

# The impact of the First World War on Ireland and Australia

by JEFF KILDEA \*

During the Spring of 1914 Ireland appeared to be lurching uneasily towards civil war, but as Spring turned to Summer events in Europe put that unhappy prospect into perspective when the major powers of Europe embarked on the road to a disaster far worse than that which Ireland ever threatened – a conflagration that would ultimately bring down empires and kill more than ten million people, including tens of thousands of Irishmen and Australians. But for Ireland and Australia the significance of the conflict extends beyond the shocking death toll. The Great War turned out to be crucial in the development of these two emerging nations. Its effects continue to be felt to this day.

Ireland sent to the war more than 200,000 soldiers, while for its part, Australia sent overseas about 320,000. The casualties were enormous. Australia lost more than 60,000 killed and, according to recent research, another 208,000 wounded.<sup>1</sup> Estimates of Irish deaths in the war vary. Some claim 50,000 — though a figure of 35,000 is probably more accurate.<sup>2</sup>

For both countries the loss of so many of its young, and not so young, was a tragedy: a personal tragedy for those whose lives were cruelly cut short or shattered by infirmity and for their families and friends; but also a national tragedy for their countries which were denied the contributions those men and women would have made in their development as newly emerging nation states.

In addition, events on the battlefield and on the home front during the war shaped the future for both countries, accelerating their slow march to nationhood, with events in Ireland having a knock-on effect in Australia, as evidenced by Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes' complaint to his British counterpart David Lloyd George in August 1917 that 'the Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Noonan, *Those we forget: Recounting Australian casualties of the First World War*, (Melbourne: MUP Academic, 2014). Noonan's research has called into question the figures normally quoted in official sources, such as 416,809 for enlistments, 331,781 for embarkations, 58,132 for deaths and 156,228 for casualties. See, for example, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920* (London: H.M.S.O., 1922). Noonan's figures for each category are approximately 379,000, 324,000, 62,300 and 208,000.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), at pp 33-35, discusses the various estimates.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in L. F. Fitzhardinge, *William Morris Hughes: The Little Digger* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979), p. 276.

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The intention is to consider how each of Australia and Ireland responded to the outbreak of the war, and to look at the impact the war had on their societies and how it affected their progress towards independent nationhood after the war.

#### Background

When Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914 both Ireland and Australia were deeply divided societies. The divisions in Ireland were more life-threatening than those in Australia, overtly challenging the civil order as opponents and supporters of Irish Home Rule formed paramilitary organisations and smuggled guns into Ireland. Nevertheless, Australian society at the time was also deeply divided, both along sectarian lines and between capital and labour.

Sectarianism had been endemic in Australia almost from the start of the colony in 1788. Irish Catholics were a sizeable minority, making up about one quarter of the immigrants through most of the nineteenth century. For the most part Catholics, predominantly Irish, and Protestants, predominantly British, coexisted peacefully, but occasionally there would be a flare up, sometimes around the 12<sup>th</sup> July, as in Melbourne in 1846 when shots were fired, or St Patrick's Day, as in Sydney in 1878 when rioting broke out.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of the ethno-religious divide in Australia, events in Ireland, such as the rise of Fenianism or the push for Home Rule, often impacted on local politics, particularly in N.S.W. and Victoria, where sectarianism was strongest. In the early twentieth century these divisions widened as a purely local issue, state aid for Catholic schools, intensified and became enmeshed with the issue of Irish Home Rule.

Another source of division in early twentieth-century Australia concerned industrial relations. Australia had a strong labour movement, which in the 1890s had engaged in a series of major strikes. Ultimately those strikes were defeated, leading the labour movement to turn to political action. The newly formed Labor Party had immediate success and by 1910 majority Labor governments were in place in the Commonwealth and in a number of states. But this served to raise working-class expectations that the workers' paradise was at hand.

But to win and hold power the Labor Party needed to appeal to all sections of the community and militant workers were soon disillusioned by the moderation of Labor politicians, and the prospect of a return to industrial unrest began to emerge.

The outbreak of the war acted as a circuit breaker in both Australia and Ireland and for a time the divisions that threatened the peace in both countries eased.

<sup>4</sup> For accounts of sectarianism in Australia, see Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1987), and Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910-1925* (Sydney: Citadel Books, 2002).

### THE CALL TO ARMS

#### Ireland

In early August 1914 Ireland's leaders, both nationalist and unionist, who for months previously had been bitter opponents, sensed the enormity of the European situation and unconditionally pledged their armed volunteers for home defence so as to enable the under-strength British Army to withdraw its Irish garrison for service with the British Expeditionary Force.

The Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener had begun to raise a new army by a general recruiting drive that would see the British Army expand from six to more than 70 Divisions. Under the plan three Divisions would be raised in Ireland, to be designated as the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division, the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division and the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division.

