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REFLECTIONS ON THE GREAT WAR

Diarmuid Kingston



The Great War – An Introduction

The First World War or, as it is often called, the Great War, was the first major global conflict; it involved twenty-eight nations on six continents. More than 65,000,000 men were mobilised. Although mortality figures will never be accurately known, studies estimate that between 10,000,000 and 13,000,000 combatants perished in battle or from wounds and diseases directly related to the war, and a further 21,000,000 were wounded in varying degrees of severity.¹ This war was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir-presumptive to the Habsburg throne of Austria-Hungary and his wife, the Duchess Sophie, by student and Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip in the city of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, on 28 June 1914.² As inspector general of the armed forces, the archduke, accompanied by the duchess, arrived by train in Sarajevo that morning to observe the annual manoeuvres of two Austrian army corps that had been stationed there since the province of Bosnia-Herzegovina was annexed some six years previously in 1908.³ The killings set off a diplomatic crisis when Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum to Serbia, whom they accused of being acquiescent in the killings,

though this was strenuously denied by the Serbian government and in the aftermath of the war, the accusation was never proven.⁴ The end result was that international alliances founded over previous decades were invoked and within weeks, the major powers were at war. The conflict quickly spread to engulf the entire continent of Europe and eventually, reach all corners of the globe.⁵



Fig. 1: Franz Ferdinand and his family c. 1910. Maximilian stands next to his mother with the young Ernst seated at left. Sophie, named after her mother, is in centre of photo (Source: Imperial War Museum, copyright expired).

At the beginning of hostilities, Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, entered the war as one of the Triple Entente Powers along with France and the Russian Empire in opposition to the Central Powers consisting of the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Bulgaria.⁶ As the conflict gathered pace, most Irish people, regardless of political affiliation, supported the war in much the same way as their British counterparts and backed the British war efforts.⁷ The leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, John Redmond, promised the support of the Irish Volunteers which had been founded in 1913 to defend the right of Home Rule or self-government for Ireland. Many of its members, on Redmond's advice, enlisted with Irish regiments in the British Army. In addition, the Catholic Church in Ireland initially gave its blessing and support to the participation of Irishmen in the war since the first two countries to be overrun by the Germans – neutral Belgium and Luxembourg – had predominately Catholic populations.⁸ After receiving the basic minimum of military training, the Irish soldiers were transported to the battlefields of Belgium and France.⁹

The following reflection was inspired by a number of ex-servicemen that fought in the Great War; they lived in the Timoleague/Lislevane area and I recall them from my younger days. They were typical of many from the wider West Cork area that answered the call to duty and enlisted in the British Armed Forces and were fortunate enough to make it safely back home.

A Survivor from the Great War

He walked with a shuffling gait, said to be from a shrapnel injury received in the advance on Amiens. I recall him from the 1960s, tall and gaunt with a favourable disposition towards our eager expectations of generosity when it came to birthdays, communions and confirmations. Always impeccably dressed in a dark suit with starched shirt and matching tie, he had an air about him of both mystery and respectability. But with an aloofness that set him apart. There was something slightly amiss though, it seemed that he did not quite belong. And looking back, was it any wonder since he must have looked death in the face so many times, each day, every night? Living with the endless torment of the trenches for so long, the mud and water, the deadly poisonous gases, the rats, the stench of rotting flesh.

You were the youngest son and knew your place. Not here on sound solid land but you dreamed of far-away places, across calm blue seas and raging oceans, your sights firmly set on wider horizons that took in the broadest plains and highest mountains. Nineteen-fourteen was a landmark year for you too. In September of that year, you decided to enlist, to answer the call to arms. You believed in the solidarity of Europe and in the freedom of all nations, big and small. You would go to the aid of countries like little Belgium and Luxembourg that had been overrun by the power-hungry Kaiser. You believed it was your duty to stand up and be counted, that freedom anywhere should never be taken for granted. And now, with the final passing of the Home Rule Bill for Ireland, it was guaranteed that your country's future would be secure once the bill's suspension was lifted as soon as this war was over. This would not be long, some commentators predict the fighting will be as good as over and victory assured for Christmas.

