The Great War (1914-1918) and some effects on Clare

At least 4,000 Claremen served as soldiers during World War I, and at least 400 of them lost their lives. In the County, the tiny minority Anglo-Irish population were loyal in their support for the war effort. Equally enthusiastic for the war, at least in its early stages, were the over-whelming Nationalist majority population. While Nationalist support was less forthcoming in the wake of the Easter Rebellion in 1916, the results of the East Clare bye-election of 1917 still showed one-third of the electorate continuing to support the Irish Party's commitment to war.

War was declared on 4 August 1914, but shortly before the declaration of war reservists were called to rejoin their units. Clare reservists attached to the Second Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers saw action, when they were surrounded at Erreux during the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force on 27 and 28 August. The losses were 120 dead and over 600 taken prisoner, among which were 50 Claremen.

Since Clare formed part of the Regimental area of the Royal Munster Fusiliers, the largest contingent of Claremen to serve were members of the 'Munsters', though others were to be found in all sixteen Irish Regiments of the British Army, and in other regiments and special corps. In addition, Claremen served in the armies of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, South Africa and India. Of those who served in the local regiment - The Munsters - some 170 were killed in action or died of wounds.

Some of the soldiers were regulars who had seen service in India and South Africa, others were ex-soldiers or part-time soldiers who formed a reserve. Most, however, were volunteers who joined for a variety of reasons - seeking adventure, escaping poverty, fighting for the freedom of small nations, defending Catholic Poland and Belgium or responding to pressure from peers or employers. As might be expected, the small Anglo-Irish community, which had traditionally provided officer-material, gave a very high percentage of recruits in proportion to their numbers.

A squad of Royal Munster Fusiliers at an unidentified barracks. There were 10 battalions of the RMF and Claremen made up from 5%-17% of the battalions. The soldier seated on the right is Private Peter Moloney of Clonlara, Ennis, who was killed by a stray shell at Ypres in 1917. Beside him is his brother Jimmy who survived the war and returned to live in Ennis. Photo courtesy of Michael Kenny.
ENLISTED MEN

The Nationalist recruits were largely the poor of the towns and villages. Kilrush had 416 recruits, 106 of whom were employees of Glynn’s. Ennis is said to have provided 1,100 soldiers, 538 of whom were claimed to be members of Ennis and District United Labourers’ Association. Public service employees, such as members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, Post Office workers, and local authority officials were expected to join the colours. The RIC recruits usually enlisted in the Irish Guards — a prestigious regiment whose members usually exceeded six feet and enjoyed an impeccable reputation.

Given the family background, it was common for brothers to enlist. In Kilrush, five brothers from the Keane and Devers families enlisted, while from Newmarket-on-Fergus there were five Molneans, all pre-war regulars. In Ennis, Colour Sergeant Deane had four sons, two step-sons and one son-in-law serving.

The first reported wounded were three members of the Royal Munster Fusiliers invalided home after the Earls Kenneth engagement; the first Clare soldier reported killed was Martin Scully, of Kilkee, who had previously been wounded in the Boer War. Private Kidney, of Ennis, and a member of the ill-fated Second Battalion of the ‘Munsters’ was visited by the King and Queen while convalescing in London. John Behan, of Kilkee, was the first Clare sailor reported killed; he lost his life on the ‘Monmouth’. Perhaps the most celebrated hero was Sergeant Michael Butler of Cloughleigh, Ennis, who was awarded the DCM, but had been recommended for the Victoria Cross. When he returned home, he was welcomed by a distinguished gathering of local worthies. However, on going back to the front he was killed.

THE OFFICERS

The Clare officers were either pre-war regulars or professional or educated young men who joined as volunteers. Most of these came from the Anglo-Irish community: the extended Hickman family provided seventeen officers. Later on, leaders and officers of the National Volunteers who enlisted were given commissions. The first reported death of a Clare officer was that of Capt. H.M.C. Vandeleur of Raheane, who was killed in action on 14 September 1914. Capt. Bowen-Colthurst, brother-in-law of Lord Dunboyne of Knappogue Castle, was the first officer to be reported wounded. It will be remembered, that later during the Easter Rebellion, this same man murdered six people, including the journalist and pacifist Sheehy-Skeffington.

Perhaps Clare’s most famous officer was Capt. William Redmond, who was killed with the Ulster Division in 1917. Another notable national Volunteer officer was Lieut. Dan O’Brien, of Clarecastle, who was a member of Clare County Council and Chairman of Ennis District Council. He enlisted in March 1915 and unfortunately received an undignified wound in the posterior during training. The local press were at pains to suppress this incident to avoid declaring the propaganda value of such a recruit. O’Brien was later to die in action in Flanders on 10 November 1917.