Kitchener did not want to incorporate private armies, such as the U.V.F. or the Irish Volunteers, into his New Army. Furthermore, he did not like politicians, and he liked Irish politicians even less. When Edward Carson, the leader of the Ulster Unionists, called to see him on 7 August to propose that the U.V.F. be integrated into the British Army as a separate formation to which the name Ulster should be applied, Kitchener lectured him on Irish politics and refused to consent to his proposal. He was even more negative with John Redmond, leader of the Irish nationalists, and his deputy John Dillon, regarding the Irish Volunteers as no better than rebels. He was not about to arm and give encouragement to the King's enemies. The meeting went badly, with Kitchener insisting that what he wanted was recruits for his New Army, to which Dillon protested that he and Redmond were not recruiting sergeants.<sup>5</sup>

Establishment of the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division had been authorised in August 1914 and it attracted a broad cross-section of Irishmen, Catholic and Protestant, who were keen to enlist. Its eclecticism would distinguish it from the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division, which largely comprised Catholic and nationalist Irishmen from the south and west, and from the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, which was almost exclusively Protestant, unionist and northern.

Carson was able to get around Kitchener's initial objections by persuading the War Office to allow the men of the U.V.F. to stay together. Whole units in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division were therefore based on their U.V.F. counterparts. Recruiting for the 36<sup>th</sup> was overtly sectarian: in some instances it was restricted to unionists and recruits were told to sign up at the local Orange Hall. In February 1915 the Division included only 14 Catholics.<sup>6</sup>

Kitchener's intransigence had an impact on recruitment amongst Irish nationalists. It looked as if the establishment of the proposed 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division

<sup>5</sup> Terence Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1992), pp 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*, p. 27.

would be postponed, while the prospects of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division appeared doomed unless the Irish Party gave the green light to the Volunteers to enlist for service overseas and got behind the campaign to attract recruits.

The problem was resolved after Home Rule was enacted on 18 September 1914. Two days later, at Woodenbridge in Co. Wicklow, near his home, Redmond made a speech to the local East Wicklow Volunteers in which he declared, 'account yourselves as men, not only for Ireland itself, but wherever the firing line extends, in defence of right, of freedom and religion in this war'. It was clearly a call for the Volunteers to enlist in the British Army not just for home defence but for overseas service.

Redmond believed that by serving together in the war the men of the north and the south would be reconciled on the field of battle so that at war's end they would not regard each other as enemies but as fellow Irishmen.

The Irish Party's support for the war was quite a turn around for a party which up to 1914 had discouraged the enlistment of Irishmen in the army of the conqueror and had opposed the South African war and other military expeditions. But not all nationalists had changed their tune. Since its formation in 1905 Sinn Féin had bitterly opposed enlistment in the British Army, describing the recruit as 'a traitor to his country and a felon in his soul'. Recruits were 'no longer Irishmen'. Sinn Féin and other advanced nationalists would continue to use such personal attacks throughout the war and afterwards.<sup>7</sup>

After Redmond's Woodenbridge speech the Irish Volunteers split, with about 12,000 or 6% of the total strength deserting him, including some of the most active and those most resolute in their purpose. The minority retained the name Irish Volunteers, while the Redmondites came to be known as the Irish National Volunteers (I.N.V.).

Despite attempts by the authorities to close it down, advanced nationalists began an anti-recruiting campaign, using leaflets, newspapers and public meetings. Apart from attacking the character of those who enlisted, they would attend recruiting meetings, and when the subject of 'poor little Catholic Belgium' inevitably came up, they would ask, 'What about Ireland's freedom?'. Not long into 1915, with the war dragging on, earlier optimism as to the imminence of Home Rule was dissolving.

Given the state of politics in Ireland, the fact that by the end of April 1915 over 42,000 men had volunteered for the army from the 26 southern counties was reasonably impressive. In the same period, however, the six north-eastern counties recruited over 33,000 men.<sup>8</sup>

Although the I.N.V. was by far the larger section of the original nationalist volunteer force, enthusiasm for the volunteer movement fell away. By the summer of 1915 the I.N.V. was a mere paper force that could not have made any

<sup>7</sup> Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*, p. 31. See also John S. Ellis, 'The Degenerate and the Martyr: Nationalist Propaganda and the Contestation of Irishness, 1914-1918', in *Eire-Ireland*, vol. 35, Fall/Winter 2000-2002, pp 7-33.

<sup>8</sup> Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*, p. 36.

impact on local politics had the need arisen. On the other hand the Irish Volunteers, though small in number, constituted a compact, disciplined and determined force with a clear purpose that would be demonstrated at Easter 1916.

#### Australia

In Australia, when war broke out, Prime Minister Joseph Cook immediately offered to despatch a force of 20,000 men 'of any suggested composition to any destination desired by the Home government'. Unlike Ireland, where political considerations delayed recruitment, Australia experienced no delay in raising its promised force, which, as planned, was ready to sail in six weeks. Major-General William Bridges, who was appointed to command the force, decided on its name: the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.), emphasising both the national and imperial nature of the force.

