

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA**

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**SHIFTING LOYALTIES: IRISH GREAT WAR POETRY**

FLORIANÓPOLIS

2018

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso, apresentado ao Curso de Letras - Inglês da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina como requisito para obtenção do título de bacharel em Letras - Inglês.

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FLORIANÓPOLIS

2018

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my parents, Saulo and Gislaine, who, in addition to their love and support through all these years, taught me the importance of reading and education, which were to make studying literature an obvious choice for me.

I would also like to thank Prof. Maria Rita Drumond Viana, for being the best supervisor I could have dreamt of, putting me back on track when I felt disheartened about research and not giving up on me, even though other commitments caused me to take more time than expected to complete this thesis (I like to think it was meant to be finished in 2018, with the centennial and everything).

My gratitude also goes to Luana Helena Uessler, for believing in me when it was hard for me to do that myself and being there for me when I needed, and to Nicholas Kucker Triana, for nagging me all the time to finish the thesis (are you happy now?).

Often times I have imagined what it would be like to write this section, and I always thought I would include thanks to those who doubted me, spurring me on to prove them wrong and do the best work I could; however, the people I encountered and the friends I made along the way were nothing but supportive. And for that I am also grateful.

## RESUMO

Com o início da Primeira Guerra Mundial em 1914, a Irlanda, como parte do Reino Unido da Grã-Bretanha e Irlanda, tomou parte no conflito, embora sob um conjunto de diferentes tensões. Opiniões irlandesas sobre a guerra variavam; enquanto esta era vista por unionistas e alguns nacionalistas como uma causa nobre ao lado da Grã-Bretanha contra um inimigo em comum, outros rejeitavam a ideia de lutar ao lado de uma nação que havia colonialmente dominado a ilha por séculos e que viria a reagir violentamente ao Levante de Páscoa em 1916. Não é surpreendente, então, que essa ambivalência entre lutar “pela Grã-Bretanha” e “pela Irlanda” é uma questão na escrita de vários poetas irlandeses. Este trabalho tem por objetivo analisar de que forma a lealdade uma nação é apresentada em certos poemas selecionados sobre a Primeira Guerra Mundial, e se essa lealdade é dirigida à ideia de uma Irlanda independente ou à união com o Império Britânico. De acordo com uma visão ampla do que constitui “poesia de guerra”, a análise inclui poemas escritos por combatentes, por civis contemporâneos ao conflito e também por poetas escrevendo após a guerra, como forma de explorar como a Primeira Guerra Mundial foi reimaginada e seus efeitos realizados na poesia irlandesa posterior. A importância deste trabalho encontra-se em seu desafio a perspectivas reducionistas sobre a experiência irlandesa da Primeira Guerra Mundial e as respostas culturais a esta, bem como na sua investigação de tensões que permeiam a história irlandesa no século XX como um todo.

**Palavras-chave:** Poesia irlandesa; Primeira Guerra Mundial; Poesia de guerra; Nacionalismo.

## ABSTRACT

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Ireland joined the conflict as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, albeit under different tensions than the former. Irish opinions regarding participation in the war diverged; while it was viewed by Unionists and some Nationalists as a noble effort with Britain against a common enemy, others had trouble with the idea of fighting beside a nation which had colonially dominated the island for centuries and would violently react to the 1916 Easter Rising. It is no surprise, then, that this ambivalence towards fighting “for Britain” and “for Ireland” is an issue in the writing of many Irish poets. This thesis seeks to analyse the ways in which loyalty to a nation is presented in selected poems about the Great War, and whether that loyalty is directed towards the idea of an independent Ireland or a maintained union with the British Empire. In line with a broad view of what constitutes “war poetry”, the analysis comprises poems by combatants, by civilians contemporary to the conflict and also by poets writing after the war, as a means of investigating how the Great War was reimagined and its effects realised in later Irish poetry. The significance of this work lies in its challenge to reductive views of the Irish experience of Great War and the cultural responses to it, as well as in its exploration of tensions that permeate Irish history of the twentieth century as a whole.

**Keywords:** Irish poetry; Great War; War poetry; Nationalism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“ ‘Twas better to die ‘neath an Irish sky than at Suvla or Sud-El-Bar”, states the folk song *The foggy dew*, famously recorded, among others, by Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor and The Chieftains in 1995. The verse is a reference to the Irish soldiers who died in the Battle of Gallipoli and, in a broader sense, to all of the Irishmen who did not survive the carnage of the Great War. Thousands of Irish soldiers fought in regiments under the British Imperial Army in the war, albeit in a complicated position, given the tensions over Irish Home Rule that escalated into the Easter Rising of 1916. The Rising (and especially the British reaction to it) would further intensify these tensions.

Ireland stood divided over its participation in the Great War, especially after 1916: for some, the war was a noble cause, a joint effort with Britain against a shared enemy; others, however, had trouble coming to terms with the idea of fighting for a nation which, in addition to colonially dominating the island over centuries, had so violently retaliated against the Easter Rising. It comes as no surprise, then, that this ambivalence between “fighting for Ireland” and “fighting for Britain” has appeared in the writing of many Irish poets, whether contemporaries to the war or in more recent times. Tom Kettle, an Irish poet and nationalist who fought in the war (and was killed in action in September 1916) is quoted to have said that “These men [participants in the Rising] will go down to history as heroes and martyrs, and I will go down – if I go down at all – as a bloody British soldier” (qtd. in Brearton 20).

In this thesis, I intend to carry out an investigation on Irish poetry dealing with the issue of the Great War. More specifically, I observe the ways in which loyalty to a nation is presented in certain poems. My hypothesis is that, in their reflection of the political situation in Ireland during the course of the war, especially after the Easter Rising in 1916, the poems present mixed feelings about loyalties either to the idea of an independent Ireland or a continuing union with the British Empire.

This study is significant for contributing, in a more general sense, to the area of Irish Studies, and even more so as it concerns a major event for the history of Ireland, whose importance is often underplayed and whose remembrance is ambiguous. It seeks to challenge reductive perceptions of the Great War's impact on Ireland (namely, the fiction of a single Nationalist or a single Unionist response) and its ensuing representations in culture, inserting itself in the movement towards remembering and revisiting the complicated Irish experience of the Great War and its ramifications, triggered especially by the centennials of the beginning and end of the conflict. This paper aims at relative novelty in examining Irish Great War poetry by offering a closer, more in-depth analysis of a select number of poems, exploring their relation to the wider political issues.