PRISONERS OF WAR

The local prisoners’ organisation listed 91 Clare POWs. Most of these had been in Limburg Jail, where some 2,500 Irish POWs were detained. Sir Roger Casement attempted to recruit an Irish Brigade to fight against the Allies from the ranks of the POWs; he succeeded in persuading a little over fifty to do so. Those Clare POWs who were in German hands did not fare that badly compared to those captured by the Bulgarians and the Turks. Towards the end of the war, in March 1918, many prisoners were taken. These were sent to the Russian Front and when hostilities ceased they made their way home by way of Danzig and the Shetland Islands. Among these prisoners was Michael O’Mara of Kilkee. On their home-coming, dances and fetes were held in their honour, and each received £1.

THE HOME FRONT

The first weeks of war was a time of rumours and scares: An English artist sketching at Kilkee was arrested as a suspected spy... Rumours of gun-running were rife in Foynes.
and Kilkee ... Destroyers had been seen off the coast and in North Clare the boom of naval guns was heard ... A mine exploded off Doonbeg ... In Ennis, it was said that a lady’s hand with rings on its fingers had been found in a German soldier’s knapsack ... The price of horses for the Army rose to between £25 and £45 ... Bishop Fogarty announced that the war was an act of ‘Divine Wrath’.

Shortly after the declaration of war, all German and Austrian subjects in Clare were interned. Most were hotel employees and included managers, chefs and waiters, working in Lahinch, Lisdoonvarna and Kilkee. Also arrested were jewellers and watchmakers in Ennis and Ennistymon. Mrs. Dolger of Ennis, whose husband was interned, was awarded eight shillings allowance per week by the Ennis Board of Guardians. German-born Mrs. Carroll, of Edenvale near Ennis, had to report weekly to the RIC.

In 1918, a mysterious figure came ashore on Grab Island, off Doolin, and was rowed to the mainland by two local fishermen. When he tried to exchange gold at an Ennistymon bank, he was arrested and transferred to the Tower of London. ‘The man in the Tower’ as he came to be termed in the press, was revealed to be Lance Corporal John Dowling of the Connaught Rangers at his subsequent trial. He had been a member of Casement’s Irish Brigade.

Belgian refugees fleeing before the invading Germans were offered accommodation in Clare, and being Catholics they were particularly welcome. In November 1914, a concert was held in Ennis to aid them and before long a number had been settled: eleven refugees were settled in Clarecastle by January 1915; Lord Inchiquin provided two houses in Newmarket-on-Fergus; a house was provided in Sixmilebridge.

In Ennis, the Ordnance House was used to accommodate refugees. In March 1915, two families had arrived, two more were expected and the local committee requested a further two families. In order to earn some sort of income, several refugees offered classes in French. The boys, on reaching military age, returned to enlist in the Belgian Army. A further fund-raising concert was held in Ennis in November 1915 and the last reference to the Belgian refugees in the local press was in October when it was noted that some were living in an Ennis hostel.

**KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING**

In addition to those involved in the Belgian Refugee Fund, there were a number of other local support groups. The first Red Cross unit in Clare was formed in August 1914; other organisations of a like nature included the Clare Needlework Guild, Discharged and Disabled Soldiers and Sailors Federation and the Prisoners Aid Organisation. These organisations mainly consisted of Anglo-Irish locals, some Nationalist politicians, clergy and ex-servicemen. At the end of the war many of these bodies were disbanded and others were amalgamated to form the British Union.

Concerted efforts at recruiting for the Forces would seem to have reached a high point in 1915, when atrocity stories of German actions and the mistreatment of nurses became a regular feature in the local press. The sinking of the ‘Lusitania’, on 7 May of that year, caused recruitment to rise to 40 per day in Ennis. It was reported that Maj. Wilfred Dulken had recruited over 2,000 men at the Ennis Depot between 3 February and 14 June.

The local papers also carried items with a strong local flavour to promote enlisting in the Army. Propaganda poetry with titles such as ‘Shall the Germans encamp by the Fergus’, and ‘Labasheeda Hero’, which celebrated a local named Corry of the Irish Guards, frequently appeared in the columns. The enlistment of John Fox, of Newmarket-on-Fergus, a member of the 1914 All-Ireland team was given due prominence, as was that of P.E. Kennelly, Chairman of Ennis U.D.C. Letters from the Front were often reproduced; the most notable of these being the three letters of Fr. Michael Moran of Tullamore, Inch, who was one of twelve Clare chaplains to serve.

Visits from bands formed part of the recruiting cam-
The military funeral of Nurse Grace Sweeney, sister of M. Sweeney, the photographer who took this photograph at Aldershot in 1916. Nurse Sweeney had volunteered to nurse soldiers with Spotted Fever, a form of typhus. Her noble act resulted in her contracting the virus, which led to her death. Photo courtesy of Miss Sweeney.