The Australian colonies had had domestic self-government from the 1850s and the Commonwealth of Australia from 1901. Nevertheless, in 1914, Australia was not an international entity. Thus, when the King declared war on Germany, he did so on behalf of the British Empire. Consequently, Australia was also at war with Germany.

Despite this, the Australian government could have determined not to participate actively in the war. However, politically that was not feasible as, at the time, there was a strong sense of empire loyalty in the Australian community that saw itself as part of the one big British family, a sense that had been reinforced by events such as the coronation of King George V in 1910 and the annual celebration of Empire Day as well as by imperial propaganda pushed in schools and Protestant churches. Irish Catholics may not have joined in enthusiastically in such celebrations but they were reluctant to be seen to go too much against the grain. Nevertheless, in 1911, Catholics did introduce their own day of celebration in opposition to Empire Day. They called it Australia Day. But in 1914, Irish Catholics on the whole supported the war, seeing it as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty, which had been challenged during the Home Rule debate and the campaign for state aid to Catholic schools. For example, in 1913 a member of the N.S.W. Legislative Assembly, Thomas Henley, told a Grand Protestant Demonstration in Sydney: 'The disloyalists of Australia are mostly Irish-Roman Catholics'. He put it down to the Catholic schools, which he described as 'seed-plots of disloyalty' where they taught the children 'to be disloyal to the Empire and to the Union Jack — the great Flag under whose protection they were growing up!'<sup>9</sup>

When war broke out Australia was in the middle of a federal election campaign. Prime Minister Joseph Cook and his Liberal Party were facing defeat at the polls to be held in September. He came out in support of the war as did the

<sup>9</sup> *The Watchman*, 6 February 1913, pp 1-2. Henley's 'seed-plots of disloyalty' was an allusion to the Catholic criticism of state-run schools, contained in a Joint Pastoral Letter issued by the Catholic bishops in 1879, as 'seed-plots of future immorality, infidelity, and lawlessness'.

leader of the Labor opposition, Andrew Fisher, who declared that Australia would defend Britain 'to the last man and the last shilling'.

The commitment of 20,000 was easily met, with 53,000 recruits enlisting by the end of 1914. Recruiting halls filled to overflowing in those first few months with Protestants and Catholics, workers and middle class coming together to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force. It was easy to hope that the tensions in Australian society – sectarian and industrial – that had been brewing before the war would ease. And for a time they did: but that ended after Easter 1916 following the rising in Dublin.

### SOME DEFINING BATTLES OF THE WAR

Before looking at that momentous event, let us look at some of the battles of the First World War that were defining moments in the shared war experience of Australia and Ireland, starting with the Gallipoli campaign of 1915.

#### Gallipoli

The Gallipoli campaign was designed to ease pressure on Russia by opening up a supply route from the Mediterranean to Russian ports on the Black Sea and, hopefully in the process, to knock Turkey out of the war. An attempt by the British and French navies to force a passage through the Dardanelles in March had failed with the loss of six battleships. The War Council decided to send in the army to capture the peninsula and its forts so as to allow the ships to pass through the strait.

On 25 April 1915 a military force landed on the Gallipoli peninsula. It included the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) and the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division, a Regular Army Division which included three battalions from Irish regiments. A French force landed at Kum Kale on the Asian side of the Dardanelles as a diversion, while the Royal Naval Division sailed into the Gulf of Saros to further distract the Turks.

#### The Landings

The Anzac landing at Ari Burnu was largely unopposed as they had been landed beneath a series of cliffs that the Turks did not think needed to be strongly defended. However, once the Anzacs scaled the cliffs and began to move inland towards the Third Ridge, which was the objective of the covering force, Turkish reinforcements had arrived and were able to confine the invaders to the Second Ridge and to deny them the heights at Chunuk Bair. Essentially, that is as far as the Anzacs ever got. For the next eight months they would cling desperately to their tenuous position at what is now called Anzac Cove.

While the Anzacs were landing at Ari Burnu, the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division was landing at Cape Helles. The 29<sup>th</sup> Division's 86<sup>th</sup> Brigade included two Irish regular battalions: 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers, recalled from India, and 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers, recalled from Burma. The Brigade's landing point was V

Beach near the village of Sedd-el-Bahr. The third Irish battalion, the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, was in the 87<sup>th</sup> Brigade and it landed at nearby X Beach.

If the courage of the Anzacs at Anzac Cove deserves to be remembered, as it is and as it undoubtedly does, so too should that of the Irishmen at V Beach, whose casualties at the actual landing far exceeded those of the Anzacs.<sup>10</sup>

#### The August Offensive

Neither the landing at Anzac nor that at Helles achieved its objective, and over the next few months the allies mounted a series of unsuccessful attacks at Helles designed to break out of their precarious toehold on the Turkish peninsula. In July Sir Ian Hamilton decided to launch a major offensive in the northern sector at Suvla Bay and at Anzac.

