

Good man O'Casey, good man.

An essay

By

Tom Burke.

25 May 2014

Introduction

On 20 November 2002, I went to the Abby Theatre to see *The Plough and the Stars*. It was truly an amazing production. On stage, the settings were totally convincing, the use of light and sound throughout each act adhered to the letter of what O'Casey would have wanted. The absolute perfection and absorption of the actors into their characters was inspirational. Off stage, the mood and atmosphere in the audience was as charged as the drama on stage. The performance was so engaging that I actually felt part of the drama, as if I was back in the Dublin of 1916 and a character sitting in the pub with Fluther Good or the Young Covey, or in the tenement with Nora and Bessie Burgess. My emotions swung with the drama. I laughed at the funny moments, at how Fluther, played by Owen Roe, paraded around the stage like a cock pheasant in all his finery. I got a lump in my throat when, at the end the play in a hushed tone, the soldiers sang that great old song, *Keep the home fires burning*. When the curtain came down there was rapturous applause from the audience. I stood up from my seat; I remember well I had tears in my eyes. I punched the air with my clenched fist and shouted – *Good man O' Casey, you got it right. Good man O' Casey, good man!*

After the emotions had died down a bit and the actors came back on stage to take their third or fourth bow, I blew a kiss to Bessie Burgess played by Marion O'Dwyer. Bessie was my hero because I knew what she and thousands of Irish mothers like her had gone through in those terrible years of 1914-1918. Set against the background of the Easter Rising, *The Plough and the Stars* is a play about the tragedy of war, about how the great lies of heroism, glory and death for Ireland or death for King and Country were exposed. O' Casey exposed what Wilfred Owen referred to as, *The Old Lie: Dulce et decorum est. Pro patria mori*. He exposed the Easter Rising and the indeed the war in Europe for what they were, a sham and a terrible human tragedy where humble men and especially humble women, paid with their lives in exposing such lies. That's why I believe O'Casey got it right. And now I shall now explain why.

Ireland and the Great War

Although *The Plough and the Stars* is centred on the events in Dublin during Easter week 1916, it is fair to say that the war in Europe presented an opportunity for the Irish Volunteers to strike a blow for Irish freedom; England's perceived weakness was Ireland's opportunity. Through the character of Bessie Burgess, O'Casey brings into conscience the other war that was afoot at the time of the rising, which was of course the Great War that began in August 1914 and ended in November 1918.

- Approximately 9,450,000 soldiers from nations all over the world died in the Great War. ¹ On average there was approximately 5,600 soldiers killed each day of the war. In the army of the United States, more soldiers died from influenza (62,000) than were killed in battle (48,000) ²
- The Great War destroyed the Romanov, Hohenzollern, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. It also caused the break-up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.
- There was a levelling of social classes. Much to the delight of Sean 'Casey, the role of women in society changed forever.
- As part of the United Kingdom, Ireland could not escape the war. The Great War saw the Irish soldier make his greatest sacrifice on Britain's behalf.

Nearly 140,460 Irishmen volunteered for the army, navy and air force. ³ In addition, approximately 50,000 Irishmen who were serving in the regular army and reserve at the outbreak of the war in August 1914.

- An estimate of 210,000 Irish men and women volunteered their services. ⁴ Interestingly, that is approximately the number of American soldier serving in Iraq at the present time.

¹ Ferguson, N. *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin Books 1998).p.295.

² Gilbert, Martin. *The First World War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994).Pp. 540-541.

³ Jeffrey, K. *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).p.7.

- Approximately 35,000 Irish born soldiers were killed. This does not include sailor or airmen. ⁵
- Ireland raised three volunteer army divisions. The 10th (Irish) Division was the first Irish division to be formed. They fought in Gallipoli, Salonicka and Palestine. The 16th (Irish) Division was the second Irish division to be formed. They fought in France and Flanders. The 36th (Ulster) Division was the third Irish division to be formed. They too fought in France and Flanders.
- The first shots fired in anger by a British soldier on the continent of Europe since the Battle of Waterloo was fired by Cpl E. Thomas of the 4th (Royal Irish) Dragoon Guards near Mons at 7:00 a.m. on 22 August 1914. ⁶
- The first Victoria Cross for gallantry won in the war was awarded to an Irishman named Lieut. John Maurice Dease from Co. Westmeath. Lieut. Dease was a member of the Royal Fusiliers. He won his Victoria Cross near Mons on 23 August 1914. ⁷
- Irishmen from the four provinces fought in the major battles of the war which included Mons, Ypres, Gallipoli, Salonica , The Somme, Wijtschate at Messines, Passchendaele, the German offensive in 1918 and the final allied offensive beginning in September 1918 and ending in November.
- During the Easter Rising in Dublin, Irish regiments of the British Army were some of the first units to fight against the Irish Volunteers in Dublin. It was Irishman fighting Irishman.