## 2.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Tensions between Ireland and Britain have a long past. Even though England had controlled small portions of Ireland during the Middle Ages, it was only after 1600 that its rule was established more effectively, and a process of Anglicisation started to take place. The seventeenth century would see a period of military turbulence in the island, with the Irish Confederate Wars and the Williamite-Jacobite War. These wars, like most other later conflicts in Ireland (the Troubles in Northern Ireland being a more recent example) also had a religious dimension: Irish history is marked by the struggle between Irish Catholicism and the Protestantism brought by British colonizers. The latter predominated over the following centuries, giving rise to the Protestant Ascendancy, i.e. an Anglo-Irish ruling class, while the mostly Catholic population suffered several economic and political sanctions. In 1801, Ireland would become part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which meant that it was ruled by a United Kingdom parliament, under conditions that prevented it from achieving self-government (Foster 289).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century were marked by the rise of Irish Nationalism. Irish Home Rule had, as a consequence, already been a matter of contention for decades when a Home Rule Bill was introduced in parliament in 1912 (Foster 462). Unionists, the majority of them protestants from the northern province of Ulster, responded to seemingly imminent self-government by signing what became known as the Ulster Covenant (1912) and forming the Ulster Volunteer Force (467), a paramilitary force dedicated to resisting Home Rule (even fighting the British Army if necessary). As a reaction, the Irish Volunteers were formed in the south (468), aiming to protect Home Rule should it be established. If Home Rule seemed on the verge of being passed, and the creation of paramilitary groups appeared to be a prelude for civil war, the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, triggering the Great War, would soon change that.

Due to the intricate web of alliances between European nation-states, the outbreak of the Great War led the British Empire, part of the Triple Entente (together with France and Russia) to declare war on the Triple Alliance, comprised of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. As a constituent part of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, Ireland was involved in the war, albeit under significantly different conditions. Foster argues that the Great War “should be seen as one of the most decisive events in modern Irish history” (471), as it temporarily averted the domestic crisis in Ireland and was a key factor in creating opportunity for the Easter Rising in 1916. He notes that “An external war created the necessary conditions for a rebellion against the British government, even one that had put a Home Rule Bill on the statute book” (461).

One variable which differentiates Ireland’s participation in the war from that of Britain is the fact that conscription was not in place in the former; Irish soldiers, thus, were not forced to enlist by law (which complicates Irish memory, rather, memories, of the conflict, as this paper will demonstrate). The war effort had supporters in both the Unionist

and Nationalist camps, although for different reasons. Unionists saw the conflict as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty and importance to Britain and Empire; pro-war Nationalists, in turn, believed that participating could “prove that Home Rule was fully compatible with loyalty to Crown and Empire” (Foster 472), with Home Rule being granted as a reward for Irish support during the war. Other nationalists, though, saw the war as a British war, opposed to the interests of Ireland.

Nevertheless, Irish involvement was extensive: according to Foster, Irish recruits on active service amounted to 150,000 by 1916, with that number rising to 200,000 by the end of the war (471). Battalions of volunteers from Ireland were mostly assigned to the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division, the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division and the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division. Members of the National Volunteers (the pro-war effort part of the former Irish Volunteers, who split over support of the war) enlisted in the 10<sup>th</sup> but most predominantly in the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, while the 36<sup>th</sup> Division drew largely from the ranks of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Both divisions did, at some point, fight together quite literally: both were present in the Battle of the Somme (notably, poet Tom Kettle, part of the 16<sup>th</sup>, was killed there). The terms of Irish remembrance of the Somme and the Great War as a whole, however, differ. Foster writes of “a policy of intentional amnesia about the extent of Irish commitment to the war effort before 1916” (472) on part of independent Ireland (something that has changed in recent decades, though); 1916 is an important year for the mythology surrounding the creation of the Irish Free State, but with the Easter Rising held as the foundational event. Conversely, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division’s deeds on the Somme remain a matter of celebration and an emblem of loyalty to the United Kingdom in the Northern Irish Unionist tradition.

## 2.2. WAR POETRY

In contrast with a popular perception of war poetry as poetry written by the soldier-poet, authors such as Santanu Das argue that the term war poetry cannot be confined to poetry written by the direct participants in wars, or written during the course of wars. In his preface to the *Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, Das writes that “poetry by male civilians and women is now largely part of the accepted canon” and that the book “indicates the reconceptualisation of the term [war poetry]” (xix). Authors who agree with this view broaden that notion (of the poet as soldier-poet) to encompass poetry that reflects the effects of war in one way or another, even if written long after it. Fran Brearton, in *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, also advocates for such a wide view of “war poetry”. She indicates that, in popular perception, the term “War poetry” is frequently associated with the ‘trench lyric’, that is, the poetry written by combatants about life in the battlefield (39). She goes on to point out some examples of how this is realised also in studies about the topic: on discussing Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Brearton claims that the author’s “equation of ‘involvement’ with combat experience, and his almost exclusively male roster of writers [...] serve to equate the ‘war poet’ with the ‘soldier-poet’ (230). She further argues that anthologies, such as Brian Gardner’s 1964 *Up the Line to Death*, add to that effect (39).

However, this “framework” of the poet as combatant cannot be applied to all contexts: Das argues that a wider view of war poetry, accounting for non-combatants as well, requires “a more flexible frame of reference nuanced to different histories, cultures and traditions” (xx). One such case that requires nuance is that in Ireland: according to Brearton, there is a fundamental distinction between Irish Great War literature and English literature regarding the same event, the fact that Ireland’s writers were not, for the most part, combatants (something that can be related to Ireland’s ambiguous positioning towards the conflict). Most

of the Irish poets who wrote about the war, or whose poems reflect the war, were not directly involved in it or were born after it (there are, however, exceptions). This paper seeks to account for poets inserted in these three categories: soldier-poets (with the inclusion of Tom Kettle and Francis Ledwidge), non-combatant poets contemporary to the war, as is the case of W.B. Yeats, and poets writing after the war, represented here by Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley. In addition to this “deviation” from the soldier-poet framework, it is also the case that the significance of Irish Great War literature is not nearly as recognized as that of its English counterpart. Brearton writes that “Irish involvement in the Great War was extensive, but Ireland was also a country with divided loyalties that was on the verge of civil war when the Great War broke out, and which dissolved into civil war at its close” (vii). Investigating these somewhat ostracised or overlooked Irish responses to the war, then, can have two effects: in addition to increasing the visibility of their complexities, and what they mean to Irish remembrance of the conflict, this might help inform the ways in which we read those responses that are more “canonical”, acknowledging that they are not monolithic nor the only responses.

