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A Historical Analysis of the 'Forgotten' POWs of Templemore during the Great War (1914-1918)

Category for which you wish to be entered (i.e. 1916, World War 1; Women in the Revolutionary Period, local/regional category):

Local/Regional Category

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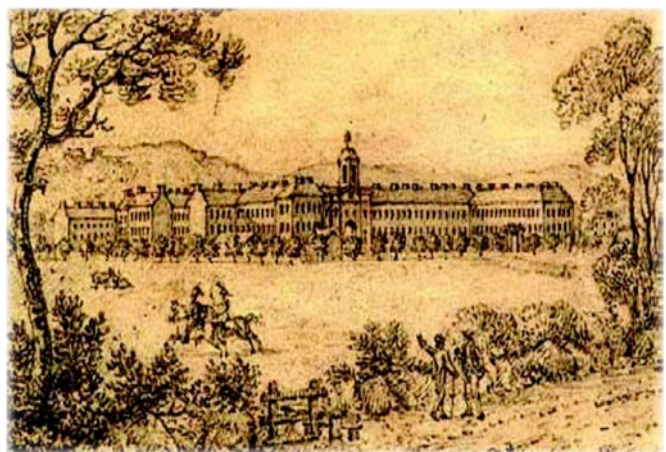
A Historical Analysis of the “Forgotten” POWs of Templemore during the Great War (1914-1918)

BY

James Osborne and Oisín T. Morrin

Modern-day Ireland has seen many old patterns of the 20th Century re-emerge once again, though with much contextual difference; but still, the moral, ethical and personal questions asked of the people remain the same. The focus of this essay is on the prisoners of war (POWs) of the Great War that were captured and interned in Richmond Barracks, Templemore, Co. Tipperary during the 1910's. We ask the reader to pay particular attention to the zeitgeist of the era: the growing xenophobia and discrimination against these POWs, and how this was, in many ways, transformed and reversed by the end of their internment of Templemore through the economic stimulation they brought in a time of fiscal and political turmoil. In addition to our historical analysis, we shall draw conclusions - in the form of parallels - to our present day where the allegorical quality of the history presented below can be applied.

Following the unsuccessful rebellions of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century that decimated the country, Ireland was subjected to an aggressive policy of militarization. The overhanging fear of further revolution - coupled with the fact that the English were at war with the French - justified an intensive barracks building program to once again remind the rebels of the tight grip on power by Britain.



Richmond Barracks, 1829

Ireland was a superb place for Napoleon's French to launch an attack, due to the vast number of places along the west coast of Ireland to base an attack from. The area also suffered a lack of meaningful expenditure on coastal defenses and troops in the area.

It was this perceived weakness that was tested by French fleets when they arrived in Bantry Bay in 1786 and Killala Bay in 1798. To guard against this threat of invasion, over forty Martello towers were constructed around the coast between 1804 and 1815 at locations such as Glengariff, Co Kerry.

The strength of the military garrison in Ireland increased from 40,000 to 225,000 between 1789 -1814. Richmond Barracks was just one of a number of barracks that were built in the county of Tipperary, which *'had a long tradition of rebellion and lawlessness.'* This belligerent tradition was remarked on by Chief Secretary Robert Peel when writing to the Lord Lieutenant Whitworth in 1813: *'You can have no idea of the moral depravation of the lower orders in that county.'*

Richmond Barracks was part of this systematic policy of militarization. The 17-acre site for Richmond Barracks was donated to the British crown by the local landlord, Sir John Craven Carden, 1st baronet Templemore (of the Priory) in 1800. Although the barracks was originally intended for Thurles, the planned barracks was relocated to Templemore on the request of the Ursuline Nuns in Thurles. Construction began in 1813 and was completed the following year. John Carden also donated a further 40 acres of land to be used as the training and parading ground.

When Richmond Barracks was finally finished – it was enormous. It had 'accommodations for 54 officers, 1500 men and 30 horses, and a hospital for 80 patients; a bridewell; a fever hospital and a dispensary, ball, news and reading rooms, and a public billiard table.'

