

UNITING WORKERS' MEMORIES

Experience and Legacy of WWI



Picture: Village of Myrshaete as seen on 8 June 1917



Preface

As trade unionists, workers and citizens, our present has been shaped by our past. That is why, during recent years, Unite has published pamphlets marking the 1907 Belfast Strike and the 1913 Dublin Lockout – events which helped pave the way for the rights we enjoy today, as well as reminding us of the rights we still have to fight for.

This year, on the occasion of our Third Irish Policy Conference, we are publishing a short brochure on the First World War. World War I was, of course, very different from the great labour struggles of 1907 and 1913 – but its impact was felt in every working class community in Ireland. And that is why we asked the oral historian Mary Muldowney, who has a sympathetic understanding of trade union history, to interview Unite members for an oral history project exploring that impact.

This project, which was necessarily on a small scale, involved interviews with six retired members of our union, from North and South and from different traditions.

World War I was an imperialist war fought – like all wars – by working people. While there is no agreement on the total number of soldiers from Ireland who served in the British Army and Navy, Professor Keith Jeffery gives a figure of 210,000, of whom between 35,000 and 50,000 were killed.

In terms of the number of participants directly involved, and their families, WWI thus had a greater impact on communities than the other seminal events during those years such as the 1907 Belfast Strike or the 1913 Dublin Lockout.

To quote one of those interviewed for this project, Jimmy Nixon:

“There wasn’t one townland in Ireland, north, south, east or west that didn’t lose people”.

Those affected were overwhelmingly working class. Growing up in Waterford, I remember hearing about local boy John Condon – the youngest member of the British army to die in the war, aged just fourteen when he was killed at the second battle of Ypres almost exactly 100 years ago. The story went that he walked barefoot to the recruiting place and was happy to get supplied with a pair of boots. While a sense of adventure might have prompted some under-age boys to enlist (Jimmy Whelan’s great-uncle was just fifteen when he joined the army), there is no doubt that there was also an economic imperative, as explained again by Jimmy Nixon:

“a lot of people joined the Army because there was no work and because they needed to feed the house anyway. Some of them maybe even thinking, some of the younger ones thinking ‘well if I’m not in the house it’s a mouth less to feed and I might be able to send back a few bob’.”

It is unfortunate that no women members came forward to be interviewed for this project – but perhaps not entirely surprising. Not only were Unite’s predecessor unions largely organised in male-dominated trades; the business of war is also seen as predominantly male, while it is disproportionately

women who cope with the devastation left behind.

Liam Murray’s mother had to cope with the psychological after-effects of the war on her husband, whose depression resulted in the loss of the family income – so it is understandable that (referring to his mother’s role as transmitter of the family history) Liam says:

“My mother – in terms of the War – my mother wasn’t interested in the War, I was”.

Those interviewed for this project come from different jurisdictions, communities and traditions – but they have one trait in common. They are staunch trade unionists with a history of activism and awareness that gives them a unique perspective not only on historical events, but also on the history of our union.

As Jimmy Whelan points out, the history of our union stretches back over 150 years, while Daniel Lee notes that:

“I’ve seen more general secretaries than Tommy Lipton has got tea-leaves because I’m 63 years a member – well it was the ETU, then there was the EPTU, then there was the AEEU and then there was AMICUS and then the Transport and General and now there’s Unite”.

Our members are repositories not only of the history of our union, but of the history of working people throughout this island. I would like to thank all those who contributed to this project – not only those quoted in this pamphlet (Fergus Farrell, Eric Harvey, Daniel Lee, Liam Murray, Jimmy Nixon and Jimmy Whelan), but also those who gave advice and helped source artefacts, especially Brian Nelson and Robert Scott.

Jimmy Kelly
Ireland Secretary
Unite the Union

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Irish trade unions and the First World War

When the First World War commenced in August 1914, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and there was every expectation that the country would be involved to the same extent as England, Scotland and Wales despite the political situation here.

In the years preceding the outbreak of war, there was a danger that the Home Rule crisis would escalate from political conflict to outright violence. In the autumn of 1914, the first Irish men to enlist in the British Army were members of the unionist Ulster Volunteer Force and the nationalist Irish Volunteers, who had been ready to fight each other only months previously.

available to them when they returned from the war.

Liam Murray's father, Martin enlisted in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in 1915. Martin had a steady job with Hill & Sons, flour millers in Lucan, County Dublin and would not have thought of joining the Army if it had not been for the war. He responded to John Redmond's call to his followers to enlist so that Home Rule for Ireland would be secured after the war but like many others, the attitude of Martin's employers was an important consideration for him. Martin Murray was a member of the ITGWU but that union's opposition to the war does not seem to have affected his thinking.

of hunger. Already we are threatened with famine prices; already the gaunt frame of hunger looms large in the outlook because the people think that you will do in 1914 as your fathers did in 1846-7-8. Is it not better to take the risk and responsibility of preventing a repetition of this than to die as our fathers died of hunger and of fever begotten of famine? And you can prevent it. To the men of our class who are armed we say, Keep your arms and use them if necessary.

If God created the fruits of the earth He created them for you and yours. Do not allow our crops to be gleaned for any other country.

They are yours. KEEP THEM AT HOME, WE SAY! KEEP THEM AT HOME BY THE STRENGTH OF YOUR RIGHT ARM!

The ITUC's attitude to the war was quite different to that of the British trade unions, who supported the war and soon after its commencement negotiated an industrial truce with the government. An agreement was signed in March 1915 suspending all 'trade

"The other reason why my father would have joined, apart from being a Redmondite. They were influenced by their employers who had Anglo-Irish sentiments. ... A lot of people who worked on landed gentry land here, also joined up to curry favour with their employers. ... He was getting away from the routine of the village, he was getting a trip down to Buttevant in Cork. Where he was being instructed in the use of arms such as trench mortars and the standard rifle. He joined with friends so there would have been a great spirit of adventure."

