

Template cover sheet which must be included at the front of all projects

Title of project: The First World War in Omagh

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The Significance of the First World War

What makes an event significant? How do we measure significance? What makes one event more significant than the other? These are questions we have pondered over when considering the significance of the First World War.

There can be no doubt that the First World War was a significant event in our history. A 'strange sort of conflict' as the chair of the West Tyrone Historical Association called it. And it was. It was hugely significant and is a major part of our history. The word 'our' also being something we have engaged in and discussed when researching this conflict. In the words of author and historian Jude Collins, 'Whose past is this anyway'? Whose story is it?

In tackling such questions we have discovered that public thinking on the war and its significance has changed. In Northern Ireland, and in Omagh, it was once common only for Unionists to commemorate the war, while Nationalists almost completely ignored forebears' service in an army which many saw as that of an occupying power. Yet in recent years there has been much grassroots nationalist engagement, and even Sinn Fein figures now take some part in commemoration. Meanwhile, in the Irish Republic over the past 20 years, there has been a steady engagement of political leaders who would once have boycotted ceremonies, paving the way for The Queen's ground-breaking acts of commemoration here in 2011.

Such changes took investments of time and money – both from government and from individuals who work in the many different areas of First World War history. We hope that through this project we have paid tribute to sacrifice, but also remembering survivors and service, and more accurately understanding the true significance of the Great War.

"The hope is that, by recovering the memory of the common suffering of all sorts of Irish - Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist - in World War One, the peace process in contemporary Northern Ireland, aiming to heal its equivalent shared suffering, might markedly be advanced. And if it does this, then surely the Irish fallen of World War one may not have died in vain."

Professor Keith Jeffery¹

¹ Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*

The Great War and Omagh

When the Great War began in 1914 many thousands of men from the North West of Ireland enlisted in Omagh. There were recruiting meetings in the town and a special camp was set up in the holm behind St. Lucia to house them.



In this photograph the band used in the recruiting campaign is seen passing the Sacred Heart Church in the snow.²



The men trained together at St. Lucia barracks and the land that eventually became the 'Lisanelly' barracks was also a training ground for these men.

A view from St. Lucia looking North. This land eventually became the site of the Lisanelly barracks and today this land will house the first shared educational campus in Omagh.³

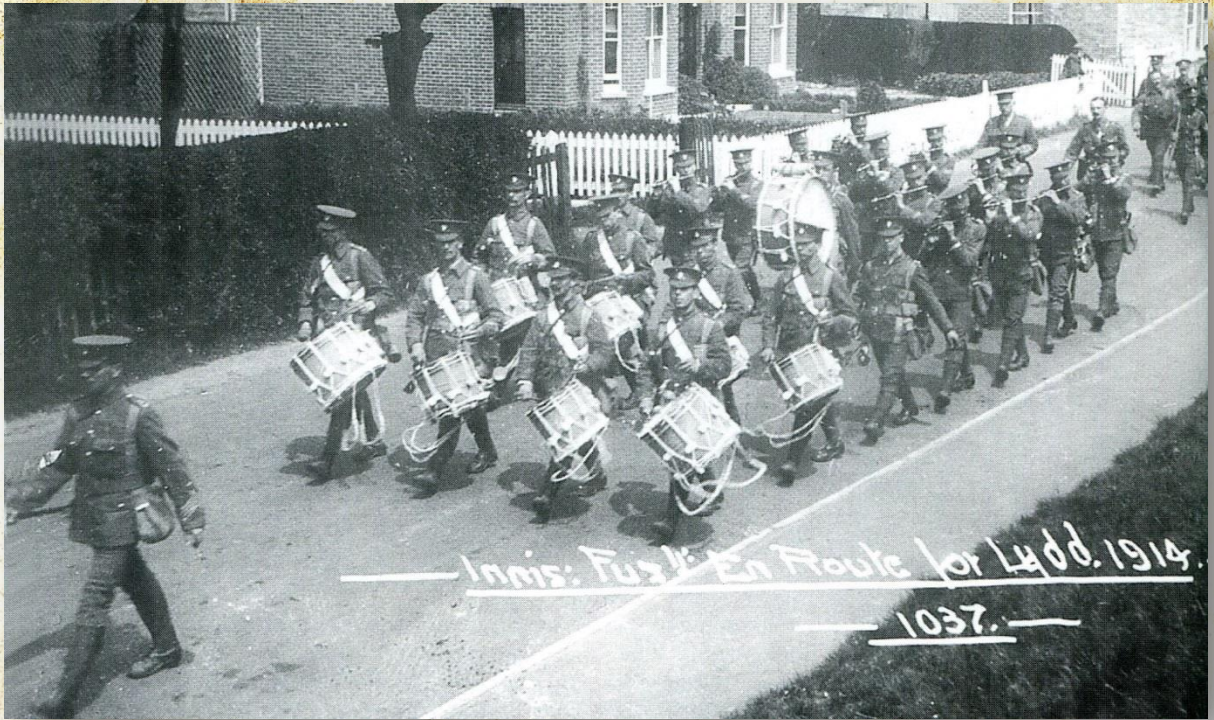
² Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 20.

³ Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 12.



⁴Here we have an image of the 2nd Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, including many men from Omagh and district, going off to war. They were to fight at Le Cateau, The Retreat from Mons, the Battles of the Marne, The Aisne, First Ypres and Neuve Chapelle. Very few of the original drafts survived to participate in the Battle of the Somme. The officer on the horse in the centre of the picture looking at the camera is Lieutenant Charlie Alexander of Termon House, Carrickmore, who was transport officer for the battalion.

⁴Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 110.



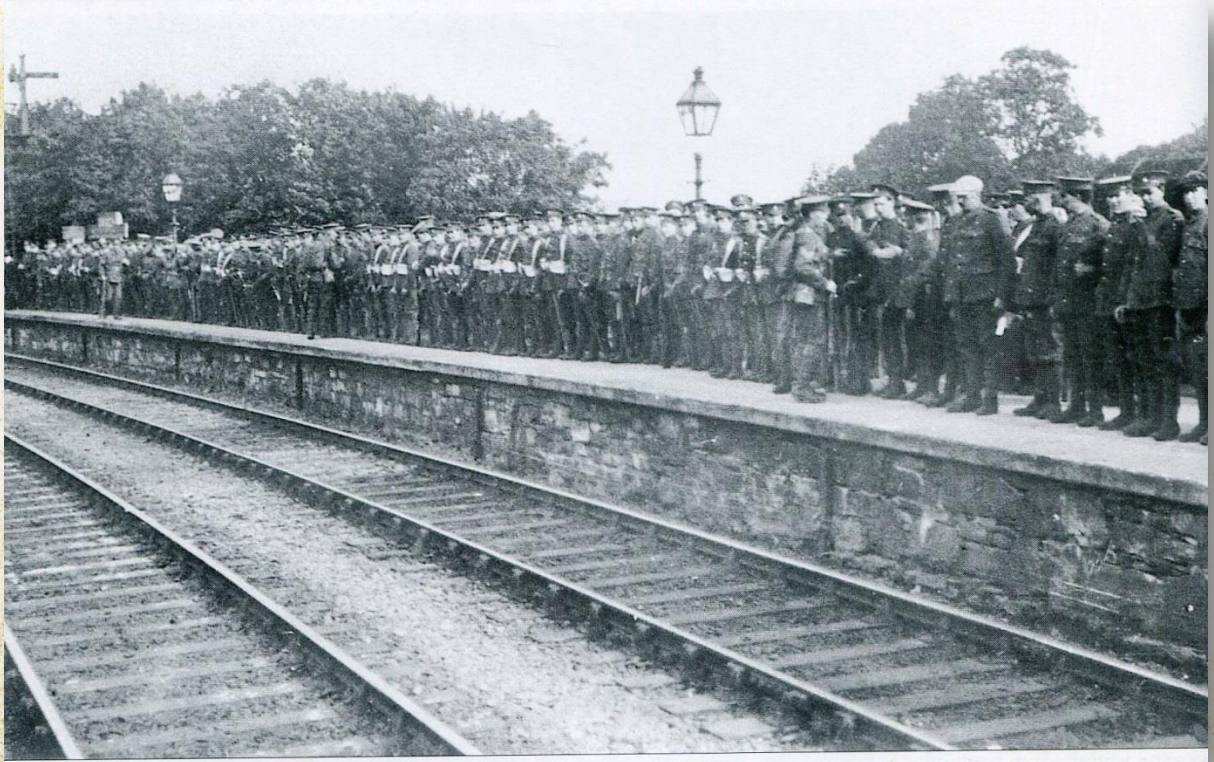
⁵ Here we have the 2nd Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers led by their band en route for Lydd prior to embarkation to France and their first confrontation with the enemy in Belgium, 1914.



