

# Anzacs and Ireland: Some Aspects of the Relationship between Australian Soldiers and Ireland during the First World War\*

by Jeff Kildea

## ***Introduction***

In the small graveyard of Grangegorman, just off Blackhorse Avenue near Dublin's Phoenix Park, a cluster of headstones marks the last resting place of seven Australian soldiers of the First World War. Unlike their counterparts in the hundreds of graveyards scattered across Gallipoli and the Somme these men are the forgotten soldiers of a war that continues to hold the interest of Australians despite the passing of the years.

For a nation which claims to be the most Irish country in the world outside of Ireland, with more than a quarter of the population professing Irish descent, it is surprising that little is known in Australia of the association between Australian soldiers and Ireland during the First World War.<sup>1</sup> That association began at Gallipoli when Australians and Irishmen fought alongside each other in battle at such iconic places as Lone Pine and Quinn's Post. They also served together in France and Belgium, with Irishmen from the 16th (Irish) Division and the 36th (Ulster) Division joining with the Australian 3rd Division in June 1917 to defeat the Germans at Messines, while later that year the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division served with Australians in Palestine, taking part in the Battle of Beersheba and the capture of Jerusalem.

But it was mostly in Ireland itself that Australian soldiers forged their relationship with Ireland and the Irish people. Thousands of Australian soldiers visited Ireland during the First World War, usually on a fourteen day leave pass that gave them a brief respite from the horrors of the Western Front or the boredom of camp life in England – some of these men never left Ireland, as was the fate of the seven who are buried at Grangegorman. Some found themselves caught up in the momentous events of the period such as the Easter Rising. Some went to Ireland to evade further war service and found themselves under the protection of Sinn Féin, while others stayed on after the war and participated in the Irish War of Independence, on one side or the other. But mostly the diggers spent their precious leave with family or as tourists visiting the sights in much the same way as Australian tourists do today. The Lakes of Killarney and Phoenix Park were favourite spots. Indeed it is remarkable how similar their itineraries were to the packaged holidays now offered by tour operators. The main difference between now and then, however, is that from the time Australian soldiers began arriving in numbers, Ireland was in the process of a revolution that led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and eventually the Republic of Ireland as it is today. As a result attitudes in the two countries to the war have been very different.

In Ireland, advanced nationalists, who were in the minority at the start of the war, were convinced that England, not Germany, was Ireland's enemy and that England would never willingly relinquish control over their native land. They therefore regarded the 200 000 Irishmen who enlisted in the British Army, of whom 35 000 were killed, as degenerates who were prepared to pollute the national ideal to take the King's shilling. By 1918 the advanced nationalists had displaced constitutional nationalists, who supported the war, as the leaders of Irish national opinion. Therefore, when in December 1921 advanced nationalists achieved

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates vary from 25% to 40% (Tim Pat Coogan, *Wherever Green is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora*, Hutchinson, London, 2001, p. 431).

victory of a sort (Michael Collins' "freedom to achieve freedom") with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, their antagonistic attitude to "England's war" predominated. In the words of the nationalist song *The Foggy Dew*, which commemorates those who died in the Easter Rising: "Twas better to die 'neath an Irish sky than at Suvla or Sedd-el-Bar".

As the years passed this approach to the war and the Irishmen who fought and died in it took on the form of institutionalised social amnesia, which is incomprehensible to generations of Australians used to being regularly reminded of Australia's willing participation alongside Britain in wars ranging from Sudan in 1885 to Iraq today. The closest analogy might be the frosty attitude which Australians until recently had adopted toward veterans of the Vietnam War, though the level of popular antagonism in that case never approached that which Ireland at times reserved for her soldiers of the First World War.

In recent years attitudes have been changing: local museums often now include exhibitions on the war; new war memorials are being established in some towns; in 1998 President Mary McAleese and Queen Elizabeth inaugurated the Irish Peace Park at Messines; in July this year, for the first time ever, the Irish state commemorated the Battle of the Somme.

