

The Irish Anzacs Project

by Jeff Kildea*

Introduction

Australians have always had a fascination with the First World War, but over the past 25 years Australian interest in the war has intensified.¹ So much so, that the recent Labor government felt it necessary to commit \$140 million towards Australia's centenary commemorations, about 50% more than the United Kingdom, a commitment confirmed by the current Coalition government.²

In Ireland, remembrance of the First World War took a different trajectory descending into what FX Martin called "the Great Oblivion".³ This was despite the fact that 200 000 Irishmen had enlisted in the British Army during the war, of whom more than 35 000 were killed.

After the Irish had won their hard-fought independence and had established their state in 1922, their nation-building understandably focussed on the struggle for independence, especially the Easter Rising, not the part that Irish soldiers had played in what many regarded as "England's war". In recent times the Irish in Ireland have rediscovered the First World War and with official support and encouragement have begun to acknowledge the Irishmen who fought and died in it.

While the Irish in Ireland may have had difficulty in coming to terms with the First World War, this was not the case with the Irish in Australia. Generally speaking, they participated in the war in proportion to their numbers in the population and, with their fellow Australians, they have commemorated it without reservation, even if in some cases they did so separately for reasons of religious sensitivity when prayers were included in the ceremonies.

The Irish Anzacs Project

To understand why this might be so we need to know more about the Australian Irish who participated in the war: how many of them did so; where in Ireland were they from; what were their religious affiliations; their ages; their occupations? What ranks did they attain? How many died as a consequence of their war service? What decorations did they receive? Did events in Ireland, such as the Easter Rising have an impact on their enlistment? These are questions for which historians, such as Lloyd Robson, John Connor and myself, have offered some answers over the years, but those answers were

*A paper given by Dr Jeff Kildea (Keith Cameron Chair of Australian History at University College Dublin) at the "Australia in the Great War – Centenary Perspectives" symposium, King's College London on 23 May 2014.

¹ The reasons for this recent increase in interest in the war are beyond the scope of this paper. Mark McKenna has examined some of them in "Anzac Day: How did it become Australia's national day?" in Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (eds), *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, New South, Sydney, 2010, pp. 110-134.

² Paul Daley, "Australia spares no expense as the Anzac legend nears its century", *The Guardian* 14 October 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/14/australia-anzac-legend-centenary-war> (accessed 6 May 2014)).

³ FX Martin, "1916 – Myth, Fact and Mystery", *Studia Hibernica*, No. 7, pp. 7–124 at p. 68.

tentative in that they were based on limited evidence, namely, small samples of the total numbers involved.⁴

The Irish Anzacs Project, which is a significant research undertaking of the Global Irish Studies Centre at UNSW, made possible by a grant from the Irish government's Emigrant Support Program, aims to identify all Irish-born enlistments, or as close to all as is practicable, and to compile a publicly accessible database containing information on each of them so as to enable historians to give definitive answers to those questions. In addition, it will provide families with information on their Irish-born family members who served in the war.

The project involves the following steps:

1. identifying the Irish Anzacs;
2. extracting the relevant data from their service records;
3. publishing the data on a publicly accessible website; and
4. analysing the data and drawing conclusions.

Identifying the Irish Anzacs

In the study the term "Irish Anzacs" refers to those members of the Australian Imperial Force who were born in Ireland. The study is confined to those of Irish birth rather than of Irish descent for the very pragmatic reason that, because the AIF service records held by the National Archives of Australia (NAA) include place of birth, the Irish-born are capable of identification. In the case of Australian-born soldiers with one or more Irish parents or grandparents, it is not so easy. A Gaelic surname might indicate Irish ancestry, but the corollary is not true – a non-Gaelic surname does not exclude Irish ancestry. For example, in 1890 Smith was the fifth most common surname in Ireland.⁵ It is therefore simply not possible to identify from the service records, or, perhaps, at all, all those AIF members born in Australia who were of Irish descent.

The task of finding the service records of the Irish-born from among the 375 956 AIF service records held by the NAA is made easier by the fact that those records, designated as series B2455, are available online and the searchable Item Title for all but 4664 of them shows the soldier's place of birth or POB. As a result, we have so far found 5740 Irish-born among the 371 292 records in Series B2455 with a POB, or 1.55%. How does that compare with the proportion of Irish-born in the population?