The 6th Battalion marching along James street to the Railway station, and hence to Randalstown before leaving for the Front, 1914. ⁶

⁵ Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 28.

⁶ Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 21.



⁷Here we see the 6th Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers waiting at the station in Omagh in 1914. Little did these naïve young men realise what was waiting for them in France and Belgium.

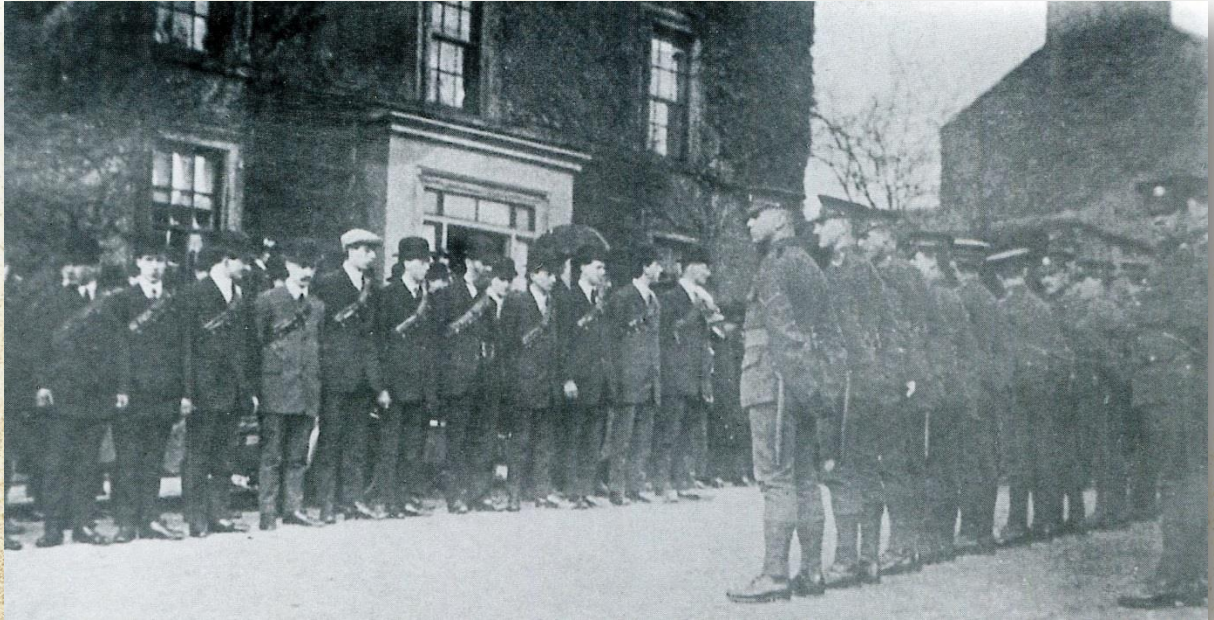
The interesting thing we uncovered in our research about the impact of the War in Omagh is how much this was a shared war. The men who enlisted came from both sides of the community, Catholic and Protestant. In fact the latest figures suggest that 55% of the men who left Ireland to enlist in the War were from a Nationalist or Catholic background. Yet amongst the Nationalist community and especially in what became the Republic of Ireland; it is almost like these men's sacrifice is forgotten. A type of historical amnesia has happened. However Bernadette McAliskey points out in 'Whose past is it anyway?' that the homes of those soldiers never forgot. Their mothers never forgot, it was the state that 'forgot'. "In the real communities of real people, real grandfathers and real fathers died there, and they were never, ever forgotten."⁸ This issue of remembrance and how we remember the war we will cover later in our project.

To illustrate our point that this was indeed a shared war we have uncovered this fascinating photograph taken on 21st March 1914 taken outside St. Columba's church. Ireland is in a ferment over the Home Rule Crisis yet here we see the total absence of ill feeling between

⁷ Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 22.

⁸ Jude Collins, Whose past is it anyway?, Pg. 189

the 'imported' soldiers and Carson's volunteers. At Omagh, 100 of the Bedfordshire regiment and 50 of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers along with 200 Ulster Volunteers met at a church parade. "They shared the same hymn book, sang 'God Save the King' and even saluted." Quote from Daily Sketch, 25th March, 1914.⁹



This 'integration' of the soldiers was not something extraordinary at this time in Omagh. The local community in general co-existed peacefully with each other and there was a genuine tolerance and respect for each other's traditions and beliefs. Perhaps it is significant now that the old St. Lucia and Lisanelly barracks is being transformed once again into a shared campus, this time an educational one, where once again the two communities, Catholic and Protestant, will work together side by side.

⁹ Haldane Mitchell, Images of Omagh, Vol 6 pg. 27.

Life at home during the War

The reality for people at home during the war was that life continued on as normal. Relatives and friends would wait for letter from their loved ones or read about battles in local newspapers.

As part of our research we visited the Ulster Herald offices in Omagh and accessed their archives.

Below is the official declaration of war in the Ulster Herald newspaper, dated 8th August 1914.

**ENGLAND DECLARES WAR
GERMANY.**

OFFICIAL DECLARATION.

STATE OF WAR EXISTS AS FROM 11 P.M. AUGUST 4th

The following is the text of the official declaration made by the British Government :-

Owing to the summary rejection by the German Government of the request made by his Majesty's Government that the neutrality of Belgium will be respected his Majesty's Ambassador at Berlin has received his passport, and his Majesty's Government has declared to the German Government that a state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany as from 11 p.m. on August 4th.

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CASUALTIES IN THE WAR.

Northern Officers and Men.

Second-Lieutenant William M. Hunter, Royal Irish Fusiliers, killed, was the fourth son of the late Mr. John Hunter and Mrs. Hunter, Barnhill House, Letterkenny. He had been accountant in the Belfast Bank, Ballyshannon.

Captain C. E. Cole Hamilton, Royal Scots, (accidentally killed in England), was a nephew of Lieut. Col. A. R. Cole Hamilton, D.L., Beltrim, Newtown Stewart.

Sergeant T. Harpur, Inniskilling Fusiliers, has been wounded by shrapnel in the left arm, and is in hospital in Dublin. Sergeant Harpur, who is a son of Mr. Harpur, Fairman Place, Derry, was an assistant in Mr. Malseed's establishment, Duke Street.

Mrs. E. Fulton, Wapping Lane, Derry, has been noticed that her husband, Lance-Corporal R. Fulton, Inniskilling Fusiliers (Derry Regiment), has been wounded for the second time, and is in hospital.

Mrs. Wylie, Edenmore Street, Derry, has received a postcard from her husband, Sergeant B. Wylie, Inniskilling Fusiliers, stating that he has been wounded in the left arm and shoulder, and is in hospital in France.

Sergeant Christopher Laird, Inniskilling Fusiliers, Ballyshannon, has died in France.

Mr. Robert Bennett, Carron, Trillick, has been informed that his son, Private Fred. G. Bennett, Dragoon Guards, has been dangerously wounded, and is in a base hospital in France.