From its earliest stages, the Irish trade unions warned that the war would not be in the best interests of Irish workers. The National Executive of the ITUCLP reminded Irish men and women of how the British Empire had treated them in the past:

"IRISH WOMEN, it is you who will suffer most by this foreign war. It is the sons you reared at your bosom that will be sent to be mangled by shot and torn by shell; it is your fathers, husbands and brothers whose corpses will pave the way to glory for an Empire that despises you; it is you and your children who will starve at home if the produce of Irish soil is sent out of the country. TO YOU WE APPEAL TO AID US IN THIS STRUGGLE TO SAVE IRELAND FROM THE HORRORS OF FAMINE.

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN, if we allow the farmer to sell his crops for export our people will starve; if we allow the profit-monger to sell the products of our land to be exported to foreign countries our people will die



Army reservists or ex-soldiers were called up when war was declared and it has been estimated that approximately 57,000 Irishmen were serving in the Army or the reserves in 1914. The call-up of the reservists was based on the requirement that enlisted men who had completed military service should be on reserve for twelve years after their discharge. There was no allowance made for the needs of the industries in which reservists worked and the immediate result was disruption of employment as short hours, lay-offs and pay cuts were introduced in the sectors from which men were called up.

The Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party (ITUCLP) had an affiliated membership of 110,000 in 1914, mainly comprised of craft unions but including the general workers of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). Many other workers belonged to unions that were not members of the ITUCLP. Initially there was widespread support for the war, which the Westminster government claimed was to be fought for the right to self-determination of small nations like Belgium.

The recruitment campaign that was launched as soon as war was declared in 1914 was met with enthusiasm in the early months. There is evidence that employers encouraged their workers to enlist in the armed forces by promising that their jobs would still be



practices' for as long as the war lasted. This was followed by the Munitions of War Act in July 1915, which banned strikes and lockouts in war-related industry, particularly munitions. On the other hand, procedures were set in place that recognised collective bargaining (although subject to a system of compulsory arbitration) and this had the effect of encouraging trade union membership and organisation.

Other repressive legislation and increased inflation throughout the war undermined the enthusiasm that was evident in 1914, contributing to the massive support for the anti-conscription movement in 1918.

In Ireland, by 1915 there were frequent complaints to trade unions that employers were forcing men into the army. This was especially true of unskilled general workers who were sacked from their jobs and left with no

choice but to enlist. James Connolly's Workers Republic described this practice in unambiguous terms:

"Dismissing men of military age from their employment, both married and single, and endeavouring to stare themselves and their families, is a very obnoxious form of Conscription, as it enables the well-to-do and upper classes to evade their duties. Nearly all the employers are doing it."

Such coercion applied much more to unskilled workers than to tradesmen, who were frequently granted exempt status to continue their work in essential industries and not have to worry about being called up for military service.

Public sector employers were proactive in promotion recruitment in the workplace. The Belfast Post Office, for example, gave a financial allowance to employees who enlisted and guaranteed to keep their jobs open while they were in the armed forces. Belfast Corporation favoured office staff who joined up by subsidising them to a higher level than manual workers.

Wartime necessity had an impact on the success rate of strikes. The terms of the Munitions of War Act were intended to discourage industrial disputes and the conciliation process was an obstacle to spontaneous protests and withdrawal of labour.

However, workers who did strike were generally successful, not least because there was a much greater likelihood of negotiation. Before the war, many employers were confident that the high unemployment rates and widespread poverty guaranteed them a docile workforce. In the course of the war, between 1915 and 1918 Irish strike activity grew in intensity throughout the country. Disputes



Anti-conscription pledge. An Phoblacht, 17 April 2008

were not solely about wages and included demands for trade union recognition.

In the last year of the war, the casualties in the British Army had reached such a level that the government prepared to impose conscription in Ireland. Due to the hardship imposed by the rising cost of living, as well as the numbers of casualties, an attitude of defiance was prevalent and the trade unions responded to the threat of conscription with an immediate call to organise against it.

A general strike was called for 23rd April 1918 and it was widely supported, with the exception of north-east Ulster. There were also plans for boycotts, passive resistance and industrial espionage if conscription was introduced, which it was not. The militant stance of the labour movement cannot be separated from similar activities taking place at the time across Europe in anger at the scale of the slaughter that had taken place in the previous four years.



Why the men joined up

There were many reasons why Irishmen enlisted in the British Army to fight the war. Some of them were persuaded by politicians like Edward Carson and John Redmond who believed that the British government would reward them at a later stage for their assistance.

Unionists would be demonstrating their loyalty to their king and underlining the advantages to Britain of maintaining the union. Nationalists could show that even a more independent Ireland would continue to be a British ally. Both sides were prepared to sacrifice the lives of their followers for future benefits. On a more fundamental level, many men were motivated by the need to earn a steady wage at a time when work was scarce and families were often hungry.

There is also the inescapable fact that armies have always attracted adventurers, for whom wartime is an additional attraction to enlist.

Liam Murray's father Martin was probably typical of the men who enlisted, in that he had no previous knowledge of warfare and what it would mean. He was a Redmondite who believed that his enlistment would ultimately benefit Ireland. That is the context in which he was prepared to fight, with what he thought would be the added benefit of leaving home for a while but accompanied by childhood friends from his home town of Lucan, Co. Dublin. Liam believes that Martin had no real conception of what he would be doing in the army.

"They went out to kill the sons and daughters of

German parents. I mean it was kill or be killed so you know my father went out to kill Germans and he had no hatred in his heart for Germans. He was in a situation where he was conditioned to do it by social indoctrination and by the training.

They had no idea they were going to fight in the first industrial war. The equipment they used had the capability to inflict massive losses on both sides. They had Lewis guns, improved machine guns and other heavy guns and gas. This resulted in people being injured or killed on an industrial scale. ... This was a new rate of killing much greater than the Boer War or Crimean War."

It was not unusual to find young men lying about their age so that they could enlist. Jimmy Nixon's

NO. 30308
CERTIFICATE OF

Discharge
Transfer to Reserve
Demobilization
Demobilization

Army Form Z. 21.
on Demobilization.