In 1911, the year of the last census before the First World War, Australia's population was just under 4.5 million of whom almost 140,000 were born in Ireland, ie. Irish-born Australians were 3.13 per cent of the general population.⁶ At first sight, this suggests

⁴ LL Robson 'The Origin and Character of the First AIF, 1914–18: Some Statistical Evidence', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 61, 1973, pp. 737–48 at p. 748. Robson was concerned with Catholics rather than Irish-born from the geographical entity 'Great Britain', within which, presumably, he includes Ireland. John Connor, 'Irish Soldiers in the 1st Australian Imperial Force' in Rebecca Pelan (ed.), *Papers Delivered at the Seventh Irish-Australian Conference July 1993*, Crossing Press, Sydney, 1994. See also John Connor, "Some Examples of Irish Enlistment in the Australian Imperial Force, 1914", *Irish Sword*, Vol. 21, No. 83, pp. 85–94. Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, pp. 81-88.

⁵ Sean J Murphy, "A Survey of Irish Surnames 1992-97", *Studies in Irish Genealogy and Heraldry*, Windgates, Wicklow, 2009, pp. 14-24, p. 18.

⁶ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia for 1911*, Vol. 2, p. 135 shows a total population of 4,455,005 of whom 139,434 were born in Ireland.

that the Irish-born, at 1.55% of AIF enlistments, did not support the war in proportion to their numbers in the population. However, a closer examination of the 1911 census reveals a startling fact about the Irish-born, namely that they were an aging population, with 74 per cent being 45 years and over compared to 19 per cent for the general population.

This trend is due largely to the fact that in the second half of the 19th century Irish immigration to Australia slowed both in absolute terms and as a relative contributor to population growth, so that the Irish-born proportion of the population decreased from 15.4 per cent in 1861 to only 3.13 per cent in 1911. If one counts only males of military age (that is, between 18 and 44 years), the proportion of eligible Irish-born males to all eligible Australian males is not 3.13 per cent but 1.8 per cent. But, furthermore, if you have regard to the fact that in 1911 it was those aged 15-41 who would be of enlistment age in 1914, the proportion for that cohort is 1.41%. Consequently, the enlistment rate of 1.55% for the Irish-born exceeded the proportion of eligible Irish-born in the population.

Applying the 1.55% figure to the 4664 records in series B2455 without a POB, there are likely to be another 72 Irish-born that we need to track down in that group. Preliminary searching of those records indicates that those records will not readily yield up the soldiers' POBs. Presumably that is why their Item Titles state "POB: N/A". But we might find a few that the cataloguers have missed.

But there is an even bigger problem in our quest to identify all the Irish-born in the AIF. According to the official statistics of the war relating to Australia, a total of 416 809 were "mobilised, enlisted or trained" during the war.⁷ However, as we have seen, there are only 375 956 items in series B2455. This suggests that there are another 40 853 records which have not been included in that series. Of these, 633 are likely to be Irish-born, applying the figure of 1.55%. Unfortunately, even the National Archives of Australia has not been able to indicate with any certainty where the missing 40-odd thousand records might be found. However, there seem to be at least two likely explanations.

Firstly, it would seem that the figure of 416 809 is enlistments whereas series B2455 relates to individuals, some of whom enlisted on multiple occasions.⁸ By examining the service records of the 5740 Irish-born I will be able to determine the extent of double counting that has occurred within that group and that will give me an idea as to what proportion of the "missing 40 000" might involve double counting.

Secondly, in addition to series B2455 the NAA has another collection which also comprises service records. It is series MT1486/1, which although entitled "Applications to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force", includes many records where the soldier had not only applied to enlist but had in fact enlisted in the AIF.⁹ Consequently, many of

⁷ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920*, HMSO, London, 1922, p. 759.

⁸ The Australian Official Medical History notes that "enlistments do not represent individuals, as multiple enlistments were common among certain classes of men who were unfit or for other reasons resorted to impersonation or misstatements at enrolments" (AG Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914-1918*, Volume III – Special Problems and Services, AWM, Canberra, 1943, p. 882).

⁹ According to the Australian Official Medical History, "The 'AIF' officially includes all men attested after medical examination" (AG Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 892). The series description for MT1486/1 states: "This series consists of records for those individuals who applied to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force, and were either rejected, discharged while still in training, or went on to serve within Australia only", indicating

those whose papers have been filed in series MT1486/1 rather than series B2455 were in fact members of the AIF.¹⁰ How many is difficult to gauge.

