

2015

## Let Ireland Weep: Poetry of Loss in the First World War

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### Recommended Citation

McDonagh, John (2015) "Let Ireland Weep: Poetry of Loss in the First World War," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 3.

doi:10.21427/D7FM9V

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol4/iss1/3>

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## **John McDonagh**

### **‘Let Ireland Weep’: Poetry of Loss in the First World War**

The 2014 centenary of the outbreak of the First World War was marked on the Champs Elysées in Paris by a series of enlarged black and white photographs, mounted on mini billboards running the length of the city’s most prestigious boulevard. The images focus on the social and cultural impact of the fighting, varying from cigarette-puffing Tommies in the trenches of the Somme to pots and pans being melted down to make munitions. The photographs show just how international the war turned out to be, with soldiers from all five continents engaged in the four year struggle for supremacy in Europe. Images of ordinary human interaction, even between the combatting troops, point to the enormous human cost entailed in the playing out of old treaties and alliances. The war touched the lives of millions of people throughout the world, and the exhibition is a prescient reminder of just how much damage was wreaked during the fighting. The photographs serve another function, however. They are indicative of the technological advances that marked this particular war, with tanks, machine-guns and aircraft complementing the traditional horse-mounted cavalry, the bayonet-armed rifles and crude trench fortifications. This contrast marks the First World War as something of a social, political and military watershed, traditionally unsophisticated in the sense of the enormous loss of life for the gain of little territory, yet radical in terms of the extent to which the war was filmed, recorded, photographed and, most significantly, written about. Indeed, this exhibition is a very early example of the photo-journalism that is such a feature of contemporary war reporting in that the images are designed not as propaganda for any one side but act as an objective record of the degree to which the war affected the ordinary lives of millions of people, least of all the estimated sixteen million people, both military and civilian, who died in the process. It can be argued that the globalisation of society, which many present as a relatively recent phenomenon, finds some of its roots in the conflict played out largely in the flat, fertile plains of the north western European continent, and that the First World War was the first global conflict to truly lodge itself into the burgeoning media-saturated culture that is so familiar in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The literary response to the conflict was yet another reason why the First World War continues to hold a special interest in the cultural life of Europe. The men who enlisted, and those who were conscripted, included playwrights, novelists, artists and poets, and their responses to their experiences provide a vital literary perspective on the conflict and a unique

insight to the unfolding conflict. Indeed, The Artists' Rifles, established in 1859 as a battalion of volunteers made up largely of artists, writers and poets, saw action in both the Boer war and particularly the First World War, serving as a natural home for those with an interest in both cultural and military life. One of their better known recruits in 1916 was the 23-year old Wilfred Owen, who was to be killed in action a week before the end of the war in November, 1918. He experienced, at first hand, the deadlock on the Western Front, where over 500 miles of trenches stretched from Switzerland to the English Channel, and where warfare occasioned the concept of "going over the top" to an almost certain death. Consequently, an inherent philosophy of sacrifice prevailed amongst the ranks of the soldiers and this finds its way into much of the poetry written at the time. Writing home on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 1917, Owen describes the desolate scene facing him:

Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language... everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious.<sup>1</sup>

Most of Owen's war poetry was written in an incredibly productive period between January, 1917, and November 4, 1918, when he was killed during the crossing of the Sambre-Oise Canal, exactly one week before the signing of the Armistice. His fame was posthumous, largely as a result of the efforts of fellow soldier and poet Siegfried Sassoon, and he saw only four of his poems in print in his lifetime. His *annus mirabilis* was certainly from August 1917 to September, 1918, a period of intense exposure to trench warfare during which his perspective on the futility and brutality of the war begins to harden to what Cecil Day Lewis describes as "savage indignation"<sup>2</sup>. Owen's poetry signifies the move from the poetry of exhortation and exhilaration to poems of disgust, horror and bitterness. It is the reality of front-line fighting, so appalling in fact and unimaginable by those who had not experienced it, that gives Owen's poetry its true force, allied to an increasing awareness of the futility of the entire exercise. Often the approach is factual and the tone objective, unflinching in its desire to record the reality of death and injury faced by the millions of soldiers at the front. His poetry of protest highlights the gulf between the fighting soldier, the commanders and the civilians at home, each portrayed with different degrees of culpability in what William Butler

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. C. Day Lewis, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, p.24.