Regtl. No. 95443 Rank. Pte. James Lee

Names in full (survivors first)
Unit and Regiment or Corps from which discharged
NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS

Discharged on the 22.6.1918
Called up for service 6.4.18. 52nd (48) Northants

Also served in.....

Medical Category A.I

Year of birth 1900

He is Transferred to Army Reserve on 14.1.1920
in consequence of Demobilization.

Signature and Rank. Lee James (Place) York

For the Secretary, War Office, London, S.W. 1.

WARNING - This Certificate is not a duplicate and cannot be issued. You should therefore only request it if you are sure you have not already received one.

Any person finding this Certificate is requested to forward it in an unstamped envelope to the Secretary, War Office, London, S.W. 1.

T.A. 1918

Enlisted

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T.A. 1918

Enlisted

would often not fit any more and the gratuity was intended to facilitate their buying new ones. As there was a shortage of new clothing, many soldiers opted to take the greatcoat, which was of good quality, instead of the money.

Many soldiers were kept on in the Army Reserves after the war, as James Lee was, and as a result they were liable to call-up when the Second World War was declared. James was conscripted in 1939, at the age of forty and it took nearly a year for the Army to declare him unfit for duty on health grounds and to discharge him permanently.

Jimmy Whelan's grand-uncle Michael was proud of the fact that he was not one of "Kitchener's men", the many soldiers who responded to the expansion of the British Army when war was declared in 1914. Field Marshal Horatio Kitchener was made Minister for War in August 1914 and he immediately implemented a call for volunteers to expand the existing regular army, which was significantly smaller than its equivalents in other European countries. Michael Reddy's determination to be a soldier was not deterred by his age or his size.

"My father told me that when he signed up he was under age but he had been sent home previous to that for trying to sign up and they said he was too small. He used to hang out of the door frame trying to make himself taller to get into the Army."

Family traditions of military service and public service often influenced young men. Eric Harvey's grandfather had been a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Dublin before he moved to Belfast.

William Harvey went to war as a civilian contractor doing building work and Eric told a family story about his grandfather's arrival in France with a group of workers who were frightened by the shelling and

scattered, forcing him to spend his time rounding up the men rather than getting on with the job. William had two sons who joined the British Army in Dublin.

David survived the war but his brother Jimmy, who must have lied about his age to enlist, was killed. Eric's father Edmund joined up in the Second World War and fought at Dunkirk, before his capture and incarceration in difficult circumstances as a prisoner of war.



grandfather was one of them. Born in 1899, George Robinson was only fifteen when he joined up but he claimed to be older when he joined the Royal Irish Rifles. During the Second World War, he reversed his actions and claimed to be younger than he was so that he could join the Army again. This time he went to England to join the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, where they would not have a record of his true age. Daniel Lee's father enlisted in 1915 at the age of fifteen but his demobilisation papers show that he was "deemed to have enlisted" in 1918.

"That's why the authorities didn't put it down because they weren't really allowed to take him at that age."

James Lee served in the Theatre of the Rhine during the War. On discharge, he was charged the sum of one pound in respect of his army greatcoat, which would have been deducted from his "war gratuity".

This was a standard payment for lower ranks, many of whom came from poverty stricken backgrounds and would have gained weight and stature during their time in the army. As a result their civilian clothes



James Lee (on the front horse) on the Western Front c. 1918

The contributors Fergus Farrell

Fergus is a Dubliner and a lifelong trade unionist. He was a young child during the Second World War and it left him believing that it is wrong to glorify war.

"There is something, I believe, in the human makeup that in a lot of people gives them that attitude that they want to fight, they want to destroy everything and take over everything and there are people who get like that - once they've been in a peaceful situation for maybe ten years, they're not happy. They want to be fighting with somebody."

Women and trade unions during the First World War

The First World War brought many women into their first contact with highly organised, militant workers from whom they could learn about the advantages of trade union protection.

However, the opposition of several labour organisations to women's membership also taught some of these women to equate trade unionism with gender discrimination. During the war, opportunities for women's paid work expanded significantly, although not to the same extent in Ireland as in Britain and other western nations. This was mainly because conscription was not extended here and for the most part jobs that were vacated by men were filled by other men.

There is a long history of women participating in trade unions but until the early 20th century it was mainly in supporting roles, as the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of male trade union activists. This was nothing to do with the women's lack of interest or capacity to organise but resulted mainly from the nature of their work.

In the First World War the impetus to employ women in 'non-traditional' areas in Britain and elsewhere came from the labour shortages that

developed as early as the autumn of 1914 but even as increasing numbers of men joined the armed forces, many employers were still reluctant to employ women in their place. Trade unions were also concerned about the diluting effect of female labour on wages and security.

The Irish Trades Union Congress was dominated by craft unions at that point and the majority of them traditionally excluded women. Where women did work in large enterprises, such as the linen mills in Northern Ireland, there was generally strict demarcation between men and women in terms of the jobs they did while the women earned half or less of the rates paid to men. Nevertheless, the linen workers were the largest group of trade unionised women in the country.

In 1914, women linen workers were mainly concentrated in the Textile Operatives Society of Ireland (TOSI) and the Flax Roughers and Yarn Spinners (FRYS), both Belfast unions. By 1916 women in the textile and shirt factories saw their workforce increase by nearly 20 per cent in 1916 compared to 1912. This was due to the heightened demand for textiles generally and for items such as tents, haversacks and aeroplane cloth specifically. When the war started, the TOSI and the FRYs had a combined membership of 3,000 but by 1918 membership of the two unions had risen to roughly 20,000.

The clothing trade had a mainly female workforce, especially in the shirt factories of the north-west. The British-based Amalgamated Society of Tailors and Tailoresses (ASTT) organised the Irish clothing trade but it was a craft union with a predominantly male membership. During the war a rival British union, the United Garment Workers began to recruit factory workers, who were mainly women and the ASTT, was forced to recruit female members. The membership of the Derry branch of the ASTT grew and by the end of the war it had increased from 12,000 in Britain and Ireland in 1914 to 27,000 in 1918, two-thirds of them women.