Moreover, the idea that war poetry is a ‘special’ kind of poetry, determined only by its immediate local and temporal context, ignores war poetry’s possibility to resonate in later literature and society, stripping it from its political aspect. As Brearton indicates, considering the Great War as a unique event, as a singularity in history, detached from the events that preceded and led to it and from its aftermath, might be a strategy to create a “‘safer arena’ for and from poetry” (78); viewing war poetry in isolation, separate from the political conditions which surround it, then, prevents it from inciting social and political change, instead carrying forward the assumption that war poetry is “relevant only to the extraordinary circumstance of war”, as Featherstone puts it (qtd. in Brearton 78). One of the aims of this paper is to present the connectedness of Great War poetry to later developments in literature, and how that war

was reconstructed/reimagined in Irish poetry. The consequences of those four years, whether social, cultural or geopolitical, are felt to this day, especially as in recent years commemorations of the centennials of the conflict have been held in various countries. Some of these commemorations have taken place, significantly, in the Republic of Ireland – a nation which, unlike Northern Ireland, had gone for years without officially recognising the death toll of Irish soldiers in the Great War. The very existence of these commemorations demonstrates a change in attitude towards memory of the Irish war dead, and an acknowledgement of the lack of a single narrative to explain Irish involvement in the war.

### 2.3. POETRY DURING THE GREAT WAR

During the Great War, poetry saw a marked increase in popularity, especially in Britain. Poetry was being widely circulated in newspapers and anthologies, for the most part poetry about the cataclysm taking place in Europe, whether by combatants from the front or by those not directly involved (Longley 57). The amount of soldiers who also wrote poetry was such that Longley adds that “during the war ‘soldier poet’ was a tautology” (58), given the amount of poetry written on the front lines (this was, after all, the war that opened ground for the previously mentioned popular view that of the war poet as soldier-poet). She goes on to suggest that this is largely due to the reliance of the British Army on new recruits, which “peculiarly entangled the Western Front with British intellectual life” (58).

However, not all “war poetry” from the period was equal in scope, objective, or even positioning; the patriotic calls at the beginning of the war, such as those in Rupert Brooke’s sonnets, lost ground over the course of the conflict to the disillusionment present in much of later Great War poetry. If poetry was first used as a means to propagate national pride and raise morale among troops and civilians alike, trench warfare turned it into a tool for

denouncing the cruel, harsh truths of the war experience and protesting the systems that allowed the war to happen.

Another cause of variety in political standpoint is related to the status of the different countries that constituted the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland at the time. Ireland had been involved in the debate over Home Rule since the late nineteenth century; self-government was on the verge of being enacted when the Great War broke out. The years immediately preceding the war saw tensions escalating, with the establishment of paramilitary groups in defence of both sides of the issue: the unionist Ulster Volunteers were founded in 1912, with the Irish Volunteers forming in 1913 as a response. 1916, with the Easter Rising and the violent British response to it, would only intensify these tensions. The end of the Great War did not mean peace for Ireland, as the island entered its war of independence, followed by a civil war. Such oppositions between union with the British Empire and nationalism were not exclusive to Ireland: given the “minor” status of these nations in the Union, as English interests dominated the political arena, the period after the Great War also saw the rise of nationalist movements in both Scotland and Wales. Thus, Goldie (2005) argues that different tensions influenced the work of Irish, Scottish and Welsh writers during the war, tensions to which English writers were not subject. Writers from the non-dominant nations might be concerned “that their distinctive national identity and rights to self-determination might be stifled rather than enabled by the vast machinery of a war effort driven from the English metropolitan centre” (160), that is, as minor players in the Union, there was a possibility that this was not “their” war in a sense; victory would likely not change the dominance of England in the arrangement, perhaps conversely increasing its power over these non-dominant nations.

In Goldie’s view, however, these tensions are not significantly realised in the poetry written during wartime, especially the poetry of the earliest stages of the war, uniform in its

support for the war effort and inserted in certain conventions of Edwardian poetry (160). Nevertheless, this paper will argue that these tensions do, indeed, appear in Irish poetry written not only after 1918, but during wartime as well.

Another kind of tension registered in Great War poetry is the struggle between poetic convention and its seeming incapacity of accounting for the brutality and horrors witnessed in that conflict. Paul Fussell, in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), discusses how the experience of The Great War transformed the aesthetics of poets, marking, for many of them (Fussell analyses Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in more detail), a shift from the influential perceptions and tropes of Romanticism towards less idealised poetic material and a harsher treatment of that material. This is especially clear if we think of a conflict parallel to the war, but within poetry, between “traditionalism” and “modernism”, (the idealisation of war versus its rejection), as Edna Longley indicates in the introduction to *Poetry in the wars* (9). Elsewhere, she supposes that war poetry “may be less a category than a multi-generic case – even the quintessential case – of the encounter between form and history” (58); it necessarily conflates aesthetics with historical pressures, but those pressures are not limited to those present in the trench lyric, for instance. Rather, this idea of “a multi-generic case” brings us back to the broader view of war poetry discussed earlier.

Brearton argues that the Great War transformed poetic sensibilities and responses irreversibly: “The summer of 1914 is often perceived as a watershed, the point in history that marked the beginnings of a new, modern, ironic sensibility, or as [Philip] Larkin puts it, ‘Never such innocence again’; the brutalities of modern warfare in 1914-18 were such that they set the terms for responses to war in 1939-45, for what was not ‘new’” (234). Here one may also notice how the poetry of one war is not isolated from what comes after; Great War poetry was deeply influential for those who wrote (and write) about the Second World War.