⁴ Fitzpatrick, D. " Militarism in Ireland 1900 - 1922," in *A Military History of Ireland*, ed. Bartlett T. and Jeffery K.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.). p.386.

⁵ Jeffery. p.150.

⁶ Ibid.p.64.

⁷ Dungan, M. *Irish Voices from the Great War* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995). p.20.

- A few days before the rebellion broke out in Dublin, the Germans launched a gas attack on Irish troops near the Village of Hulluch in northern France. The 16th (Irish) Division suffered a casualty count of 2,128. ⁸
- On 1 July 1916, the opening day in the Battle of the Somme, British casualties were 57,470 men, of whom 19,420 were killed. ⁹ At Thiepval in the northern sector of the Somme battle front, nearly 5,000 men from the 36th(Ulster) Division were killed, wounded or taken prisoner on that day. ¹⁰ In September 1916, the 16th (Irish) Division fought near the villages of Ginchy and Guillemont south of Thiepval, their casualty count was approximately 4,400. ¹¹
- The Great War ended at 11:00 am on 11 November 1918. Approximately 35,000 Irishmen were laid to rest in forgotten graves all throughout Europe and the Middle East. Many thousands came home to unemployment, disillusionment and yet another bloody war.
- In 1937, The Irish National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge on the banks of the river Liffey was opened to commemorate the thousands of Irishmen killed in the Great War. For many years it was, like the men whom it was built to remember, forgotten and ruined. Today however, it is restored to all its beauty; it is a symbol of a New Ireland.
- In November 1998, a traditional Irish Round Tower was built in a field near Messines in Belgium. It was opened by President Mary Mc Aleese in the presence of H.M. Queen Elizabeth and H.M. King Albert II of the Belgians.

⁸ Denman, T. *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers. The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992). p.129.

⁹ Middlebrook, M. *The First Day on the Somme* (London: Penguin Books, 1971). p.263.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.224.

¹¹ Denman. p.101.

11th BATTALION

ROYAL DUBLIN FUSILIERS

(Commercial Comrades)

Follow the lead of the men of the Famous
10th Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers (which is
full) by Joining the

11th BATTALION

Now Open to receive recruits
Clerks, Farmers' Sons, Shop Assistants, Civil
Servants and Business Men generally.

**The Battalion will be formed at the
ROYAL BARRACKS, DUBLIN.**

Full particulars at any Recruiting Office.

An Irish recruiting poster for the Dublin Fusiliers.

Tenement life in Dublin at the outbreak of War in 1914

The Plough and the Stars is set in a Dublin tenement during the year 1916. The Clitheroes were relatively well off by the standards of Dublin tenement dwellers. They occupied the front and back drawing room on the main floor – the best in the house – they appeared to have shared with two lodgers, Uncle Peter and The Young Covey. Bessie Burgess lived in two small attic rooms.¹² The economy of Dublin was built upon beer, whiskey, biscuits and bread. On the eve of the Great War, one-third of Dublin tenement households were headed by women, many of them widows, like Mrs. Grogan.¹³ There is no mention of Bessie Burges being a widow. Sean O’Casey had first-hand experience of Dublin tenement life and suggests that differences over politics and religion could be set aside when the people were faced with the common battle against poverty, illness and death.¹⁴

Bessie Burgess was a poor Dublin Protestant Unionist woman who lived in a tenement house with her poor Catholic neighbours. As far as O’Casey was concerned, nobody had the monopoly on poverty and the character of Bessie Burgess gives life to that belief. O’Casey turns the character of Bessie Burgess on its head from the contemporary image of a Dublin protestant who would have been associated with the Georgian townhouses of Merrion Square or Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) to a poor tenement dweller. Dublin was an extremely unhealthy city to live in, especially between the canals. The poverty and squalor of much of Dublin in the early years of the twentieth century appalled all who encountered it. A British government report issued in 1914 assessed, that of a Dublin population of 304,000 some 194,000 or approximately 63% could be reckoned as working class. The majority of this working class lived in tenement houses, almost half of them with no more than one room per family.¹⁵ Approximately 37% of the entire working class of Dublin lived at a density of more than six persons per room, 14% lived in houses declared unfit for human habitation.¹⁶

¹² Daly, M. "Tenement Life," in *Programme-the Plough and the Stars*(Dublin: The Abbey Theatre, 2002). p.7.

¹³ Ibid. p.9.

¹⁴ Ibid.p.11.

¹⁵ Kee, R. *The Green Flag, a History of Irish Nationalism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicoloson, 1972).p.491.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.491.