Private Jeremiah M'Daid, Inniskilling Fusiliers, Letterkenny, was killed in action on the 7th June.

Private Edward Moran, Post Office Rifles, Drogheda, Tyrone, has been killed in action.

Private Joseph Cuthbertson, Inniskilling Fusiliers, Bundoran, who was previously reported missing, has been killed in action.

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers:—Missing—P. Connon, Derry; Cpl. G. Kerr, Omagh; O. McAleer, Newtown Stewart; Sergeant F. McCrory, Omagh; R. M'Daid, Burndennett; A. M'Laughlin, Derry; W. M'Sherry, Derry; J. Mullen, Fintona; J. Mullan, Derry; E. Reilly, Enniskillen; E. Sheehan, Derry; J. Taylor, Derry.

Pte. W. Downey, Derry, R. I. Regt., died of wounds. Pte. D. Bradley, Derry, is reported wounded.

ENNISKILLEN MARKETS.

Return for week ending Tuesday, 10th July, 1917.—Butts of butter in market, 202, from 1s 5d to 1s 7d per lb.; dead pigs, 110, from 127s to 137s per cwt.; oats, from 2s 9d to 3s per stone; hay, from 3s 6d. to 4s 6d per cwt.; straw, from 2s 6d to 3s 6d per cwt.; turnips, none; potatoes, from 1s 4d to 1s 6d per stone.

Although the media was censored back then reports of war casualties were published. This news report details the names of local men killed or injured. This would have been very difficult for the families seeing their loved ones name printed here.

Interesting to note that Lieutenants and Captains are reported on first then privates. The hierarchy exists even in death.

As if to highlight the fact that life just continues on regardless note the article underneath about Enniskillen Markets.

WAR NEWS.

BRITISH OFFENSIVE ON THE SOMME.

It is reported that on a front of 25 miles the Allies on the west front commenced the expected great offensive on the extreme right of the British line and left of the French, and on both sides of the Somme, early on Saturday morning, continued during the whole day, and through the night.

The artillery preparation by the British for the subsequent infantry assault is described as altogether unparalleled.

(Press Association War Special.)

Paris, Monday.—The semi-official statement issued last evening says:—

The French and British offensive was continued with desperation throughout the day and night of July 1 and the day of July 2. To-day's results were no less encouraging than yesterday's. We made fresh progress, repulsed all counter-attacks, and took a great number of prisoners.

In the British sector the struggle is particularly keen between the Ancre and Somme round the villages of Montauban (which was captured yesterday, violently counter-attacked during the night, and firmly held), Fricourt, which was carried this afternoon, and La Boisselle, where our Allies are making progress.

On the right wing held by the French the enemy several times made vigorous counter-attacks against our positions on the edge of the village of Hardecourt, but he was routed by our fire.

To the south we carried, after violent fighting, the village of Curlu, and a neighbouring quarry which had been strongly fortified.

South of the Somme we made a further advance and reached a number of points in the German second position on a front of about seven kilometres between the Somme and Assevillers.

This advance gave us the villages of Frise, only eight kilometres from Peronne, and also the Meriaucourt Wood, to the east.

In two days over 6,000 unwounded prisoners have fallen into the hands of the French, and the British on their side report having taken 3,500. Besides this, we have captured many guns and considerable war material.

The opening of battle has been magnificent, and the operations are continuing favourably, although the Germans are putting up strong resistance.

However, our progress must be expected to be relatively slow but sure, for the tactics employed consist in consolidating every gain before attacking the next objective. Let us therefore congratulate ourselves on the present success, and await the future with patience. The enemy has just sustained a very hard shock, which will be followed by many more.

Engaged as he is, on two wings, on the Somme and Meuse, and rebuffed before Verdun by our violent attacks, it seems an impossibility that he should be able to withstand the push which is going to be made against his without giving way. In any case the Germans are forced to admit our successes in their official communique.

They say, "We gained important advantages," adding, "We preferred to withdraw to a position situated midway between the first and second lines. Material which was permanently fixed in our advanced lines, and which, moreover, had been rendered useless, was lost, as is usual in such cases." The admission is significant.

Battle reports in the local media

Local media reports on the major battles during the War.

With the men away at the front fighting the reality for people at home was that life went on as normal. The media reported weekly on what was happening in the war but news was so heavily censored back then by the government that people were not getting an accurate description of what was actually happening. This newspaper report, accessed from the archives of 'The Ulster Herald', is about the Battle of the Somme. We now know that this battle took heavy casualties, especially Irish soldiers and a high volume on the first day, 5,500 killed, wounded or missing out of a total of about 15,000, and yet it has been reported as 'magnificent'.

The opening of the battle has been magnificent, and the operations are continuing favourably, although the Germans are putting up strong resistance.

THE STRUGGLE FOR YPRES.

Three Weeks Battle—Thrilling Narrative By Eye-Witness.

(PRESS ASSOCIATION WAS SPECIAL.)

PIESS BUREAU, Saturday, 10.30 a.m.

The following descriptive account, which has been communicated by an Eye-Witness present with the General Headquarters, continues and supplements the narrative published on the 16th inst. of the British force and the French armies in immediate touch with it.

18th May, 10.15.—The struggle for Ypres continued on Thursday, the 13th May. As already described, Wednesday, 12th, had been devoted to artillery action by both sides, and early in the morning of Thursday this was renewed with even greater violence, especially in the sector between the Ypres—St. Julian road and the Menin high road.

On the extreme right of this sector, immediately north of the high road, our troops held firm in spite of everything, but further to the north they fell back on to the supporting line. About the same time a strong infantry attack, supported with heavy artillery, was delivered against our position north of Wicke, and here

THE LINE WAS TEMPORARILY BROKEN, but a counter-attack was undertaken without delay, by which the Germans were forced back, and one line was re-established. In their advance in this quarter they suffered enormous losses. While this was going on our line between Verlorenhoek and the Ypres-Boulers railway was subjected to an even heavier bombardment, and a gap was thus made in our line. The enemy's infantry, however, did not attempt to push forward in large numbers, and by counter-attacking to the north of Hooge and in the neighbourhood of Verlorenhoek, we

SUCCEEDED IN RE-OCCUPYING OUR TRENCHES, or rather the crater which represented them

awaiting the signal for attack, a party of Germans was suddenly seen to bolt to the rear. Immediately someone raised the cry, "They're off," and our whole line raced forward. As they did so, all the German infantry, including those in the support and reserve trenches, broken and fled to the rear, suffering severely from our artillery and machine guns. In doing so we took some prisoners.

The position about Verlorenhoek was, however, subjected to a tremendous artillery and machine gun fire. During the night the line was re-established a little way behind the original trenches, which had been destroyed. Throughout these very trying operations, during which our men were often lying

EXPOSED FOR HOURS TO A MURDEROUS ARTILLERY FIRE.

They remained perfectly steady and unshaken, and were always perfectly ready to dig themselves in or to advance again against the enemy as the situation required. This was due in no small part to the devotion of the officers. One, and his case is not exceptional, whose thigh had been shattered by the splinter of a shell, refused to be carried away and lay on the ground in the open, giving orders and directing operations all through the fighting. When the retirement took place four of his men tried to rescue him. Three were shot in the attempt, and he ordered the fourth to leave him and rejoin his regiment. He was not recovered until the night of the 14th.

Thursday night passed quietly, and by the morning of Friday, the 14th, our line was strengthened and the enemy's further efforts were awaited with confidence. The shelling was less heavy, and the day passed without incident, no attempt or advance being made.