The Irish Women Workers Union (IWWU) organised a variety of different workers and in 1914 it was still suffering in the aftermath of the 1913 Dublin



Mary Galway, Secretary of the Textile Operatives' Society of Ireland, 1897-1928

Lockout, with half of its members unemployed. In 1915 James Connolly appointed Helena Molony to reorganise the union, following the departure to England of Delia Larkin. Molony's involvement in the Easter Rising in 1916 and her subsequent imprisonment caused her to step aside in favour of Louie Bennett. By 1918 they had around 5,500 members and mainly organised what were described as general, unskilled workers. What is now the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation was part of the union through its first decade and psychiatric nurses continued to be organised by the IWWU. Its main areas of activity included the box making, printing and laundry trades while an effort to organise domestic workers was largely unsuccessful.

The railway industry was one of the industries that resisted hiring women workers until forced to do so by the wartime conditions. In Ireland, while the problems caused by enlistment in the armed forces were never as acute as in Britain, there was an increase in the number of women hired by railway companies during the war years, mainly in the limited areas in which women had worked in the industry before 1914 – cleaning, catering and some office work, with the exception of eight ticket collectors who were appointed by the Cork Blackrock and Passage Railway.

The contributors Daniel Lee

Born in Leeds, Daniel was a union activist in England all his working life. He moved to Armagh in retirement. His grandfather was of Irish extraction and was a devoted follower of John Redmond. His two sons, one of them Daniel's father, joined the British Army.

"I left school at fourteen, and I joined the Union at fifteen and I'm still a member. ... So I've been through all of them since 1947, that's when I joined. I left Leeds and went contract and all sorts of things, as one does – and whenever I went home and started to go out for a pint or whatever, I'd start talking unions."



Women Workers' Union members on the steps of Liberty Hall

The role of ticket collector was one that was contested bitterly in Britain when the issue of employing women was discussed. The National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) agreed with both the Board of Trade representatives and railway management that women would not be capable of doing the job. For example, a writer in the NUR's *Railway Review* remarked:

"The ticket collector is often exposed to the columnies of a rough element which passes through the ticket gates, and this is the objectionable part of the position, unsuitable to the fair sex."

The rates of pay given to women varied from company to company, as indeed they did for male workers. There was no national pay rate and each company set its own grades and related pay. However, what was consistent was the disparity between male and female rates for the same work. Although the unions had argued that women taking up temporary employment during the war to substitute for men should be paid the same rate, this was on the basis of protecting the terms and conditions for the men when they returned from war, rather than a bid for equality.

The solution agreed was that the women would be paid as 'temporary' workers, which would allow a differentiated pay rate. In any case, women were paid significantly less than men even when they were doing the same work.

Women recruited to the Irish munitions factories were unionised by the British-based National Federation of Women Workers. They had members in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Derry, Waterford and Wexford. This union and its members forced Irish employers to adhere to the government regulation of a minimum wage of £1 per week for women in government-controlled employment. This was no small achievement, since under the Munitions of War Act 1915—which covered all munitions companies, public and private, producing material for the army—strikes, lockouts and stoppages were banned.

One of the union's most significant successes was the Special Arbitration Tribunal for Women Employed on Munitions Works, held at the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin, in April 1918, which raised rates and war

bonuses not only for shell workers but also for canteen, cloakroom and cleaning staff. By November 1918 the women were earning £1-4-0 per week, and some earned more. Young Florence Lea was fifteen and earning two shillings per week as an apprentice dressmaker when the war started in 1914.

When it ended in 1918 she was earning 50 shillings for a 48 hour week as a munitions worker. However, there was significant social commentary on the women's increased earnings, which were seen as a danger to their morals because they might be tempted to spend the money drinking. It was only working class women who were subjected to this sort of scrutiny.

Conscription was introduced in Britain in 1916 but in the final year of the war there was considered to be an even greater need to increase recruitment to the armed forces and the government proposed extending conscription to Ireland.

Many loyalist employers had already co-operated by sacking their workers, an act which served two ends: men were forced through lack of alternative employment into the army and women, a cheaper source of labour, could be installed in their place.

In the spring of 1917 a government decree institutionalised this practice by barring employers from filling vacant positions with men aged between 16 and 62, which the Irish unions dubbed 'economic conscription'.

An opposition campaign was organised, which was supported by trade unionists and nationalists, church leaders and members of public bodies. Women workers' support for this campaign was crucial to its success.

In the aftermath of the

The contributors Liam Murray

Liam's family has lived in Lucan, Co. Dublin for several generations. Liam grew up near Weston Aerodrome and was always fascinated by aircraft and the physics of flying. He went to England in the 1950s to join the RAF Boy Service when he was sixteen and trained as an aircraft engineer. He returned to Ireland in the 1960s and was employed by Aer Lingus where he first became interested in trade union activism. Liam admires people who are prepared to fight for a principle.

"I knew a veteran friend of my father who served in the International Brigade in Spain in 1936. A man called Farrell from Leixlip. Again, because that was voluntary, going off to fight for a principal, except that he was in the International Brigade, which was trade union based, like the miners from Wales and they actually fought."

war, women were largely replaced by returning soldiers taking up pre-war jobs, but in some sectors, the women consolidated their position and office work in particular saw the employment of large numbers of women. The existence of marriage bars in many jobs in which women were employed meant that female employees were mainly young and/or single but they were joining unions in increasing numbers.

Helena Moloney, responding to the Commission of Enquiry set up by the Irish Trades Union Congress in 1936 and with the authority of many years working for the IWWU, pointed to the reality of the situation for her union and others who represented predominantly female workers:

"The organisation of this Union was not a deliberate pursuit of a policy of organising women on sex lines, which would be theoretically wrong, but was, and still is, a temporary necessity owing to the fact that women are a separate economic class."



National Shell Factory, Dublin

Comrades and friends

When the United Kingdom declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, the Minister for War, Field Marshal Kitchener started an immediate recruitment campaign.