A Dublin tenement dwelling showing cramped conditions.

The only water supply for houses that sometimes contained as many as ninety people was often a single tap in the outside yard. ‘ We cannot conceive,’ wrote the committee who presented the report, ‘ how any self-respecting male or female could be expected to use accommodation such as we have seen.’ ¹⁷ Of the non-tenement houses in which the rest of the working class population lived, the report stated that some ‘scarcely deserve the name house, and could be more aptly described as shelters.’ ¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid. p.491.

¹⁸ Ibid. p 492.

The death rate in Dublin was higher than many other large centres of population in the United Kingdom, being the highest of all in Wexford, Galway and Cork.¹⁹ The same report reproached Dublin Corporation over its housing commitments. Interestingly three members of the Dublin Corporation were strong supporters of Home Rule and owned large blocks of tenement houses.²⁰ It was against this background that the recruiting sergeants of the British army at the outbreak of war went to work.

As a recruiting area into the British Army, Dublin was a safe bet. It has been calculated that between the years 1910 and 1913, recruiting into the regimental area of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers was double the national average, far exceeding Belfast and Cork.²¹ Between the years of the Great War, i.e. 1914 to 1918, out of a population of 304,000, approx. 30,000 men joined the Colours.²² Between 1917 and 1918, a further 8,400 went to work in the shipyards and munitions factories in England.²³ In the first week of September 1914, recruitment in Dublin was on a par with Belfast i.e., an average of 150 men joined up every day. By the end of October 1914, it is estimated that approx. 5,500 men had joined up in Dublin alone, the majority of them from Dublin and the surrounding towns.²⁴ Bessie Burgess's son was one of them and despite her protestations about Catholics not willing to enlist when speaking to The Covey in Act II she states, 'I can't for th' life o' me understand how they can call themselves Catholics, when they won't lift a finger top help poor little Catholic Belgium', not that it matters, more Catholics than Protestants enlisted.²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid. p.492.

²⁰ Ibid. p.492

²¹ O'Flanagan, N. "Dublin City in an Age of War and Revolution, 1914 - 1922" (University College Dublin, 1985). p.60.

²² Ibid. p.35.

²³ Ibid. p. 47.

²⁴ Ibid.p.36 . See also Editor. *The Irish Times*. 22 October 1914, p.8.

²⁵ Murray, C. *Three Dublin Plays* (London: Faber and Faber Inc, 1998). p.189. See also, Callan, P. "Recruiting for the British Army in Ireland During the First World War," *The Irish Sword* XVII., (1987). No. 66. Pp. 42-56.

Bessie's son marches off to war

At the end of Act 1, the sick Mollser is talking to Nora. Just before Mollser ceases to speak, there is heard in the distance the music of a brass band playing a regiment to the boat on their way to the front. The tune that is being played is, *'It's a long way to Tipperary'*; as the band comes to the chorus, the regiment is swinging into the street by Nora's tenement house, and the voices of the soldiers can be heard lustily singing the chorus of the song. She says to Nora. 'Oh, this must be some more o' the Dublin Fusiliers flyin' off to the front.'²⁶

Soldiers (off)

It's a long way to Tipperary, it's a long way to go;

It's a long way to Tipperary, to th' sweetest girl I know!

Goodbye Piccadilly, farewell Leicester Square.

It's a long, long way to Tipperary, but my heart's right there!

Nora and Mollser remain silently listening. As the chorus ends and the music is faint in the distance again, Bessie Burgess appears at the door, right, which Mollser has left open the sight and sound of theses Dublin Fusiliers marching through Dublin was not lost by Sean O'Casey nor Bessie Burgess either.

Bessie (speaking in towards the room).²⁷

There's th' men marchin' out into th' dhread dimness o' danger,

while th' lice is crawlin' about feedin' on th' fatness o' the land!

But yous'll not escape from th' arrow that fleith be night,

or th' sickness that wasteth be day...An' ladyship an' all, as some o'them may be,

they'll be scattered abroad, lik th' dust in th darkness!

²⁶ The Plough and the Stars. *The Three Dublin Plays*. Faber and Faber, London , 1998. p.179.

²⁷ The Plough and the Stars. *The Three Dublin Plays*. Faber and Faber, London , 1998. p.180.

