in every Irish town, mutely or loudly reproaching those who had stayed out of the conflict. Even before the Battle of the Somme, which tore the heart out of the 36th (Ulster) Division in July 1916, the rector of Carrickfergus in Co. Antrim, Frederick MacNeice, had begun to count the cost:

In the days to come there will, all through the land, be many memorials of the sacrifices made in this agonising conflict. For a generation or more there will be living memorials—men who have suffered loss in their bodies—an eye, a hand or leg—men who will all their days on earth bear the marks of the terrible struggle in which they had been

engaged. And there will be other memorials, too. In oldest castle, in humblest cottage, in every kind of home in town and country there will be material things—a cap, a sword, a scroll, a medal, a something that will have a dearness, a sacredness, because it belonged to the brave dead.⁵

The war's social and economic impact was equally significant, though here too the Irish experience was in some respects muted by comparison with the dramatic transformation of everyday life in Britain, France, Russia or Germany. The shortage of available men had a stultifying effect on social events, as Olive Armstrong (later a lecturer in political science at Trinity College Dublin) remarked in her diary on 2 August 1915:

We are back here again, and it is a very different Ballycastle. Hardly any of the people we know are here and everything is very dead. The dearth of men is awful, but for the last fortnight I believe they have had a wildly gay time as the 9th Inniskillings were here. They had picnics, tennis & even dances. Why weren't we here!⁶

The absence of men was also reflected in slightly fewer marriages and births; but the most obvious impact of the war on family life was the virtual stoppage of emigration to America after early 1915. For generations, Irish couples had been producing twice as many children as could expect to gain a livelihood in Ireland, in the knowledge that some would be able to emigrate to make a living. Suddenly, would-be emigrants were faced with the options of enlistment, working in munitions factories or trying to scratch a living at home. In the more urbanised east and north, the stock of frustrated emigrants was easily absorbed by war-time demand, so that industrial unemployment was virtually eliminated by 1916. In the rural south and west, however, there were fewer recruits and more disappointed emigrants, creating a surplus of restive young men and women who were to contribute so crucially to Sinn Féin and the IRA in the years after 1916. Without the war, it may be argued that, most of the manpower driving the revolutionary movement would have been absent without leave in America.

In the early months of the war, it was universally expected to have catastrophic economic consequences. While it is true that 'inessential' industries

were severely disrupted, this was soon outweighed by the insatiable demand for munitions and essential goods (such as linen for aircraft). After a few weeks of severe unemployment, as workers were laid off in industries such as building and textiles, it became clear that civilians in most parts of Ireland had brighter job prospects than in peacetime, provided they had the versatility to adapt to radically changed conditions. Even in construction, unemployment rates fell far below those of summer 1914.⁷ Wages kept pace with inflation, while earnings and working conditions improved sharply for those employed in the munitions sector. Industrial unrest, which had brought Dublin to a standstill in 1913–14, was negligible until the last year or so of the war. Even Larkin's ITGWU, whose leaders were strongly anti-war, was virtually inactive. A senior union official revealed after the Rising that as many members had joined the forces as the number of persons currently enrolled in the organisation in Ireland.⁸

In one respect, the war had a more positive impact in Ireland than in Britain. By 1916 the German submarine campaign and the naval requisitioning of most merchant vessels had cut Britain off from many of its traditional food suppliers, providing Irish farmers with an irresistible opportunity to 'do well out of the war'. Ireland, still overwhelmingly agricultural, was only lightly affected by food shortages and rationing, while the entire rural economy prospered in the course of sating British appetites. Rural Ireland's prosperity drew sneers from British patriots and Irish nationalists alike, but it gave Ireland a solid economic stake in the war, and a reason for avoiding personal participation. Demand for farm labour increased along with enlistment, and poverty was virtually eliminated in many regions. Urban wage-earners and those on fixed incomes, faced with the doubling of food prices between 1914 and 1918, did not fare so well. The agricultural boom lingered until 1920, its subsequent collapse coinciding precisely with the most destructive phase of the revolutionary conflict.