He said he needed a minimum of 100,000 volunteers because at the beginning of the war, the British Army was badly equipped and comprised just 450,000 men and roughly 250,000 reservists. This was significantly smaller than the standing armies of continental Europe, where conscription was standard practice.

The government in Westminster was reluctant to introduce conscription and various inducements were devised to encourage men to volunteer once the supply of reservists had been called up. Initially, one of the most successful initiatives was the notion of the Pals' Battalions. This was based on the idea that men were more likely to sign up if they could be sure they would be serving alongside people they knew already, such as friends, workmates and members of their local communities. In many cases, employers were urged to guarantee that men who enlisted in the armed forces would have their jobs back when they returned from the war. This was an important promise for many men, although it was one that was not always kept.

In Ireland, the Pals' Battalions mainly drew their membership from the north-east of the country. The

battalions formed by the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers tended to draw recruits mainly from members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (representing the unionist community) in Counties Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh and Tyrone.

The 9th, 10th and 11th Service Battalions were formed in Omagh in September 1914 and their original assignment was with the 36th (Ulster) Division. The 12th Reserve Battalion was formed in Enniskillen in July 1915. In Omagh, there was a joint guard of honour for reservists from the UVF and the Irish Volunteers (who were drawn from nationalist and Home Rule supporters). It was delivered by their respective brass and pipe bands playing together.

The Royal Irish Rifles formed the 8th to 16th (inclusive) Service Battalions in September 1914 and four further Reserve Battalions between March and November 1915. The Service Battalions were comprised of men from the Ulster Volunteer Force (mainly from Belfast). The Reserve Battalions in both regiments were formed from depot companies of the respective battalions.

Ulster Volunteer Force members from Armagh, Cavan and Monaghan joined a Service Battalion of Princess Victoria's Royal Irish Fusiliers in September 1914 while a Reserve Battalion was formed in September 1915.

Although the men who joined these Battalions were originally motivated by their membership of the Ulster Volunteer Force or the Irish Volunteer Force, their communities suffered great losses because they were deployed in some of the worst carnage of the war and many of them were killed together.

After the Battle of the Somme, which lasted from July to November 1916, the losses were so great in the various divisions involved that they were often redeployed with members of other regiments to form new units. On the Western Front, men from strongly unionist battalions could find themselves fighting alongside men from battalions formed from members of strongly nationalist groups as well as soldiers from other nationalities. In 1917 the Battle of Messines witnessed the engagement of both the 10th and the 36th Divisions (the former drawn primarily from southern Irish units and the latter from the North) playing a crucial role together. They went forward against the German lines at the Messines Ridge in Belgium, supported by tanks but mainly by each other. John Redmond's brother Willie was killed during the battle.



'Pals' from the 7th Battalion, Royal Dublin Fusiliers

Jimmy Nixon grew up in a working class area of Belfast where work was often scarce and the armed forces offered a steady wage and the chance to learn a trade. The infantry tended to be the destination of choice, mainly because before the First World War the Air Force did not really exist and the higher standards of physical fitness demanded by the Navy made it an option outside the reach of many poorly nourished men from low income backgrounds.

"There would have been a history within our area of people going into the Army and Air Force and Navy but mainly to the Army. To get into the Navy you would have needed a better person generally - a harder interview and stuff like that and the Air Force maybe similar, so most working people went into the Army."

The linen industry was a major source of employment in Belfast but it had been affected by the loss of some continental markets on the outbreak of the war. Several foundries laid off their workers or went on short hours although many of those workers were taken back within a month as orders recovered but many of the laid off men had already enlisted. Belfast had more voluntary recruits per head of population than any other part of Ireland.

In the aftermath of the 1913 Dublin Lockout, some men were blacklisted by employers and never got back to work. Employment generally was scarce and hard to find and joining the British Army probably looked like a good alternative to starvation for the men and their families, particularly before war was declared in August 1914. Men who enlisted after that date would still have been led to expect that the war would be over by Christmas of that year.

The 2nd battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers was a regular army battalion and it was reported that at the second Battle of Ypres in 1915 the men were roused

The contributors Jimmy Whelan

Jimmy has a strong sense of the history of trade union organisation and why it has been so important to working people. He was born in Birmingham but his family came back to Dublin in 1963 and when he went to school he began to sense that relations between Britain and Ireland were complex.

"I went to school then in Coolock and I got bashed up in the schoolyard for having an English accent. ... In 1966 everything in the primary school was totally geared to 1916. I remember the Proclamation was up and there was posters of all the commandants and the signatories all around the school and it was all that. ... As I got older I saw the attitudes to the wearing of the poppy and things like that, which I didn't understand."



A ration party of the Royal Irish Rifles in a communications trench on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

by three cheers for Jim Larkin, suggesting that many formerly locked out workers had enlisted in its ranks. The 7th Battalion belonged to 'Kitchener's Army' and were nicknamed the 'Larkinites' because of their previous membership of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. Over a thousand ITGWU members had been called up because they were reservists and a further 1,500 enlisted. This meant that nearly half the union's membership in 1915 was in the British Army. They fought alongside 'Pals' from rugby clubs, schools and colleges and middle-class representatives of many professions. As the war continued, fewer salaried professionals joined up, particularly in proportion to unskilled labourers, who were still attracted by regular pay and separation allowances for their wives and families.

Martin Murray had a steady well paid job and was not driven by economic necessity to join the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, although he was probably encouraged by his employer, whom his son Liam recalled had 'strong Anglo-Irish sympathies'. He remembered that Martin rallied to John Redmond's call to his followers to support the war effort but he was also excited by the prospect of going away with his friends.

"He was a member of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, it was very active in the Mill in terms of pay and conditions. He was conscious of the fact that there was people for and against going to the War. Now his brother joined as well, his brother was in India. He joined with friends so there would have been a great spirit of adventure."

When Martin was captured after the Battle of Loos, the separation from his friends was devastating for him when they were sent to different prisoner of war camps in Germany.