#### 2.4. GREAT WAR POETRY AFTER THE WAR

Brearton (2000 and 2005) states that the Great War, and poetry about it, has had a lasting effect on later Irish poetry, as it would influence the Anglo-Irish War, the Irish Civil War, and the Second World War, as well as the political tensions between what is now the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. However, according to the author, its importance is, for the most part, underestimated: “The compulsion to ‘go over the ground again’, to ‘revisit’ the Great War, is central to Irish poetry this century, but its centrality is rarely acknowledged” (vi). She also discusses how the work of certain Irish poets who wrote about the Great War may create “some canonical confusion in both England and Ireland” (ix), as it challenges reductive views of Ireland’s participation in the Great War, as well as the surrounding socio-political context. This confusion disrupts the competing sets of Great War mythologies in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland: whereas in the republic the war’s significance was long downplayed in favour of the Easter Rising as a “foundational myth”, in the unionist tradition the war had since been commemorated, with the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division’s sacrifice on the Somme standing as a testament of loyalty and allegiance to King and Empire. Brearton writes that “Irish memory of the Great War has been until recently a tale of two histories – not necessarily the two that might have been told from the perspective of 1914, but ones which prove equally reductive” (14-15). To address Irish writing about the war is, then, also to re-evaluate and question these established histories.

Additionally, Brearton (2000) discuss the importance of the Great War for the work of later poets. She offers a deep analysis of how the war, though mostly avoided by W. B. Yeats in his poetry (his “On Being Asked for a War Poem” is a good example of this) is an essential part in the formation of his aesthetic after the 1910s, and, therefore, of his poetic making. This view of connectedness between the Great War and later Irish poetry is also put forward

by Edna Longley in *Poetry in the Wars* (1986) and her essay *The Great War, history and the English lyric* (2005). For many poets, the Great War is not something they had experienced themselves, whether or not at home; it is accessed through the lives and memories of older relatives. Likewise, the Great War's haunting presence appears through later events connected with it; as the war is closely tied to the political (and military) struggles that led to the partition of Ireland, it is not surprising that the war echoes in later conflicts between unionism and nationalism, most notably in the Troubles of the late twentieth century. Thus, many poets looked back at the war experience in an attempt to make sense of present conditions and tensions, as is the case of Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, two of the poets analysed here.

### 3.1. SOLDIER-POETS

Although the work of most Irish poets of the Great War (and this includes soldier-poets) was neglected for decades, Irish cultural responses to the war remain important in the sense of opening possibilities for exploring the tensions present in the country at the time. As Irish war writing escapes the equation of poet and soldier-poet, it is interesting to note that not only were most of the writers not involved in combat, but the poetry of many of those who were is seldom read as "war poetry". Brearton suggests that Francis Ledwidge might be the only Irish poet whose work is read in the context of the Great War, "perhaps because of the absence of any other obvious context in which to read him" (39-40). Recognition of his poetry as war poetry comes, then, not because of an affirmation of its connection to war, but rather by elimination, as it were. Nevertheless, Ledwidge is not the only Irish soldier-poet; another significant name is Tom Kettle, the memory of whom is emblematic of the Republic of Ireland's previous dismissal of the Irish Great War dead: the attempt to erect a bust in Dublin to commemorate him was met with resistance in the first decades of the republic.

Ledwidge was a catholic and a Nationalist; his motives for enlisting, as a member of these two groups, cause the enigma that appears in Seamus Heaney's "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge", analysed below. Having seen combat in the Battle of Gallipoli and Serbia, Ledwidge was hospitalised in England at the time of the Easter Rising. Dismayed by the British reaction to the rising and the execution of Thomas McDonagh, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising and a personal friend of his, Ledwidge registers a disillusion with the war in some of his post-Rising poetry.

Ledwidge's poem "Thomas McDonagh" (see appendix), also appearing sometimes as "Lament for Thomas McDonagh", was written in response to the events mentioned above. The tone throughout the poem is elegiac; although definitions of elegy vary, one common aspect modern definitions share (as opposed to classical ones) is that the elegy is a poem of mourning. According to Marjorie Perloff, the elegy is conventionally characterized "by a temporal movement from lament to consolation" (306), a movement that occurs in the poem in question. The "bittern" mentioned in the first line is a noun referring to a species of bird; however, the sound of the word resembles "bitter", adding to the melancholic aspect of the poem. McDonagh's not being able to hear the bird's cry "where he is lain" may be a reflection of the fact that he was buried in Dublin after his execution, rather than in his home county of Tipperary. The "wailing of the rain" further intensifies the tone of sadness and mourning, in contrast with the voices of "the sweeter birds".

The aspect of lament continues into the second stanza. It is notable that here the poet employs military imagery together with the imagery of nature: "loud March" invokes spring, but march could also be interpreted as a march of soldiers, especially for being paired with the adjective "loud". The "fanfare shrill" calls to mind a military parade, while an element of violence may be read with the golden daffodil's "blowing into flame". This also suggests a parallel between military action and spring, more specifically the renovation and rebirth

usually associated with that season. There is also the idea that the “loud March” is the trigger for the blooming of the flowers; this could be a reference to the Easter Rising, which led to McDonagh’s execution, and a suggestion that armed struggle might still be a way to reach spring, that is, a renewal of Ireland, presumably out of British dominance. The “golden cup” may be seen as a Christian image, which is connected to the description of spring given in this stanza not only through its position as part of a daffodil, but also through the fact that the religious ritual of Easter (and here it is almost impossible to talk about Easter without hinting at the Rising), associated with rebirth, happens in spring.

The “but” at the very beginning of the third and final stanza introduces a turn in the poem: the melancholic tone gives way to a hopeful vision for the future. “when the Dark Cow leaves the moor, / And pastures poor with greedy weeds” could be read as Ireland breaking free from Britain’s greed and dominion, as the cow stands symbolically for Ireland (Kerry cattle, with black coat, are a rare breed native to Ireland). It is interesting to note that the speaker does not use a conditional clause – if the Dark Cow leaves the moor; rather, the liberation of Ireland is presented as something certain to happen in the future. The poem ends on a hopeful note, with McDonagh, who would not hear his mourning nor spring/the renewal of Ireland, possibly hearing the Dark Cow “Lifting her horn in pleasant meads”, indicating a brighter future and that the cause he had died for would continue to live on – whose results, however, neither of the two men would survive to see.