As at 6 May 2014 series MT1486/1 comprised 68 886 items. But it continues to grow as more records are catalogued.¹¹ What the final number will be is also difficult to know. In 1938 Charles Bean noted that Base Records of the Defence Department held 510,000 personal files.¹² That suggests that series MT1486/1 might eventually comprise about 134 000 files, given that there are 376 000-odd items in series B2455. Many of those will be mere applications to enlist, but many will also be AIF enlistments, 1.55% of which would relate to Irish-born.¹³

This problem, which to me is an obstacle to my aim of identifying all Irish-born who enlisted in the AIF, is in fact a symptom of a far greater problem concerning the statistics of the war, which has recently been identified with regard to casualty figures by David Noonan in his PhD thesis “Those we forget: recounting Australian casualties of the First World War”.¹⁴ It seems that figures which for decades have been accepted and quoted extensively in official publications and histories of the war may be unreliable.

Since 1919, 416 809 has been the generally accepted figure for enlistments. However, whether that figure is for the AIF only or for all military forces or for the combined military and naval forces is not clear.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the combined total of 444 842 records in series B2455 and series MT1486/1, so far, well exceeds the generally accepted figure. With multiple enlistments and the continuing growth in the number of records in series MT1486/1, the difference between the two figures is likely to be even greater. Resolving the problem is beyond the scope of this paper but ultimately it is

that items in the series relate not only to applicants but also to those who enlisted in the AIF as defined by Colonel Butler.

¹⁰ It is not clear on what basis individual service records were allocated to series B2455 rather than series MT1486/1 and vice versa. For example, William Joseph Mitchell of Galway, whose service record is in series B2455, was found unfit and never attested (Item barcode 7984074). Wilfred Seymour of Dublin, whose service record is in series B2455, was attested on 21 August 1914 and discharged the same day (Item barcode 8076960). In addition, the service records of many soldiers who enlisted for service within Australia only are in series MT1486/1, as you would expect from the series description. But series B2455 also includes service records of soldiers who enlisted for home service only (eg., Thomas McCarthy of Cork (Item barcode 1939443); Michael Power of Waterford (Item barcode 8022010)).

¹¹ For instance, in December 2013 the series comprised 64 487 items.

¹² C.E.W. Bean, “The writing of the Australian official history of the Great War—source, methods and some conclusions”, *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, vol. XXIV, part 2, 1938, pp. 85-112 at p. 99.

¹³ A search in December 2013 of series MT1486/1, which then comprised 64 487 items yielded 633 Irish-born, less than the 1000 that would be expected using the 1.55% proportion. However, a large number of items in the series (in excess of 20 000) do not include POB information in the Item Title.

¹⁴ Melbourne University, 2014. It has recently been published as a monograph by Melbourne University Press.

¹⁵ The *Statistics of the Military Effort* states that Australia “mobilised, enlisted or trained 412,953 military and 3,856 naval men, making a total of 416,809” (p. 759). However, the Australian Official History, Volume 3, chapter XVII, in Table No. 11 on p. 882 shows that 412 953 enlisted in the AIF, 3651 enlisted in the infantry component of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) and 2861 in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), which makes a total of 419 465. It also states that in 1918 the strength of the Royal Australian Navy was 5050 seagoing personnel, of whom 4225 were in the RAN and 825 on loan from the Royal Navy, plus 3093 in the RAN Brigade. The figure of 416 809 was published by the Department of Defence in March 1919 but it was described as relating to the AIF (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 4 March 1919, p. 6; *The Argus* 7 March 1919, p. 6) and was adopted by the Australian Official History, Volume XI, pp. 871-872 in a table that shows monthly enlistments by state. The AWM on its website has also adopted this figure (<https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1/>).

relevant to the project's aim of identifying all Irish-born enlistments. But more importantly, it is an issue that needs further investigation in order to answer what is a fundamental question, namely, how many did enlist in the AIF.

To summarise the position on the numbers: applying the 1.55% figure to the generally accepted figure of total AIF enlistments we arrive at a figure of 6460 Irish-born enlistments in the AIF, of which we have so far identified 5740 individuals in series B2455, some of whom had multiple enlistments. In addition, there are probably another 70 or so individuals in series B2455 among those where POB is not stated in the Item Title. Finally, we have so far identified about 630 Irish-born in series MT1486/1, some of whom will turn out to be AIF enlistments and not just applicants. All up, therefore, it is reasonably safe to conclude that the total figure for the number of Irish-born who enlisted in the AIF exceeds 6000, though by how much is difficult to say and it may never be known precisely.

Extracting the data

After identifying the Irish-born, the next step is to extract the data from their service records. These records typically, but not always, include the soldier's attestation form from which we extract basic data: name, town and county of birth, age, occupation, marital status, next of kin location, previous military service, date and place of enlistment and religion. In addition to this basic information found in the attestation form, the service records sometimes contain other information such as recommendations for decorations, correspondence from family members, court martial records, and so on. So, we flag such records with a view to returning later to extract more information, as the project also aims to tell the stories of some of the more interesting individuals.