"That was probably one of the worst things for him because he was with his companions all his life. They attended school together and worked together and joined the Army together. At the time he was captured they had been at war together for a few years. The shock of sudden separation, being suddenly on his own also being with prisoners who didn't speak English. Now he didn't tell me he cried, somebody else told me he cried when he was separated."

The strength of the relationships that could be formed by the stresses of being at war was evident in the friendship that developed between Daniel Lee's father James and another soldier. James was in the Northumberland Fusiliers where he drove artillery and John was a member of the Royal Field Artillery and they met in the course of their duties. *"What happened was that Uncle Frank and my father met as a result of the War, because they were both serving and as a consequence of that, my father met my mother, her being his sister. Why we can conclude that is because my Uncle Frank and my Auntie Rhoda, his wife, my Auntie Rhoda was my father's sister. My mother and my father - it sounds confusing - what happened was a brother and a sister married a brother and a sister."*

During the First World War, nationalist Ireland contributed almost equally to unionists in terms of enlistment and the motives for Irish soldiers who joined the British forces were generally similar to those from other parts of the United Kingdom.

The fact that the war lasted for more than four bitter years, when initially it had been expected it would be over by Christmas 1914, contributed significantly to disillusion about the value of involvement.

While the Rising in 1916 and its aftermath was a vital element for the increasing dissent of nationalists, culminating in the Anti-Conscription Campaign in 1918, no matter which side of the political divide (or none) soldiers came from, there was no happy ending for those who survived or for the families and loved ones of those who did not come home.

Researcher and author Dr Mary Muldowney

Dr Mary Muldowney is an independent researcher and writer who has published extensively on labour and women's history. She is the founder and director of the Alternative Visions Oral History Group and a founding member of the Oral History Network of Ireland. Mary also works as an education consultant, designing and delivering courses for community and trade union activists.



Village of Wytchaete captured on 7th June 1917 by the 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) Division. 8 June 1917.

Trauma and silence

Veterans of the First World War sometimes suffered from psychological trauma that was as damaging as physical injury but too frequently they were met with a refusal to recognise the connection between their experiences and what we now understand to be post-traumatic stress.

The term “shell shock” emerged during the early years of the war as soldiers tried to describe how they felt when under fire, trapped in the trenches but unable to hit back. During training, they had been instructed to conceal their fears because panic was known to spread rapidly through battalions.

From having been told initially that the war would be over by Christmas 1914, many frontline soldiers were worn down by the emotional demands of trench warfare and by the constant uncertainty over when the conflict would come to an end.



Jimmy Nixon's Robinson grandparents

In the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme (which continued from July to November 1916, killing more than one million men) shell shock became a military priority as a flood of psychiatric casualties eroded the strength of front-line units. Specialist centres were set up within the sound of the guns to provide rapid treatment and to discourage soldiers from thinking they had found a way to escape military duty.

Some doctors recognised that shell shock was a legitimate illness requiring expert treatment but others took a very hard line and refused to admit that it was just as much an injury as physical wounds. Such doctors were taking their lead from the military authorities. In the course of the war, over 300 British and Commonwealth soldiers were shot on the orders of senior military personnel, who accused them of desertion, cowardice and insubordination.

The generals believed that anyone suffering from shell shock was malingering and young soldiers were shot “as an example to others”. It is only recently that posthumous pardons were granted to these men.

Jimmy Nixon's two grandfathers, Charlie Nixon and Bertie Robinson, went to the First World War with the Royal Irish Regiment. His wife Kathleen's two grandfathers also joined the armed forces. Jimmy considered that the family was fortunate that all four men survived the trench warfare.

“My Granddad Nixon was buried in a trench. The trench that he was in was hit by heavy artillery fire. The trench caved in and he was buried in the trench and he was alive. A few days later, when the trench was dug back out he was lifted out of the trench. He survived, but he finished up with a plate in the head, but he went back. He didn't come out of the Army until 1919. January 17th 1919 he was honourably discharged.”

At least 250,000 servicemen suffered from some form of psychosomatic illness related to the conflict. Many failed to recover once peace had been restored. At first, the government funded treatment for veterans and set up specialist clinics but these soon closed down due to lack of resources. Jimmy pointed to a common phenomenon, observed after the First World War but not confined to that conflict.

“My Granddad Robinson came home what seemed to be unscathed but funny enough, he never talked about it. He'd talk about anything else, there was no problem about it but never talked about that, about the War, the First or the Second War. ... Kathleen's grandfather was gassed and had the same experience as many of going to hospital and then back to fight again, her Granddad Allister.”

Liam Murray's father enlisted in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Liam remembers questioning him with great interest about his wartime experiences. As a young boy Liam thought that fighting in a war must have been exciting and did not see it in the context of the suffering Martin Murray had undergone, both in the fighting and later as a prisoner of war.

He was not emotional during the questions; however, eventually it did get to him. According to the professional opinion of the day he was depressed. He said *“I can't go to work anymore. I just can't, he couldn't face it. ... According to the psychiatrists who would have interviewed him, they said it was due to the war.”*

Martin had been a prisoner of war in Germany after the Battle of Loos, when he got shrapnel in his ankle and was unable to escape.

He was taken prisoner with a lot of other Dublin Fusiliers. They treated him badly because when he was lined up with the other prisoners, he got a few kicks and punches from the German troops and then he found out that it was the emblem on his arm which indicated that he was a trench mortar specialist. The Germans didn't like this because they probably had suffered injuries themselves.

It was not until the 1950s that the trauma caught up with Martin but it left him unable to work and in a depressed state for the rest of his life.

Soldiers' families also suffered in the aftermath of the war. Fergus Farrell's grandfather John enlisted in the Argyle and Sutherland Highland Regiment in Glasgow, where the family had emigrated from Sligo. Because John's wife had died and there were no other family members in Scotland, the six or

seven year old Fergus Farrell was sent to live in Dublin with his aunt and was not reunited with his father until he was an adult himself. His son, also Fergus met his grandfather when he visited Ireland in the late 1940s. His grandfather did not speak at all about his experience as a soldier but nearly thirty years later he was still suffering the effects of his experience in the trenches.