During the war, the sight and sound of soldiers marching through Dublin was a regular occurrence. Some men were cheered off as they went, others like the King's Own Scottish Borderers were hissed and booed. In September 1916, the 16th (Irish) Division left Ireland for a final period of training in Aldershot before being sent to France in December 1915.²⁸ Bessie's son may well have been among their ranks. The 10th (Irish) Division had marched with fixed bayonets through the streets of Dublin back in late April 1915 on their way to Gallipoli. Both Georgian and tenement Dublin cheered them off. The splendour of the departure to England through the streets of Dublin was captured by *The Irish Times* on 1 May 1915.²⁹

Led by the band of the 12th Lancers and the pipers of the Trinity College Officer Training Corps, they marched off from the Royal Barracks. Along the Liffey quays, crowds on the pavements and spectators in the windows cheered and waved. Outside the Four Courts, a large group of barristers, solicitors, officials and judges shouted good-bye to their friends. Little boys strutted along side the marching column, chanting their street songs,

Left, right ; left right; here's the way we go,
Marching with fixed bayonets, the terror of every foe,
A credit to the nation, a thousand buccaneers,
A terror to creation, are the Dublin Fusiliers.

Not for them the direct route along the Liffey quays to the ships. Diverting across Essex Bridge, they marched through the commercial centre of Dame Street, then College Green, passing the Bank of Ireland and Trinity College where many of the Battalion had been students and one a Professor. Spectators became dense as the marching column crossed O'Connell Bridge and right wheeled onto the quays skirting the statue of O'Connell the liberator.

²⁸ Denman, T. *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*. Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1992. p.60

²⁹ *The Irish Times* 1 May 1915. See also Johnson .T, *Orange Green and Khaki*. Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1992. p.93.

Emotion rose when well-dressed ladies from the fashionable Georgian and Regency squares of south Dublin mingled with their poorer sisters in shawls from the Liberties and lesser squares of north Dublin. Together, they joined their husbands and sweethearts in the ranks to keep step with them the last few hundred yards.



Dublin Fusiliers leaving The Royal (Collins) Barracks in Dublin on their way to the front in April 1915. Courtesy of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association.

France and Dublin Easter 1916, a terrible beauty was born

At twelve noon on Easter Monday 24 April 1916, Corporal John William Humphrey's aged twenty-nine and a soldier in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, was walking along Westmoreland Street in Dublin. He was un-armed and on furlough from the front. He was shot through the head and died later that day in Mercer's Hospital.³⁰ The rebellion in Dublin had begun. He was buried in Grangegorman Military Cemetery in Dublin with the rest of his comrades. On the same day as Cpl Humphrey's was killed, Patrick Pearse stood outside the General Post Office in Dublin and proclaimed his Irish republic.

It is a well-known fact that initially, attitudes to the rising in Dublin were not altogether positive, particularly among the women of tenement Dublin. There was good reason for this. When Patrick Pearse and the Irish Volunteers occupied the GPO on Easter Monday 1916, the post-office was thronged with women who were cashing the separation allowances that the British army paid to soldier's families.³¹ Although not in the GPO collecting her allowance, Bessie Burgess had her few words to say about the rebels and their supporters. She, like many of her fellow Dubliners, felt her son and his comrades fighting in France were stabbed in the back by the rebels.³²

Bessie (from upper window.)

Yous are all nicely shanghaied now!

Sorra mend th' lasses that have been kissin' an' cuddlin' their boys into th' sheddin of blood!

.... Fillin' their minds with fairy tales that had no beginnin', but, please God, 'Il have a bloody quick endin'!

....Turnin' bitter into sweet, an sweet into bitter...

Stabbin' in th' back th' men that are dyin' in th' trenches for them!

³⁰ "Casualties of the Rebellion in Dublin April 1916,W035/69," (London: Public Records Office).

³¹Daly. p.8.

³²Murray. p.207.

It's a bad thing for anyone that thries to jilt th' Ten Commandments, for judgements are prepared
for scornors an' sthripes for th' back o' fools! (*going away from the window she sings.*)
Rule, Britannia, Britannia rule th' waves,
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves!

Attitudes amongst the Irish soldiers serving in France were in tandem with their people
back in Dublin. Corporal Christy Fox of the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers wrote home to Miss
Monica Roberts who ran a comforts for the troops group from her house in Stillorgan.³³ He was
totally against the rising.

³³ "Monica Roberts Collection," (Dublin: RDFA Archive).Vol.2.

12 May 1916.

6455 Private Christy Fox

1st Line of Transport

2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers

BEF

France

Dear Miss Roberts,

I received your ever-welcome letter and was glad to get some information off you about the Dublin riots. I must certainly say it was disgraceful and it makes us out here very uneasy getting now letters from home. I am very uneasy about my people as I see by the paper that Linen Hall Barracks has been set on fire, I live close by when I am home. I have not had a letter from home for the past 6 weeks so I am wondering if anything has happened to my parents. I generally have a letter from home every week so I am very anxious to get one or hear about them. I hope again this letter reaches you and that things will be going as smooth as ever, those Sinn Feiners are a lot of murderers, the sooner Ireland gets rid of them, the better. They have brought a nice disgrace on the old country. I can tell you some of the boys out here would like to catch a few of them and we would give them a rough time of it, but its all the work of the Germans, however it all failed, we have got to wait for his next trick and that will fail too. I hope you will like this card I am sending in this letter. I must now finish hoping to hear in your next letter that Dublin is enjoying peace and quietness once more.