The next step is to cross-check the data with that in other records kept by the Australian War Memorial such as the Roll of Honour, the Embarkation Roll, the Nominal Roll, the list of Honours and Decorations and the Red Cross's files relating to the wounded and missing and to prisoners of war, ultimately producing for each soldier a fairly comprehensive record.

The Roll of Honour lists those who died between 4 August 1914 and 31 March 1921 "during or as a result of service while a member of an Australian military force or unit which was or could be sent overseas".¹⁶ According to the Australian War Memorial 61 513 persons died as a result of their service.¹⁷ Of these 61 326 died serving with the military forces and 187 with the navy.¹⁸ For the military this represents a mortality rate of 14.85% of military enlistments. So far we have identified in the Roll of Honour and series B2455 853 Irish-born. As a proportion of the 5740 currently in the database that represents 14.86%, a pretty close match one might think. However, as the names of those in series MT1486/1 are added to the database, the mortality rate is likely to fall, assuming that most of those in that series enlisted for home service only or were discharged soon after enlistment. It may be that the number of Irish-born who died due

¹⁶ http://www.awm.gov.au/research/people/roll_of_honour/introduction/ (accessed 9 May 2014).

¹⁷ https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/war_casualties/ (accessed 9 May 2014).

¹⁸ The naval figure was determined by searching the Roll of Honour database using the terms "HMAS", "HMS", "bridging" (for the Royal Australian Navy Bridging Train), "expeditionary" (for the Australian Naval and Military Expedition Force or ANMEF) and "naval" (to exclude naval members of the ANMEF). For the ANMEF 63 deaths are recorded of which 5 were members of the Royal Australian Navy.

to war service will not increase much above the present figure, perhaps rounded to about 900.

Publishing the data

It is intended to make the database available to the public via the internet. This will mean that members of the public will be able to examine the details of a particular individual, with hyperlinks to the source documents, such as the soldier's service record, embarkation roll etc. In addition, researchers will be able to extract statistical information. Because the database will be hosted by UNSW on the same server that hosts the university's library catalogue they will be able to search on multiple fields, such as county of birth, religious affiliation, age, occupation and so on, employing the powerful search engine used by the library.

Analysing the data and drawing conclusions

In the appendix to this paper are a series of graphs which give some examples of the statistical information that is available for the 5740 individuals whose service records are in series B2455. Already the database has revealed an interesting statistic that opens up a line of inquiry. As can be seen from this table, in the general population, NSW and WA provided enlistments a little above their national proportions, while Victoria, SA and Tasmania provided a little below. But the differences are not large – a couple of percentage points.

Enlistments by State

General Population

<i>State</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% Popn</i>	<i>Enlistments</i>	<i>% Enlistments</i>
NSW	1648448	37.00%	164030	39.35%
Victoria	1315551	29.53%	112399	26.97%
Queensland	605813	13.60%	57705	13.84%
South Australia	411868	9.25%	34959	8.39%
Western Australia	282114	6.33%	32231	7.73%
Tasmania	191211	4.29%	15485	3.72%
Other	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
All States	4455005	100.00%	416809	100.00%

However, when you look at the Irish-born population, Victoria is well below its proportion in its contribution of Irish Anzacs, while WA is well above.

Enlistments by State

Irish-born Population

<i>State</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% Popn</i>	<i>Enlistments</i>	<i>% Enlistments</i>
NSW	47467	33.58%	2007	34.97%
Victoria	42082	29.77%	1058	18.43%
Queensland	31913	22.57%	1436	25.02%
South Australia	8143	5.76%	326	5.68%
Western Australia	9573	6.77%	827	14.41%
Tasmania	2187	1.55%	68	1.18%
Other	0	0.00%	18	0.31%
All States	141365	100.00%	5740	100.00%

So what was it about the Irish-born in Victoria and WA and their attitudes to the war. Now, in the case of Victoria, you might immediately think that it was the influence of

Archbishop Mannix. But Mannix only became widely associated with the issue of the war in a public way after the first referendum in October 1916. Yet these next tables show that, from the start, the contribution of Victoria's Irish-born to the AIF was well below par, admittedly dropping rapidly in 1917 and 1918 when Mannix had become prominent on the issue of the war.