At the time of Richmond's construction the British military was involved in the Peninsular War (1807-1814) – a war that pitted the First French Empire against an alliance of Spain, Portugal and Britain for control of the strategic Iberian Peninsula.

To commemorate the success of Charles Gordon-Lennox, 5th Duke of Richmond at the siege of Ciudad Rodrigo (1812), the new barracks was suitably named 'Richmond Barracks'.

Richmond gave an enormous boost to the economic and social life of Templemore, with business in the town developing around it. Though due to the good demand for the usual farm produces in the barracks there was for many years no market in the town itself. The town's unusually large number of licensed houses were also well patronised by the troops.



Market Street Templemore 1865-1914

Richmond also provided the opportunity for local men to enlist, as Richmond was primarily a recruiting depot. Ireland was a premier recruiting area for men trying to evade the near-inevitable poverty. Irishmen were also considered good recruits, being described by one military surgeon as 'physically and morally the best adapted for service'. The lack of work at home and poverty coupled with the chance of experiencing adventures abroad saw a large number of Irishmen join the British Army to accept the 'Queen's shilling'. The success of enlistment in Ireland is ascertained by the fact that up until the 1830s Irishmen constituted almost 45% of the entire British Army.

Year	Percentage
1830	42.2%
1840	37.2%
1868	30.8%
1873	23.7%
1878	21.9%
1883	20.0%
1893	13.4%
1898	12.9%

**Irishmen in the British Army
1830-1898.**

Although, the percentage constantly decreases this doesn't suggest that Irish men joining the army decreased. In 1830, Britain's population was a sixteen million. Ireland's was around eight million. However, the Irish Famine, which began in the 1840s, caused the deaths of one million and caused well over a million to emigrate. In the same period, the population of England almost doubled from sixteen million in 1851 to thirty million in 1901-the population grew *'fifteen percent every ten years.'* Despite the two country's completely

different demographics, Irish soldiers still contributed many men to the British Army, despite the growing anti-British sentiment.

Although, Richmond Barracks was considered one of the largest barracks in the country by the turn of the century (1909), Richmond had been abandoned, and Templemore town council were informed by the War Office that there was '*no prospect of troops being quartered there in the near future.*' However, with the outbreak of World War 1 in August 1914 brought a complete u-turn in this policy – Templemore – an '*inland town with limited traffic connections, and limited possibilities of escape*' and Richmond Barracks, recently vacated with large housing quarters proved to be an ideal place to detain POWs.



Anti-German Propaganda in Britain

Prior to the arrival of prisoners, extensive work was completed on the barracks to make it suitable as a detention centre. To contain the POWs, the two barracks squares were divided into four concentration camp type compounds enclosed by heavy barbed wire, surrounded with a high sentry observation tower mounted with machine guns and searchlights.

From the middle of August, male civilian aliens of military age - from the countries that Britain was at war with - were apprehended and jailed at Templemore. The government viewed them with suspicion and feared that they might have been sympathetic to the German war effort. The arrival of these groups went ignored to the greatest extent. However subsequent groups of civilian prisoners did arouse the curiosity and disgust of local townspeople. These prisoners were guarded by the 3rd Leinster regiment.

The extent of the wartime demonization of ordinary people of Germanic descent is quite surprising. Periodic reports suggest that the locals were expecting sub-humans rather than actual men. This confusion can be attributed to the hyperbolised reports

by the press. Propaganda at the time accused Germans of atrocities (such as impaling children with bayonets) in an attempt to dehumanize the alien enemy while gaining support for the war cause. These were civilian prisoners - many of whom had been living in Ireland and carrying on a normal working life for many years – they were practically naturalised citizen. The outbreak of war and the consequential nationwide mobilisation had, in its wake, raised doubts in the minds of the general populace about the humanity of Germans.

