

# A shared sacrifice for peace

Farset/Inishowen & Border Counties Initiative

*compiled by*

Michael Hall

ISLAND (84) PAMPHLETS

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mikeohall@hotmail.com  
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*The following participated in the discussions which  
have been summarised on pages 14-32 of this publication:*

Ian Adamson	<i>Founder Chair of the Somme Association</i>
Harry Donaghy	<i>Fellowship of Messines Association</i>
Frankie Gallagher	<i>Conflict Transformation Initiative</i>
P J Hallinan	<i>Inishowen Partnership; Inishowen Friends of Messines</i>
Tom Haire	<i>Farset</i>
Jackie Hewitt	<i>Manager, Farset</i>
Sam Johnston	<i>Fellowship of Messines Association</i>
John MacVicar	<i>Greater Shankill Community Council</i>
David Magee	<i>Manager, Fort Dunree Military Museum</i>
Mary McCallion	<i>Inishowen Partnership; Inishowen Friends of Messines</i>
John McCarter	<i>Chairman, Fort Dunree Military Museum</i>
Barney McCaughey	<i>President, Farset</i>
Shauna McClenaghan	<i>Manager, Inishowen Partnership</i>
John McGrory	<i>Manager, Bunrana Youth Club</i>
Fergal O Boyle	<i>Inishowen Partnership; Inishowen Friends of Messines</i>

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# Introduction

Over the last two decades the manner in which the memory of the soldiers from all parts of Ireland who died in the First World War has been commemorated has witnessed a remarkable transformation. Twenty years ago any commemoration was largely the preserve of the Protestant Unionist population of Northern Ireland; the people of the Republic remained aloof, even antagonistic. This was poignantly revealed when members of the Farset Somme Project interviewed some of the few remaining veterans in the 1980s. One veteran, interviewed in Dublin, began to cry during the course of his recounting. The interviewer apologised: ‘I’m really sorry, sir; bringing back these memories has obviously upset you.’ The veteran replied: ‘No, no; it’s not the memories that have upset me, son. I’m upset because this is the first time I have been able to talk about them. When I returned to Dublin after the war, the Easter Rising had taken place and nobody, even in my local community, wanted to know that I had “fought for the Brits”. I wasn’t allowed to talk about my experiences; I had to suppress my memories all those years.’ Sadly, he asked that his story not be made public until after his death, his memory of being spat at while walking through the streets of Dublin in his British Army uniform still indelibly imprinted on his mind.

Of course, both ‘sides’ colluded in this avoidance. Many Protestant Ulstermen would have been loath to acknowledge the role played by Catholic Irishmen – even Catholic Ulstermen – in the Great War. Some undoubtedly would have based their aversion on blatantly sectarian attitudes, but the vast majority would probably have been quite *unaware* of that role. History in Ireland had become – as it had always been – selective, exclusive and politicised.

However, this situation has now been totally turned around, the transformation having been grassroots-led, and with the political leadership having been brought on board – willingly – by a populist movement. Nothing epitomised that better than when Irish President, Mary McAleese, stood alongside Queen Elizabeth at a commemoration ceremony in 1998, or when Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, in an address to a joint sitting of the Houses of Parliament in May 2007, spoke of the World War I experience as an example of our “shared journey”.

Members of the Farset/Inishowen and Border Counties Initiative have been involved in both leading and consolidating this transformation, and it was felt that it was an appropriate time to bring a group of people together to reflect on what had been achieved. The main part of this pamphlet is an edited account of the discussions which ensued. However, to ‘set the scene’, it is preceded by an overview of the involvement of Ulstermen and Irishmen in the First World War, distilled from the 1988 Farset publication, *Sacrifice on the Somme*.

**Jackie Hewitt** *Manager, Farset/Inishowen & Border Counties Initiative*

# Ireland and the First World War

## War Clouds

A few years before the First World War would plunge a whole generation of young men into a conflagration of unimagined proportions, the only war which people in Ireland felt might be on the horizon was one brewing on their own doorstep. Asquith's Liberal government was planning to introduce a Home Rule Bill which would grant Ireland a limited measure of independence. The Protestants of Ulster, however, were making strenuous plans to oppose any such dissolution of the Union. Under the leadership of Sir Edward Carson, they began to organise on a massive scale. On 28 September 1912 almost half a million Ulster men and women signed a 'Solemn League and Covenant', pledging their willingness to fight to remain part of the United Kingdom. This preparedness to fight was reinforced in January 1913 with the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The Nationalist population of Ireland looked upon these preparations with grave misgivings. They were relying on the British government to deliver its promises, but could the organised Ulstermen affect the issue? Their response was the formation of the Irish National Volunteers. In April 1914 the UVF pulled off a highly successful gun-running operation which provided them with 24,000 rifles and two million rounds of ammunition. The Irish Volunteers did likewise, although bringing in much smaller quantities. Ireland was fast becoming an armed camp. Then, on 4 August 1914, after German forces had invaded Belgium, Britain declared war on Germany.

Both Unionists and Nationalists believed that loyalty to England would be rewarded politically when the war ended. Carson declared: 'Our country and our Empire are in danger. I say to our Volunteers, go and help to save our country.' John Redmond, on behalf of the Nationalists, likewise declared their loyalty to the British government, but with different hopes: 'It is these soldiers of ours to whose keeping the Cause of Ireland has passed today.'<sup>1</sup> Thousands of Irish Volunteers were to enlist in existing Irish regiments or in the newly formed 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions.

A few voices expressed scepticism about the British government's claims to be 'fighting for small nations'. The Irish Socialist James Connolly wrote in the *Irish Worker*: 'Should the working class of Europe, rather than slaughter each other for the benefit of kings and financiers, proceed tomorrow to erect barricades all over Europe, to break up bridges and destroy the transport service that war might be abolished, we should be perfectly justified in following such a glorious example, and contributing our aid to the final dethronement of the vulture classes that rule and rob the world.'<sup>2</sup>

But from all over Ireland, Protestant and Catholic, Northerner and Southerner, came forward in their thousands to enlist. In some towns the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers marched side by side to send off departing troops.

Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, made it clear that he wanted the Ulster Volunteers for his 'New Army', and met with Carson. Carson won the argument to keep the UVF together as a unit, and the 36th (Ulster) Division was born. As for the Home Rule Bill, it was to be kept inoperative for the duration of the war. What no-one could have anticipated was that within four years 50,000 men from all over Ireland would have made the ultimate sacrifice.

## The Road to the Somme

When the First World War began it was greeted in the participating countries with an enthusiasm that at times bordered on hysteria. All the nations involved believed in the righteousness of their cause: the French were fighting for *la patrie*, the Germans for the Fatherland, the Russians for Holy Mother Russia, the British for 'a war to end war'. It would be, so many imagined, a spectacle of great and glorious battles, above all a war of 'movement'. As for its duration, some believed it might well be over by Christmas. Few could have suspected what a devastating war of attrition it would become, a war for which memorials to the dead would be erected in almost every town and village in Europe, memorials to a 'lost generation' of unknown soldiers.