A number of Germans concentrating near the Ypres-Boulers railway, and to the west of Wicke, were fired on by our guns, and later on some could be seen digging themselves in along the Hannobeek stream near the line of trenches we had organised. This interval of

respite was supported by us in col-

lecting the wounded, many of whom were lying between the hostile lines. Our reconnoitring patrols reported that the ground was littered thickly with killed and wounded Germans and a quantity of equipment. The trenches on the previous day were noticed to be full of German equipment, which had been thrown away to facilitate their flight. The prisoners stated that their losses on the 13th had been very severe. Thus ended for the moment at least the protracted fighting round Ypres, which had been continued intermittently from April 22.

Throughout this three weeks' battle the enemy consistently held to his plan of driving us back on Ypres by means of simultaneous pressure from the north and east of the salient, his attacks being supported by a great mass of heavy artillery. These assaults have uniformly failed with enormous losses, although on a few occasions, where our first line trenches have been evacuated, the enemy has succeeded in occupying portion of our line, and our general front has had to be contracted.

THE GERMAN INFANTRY HAS BEEN SACRIFICED

with the usual disregard for loss, being used rather as a screen for machine guns and artillery than anything else. Wherever the fighting has resolved itself into purely infantry action, our men have proved their superiority again and again. There have indeed been many occasions both here and further south on which the German infantry in spite of its courage has shown a marked lack of training, discipline, and cohesion. And it would seem that it is now the enemy's policy to make up for any deficiency in such respects by strengthening the elaborate series of entrenchments behind their first line, and by multiplying the number of machine guns placed so as to bring cross fire to bear on every portion of the front.

The importance they attach to these weapons is shown by the fact that officers are now being employed to man them.

On the most of our line Friday was an eventful day. The Germans showed greater vigour in the early hours of the morning in the neighbourhood of Richebourg and Festubert, where they opened a rapid rifle fire, as if expecting an assault. They also shelled Be-thune intermittently without doing any damage of military importance. The day of the 15th also passed quietly, but during that night and before dawn of the 16th events were in progress on the portion of the front far removed from Ypres, which were to

RENDER SUNDAY THE REVERSE OF A DAY OF REST.

As has so frequently happened in this campaign, we renewed our attack between Richebourg, L'Ansois, and Festubert, in this area. As will be remembered, no progress had been made on the 9th May, but since then the whole of the enemy's defences, including the redoubts and machine posts in rear of the line, had been subjected to a deliberate and accurate artillery fire. Our renewed effort was made generally from that portion of our front which from Richebourg follows the line of the road, known as the Rue de Bois, running south of the road until it reaches the turning to La Quinke Rue, and then takes a turn southwards passing in front of Festubert. The first attack took place from our trenches in front of Richebourg at 11.30 p.m.

The enemy in this quarter was on the quiet, evidently expecting an attack. The moment our men left the trenches

THE WHOLE SKY WAS LIT UP WITH INNUMERABLE FLARES,

which shed a bright white light over a very large area. On the extreme left sector our advance was checked, many of our men being shot as they clambered over our own parapets, and a second attempt to push on made somewhat later, met with the same fate, but on the right sector we were more successful and the

assaulting troops at once gained the enemy's first line. Owing to the failure of the advance farther north, the left of this attack did not push on beyond the first line of German trenches, and threw back its flank to connect with our original line, but the centre and right were soon firmly established in the German second line, the gain of ground amounting to eight hundred yards in frontage and about six hundred in depth at the furthest point.

This attack near Richebourg, however, was only part of the whole operation planned, and four hours later, soon after three a.m., Sunday, another assault was carried out on the part of the line immediately to the north of L'Ansois.

It seems the Germans were not expecting a blow at this point and that their attention was fully occupied with our offensive farther north. Our infantry carried the whole of their entrenchments, which were of a most intricate character, without any great difficulty on a front of some twelve hundred yards, and such was their dash that they pressed on beyond the enemy's third line and rushed one supporting point after another, until at the furthest point they had

PENETRATED TWELVE HUNDRED YARDS BEHIND THE GERMAN FRONT.

In direction of the Rue du Marais over one hundred prisoners were taken, including three officers. There is no doubt that the Germans were taken by surprise and so some of them received the order to "Hands up."

As they set round the lines in dug-outs one captured non-commissioned officer said that they were engaged in carrying out a relief when our men were upon them, and that had our attack been delayed for a quarter of an hour they would have been ready for it. All the prisoners testified to the heavy casualties the enemy had suffered from our artillery fire in the past few days, and also the damage that had been inflicted on their artillery, four

field guns, howitzers, and many machine-guns having been destroyed. The position thus gained early on Sunday morning formed a couple of formidable wedges driven into the German line at a distance apart of about 1,000 yards. This intervening space, which was placed between two of his men, who were both suffering from very severe wounds. The day was chilly and he had only one blanket, and instead of asking for more he ordered the soldiers to give him them. He then went to sleep wrapped in three blankets, leaving his men to shiver with no covering. Throughout the day our guns hampered the reinforcements of the enemy's first line troops by shelling those who were seen concentrating in the rear, and they also made good practice against the hostile artillery.

At one period they stopped by their fire the progress of a convoy of forty motor-buses filled with troops, which were observed to be proceeding along the road from Labosse to Viduaire, accompanied by a body of infantry on foot. The infantry were dispersed. The result of the day was that the enemy's line was broken in two places over a front of some two miles, with as short a space in between, and that at one point we had penetrated right through his whole series of entrenchments.

AT THIS SPOT OUR LINE FORMED A PROMINENT SALIENT DEFENDED BY A BREASTWORK, and during the night the Germans counter-attacked and forced us to evacuate the most exposed portion of it.

All our other gains were maintained. Our troops were much encouraged by their success, by the number of prisoners taken, and at the manner in which the enemy were surprised in between. It was felt that the pressure exerted by us and by the French was having its effect on the German resistance, and was of good augury for the future.

command he seized one man, shook him, and suffer him unmercifully.

Another, and even a more surprising example of German methods, was recently given in hospital. A slightly wounded Prussian officer was strongly held and entrenched, included two lines of breastworks running from front to rear and constructed so as to give fire literally in both directions behind the front, and also a series of rebanks consisting of strongly-fortified posts and farm buildings connected by trenches. Against these we could for a time make no further progress, but on the right our men cleared the German first line trenches for three or four hundred yards towards Festubert, driving out the defenders with hand grenades thrown over the traverses. About 10.30 a.m. a determined effort was made to turn out and cut off the Germans in the space between the two portions of their position captured, by pressing on northwards from La Quinke Rue across their communications, but the attack failed. The enemy's breastworks were well armed with machine guns behind steel shields which could only be destroyed by high explosive. Another attempt in this direction made by us later met with the same result. During the afternoon, however, some little progress was made at various points by bombing parties working along trenches, and by evening two hundred prisoners had fallen into our hands. These prisoners varied greatly in quality, many being of the physique and of military bearing, and others appearing demoralised, untrained, and undisciplined.

THE OLDEST SOLDIERS SPOKE WITH GREAT CONTENTMENT

of the drafts they had latterly received. One batch of men was evidently composed of recruits. A German under-officer who was with them was told to fall them in for examination, but as they did not move on his word of

Here we have another local media news report dated 29th May 1915. This report is retelling the story of the Battle of Ypres which many local volunteers would have been involved in. The men are reported as being 'steady and unshaken' and 'have proven their superiority again and again'. These news reports would have kept the morale high at home and ensured continued support for the war.