This is exemplified by the case of Frederick Vogelsang. Born in Lower Saxony, in Germany, at the outbreak of war he had been resident in Dublin and working as a waiter in the Hotel Metropole, on Sackville Street, for nine years. On the 13 August 1914, Frederick was arrested as an enemy alien and placed in military custody in Arbour Hill. When he was released after a few weeks his job in the



Metropole Hotel, Dublin

Metropole had been filled and he was forced to seek employment elsewhere. In many cases, patrons boycotted hotels, etc. who employed foreigners and it was out of necessity that these people (Aliens) were dismissed. Frederick was arrested again on 16 December 1914 and detained at Oldcastle Concentration Camp for being '*an alien of doubtful loyalty*.' Frederick was then detained for the duration of the war. This was an ordinary man, ostracized for the actions of his homeland.

On 10 September 1914, the first military prisoners were brought to Templemore. Over the following week, some 300 German and Austrian prisoners arrived. These included 200 prisoners brought by special train. Among these were sailors from the Koenig Luise: a minelayer which had been sunk by the HMS Amphion on the 15th August 1914 and a detachment of the elite Uhlan cavalry. By the 20th September, approximately eight hundred prisoners were detained at Templemore; three hundred were civilians and the rest were military prisoners.

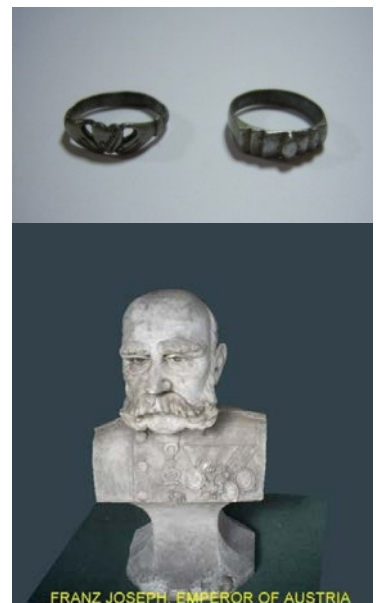
As numbers and the necessity to intern war prisoners at the encampment at Templemore increased, speculation was already mounting that the civilian prisoners would be moved out of Templemore and the complex completely devoted to military endeavours. In October 1914, the civilian detainees were transferred to Oldcastle Workhouse,



Oldcastle Workhouse

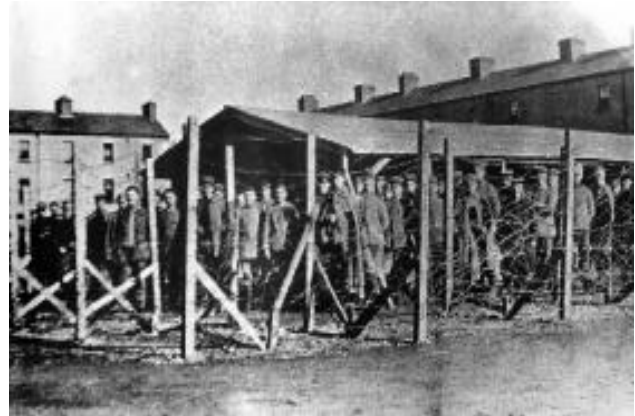
Co. Meath. On 12th December 1914, The Meath Chronicle wrote, '*The long expected German prisoners arrived this week in Oldcastle and took up quarters in the disused workhouse*'. A constant flow of prisoners continued until late 1914 - early 1915. By February 1915, there were over 300 '*enemy*' aliens at the Oldcastle detention camp. This number rose to nearly 600 by June 1916.

The Oldcastle workhouse was constructed following the Act for the More Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland was passed. The workhouse complied with George Wilkinson's standard design, quite similar to most of the pre-famine workhouse in Ireland. It was a '*medium workhouse*', capable of accommodating 600 inmates. These internees, unlike the soldiers, came from a wide variety of backgrounds and professions. On 28th August 1915, The Irish Times reported about the '*further arrest of German subjects*', among this particular group there was a '*pork butcher*', '*a dealer*' and a '*hairdresser*.' We also know that there were many skilled tradesmen such as jewellery makers. These tradesmen completed some exemplary pieces such as a large stone bust of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph and a number of rings. As well as tradesman, a butler and some members of the clergy were also present in the civilians' camp.