Nevertheless, when touring the south it is not easy to find war memorials erected in honour of those who died in the Empire's cause in the First World War, though in the north they are as prolific as they are in Australia. But it is often worth the effort to read the names on these memorials, whether in the north or the south, for many of them bear the names of Australian servicemen, mostly local lads who had emigrated to Australia and were killed while serving in the AIF. In Cahir Co. Tipperary, for instance, on the war memorial near the castle three names appear under the word "Australians", while in other towns Australians are indicated by designations such as "AIF" or "Aust forces".

On my calculation, there were more than 6,600 Irish Anzacs, Irish-born men and women who served in the Australian forces during the First World War, including one Victoria Cross winner Sergeant Martin O'Meara of Co. Tipperary.<sup>2</sup> Most of them already called Australia home, having emigrated to the new land of opportunity in the South Seas. Some, however, found themselves in Australia by chance when war broke out and enlisted here rather than returning home to join up, perhaps fearful that the war might end before they did so or calculating that they might get a free passage home when the AIF sailed.<sup>3</sup> But the traffic was not all one way. Dozens of Australians, for one reason or another, took part in the war serving in Irish Regiments, 18 of them making the ultimate sacrifice.

Time does not permit me today to explore all the many aspects of the relationship between Australian soldiers and Ireland during the First World War. Therefore, in this paper I will concentrate on just two: firstly, the story of Australian soldiers caught up in the Easter rising, whom I have labelled the Diggers in Dublin; and, secondly, Australian servicemen who are buried in Ireland, whom I have termed the Wattle Among the Shamrocks.

### ***Diggers in Dublin***

As dawn broke across Australia on 25 April 1916 heralding the first Anzac Day, a day which commemorates the defining moment of the Australian nation, Irish rebels who had seized the

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<sup>2</sup> Based on a survey of data available through the National Archives of Australia RecordSearch database.

<sup>3</sup> The reasons why so many enlisted are many and varied. See Richard White, "Motives for joining up: self-sacrifice, self-interest and social class", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Vol 9, 1986, pp. 3-16; John McQuilton, "Enlistment for the First World War in rural Australia: The case of north-eastern Victoria, 1914-1918", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 33, 2000

General Post Office in Dublin the day before were fighting to establish a nation of their own. When the British Empire marshalled its forces to strike back, Australian soldiers on leave in Ireland were called to arms to help put down the rising. While the men of the AIF, newly arrived in Belgium and France, were preparing themselves for battle with the Germans in the anticipated Summer offensive, these Australians, remote from the barbed wire and the trenches, found themselves called upon to do their duty, fighting not the hated Hun but Irishmen with whom they had no quarrel.

Among them were two drivers from AIF Headquarters, Private George Davis and his mate Private Bob Grant, and two Queenslanders from the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Privates John Chapman and Michael McHugh. Each had been evacuated from Gallipoli to England due to illness and had decided to spend his Easter leave in Ireland.

On Easter Monday, the day of the rising, Chapman was returning from sightseeing in Killarney when his train was diverted to Cork and then held up overnight because of the fighting. When he eventually arrived in Dublin the next day he was escorted to the Royal Barracks and told to be ready for action at any time. He soon found himself alongside soldiers of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers fighting in the streets around the quays along the River Liffey. It was dangerous work and Chapman noted in his diary that several times he was nearly hit.

Davis and Grant had also been to Killarney but were back in Dublin in time to witness the rebels mustering in preparation for the seizure of the GPO. Ignoring a warning to get out of Dublin the two diggers joined a crowd of Dubliners watching rebels on the roof of City Hall firing at people in the street below. Their complacency was shattered when bullets began hitting the pavement near them. As they fled the scene a man running alongside them was shot in the back and fell to the ground. They dragged him around the corner and bundled him into a taxi.

In the meantime, Private McHugh, who had been out in the streets when the rising started, took refuge in Trinity College. He found himself among a small band of defenders including five New Zealanders. The Anzacs were posted on the roof of the college where they acted as snipers. From their position they had good fields of fire toward O'Connell Street and the GPO and along Dame Street toward the rebel stronghold in the City Hall. As well as making it dangerous for insurgents to cross those streets, the Anzacs engaged in sniping duels with rebels holed up in nearby buildings. The marksmanship of the Anzac sharpshooters at Trinity College became legendary.