The reality of how the war would unfold quickly became apparent. A French offensive in Lorraine against the German flank was a disaster. The French suffered terrible casualties and reeled back in confusion and disorder. To the north, the Germans advanced through Belgium almost unimpeded. The British Expeditionary Force clashed with them at the mining town of Mons on 23 August 1914, but were forced to retreat because of their exposed flanks. However, the Germans, who advanced to within thirty miles of Paris, had overstretched themselves. Realising the danger this left them in, they began a general retreat. As A.J.P. Taylor described it:

On 14 September the Germans reached the Aisne. They were exhausted, could march no more. [They] scratched holes in the ground, set up machine guns. To everyone's amazement, the advancing Allies hesitated, stopped. The campaign was over. One man with a machine gun, protected by mounds of earth, was more powerful than advancing masses. Trench warfare had begun. The war of movement ended when men dug themselves in. They could be dislodged only by massive bombardment and the accumulation of reserves. Indeed they did not move at all. The opposing lines congealed, grew solid. The generals on both sides stared at these lines impotently and without understanding. They went on staring for nearly four years.<sup>3</sup>

1915 saw more confirmation of this state of affairs. On the Western Front attack and counter-attack followed one after the other with little gain in territory but an ever-lengthening casualty list. Further afield the Allied assaults at Gallipoli and Salonika became bogged down just as surely as in the mud of France. On the Eastern Front there was at least a war of movement, but one with just as terrible a cost. A combined German/Austro-Hungarian offensive on 2 May blew the Russian front wide open. The Russians 'lost three-quarters of a million men in prisoners alone, and more territory than the whole of France. Something like ten million civilian refugees trailed along with the armies.'<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the German advance slowed and Russia somehow managed to remain in the war.

In 1916 the Allied Commanders began to feel more confident. The citizens of the British Isles had flocked to enlist, and Kitchener's New Armies in France had grown into a mighty force. A joint Allied offensive was being planned for the Somme area when the Germans struck first. Their target was Verdun, a fortress town of great symbolic importance to French pride. The German and French armies soon became engaged in a terrible battle of attrition, and General Joffre appealed to his British counterpart, General Sir Douglas Haig, to bring forward the Somme offensive, in which the British forces would now have to shoulder the main burden.

## Sacrifice on the Somme

Haig deliberately chose, as the point for the breakthrough, the strongest portion of the German line, believing that to be defeated there would most demoralise the Germans. The battle was opened by five days of intense bombardment on an eighteen-mile front. 1,738,000 shells were fired with the intention of destroying the enemy barbed wire and front line. Not only did this bombardment fail to do so, but it pitted the ground so heavily with shell craters orderly advance was made impossible.

Then, on the morning of 1 July 1916, a hundred thousand men left their trenches and moved forward at a steady walk. They had been drilled to advance in rigid parade-ground formation – straight lines two to three paces between each man, 100 yards between each rank in the assault waves. Even worse, they were all laden down with between 66 and 90 pounds of equipment. Indeed, the only advantage they possessed was their zeal and their courage. As they struggled across no-man's-land the German machine-gunners emerged from their dug-outs and manned their guns. The carnage was about to begin. By the end of the day 20,000 British soldiers would be dead, and another 40,000 wounded or missing.

The 36th (Ulster) Division had been given the objective of capturing the German trenches beside the River Ancre, and north of the village of Thiepval. What made this task particularly difficult was that the battlefield was overlooked by the notorious Schwaben Redoubt, a formidable system of trenches and fortified machine gun posts. Brigadier R.J.C. Broadhurst described what followed:

At first, south of the Ancre, everything went well, and 108 and 109 Brigades moved over the first German trenches with little loss. Scarcely were they across, however, when the German batteries opened a barrage on No Man's Land. Simultaneously the skilful and resolute German machine-gunners, who had remained safe from our bombardment, now sprang up from their shelters, pulling up their guns and heavy ammunition boxes, and raked our men from the flanks and the rear, thinning the khaki waves. Officers went down, and the men went on alone.

Then a fearful misfortune struck them. Thiepval village on the right, a nest of German weapons, should have been taken by the 32nd Division. But the assaulting troops had over-run it, and had been mown down from the rear by the German machine-gunners, likewise untouched by the bombardment. These guns now swung round and fired belt after belt of accurately aimed ammunition on the exposed Ulstermen. In dozens they fell dead or crawled wounded into the craters. Yet on the Inniskilling battalions pushed, the rear companies struggling over earth crimsoned with the deeds of their fallen comrades. With a wild Irish yell, they stormed the Schwaben Redoubt, quelling the doughty German machine-gunners who fired to the last. By 8.30 a.m., having covered a mile of devastated land in an hour of unremitting fighting, they had carried their objective.

On their left, 108 Brigade had advanced with equal ardour through equal tribulation. The 13th Irish Rifles, exposed to enfilade fire from the Beaucourt Redoubt across the River Ancre, lost nearly all its officers even before it reached the enemy trenches. The 11th Irish Rifles had its 'A' and 'D' Companies utterly obliterated – cut down like hay. But the supporting companies and the 15th Irish Rifles behind them pressed on over the dead and the dying. Great gaps began to appear in their lines. Never falling behind the rolling barrage, these troops, battalions in name

only, assaulted and carried their objective, the north-east corner of the Schwaben Redoubt and the trenches running north.

Their comrades across the Ancre, the 12th Irish Rifles and the 9th Royal Irish Fusiliers, with courage no less great, suffered immediate destruction. Held up by wire over the hill-brow undamaged by our bombardment, they fell behind our rolling barrage and were scourged by withering machine-gun fire. Twice the remnants were re-formed under their indomitable officers and again led forward and reduced to ruin.

Meanwhile, 107 Brigade, the 8th, 9th and 10th Irish Rifles, advancing through a tempest of fire, had passed, as planned, through 109 Brigade and occupied the German line before the Grandcourt line; their final objective 600 yards of open ground remained. Believing that all hazards must be dared for victory, the Rifles charged across. Two-thirds of them went down. The undaunted survivors leapt into the trenches, and seized them after desperate hand-to-hand fighting.<sup>4</sup>

The Ulstermen had achieved a remarkable success, one that could have been turned to great tactical advantage. As Lt.-Colonel W.A. Shooter noted: 'The Ulster Division, in spite of the fact that more than half its strength were now casualties, held in their grasp the promise of a great and far-reaching victory if the breach which they had made in the strongest part of the enemy defence system could have been put to use.'<sup>5</sup>

But nothing was done, and all the exhausted men in the captured trenches could do was wait for the inevitable German counter-attack, or listen to the sounds of their injured comrades. 'There was fellas crawlin' back that couldn't walk... One fella lay down, put down his rifle, covered himself with his groundsheet and when we came across him he was dead. No one to touch them! I used to think it was terrible to see young lives – the blood of life oozing out of them. Nobody there to lift their head – not one – nobody there to care – that was it!' <sup>6</sup>



*A ration party of the Royal Irish Rifles at the Somme, 1 July 1916*

At dusk on 1 July a powerful counter-attack by fresh German troops drove the Ulstermen, almost weaponless, back to the second German line, which they held all next day, tattered and exhausted, until relieved at night by the 49th Division. Four VCs and many other decorations were to be awarded to them for their bravery. 'They had lost over five thousand five hundred officers and men. The Inniskillings lost more than any British regiment of the line has ever lost in a single day. Of the 15th Royal Irish Rifles, only 70 men answered their names that night of the 1st of July.'<sup>4</sup> The dead accounted for half of these casualties.