Irish Anzac Enlistments by State and Year

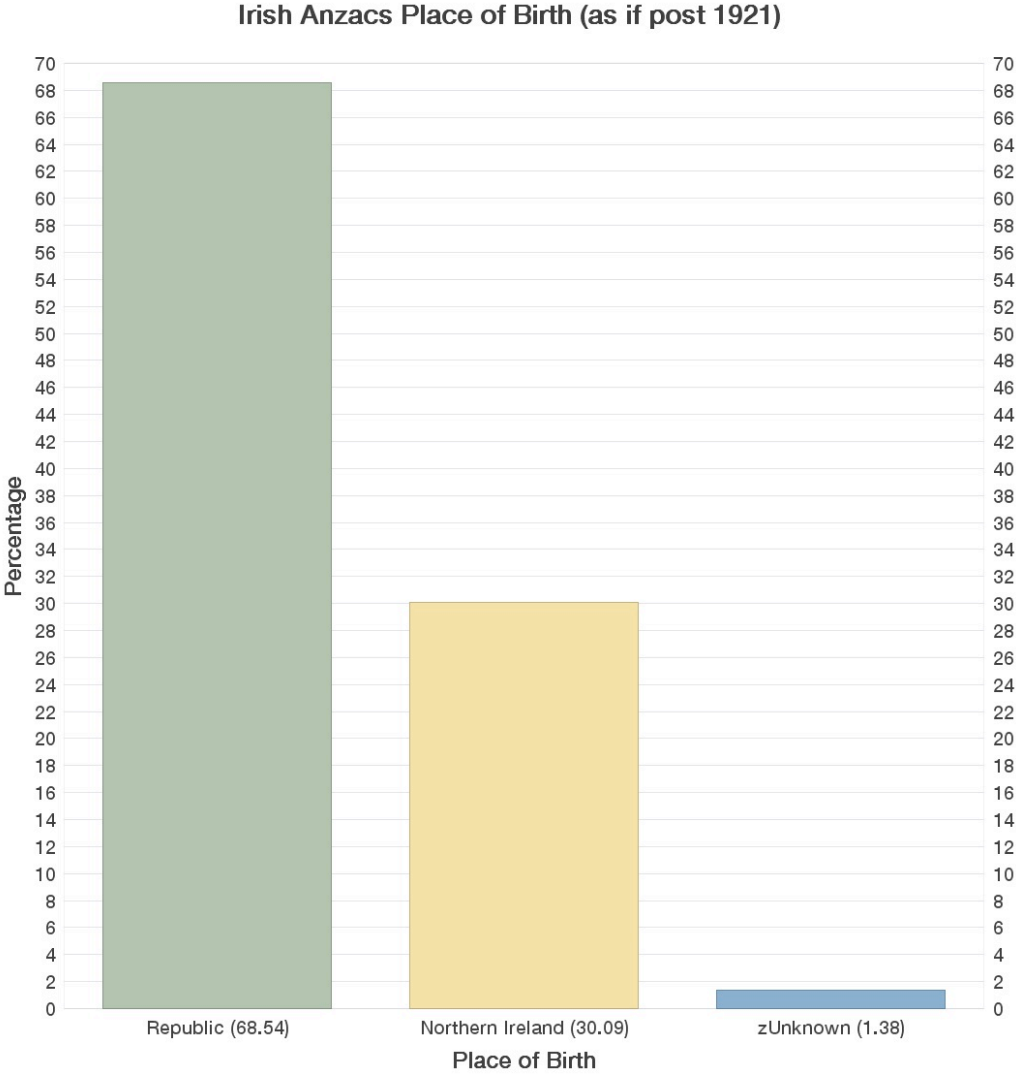
<i>State</i>	<i>1914</i>	<i>% Enlisted</i>	<i>1915</i>	<i>% Enlisted</i>	<i>1916</i>	<i>% Enlisted</i>
NSW	316	37.13%	735	33.11%	606	33.08%
Victoria	180	21.15%	438	19.73%	327	17.85%
Queensland	169	19.86%	592	27.67%	473	25.82%
South Australia	76	8.93%	132	5.95%	80	4.37%
Western Australia	91	10.69%	298	13.42%	319	17.41%
Tasmania	16	1.88%	20	0.90%	20	1.09%
Other	3	0.36%	5	0.24%	7	0.37%
All States	851	100.00%	2220	100.00%	1832	100.00%