Another poem by a soldier-poet that reflects the complex position of Irish soldiers fighting in the British army during the Great War is Tom Kettle’s “To my Daughter Betty, the Gift of God”. Tom Kettle had formerly been a member of parliament, and a staunch Home Rule supporter. After enlisting, he was sent to the Western Front as part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, one of the forces which constituted the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish)

Division. The 16<sup>th</sup> was a division comprised mostly of men recruited from the ranks of the Irish Volunteers; thus, it had a predominantly Irish nationalist and catholic identity.

“To my Daughter Betty, the Gift of God” (see appendix) was written by Tom Kettle days before his death in September 1916 at the Somme, where his division suffered enormous casualties. Addressed to the poet’s daughter, the poem may be read as an attempt at justification, at answering those questions which lie at the core of the Irish confusion over their participation in the Great War: *why enlist? Why fight with the British?*. When compared to Ledwidge’s “Thomas McDonagh”, the poem in question addresses the issue of the Irish soldiers’ relation to Britain in a somewhat more explicit manner, claiming that those who decry the war will do so “in a knowing tone” (line 7) and that the Irish soldiers died not for King or Emperor (line 12).

The war appears directly halfway through the poem. “some will call the thing sublime, / And some decry it in a knowing tone” introduces a note of disillusionment on the speaker’s part; it implies that there is, indeed, reason for the war not to be called sublime, but rather criticised. This echoes one of the novelties in war poetry brought about by the Great War: the move from an idealised perspective of war, seen predominantly as something noble, grandiose and heroic, in much of Western literature, towards an account of the horrors witnessed on the battlefield and a questioning of the purpose behind waging war.

Kettle’s open rejection of a supposed commitment and duty towards Britain comes straight from the battlefield, where “the mad guns curse overhead / And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor” (lines 9-10). On lines 11 and 12, he refers to him and the other soldiers who died or for whom death is almost certain as “we fools”, further claiming that they “Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor”; that is, their motivation and, ultimately, the purpose of their death, is not to defend a British nationalistic ideal of King and Country,

(unlike many other soldiers in the war). Rather than giving their lives for the British Empire, the soldiers in the poem died for “a dream, born in a herdsman’s shed”. The cause of their sacrifice, thus, is purely religious, in an outright rejection of the ideal of “King and Country” dominant in the British mentality of the time and widely circulated as propaganda in support of the war effort. This religious element could be connected, instead, to the struggle for Irish independence. One point in which these two aspects converge is the idea of martyrdom – which is appealing to war poets in general, but even more so to war poets in an Irish nationalist context, due to the parallel that may be drawn with Christ; in both cases, a sacrifice is being made for a greater, collective cause, whether that is redeeming humankind, defending the freedom of small nations or fighting for the independence of a country. The characterization of the soldiers as fools and their pairing with the foolish dead further intensify the overall idea of fighting in the war as a misguided decision – not only due to the enormous death toll and the horrors this entailed, but due to Ireland’s specific position in fighting alongside Britain, especially after the British reaction to the Easter Rising (a complex consideration implicit in Kettle’s words about his own legacy as a soldier and that of the participants of 1916, quoted in the introduction of this paper).

### 3.2. CONTEMPORARY NON-COMBATANTS

As previously mentioned, something that causes trouble for the notion of the war poet as necessarily being a soldier-poet is the Irish case: most of the poets who wrote about the Great War were not directly involved in combat. One element that contributes to this is that, unlike in Britain, conscription was not established in Ireland (1918 moves by Britain to introduce it were met with protest, to the effect that conscription was never implemented in Ireland). This meant that would-be soldiers had to enlist voluntarily; while Irishmen on both

sides of the unionist/nationalist feud did enlist, though for a variety of different reasons, not entering army service remained a possibility.

That is the case of W. B. Yeats: although not involved in combat during the Great War, he registered the impact of the conflict in some of his poetry, especially its interplay with other significant events in Irish history, e.g. the Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish War that would come after 1918. “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” (see appendix) is one of the poems in which the issue of a particular soldier’s motives for fighting in the British Army comes to the fore. Written in 1918 but published only in the 1919 version of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, it is one of Yeats’ four elegies for Major Robert Gregory, the others being “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, “The Shepherd and the Goatherd” and the unpublished “Reprisals”.

Rather than ratifying his supposed allegiance to Britain and the Empire, the airman in Yeats’ poem positions himself as loyal to a very specific place in Ireland and gives reasons for his decision to fight other than a perceived sense of duty to the British/King and Country/the Royal Air Force. The tensions regarding Ireland’s position in the Great War are clear in the third and fourth lines of the poem: “Those that I fight I do not hate / those that I guard I do not love”. The airman’s lack of hatred indicates a lack of emotional involvement with the war effort as a whole, at odds with the idea of fighting together with the British Empire against a common enemy. Similarly, “those that I guard I do not love” suggests a detachment from the British allies; the speaker states, instead, that his country is Kiltartan Cross, a small parish in County Galway, his countrymen Kiltartan’s poor. This connects the speaker only to the Irish, excluding the British, the allies that for whom he would be expected to fight as well. It is interesting to note that his identification with Ireland occurs solely via Kiltartan Cross – that is to say, even though the reference lies in Irish soil, the idea of a unified Irish state does not appear here. Loyalty, instead, appears within a microcosm, in the

relations between Kiltartan's poor and the landowners, represented here by the speaker. By identifying the airman only with Kiltartan's poor, rather than a wider idea of Ireland, Yeats avoids questions regarding what exactly constitutes Ireland – unionism or nationalism, Protestantism or Catholicism, and their role in shaping the island. The Ireland that appears is, on the contrary, a quasi-feudal land, defined by the relations between tenants and landowners.

With “No likely end could bring them loss / Or leave them happier than before”, the speaker presents, in effect, a disparity between Irish and British interests regarding the war: even if the British Empire were to be defeated, that would mean no loss for Ireland, and certainly not for Kiltartan's poor; Likewise, a British victory would not benefit Ireland, pointing to a distrust of the idea that Irish Home Rule would, in fact, be legally enacted after the end of the Great War (as it was officially expected).