## **Comrades in Arms**

Irish troops had already been well blooded in the war. They had fought gallantly at Sedd-el-Bahr and Suvla Bay, during the ill-fated landings in the Dardanelles. Of that particular episode Brigadier-General W.B. Marshal had written: 'Though I am an Englishman, I must say the Irish soldiers have fought magnificently. They are the cream of the Army. Ireland may well be proud of her sons. Ireland has done her duty nobly. Irishmen are absolutely indispensable for our final triumph.' And Captain Thornhill, of the New Zealand Force said: 'Your Irish soldiers are the talk of the whole Army. Their landing at Suvla Bay was the greatest thing that you will ever read of in books. Those who witnessed the advance will never forget it.'<sup>1</sup>

In the Battle of the Somme, as well as the sacrifice made by the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, battalions of Irishmen and Ulstermen fought elsewhere along the battle front, particularly in the 16th (Irish) Division. This Division included five Ulster battalions and also the 6th Battalion The Connaught Rangers, which contained over 600 Ulstermen recruited mainly from West Belfast. During the battle the 16th (Irish) Division is most prominently identified with the assaults on the villages of Guillemont and Ginchy in September. As Lt.-Colonel W.A. Shooter described it:

The conditions in which the Irishmen had to advance were appalling. The whole of this area was a scene of complete desolation and odious mud, churned up by continuous British bombardment during many unsuccessful attacks on this stubborn bastion since the Battle of the Somme opened on 1st July. Movement over the ground in such conditions required a supreme effort, apart altogether from the fierce hurricane of machine-gun and artillery fire which the enemy brought to bear on the advancing troops. Nevertheless, the advancing Fusiliers and Riflemen hacked their way forward with great determination and traditional Irish dash, in spite of the most severe casualties and drove the Germans from their positions, inflicting heavy loss on the defenders and taking many prisoners. A fierce enemy counter-attack on the newly-won position in Leuze Wood was decisively beaten off by the two Inniskilling Battalions and the whole of the line firmly held. The newly-won ground had to be defended stubbornly for the next few days against many hostile onslaughts. The enemy realised he had lost an important key position and put in great efforts to regain the position lost to the Irishmen.

On September 9th the 16th Division again greatly distinguished itself by capturing the closely neighbouring village of Ginchy in an equally brilliant fashion. The Ulstermen of the Inniskillings, the Irish Fusiliers and the Rifles, advanced with great determination through a fierce barrage of enemy fire so intense as to suggest that not even an insect could have survived in that hail of fire and death.<sup>5</sup>





*Men of the 16th (Irish) Division after the capture of Guillemont, 3 September 1916*

## **Side by Side at Messines and beyond**

After the Battle of the Somme the 36th (Ulster) Division was withdrawn to make good its terrible losses, and transferred to Flanders. On 7 June 1917 it took part in the Battle of Messines. This was the first completely successful single operation on the British front. But there was another important ingredient to it. As H.E.D. Harris pointed out: 'It is also memorable to Irishmen as largely an all-Irish achievement; two of the three divisions in the attacking line were Irish, the 36th on the right and the 16th in the centre of IX Corps, a unique line-up of Irish fighting men, and the largest in modern history.'<sup>7</sup>

The Messines-Wytschaete Ridge was a narrow feature which dominated the surrounding landscape, giving the Germans a perfect view of the British lines. Unless the ridge could be taken no break-out from the Ypres Salient would be possible. The preparations for the attack were thorough, with no aspect overlooked. An elaborate model of the ridge, with trenches, forts, roads and woods, was constructed, surrounded by a wooden gallery and trench-board walks, so that at least a company could examine it at one time. Attacks were practised over ground marked out to represent the enemy trench system. The provision of food, water, ammunition, and stores for the advancing troops was planned and prepared – at an early stage in the assault the troops were even served with hot tea!

The boundary line between the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division ran along the main street of Wytschaete, half the village being in the objective of each Division. When the attack ended all the objectives had been taken. Casualties among the Irish troops were comparatively light for a Western Front battle. In the 36th Division, 61 officers and 1,058 other ranks; in the 16th, under 1,000, all ranks.

One of the casualties of the 16th Division was Major William Redmond, MP, brother of John Redmond. Because of his age (fifty-seven) he wasn't required to go 'over the top', and had been attached for duty to Divisional Headquarters, but had insisted on accompanying his men. He was brought in by stretcher bearers of the Ulster Division, but although his wound was light, he wasn't young or fit enough to stand the trauma and died a few hours later. Harris commented:

They showed to the world the sight of nearly 30,000 Irishmen shoulder to shoulder, men of all four provinces, and the only rivalry that existed between them was that of gallantry. In his book *As from Kemmel Hill*, Andrew Behrend wrote: 'I should like to put on record one further memory of the Battle of Messines. However little it interested me then, it fascinates me today; that during this battle and for weeks before, the 16th (Irish) and the 36th (Ulster) Divisions lived and fought side by side, got on with each other splendidly and at times even pulled each other's chestnuts out of the fire ....'<sup>7</sup>

The two Irish Divisions next took part in the series of battles known as Third Ypres, which began on 31 July and went on continuously until 10 November 1917, costing 244,897 British casualties and about 337,000 German.

On 16 August there was an offensive attack on Langemarck, the two divisions selected to lead the attack being the 16th (Irish) and the 36th (Ulster). Battalions of the Royal Irish Fusiliers linked the two Divisions. 'The ground was a swamp, the weather was atrocious, and through a morass of shell-holes, in which wounded men were drowned, the attack was pressed home; but in the process various units, notably the 9th Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, were all but annihilated. This long and desperate fight was like a nightmare. In some respects, says Col. Buchan, the histories have no parallel for colossal difficulty and naked misery among the shell-holes and tortured ridges of the Ypres salient. It was a soldiers' battle, and as such was made conspicuous by gallant deeds.'<sup>8</sup>

When the Germans counter-attacked the 9th Royal Irish Fusiliers tried to dig in on Hill 35 but with their C.O. and many others killed there were too few to withstand the assault. Philip Gibbs wrote: 'The counter-attacks drove in the thinned but still determined line of Irishmen, and they came back across the riddled ground, some of them wounded, all in the last stages of exhaustion, pausing in their unwilling journey to fire at snipers who harassed them, and reaching at last the trenches they left at dawn, angry and bitter and disappointed, but undismayed – the heroes of a splendid failure.'<sup>8</sup>

The last phase in the Third Battle of Ypres, from 4 October to 6 November, was fought for the almost obliterated village of Passchendaele. Rain fell almost unceasingly throughout October, and Passchendaele became known to history as the 'battle of the mud'. Instead of the hoped-for break-through to clear the Flanders coast, it turned into a terrible battle of attrition, where men and animals alike drowned in the quagmire.