"He still had quite a lot of shell shock. He was very shaky at times and you had to be absolutely quiet when he was shaving himself because he shaved himself with one of those open blades."

Some years ago Unite members took part in a trip to the battlefields in Belgium and France as part of a commemoration project that enlightened people from Northern and Southern Ireland about the impact of the First World War on communities in every part of Ireland. Jimmy Whelan was one of the group and he thought about how his grand-uncle Michael would have felt, even though he had always been eager to be a soldier.



Martin Murray in RDF uniform

"We went to a lot of the graveyards and all that and with knowing that Micky had been there it kind of brought a real sense of the horror of what these people went through and it just was unbelievable. We were told that at one stage it was very wet weather and basically the ground was just gone to like muck and marsh and they were told, ordered, that if one of them dropped they weren't to pick them up, just leave them there."

Michael Reddy had joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers before the war, following in a family tradition of military service. He was wounded in the course of the war because Jimmy remembered that when there was damp weather, Micky would complain that the shrapnel that he still carried in his leg would cause him pain. It is not clear whether it was war trauma or something else that caused him to go absent without leave in 1917, but in December 1917 he was in Mountjoy prison in Dublin.

"Well he was a corporal in the Army and I don't know whether it was anything to do with what happened in Ireland in 1916 but he went AWOL. But he went back to the Army and I think he lost his stripes when he went back. But he did finish out his term in the British Army and as I say, he always wanted to be in the Army and my father told me that his – what would have been my father's grand-father on his mother's side – he was a colour sergeant in the British Army."

Whatever the reason for Micky's defection, when the war ended he was awarded his service medal and honourably discharged.

One of the important things to remember about the First World War is that it had a devastating effect on all the countries involved, regardless of whether they were in a combat area. Jimmy Nixon emphasised the misery inflicted on ordinary people as a result of the widespread slaughter.

"We have cities, we have towns, we have villages but we're unique here in many ways and one of the ways that we're unique is that we have townlands. My understanding, growing up as a boy, coming from a staunch Protestant, Loyalist community, my understanding coming from there wasn't that there was no Catholics killed in the war. It was this: there wasn't one townland in Ireland – north, south, east or west – that didn't lose people."

The awful impact of losing a family member in the war is undeniable but Liam Murray also pointed to a consequence that is less frequently considered.

"The people who survived the War, they're forgotten. Even in the local church here, the local Protestant church, I happened to be a Catholic myself but I attended the service because the service was for the dead of the First World War. There was no mention of the survivors, who returned badly injured, either mentally or physically. No mention of the families or how they coped with the injured."

The collective amnesia was encouraged by a government that was responsible for sending young men to the conflict in the first place and then avoided dealing with the aftermath, primarily because to do so would have involved significant expenditure. As Fergus Farrell noted when considering the lessons we might take from remembering the First World War:

"I've no time for war really but I think that it's unavoidable because it's part of some people's nature to go to war to - and part of people who run countries – to go to war to gain advantage and all the countries seem to be stricken with that. There are very few countries that you would say are definitely pacifists."

There is no evidence that Irish soldiers were any more likely to suffer from shell shock or other

The contributors Jimmy Nixon

Jimmy was born in his grandfather's house in Matilda Street, in the Sandy Row area of Belfast. He became a union member at the age of eighteen when he joined James Mackey's engineering company, which made textile manufacturing machinery. Jimmy's family were all union members and activists. He was particularly guided by the advice of his first shop steward.

"One of the things that old fellow said to me stuck with me and that's what kept me in the union. What old Bob said all those years ago, he said: 'I want you to remember something. Tradesmen, a lot of tradesmen didn't treat non-tradespeople right. That's putting no bones on it. Their heads got too big – oh I'm better than him.' Now he said to me 'do you see the people brushing the floor, Jimmy, and do you see the fellow who carts the stuff into you, the labourer?' And I says 'aye'. He says 'well, it costs him the same for a loaf as it does you. And I want you never to forget that'."

psychiatric illness as a result of their military service during the war, but old prejudices about the predisposition of the Irish (particularly from the south of the country) to insanity were apparent in the attitudes of the pensioning authorities. It was accepted that the post-war circumstances and the political situation in Ireland was likely to lead to an increase in claims for war-related neurasthenia.

In some ways, the senior military authorities who believed that shell-shocked soldiers were malingering were more realistic, if cynical. It makes a great deal of sense that frightened men should feign madness or even 'really' become temporarily insane given the levels of slaughter that faced them.



The Silver War badge was first used in 1916, although it was later made retrospective to men who had enlisted in 1914 and 1915. It was awarded to men who were honourably discharged but is often known as the 'Silver Wound Badge' because it was awarded to soldiers who had been wounded in the course of their service. It had a pin on the back of it to allow it to be used like a brooch.

Sharing the loss

During the century since the start of the First World War, how it was remembered has been one of the key differences in the participant nations.

The unprecedented mass death and the scale of the mobilisation on several continents underpins remembrance and certainly contributed to the extent of political and social change that followed in the wake of the war, regardless of whether nations considered themselves to have been victorious or defeated. The map of the world that emerged after 1918 was re-drawn again in 1945 and indeed by other turning points in history, such as the collapse of the old Soviet Union or the growth of global capitalism, particularly in Asia.

Remembrance of the First World War in Ireland has been shaped by forces other than the war itself, which contributed in turn to the division between two main strands of how the conflict was commemorated until relatively recently. The motivations for engagement in the war were many but two main themes were crucial: defence of the British Empire and King and Country was the main principle for unionists while defence of the rights of small nations linked to the aspirations of Home Rulers to secure a measure of self-determination as their reward for coming to the aid of the United Kingdom.