The plan of attack involved a series of feints to deceive the Turks as to the direction of the main assault, including diversionary attacks at Helles by the British and French, and at Lone Pine by the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division, while IX Corps, a force of New Army soldiers under Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stopford, including two brigades of the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division – the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> – would be landed at Suvla Bay to secure a base of operations for all the forces in the northern zone and to seize the Chocolate and ‘W’ Hills that would establish a link with the Anzac sector.

At Anzac Cove the main objective of the offensive would be the capture of the high points of the Sari Bair range: Chunuk Bair by the New Zealanders, and Hill 971 to its north by the Australians. The Anzacs would be reinforced by an English Division of the British New Army and the remaining brigade of the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division – the 29<sup>th</sup> Brigade. This brigade included the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, the 6<sup>th</sup> Leinster Regiment, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers.

Over the next few weeks Irishmen would fight alongside the Anzacs in places such as Lone Pine, Quinn’s Post, Chunuk Bair, and Hill 60, names that today resonate with Australians and New Zealanders, but which are largely unknown to the Irish.

While the men of the 29<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division were fighting with the Anzacs, the other two brigades, the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, along with the rest of

<sup>10</sup> Determining the number of fatalities at the landing or on the first day of the Gallipoli campaign is fraught because no accurate count was or could be made while the battle remained in a fluid state. Some battalions could not make a roll call until 2 May: *Gardens of Hell: Battles of the Gallipoli Campaign* (Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2014), p. 55. The Australian War Memorial’s Roll of Honour lists 747 Australians who died at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, but for many that would be a nominal date. The *Statistics of the Military Effort*, p. 284, gives a figure of 846 for Australians who were killed or died of wounds or disease from 25–30 April; but that is likely to be an understatement as the Roll of Honour lists 1189 names for that period. Peter Stanley in *The Lost Boys of Anzac*, (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014) states, at p. 350, that 101 men of the first wave to land at Anzac Cove at dawn on 25 April 1915 died that day, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade as a whole, which provided the covering force, lost about 270. But most of them would have been killed in the battle for the ridges and the heights and not on the beach. With the exception of a company of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, who were shot in their boats in a way similar to the Dublin Fusiliers, few in the main force were killed in the actual landing.

the invasion force, were landing at Suvla Bay. The logistics were poor and the troops ran out of water and had to endure the intense August heat. Despite their gallantry and some notable successes, the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division over the next few weeks at Suvla would suffer horribly in their failed attempt to capture the high ground of Kiritch Tepe Sirt.

After weeks of fighting and dying the 10<sup>th</sup> Division was reduced to under-effective strength. On 29 September the survivors of the 29<sup>th</sup> Brigade said farewell to their Australian comrades at Anzac and marched down to the shore. Linking up with the remnants of the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> Brigade from Suvla, they boarded ships to take them to the island of Lemnos.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Division's reprieve was brief, for in December the Division was sent to Salonika in northern Greece to fight the Bulgarians. The Irishmen's experiences in that theatre would prove no more inspiring than their brief but tragic sojourn at Gallipoli.

For the Anzacs the Gallipoli campaign ended in December 1915 when they were evacuated, in what proved to be the most successful operation of the whole campaign.

Gallipoli was a major defeat for the military forces of the British Empire: one that was to have a profound effect on its emerging nations. Anzacs and Irishmen both came away from the peninsula convinced that they had been messed about and butchered by the incompetence of their English commanders.

For Australians and New Zealanders, eager to impress the mother country of their worthiness, Gallipoli, despite the cost, had a salutary effect on the nation building process without rupturing relations with the British Empire. In 1919 Billy Hughes would tell an Anzac Day luncheon in London that Australia was 'born on the shores of Gallipoli'.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, nationalist Irishmen, who sought to impress no one, as they wanted to become not so much a nation as 'a nation once again', were not so forgiving. Coming at a sensitive time in the relationship between England and Ireland, with the divisive issue of Home Rule having been tentatively put on hold, the Gallipoli legacy became politicised, symbolising the waste of young Irish lives and English indifference.

Separatist nationalists, who were opposed to the war, exploited the Dardanelles fiasco to whip up anti-English sentiment, while moderate nationalists began to lose faith in the idea that supporting Britain in the war would assure Home Rule, particularly as the Coalition government formed in May 1915 included unionists, such as Edward Carson, who were implacably opposed to Home Rule.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Division remained on the Salonika front until September 1917, when it was transferred to Egypt, and then Palestine, to serve with General Allenby's desert army, which included Lieutenant-General Harry Chauvel's Australian Light Horse. In a mad cavalry charge in October 1917 the Australians

<sup>11</sup> *The Mirror* (Sydney) 27 April 1919, p. 1.



dramatically captured the wells at Beersheba, enabling Allenby's army to continue the advance on Jerusalem. The 10<sup>th</sup> Division saw out the war in Palestine.