Sincerely,

Christy.

12/5/16

6455

P^{te} Christy Fox
1st Line of Transport
2nd Roy Dub Fusiliers
B. & F France

Dear Miss Roberts

I received your ever welcome letter and was glad to get some information of you about the Dublin ~~Boys~~ Riots I must certainly say it was Disgraceful and it makes us out here very uneasy getting now letters from home I am very uneasy about my people as I see by the paper that Linen hall Barrack has been set on fire I live close by when I am home so I have not had a letter from

Page 1 of the letter from Private Christy Fox, 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

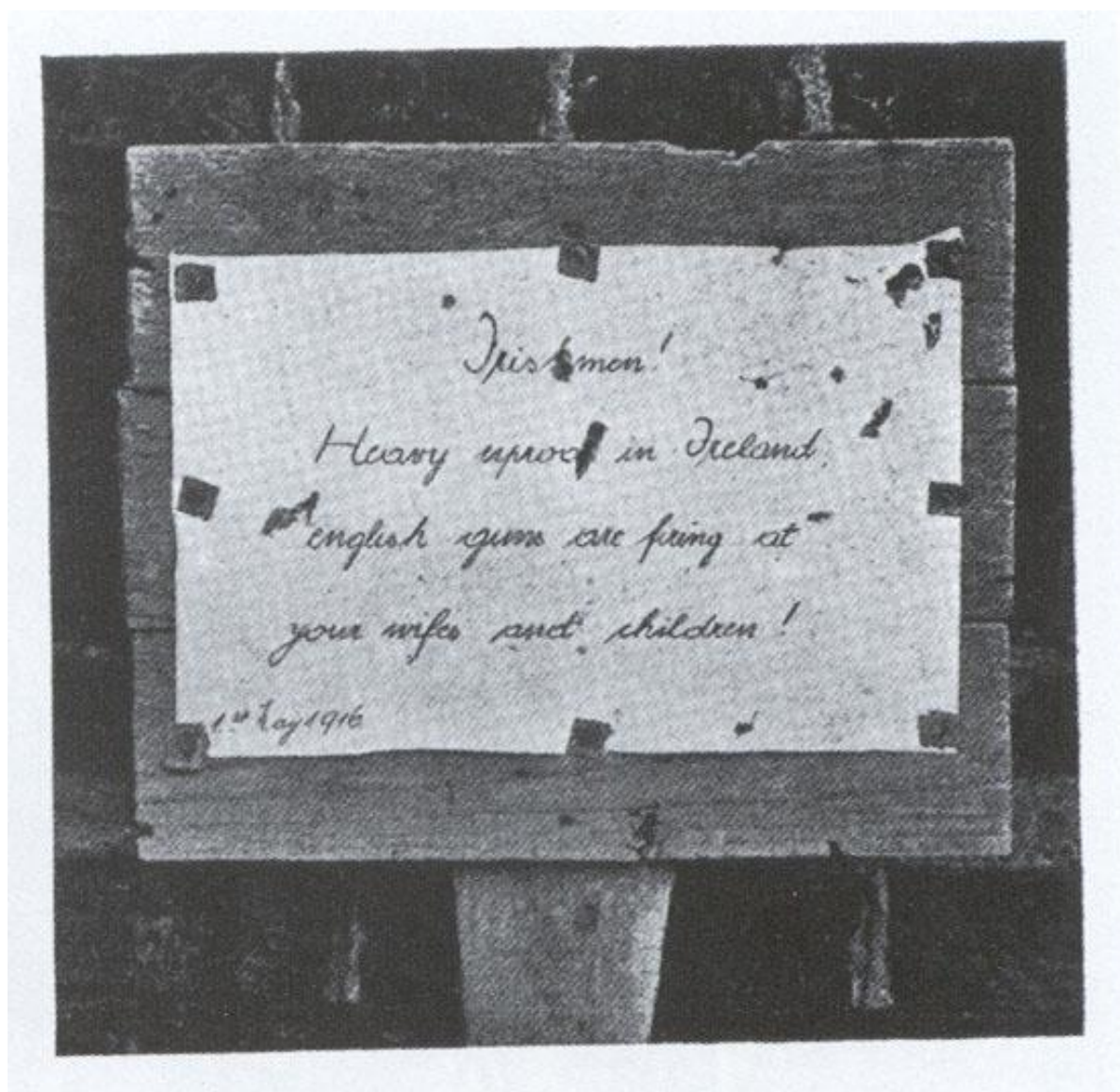
The leader of the Irish Party John Redmond pronounced the rising a ‘German invasion of Ireland, as brutal, as selfish, as cynical as Germany’s invasion of Belgium.’ Redmond contrasted the ‘treason’ in Dublin with the fortitude and loyalty of the Irish troops of the 16th (Irish) Division in France. He commented in the House of Commons.³⁴