On 20 November 1917 the 16th and 36th Divisions took part in the Battle of Cambrai, when 380 tanks were used in the assault. The 16th Division attacked on a three-brigade front, and were immediately successful. At zero hour the leading troops went 'over the top' and were across no-man's-land into the famous Tunnel Trench within moments of the barrage lifting. However, when the enemy counter-attacks were launched there was desperate hand-to-hand fighting for several hours.

On the main sector the most difficult task fell to the 36th Division. They were to attack the Hindenburg Line on the Canal du Nord, a wide canal with deep sides. After close and fierce fighting 109th Brigade broke through and stormed the mound. 'The divisional staff had foreseen the difficulty of crossing the dry canal and prepared for it. Ex-Belfast shipwrights serving in the Divisional Engineers threw a temporary bridge over the ravine and the infantry charged across it. By 16:00 hours the Cambrai-Bapaume road was crossed and the main Hindenburg Line entered – an advance of 4,000 yards.'<sup>7</sup>

On 21 March 1918 the Germans launched a massive attack against the Allied positions. After a terrific bombardment, massed German divisions surged forward at 09:40 hours. The 16th (Irish) Division was to receive a terrible battering. Two companies of the 7th Royal Irish Regiment posted in the Forward Zone were smothered completely; not one man managed to escape. Attacking the village of Ronnsoy, held by the 7th and 8th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Germans, after a fierce struggle, managed to occupy the village by noon, although some posts held out until evening. But by then all the men of the Inniskillings had been killed or captured. The garrison of Lempire, the 2nd Royal Irish Regiment, came under attack on three sides, and after a desperate resistance most of this battalion were killed or captured. The British Official History says: 'Three-quarters of the Fifth Army battalions in the Forward Zone ceased to exist as units, whilst in the rest only a few officers and men remained. The losses were severest in 14 and 16 Divisions leaving them with little further fighting strength. The 16th Division continued by strenuous efforts to delay the enemy's advance whilst guns were got away.'

In the south the Germans had made faster progress. Here the 36th (Ulster) Division was part of the British XVIII Corps. The German attack was so swift and concentrated that few of the out-post troops managed to get back to the line of resistance. The 12th Royal Irish Rifles held out until 15:15 hours. The 15th Royal Irish Rifles and 2nd Inniskillings held out against repeated attacks until after 18:00 hours. But eventually they were all overwhelmed.

The next day the British divisions began ordered withdrawals. But one position, the Ricardo Redoubt, occupied by the 1st Inniskillings, was surrounded and cut off. 'Here Colonel Crawford's men fought doggedly on. In the afternoon he sent away a party which managed to get back to our lines but the remainder fought on until, driven by bombers and pounded by trench mortars into a corner of the Redoubt, "a mere handful was taken prisoner at 6 p.m."<sup>7</sup> As Brigadier A.E.C. Bredin commented, the 16th and 36th Divisions 'suffered the heaviest losses of any formation during the great German offensive of March, 1918.'<sup>9</sup>

But after these initial German successes their offensive faltered. They may not have realised it then, but it was to have been their last real chance to turn the war in their favour. The Allies armies had been battered, but not defeated. Put under a united command at last, the Allies began to launch their counter-attacks. The Germans still had plenty of fighting potential, but behind them their own allies began to collapse, through war weariness, privation and military defeat. All the German army could hope for now was a fighting retreat. Indeed, when the Armistice was finally signed, the German army, still unbroken, stood everywhere on foreign soil, except for a few villages which the French had held throughout the war in Alsace.

## Homecoming

When the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division went ‘over the top’ on 1 July, 1916, news of the sacrifice they had made took some days filtering back to their communities. A.T.Q. Stewart wrote: ‘In the long streets of Belfast mothers looked out in dread for the red bicycles of the telegram boys. In house after house blinds were drawn down, until it seemed that every family in the city had been bereaved.’<sup>10</sup> Gradually the full extent of the carnage became clear. At noon on 12 July the traffic of Belfast came to a halt, and in the pouring rain the citizens of the town stood in silence to remember the dead. The usual Twelfth celebrations were cancelled and all work was suspended.

Yet while Irishmen of all persuasions were dying side by side in the mud of France, the Irish conflict itself had not gone away. During Easter 1916 a body of Irish Nationalists – who felt that nothing short of an Irish Republic was acceptable – had risen in rebellion in Dublin. The citizens were far from sympathetic. Thousands of Irish families had their menfolk fighting in the trenches, and those rebels who had taken over Jacob’s Biscuit Factory ‘were jeered by a hostile crowd... telling them if they wanted to fight, they should go out and fight in France.’<sup>11</sup> However, after defeating the rebellion, the British government executed fifteen leaders of the Rising, and Irish opinion was finally swayed in favour of their rebellious fellow citizens – the ‘blood sacrifice’ had been legitimised.

So when the war ended in Europe the soldiers returned to an Ireland where divisions were growing more intractable by the day. Seventy-three Sinn Féin MPs were elected in 1918, but rather than sit at Westminster they set up their own assembly in Dublin, Dáil Eireann. On 21 January 1919 they proclaimed the Irish Republic, and when Dáil Eireann was declared illegal by the British government, guerrilla warfare by the IRA commenced against the British security forces.

On 6 December 1921 the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in London. It gave twenty-six counties of Ireland Dominion status, and the ‘Irish Free State’ was born. Six northern counties, however, were allowed to opt out. Those wanting a fully independent Irish Republic took up arms against the new Free State government. In the North, nationalists resented the partition of the island, and both communities there felt beleaguered. Suspicion, fear, and intolerance increased. By the end of 1922 over 450 people had become victims of the violence which resulted. Hence, only a few years after the end of the European war, a new conflict now blighted the lives of many in Ireland, a conflict which, until very recently, was still being visited upon the great-grandchildren of the men who fought in the muddy fields of France and Belgium.

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The record of the Thirty-sixth Division will ever be the pride of Ulster. At Thiepval in the great battle of the Somme on July 1st, 1916; at Wyttschaete on June 17th, 1917, in the storming of the Messines Ridge; on the Canal du Nord, in the attack on the Hindenburg Line of November 20th in the same year; on March 21, 1918, near Fontaine-les-Clercs, defending their positions long after they were isolated and surrounded by the enemy; and later in the month at Andechy in the days of 'backs to the wall', they acquired a reputation for conduct and devotion deathless in the military history of the United Kingdom, and repeatedly signalled in the despatches of the Commander-in-Chief.

**Winston Churchill**

It is these soldiers of ours, with their astonishing courage and their beautiful faith, with their natural military genius, with their tenderness as well as strength; carrying with them their green flags and their Irish war-pipes; advancing to the charge, their fearless officers at their head, and followed by their beloved chaplains as great-hearted as themselves; bringing with them a quality all their own to the sordid modern battlefield; exhibiting the character of the Irishman at its noblest and greatest. May Ireland, cherishing them in her bosom, know how to prove her love and pride and send their brothers leaping to keep full their battle-torn ranks and to keep high and glad their heroic hearts!