The costs and benefits of the Great War for Irish civilians are more difficult to assess, once we broaden the discussion from income and employment to personal 'welfare'. The 'welfare state' was greatly extended after 1914, as more workers qualified for insurance or gained statutory protection by working in 'controlled' industries and state factories. Yet those who worked in munitions also accepted restrictions on their freedom to move jobs or to campaign for collective benefits through trades unions. Even in Ireland, basic commodities such as bread and beer became scarcer and more expensive, though some food prices were capped, and rationing introduced, in order to protect poorer consumers. By early 1918 there was only one shop in Belfast still selling butter

over the counter.⁹ Anxiety about the future of the human race led to important advances in Irish child and maternal welfare, with provision of free milk for school-children, clinics for mothers and babies, and encouragement of breast-feeding in order to diminish infant mortality. Nutrition actually improved through the enforced substitution of wholemeal for wheaten breads, margarine for butter, and vegetable products for meat.

Yet consumers undoubtedly suffered from unprecedented restriction of choice and the unavailability of 'luxuries', except to the rich and well-connected. Even liquor became a luxury through curtailed licensing hours and increased excise duties, though the political clout of the liquor lobby (unionist as well as nationalist) ensured that it was still easier to get drunk in Ireland than in Britain. Housing conditions, already appalling in the urban inner cities, deteriorated alarmingly as the building trade declined. Rapid inflation and higher interest rates made it difficult for borrowers to meet their obligations, and fuel prices soared because of a shortage of imported coal. Recreational travel, sport and public entertainments were all hard hit, though the cinema flourished as civilians flocked to watch battle films and newsreels. A shortage of trains for Sunday excursions became a major problem, making it difficult to organise Gaelic matches and monster meetings. Life should, therefore, have been less fun than before the war.

Even so, privations and sacrifices unthinkable in peacetime were widely accepted as not just inevitable but life-enhancing. For Frederick MacNeice, this response showed that the war had conferred a deeper, moral benefit. Speaking eleven years after the armistice of November 1918, he recalled the years of rationing and self-sacrifice as 'a glorious interval. The spirit of that brief period must be recaptured'.¹⁰ The feeling, stronger among Protestants, that the war had overwhelmed all normal preoccupations was well conveyed by Olive Armstrong in September 1915:

There is a queer strained feeling about everything now. It is the war, it has cast an awful gloom over everything. When you take up the paper in the morning, it is with a sort of dread, for you don't know whose name may be in the Roll of Honour. Then on Sunday we have the national Anthem in Church and of course special prayers & hymns. 'God the All-Terrible' to the Russian National Anthem is the nicest I think. Absolutely everyone is doing war work from knitting

*to Munition Factories & nursing, in France if possible. It is perfectly splendid.*¹¹

Gloom and splendour coexisted in Olive's vision of the war, reminding us of Yeats's notion of the 'terrible beauty' engendered by the 1916 Rising.

War-time mobilisation had indeed drawn women into the mainstream of economic life, as they temporarily took over jobs once monopolised by men. Irish 'munitions girls', in Irish, as well as British, shell factories and engineering plants, were the most obvious tokens of the new order. As in Britain, men were taken aback, even thrilled, by the novelty of female bus conductors or ambulance drivers. Through a scheme of 'national service' introduced in 1917, women were deployed in heavy farming work and encouraged to take the place of male clerks and 'shop-walkers' (assistants giving directions to customers). Though the number of women at or near any front line was small, many Irishwomen (including Maud Gonne) became nurses or occasionally doctors in Irish, British and French hospitals. There were also thousands of 'separation women', notorious for drinking away the maintenance payments sent on behalf of their husbands on active service. Their novel access to cash caused resentment on the part of wives still hampered by the presence of husbands. This could erupt into violence, as was apparent in a case brought before Ennis petty sessions court in May 1915, in which Patrick Mahony was charged with breaking Mrs Rynne's window with a stone:

Jane Mahony [Patrick's wife] deposed that on Sunday morning Mrs Rynne cursed her and her ass because the ass went into her yard. Because she [Mrs Rynne] was getting a separation allowance she wanted to look down on [the] witness. Mrs Rynne caught [the] witness by the hair of the head, and she ([the] witness) caught Mrs Rynne's, and they wrestled around and could not kill one another (laughter). Butler (defendant's brother) came out and gave [the] witness a black eye. That was the wholly all of the fight.¹²

In addition, women dominated the innumerable charities providing comforts for servicemen and support for those who were injured, widowed or

orphaned. So massive was the supply of clothing that one Dublin charity announced in April 1915 that ‘no more socks or woollies are required at the front’. As a Wexford writer remarked: ‘This is really a calamity to many women, to whom the resource of knitting has been a God-send, helping to take from their minds the terrible strain of the war, and giving them the feeling that they were doing their “bit” in this great national upheaval’.¹³ The effect of the war was to extend something approaching full citizenship to women, a change reflected in the extension of the franchise in 1918.