The poem then turns to the speaker's justification for joining the war. Rather than a sense of duty or law, espoused by ‘public men’ or ‘cheering crowds’, the speaker attributes his participation in the fight to ‘a lonely impulse of delight’. This dislocation of purpose from a collective cause to an individual desire, without regard for external pressures, is especially meaningful when considering that conscription was not in place in Ireland during the Great War, and that the Irish soldiers who enlisted did so (at least in theory) voluntarily. The speaker's lonely impulse of delight, thus, cancels the idea of a moral duty or compromise towards Britain, a view put forward by many at the time; his motivations for taking part in the conflict are personal, and not at all tinged by considerations of king, country or loyalty to Britain.

Another poem by Yeats which rejects the possibility of considering the war's outcome as something positive for Ireland is “Reprisals”. Even though it was also written with Robert Gregory in mind, it is significantly darker and more vicious in tone (which led to Lady

Gregory's asking Yeats to withdraw publication of the poem) than the other elegies. In fact, Kevin Riel argues that "Reprisals" should not be read as an elegy, as, rather than mourning Gregory's death and offering some sort of consolation, it seems to criticise the dead subject (9). At its core, the poem denounces the pointlessness of Gregory's sacrifice (and, by extension, that of Irish soldiers in general) in light of the atrocities committed by the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division, military forces employed by the government during the Irish War of Independence, and especially infamous for the murder of civilians.

The tension between a certain view – contemporary to the conflict – of Irish involvement in the war and the subsequent disillusionment brought by British retaliations is initially realised through the contrast between the deadpan tone of the first lines, tallying the result of Gregory's participation ("Some nineteen German planes, they say/you had brought down before you died) and the bleak picture of a post-war Ireland in the rest of the poem. Gregory's death, once called a "good death" (line 3), is not enough anymore: no ghost or man can be satisfied, as violence rages on in Ireland. The image of an unsatisfied ghost could hint at a sacrifice made in vain or a betrayal of the dead's motives.

The dead Gregory is then exhorted to "rise from your [his] Italian tomb" and "Flit to Kiltartan Cross" (which, together with the "battle joy" mentioned a few lines earlier, connects the poem to 'Airman') to witness the horror. Yeats then names the "second thoughts" of much of the Irish public at the time: the cause Gregory had served, once thought to be "such a fine affair", has clearly proven not to be so, as British "half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery" murders civilians on Irish soil, without "law or parliament" taking any action. The poem closes with an image of Gregory lying with "the other cheated dead", the other Irish who fought together with Britain, only to suffer the violent reprisals that give the poem its title.

### 3.3. POETS AFTER THE WAR

Given that the Great War would set the conditions not only for the Easter Rising, but also for the later Irish War of Independence (in turn setting the conditions for the Irish Civil War, and for the partition of Ireland), it holds a central place in the chain of events of Irish history in the twentieth century. The complications brought about by the variety of positions and identities involved in Irish experience of the war – whether Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Unionist – echo years later in the confusion of identities and conflicts derived thereof, both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This prompted poets, especially in Northern Ireland (Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley are two great exponents of this) to revisit the Great War as a means of exploring the contradictions in the Nationalist and Unionist mythologies surrounding it, and trying to make sense of the Troubles that ravaged Northern Ireland, hitting its peak in the 1970s.

One poem which explores Irish involvement in the Great War is Heaney's "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge" (see appendix). The poem begins with the speaker recalling a childhood visit to a memorial statue, celebrating the soldiers from the Great War. However, the description of the statue is ironic: even as a child, the speaker realizes that, under real conditions, the soldier's cape would not appear the way it does in the bronze representation. The bronze cape "crumbles stiffly in imagined wind", without regard to the real winds where the statue is located. This hints at a disruption between two temporal moments: there is the romanticised, heroic past; the child in the present, however, finds that romanticised representation somewhat incongruous – its artificiality is noticeable. This calls to question romantic representations of war (and especially the Great War).

In the second quatrain, the speaker mentions "the loyal, fallen names on the embossed plaque". This shows how the soldiers who sacrificed themselves in the war are reduced, in memory, to mere names on a commemorative plaque. The very existence of the memorial is

notable, taking into account the context and setting; it is Northern Ireland, where Irish participation in the Great War is intensely memorialised and celebrated – something diametrically opposite to the Republic of Ireland’s attitude towards the war dead at the time. The adjective “loyal” brings multiple connotations. On the one hand, it echoes Unionist loyalty to the United Kingdom; however, it also causes some trouble for that perspective when considering that not all soldiers in the war were Unionists, much on the contrary: it is doubtful whether a Unionist view can accommodate the subject of the poem, Nationalist Francis Ledwidge, in its definitions of “loyal”.

The poem then changes in tone – the names on the plaque, and the whole story behind them, mean little to the child-speaker, walking with his aunt and seeing everyday scenes of courting couples and farmers, thirty years removed from the horrors of the war referenced in the memorial. A few stanzas later, the poem starts addressing Ledwidge, and we are presented with how he, “Literary, sweet-talking, countrified”, once saw the same scenes, courting “at the seaside/ Beyond Drogheda one Sunday afternoon”. The following stanza, in addition to describing the country landscape, introduces another key element: the countryside is where Ledwidge belonged, “among the dolorous / And lovely” (lines 25-26); the poem states, thus, that his place is Ireland, and not the trenches drawn across continental Europe, where he would fight for Britain.

Heaney then evokes the image of Ledwidge in a trench, dressed in his British uniform, “A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave” (line 30) as the poem moves to parallel recollections of the past, alternating between the Irish countryside and the hardships faced by Ledwidge during the war: “It’s nineteen-seventeen”, and while the speaker’s aunt herds cows, the poet is killed in action in Ypres. The next stanza introduces a post-Rising quote by Ledwidge which perfectly encapsulates the disillusionment of many nationalists who had

initially supported the war effort: “To be called a British soldier while my country / Has no place among nations...” (lines 41-42).

Ledwidge is addressed as “our dead enigma”, standing for the complicated question of Irishmen’s reasons to voluntarily enlist during the Great War (especially those who were Catholics and nationalists like him), given the British position of domination in relation to Ireland, a matter further complicated by the violent response to the 1916 rising. And, in that enigma, “all the strains / Criss-cross in useless equilibrium”; the “useless equilibrium” of the difficulties involved in trying to “solve” this puzzle hints that the poem does not arrive at an answer to those questions, perhaps because there is no single answer. The wind that tunes “through this vigilant bronze” marks a return of the poem to 1946 and the war memorial; upon looking at the statue, the speaker hears again “the sure confusing drum”, which could indicate his own uncertainty and anxiety over these questions of nation raised by the various positions, the “enigmas” raised by Irish involvement in the Great War. The last stanza shows us that Ledwidge followed the British army to the Balkans, however missing “the twilit note [his] flute should sound”, not being “keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones”. His Catholic nationalist Irishness differentiates him from a “regular” British soldier, making him sound a different note from the one expected of him.