Above: rings made by prisoners of Oldcastle and Bust of Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria

A large group of four hundred prisoners, including a number of officers, had been carried on a steamer, The Barry, a ship of the Bristol Channel Ports, to the North Wall Port in Dublin at the end of September. The prisoners then were transported by train to Templemore, where they were marched from the railway station to the camp. The prisoners had been taken at various engagements in France and Belgium. These steamers continued to transport men for some time. The prisoners included soldiers from the following regiments; 35th Brandenburg infantry, 74th Hanoverian regiment, 211th Reserve regiment, 241st Reserve regiment, 4th Jaeger regiment 212th Reserve regiment, and the 9th regiment.



Prisoners at Templemore

In late November, another group of over four hundred prisoners taken at Aisne in France were transferred by steamer from Aldershot in Britain to the North Wall. Within a few weeks, the numbers had risen to 2,000. The local reaction to these prisoners varied considerably. As mentioned earlier, locals experienced some shock at initially discovering that the much-denigrated Germans were actually human beings.

However, the arrival of the prisoners added to the town's prospects and the prisoners were then received '*with much cordiality by the townspeople*' just like the economic prosperity that accompanied them. While marching to barracks from the railway station, one prisoner was heard to ask a pub owner to get him '*a pint*'. One local newspaper interpreted this as a sign that the new arrivals had become accustomed to the '*subtleties of Bearla.*' Newspaper archives records also suggest that the prisoners made Templemore more famous than it had ever been, encouraging people to travel to Templemore to see its new, somewhat exotic inhabitants.

While a passel of prisoners arrived in Templemore wounded, only one died of his wounds while in Templemore. A Private A. Gierzweski died of his wounds. Some accounts of his death point to diabetes.

The prisoner was buried with military honours with a firing party of the Leinster Regiment escorting the funeral. The Prussian guard formed a guard of honour and the coffin was draped in the German colours. A large group of local people gathered at the gates of the camp to view the funeral. As the dead prisoner was a Catholic, the funeral was met by the parish priest of Templemore, Father Kiely, who read the prayers at the graveside. German soldiers sang hymns and three volleys were fired by the firing party and the last post was sounded. Following their custom, each of the German soldiers threw three handfuls of clay into the grave. Four wreaths of flowers with ribbons in the German colours were placed on the grave.

Subsequently, a second prisoner, Private L. Spelleberg, from the 212th regiment, died of food poisoning as a result of eating a German sausage. Spelleberg, a Protestant, was buried at the Church of Ireland graveyard. The funeral was described as being '*impressive*'. Over five hundred comrades attended the funeral of the young man. Music was provided by a POW who was an avid organist. The usual honours of the firing party and the playing of the last post were observed.

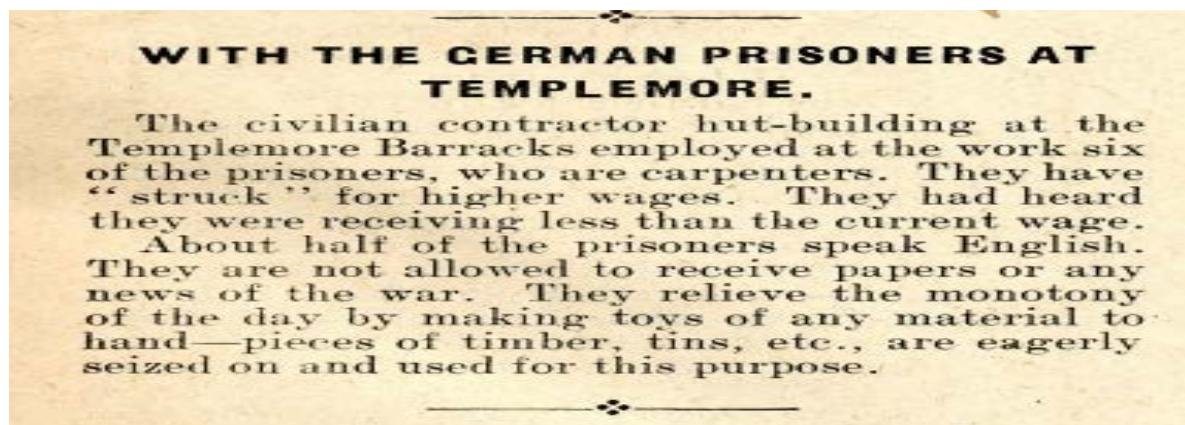
Both bodies were re-interred at the German National Cemetery in Glencree, Co. Wicklow, after the Second World War.