Irish Anzac Enlistments by State and Year

<i>State</i>	<i>1917</i>	<i>% Enlisted</i>	<i>1918</i>	<i>% Enlisted</i>
NSW	203	33.95%	143	61.90%
Victoria	84	14.05%	28	12.12%
Queensland	161	26.92%	39	16.88%
South Australia	33	5.52%	5	2.16%
Western Australia	110	18.39%	9	3.90%
Tasmania	6	1.00%	6	2.60%
Other	1	0.17%	1	0.43%
All States	598	100.00%	231	100.00%

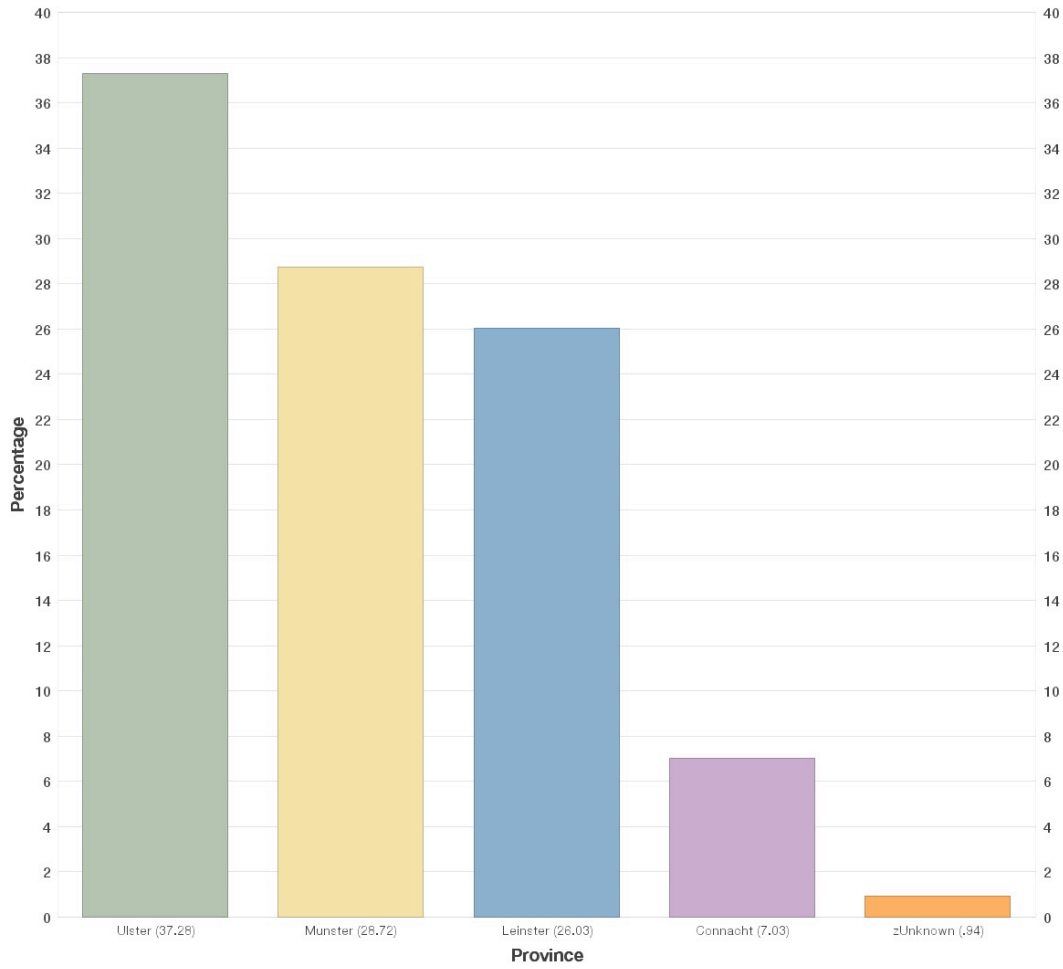
The figures for the period from 1914 to 1916 show that something else must have been in play as well as any influence Mannix might have had in 1917 and 1918. What that is, I cannot yet say. Similarly, with WA. But the conundrum illustrates the value of the Irish Anzacs Project in raising questions for researchers to pursue in their endeavour to better understand the Irish in Australia and their attitudes to the war that played such a significant part in the history of our two nations.