If Heaney’s poem grapples with the complications surrounding Irish nationalist participation in the war, Michael Longley’s “Wounds” (see appendix) foregrounds a unionist experience of it, while connecting it with the Troubles, sectarian conflicts in the late twentieth century over Northern Ireland’s permanence in the United Kingdom or its union with the Republic of Ireland. The Great War combatant that appears in the poem is Longley’s father, whose head holds “two pictures” the poet had “kept [...] like secrets”. The first picture shows the Ulster division going over at the top at the Somme; the location is significant, as in the unionist tradition the Somme is perceived to be the ground for the “blood sacrifice” of Ulster

unionism, the heavy casualties suffered by the division standing as an emblem of loyalty to the British Empire. The battle cries of the division echo a strong Ulster Protestant and anti-Catholic identity. “Fuck the Pope!” is self-explanatory; “No surrender!” refers to a traditional unionist slogan, made popular by the siege of Derry during the Williamite-Jacobite War (the slogan is also connected to a folk song also known as “The Crimson Banner”, which recounts the events of the siege). “Give ‘em one for the Shankill!” adds an element of class to that protestant identity, as it constitutes a predominantly protestant and unionist working-class area of Belfast. The father, in line with unionist mythology surrounding the Somme, sees the battle with “admiration and bewilderment”. The second image is the “London-Scottish padre”, whom the father has followed for fifty years. This following serves to suggest the idea of latent war: instead of ending with the Armistice, the Great War and its effects have had a long-lasting impact, both for Longley’s father, “a belated casualty”, and for Ireland (the “landscape of dead buttocks”, presumably made up of the war dead, suggests further, post-1918 dead buttocks, thus calling to mind the later conflicts in Ireland after the Great War). The issue of loyalty is then very explicitly realised: the father says that he is “dying for King and Country, slowly”, positioning himself in a British patriotic sentiment; “slowly”, however, adds a tinge of irony, as the slow and painful death contrasts with the “heroic” Ulster deaths on the Somme.

The second stanza turns to 1970s Northern Ireland and the Troubles, holding a series of parallelisms with the first. The first image is that of the poet burying his father, together with recent casualties; the dead in this war are “Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer”, victims of a paramilitary killing. The ordinary things (“Irish beer”, “Woodbines”, “a lucifer” connect the conflict to an everyday setting, as war is no longer fought in the trenches of France, but in the streets of Northern Ireland. More killings are described: “heavy guns / Put out the night-light in a nursery for ever”, and a bus conductor is

“shot through the head / By a shivering boy who wandered in”. The bus conductor is mentioned only through his uniform and his carpet-slippers. This reinforces the domestic quality of these events, the civilian bus conductor’s uniform contrasting with those of the Great War soldiers of the first stanza. More parallels may be drawn: the teenage soldiers and the shivering boy connect to the screaming “boy about to die”; bewilderment is both how Longley’s father reacts to the Ulster Division and how the wife reacts to witnessing the murder of her husband.

In a more general sense, the poem juxtaposes the two settings and temporal moments: the Somme in 1916 and Belfast in the 1970s, always pointing to the connection between the two and how the existence of those loyalties during the Great War are fundamentally connected to the later conflicts in Ireland. What Longley does with the poem is try to make sense of current dangers and tensions by looking back at the Great War. It would seem that the “answer” at which the poem arrives is that the violence in Northern Ireland is indissociable from the conflict of identities which informed (and continues to inform, though to a lesser extent) much of the dissent over Irish Home Rule and Irish participation in the Great War.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In presenting a variety of perspectives, motives and attitudes towards the Great War, the poems here analysed disrupt narratives that simplify both Irish experience of the war and individual soldiers’ experiences, seeking to homogenise Irish combatants as either “Nationalists fighting for Ireland” (in this case, more of an erasure, considering Irish Free State policy) or “Unionists fighting for the Empire”. The poems by Ledwidge and Kettle serve as indicators that there were, indeed, Irish Nationalists who fought with the British

Army, for believing that was in Ireland's best interest, even if disillusion after the Easter Rising changed their views. Yeats' "Airman", in a way, rejects both the Unionist and the Nationalist perspective; the airman's loyalty lies neither with the British Empire nor with an unified Ireland, rather with the more local and aristocratic dynamics of tenant-landowner relations. "Reprisals" explores the war in light of later conflicts, intensely communicating a perceived betrayal of the Irish by the British, with the violence during the War of Independence. Heaney and Longley's poems revisit the Great War from a Northern Irish perspective during the Troubles, deeply connected with the war. Heaney tries to solve the enigma Ledwidge represents, that of the Catholic Nationalist who fought in the British Army, but arrives at no conclusion; Longley, in turn, intertwines memories and images from the war with those of 1970s Belfast and its killings, trying to make sense of the violence, focusing on the war's delayed effects (such as the death of his father).

Irish poetry of the Great War has been ostracised for long. The surge in interest for such a topic in recent decades has certainly contributed to the debunking of simplistic interpretations of history, that do not account for the variety of Irish experience(s), both of the war and of the century as a whole. To investigate Ireland's relation to the Great War, and the cultural responses it has produced, is to investigate how the Ireland of the 1920s, the Ireland of the Troubles, and the Ireland of today came to be. Acknowledging the various strains that run through Irish history might be a way to make sense of contemporary challenges and tensions and work towards overcoming them. And therein lies, in a broader sense, the relevance of investigating writers that have been forgotten or downplayed: they resist single official histories, narratives that leave no room for argument or difference. To bring these experiences to the fore is, hopefully, a step towards creating not an arena, but a bridge towards acknowledging the other.