#### **The Somme**

Meanwhile, on the Western Front the Somme offensive of 1916 had become synonymous with the slaughter of industrialised warfare. In Ireland and Australia, 'the Somme' evokes memories of devastating losses of life.

#### **36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division at Thiepval**

For the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division it was at Thiepval on 1 July 1916, the first day of the battle. A total of 60,000 British casualties were suffered that day including 21,000 killed. Of these the 36<sup>th</sup> Division suffered 5,500 casualties of whom nearly 2,000 were killed. The disaster is still remembered in the unionist north, with pictorial representations of the battle a recurring theme of Protestant Belfast's murals.

#### **Australians at Pozières, 23 July to 7 August 1916**

For the Australians the defining action during the Battle of the Somme was at Pozières in July and August. Australians did not enter the Battle of the Somme on the first day, though they suffered huge casualties soon after on 18/19 July further north in French Flanders at Fromelles in a diversion designed to fool the Germans. It did not work and the 5<sup>th</sup> Division lost as many casualties that day as the Ulster Division did on 1 July.

The Australian 1<sup>st</sup> Division joined the Somme offensive on 23 July at Pozières, a German strongpoint that had withstood three weeks of offensive action. The Australians quickly captured the village and then clung to their gains despite almost continuous artillery fire and repeated German counter-attacks. By the time the Division was relieved on 27 July it had suffered over 5,000 casualties. For 7 weeks three Australian Divisions, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, in turn, pushed the German line along the Thiepval Ridge towards Mouquet Farm, suffering a total of 23 000 casualties. The name Pozières is etched into the Australian national psyche.

#### **16<sup>th</sup> Division at Guillemont and Ginchy, September 1916**

Although the people of the north of Ireland have not forgotten the Somme, no similar communal memory exists in the 26 counties of the disaster that befell the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division in September 1916 during the middle phase of the Battle of the Somme.

The attack on Guillemont by the Division's 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which lost almost half of its 2,400 men in the fighting, was successful, but costly. But in just a few days the Brigade was required to join in the Division's attack on the neighbouring village of Ginchy.

When the 16<sup>th</sup> Division lined up for the attack on 9 September Major General Hickie found himself in charge of an exhausted, shell-shocked band of men, greatly depleted in numbers. During the attack the 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade once again lost

almost one half of its force. The 48<sup>th</sup> Brigade included the 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers among whose number was Tom Kettle, poet, barrister and former Nationalist M.P. He was killed that day.

Within the first ten days of its introduction to the Somme the 16<sup>th</sup> Division lost almost one half of its 11,000 officers and men. Yet they returned down the line, in the knowledge that they, like their Ulster comrades, had not been found wanting.

#### **Messines 7-14 June 1917**

For the Australian and Irish Divisions, the Somme was a disaster of tragic proportions: but it would not be the last. For the Australians the actions at Bullecourt in April and May 1917 would yield huge casualties and confirm their disgust of British generalship. At the end of the year Passchendaele would do that for all of them: but, in between, was a battle that, although costly in lives, saw the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions and the Anzacs fighting alongside each other to achieve a victory that demonstrated that the Generals could get it right with sufficient imagination, planning and logistical support.

Irish casualties were much lighter than in some of the earlier battles, though the Australians were not so fortunate, many being killed or wounded in a gas bombardment even before they crossed the start line. One of the Irish casualties was Major William Redmond M.P., the brother of John Redmond, both of whom had visited Australia in 1883 and married Australian brides. At age 56 Willy did not have to be there, but like fellow Nationalist M.P., Tom Kettle, he had used his influence to ensure he was.

Both saw themselves as fighting for Ireland, but Kettle's lament on leaving for the front foretells how Ireland would perceive them. Referring to the Easter rebels, he wrote, 'These men will go down in history as heroes and martyrs, and I will go down – if I go down at all – as a bloody British officer'.<sup>12</sup> A monument to him stands in St Stephen's Green, but its erection was tinged with controversy.

Another soldier-nationalist who felt conflicted was the poet Francis Ledwidge, a veteran of Gallipoli. While recovering from injuries received when serving with the 10<sup>th</sup> Division at Salonika he penned his famous 'Lament for Thomas McDonagh', one of the executed leaders of the rising. Ledwidge himself was killed in July 1917 during the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele).

### **1918: THE YEAR OF VICTORY**

#### **16<sup>th</sup> Division**

The final blow for the 16<sup>th</sup> Division came during Operation Michael, the German offensive of March-April 1918, the last throw of the dice by the Germans to break the stalemate on the Western Front before the Americans arrived in

<sup>12</sup> Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*, p. 145.

numbers. It almost succeeded, as the Allies were driven back in some sectors up to 60 kilometres.