The Ulster Herald

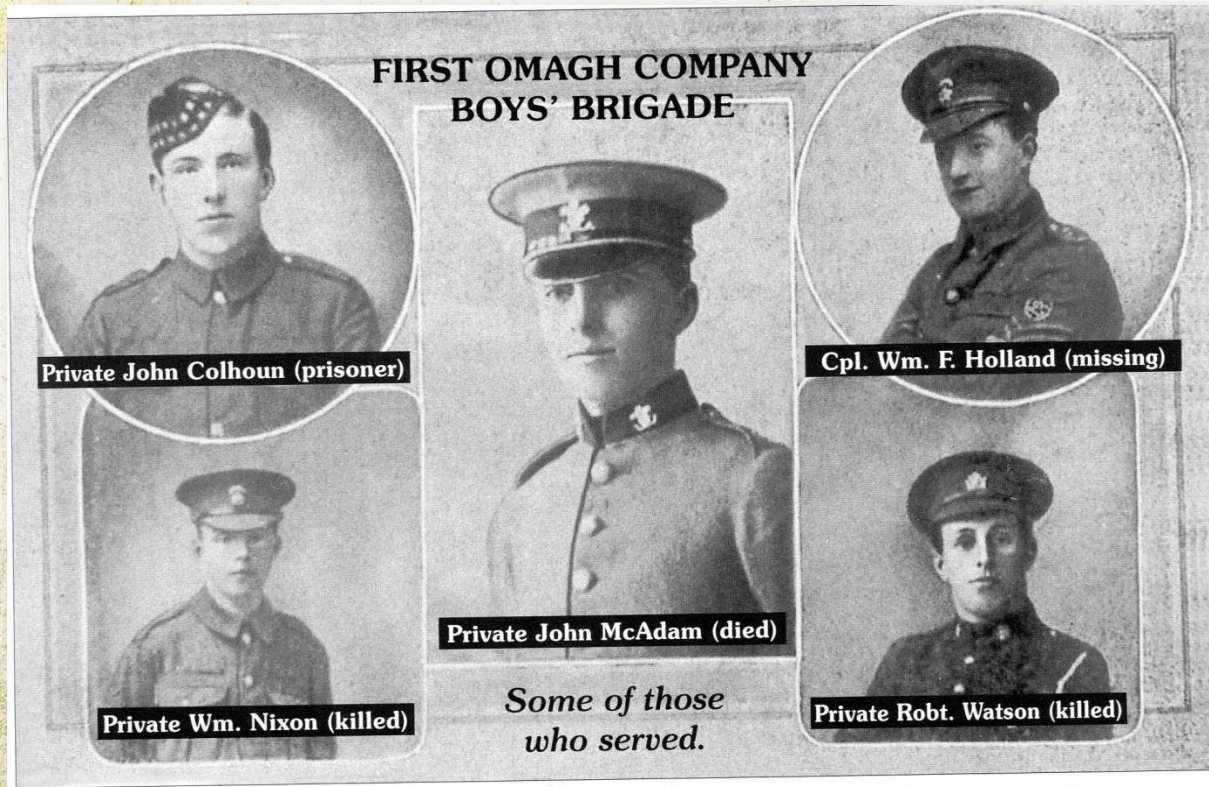
SATURDAY, AUGUST 21, 1915.

'NATIONAL SERVICE' HUMBUG.

The Conscriptionists have found what they believe a more delectable name for Compulsory Military Service. They call it "National Service." Lord Northcliffe, who has such a record as a British "factionist", to his account, the maker of Cabinets, the dictator of policies, the "last word" on munitions, the shrewd business-man, who has almost come to believe that the war was undertaken for the benefit of his newspapers' circulation—this person may be regarded as the leader of the conspirators. For a time the campaign on behalf of Prussian military methods in these countries was carried on by papers of the "Daily Mail," "London Times," and "Morning Post" ilk, but these having failed to intimidate the people, an organisation, known as the National Service League, has come into existence, and undertaken the work of browbeating all who fail to acknowledge its monopoly of patriotism and virility. Fortunately for the peace and future happiness of the United Kingdom, as well as for the rest of the world, the National Service League's Prussianist programme is doomed to failure, but it is possible that it may be carried far enough to cause annoyance to those who have really the interests of the realm at heart, and possibly do grave injury to voluntary recruiting. The old

We found this story particularly interesting when researching the local media reports on the First World War as it deals with the issue of conscription. The men that fought in the war had all volunteered and conscription was never actually introduced, however it is very interesting to read here what the people of Tyrone thought about Conscription. It is obvious from this report that they are totally opposed to the idea of conscription in any form and refer to any policy posing to introduce conscription as 'intimidating' and 'browbeating'.

Local Soldier's Stories



It is estimated that around 330 local men lost their lives in the Great War during the period 1914-18.

The picture above is an example of a typical war memorial produced to honour the dead.

When we embarked upon our research for this project we threw out the net in our school and asked students to come forward if they knew of any relatives they had that fought in the First World War. One girl in Year 9, Jenny Steele, came with a wealth of information about her two great, great uncles who had fought and died during the war and a third who had returned home. Jenny and her family had even visited the graves and memorials to these men in Belgium and France.

Three brothers, sons of William and Isabella McKeown from Ballygawley, Co. Tyrone enlisted in the war at Omagh barracks. Thomas and William McKeown both enlisted in September 1914. Thomas, second son of William and Isabella, came under the 11th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 109th Brigade, 36th (Ulster Division) and William, eldest son, came under the 9th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 109th Brigade, 36th Ulster Division.



William McKeown

William was among the first batch of intakes, enlisting on the 17th September 1914. William was a receiver of an ornate brass gift tin as a Christmas present in December 1914 from Her Royal Highness the Princess Mary's Christmas fund. William's battalion was to remain on the Western Front until November 1918 seeing action at the Somme, Albert (Thiepval), Messines, the Ypres Salient (Langemarck), Cambrai (Welsh Ridge), St Quentin, The Ypres Salient (Ravelsburg Ridge, Passchendale Ridge) and the crossing of the Lys.

In late 1917, William was promoted to King's corporal and received the Military Medal. It has proved difficult to establish the date or the circumstances surrounding the incident that led to this recognition; but from family statements it appears that during an engagement with the enemy, William single-handedly captured four German soldiers returning them, at bayonet point and under fire, to his own forward trench. From the date he was presented with the medal, the incident appears to have occurred during the Battle of Cambrai which began in November 1917.

At the end of the war King's Corporal William McKeown MM was serving with 243 Company, Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) as a driver. He was transferred from the RASC to the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers Reserve (Class 2) on demobilisation on 28th June 1919 while the Corps was stationed at Woolwich Dockyard, and remained on the Reserve list until 1924. As William had signed up for the duration of the war he was not entitled to a pension but received gratuity upon demobilisation. Following his discharge, he returned to the family home in Ballygawley. William gained employment as a driver for Major Carleton at Eskra, Co.Tyrone and remained in service for three years. Maud Brown from Cootehill, Co. Cavan, was housekeeper on the Carleton Estate and they were married in 1921.

Wedding of William McKeown and Maud Brown



William unveiled the Great War Memorial in St Mark's Parish Church Newtownsaville, which includes the names of his brothers Thomas and Robert along with other comrades.

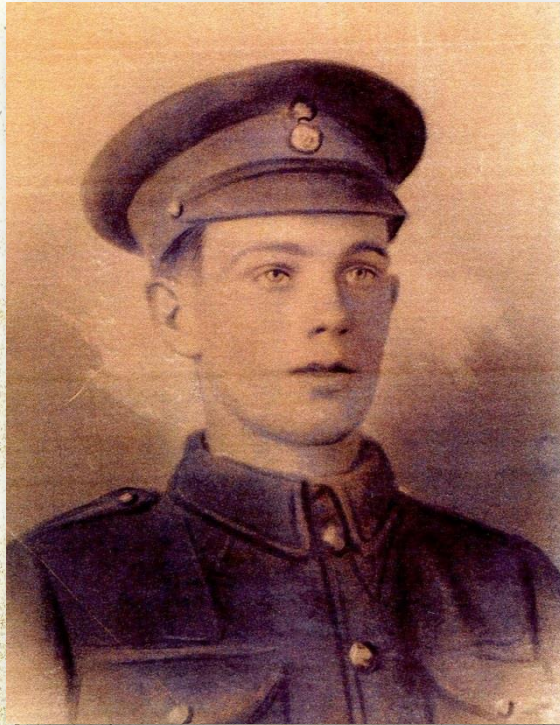
William died on 2nd January 1968 and is buried in St George's Parish Church graveyard, Ballygawley.