When Jimmy Whelan took part in the trip to the war memorials of France and Belgium, he was reminded that the story was never as black and white as the way it was taught on both sides of the Border in Ireland. *"We would have been told a lot about the history of Redmond's men and Carson's and they were both basically fighting for a promise; that they were told if they helped out they'd get their way and I think in parts of the war they actually were close by one another fighting and that."*

The itinerary of the trip included a visit to the Menin Gate where the Hall of Memory is engraved with the names of tens of thousands of soldiers who died during the battles of the Ypres Salient, who have no known graves. The slaughter was such that some bodies are still being found in the course of road building and other construction projects in the area. The loss of Irish lives is enumerated in war memorials throughout the country, although there is still debate about the actual numbers. The Irish National War Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge in Dublin is dedicated "to the memory of the 49,400 Irish soldiers who gave their lives in the Great War, 1914–1918".

There were estimated to be 300,000 Irish soldiers who fought in various armies, not just the British when the Memorial was built in 1921. While the War Memorial and the surrounding parkland is now a beautiful oasis near the centre of Dublin city, for many decades during the 20th century it was neglected, mainly due to the same attitude to the First World War that Fergus Farrell described, when he remembered how he learned about it in school.

"They never mentioned the world war, any of the world wars, but there was one particular Brother, Brother Allen and he was a grumpy so and so too but he used to give us lectures every now and again on the imposition of British rule on the Irish and the way we fought and won our freedom and got away from Britain altogether. He'd labour on that from 1916 up to 1921 but he never went past it into the Civil War. So he wasn't showing his colours but at the same time he was supporting the IRA up to the hilt."

There was a similarly one-sided remembrance in unionist accounts of the war and the sacrifices of the Ulster Volunteer Force in particular. This viewpoint often celebrated the war for the glorious showing of the brave (Ulster) Irish soldiers and did not deal with the disproportionate extent to which that sacrifice was driven as much by economic and social inequality as it was by a belief in a system that facilitated the waste of so many lives.

Liam Murray's father believed he was saving 'little Belgium' just as fervently as Jimmy Nixon's four grandfathers. Thankfully, all five men survived the war but the shared experience that their silence on the subject suggests they remembered all too vividly was of suffering and death on an industrial scale, as human ingenuity was turned to the development of increasingly sophisticated methods of killing. Liam's memories of the damage done to his father are tempered by his belief now that we must learn from what happened.

"We mustn't be hard on people when we look back. You can only be a doctor of your age, a soldier of your age. The horrific thing for me that happened in Ireland at the time was the subservience of the ordinary people towards the so-called professional classes."

Working people have always been exploited by rulers who justified their ill treatment by reference to national pride and patriotism. This is not a singularly Irish experience but as it applied to Ireland's involvement in the First World War it has led to the wide disparity between remembrances of the war as it was deliberately shaped by the ruling classes in what was initially the Irish Free State (and is now the Republic) and in Northern Ireland. What we should resolve in these centenary years of the war is to create a world in which war has no place and working people can truly claim the earth.

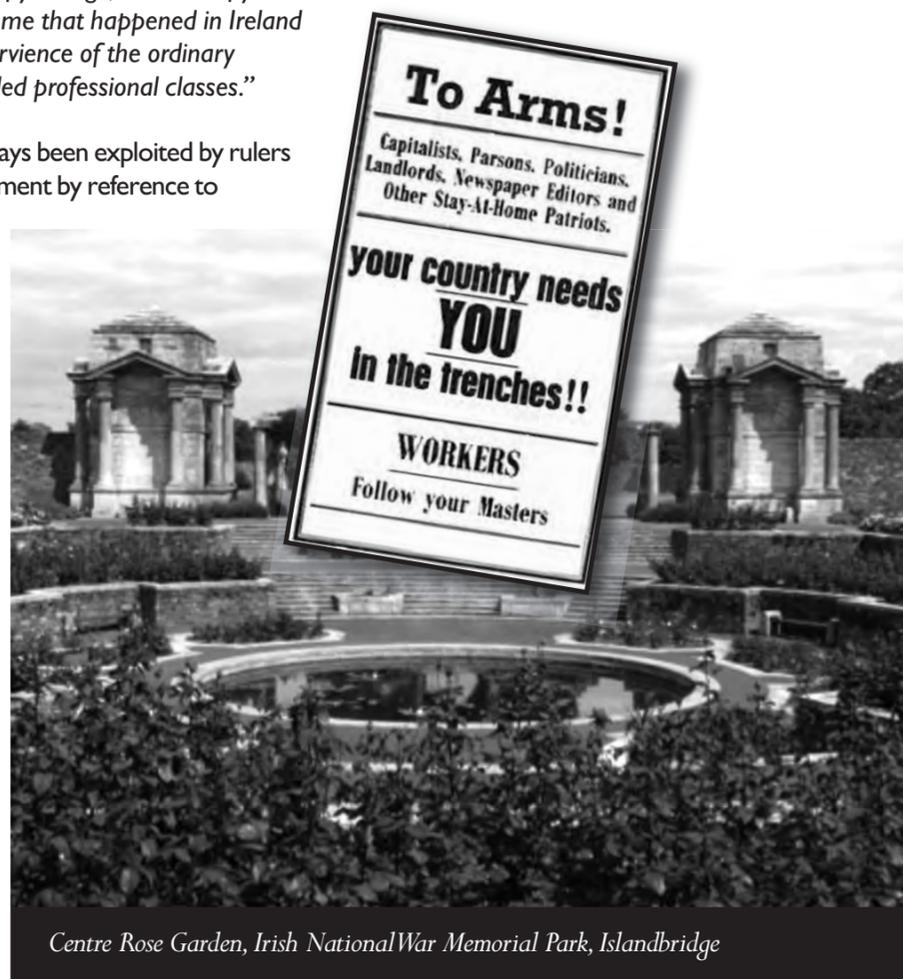
The contributors Eric Harvey

The Harvey family moved to Belfast around the beginning of the First World War but Eric's two uncles joined the British Army from Dublin, where they had been living.

Their younger brother was Eric's father, whose stories of being captured after Dunkirk and kept as a prisoner of war in Poland during the Second World War made a major impression on his son. Eric's father was an active member of the Post Office Executives Union and created a family tradition that Eric has been proud to follow.



The Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, Ypres, Belgium



Centre Rose Garden, Irish National War Memorial Park, Islandbridge