Davis and Grant, deciding to heed the advice to get out of Dublin, made their way to Portobello Barracks only to be told there was no transport to England. They were ordered to protect the barracks instead. That night they joined a party of seventy men escorting arms and ammunition to Dublin Castle. As they passed under a street lamp a volley of rifle shots rained down on them. Davis recalled, "bullets 'pinged' and broken glass clattered to the footpath. The horses bolted and vanished in the darkness, and the troops did likewise."

Davis made his way to Kingsbridge station and for the next few days was assigned to guard duty. On the Thursday he went with a party escorting stores to various parts of the city, including Trinity College where he noticed an Australian and several 'Enzedders' amongst the armed guard. Presumably the Australian was Private McHugh.

Davis did not record whether at Portobello Barracks he came across another Australian who was billeted there. That digger, whose name remains unknown, participated in one of the most notorious events of the rising.

Portobello Barracks was home to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, whose officers included Captain John Bowen-Colthurst. Wounded in France in 1914 and unfit for combat,

Colthurst might have sat out the war in the relative peace of a home posting, but for the Easter Rising. Instead he ended up being court-martialled for the murder of three journalists, including Francis Sheehy Skeffington, a well-known Dublin eccentric. Colthurst had ordered they be shot by firing squad at the barracks on the Wednesday morning of Easter Week.

Nothing suggests the anonymous Australian soldier took part in the murder of the journalists. However, he did accompany Colthurst on a patrol the night before, which had fatal consequences and which led to the unlawful executions. That night Colthurst called for volunteers to go on a bombing raid to a nearby shop suspected of harbouring rebels. The anonymous Australian, who was an experienced bomber, came forward.

As the patrol turned into Rathmines Road three men came out of the nearby Catholic Church. The Australian soldier, in a letter home, described what happened:

Near the barracks we saw three men. The captain wanted to know their business, and one answered back, so the captain just knocked him insensible with the butt of his rifle. The other two ran and one shouted something about 'down with the military' and the captain just shot him dead.

The patrol proceeded to the shop where the Australian soldier threw a bomb through the front window, doing a lot of damage. He then charged into the shop, followed by the others. He wrote:

There was a light showing from a room downstairs. I went down carefully, and told the people there to put up their hands, just allowing them to see a bomb I was holding. This had the right effect, and I went down and found five men and three women. They were marched to the barracks. Two were let go. The three others turned out to be head men of the gang and were shot.

The idea that the executed men were insurgents was later exposed as untrue, a fabrication promoted by Colthurst to justify his actions.

The soldier's letter was published in the Melbourne Age in July 1916, provoking a strong reaction, particularly from Irish-Australian Catholics already outraged by what they saw as Britain's brutal suppression of the rising. Socialist activist D. P. Russell republished the letter in a pamphlet, *Sinn Féin and the Irish Rebellion*, adding the comment:

Did Australia's sons in Dublin add lustre to the deeds of the heroes who fought and died in Gallipoli for the "Rights of Small Nations"?

Russell's question still remains. What do we say about the deeds of these Australians? Did they feel any qualms about fighting Irish insurgents? Davis was certainly not happy about what he was asked to do. After all, he had joined up to fight Germans. He later wrote: "We were in a very unenviable position, for we personally had no quarrel with the rioters." But as a pragmatic Australian soldier he did what he was lawfully ordered, adding: "We are making the best of a bad job, but would prefer to be anywhere but in this unenviable city." McHugh, a Catholic of Irish descent, also did his duty. He later received a silver cup from a committee of grateful citizens. But, unfortunately, he left no record telling us how he felt about fighting his "cousins".

Although they might not have liked doing what they were ordered to do, the diggers in Dublin as loyal soldiers of the Empire would have seen it as their duty. And, fortunately for them, they survived their experience and the war, not like the 25 Australian servicemen buried in Ireland.