**John Redmond**

North of Thiepval the Ulster Division broke through the enemy trenches, passed the crest of the ridge, and reached the point called The Crucifix, in rear of the first German position. For a little while they held the strong Schwaben Redoubt (where), enfiladed on three sides, they went on through successive German lines, and only a remnant came back to tell the tale. Nothing finer was done in the war. The splendid troops drawn from those Volunteers who had banded themselves together for another cause now shed their blood like water for the liberty of the world.

**Colonel John Buchan**, *History of the War*

I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, the 1st July, as I followed their amazing attack, I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world. My pen cannot describe adequately the hundreds of heroic acts that I witnessed... The Ulster Volunteer Force, from which the Division was made, has won a name which equals any in history. Their devotion deserves the gratitude of the British Empire.

**Captain W. B. Spender**

Our greatest success (on the 3rd September 1916) was the capture of Guillemont by the Irish troops. They advanced on Guillemont with an impetuosity which carried all before it: charged through the German positions with the wild music of their pipes playing them on. Before the afternoon was out the 2000 Prussians who constituted the garrison – with imperative orders to hold the ground at all cost – were killed, wounded, or captured. The same Irish troops charged into Ginchy as they had charged into Guillemont, through the barrage of shells and the storm of machine-gun fire, clambering over shell-holes, fallen trees, and the great mounds of bricks and rubble which were all that remained of the village itself; cheering like mad, and driving the enemy before them in a fierce assault against which nothing could stand.

**Frank A. Mumby**, *The Great World War: A History*

# A shared sacrifice for peace: a group discussion<sup>†</sup>

## Preparing the ground

Farset Youth & Community Development Project emerged as one of a number of community-based attempts to counteract the social breakdown which followed in the wake of the escalating Troubles. Like many such projects Farset had a concern for young people, seeking ways to turn them away from ingrained sectarian attitudes or even to get them ‘offside’ for a while, to allow them to view their own society more objectively. One such opportunity arose almost by accident.

Soon after my book *The Identity of Ulster* was published, Professor René Fréchet, from the University of the Sorbonne, Paris, contacted me to say that he lauded my efforts to promote a common heritage for the divided communities in Ulster. I informed him that I wasn’t alone in such efforts, and told him about the work of Farset, of which I was Secretary. He invited a number of us to Paris, and that visit motivated Jackie Hewitt, Farset’s Manager, to initiate a youth exchange scheme. The first trip to France took place in 1983, funded by the British Council, and was a great success. As part of our programme we took our young people to Paris where they visited the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe and other tourist sights. But it was on the last day of that trip that something unplanned-for occurred. I’ll let Jackie pick up the story.

On our way back to the boat, we realised we would arrive at the channel port far too early, so Ian suggested that we make a detour to the Ulster Tower at Thiepval, on the Somme battlefield. Now, my father had made mention of an ‘Ulster Tower’ in France, but that was the limit of my knowledge. We parked at the nearby war cemetery and immediately our group of young people – who were from Dublin as well as Belfast – were soon engrossed walking round the headstones, identifying the different Irish regiments. They were so enthusiastic that we decided we would take them inside the tower itself. However, a notice on the door said that anyone seeking access had to see a Madame Van Suyt, who lived at Hamel. At the young people’s insistence we went to see Madame Van Suyt, who duly opened up the Tower. The interior was full of spiders and cobwebs, dust was lying thick on the floor and dead flies were everywhere. Again prompted by some of our young people, we decided that we would do something about this. Now, this is not the place to go into detail about the actual process, for it was long and involved, but, with the help of local politicians like Ian Paisley and Sammy Wilson we eventually secured government funding to initiate a Farset Somme Project, for the purpose of refurbishing the Ulster Tower, opening it up to visitors, and reinstating it as a place of remembrance. As the project developed it soon became quite clear the massive interest we had generated.

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<sup>†</sup> See page 2 for a list of those who participated in this discussion

Our second visit with our young people was in 1984, when a more extensive programme incorporated tours of the Somme area. Jackie Hewitt explained to the young people that the purpose was not to glorify what happened during the war, but to make them aware of the devastation and loss of life, not forgetting those left bereaved throughout Ireland. In 1987 our 'Somme tour' broadened out to include sites in Belgium: Messines, Ypres, the Menin Gate and the 16th (Irish) memorial at Wyteschaete. 1987 also saw the start of official ceremonies to which we invited dignitaries and local councillors from across Northern Ireland. Then, on 1 July 1989, we held an official Re-dedication Ceremony at the Tower, in the presence of Princess Alice, the Duchess of Gloucester.

When the suggestion was made to purchase Thiepval Wood, which had been the 36th Division's base prior to the battle, we said: look, this is going to need the setting up of a separate company. And so the Somme Association was established in 1990, under the management of David Campbell, who had worked for the Farset Somme Project. In 1994 the Association opened a visitors centre at Thiepval, and also the Somme Heritage Centre, a registered museum located at Conlig, near Newtownards, Co. Down. In 2004, with government assistance, the Association finally purchased Thiepval Wood.

I must reinforce the fact that, right from the beginning, Farset endeavoured to develop the project as a cross-community one; we wanted it to embrace all



*Thiepval Memorial Tower, known as the Ulster Tower, was erected in 1921 by public subscription raised in Northern Ireland in memory of the officers and men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, and all Ulstermen, who died in the Great War. It stands on the site of some of the most desperate fighting which took place during the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It is modelled on Helen's Tower in Clondeboye estate, Co. Down, where the Division trained before being sent to France.*

**FARSET YOUTH & COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT LIMITED**

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**TOUR ITINERARY**

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**SATURDAY 1st JULY 1989**

After a Continental Breakfast, the Tour will depart to the Battlefields of the Somme area. The highlight of the day will be the Re-dedication at the Ulster Tower where there will be time to examine the Tower and visit Thiepval Wood, the Connaught and Mill Road Cemeteries, and the area fought over by the Ulster Division.

There will be a Tour of the Thiepval area visiting various places in the locality where the Ulster Division was engaged. A visit will be made to the Newfoundland Memorial Park where World War I trenches have been preserved.

**SUNDAY 2nd JULY 1989**

8.30 am Continental Breakfast.

9.30 am Depart for all day Excursion into Belgium. The Tour will pass through Armentieres, Messines, Wyteschaete, Ypres and Passendale including stops of direct relevance to the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 16th (Irish) Division.

Wreaths will be laid at the Memorial to the 16th (Irish) Division at Wyteschaete.

There will be a break for Lunch and time for personal sightseeing in the beautiful town of Ypres.

8.00 pm Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate, Ypres.

**MONDAY 3th JULY 1989**

8.30 am Continental Breakfast.

9.30 am Depart for full-day Excursion to Paris to include a sightseeing Tour. There will be time for personal sightseeing and shopping.

For those not wishing to visit Paris, private visits may be made to cemeteries and memorials not covered by the Tour, but where the graves of personal relatives may be visited.