Is it not an additional horror that on the very day when we hear that the men of the Dublin Fusiliers have been killed by Irishmen on the streets of Dublin, we receive the news of how the men of the 16th Division - our own Irish Brigade, and of the same Dublin Fusiliers-had dashed forward and by their unconquerable bravery retaken the trenches that the Germans had won at Hulluch? Was there ever such a picture of a tragedy which a small section of Irish faction had so often inflicted on the fairest hopes and the bravest deeds of Ireland.

German newspapers were aware of the Dublin rebellion and this news travelled to the German lines at the front. One read, ‘Irishmen! Heavy uproar in Ireland. English guns are firing on your wives and children, 1st May 1916’. The 8th Royal Munster Fusiliers hung an effigy of Casement in No-Man’s Land just to annoy the Germans.³⁵ The Easter Rising in Dublin occurred roughly one year after the Gallipoli landings and the German gas attack at Mouse Trap farm near Ieper in Flanders where in both places, hundreds of Dublin Fusiliers were killed. The people who lived in the inner-streets of Dublin City had not yet recovered from the terrible loss of loved ones resulting from those attacks. Is it any wonder why the rebellion was initially not so popular with Bessie Burgess and the rest of the citizens of Dublin’s inner city?

³⁴Denman. p.129.

³⁵McCance, S. *History of the Royal Munster Fusiliers. 1861 to 1922*, vol. 2 (Cork: Schull Books, 1995).



This notice board that was put up in No Man's Land by the Germans in front of the 8th Royal Munster Fusiliers after the Rising in Dublin informing the Munsters of the 'Heavy uproar in Ireland'.

Note the bullet marks.

It is interesting to note the surname of the leader of the Irish Party, John Redmond who encouraged Irish men to join the British Army for Irish Home Rule implementation, and, the prostitute in the play named Rosie Redmond. Was O' Casey playing politics with these names by equating of the leader of the party who supposedly prostituted Irish youth in France and a prostitute in Dublin.

On 27 April 1916, three days after Patrick Pearse stepped onto the portico of the GPO, 2,128 men of the 16th (Irish) Division suffered horrifically from a German gas attack launched over the Irish lines near the village of Hulluch near Loos in France.³⁶ The timing of this attack could not have been crueller for the people of Dublin. The killing field at Hulluch was about twice the size of the playing pitch in Croke Park and it lies about four kilometres north of the French coal-mining city of Lens. As the rebellion roared in Dublin, over 540 men of the Irish Division were killed instantly from the effects of the gas; the remainder would suffer chronic lung and breathing conditions for the rest of their lives.

³⁶Denman. p.129.