William's brother's Thomas and Robert did not manage to make it home from the war. Thomas was killed in action on 16th August 1917, he was 23 years old. Along with his comrades, Thomas was given a temporary grave at the time. Following the completion of hostilities, the War Graves Commission undertook to provide soldiers' remains with a marked plot in newly constructed cemeteries close to where they fell. Thomas' grave can be found in the New Irish Farm Cemetery in West -Vlaanderen, Belgium.

Thomas McKeown



Robert McKeown, fifth son of William and Isabella was also killed in the war. He was only 19 years old. On one of the few occasions that his brother William spoke of his experiences during the Great War, he described how he had witnessed Robert's death. An instruction had been given for the Inniskillings to "go over the top". As the troops emerged from the cover of the trench, a German shell landed in front of them. Robert, who was part of the group in front of William, caught the full force of the blast. William assisted with the recovery of the dead and wounded.



Robert McKeown

Letters Home

To win the war the British Army believed that morale was crucial, and it looked to the Post Office for help.

The delivery of post was vital for two reasons. Firstly, receiving well wishes and gifts from home was one of the few comforts a soldier had on the Western Front. The majority of them spent more time fighting boredom than they did the enemy, and writing was one of the few hobbies available to them. For some, it was a welcome distraction from the horrors of the trenches.

Secondly, letters served a propaganda purpose as everything that soldiers sent back was subject to censorship. The British Army claimed this was to prevent the enemy finding out secret information, but really it was to prevent bad news from reaching the home front. Letters from serving soldiers had a powerful role, not just in keeping families informed of the well-being of their loved ones; they also helped to sustain popular support for the war across the home front. Nothing could be allowed to jeopardise that.

When we visited the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland as part of our research they showed us letters written by men during the war.

One of the most poignant letters we came across was that of Major-General Oliver Nugent who came from Co. Tyrone writing to his wife on the 2nd July 1916, the second day of the battle of the Somme. He opens his letter with 'Just a line to say Arthur and I and my staff are all well. Yesterday was terrible. Our losses I fear very heavy.' He goes on to tell her 'we are the only division which succeeded in doing what it was given to do and we did it but at a fearful cost. We are fighting today but we have so few men left.' We know that the casualties amongst the Ulster division were very heavy. 5,500 men missing, dead or wounded out of around 15,000 on the first and second day of the battle. Major-General Nugent describes the bravery of those men in his letter saying 'I did not believe men were made who could do such gallant work under the conditions of modern war.'

Letters like this one would have been sent regularly back and forth from the homes in Omagh and Co. Tyrone to the front line.

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ACC 17075

July 2. 16.

Just a line to say Fortson and I and my staff are all well. Yesterday was terrible. Our losses I fear very heavy.

My dear Sir, the Ulster Division has been too overpaid for words. The whole Army is talking of the incomparable gallantry shown by Officers & men.

There has been nothing like it since the New Army came out.

They came out of the trenches, forward up as if on the barrack square and went forward with every line dressed as if for the King's inspection, then from end to end by shell and machine gun fire.

We are the only Division that succeeded in doing what it was given to do and we did it with a fearful cost.

We are fighting today but we have so few men left.

I am hanging on till dark when we are to be relieved by a fresh Division for the next attack tomorrow.

The Ulster Division no longer exists as a fighting force and we shall probably go back behind the line to rest and be made up again in December. I do not know the full tale of losses yet, but though we have lost about 150 Officers and about 6000 men not all killed and in fact I hope there are a large

Undoubtedly one of the hardest letters to receive would have been the next letter we took a particular interest in. This letter was sent by a soldier to his friend's father, a Mr Davidson. In it he describes his friend's death and he writes 'I believe he died instantly and in no pain'. Apparently this was something soldiers almost always told relatives as no one would want to reveal the awful truth about how some men met their death. The saddest part in this letter we found was at the end when he says 'I am sorry I am unable to write you a good letter, but even yet I am not myself after what I have come through this last 10 days, and the tears are rolling down the face.'

Jim he made his way out of
the dugout to try & get back
to rally his men, what a
noble heart, - but found
he was unable to do anything
but crawl, therefore as no
help was coming across he
tried to get back him self
and while crossing "no mans land"
was shot, I believe through the
head & it is believed died
instantly in no pain. Was
not it a glorious ending to a
glorious life. I am sorry I
am unable to write you a good
letter but even yet I am not myself
after what I have come through this
last 10 days, and the tears are rolling
down the face of your friend and his father
Do Herdman.

Remembering the War

"Commemoration is about sharing human experiences and fates, and reflecting on them."
(Piet Chielens, Co-ordinator, In Flanders Museum)

How we commemorate and remember the Great War very often depends on our political and/or religious background. Speaking about the decade of centenaries and their importance deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness said: "Over 200,000 Irishmen fought in the war and over 49,000 were killed, which shows the human impact of the war on the island of Ireland. It is important all their personal stories are told to ensure the memory of those Irish soldiers killed will continue." The First Minister Peter Robinson also said, "As we enter an important decade of commemorations in both our countries, it is my hope that we will keep alive the history and the stories of those who did not return from war. The stories of the fallen have to be recorded for the benefit of future generations and will allow us to express our thanks and acknowledge the sacrifice of men who died helping to preserve our freedom."

"Lest we forget" are the famous words, originally penned by Kipling. In Ireland however, some did forget the sacrifices made by the men during the Great War. Why and how that happened is very complex. During the war John Redmond leader of the IPP said "the achievements of that Irish army have covered Ireland with glory before the world". When the soldiers returned to Ireland however, they found a changed political climate. Due to the fact that the 1916 Easter Rising had taken place during the war, for the most part, these Irish heroes have been forgotten in history. Tom Kettle, a nationalist politician, killed on the Somme predicted "These men (the 1916 leaders) will go down in history as heroes and martyrs; and I will go down - if I go down at all - as a bloody British officer." The election then in December 1918 was a clear endorsement of Sinn Fein outside of the traditional Unionist areas. The sacrifices made in the war were side-lined in the southern provinces whereas the losses at the Somme became part of the heritage of the new Northern Ireland. Many of those Irishmen who served in the British army returned to their nationalist neighbourhoods greeted with 'begrudgery' and even hostility. Some however did recognise these men's sacrifices. Joe Devlin, a west Belfast politician, said their fallen comrades had "died not as cowards died, but as soldiers of freedom, with their faces toward the fire, and in the belief that their life-blood was poured out in defence of liberty for the world".

In Omagh commemoration of the war was viewed as part of the Unionist tradition. In recent years however much work has been done in the Republic of Ireland and here to engage both sides of the community in some sort of commemoration. The following article appeared in the Ulster Herald in 2007. Ross Hussey, now MLA for West Tyrone, member of the UUP, outlines the sacrifice made by men from Omagh in the Great War. He highlights in his article the extraordinary moment that Irish National Volunteers and Ulster Volunteers marched through the town of Omagh together and respectfully saluted each other. He then goes on to name Irish National Volunteers that became part of the 16th Ulster division that came

from Omagh. The fact he wants to highlight the names of these Nationalist men shows how much thinking has changed in Northern Ireland and how far we have come recently in trying to recognise those men that their own communities may have forgotten or ignored.

BY ROSS HUSSEY

The service of remembrance held throughout the United Kingdom and most of the British Commonwealth is based on the Armistice which occurred following the First World War and took effect from the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918.

Omagh, as a garrison town and centre for the training depot of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in St Lucia Barracks, was a hub of activity at this time. Obviously from a historical context, we are also dealing with the Home Rule period. War was declared on August 3, 1914, and those that had aligned themselves with the Irish Volunteers or the Ulster Volunteers prepared at the bidding of their political masters – John Redmond MP and Sir Edward Carson MP – to go to war.