But this war, 'the war to end all wars', dragged on for so long, millions died in the trenches, in the dykes and ditches. Many died because weak-minded generals threw thousands of men at hopeless situations. Some with their minds scattered, like the body parts of their comrades, were executed as deserters. It is believed that over 50,000 Irishmen died on land, sea and air in the cause of freedom in the Great War. You were one of the luckier ones, not permanently maimed or disabled for life. After all, a pronounced limp, this step and three-quarters, is in a totally different category. When peace finally comes, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, you are thankful and look forward to Christmas and the New Year at last at home in your beloved West Cork.

But you are not welcomed back with open arms. Rather, you are warned to keep your head down, well below the parapet. This country you are returning to, bears little semblance to the one you had left a few years before. All had 'changed, changed utterly', to paraphrase the poet.¹⁰ In Dublin, after the Easter Rising, General Maxwell had shown he was cast in the same mould as those generals and their subordinates who ruled on the western front. An example must be made to maintain discipline. All along the front line, the brutal reality was that those battalions of fighting men were expendable as long as they were replaceable.

After you returned home, it is said you did not go to Mass, church nor meeting. This may well have been a wise decision. Of your many comrades that did venture out, some were looked upon with suspicion and never

returned to their homes. Easy targets, they were duly found shot to death in dark alleyways or by the side of lonely country roads, a placard pinned on their chests, declaring to the world, 'traitors and spies beware'.

Even when 'The Troubles' were over and independence achieved, you seldom went anywhere except for the odd pint to the local. This visit also ceased when you once wore a poppy on Remembrance Day to the memory of all Irishmen and Irishwomen that died in the Great War. You never recovered from the abuse suffered at the hands of those people who branded you a disgrace to your country, a traitor and a coward. You did not try to explain your motives or, indeed, the reasons why hundreds of thousands of Irishmen and Irishwomen also stood up for what they believed was right. You did not try to reason with fixated minds that could never reach a fair conclusion on events and circumstances that occurred in real time. You knew it would be a pointless exercise.

You died and we buried you quietly without trumpet or fanfare. But as we closed your coffin, I recall, you still had that slightly bemused look on your face.

A Comment on Francis Ledwidge – An Irish Poet of the Great War

This year, 2017, is the centenary of the death of Irish poet, Francis Edward Ledwidge, also known as the 'Poet of the Blackbirds'. Born in Janeville, Slane, Co. Meath, on 19 August 1887, he was killed in action a few weeks short of his thirtieth birthday, in the Battle of Passchendaele, 31 July 1917.¹¹ He was one of nine children born to farm labourer Patrick Ledwidge and Anne Lynch. His father died when he was four years old and when his younger brother, Joseph, was a baby of just three months. The burden of rearing such a large family fell on the shoulders of their mother, Anne. She laboured in the fields and big houses to ensure her family's survival. When Ledwidge's elder brother, Patrick, contracted tuberculosis and died, the family lost another breadwinner.¹²

Ledwidge left school at thirteen and worked as a farmer's boy for the next two years until his mother found him a position as a grocer's assistant in Dublin. But he missed rural life with its unspoilt nature, birds and wild flowers so much that, one night, unable to sleep, he dressed himself and walked the thirty miles back to Slane, arriving home at six in the morning.¹³

Following this, he worked at a number of jobs in the Slane area including that of farmhand, groom, roadworker and miner. He was also a keen political activist. When working in the nearby Beuparc copper mines, he was dismayed at the conditions that prevailed and organised a strike for better working conditions.¹⁴ He was promptly fired. As well, he was general secretary of the Slane branch of Meath Labour Union and elected a member of Navan Rural Council.¹⁵ Ledwidge and his younger brother, Joe, were founding members of the Slane branch of Irish Volunteers, set up in 1913 in response to Carson's Ulster Volunteers.¹⁶

By this time, Ledwidge was already an established poet having come under the patronage of the local Lord Dunsany, who introduced him into Dublin literary circles. When England declared war on Germany and nationalist leader John Redmond called on all Irishmen to support the British war effort, Ledwidge was the only member of the rural council to vote against a motion to support Redmond.¹⁷ However, a few weeks later, Ledwidge was to change his mind and enlist with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers at Navan.¹⁸ He later wrote of his decision:

I joined the British army because England stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation and I would not have it said that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions.¹⁹

Another reason suggested was his failed romance with local girl, Ellie Vaughey, who had helped him get published in the *Drogheda Independent*. She married another and settled in Manchester; but sadly died in childbirth in 1915.²⁰ Ledwidge was to write many elegies to Ellie that included poignant lines of imagery on blackbirds and nature.²¹