The band of the 8th Battalion of the Royal Munster Fusiliers visited Ennis twice while the Irish Guards Fife and Drum Band also paraded. A more high-powered effort was undertaken in early August 1915, when the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Wimborne, conducted a recruiting drive in the county. In Kilrush he was greeted by the political, business and clerical leaders, Allied flags were flown and shouts of 'Down with Huns' were roared: in Kilkee, the local band played 'Rule Britannia' and in Quilty, he was met by County and District Councilors; in Miltown he was welcomed by Canon Hannon and P.H. O'Neill, a prominent merchant, while at Ennistymon, Fr. Hynes and the Board of Guardians, with an honour guard drawn from the RIC and the National Volunteers, turned out to greet him. A similar reception awaited him in Ennis, where the platform group included all the members of the UDC, some of whom, like T.V. Honan, were later to be prominent in Sinn Fein. However, the tide of enthusiasm would seem to have been on the ebb, as, just one month later the Ennis UDC declared itself against conscription.

LIFE GOES ON

The wives of serving soldiers were known as 'Separation Women' and received an allowance. In February 1915 we find Mrs. F.N. Studdert warning against soldiers' dependents claiming credit in Ennis shops, as in her opinion the dependents were receiving adequate allowances. A court in Ennis in October 1916 reckoned that there were ten Ennis women abusing the allowance scheme. Sneering reports of brawls by drunken wives of soldiers were carried in the local press.

Despite the war and the ripples it caused at home, ordinary life went on as usual: The Clare Hunt met a number of days each week: the County Sanatorium, at Ballyalla, was accidentally destroyed by fire in April 1915: the following year Mabel Waring, of Ennis, was married and a list of guests and the presents they had given appeared in the paper: Signora Marconi — wife of the inventor of radio and sister of Lord Inchiquin — was appointed Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen of Italy.

The needs for diversion and entertainment were well provided in Clare. The Picture Palace, in Ennis, offered its patrons such cinematic delights as 'The Sign of the Cross', 'Greed', 'The Mill on the Floss' and 'The Whip' in addition to newscasts from the war. Dr. Fogarty wrote a letter to the newspaper congratulating Mr. P.J. Limane, Ennis UDC member, for condemning a film as immoral. The showing of this film was defended in a further letter from 'John Halifax', who stated that the book from which the film was derived had received wide-spread circulation without harming public morals, adding that bicycles and the picture house had done much for temperance.

Theatre was provided by both local groups and visiting...
troupes of actors: Payne Seddon’s London Company, La Comédie Anglaise Company and Miss Kit Tom’s Company were among many who trod the stage in Ennis during the course of the war. In Kilrush, the townpeople were treated to operetta in July 1917 and in 1918 the Ennis Dramatic Society performed ‘The Colleen Bawn’ for the benefit of the poor of the town.

Race meetings and regattas were held widely and 1917 saw the holiday season break all records at Kilkee and Lisdoonvarna. Fund-raising fetes were held at the homes of members of the gentry and dances and Balls were held by various social and political groups. In February 1915, the Ancient Order of Hibernians used Ennis Court House, decked with Allied flags, as the venue for its Ball. By May 1918, however, it did not occasion surprise that the Newmarket GAA Concert ended with the singing of ‘A Nation once Again’. 

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

The Easter Rebellion had little effect in Clare. Some men gathered at Bunratty, Carragholt, Kildysert, Cranny and Corofin, and individuals took action in Kilrush and Ennistymon. The first Clare casualty was Constable Lahiffe, a native of Tullabrine and a member of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Also in Dublin, Mr. Mechan of Ennis, who was visiting his invalid daughter, was knocked down and killed by a military vehicle. In all, about twenty Claremen, including a few arrested in Dublin, were interned in Wales.

The execution of the leaders of 1916 resulted in a more widespread acceptance of the ideas of Irish Independence and a rejection of the notions of Imperialism. 1917 saw the election of Eamonn de Valera in the bye-election that followed the death of the sitting MP Capt. Redmond and later that year the first attack on an RIC hut took place at Inch, an action which was condemned by the Inch company of the Irish Volunteers in a letter to the Saturday Record of 26 December. The following year, extensive cattle drives and the malicious ploughing of estates became common. At Castletenguins, John Ryan became the first Clare Volunteer to fall at the hands of the RIC, who claimed that they were threatened by a 300-strong party of cattle drivers. The following day, 2 March 1918, Clare was put under Martial Law.

On 30 March, Thomas Russell, a teacher from Kerry, died from a bayonet wound as he presided at a Sinn Féin meeting in Carragholt, when the meeting was surprised by a patrol of soldiers arriving from Kilrush by speed-boat.

The ‘War to end all wars’ itself ended at 11 a.m. on the eleventh day of the eleventh month (November) 1918, after one-thousand-five-hundred-and-fifty-nine days of fighting. Of those who died in the hostilities, half had no known grave, 30% of soldiers had been wounded and almost all had suffered psychologically. Later, men who had fought side-by-side in the trenches were to face each other as members of the Crown Forces or the Irish Volunteers, and later still, as Republicans against the Free State Army. When peace was restored many had to emigrate, either from economic necessity or fear of reprisal. No doubt, it would not have been difficult to find those who would agree with Christopher Marlowe:

Accurst be he that first invented war.

The above article is mainly based on newspaper reports of the period and the recollections of survivors as heard from the people themselves or recounted by relatives. The author is engaged on the preparation of a detailed account of the years 1914-1922 in County Clare.