

Shared history can help build a shared future

Irish Times - Armistice Day - 11th November 2005

We must honor our dead of the Somme, just as we honor the insurgents of 1916, writes Dermot Ahern. 1916 is an iconic year in Irish history. Next year we will mark the 90th anniversary of the Easter Rising. We will also remember another event of particular significance for the people of this island - the battle of the Somme. The loss of 5,000 men of the 36th Ulster Division in the first two days of the battle of the Somme is rightly well-remembered. As we work to build a shared and peaceful present and future on this island, it is appropriate that the memories of all 200,000 young men from all parts of this island who fought at the Somme and elsewhere in that war are similarly honored. We can no longer have two histories, separate and in conflict. We must acknowledge that the experiences of all the people on this island have shaped our present and, in some way, defined what it is for all of us to be Irish. In the years following partition, our state-building efforts North and South, led us towards the establishment of mono-cultures, bolstered by a single national historical narrative - a narrative which, in the South, excluded the memory of those ordinary Irish people who fought in the "Great War". The time has come to move beyond those safe historical narratives. As a confident and secure people, it is time to begin a national debate on the issues raised by both the Somme and 1916. Such a debate on our shared history can only assist us in our efforts to build a shared future.

Such a debate should acknowledge the similarities between ordinary soldiers of 1916 and the "Great War" which writers such as Sebastian Barry have brought into focus. Equally, it should focus on the common historical and political threads between 1916 and the Somme. We must debate the notion that both were concomitants of a wider European movement of national awareness which came with the rise of democracy. Right across Europe, through empires and emerging nations, the belief in the manifest destiny of nations, the sacredness of soil and the cleansing nature of war had gripped our Continent. From Flanders to the Balkans, the fight for self-determination and the freedom of small nations was raging. The insurgents of 1916 were profoundly conscious that young men

and women just like them were fighting for the same ideals across the Continent - ideals denied to Ireland.

In his statement to the court martial, James Connolly asserted that "we succeeded in proving that Irishmen are ready to die endeavouring to win for Ireland those national rights which the British government has been asking them to die to win for Belgium." In his address, Pearse appealed to British soldiers in Belgium and Serbia fighting for self-determination, nationhood and the rights of small nations. Their objective was to secure for Ireland those same rights being fought for across the Continent by many of their countrymen, from both parts of this island. When the President jointly inaugurated with Queen Elizabeth the Memorial Peace Park at Messines, she reminded us that men of the 36th Ulster Division and the 16th Irish Division fought side-by-side 90 years ago, their historic differences transcended by a common cause. Of the 200,000 Irishmen of the Irish regiments and others who volunteered for service with the British army by the end of the first World War, at least half were Catholic and many strong Irish nationalists. An estimated 50,000, both Catholic and Protestant, never came home. They died far from this island, at the Somme, at Gallipoli and as far afield as Macedonia, Egypt and Palestine.

Now, as we are so tantalizingly close to sustainable peace on this island, it is all the more important that we remember those young men, from all corners of the island, who volunteered for the idea of something greater than themselves, whether that was their future, their families, the protection of freedom or for Ireland. It is in this spirit of recognition of this part of our shared history that the Taoiseach recently visited the Somme Heritage Centre in Newtownards. In their service in the first World War, these men were caught up in a catastrophe that affected all parts of this island. In the memorial park in Messines, for which the Government provided funding, there is a round tower built with stones from every county in Ireland. Young men, often united more by their social background than by religion or politics, fought in the horrific conditions of the trenches. For their families across Ireland, this was a time of extraordinary fear and, for many, grief. The very scale of the losses makes it hard for us to grasp, but each death

holds a story and an enduring burden for the families. To give an idea of how this affected life here, more than 2,000 men from Athy and the surrounding district in Co Kildare went to fight between 1914 and 1918. One hundred and two men from Athy, (population 4,000) itself died in the trenches. The legacy that this left for that community is tragic. The bereaved, the traumatised and those left permanently changed by their experiences, went on to work and live and contribute to the development of this country. Their sacrifice and their memories are unquestionably still part of the fabric of our society. The bonds that were forged among the Irish soldiers is perhaps best exemplified by the tribute paid to Fr Willie Doyle, one of 30 Irish Catholic priests to die in the war, by a Belfast Orangeman in the Glasgow Weekly News on September 1st, 1917: "Fr Doyle was a good deal among us. We couldn't possibly agree with his religious opinions, but we simply worshipped him for other things. He didn't know the meaning of fear and he didn't know what bigotry was. He was as ready to risk his life to take a drop of water to a wounded Ulsterman, as to assist men of his own faith and regiment. If he risked his life in looking after Ulster Protestant soldiers once, he did it a hundred times.

It is in recognition of the significance of this event for the people of this island, that the Government has lent its support to the campaign to secure pardons for 26 Irish Men serving with the British Army who were executed during the first World War. In October of last year, our Embassy in London presented a Report to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. This report thoroughly evaluated the courts-martial and sentencing of these men and compellingly revealed a military system of justice that was seriously flawed, ignored clear evidence of medical afflictions and was marked by class-bias and a disparity in the treatment of soldiers from Ireland. One in 50 recruits were Irish, but more than one in every 13 of those condemned were Irish (roughly four times higher than other troops). This report is not an attempt to rewrite history or to impose today's norms on the past. The offences for which these men were executed were the subject of controversy at the time, and no longer carried the death penalty 10 years after the war. The executions of the first World War have been the subject of an ongoing campaign both in Britain and Ireland. Here the "Shot At Dawn" campaign has attracted

overwhelming support across political and religious divides, North and South. The Government is in ongoing contact with the British government to secure a response to our report which we hope will resolve the matter so as to bring comfort to the families of the men involved, and to contribute further to a fuller understanding of the shared history of this island.

As President McAleese put it so eloquently at the opening of the memorial park in Messines: "war defines our failure in its ugliness and its wastefulness". It is terrible both in the immediate human losses it inflicts and its legacies of grief and division. The National Day of Commemoration offers us the opportunity every year to commemorate Irish men and women who died in past wars or in service with the United Nations. It is an opportunity to reflect not on the politics of the wars of history, but their tragic human cost.

As another contingent of more than 400 Irish soldiers departs for Liberia with UNMIL, to help secure the peaceful future of that troubled country, we can be proud of the continuing tradition of service and heroism of our people. However, in remembering the wars of the past, we have a duty to those who suffered not to let conflicted memories of those wars be the source of tension in the present. The Irish men of the first World War died side-by-side. They are remembered side-by-side in Messines and their sacrifice should be honoured by all of us on this island without reservation.

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