Ledwidge was a committed Irish nationalist and a firm believer that freedom should be defended whenever it was attacked. When Britain and her allies had to withdraw from Serbia and retreat to Salonika, Ledwidge was injured in the evacuation.²² He was recuperating in hospital in Manchester when he heard of the execution in Dublin of his friend and fellow poet, Thomas MacDonagh. Two of Ledwidge's best known poems, 'Lament for Thomas MacDonagh' and 'Lament for the Poets of 1916', are from this period.²³ On 31 July 1917, Ledwidge's company was engaged in road repairs near Ypres in Belgium when

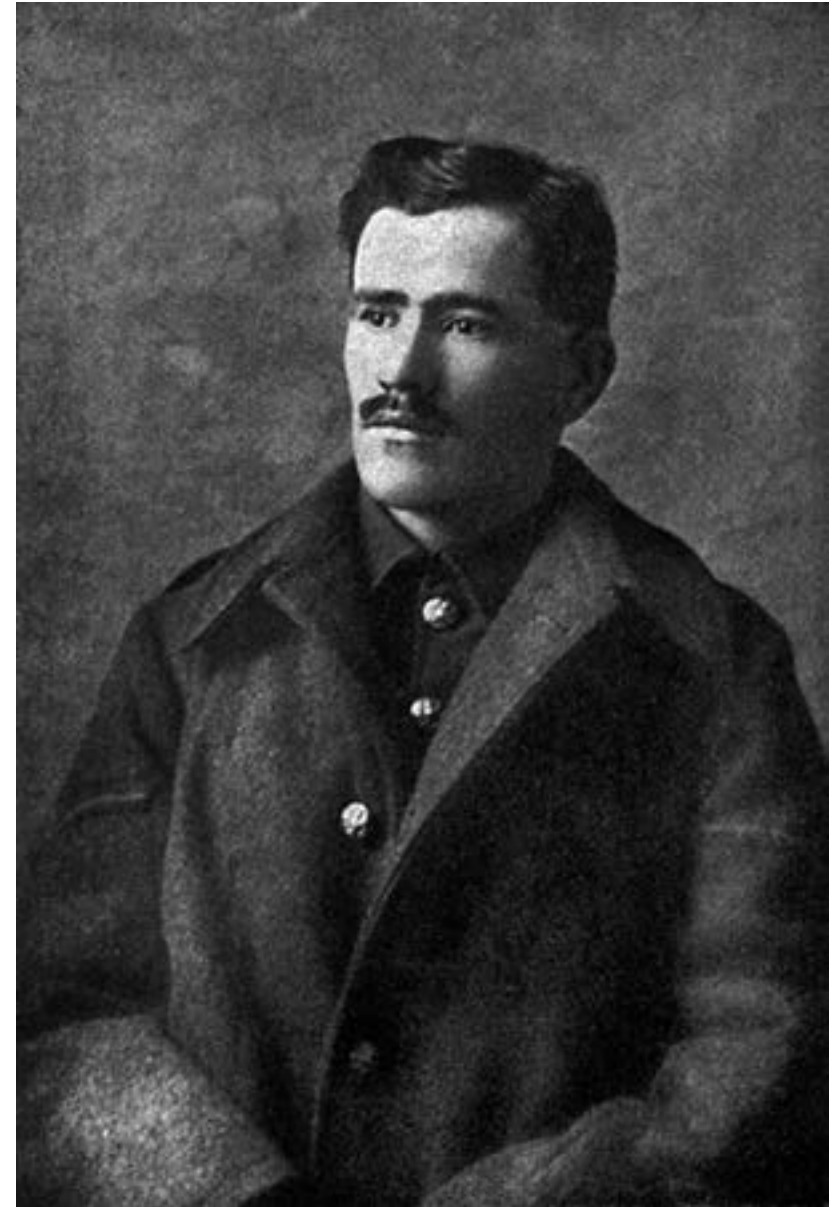


Fig. 2: Francis Ledwidge in uniform (From *The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge*. 1919. London, copyright expired).

a shell exploded near them, killing Ledwidge and five others. They were buried where they fell but were later re-interred at nearby Artillery Wood Cemetery where a monument was erected.²⁴

Lament for Thomas MacDonagh

He shall not hear the bitter cry
In the wild sky where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds,
Above the wailing of the rain.

Nor shall he know when loud March blows
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,
Blowing to flame the golden cup
Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor
And pastures poor with greedy weeds
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

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