The Irish News at the time reported under the banner headline, 'Tyrone's Fine Example: National and Ulster Volunteers march together': "The Ulster Volunteers and Irish National Volunteers united at Omagh on Friday night (August 7, 1914) in giving a most hearty send off to the final draft of the Army Reserve of the Royal Inniskillings who left the town at half past nine o'clock and a scene of unparalleled description was witnessed when the procession of both volunteers and military marched through the town together... Subsequently as both bodies of Volunteers paraded the town, they met one another and respectfully saluted."

THE FALLEN

The War saw many young men from Omagh and District make the supreme sacrifice for their 'King and Country'

and those from the area who were attached to the 16th (Irish) Division as opposed to the 36th (Ulster Division) were:-

Pte F Daly, L/Cpl J Dempsey, Pte J Deveney, L/Sgt J Doherty, Pte F Doherty, WO1 R Dolan, Pte W Fenton MM, L/Sgt P Finnegan, Pte J Kinnear, Pte H Lindsay, Pte J Lindsay, Pte J McCluskey, Pte B McCrossan, Pte W McGillin, Pte J McGlinchey, Pte W McKee, Sgt E McKernan, Pte F McManus, Pte J McNamee, Pte J McSwiggan, L/Cpl E Mullholland, Pte H O'Kane, Pte J Paul, Pte J Stewart, Pte J Veldon, Sgt J Wilson, Pte J Young.

This not an exhaustive list of those that served with the Irish Division from Omagh I have only named those that I can clearly identify from their service with the relevant Battalion of the Regiment, the Regiments and Battalions concerned that made up the Irish Division were - 4th Brigade (Ulster Brigade), 47th and 48th Brigade and the Regiments were - 7th and 8th Battalions Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 7th and 8th Battalions Royal Irish Fusiliers, 6th Royal Irish Regiment, 6th Connaught Rangers, 7th Leinster Regiment, 8th Royal Munster Fusiliers, 7th Royal Irish Rifles, 9th Royal Munster Fusiliers, 8th and 9th Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

If I have omitted any family I apologise for the error; however, in memory of those that made the supreme sacrifice during the Great War a token poppy wreath will be laid by the Royal British Legion.

"They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old, age shall not weary them nor the years condemn, at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them. When you go home tell them of us, and say for their tomorrow we gave our today."

Should we remember?

We live in a time where the casualties of conflict are heard about and commemorated but not directly experienced. Northern Ireland has suffered its own conflict but we are too young to really remember it. We have read books, poems, articles and memoirs concerning those affected by the First World War, both the soldiers and their families, women nurses and their duties, and have been shocked by what we have read and at times even upset. Whilst access to these stories, fiction or otherwise, can provide insight into the terrible atrocities that these people experienced, from our modern stance, it can be difficult to put it into any sort of perspective. There are no survivors of the first world war anymore so all living memory of the war has been lost. Anything learnt about now is through the passing down of tales and information.

Can we empathise truly from a retrospective position? We may wear poppies, but do we really know what we wear them for? Have they just become more of a novelty – an outward symbol of respect which lacks any inward reflection? Within our own communities the wearing of the poppy actually antagonises some people, why is this? How has this come to pass?

It is inevitable that as time passes and the gap between ourselves and the First World War increases, our circumstances will also differ more and more. However, it is more important that we don't detach ourselves from the 1914 generation. This 'decade of centenaries' that we are currently living through has such importance for our lives. We must remember these men and their sacrifices and appreciate the difficulties that these people suffered.

The First World War was named the Great War and a war to end all wars, yet only 20 years after its end the Second World War broke out and since then there have been countless conflicts across the globe, conflicts which are still carrying on today – 100 years later – making that "lest we forget" even more significant.

There is controversy surrounding the centenary celebrations. There are those that claim by honouring those that gave their lives in battle we are in fact celebrating war. Jude Collins touched on this when he visited our school as part of our research. He talked about the difference in 'commemorating' and 'celebrating'. We believe that by remembering the sacrifice of the soldiers in the First World War, and all those who have followed the same path in successive wars, we aren't celebrating their deaths as a victory but recognising it as a great loss.

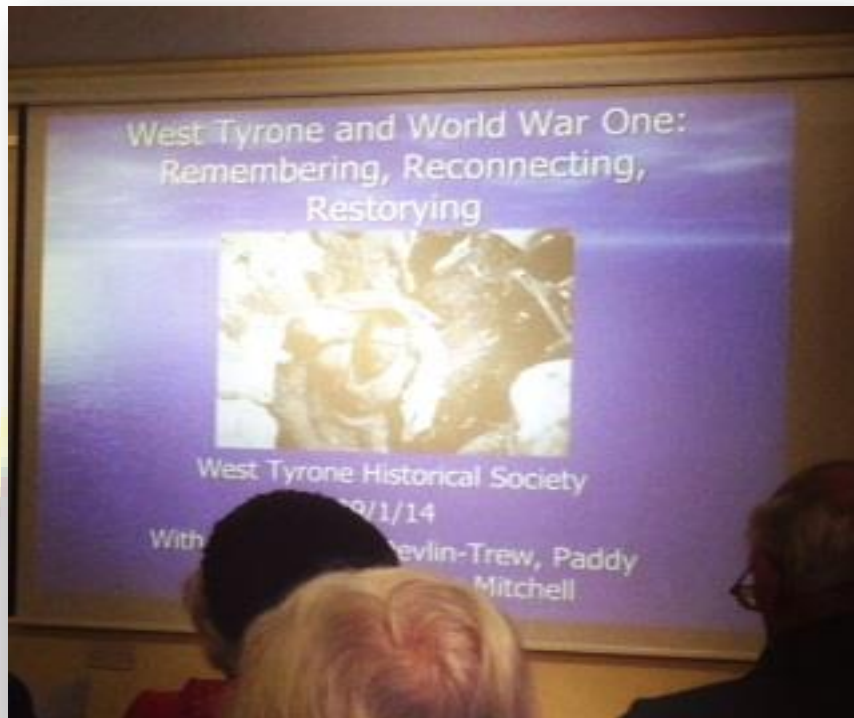
As part of a generation that has grown up in Northern Ireland we believe that we can understand the First World War as a celebration of the lives that could have been and we honour their sacrifice. To us the First World War is about the individual soldiers and participants who didn't survive and the unimaginable acts of courage they performed.

How the First World War will be regarded in the future is a different matter entirely. Obviously the further and further into the past the First World War becomes the more distance and therefore less relevant it will be. But it is important to make sure the sheer scale of the devastation is understood. We still need to remember, even if we can never fully empathise. 'Lest we forget'.

Researching the First World War

West Tyrone Historical Association

First World War Lecture





Visiting PRONI







Students involved in the history project with their teacher Mrs Martina McCauley at the PRONI exhibition 'A Century of Change, Conflict and Transformation'.

Accessing the archives at the 'Ulster Herald' offices

CLASS ACT

Our readers want to hear their successes and achievements on our website (www.ulsterherald.com) photos (.jpg format) by



History and politics teacher Martina McCauley, with students, Abbie Jackson-Ware, Ellen Hegarty and Moya Garrity from Drumragh Integrated College, look at old newspapers files to see how the **UlsterHerald** reported the First World War. MC29

Drumragh students browse **UlsterHerald** archives to help with project on First World War

STUDENTS from Drumragh Integrated College visited the **UlsterHerald** office last week to find out how the First World War impacted upon the Omagh district.

The students are currently doing a project on the war - which com-

menced 100 years ago on July 28 1914 - as part of the decade of centenaries commemorations.

Utilising both the **UlsterHerald** online archives and actual editions of the paper from that time, the students are trying to assess the im-

pact of the war on Omagh and surrounding areas and are also looking at how people remember the war. This project will be submitted to the Department of Education for a competition they are running based on the decade 1910-1920.