Arrive back at Hotel in late evening.

**TUESDAY 4th JULY 1989**

8.30 am Continental Breakfast.

9.30 am Depart Tour to Vimy Ridge to see the extensive German and Canadian trench systems. The South African Memorial and Museum at Delville Wood will be visited.

6.00 pm Arrive back at Hotel in Lille.



sections of the community. That approach proved to be very productive, to such an extent that those who go over to the Somme today range from members of the Democratic Unionist Party to Sinn Féin. Indeed, because it is now so commonplace, people forget the painstaking path which had to be trodden to change former perceptions and attitudes. Michael Hall's booklet *Sacrifice on the Somme*, commissioned by Farset in 1988, greatly helped to influence people to look at this whole part of our shared history in a new way. To be honest, I can remember reading through the draft and feeling extremely uneasy: the contents mentioned not only the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions, but James Connolly, the Easter Rising, Partition and the Russian Revolution! At first I thought, as did others, that we wouldn't get away with this. Then we decided: let's put it out and see. And, although there were some negative comments, at a grassroots level the response was largely positive. That booklet, of which 5000 copies were eventually distributed, helped to consolidate Farset's efforts to make the initiative all-inclusive.

## **Complementary efforts at Messines**

With public interest now aroused by the work initiated by Farset, and carried on by the Somme Association, other people began to add to its impact. One important development was when former Loyalist politician Glen Barr and Southern TD Paddy Harte launched the 'Island of Ireland Peace Park', located at Messines in Belgium, where a replica of an Irish round tower was erected as its central focus. The Peace Park was officially opened on 11 November 1998, in the presence of Queen Elizabeth, Irish President Mary McAleese, and King Albert of Belgium. On 7 June 2007 the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Messines was celebrated there, and, as a further sign of changing attitudes, Sinn Féin sent its first official representatives (although individual Sinn Féin members, like Tom Hartley and Alex Maskey, had previously supported Farset's efforts). The Peace Park was to impact strongly on PJ Hallinan and others from Inishowen, Co. Donegal.

Four years ago Glen Barr invited me to accompany him to the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Messines. I asked him what was going on there and he replied that it was hard to explain, the best thing was for me to come and see for myself. Now, to be honest, I wasn't overly fussed about going, but nevertheless I decided to go. We went by coach and I knew only one person on it, the others being people from the British Legion and the Protestant community in Derry. As part of the programme we visited the battlefields in France and Belgium, and as we walked among the vast cemeteries it wasn't long before my feelings and emotions were going haywire. I was also struck by the fact that at the Somme, where the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division had died, there was a large memorial Tower, but when we visited Guillemont, where the men of the 16th (Irish) Division had died, there was only a simple Celtic cross. That difference seemed significant, in that the Unionist community had done something to remember their dead, whereas the Nationalist community in Ireland were largely in denial of their own contribution. Indeed, I began to feel very angry

at the fact that people from all over Ireland had given their lives during the war, fighting for the freedom of small nations, and yet we'd done next to nothing to remember them. The whole week's experience affected me to such an extent that I decided that I was going to have to do something about this.

I knew that something *could* be done, for the Peace Park itself was the result of people like Glen Barr and Paddy Harte deciding that the sacrifice made by *all* communities in Ireland should be commemorated jointly. Both sides of the 'divide' were involved in this project, and also in the Wider Horizons programmes which were bringing Protestant and Catholic young people together, not only within Northern Ireland but on a cross-border basis. At Tyne Cot the depth of the tragedy really hit me, like an actual physical punch. I remember looking at all the headstones; all those young lives... and all of them somebody's sons, brothers, grandsons. But there they lay, under a stone, forgotten. And we must remember the German sacrifice too. We were visiting the Passchendaele site and I looked at a German headstone which read: '17 years of age'. As I stood there I must admit that tears came down my cheeks and I said to myself that if I had been seventeen when they were recruiting for World War I, in whatever country, I would have joined up, and most likely be just a statistic today. And to think that so many of our people were reviled for joining the British Army. They went out and gave their lives and were forgotten about, and those who came back were insulted, castigated, assaulted –both verbally and physically – for doing their bit for what they were led to believe was the freedom of small nations. And we in the Republic of Ireland went into total denial about it. But the challenge for me was – what can I personally do about it, what can we collectively do about it?



*The Island of Ireland Peace Park was initiated by A Journey of Reconciliation Trust, a broad-based cross-border body bringing together people of all religious and political aspirations in Ireland. To complement the Peace Park and extend its purpose, an International School for Peace Studies was established in 2000 in Messines, in collaboration with local people. This school holds courses and workshops on peace-related themes.*

## **Inishowen remembrance and Fort Dunree**

Yet another strand to the process of shared remembrance was now to develop.

It took me a while to get my head around what could be done, but eventually I called upon a number of community activists in the Inishowen area – Danny McLaughlin and others – and we created the Inishowen Partnership Friends of Messines (most of us being involved with the Inishowen Partnership). We took a number of people out to Belgium, and anyone who went there instantly warmed to the idea of jointly commemorating the 52,000 individuals from the island of Ireland who died in the First World War. We then decided that we were specifically going to remember the men – and two women – of Inishowen who were killed in the Great War. (When we started our research we discovered that some 220 people from Inishowen were killed in World War I, and 1200 throughout County Donegal. Indeed, there wasn't a parish in Donegal that hadn't people killed.) With support from individuals such as Glen Barr and Sean Feenan, and organisations like Farset, we successfully applied for funding to run a programme focusing on reconciliation through remembrance: the 'Foyle Training Towards Reconciliation' programme. That empowered us to move forward, learning at the same time. The Inishowen group then decided that the best way to remember the men and women of Inishowen was to hold a service of commemoration at Dunree Military Fort. And we put together quite a comprehensive programme for the day. And through that we were, in a sense, laying their spirits to rest in their native, their beloved Inishowen. And to me it was a great sense of relief and achievement that we had done something at last and they will never be forgotten again.

Dunree Military Fort, overlooking Lough Swilly a few miles north of Buncrana, was constructed after the attempted incursion by Wolfe Tone and a French invasion squadron in 1798. Dunree became one of a number of coastal fortifications. In 1938 it passed into Irish hands and became an Irish coastal defence unit.

I am Chairman of Fort Dunree Military Museum and am involved in Inishowen Friends of Messines. I was first introduced to the First World War in history at school; there was also a janitor at the school who was a veteran of the 36th (Ulster) Division and he used to regale us young fellas with stories about his involvement. At school in Coleraine, of course, the focus was very much on the involvement of the 36th (Ulster) Division. Glen Barr told me that when he first went to visit the Somme, all he really saw was the 36th (Ulster) Division; he was never aware there was any other Irish involvement. Indeed, he said he was so fixated with the Ulster Division, he almost forgot there were Germans involved as well! So, I suppose it was from a similar perspective that I came to it, and it was great to have it all opened up and learn about the involvement of all the other nations, and in particular the Irish Divisions. And then to find that what happened 90 years ago is still relevant today, for it can be used as a tool for promoting and building reconciliation among our different communities. And having got involved with the facilitation work on the courses run at the International School for Peace Studies at Messines – particularly with the

youngsters –there’s great satisfaction to see people open up their ideas, enlarge their perceptions. There is far more that unites us than divides us, and there’s a lot more to be gained from building relationships with people than creating and maintaining divisions.