Yeats referred to “this casual comedy”<sup>3</sup>. Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” perfectly captures the pervading tone of his work:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.<sup>4</sup>

The Irish contribution to the First World War has been, until recent times, a source of much controversy, given the chronological coincidence of the Easter Rising, which took place in Dublin between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1916, with some of the most pivotal battles of the war. For example, at the Battle of the Somme on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916, a mere eight weeks after the Rising, 19, 240 soldiers were killed, making it the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army. An estimated 200,000 Irishmen served in the British army over the course of the war, suffering nearly 50,000 fatalities, a figure that dwarfs the casualties of the Rising, numbered in the hundreds. Many other Irish-born men, reluctant or perhaps fearful to join the British Army, fought and died with the American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand forces, but theirs was a history that was largely ignored in post-independent Ireland. Their contribution to the war did not fit easily with the meta-narrative of Irish nationalism, driven as it was by the recognition of the British Army and its various manifestations in Ireland as the embodiment of the inequalities of the colonial regime. This elision from history was not formally addressed until as recently as 1998, on the 80th anniversary of the Armistice, when the then President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, and Queen Elizabeth II, alongside King Albert 11 of Belgium, together dedicated a memorial at Messines to all the Irish people who had fallen in World War One. In her speech on the day, she recalls the travesty of historical silence:

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<sup>3</sup> Ed. A. Norman Jeffares, *Yeats's Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 287.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, p.44.

Today's ceremony at the Peace Park was not just another journey down a well-travelled path. For much of the past eighty years, the very idea of such a ceremony would probably have been unthinkable. Those whom we commemorate here were doubly tragic. They fell victim to a war against oppression in Europe. Their memory too fell victim to a war for independence at home in Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of sacrifice, such a strong feature of much early WW1 poetry, was one that was largely coined to describe those who died in the cause of Irish independence in Ireland and not those who decided that fighting in the trenches of Europe in a British army uniform was the best way to secure the realisation of Home Rule, which had been passed by the British parliament in 1914. What is striking, however, are the similarities in the images and language of nationalist poets such as Padraic Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh and the patriotic exhortations of the war verses of English poets John Masefield and Robert Bridges, and they certainly point more to the similar poetic responses to conflict rather than any fundamental ideological differences. Both exhort the concept of an honourable self-sacrifice for the greater good, and images of fields running with the blood of willing participants abound. Indeed, if the names of the respective poets were removed it would be difficult to identify the poems that emanated from such diametrically opposed political perspectives.

On July 31, 1917, Francis Ledwidge was killed by a stray shell while constructing roads for the British Army during the third battle of Ypres. Aged 30, he was to become arguably the best known of the Irish poets whose work was inspired by their varied experiences in the war. Amongst this group were Stephen Gwynne, one of seven nationalist MPs who served at the front, and the artist William Orpen, who travelled to the front as the official artist of the British Army. Orpen's poem "The Church, Zillebeke" captures the grim reality of the confluence of bad weather and a landscape shattered by the conflict:

Mud  
Everywhere\_  
Nothing but mud.  
The very air is thick with it,  
The few tufts of grass are all smeared with –

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<sup>5</sup> RTE News Archive, November, 1998.

Mud!

The Church a heap of it;

One look and weep for it.

That's what they've made of it –

Mud!<sup>6</sup>

Francis Ledwidge was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1887, near the village of Slane, Co. Meath. The second youngest of nine children, his fortunes took a dramatic turn for the worse when his father Patrick, a labourer, died suddenly on March, 1892, aged fifty-two. The social convention at the time would have seen the children farmed out to various relatives or even into the care of religious orders, but Anne Ledwidge was a formidable woman who was determined to raise her children herself, and eventually, through the efforts of her elder children and her own willingness to put in long hours of manual labour, she managed to get them educated, apprenticed and eventually independent. Ledwidge spent his teenage years in and around Slane, a village dominated by the Conyngham family, benevolent landlords who encouraged equitable relations with their tenants. Ledwidge's knowledge of and passion for the countryside around Slane features heavily in his poetry and it is for his gentle pastorality as much as his war poetry that he is known. Indeed, some of the most poignant images in his poems feature the verdant fields of north eastern France and Belgium, the shattered landscape he encountered during his time at the front evoking fond memories of the similar landscape of Meath. "Home", written in Belgium in July 1917, shortly before his death, exemplifies the longing Ledwidge felt for his native county and it typifies the sense of fracture and dissonance that he experienced at the front. The robin that he hears singing on a "broken tree" becomes the symbol of the commonality of human experience:

A burst of sudden wings at dawn

Faint voices in a dreamy noon,

Evenings of mist and murmurings,

And nights with rainbows of the moon.

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<sup>6</sup> Ed. Gerard Dawe, *Earth Voices Whispering: An Anthology of Irish War Poetry* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2008), p.46.

And through these things a wood-way dim,  
And waters dim, and slow sheep seen  
On uphill paths that wind away  
Through summer sounds and harvest green.

This is a song a robin sang  
This morning on a broken tree,  
It was about the little fields  
That call across the world to me<sup>7</sup>.