This is but a very limited analysis of Irish poetry of the Great War. Further study on this topic is not only interesting, but also important, as it could possibly help recover voices that have been suppressed in favour of reductive perspectives, aligned with a desired mythology. It could also lead to a better understanding of the histories and identities that still circulate in the Ireland of today. Suggestions for further research include more detailed analyses of the work of the individual poets comprised here, or the inclusion of other poets that are currently outside of the canon. Investigating the Great War poetry of Irish women might also lead to a better understanding of Irish experience of the war, and to rescuing voices that have been even more marginalised than those of many male Irish war poets. More research could also be conducted on poetry that specifically deals with the “Home Front”, as it was especially relevant in the Great War (and subject to even more pressures in Ireland, as I hope to have demonstrated in the course of this paper). In addition, comparative and contrastive studies might prove useful to criticism – I aim to carry out such an investigation between Irish poetry of the Great War and its British counterpart in my postgraduate studies. National contrasts in archipelagic poetry of the British Isles are also a research-worthy topic; is the Great War poetry of Scotland and Wales under the same tensions as that of Ireland? Issues of class and religion could also be further explored in the context of Irish war poetry. Studying the Great War poetry of Ireland sheds light on the divisions, contradictions and complexities of Irish history in the twentieth century, exposing the multiplicity of positions regarding loyalty to the United Kingdom or Irish independence and, in so doing, resisting narratives that simplify Irish involvement in the Great War and soldiers’ motives for fighting.

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APPENDIX

Thomas McDonagh

Francis Ledwidge

He shall not hear the bittern cry  
In the wild sky, where he is lain,  
Nor voices of the sweeter birds  
Above the wailing of the rain.

Nor shall he know when loud March blows  
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,  
Blowing to flame the golden cup  
Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor,  
And pastures poor with greedy weeds,  
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn  
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

To my Daughter Betty, the Gift of God

Tom Kettle

IN wiser days, my darling rosebud, blown  
To beauty proud as was your mother's prime,  
In that desired, delayed, incredible time,  
You'll ask why I abandoned you, my own,  
And the dear heart that was your baby throne,  
To dice with death. And oh! they'll give you rhyme  
And reason: some will call the thing sublime,  
And some decry it in a knowing tone.  
So here, while the mad guns curse overhead,  
And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor,  
Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,  
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,—  
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,  
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.

An Irish Airman Foresees his Death

W.B. Yeats

I know that I shall meet my fate,  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

Reprisals

W. B. Yeats

Some nineteen German planes, they say,  
You had brought down before you died.  
We called it a good death. Today  
Can ghost or man be satisfied?  
Although your last exciting year  
Outweighed all other years, you said,  
Though battle joy may be so dear  
A memory, even to the dead,  
It chases other thought away,  
Yet rise from your Italian tomb,  
Flit to Kiltartan Cross and stay  
Till certain second thoughts have come  
Upon the cause you served, that we  
Imagined such a fine affair:  
Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery  
Are murdering your tenants there.  
Men that revere your father yet  
Are shot at on the open plain.  
Where may new-married women sit  
And suckle children now? Armed men  
May murder them in passing by  
Nor law nor parliament take heed.  
Then close your ears with dust and lie  
Among the other cheated dead.

In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge

Seamus Heaney

Killed in France 31 July 1917

The bronze soldier hitches a bronze cape  
That crumples stiffly in imagined wind  
No matter how the real winds buff and sweep  
His sudden hunkering run, forever craned

Over Flanders. Helmet and haversack,  
The gun's firm slope from butt to bayonet,  
The loyal, fallen names on the embossed plaque —  
It all meant little to the worried pet

I was in nineteen forty-six or seven,  
Gripping my Aunt Mary by the hand  
Along the Portstewart prom, then round the crescent  
To thread the Castle Walk out to the strand.

The pilot from Coleraine sailed to the coal-boat.  
Courting couples rose out of the scooped dunes.  
A farmer stripped to his studs and shiny waistcoat  
Rolled the trousers down on his timid shins.

At night when coloured bulbs strung out the sea-front  
Country voices rose from a cliff-top shelter  
With news of a great litter – “We'll pet the runt!” –  
And barbed wire that had torn a friesian's elder.

Francis Ledwidge, you courted at the seaside  
Beyond Drogheda one Sunday afternoon.  
Literary, sweet-talking, countrified,  
You pedalled out the leafy road from Slane.

Where you belonged, among the dolorous  
And lovely: the May altar of wild flowers,  
Easter water sprinkled in outhouses,  
Mass-rocks and hill-top raths and raftered byres.

I think of you in your Tommy's uniform,  
A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave,  
Ghosting the trenches with a bloom of hawthorn  
Or silence cored from a Boyne passage-grave.

It's summer, nineteen-fifteen. I see the girl  
My aunt was then, herding on the long acre.  
Behind a low bush in the Dardanelles  
You suck stones to make your dry mouth water.

It's nineteen-seventeen. She still herds cows,  
But a big strafe puts the candles out in Ypres:  
'My soul is by the Boyne, cutting new meadows...  
My country wears her confirmation dress.'

'To be called a British soldier while my country  
Has no place among nations...' You were rent  
By shrapnel six weeks later. 'I am sorry  
That party politics should divide our tents.'

In you, our dead enigma, all the strains  
Criss-cross in useless equilibrium  
And as the wind tunes through this vigilant bronze  
I hear again the sure confusing drum

You followed from Boyne water to the Balkans  
But miss the twilit note your flute should sound.  
You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones  
Though all of you consort now underground.

Wounds

Michael Longley

Here are two pictures from my father's head —

I have kept them like secrets until now:

First, the Ulster Division at the Somme

Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!'

'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,

Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!'

'Wilder than Gurkhas' were my father's words

Of admiration and bewilderment.

Next comes the London-Scottish padre

Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick,

With a stylish backhand and a prayer.

Over a landscape of dead buttocks

My father followed him for fifty years.

At last, a belated casualty,

He said — lead traces flaring till they hurt —

'I am dying for King and Country, slowly.'

I touched his hand, his thin head I touched.

Now, with military honours of a kind,

With his badges, his medals like rainbows,

His spinning compass, I bury beside him

Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of  
Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.  
A packet of Woodbines I throw in,  
A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus  
Paralysed as heavy guns put out  
The night-light in a nursery for ever;  
Also a bus-conductor's uniform —  
He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers  
Without a murmur, shot through the head  
By a shivering boy who wandered in  
Before they could turn the television down  
Or tidy away the supper dishes.  
To the children, to a bewildered wife,  
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.