## **Wattle Among the Shamrocks**

Of these, 10 died while on leave in Ireland, 10 died of wounds or illness in England and their Irish relatives brought their bodies to Ireland and five died at sea and their bodies were brought ashore in Ireland. Five of the graves are located in what is now Northern Ireland and 20 are in the Republic. The graves are dotted throughout the island of Ireland as if laid out as markers for a Cook's tour of the Emerald Isle – though, unlike Gallipoli or the Somme, there are no signposts to tell you where they are.

Of the seven Australian soldiers buried at Grangegorman, four were killed on 10 October 1918, a month before the end of the war, when a German submarine *UB-123* torpedoed and sank RMS *Leinster*, the mail-boat from Kingstown to Holyhead, with the loss of over 500 lives – the worst ever maritime disaster in the Irish Sea. They were: Private Joseph Thomas Barnes; Private Edwin Johnson Carter; Private Joseph Gratton; and Private Michael Ernest Smith. Three other Australian soldiers died that day but their bodies were never recovered. Another Australian casualty whose body was not recovered was Sydney-born Nurse Winifred Starling, attached to a New Zealand military hospital in England, where she was serving when she took leave in Ireland. Nurse Starling had just been given a new posting on a hospital ship heading to New Zealand when she made the fateful decision to visit friends in Ireland before returning to the antipodes.<sup>4</sup>

The other three graves at Grangegorman belong to soldiers who died of illness in Ireland, two of them from pneumonic influenza, popularly known as the Spanish flu. By my reckoning, six of the 25 Australian servicemen of the First World War buried in Ireland died of Spanish flu: Lieutenant Reginald Leopold MacLean; Lance Sergeant William Hugh Moore; Private George Bardon; Private Charles Michael Byrne; Private Robert Emmett Kinchington; and Private John Quinane.

Spanish flu spread throughout the world in 1918-19 killing millions of people. Estimates at the time were in the order of 20 million, but since then further research has seen that figure climb to 50 million, with a caveat that “even this vast figure may be substantially lower than the real toll, perhaps as much as 100 percent understated”.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the estimated 14 million deaths, both military and civilian, attributable to the four years of the war it is a staggering statistic, particularly as the pandemic's death toll occurred in less than a year.<sup>6</sup> An effective maritime quarantine spared Australia from the worst effects of the disease by delaying its onset until early 1919 when its virulence had lessened, with the result that Australia recorded the world's lowest death rate of any country with a large European population.<sup>7</sup> Even so, more than 12,000 Australians died in the space of six months once the

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<sup>4</sup> Letter 13 January 1919 from W. Bousden of the New Zealand High Commission to Vera Deakin of the Australian Red Cross Society in Australian Red Cross, Carter file. A typescript of the text of the letter is reproduced in the Australian Red Cross file, 2610108 Nurse Winifred Starling.

<sup>5</sup> Niall Johnson and Juergen Mueller, “Updating the Accounts: Global Mortality of the 1918-1920 ‘Spanish’ Influenza Pandemic”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol 76 No 1, 2002, pp. 105-115, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Gilbert, *First World War*, HarperCollins, London, 1995, p. xv. Despite the much higher death toll and its direct impact on civilian populations memory of the Spanish flu quickly faded in comparison to that of the war.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey W. Rice and Edwina Palmer, “Pandemic Influenza in Japan, 1918-19: Mortality Patterns and Official Responses”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol 19 No 2, 1993, pp. 389-420, p. 410; John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp. 375-377.

quarantine barrier broke down.<sup>8</sup> But on the Western Front and in Britain and Ireland Australian soldiers were exposed to the full brunt of the disease.

Various other illnesses claimed the lives of another seven: Private James Carroll (tuberculosis), Private James Leathem (meningitis), Private Arthur Andrew Murphy (abscess of the liver), Private Philip Douglas Davis (pneumonia), Private John Michael Doyle (asthma), Gunner Ambrose Augustine Haley (cancer of the pancreas, lungs and spleen), and Sergeant Thomas Robert Reid (diabetes).

Five died of wounds: Lieutenant George Gilmour Allardyce; Private John Joseph Cahill; Private James Cowan; Private John Parnell Darmody; and Private Thomas Paget Sudlow.