Appendix

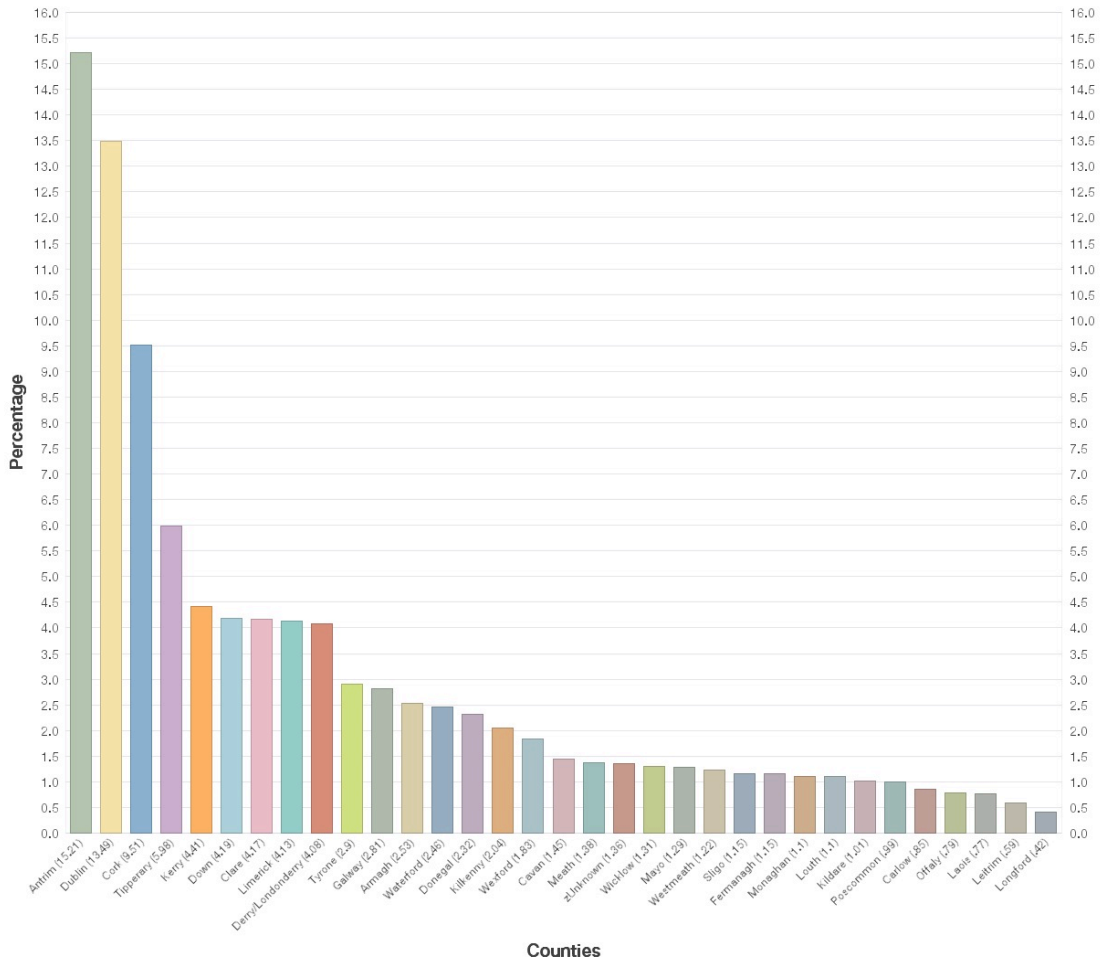


This graph shows the place of birth of the Irish Anzacs grouped into the 26 counties that after 1921 constituted the Irish Free State (today the Republic of Ireland) and the 6 counties that constitute Northern Ireland.