As the allied line fell back, the 16<sup>th</sup> Division was savagely mauled, suffering about 7,000 casualties. The once proud hope of nationalist Ireland and its leader, John Redmond, had suffered so badly that it soon ceased to be a fighting formation. It was withdrawn from the line and reconstituted in England before returning to the front devoid of almost all its Irish battalions. Growing anti-war feeling in Ireland, which intensified during the conscription crisis, led to concerns in the War Office of Sinn Féin infiltration of the Irish regiments and a belief they could no longer be trusted to fight, a slander with little justification.<sup>13</sup>

### **36<sup>th</sup> Division**

The 36<sup>th</sup> Division continued in France until the armistice, being involved in the last months of the war in the advance through Flanders that led ultimately to the defeat of the Germans.

### **Australians**

For the A.I.F., 1918 turned out to be its most successful year in battle. When the German Spring Offensive began, the five Divisions of the newly formed Australian Corps were resting in Flanders. Over the following weeks, four of the Divisions were brought south to stem the flow. At Villers-Bretonneux in April they helped stop the German advance on Amiens, the vital rail junction for the Somme region. In the north the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division did likewise in front of Hazebrouck, the vital rail junction for the Flanders region.

The Australian Corps then took part in the advance in the Somme that forced the Germans back, starting with the German Army's Black Day on 8 August. Used time and again as shock troops, the Australians after six months of continuous fighting were physically and mentally drained. After breaching the Hindenburg line they were relieved in early October never to return to the front because of the armistice on 11 November.

## **WAR ON THE HOME FRONT**

That is a brief summary of the war on the battle front. In both Australia and Ireland the period of the First World War also saw a war on the home front.

### **The Easter Rising: Ireland**

The Easter Rising, which broke out on 24 April 1916 is undoubtedly one of the great turning points in Irish history. As a military exercise it was a failure, but in political terms it can be seen in retrospect to mark the break between the forty-six

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Bowman, *Irish Regiments in the Great War: Discipline and Morale* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2003), pp 176-7.

year constitutional campaign for limited home rule within the United Kingdom and the revolutionary demand for an independent Irish republic.

In Ireland the rising marked the beginning of the end politically for the Irish Parliamentary Party, though that was not inevitable at the time. In 1917 candidates endorsed by Sinn Féin defeated the I.P.P. in four by-elections. The I.P.P. came to be identified with a policy that was past its use-by date: Home Rule. For two generations this ambiguous and incongruous policy had been the mantra of Irish nationalism – it had now lost its power to mesmerise. In March 1918 the I.P.P.'s leader, John Redmond, died. He had come to be identified with the British political establishment, while Sinn Féin, with its policy of abstention, was now seen as the voice of Irish nationalism. At the general election of 1918 the I.P.P. was almost totally wiped out, winning only 6 seats to Sinn Féin's 74.

#### **The Easter Rising: Australia**

The Easter Rising also had a significant impact in Australia, resulting in the breakdown of the uneasy truce in the sectarian confrontation that was in place since the outbreak of the Great War. When news of the rising was received in Australia it was greeted with angry disbelief. For years the Australian Irish had followed the slow and tortuous path towards Home Rule with intense interest, and in 1914 it had appeared that the struggle, which had been so patiently waged by John Redmond and the Irish Party, was all but won. Home Rule was on the statute book only awaiting the end of the war to come into force. The events of Easter Monday threatened to blow all that apart. Australian Catholic newspapers criticised the rebels, as did Archbishop Daniel Mannix, later to be strongly identified with Sinn Féin and de Valera.<sup>14</sup> However, as the weeks passed, and as it became apparent that the British authorities were not prepared to show restraint, the mood among the Australian Irish changed and Catholic newspapers began to criticise British rule in Ireland, leading to a Protestant backlash.

In the first twenty months of the war, Protestant suspicions about Catholic loyalty had largely dissipated; but the Rising brought the issue of Catholic loyalty into stark relief. Hitherto Home Rule had promised to square the circle: the Australian Irish could be loyal to Australia, Ireland and the Empire all at once. After the Easter Rising, in which Irishmen aided by Germany, with whom Australia and England were at war, had taken up arms against Britain, loyalty to Ireland and loyalty to the Empire and even to Australia, began to look like alternatives. The sectarian conflict reignited by the Rising would come to a head over the issue of conscription.

<sup>14</sup> Archbishop Mannix initially described the rising as 'deplorable' and its leaders as 'misguided' (*Advocate* 6 May 1916, p. 25). See Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp 134-36; Peter Overlack, 'Easter 1916' in Dublin and the Australian press: background and response', in *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 54/55, 1997, pp 188-93; R.P. Davis, 'Tasmania and the Irish revolution, 1916-22', in *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 21 no. 2, 1974, pp 69-88.