One, a naval rating, drowned when HMS *Laurentic*, carrying gold to America struck a mine off the north coast of Ireland and sank with the loss of 350 lives, including Able Seaman Frederick Allen Sheedy.

The two remaining soldiers died in unusual circumstances, attributable directly or indirectly to shell shock, a condition known today as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which was then little understood. I will conclude this paper by briefly recounting the story of each of these men.

One of them was Corporal John Taylor Anderson, a Melbourne-born marine engineer who enlisted on 18 August 1914. He was tall (almost 6 foot) and dark, and on enlistment was 27 years old and unmarried with tattoos on his chest and right arm. In September 1914 he sailed to Egypt where he served as a sapper in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Company Engineers engaged in bridging the Suez Canal. At Gallipoli he was promoted to Corporal in July 1915, but in mid-September, following the most intense fighting of the campaign, he took sick. Initially the diagnosis was an abscess of the antrum,<sup>9</sup> which cleared up without treatment. Nevertheless, he was evacuated from Anzac to a hospital ship and thence to Malta, where it was noted he was jumpy and irritable, with insomnia, cramps and low appetite. He was diagnosed as suffering from “debility” and “neuralgia”, vague terms that suggest the doctors were casting around for a proper diagnosis. Yet his symptoms were severe enough to warrant his being transferred to England, where on 4 November 1915 he was diagnosed as having “shell shock”.

One of the most widespread battlefield injuries of the First World War,<sup>10</sup> “shell shock” came to cover a range of debilities, many of which had nothing to do with shells or shock, so that terms such as “war neurosis” and “neurasthenia” or even “NYDN” (Not Yet Diagnosed Nervous) were frequently used. Military medical opinion was divided as to its cause, some doctors believing it to be a manifestation of cowardice, malingering or moral weakness – the chapter in the Official Medical History of the war describing the condition is entitled “Moral and Mental Disorders”. Other doctors, however, recognised it as a treatable psychological disorder induced by a man’s war experience. The latter view gained increasing support as the

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<sup>8</sup> Anthea Hyslop, “A Question of Identity: J. H. L. Cumpston and Spanish Influenza, 1918-1919”, *Australian Cultural History*, Volume 16, 1997-98, pages 60-76; McQueen, Humphrey, “The ‘Spanish’ Influenza Pandemic in Australia 1918-1919”, in Jill Roe (ed.), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975*, Cassell, Stanmore, 1976, pages 131-147. Johnson and Mueller, “Updating the Accounts”, p. 114 puts the figure at 14,528.

<sup>9</sup> Which antrum is not stated – presumably the one behind the nose.

<sup>10</sup> G. Mosse, “Shell-shock as social disease”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 35, No 1, 2000, pp. 101-108, at p. 101.

war progressed, but even so it would be more than 50 years before the condition came to be understood and more effective treatment devised.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, when Corporal Anderson was discharged from hospital on 20 November 1915 and sent on leave we can only speculate as to the fragility of his mind, particularly given the circumstances of his death. For on the morning of 18 December the maid at Geary's Hotel, Limerick, where he was staying, found him dead in his bed fully dressed.

According to evidence given at the coroner's inquest, Anderson had arrived in Limerick the night before, having met on the train Robert Ryan, the proprietor of Geary's Hotel. Anderson had been asleep when Ryan entered the compartment and he told Ryan he had no money or friends in Limerick. The kindly publican invited him to stay at the hotel. Anderson was last seen alive at about 10.30pm after having had a drink with Ryan before retiring to his room. He told Ryan he had come to Limerick on a mission of charity and that he was anxious to see the parents of a girl he met in London with a view to their doing something for her. He also told Ryan he had been shot through the left lung in the fighting, also in the legs and hand, which was bandaged. His medical records, however, do not support that claim. Doctor J.F. Shanahan, who made a "superficial examination of the body", attributed death to natural causes and the jury returned a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence. Corporal Anderson was laid to rest in the Limerick (King's Island) Military Cemetery. A sister living in England had cabled the coroner that it was impossible for her to come to Ireland, and asked to have a wreath of violets placed on his grave.<sup>12</sup>