The imprint of the war on Irish life is best understood through the trivial details recorded in newspapers and personal diaries or letters. Particularly, in the first year or so, terms and phrases associated with the war were the stock-in-trade of advertisers, music hall performers, and even (in a twisted form) republican prisoners when running rings around the censor. Phrases like ‘Business as usual’, ‘It’s a long way to Tipperary’, ‘The call to arms’, or ‘The one bright spot’ were endlessly quoted, jokily misapplied and parodied. Scrap albums were cluttered with cuttings and photographs relating to the war, and children drew sketches of toddlers with rifles or union flags rather than dolls. School magazines were crowded with reports of the heroic doings and deaths of old boys, as well as facetious essays or verses about the quality of war-time cooking or the hazards of taking a cross-channel ferry. Even sport became entangled with war, as recorded in the magazine of a Dominican convent school in Blackrock, Co. Dublin. In November 1917 Sion Hill drew two-goals-all against a hockey team composed of volunteer nurses from the Linden convalescent hospital for officers, six of whom were old girls: Hilda O’Reilly, Agnes and Hilda McDermot, Una Minch, Pearlie Stein and Edie Lemass. Who remembers those names?¹⁴

Artists, writers and musicians all applied their skills to war themes, sometimes as official propagandists or contractors but more often as entertainers responding to war-time demand. Even William Butler Yeats, though famously refusing to contribute a war poem to an anthology edited by the American novelist Edith Wharton, was moved to write a profound meditation on the psychology of enlistment, ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’:

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
 Nor public men, nor cheering crowds;
 A lonely impulse of delight
 Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
 I balanced all, brought all to mind,

The years to come seemed waste of breath,
 A waste of breath the years behind
 In balance with this life, this death.¹⁵

The political impact of the war was far-reaching, but difficult to disentangle from the consequences of the failure to achieve a constitutional settlement before August 1914. Its most obvious immediate effect was to transform potential rebels, both unionists and nationalists, into advocates of a common cause. Britain and France were almost universally regarded as champions of liberty and democracy facing a brutal and despotic adversary. Despite lingering anti-English sentiment among nationalists, most admired the workings of English democracy everywhere except in Ireland. The former ‘settler colonies’ in North America, Australasia and South Africa were particularly extolled as models for a free Ireland within a free Commonwealth. At the outbreak of war, Carson, as well as Redmond, was keen to commit his armed supporters to coastal defence, and to use the deeper loyalties reawakened by the war to defuse tensions within Ireland. Despite ill-feeling over the manner in which Home Rule was put on hold for the duration of the war, both sides believed that common sacrifice, both in the field of battle and on the home front, might break down the ancient walls of partition between Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist, northerner and southerner.

These hopes faded as the war continued, partly because of perceived discrimination against nationalist units by the War Office and the government. In the wake of the 1916 Rising, the crude application of communal penalties, such as, mass internment, suspension of common-law rights and banning of fairs and markets, unravelled the progress made by a succession of reformist governments. How could one trust a country whose government, in emergency, cast aside the basic tenets of democracy and justice in order to assert control by brute force? Despite Lloyd George’s attempts to reach a compromise settlement after the Rising, through bilateral negotiations and then the Irish Convention, the pursuit of reconciliation had lost most of its appeal for both unionists and nationalists. Irish politics emerged from the war more bitterly polarised than at any time since the Land War of the 1880s.

Though retrospective sympathy with the rebels of 1916 was far more important in radicalising nationalists than any aversion in principle to the allied cause, the Rising would have been inconceivable in the absence of war. The instigation of a rebellion without popular support or any prospect of military success, justified by the specious cliché that ‘England’s war was Ireland’s oppor-

tunity', was essentially an expression of frustration on the part of several small cliques of anti-Redmondites. The subsequent coercion, also inconceivable in peacetime, undoubtedly undermined recruiting as well as accomplishing the redescription of millions of constitutional nationalists as (often nominal) republicans. Yet, despite the apparent triumph of Sinn Féin and anti-war propaganda, there were notable upsurges in military enlistment immediately after the Rising and even at the height of the anti-conscription campaign in 1918. It would probably be futile to follow fashion by conjecturing whether Redmondism would have triumphed in the absence of European war, or what sort of civil war might have emerged from the impasse of 1912–14. Yet, if the world had remained at peace between 1914 and 1918, the Irish would surely have been poorer, less employable, and more troubled by class and sectarian conflict. To that extent, Ireland fared well from the Great War.