I am the manager of Dunree. When I first heard PJ and Danny McLaughlin talking about a commemoration and a memorial for the Inishowen people who died in the First World War, although I thought it was a good idea, to be honest I felt that it would never go anywhere. I also felt that local people might not like a memorial to the First World War. However, I went out to Belgium and my perceptions started to change. Then the first Dunree day of remembrance came about, and that was a great day, with people from different political persuasions mixing together. So people’s attitudes *are* changing, and I support it now wholeheartedly and I believe that when we eventually have a permanent memorial in Dunree the local community will be totally behind it.

I agree; I believe that there has been a fundamental attitudinal change. Since we started the commemoration work in Inishowen nobody has ever said, at any stage, that we’re wrong, we shouldn’t be doing it –not one person. I think we have broken the mould and we have also set an example and made it that bit easier for others. We are not historians, we are peace-builders, we are there to ensure that people know that there is an alternative to conflict. Making peace is difficult but you do get there.

When we organised the first commemoration at Dunree we kept the PR element to the minimum, because we wanted to gauge reaction as to how it would be accepted. And we were pleasantly surprised at the response; people were actually saying that it was high time this was done, it was great to see it being done, and offering their congratulations.

Not only did we decide to honour all those from Ireland who died, but all sides. So not only did we fly the Tricolour, the Union Jack, and the EU flag but last year we had the German flag as well, and in that way we were remembering *all* those who gave their lives.

I work for Inishowen Partnership as well, and belong to the Inishowen Friends of Messines. As somebody who grew up in the border area I was familiar with most things about the 1916 period, but when I actually went out to Belgium I wasn’t prepared for the emotional side of things. Furthermore, while I was aware that I had family members who died, it was only when I looked into it more deeply that I found out there had been more than I had realised. Also, I thought it very poignant that my six cousins who went off to war were both Protestants and Catholics. And when I myself first went to Belgium our group was very mixed, and it was remarkable to see barriers coming down before your eyes, as these people started to speak to each other, and started to respect each other. It was fantastic to watch, and not only to watch but to feel it as well. And to come back having realised that Inishowen *could* contribute in some way to building peace here, probably more than we had ever thought.

## Cross-community impact

It has been the peace-building aspects which have provided the most important ingredient for many.

During our trips to Belgium over the past number of years we have met people from all over Ireland, Unionist and Nationalist, many of whom have also joined us in our service of remembrance and celebration at Dunree. They have come in their busloads, from East Belfast, the Waterside, Bogside... different organisations have come and they have shared with us there. We held our first remembrance three years ago in July, and over 500 people turned up, eighty per cent of them from Northern Ireland, the majority of whom had never been across the border before. It was an immediate success. We have plans for developing the Dunree project even further. And we have provided Inishowen people with a platform to be proud of their dead in World War I, having their names read out in Dunree by individuals from the different parishes, so there is a local ownership to it now. We're doing our own bit in our own simple way. Indeed, we would boast that we were the first area of Ireland to bring people together like this in a service of remembrance. And a lot of our members from Inishowen are playing pivotal roles in the programmes that are being facilitated at the International School for Peace Studies in Belgium.

I was privileged to have been part of one group which went out. One of the most beneficial aspects I found was in meeting people from other traditions and backgrounds. People who would hold differing historical interpretations, which I once might have simply dismissed as 'untrue' but have now realised that none of us have a monopoly on truth, because we don't know the full truth

*It was a bright, warm morning, the sun was up in the sky, the big guns were going off like billy-o. We [had been addressed] by one of the big nobs from headquarters who told us not to run; we could light our pipes and cigarettes, slope our arms and just walk on, there would be no opposition. We were the third lot to go over the top, but the first two never got out of their trenches, the trenches were full of dead. We [managed to get] out of the trench and advance some fifty yards when suddenly a big shell came over and practically wiped out my whole platoon. I was wounded in the legs and back and lay in the field from half-past eight to four o'clock in the afternoon; to tell you the truth I thought I would never see my home again. I was lying there amongst the dead and wounded, and your thoughts were far from pleasant. There were a number there who had been blown to pieces; what a waste of life. And good lads they all were [who died in the war], the 16th (Irish) Division as well as the 36th (Ulster) Division. I still think that if we had've had Redmond's men beside us that day we would have took Thiepval; for what Carson's men could do, John Redmond's men could do the same.*

**Leslie Bell**, veteran, interviewed by RTÉ, 1 July 1989

of what has taken place. The mass graveyards had a huge impact on me – they really bring home to you the full extent of the carnage which went on. There were a number of particular sites which I found very significant. The ‘shot at dawn’ site had a huge impact on me, as did the grave of fourteen-year-old John Condon. But also the relationships that were built out there. I think that the opportunity that you are given in Belgium is that you are away from home territory, you are away from all the prejudices that go with home territory and it becomes more and more a shared experience. And by having our own joint celebration, or commemoration, here in Inishowen provides a further opportunity to rekindle those friendships and to strengthen those bonds. I believe the programmes we have developed have made a significant impact on cross-community and cross-border relationships.

I am involved with the facilitating groups through the International Peace School. We don’t do ‘military history tours’, we use military history as a key for understanding and reconciliation. Messines, where the 36th and 16th Divisions fought together, is a place that both communities have a stake in, although the Nationalist community for many years never realised that they had a stake in it. I think that idea of neutral territory is very important. When you are over there and you are involved with people from interface areas in Belfast, you can almost physically see the springs of tension uncoiling over the period of three or four days. Particularly in relation to the young people who we bring out through the School Links Programme, it is fascinating to observe their interaction. Because within a couple of hours, like any crowd of youngsters, questions such as ‘Are you a Protestant? Are you a Catholic?’ seem to go out the window very quickly. And I think it is because they are having a common experience. Another apt description is that we put people on an emotional roller-coaster. Walking through mass graveyards and going to places where thousands of people were slaughtered is undoubtedly emotional. Perhaps it is something that Celts on both sides of the community have, but you can feel spirits sometimes in graveyards and from battlefields, you can nearly feel it coming up through your feet. Now, you might have studied the First World War in history books, and thought that, yes, it was terrible, but it’s quite different when you actually stand in the middle of where the mindless

*We should never let politics blind us to the truth about things – bravery and loyalty wasn’t all on one side. The 16th Division played a vital part alongside us. We’d always the greatest respect for them – except for the odd hardliner that’s always there. The 16th were with us at Messines. I remember there were four of us in this advance post dealing with the wounded of the 19th Royal Irish Rifles. And just over the brow of the hill some of the 16th had their wee dug-out, and we went across, a couple of us at a time, to have a yarn with them; and they came across too, a couple at a time, always leaving a couple at the first aid post –and we became great friends.*

**Jack Christie**, veteran, interviewed by Farset Somme Project

slaughter took place, in what is now beautiful countryside, and try and picture thousands of corpses lying around you, and all these young fellas screaming for their mothers, with their comrades unable to do anything about it – it's hard not to be moved by that sort of thing. And I suppose people are a bit vulnerable when they are moved emotionally, and it allows them to open up and to talk about all sorts of different things: things their own family members have gone through, or stuff that they themselves have been through. But it's this notion that they're all on neutral territory, a place which belongs to everybody from this island, and I think that's the key thing about going to Belgium in the groups, that everyone can feel a part of it. I have worked with interface groups where territory is contested, and we take them out there and history as well is contested, because each community has their own version of what went on. In fact, we don't have history in Ireland, we have two sets of mythology and you select the version of history that suits your outlook. So when prospective funders ask 'Why should we pay for people to travel abroad?' we respond that not only is the whole experience of being there important and even life-changing, but the fact that it takes place on neutral territory is vital.