Author and historian Jude Collins' visit



Student Voices

Moya Garrity



"I have really enjoyed learning about the First World War. I have found that partaking in this project I have a lot more knowledge of what went on during world war one and how people were affected. I found that I had many great opportunities during this project e.g. meeting Jude Collins. I found him a very interesting man and loved hearing his point of view about the First World War. I also got the great opportunity of going to visit the public records office and thought that it was a superior building and really interesting to look at .I find that going to an integrated school made this project even better as everyone had different opinions and views on how we remember the First World War. I feel so grateful to have been giving this opportunity in history and have thoroughly enjoyed this project."

Ellen Hegarty



"I have really enjoyed learning and completing this project. I took so much from this as a person, and have had so many interesting opportunities in learning about my ancestors involved in the war and other student's ancestors. I really enjoyed going to the Folk Park because the older generation had so many stories of their past, and their opinions and I found this really interesting. I have just really enjoyed this project and hope I get many more fantastic opportunities like this."

Meg Curran



"I have really enjoyed learning about Ireland and the First World War. I never knew that Ireland played a big role in the First World War. I am really enjoying learning about this period of history as it is very interesting, in every lesson I am developing a greater understanding. I never knew that there were many nationalists fighting in the First World War, I thought that mostly unionists were fighting. I have learnt that nationalists fought in the war because they were told if they fought they would get the home rule that they wanted, unionists fought because they were told that no home rule would take place. Nationalists and unionists also fought because war meant a wage. I have really enjoyed learning about this topic."

Abbie Jackson-Ware



"I was really privileged to be involved with the centenary project and one of the best bits of our research I think, was when we visited the public records offices in Belfast. Whilst at the public records offices, the importance of the First World War really hit home for me. Reading the letters home from soldiers was very emotional, especially the letters to inform families of a tragedy. I used to think that war was totally unimaginable and I didn't think I'd ever understand as much as I do now. The further we have went with this project the more I felt affected by the First World War. Now the project is complete I definitely feel as though my eyes have been opened and I really do have a more clear understanding of the significance of the First World War."

Tara Corry



“Doing this project has really opened my eyes to how much World War One affected me and the country I live in. Researching in The Ulster Herald and The Public Records Office has definitely helped with connecting me with the people and families of 1914. Reading through the letters from the soldiers to their families was really emotional and has definitely made me appreciate the way my life is now.”

Cole Reynolds



“Learning about history is extremely important to me, especially when it is my own country’s history. In a country like ours where we can be very much divided and discriminate against each other it is important to learn from our own past and move on; so when I heard about this project, and about what I would learn from it, I simply had to be a part of it. My experiences over the past three months have immersed me in the history of our people, and I have truly learned a lot from it. I came into this project pretty much blind to what had happened during these years of conflict; I have now left it feeling enlightened and now knowledgeable in the events that have shaped how our current generation act, and what has shaped our town of Omagh, Tyrone and the whole of Ireland.”

Niall McSorley



"I really enjoyed the project. It really helped me understand better the effects of the First World War. I enjoyed the talk with Jude Collins and the trip to the Public Records Office the most. The stories of the families of 1914-1918 were really fascinating. It really showed me what we normally overlook, which is always the most interesting bit!"

Wounds by Michael Longley

Here are two pictures from my father's head—
I have kept them like secrets until now:
First, the Ulster Division at the Somme
Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!
'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,
Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!
'Wilder than Gurkhas' were my father's words
Of admiration and bewilderment.

Next comes the London-Scottish padre
Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick,
With a stylish backhand and a prayer.
Over a landscape of dead buttocks
My father followed him for fifty years.

At last, a belated casualty,
He said — lead traces flaring till they hurt —
'I am dying for King and Country, slowly.'
I touched his hand, his thin head I touched.

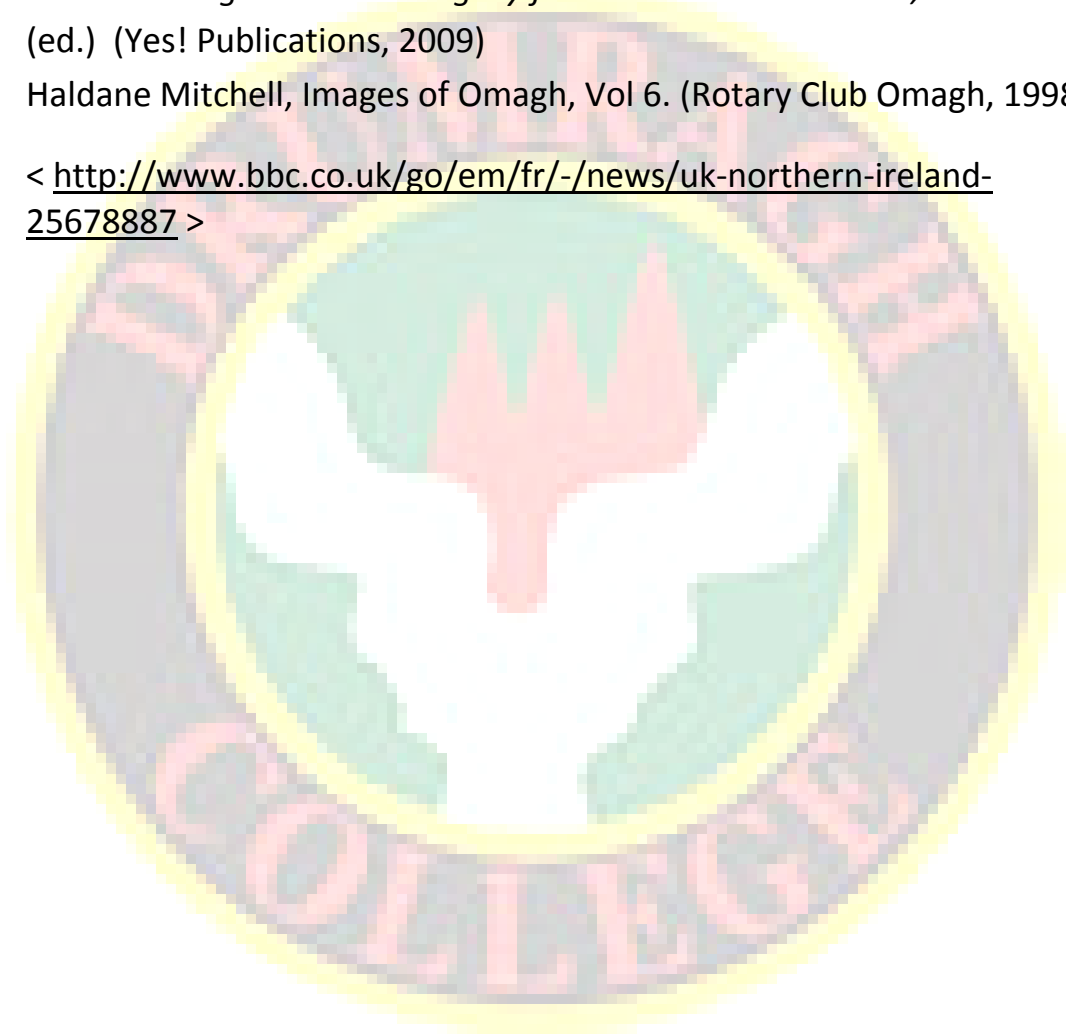
Now, with military honours of a kind,
With his badges, his medals like rainbows,
His spinning compass, I bury beside him
Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of
Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.

A packet of Woodbines I throw in,
A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Paralysed as heavy guns put out
The night-light in a nursery for ever;
Also a bus-conductor's uniform—
He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers
Without a murmur, shot through the head
By a shivering boy who wandered in
Before they could turn the television down
Or tidy away the supper dishes.

To the children, to a bewildered wife,
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.

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- West Tyrone Historical Association. A great evening all round!