The reference to “the little fields” is an interesting one in that the phrase “brave little Belgium” was often used as a call to arms in various propaganda campaigns by the allies, emphasising that the fate of “little Belgium” would be just the start of the destruction of Europe if the allies did not respond to the German advances. Indeed, in a seminal speech delivered in Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, on September 20, 1914, John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, explicitly made Belgium the exemplar for the fundamental cause of the war:

The interests of Ireland—of the whole of Ireland—are at stake in this war. This war is undertaken in the defence of the highest principles of religion and morality and right, and it would be a disgrace for ever to our country and a reproach to her manhood and a denial of the lessons of her history if young Ireland confined their efforts to remaining at home to defend the shores of Ireland from an unlikely invasion, and to shrinking from the duty of proving on the field of battle that gallantry and courage which has distinguished our race all through its history. <sup>8</sup>

Before the war, Ledwidge participated in a variety of social, political and agrarian movements in his native county, being heavily involved in the burgeoning trade union movement as well as being an ardent supporter of agrarian reform. He undertook a series of manual labouring jobs in his local area, specialising in road maintenance, and his early poetry

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<sup>7</sup> ed. Liam O’Meara, *Francis Ledwidge – The Complete Poems* (Newbridge: The Goldsmith Press, 1997), p.257.

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Independent*, September 21, 1914.

evokes a gentle landscape, fertile and productive, and the poet himself emerges as a sympathetic observer of rural Irish life. Indeed, Seamus Heaney commented that these early poems “evoke a certain nostalgia for those decades when this poet was appropriated and gratefully cherished as the guarantor of an Ireland domesticated, pious and demure; his poems used to be a safe bet for the convent library and the school prize, a charm against all that modernity which threatened the traditional values of a country battering down for independence”<sup>9</sup>. However, it was the interest in his work shown by Lord Dunsany that was not only to transform Ledwidge’s career, but to change his life completely.

Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18<sup>th</sup> Lord Dunsany, first met Ledwidge in the summer of 1912 and was immediately taken with the younger man’s poems, and in his diary he wrote of their first encounter:

A memorable event had occurred the year before when I got a letter from a young Irishman enclosing a copy-book full of verses and asking if they were any good. He was Francis Ledwidge. I was astonished by the brilliance of that eye that has looked at the fields of Meath and seen there all the simple birds and flowers, with a vividness that made those pages like a magnifying glass, through which one looked at familiar things seen thus for the first time. These poems were so unexpected and were sent or brought to me so frequently, that they gave me the queer impression that this Irish villager had found some coffer, stored in a golden age, brimful of lyrics and lost long ago.<sup>10</sup>

Dunsany himself was a noted author, publishing over sixty books in his lifetime. His novels were largely in the genre of science fiction and fantasy, and he established himself as one of the most influential Irish authors in this emerging field in the early decades of the twentieth century. Dunsany was certainly a great supporter of Ledwidge, financially and emotionally, and was instrumental in getting his poems into print, not only during Ledwidge’s short lifetime but especially after his death. He also introduced Ledwidge to his literary friends, including William Butler Yeats, George Russell, Padraig Collum, Oliver St. John Gogarty and Lady Gregory, and there are strong Yeatsean influences to be found in much of Ledwidge’s early poetry, specifically a pining for an unrequited love and a fascination with the heroes and legends of Celtic sagas and legends. Poems such as “Before the War of Cooley”, “The Death of Leag” and “The Passing of Caoilte” can be viewed as relatively

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<sup>9</sup> ed. Dermot Bolger, *Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1992), p.11.

<sup>10</sup> Alice Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge, a life of the poet* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1998), p.53.



generic of the Celtic revivalist poetry of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However beneficial Dunsany's patronage was to prove to be, their relationship was far from equal, a point made by Dermot Bolger in his editorial note to the *Selected Francis Ledwidge*, published by New Island Books in 1992:

Much of his work suffers from the flaws of its time, the quality of advice given by a patron who was at once both deeply and generously concerned for him and yet blinkered enough to describe him as a "peasant" in the introduction to his first book<sup>11</sup>.

One of the unforeseen consequences of his close relationship with Dunsany was Ledwidge's decision to enlist with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in 1914. This was the predominantly Irish regiment of the British Army that was founded in 1881 and which saw service in the Boer War in South Africa and the first and second world wars. Lord Dunsany had joined the regiment at the outbreak of the war, rising to the rank of captain, and his enthusiastic embracing of John Redmond's support for Irish involvement in the war was central in Ledwidge's decision to sign up. However, membership of that regiment was further complicated by their active participation in the suppression of the Rising, thereby blurring the line between the nationalists who enlisted to secure Home Rule and those who chose the route of direct armed resistance. It was this decision to enlist that was to define Ledwidge's short future and in many senses inspire his poetry away from the more pastoral elegies of his earlier work. "The Call to Ireland", written during his training at Richmond Barracks, Dublin, in early 1915, exemplifies his support for the Redmondite cause:

We have fought so much for the nation  
In the tents we helped to divide;  
Shall the cause of our common fathers  
On our earthstones lie denied?  
For the price of a field we have wrangled  
While the weather rusted the plow,  
'twas yours and 'twas mine and 'tis ours yet

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<sup>11</sup> Bolger, p.8.