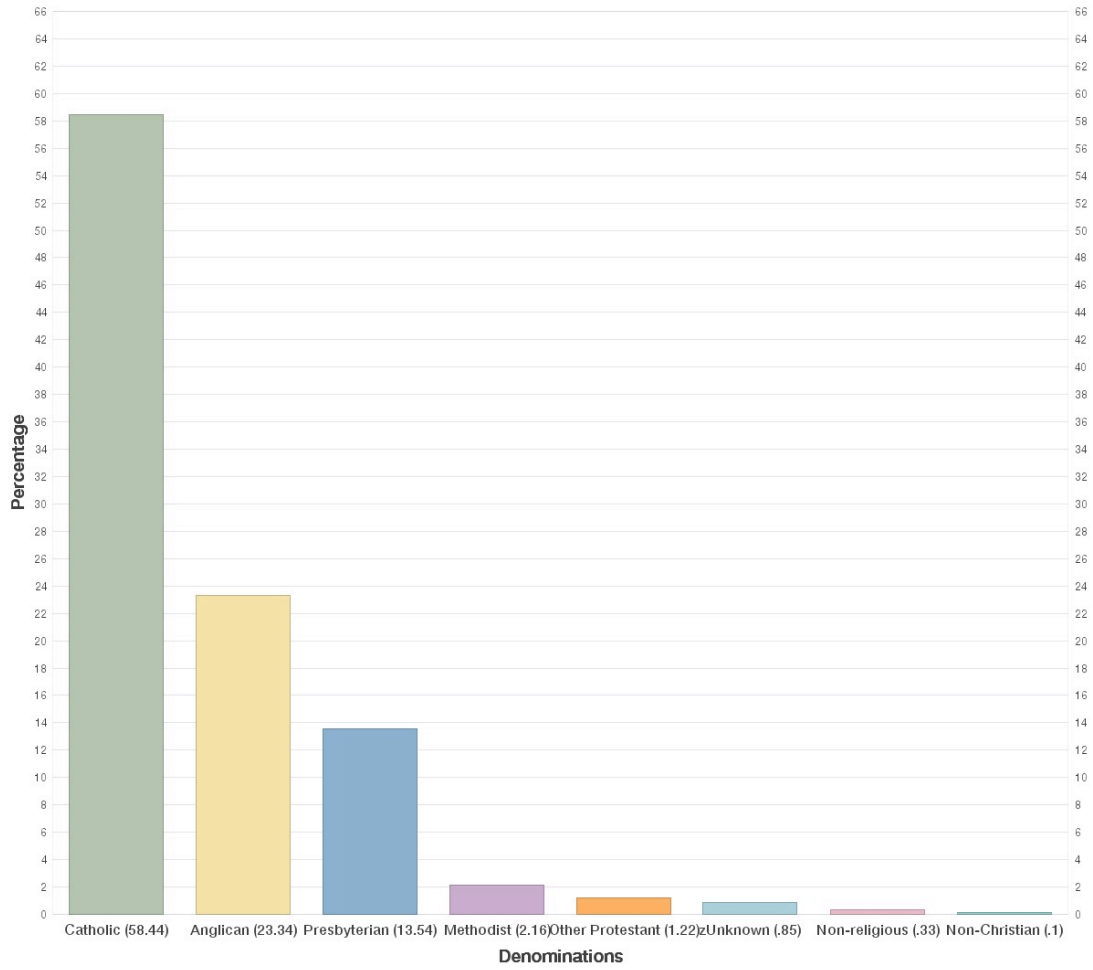
Irish Anzacs Province of Birth



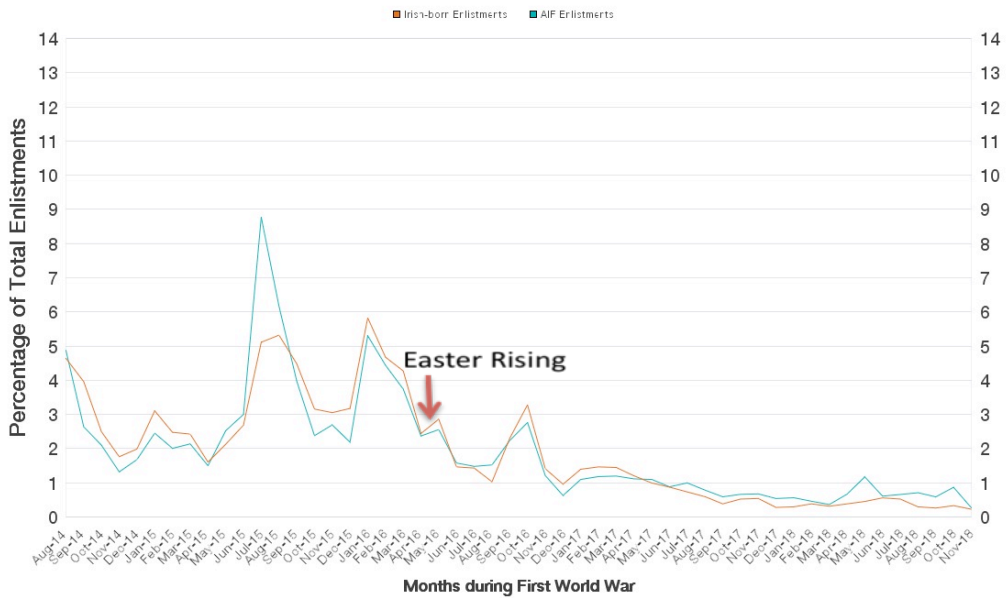
Irish Anzacs County of Birth



Irish Anzacs Religious Affiliation



Irish Anzacs and AIF Enlistment Dates



This graph shows that there was no significant difference in enlistment rates between the Irish-born and the general population following the Easter Rising of late April 1916