**Conscription: Ireland**

Conscription was a major issue both in Australia and in Ireland. When conscription was introduced in Britain early in 1916, Ireland had been excluded. The government's military advisors had calculated that for the number of effective troops it would yield, the cost would be too high in the resources needed to enforce it and to weed out malcontents. When, notwithstanding this advice, a new conscription bill that included Ireland was introduced in 1918, the I.P.P. endorsed Sinn Féin's abstentionist strategy by walking out of the House of Commons. The Catholic hierarchy came out in opposition to conscription and the labour movement showed its support by holding a general strike on 23 April.

Nationalist Ireland was united in its opposition to conscription but, in the popular agitation against conscription, it was Sinn Féin that took the lead.

**Conscription: Australia**

While conscription served to unite Irish nationalists, in Australia it was a force for division.

When Prime Minister Billy Hughes returned in August 1916 from a visit to London, where the British Generals had impressed upon him the need for more recruits, he was determined to introduce conscription despite the difficulty which he knew he faced in gaining the support of the labour movement, even though he was a Labor prime minister.

The Defence Act prohibited conscription for overseas service and would have to be amended. However, anti-conscriptionist Labor members controlled the Senate and could block the amending act. Hughes decided to appeal over their heads to the people by holding a plebiscite, which would give him a strong moral argument to persuade the senate to pass the legislation.

In Irish Catholic circles there were differences of opinion on the conscription issue and there was no official line. The Catholic hierarchy was divided on the issue and Catholic newspapers throughout Australia adopted divergent viewpoints. Catholic spokesmen were at pains to explain that the Catholic Church had not adopted, and should not adopt, an official attitude to the issue because it was a civil matter and not a religious one. But it was precisely that fact which Protestant critics relied on to justify their attack on the Catholic Church as not supporting the war effort and for being disloyal.

By a narrow margin the voters rejected conscription on 28 October 1916. The 'No' majority was only 72,476 out of a total of 2,247,590 formal votes, a margin of 51.6% to 48.4%. Contemporaries, and for many years historians as well, claimed that the Easter Rising and England's response to it was a major factor influencing Irish-Australian voters. More recent scholarship has called this into question, suggesting that Catholics voted more according to their class than their

ethnicity. In other words the high 'No' vote among Irish Catholics was because they were mostly working class rather than because they were Irish.<sup>15</sup>

The perceived role of the Irish Catholic vote in the referendum was to become the occasion of some of the most vitriolic attacks ever to be made on the Australian Catholic community. Catholic assertiveness in public affairs was to provoke a Protestant backlash, the fury of which was magnified by the humiliation that Empire loyalists had suffered as a result of the failure of the referendum.

The most significant political event of 1916 was the split in the Labor Party over conscription. During the following months Hughes and many pro-conscriptionist Labor parliamentarians in the federal and some state parliaments, who had been expelled from the Labor party, joined with non-Labor members to form coalition governments that eventually adopted the name Nationalist. The greater proportion of these ex-Labor men were Protestants. As a result the number of Catholics in Labor caucuses and other party units well exceeded their proportion in the general community, with Catholics in the New South Wales parliamentary Labor party having numerical superiority despite Catholics being only about a quarter of the population. As a result, in addition to doubts about Catholic loyalty, fear of Catholic political domination became a recurring theme in attacks on the Catholic Church. Often the two themes were interwoven with claims that non-Catholics had sent all their young men from Australia to fight, while the Irish Catholic men remained at home to capture the reins of political power.<sup>16</sup> This allegation was untrue. The Australian Irish enlisted in proportion to their numbers in the population.<sup>17</sup>

The federal elections held on 5 May 1917 were bitterly sectarian, with Archbishop Mannix, an outspoken anti-conscriptionist, becoming heavily involved. In the result, Hughes' Nationalist Party secured an overwhelming majority, winning 53 of the 75 seats in the House of Representatives and all of the 18 Senate seats which were being contested. The way was open for him to

<sup>15</sup> Peter Bastian, 'The 1916 conscription referendum in New South Wales,' in *Teaching History* vol. 5, 1971, pp 25-36 and J. Alcock, 'Reasons for the rejection of conscription — 1916-1917,' in *Agora* vol. 7 (1973), pp 185-94, survey some of the literature on the issue; while Turner, in *Industrial labour and politics*, pp 113-6, canvasses a number of the hypotheses, concluding that it was the farmers, normally non-Labor, who were the decisive factor in the referendum's defeat. Also, Glenn Withers, 'The 1916-1917 conscription referenda: a cliometric re-appraisal', in *Historical Studies* 20 (1982), pp 36-46, provides a statistical analysis of the voting figures in order to test some of the theories.