The other soldier was Private John Joseph Hickey, who on 26 January 1918 was found seriously injured, lying on the railway track near Sallins in Co. Kildare. Hickey was a seaman when in February 1916 he enlisted in the AIF at Melbourne, aged 21 years and 7 months. Despite, or because of, his previous employment, he had difficulty accepting the discipline of army life. His service record discloses a string of offences including being absent without leave, insubordination, threatening to strike an NCO, obscene language to an NCO, neglecting to obey an order and drunkenness. He was also wounded in action at the Battle of Fromelles in July 1916 and then in September 1917 he was buried during a bombardment in the lead up to the Battle of Polygon Wood as a result of which he was diagnosed as suffering from shell shock.

After rejoining his unit in December he was fortunate enough to be sent on leave the following month during which he made his way to Ireland to visit his father's family in Co. Clare. When found on the railway track Hickey was still alive, but only just. Rushed to the military hospital at the nearby Curragh Camp, he was admitted with compound fractures of the right arm and right leg as well as a compound fracture of the skull. His injuries were so horrific that at the railway station a doctor had removed his right arm, which was hanging by one of the nerves, while at the hospital doctors amputated his right leg. After initially rallying, Hickey eventually succumbed to shock and haemorrhage and died the following evening at 6 o'clock. A coronial inquest held two days later found that he had died of injuries suffered after being accidentally struck by a train. The coroner noted that he had no evidence as to how

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<sup>11</sup> See A.G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918: Special Problems and Services*, Vol 3, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1943, chapter 2; Joanna Bourke, "Shell Shock and Australian Soldiers in the Great War," *Sabretache*, Vol 36 No 3, 1995, pp. 3-10; and Michael Tyquin, *Madness and the Military: Australia's Experience of the Great War*, Australian Military History Publications, Sydney, 2006. The *Journal of Contemporary History* devotes an issue to shell shock in Vol 35 No 1, 2000. For a discussion of PTSD during the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare*, Granta Books, London, 2000, chapter 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Limerick Chronicle* 18 December 1915, p. 1; 21 December 1915, p. 2.

Hickey came by his death and he attached no blame to anyone. Private Hickey's body was claimed by his uncle, Thomas Hickey of Ballybrack, Co. Clare and taken by train to Limerick where it was buried in the churchyard of the Catholic church in the nearby village of Bridgetown, Co. Clare. The funeral was attended by his uncle and aunt, four cousins and twenty-five friends.<sup>13</sup>

## **Conclusion**

These are just two of the many stories of Australian soldiers and Ireland during the First World War. Fortunately, most are not as tragic and some are quite humorous, such as the one concerning Sergeant John Clark MM who was arrested in Dublin for participating in an illegal Sinn Fein march. He told his court martial in August 1919 that when the signing of the peace treaty was announced he had been drinking in a bar and had joined a procession he thought was in celebration of the peace. He admitted wearing green, white and orange ribbons but said they may have been pinned on him by the crowd. He claimed he was not aware of their significance as he had no knowledge or opinions in relation to Irish politics. The charge was dismissed.

The people of Australia and Ireland have much in common based on genealogy and a shared heritage, a fact evidenced by the success of the Galong conferences, where we gather to share the many and varied stories of the two countries' entwined past. Yet, for a long time one aspect of that past has been overlooked, a case of "don't mention the war". As Ireland increasingly comes to recognise and esteem the sacrifice of her soldiers of the First World War, a critical time in the formation of both our nations, the stories of the Anzacs and Ireland will provide new opportunities to deepen and strengthen the bonds between our two peoples.

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<sup>13</sup> Although the CWGC gives the location of Hickey's grave as being to the east of the church, there is no CWGC headstone in the churchyard and his grave is not otherwise marked. I have approached the CWGC who have advised they are aware that the grave is unmarked and that their District Inspector is intending to approach the local authority regarding erecting a marker. While researching in 2004 Hickey's death, I interviewed at a Dublin nursing home 103 year-old Sean Clancy, who as a schoolboy had witnessed Hickey's coffin being unloaded from the train at Limerick station in January 1918.