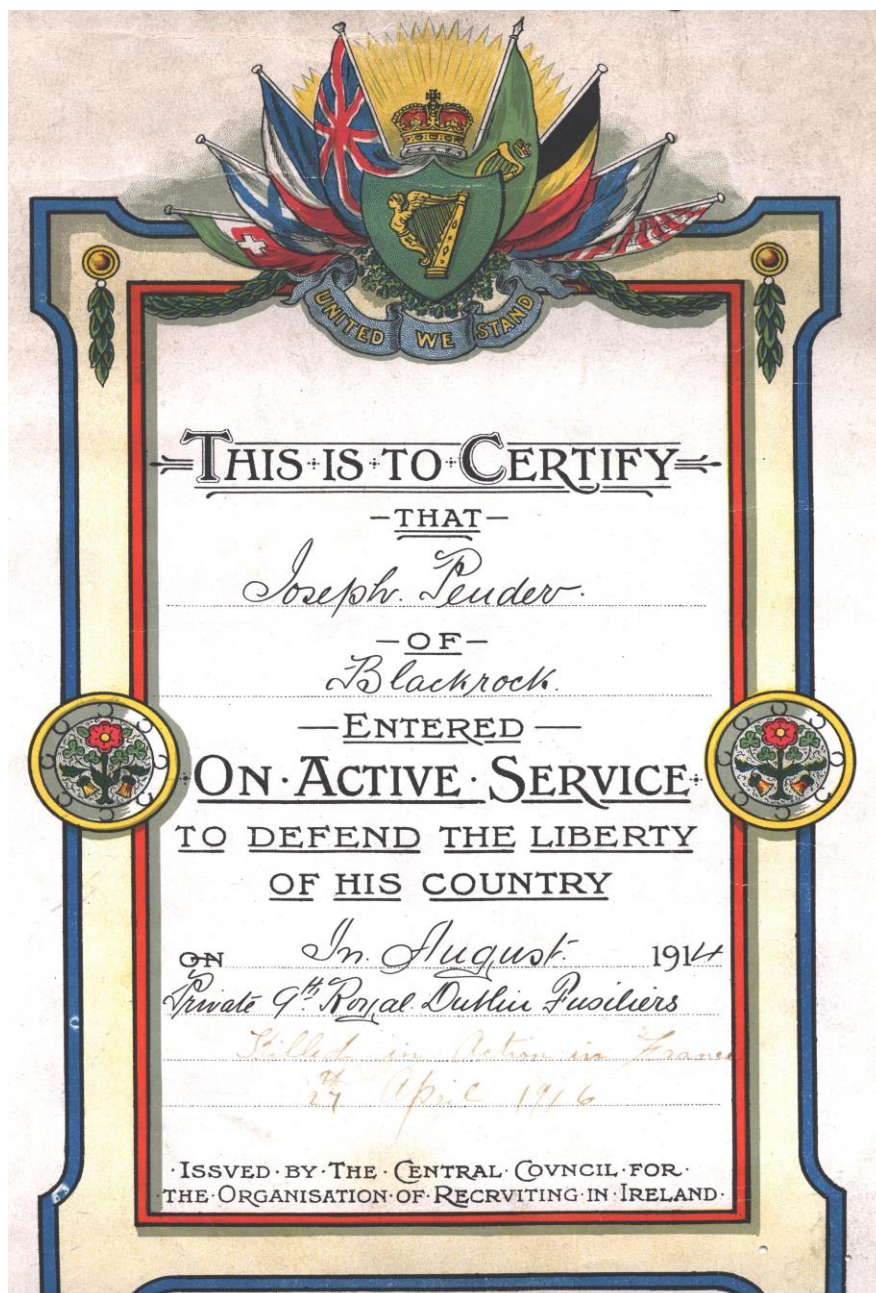


Dead soldiers on the Western Front

(Courtesy of the Photographic Archive, Imperial War Museum, London.)

In 1996, members of a Dublin Corporation housing maintenance team were clearing out a house in Blackrock, Co. Dublin. In the attic of this old house, the men came across a British army death certificate and a press cutting to a Private Joseph Pender regimental number 8477 of the 9th Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers. The date on the death certificate was 27 April 1916; cause of death was gas poisoning. Joseph was seventeen years of age when he suffered the agony of his lungs burning from the effects of the gas in them. Another boy-soldier to die of gas poisoning was Paddy Byrne from 19 Summerhill in Dublin which was a tenement house well familiar to Sean O'Casey and indeed Bessie Burgess. Paddy was a colleague of Joseph in the 8th Dublin. Both seventeen-year-old Dublin lads are remembered on the Loos Memorial.³⁷

³⁷ *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-1919*, Part 73 Royal Dublin Fusiliers (Suffolk: J.B.Hayward and Son, 1989). See also "The Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website [Www.Cwgc.Org](http://www.cwgc.org)".



Death Certificate of Private Joseph Pender, a Dublin Fusilier from Blackrock, Co. Dublin aged seventeen who died in France during the Easter Rising of 1916.



Irish Volunteer being led away after the rising in Dublin.

The initial fighting in the rising in Dublin was between Irish regiments in the British Army and the Irish Volunteers, Irishmen fighting against Irishmen. Some of the sharpest fighting occurred between the 3rd Royal Irish Regiment and the volunteers at the South Dublin Union. Also between the 4th Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the volunteers at barricades on the Cabra Road and Broadstone Railway station in the north-west of the City. An attempt to take over Dublin Castle by the volunteers failed. Reinforcements from the 10th Dublins were sent from the Royal Barracks to occupy the Castle. It was an officer of the 10th Dublins who took the surrender of volunteer Sean Heuston at the Mendicity Building in Dublin. Two officers and fifteen men of other ranks from the Dublins were killed in the rising. The two officers were, 2nd Lieut. George Gray and Lieut. Gerald Aloysius Neilan. Lieutenant Gray came from Newcastle-on-Tyne. Before joining the Dublins he was a dental student. He was twenty-two years of age when he died and is buried along with Cpl. Humpheries in Grangegorman Military Cemetery, Dublin. His name is on a memorial in the Parish Church of St. George and St. Thomas in Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin. Lieutenant Gerald Aloysius Neilan, a Dubliner who was with the 10th Battalion of the Dublins. He was killed by a rebel sniper at Usher's Island on Easter Monday.