<sup>16</sup> This was a view which Hughes expressed to Lloyd George, as communicated through Keith Murdoch, Hughes' confidant in London (quoted in L. F. Fitzhardinge, *William Morris Hughes: A Political Biography*, Vol. II *The Little Digger 1914-1953* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1979), p. 261.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland* (Cork: Cork Univ. Press, 2007), ch. 3. Subsequent research with the Irish Anzacs Project, the details of which are yet to be published, indicates that taking into account demographic considerations Irish-born enlistment in the Australian Imperial Force slightly exceeded the proportion of Irish-born males of military age in the Australian population.

introduce conscription, but he had promised not to do so without a further referendum.

In November 1917 the federal government decided once again to refer the issue of conscription to a plebiscite. The result of the bitter campaign was that social friction, which had been steadily increasing over the previous twelve months, became even more severe. More so than in 1916, Catholics identified with the anti-conscription cause. Catholic bishops who in 1916 supported conscription, now opposed it because the government refused to exempt seminarians and teaching brothers.<sup>18</sup>

When the votes were counted the outcome of the referendum on 20 December 1917 was an increased majority against conscription. The 'No' majority was 166,588 out of a total of 2,196,906 votes cast. The 'No' vote had increased from 51.6% to 53.8%. Conscriptionists had no doubt as to the reasons why the vote was lost. The Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, in his report to the colonial secretary, wrote:<sup>19</sup>

The organised opposition was composed of the Labour Party and the Roman Catholics. This body, organised and capably led by Archbishop Mannix comprises the Irish element which would be hostile to any proposals of the Government.

Even before the vote was taken, *The Methodist* was quite explicit in its attitude:<sup>20</sup>

Romanism at heart is disloyal and desires the downfall and dismemberment of the Empire as a great Protestant power. ... [T]he attitude of Romanists, as a whole, and of the great majority of their priests and bishops, is conclusive as to the utterly disloyal spirit of that communion.

In 1914 many Irish-Australian Catholics had believed that the war would provide an opportunity to dispel such suspicions and for them to gain acceptance. They had hoped, that by sharing in the blood sacrifice, they would be rewarded with increased tolerance and the satisfaction of their grievances. During the first two years of the war this hope looked as if it might be realised as the nation united behind the war effort. However, the sectarianism that re-emerged in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and during the conscription campaigns dashed those hopes for a generation.

Furthermore, in the period from 1916 to 1920, the level of industrial disputes in Australia reached heights which had not been seen before and which have not been seen since. These disputes often became entangled with other issues, such as the conscription debate, the contest between socialism and reformism, and the fight for control of the labour movement, with the success of the Bolsheviks in

<sup>18</sup> Jeff Kildea, 'Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War', in *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 26, number 3, October 2002, pp 298–313.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in D. J. Murphy, 'Religion, Race and Conscription in World War I', in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 30 (1974), pp 155–63, at p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> *The Methodist*, 8 December 1917, p. 7. See also, for example, an attack on the loyalty of the Australian Irish by Archdeacon Hindley in a sermon at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, as reported in *The Argus*, 27 August 1917, p. 4.

Russia in 1917 inspiring the radical element of the working-class movement. But the workers, faced with rising unemployment and declining living standards due to wartime austerity measures, fought bitterly to preserve what they could of the fruits of the workers' paradise that in 1914 seemed attainable.

In Ireland too, the aspirations of 1914 had evaporated. The hopes of nationalists for a peaceful transition to home rule once the war was over were dashed. The Easter Rising, the British government's reaction to it, and the resistance of recalcitrant unionists in the government to a speedy resolution of the issue, changed the dynamics of the struggle for nationalist Ireland. Home Rule, which Irish nationalists had pursued relentlessly for almost half a century, was now no longer sufficient to satisfy Irish aspirations for self-government.

#### **Conclusion**

For each of Australia and Ireland the Great War proved to be the crucible of the nation — but in very different ways.

For many Australians the First World War was the dawning of a sense of nationhood, a period when the inhabitants of the six former British colonies that had federated in 1901 were forged into citizens of an Australian nation. But, although Australians may have emerged from the war with a heightened sense of their national identity, they also saw themselves as proud and loyal members of the British Empire, in whose defence they had volunteered and had suffered the loss of more than 60,000 killed.

For Ireland, the end of the War of the Nations did not bring peace, but a new war — a War of Independence against that British Empire in whose defence Irishmen had volunteered and suffered the loss of more than 35,000 killed. And although the Treaty ending that war did not give rise to the independent Ireland for which many Irish nationalists had fought and died, it did, in the words of Michael Collins, give Ireland the 'freedom to achieve freedom'.

For both countries, then, the First World War proved to be a watershed in their march to nationhood: and, although, for each, the war affected that march in a different way, it is fitting during this decade of commemorations for us to reflect together on our shared experiences of that war and its impact on our two nations.