Despite the initial disdain towards the prisoners, some local sentiment for the deceased German prisoners was shown by a local man who asked the German Graves Commission to leave the gravestone as a marker in St Mary's cemetery and offered to maintain the grave. The Commission agreed to the request.

In keeping with established conventions regarding POW's, the prisoners were paid the relevant wage they were entitled to while bearing arms for the Kaiser, dependent on their rank, and most of this money was being spent in a shop that a shrewd shopkeeper had set up in the prison yard. It appears that the local population overcame its initial hysterical preconceptions that Germans were not human and

were taking full advantage of the air of infamy and economic prospects that the prisoners were bringing to Templemore. The townspeople had for a number of years been trying to have the barracks reoccupied. However, the prisoners were kept busy maintaining the barracks. The POW's were kept busy maintaining the camp and barrack squares. Some of the soldiers were skilled tradesmen and laid a parquet floor in the sanctuary of the local convent.

These prisoners were industrious and despite being the captive party, many had 'struck' for higher pay – a feat documented in reference to the carpenters cum prisoners who were contracted to build huts at Templemore.



Extract from newspaper in Templemore

Many saw the work as a way to escape the monotony of the day or preoccupied themselves by making toys out of any material to hand— pieces of timber, tins, etc.

In addition to the relative freedom the POWs had inside the barracks, they were frequently beyond their confines. While in Templemore, the soldiers undertook daily walks in the countryside and climbed the Devil's Bit Mountain. They partook in the Church Parade on Sundays - the Catholics marching to the Catholic Church and the Protestants to the Church of Ireland. Prisoners took a car to the local post office to collect mail. On all of the trips, soldiers escorted them from the Leinster regiment. As they marched to and from church, the POWs' sang songs, and fittingly at times were often heard singing '*It's a long way to Tipperary.*'

The POWs contained a large number of English speakers - which eased social integration. The German prisoners at Templemore refused to pay the extra penny for a pint of porter, and had also pledged themselves not to pay any 'war tax.' Though they had many civil liberties, prisoners were not allowed read papers or any news regarding the unfolding war.

Though, with freedom, comes the grumblings of those things they can't change: the food. A poem inscribed on the collarbone of a cow that they pastured refers to the quality of the food in Templemore somewhat unflatteringly:

*"But even if we grow old,
We shall never forget,
The splendid food, both hot and cold,
We got at Templemore.
In the morning for breakfast,
And the evening as well,
We generally got water and sugar,
Always clean in the trough.
At midday fatty soup,
And plenty of bones as well,
Each day a quarter loaf,
What more do you want.
But everything is amiss,
And what I told you of the food,
Is merely a fairytale,
we've gone to bed hungry."*

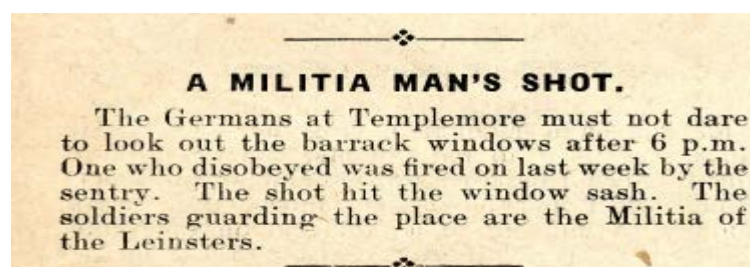
The poem is in stark contrast to local accounts of the quality Tipperary beef provided to the prisoners.

There were no reported escape attempts and the prisoners and prison guards had a good relationship - although both sides were cautious of the other. One unfortunate prisoner caught looking out a window after curfew was shot at with the bullet hitting the sash.