His brother was sent to Knutsford Detention Barracks in England on 1 May 1916 for his participation with the Irish Volunteers in the Rising.³⁸ The Neilan's were not the only brothers to take different sides in 1916. Sgt. William Malone of the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers from Dublin's South Circular Road suffered the horrific fate of the German gas attack on 24 May 1915 at Mouse Trap Farm northeast of Ieper in Flanders. He was a married man; his wife came from Brannixtown near Trim in Co. Meath. During the Easter Rising, fighting with the Irish Volunteers from No. 25 Northumberland Road in Dublin was William's brother Michael. He was killed by British soldiers at the house. His name is on a memorial on the front end of the house in which he died on Northumberland Road. The brother of the Irish Volunteer Commandant Eamon Ceant was Company Sergeant Major William Kent who served in the 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers and was killed in France one year after the Easter Rising i.e. April 1917.³⁹ Brother against brother, unhappy families indeed. A week or so after the Rising had ended; a first anniversary death notice was placed in 'The Irish Independent' newspaper on 6 May 1916 which read.⁴⁰

In sad and loving memory of my dear husband Sergt. William Malone, 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers who was killed in action at St. Jullien on May 24th 1915. Sweet heart of Jesus have mercy on his soul.... Inserted by his loving wife and children.

Above Mrs. Malone's notice was a notice from Mrs. Mc Donnell asking for the people of Dublin to pray for her three sons who had died during the gas attack on the Dublins at Mouse Trap Farm in April and May of 1915.⁴¹

³⁸ Editor. The Irish Times. *An Irishman's Diary*. Myers. K. 26 August 1998.

³⁹ "The Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website [Www.Cwgc.Org](http://www.Cwgc.Org)".

⁴⁰ Editor. *The Irish Independent*. 6 May 1916.

⁴¹ "The Battle of Bellewarde Ridge - Mouse Trap Farm the 2nd Dublins and 2nd Royal Irish," *The Blue Cap, Journal of The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association* 8, (June 2001).p1.

Good Man O' Casey, good man

As can be seen from these examples, the families and especially the wives and mothers of Irish men who died either in France, Flanders, Gallipoli or Dublin suffered appalling grief. Mrs. Mc Donnell lost her three sons; Mrs. Malone lost her two, one in Dublin and one in Flanders. The sadness and sense of loss was like a cloak that wrapped itself around both tenement and Georgian Dublin. Nobody had the monopoly on grief in 1916. Through the words of Bessie Burgess in Act II, O'Casey captured the fearful emotions of one Irish mother.⁴²

'There's a storm of anger tossin' in me heart,
thinkin' of all th' poor Tommies, an' with them me own son,
drenched in water an' soaked in blood, gropin' their way to a shattherin' death, in a shower o'
shells!

Young men with th' sunny lust o' life beamin' in them,
layin' down their white bodies, shredded into torn an' bloody pieces,
on th' althar tha God Himself has built for th' sacrifice of heroes!'

In the final scene of Act III, Bessie Burgess is killed by a soldier from the very army she has praised and was proud to have her son a member of. He would have come home to find his mother dead, shot accidentally by his own side. He would have found Dublin a different city to the one he proudly left with marching bands and cheering crowds. A terrible beauty had been born in his absence. His mother died defending one of her neighbours, Nora, a Catholic woman whose husband had fought in the rising.

At the beginning of the play, O'Casey portrays Bessie as a Protestant drunk. . 'She is a woman of forty, vigorously built. Her face is a dogged one, hardened by toil and a little coarsened by drink.'⁴³

⁴² Murray.p.189.

⁴³ Ibid. p.167.

However at the end of the play, she is portrayed as a heroine who was killed trying to protect her Catholic neighbour from soldiers firing at their room in the tenement. Perhaps this is one of the final ironies of the play. It is interesting to note that it is this theme, this tragic irony in the context of rebellion and war that the audience is finally left with in the closing moments of the play. It is a time of questioning, a time of self-assessment in our attitudes to grief, suffering and war. The play ends with British soldiers quietly singing a song synonymous with the Great War, 'Keep the home fires burning.' The singing of this particular song has nothing to do with Dublin burning as if it was sung in some kind of joking or jingoistic manner. That is not what O'Casey intended. The scene and atmosphere is very sombre with the bodies of two dead women lying on the stage and the song reflects that mood. It is dead Irish women that O'Casey presents in the final scene of the play; one the mother of an Irishman serving his King and Country as a British soldier in France, the other the wife of an Irish volunteer fighting for Ireland's freedom in Dublin. That very scene set against the soldiers quietly singing that emotive song in those final moments captured and distilled Irish history to its very essence. That is why I believe O'Casey got it right. *Good man O'Casey, good man.*

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