And it's time to be fencing it now<sup>12</sup>

Initially, Ledwidge took very well to army life, and a letter written to his old friend Paddy Healy paints a picture that contrasts somewhat with the common perception of military training:

I am having a royal fine time. I only parade one hour per day, the other six I spend in the quartermaster's store as clerk, for which I receive extra pay and mess with clerks in a place specially allotted to them. For breakfast we get tea, bread, butter, fish sometimes, or steak, always something; for dinner, beef, vegetables, and afterwards rice. For tea fish again and usually a pineapple. You can see I am not so badly off after all. I see Lord Dunsany every day, and in the evenings we meet in his quarters and discuss poetry, the thing that matters<sup>13</sup>.

It is precisely in the conjunction between a fervent Irish nationalism and the expression of that nationalism in a British Army uniform that makes Ledwidge such an interesting figure. The elision of the experiences of Irish soldiers in the Great War, in stark contrast to the hagiographical treatment of the leaders of the Rising, was as a direct consequence of the conflict between those who saw the war as opportunity to further a militant republicanism, and those who saw it as a necessary and honourable prelude to Irish Home Rule. Ledwidge was in no doubt about both the political and moral justification for the war and, as a committed Volunteer, saw it as his direct duty to enlist in the British Army to further the cause of Home Rule. In a letter written in June, 1917, to Professor Robert Chase, an American who had used some of Ledwidge's poems in his lectures, he makes his case clearly:

I am on active service since the spring of 1915, having served in the Dardanelles and the First British Expeditionary Force to Serbia, and after a brief interval at home came to France in December, 1916. Some of the people who know me least imagine that I joined the army because I knew men were struggling for higher ideals and great empires, and I could not sit idle to watch them make for me a more beautiful world. They were mistaken. I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our

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<sup>12</sup> O'Meara, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Curtayne, p.85.

civilisation, and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions<sup>14</sup> .

Ledwidge's support for the war was, however, soon tempered, as it was with Wilfred Owen, by the brutal realities of life at the front. Ledwidge is far less political than Owen, preferring to focus on the tragic nature of the loss of life rather than expressing an underlying anger at the futility and unfairness of the conflict as it manifested in the ground. Where Owen directly confronts the inherent injustices of the management of the war and unflinchingly describes the horrific events that he witnessed first-hand, Ledwidge, despite his experiences, remains true to his poetic roots. His critique of the war is less overt and is marked, as Heaney notes, by a "tendermindedness towards the predicaments of others with an ethically unsparing attitude towards the self"<sup>15</sup>. However, his allegiance to the British Army was severely tested after the executions which followed the Easter Rising, a drawn out affair which began with the execution of Padraig Pearse on May 3, and concluded with the execution of James Connolly on May 12. Ledwidge took these events badly, eventually being court-martialled after what was termed 'insubordination' to a superior officer, but was later reinstated, fatefully returning to France late, in early 1917.

Despite this episode, Ledwidge's sincere belief in the cause of the war permeates his final works. To the end, he epitomised what Gerald Dawe refers to as "Ireland's other history – not the history of cultural nationalism and the struggle for Irish independence, but the history of Irish men who, for a multiplicity of reasons, fought and died on foreign fields"<sup>16</sup> . One of his last poems, written a few weeks before his death, encapsulates his belief that the war, despite all of its horrors, was for the greater good of not just Ireland but her allies as well. "The Irish In Gallipoli" recalls the six weeks he spent in Turkey during the Dardanelles campaign of late 1915/early 1916, and the poem exemplifies a poet who attempted to make sense, in verse, of the horrors that he lived through:

Where Aegean cliffs with bristling menace front  
The treacherous splendour of that isley sea,  
Lighted by Troy's last shadow; where the first  
Hero kept watch and the last Mystery

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<sup>14</sup> *The Cornhill Magazine*, June, 1920.

<sup>15</sup> Bolger, p.20.

<sup>16</sup> Dawe, p.xviii.

Shook with dark thunder. Hark! The battle brunt!

A nation speaks, old Silences are burst.

'Tis not for lust of glory, no new throne

This thunder and this lightning of our power

Wakens up frantic echoes, not for these

Our Cross with England's mingle, to be blown

At Mammon's threshold. We but war when war

Serves Liberty and Keeps a world at peace.

Who said that such an emprise could be vain?

Were they not one with Christ, who fought and died?

Let Ireland weep: but not for sorrow, weep

That by her sons a land is sanctified,

For Christ arisen, and angels once again

Come back, like exile birds, and watch their sleep.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dawe, p.83.