1915 brought a reversal of the internment policy in Ireland. Plans were assembled and approved by the war office to relocate the prisoners to Britain and to return Templemore to its original purpose – a training centre for soldiers. The reason for the soldier's deportation was ambiguous at least – reasons ranging from substandard sanitary facilities to the barracks being at risk of collapse. However, RIC accounts conflict with this – they implied that the barracks was required for training purposes.

However, all these reasons conflict with a report commissioned by a Special Branch of the RIC. This report consistently points to covert operations by Irish Republicans and most notably Pierce McCann. McCann had on several occasions "*attempted to visit the POW's in Templemore*". He can also be attributed to a furtive plan to attack Richmond, prior to their planned rebellion. Optimistically they anticipated that the soldiers – many of whom had fought at the front lines – would support their insurrection and their fledgling republic. This plan was very palpable considering "*McCann was intimately acquainted with P.H Pearse, the O' Rahilly, Thomas McDonagh, the Plunketts and other extremists*", men with influence and the resources to attack an otherwise relatively vulnerable location. Certainly, this threat is one of the primary reasons behind the soldier's departure from Templemore.

Lilford Mill, Leigh in Lancashire was used to house the POWs from Templemore. Although what appeared to a relatively innocuous village was quite the opposite – the locals resented their new residents and were highly suspicious of them. Local newspapers were responsible for the distribution of anti-German propaganda in an attempt to segregate the prisoners. One newspaper commented that *'they had a villainous look about them which satisfies one of their being capable of committing every conceivable kind of atrocity'*. Another portrayed



Extract from newspaper in Templemore

the prisoners very negatively writing *'we are sorry to think that for a couple of years the pure air of respectable Leigh will be tainted with the breath of these specimens of the scrapings of Hell.'*

Following the departure of the POWs from Templemore, it became a training barracks for Irish recruits to the Munster Fusiliers and the Leinster Regiment.

The soldiers were unhappy with the decision to move as seen in a soldier report that detailed: *"Many were the regrets uttered at the thoughts of being taken away from the comfortable quarters and the 'Gudde nicey people' of Templemore."*

Little evidence if none remains of the soldiers stay at Richmond Barracks as *'guests of the nation.'*

That quote, *'guests of the nation'* is quite imperative to the conclusion that though these POWs were denigrated on their first arrival - through what many could dub the "fear of the unknown" and akin to the Red Scare in the 1950's in the United States – that these views were reversed or augmented through experience. This humanity and kinship is seen in their ability to mourn the loss of a soldier together as seen twice above became an important a posteriori cause of their gradual integration and acceptance in the community.

To further expand upon the causation of their integration, one must acknowledge that the acceptance of the group rested largely upon the financial stimulus and productivity that they brought to the area surrounding Richmond Barracks – witnessed through the visitors attracted to the area's thrilling infamy and exotic inhabitants, the continuous expenditure of the POWs in the local shop by the Barracks and the craftsmanship of the men as they passed the time of their internship.

One must not forget the initial negatives that had to be overcome by the POWs, those being: the costly construction and future refurbishment of the barracks and the aforementioned concern of the locality.

For this essay is not just to recount and extrapolate idyllic and stand-alone conclusions; but to gauge this in terms of modernity – 100 years later. The Irish people as a nation have been maligned and suppressed for many centuries and yet we gave in to preconceptions of others without rationalising it against the misconceptions of the Irish nation: how we were repressed by misinformed and hyperbolised preconceptions.

Though, importantly, we forwent these misconceptions and, as described above, these people – the POWs – became an intrinsic part of the success of this particular area in Tipperary for the duration of their internment.

Surely, we must remember not only the headlines of this decade of centenaries but, also reminisce and apply the moral and ethical enlightenment of the age; to engage the maligned peoples who step onto this land in a way that leads to (in the words of the 1916 Declaration) *‘the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts’* as embodied by both the life and death of all those who fought for the recognition of Irish independence: an identity free from suppressive preconceptions.



Richmond Barracks in the present day

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