I have seen the attitudinal change of people from all persuasions and aspirations and the acceptance of each other as people, irrespective of their backgrounds. The one message which comes out loud and clear from everybody who goes out there, standing by the grave-sides, is futility: what was it all about? why did this have to happen? And I suppose what we are trying to do now is to learn from those experiences; not to glorify war, but to learn from war. As part of our reconciliation programmes we look at the Willie Redmond story, where Redmond was injured and this Protestant guy from Ballymena, John Meeke, came out to tend to him on the battlefield. Redmond directed him back but he disobeyed the order and brought him to a medical post. Now, Meeke didn't see an Irish Nationalist stuck there, he saw another human being, a fellow soldier, in difficulty and brought him back. And at that troubled time in our history in Ireland those two men would have been in opposing camps, and might even have shot at each other back home. But they were out there in a war situation, fighting a common enemy.

One of the things I remember about the very first Dunree day was looking down and seeing the Sinn Féin mayor of Buncrana standing alongside a member of the UPRG [political spokespersons for the largest Loyalist paramilitary organisation, the UDA], observing a minute's silence for these guys at Dunree. And I suppose they had both come a long way, both politically and even physically as well. Another event that I can remember... a big part of what goes on in Belgium is a lot of mixing and socialising outside of the formal programme. But late one night two of us from Inishowen were sitting with a member of the UPRG and another Loyalist. And they were having a debate about the future of Unionism and Loyalism. And at one stage the second Loyalist said: 'Hold on, this is an in-house debate we should be having', a clear signal that he didn't want to talk in front of us. And the guy from the UPRG said, 'No, there is nothing that we should have to say to each other that we can't say in front of these guys. And, anyway, these guys are my friends.'

Now, we had only been together for about seventy-two hours at that stage, but you do see those sort of changes happening there. The very first time I went over as part of a group I can remember being at the rear of the coach with all these nationalists from the south and a DUP member of Derry City Council sitting just behind me. Now, he was someone who I would normally have felt dubious about, but he started to tell jokes –he seemed to have a bucketful of them – and he had the whole coach in tears by the end of it. So initially I would have perceived him as an bigot and it is only by being put in close proximity to people and spending time with them that you start to see their humanity. I think the great thing about going out there is that everyone has such moments.

When people go out to Belgium for the first time it is made clear to them that this is not a journey intended to change their mindset or beliefs, it is simply to give them a shared picture of what happened there during the war. It's not about wanting to change people's aspirations, it's about exploring a shared experience, a shared trauma which impacted on communities throughout Ireland.

What takes place during the tours is significant, but, as has already been said, more important is what goes on in the evenings when we socialise together. And one thing many of us will never forget took place in the early hours of one particular morning: that was when David Ervine and Jim McCrossan walked around with their arms around each other singing 'Danny Boy', and that to me was a hugely significant thing to happen. Very simple, but it happened. And the next day with that group there were no barriers, and when you heard the 'Sash' and the 'Fields of Athenry' being sung by the same group then you knew the barriers were breaking down.

Everyone goes over to Belgium and has a great experience there. But it's how to follow it up when we get back home that we should now be focusing on. ... The other thing we have been involved in, Glennie started it, was when people

*Before the Battle of the Somme I captured a German; well, I didn't capture him as much as he came up to me with his hands up. And some of the men – like, all you could see was the tops of their heads looking over the trench – well, anyway, they were shouting at me: 'Shoot him, Tommy, shoot him!' But I didn't like to shoot the man in cold blood, it wouldn't have been right anyway. So I took him down a hill and searched him at the bottom, but he had nothing on him – we got word at one time that the Germans had been using daggers. I don't believe it though, because I don't think the Germans were really bad people of wicked in any way, as far as I could see. So I walked him along to where the reserves were coming up and I told him to go on down there, and he walked down the hill with his hands up, and that was the last I saw of him.*

**Thomas Ervine**, veteran, interviewed by Farset Somme Project



from the town of Messines came over here for the first time and we paraded the Tricolour and the Union Jack together around the cenotaph in Derry, first time it had ever been done. PJ carried the tricolour. We got a lot of media coverage, and only one person came out and condemned it.

I think the Messines and Dunree experiences help to dispel the fear people have about the 'other' side. And I think that when that starts to disappear the mindsets do start to change. And you can see it even within yourself; initially you think to yourself – I assume that man is probably such and such – but by the time you are coming back those misperceptions have all gone. I think it's great for that.

Last 12 July we had prominent people from the Shankill up in Dunree assisting us. And you would think that that's the day they would want to be out marching in their own territory, that's where they would feel they have to be; but no, they were down in Dunree doing their bit for us, and for our remembrance service. To me that was extremely significant. The day will come when we might all parade to the Field [on 12 July]. It happened in Belgium, when the AOH [Ancient Order of Hibernians] and the Apprentice Boys of Derry paraded, not in separate groups but mingling through each other, to the Tower, two years ago. And they came back with ties exchanged; indeed, you wouldn't have known who was an AOH man or an Apprentice Boy. Now, if it happened there, there's no reason why it couldn't eventually happen here. The precedent has been set. It's about breaking down the old myths. At Dunree the Tricolour and the Union Jack fly side by side and we have included the Belgium flag. And, as was said earlier, now we're recognising the Germans, whose kids, like our own, were slaughtered, had no choice of their own, were cannon-fodder; they too gave their lives in a war that I don't think anybody today can justify. At the end ten million people lost their lives and so many families were shattered, as a result of man's inhumanity to man. The same with the conflict in the North: what was it all about? Almost 4000 people dead, thousands of families shattered, many people left with both physical and emotional scars. So, the bottom line is: can we learn from conflict?

One of the things we do at Tyne Cot now: when our groups proceed up to the main cross in the middle we ask them to look back down towards the entrance gate. We say to them: imagine a fence around that section over there, there's actually 3800 graves in that corner. And we make the point that since 1969 we've done that to each other back home. It does help to make it real.

I think it was significant that when the Taoiseach recently addressed a joint session of the House of Parliament he mentioned Messines as a place of shared history.

Some people have had to go to Belgium to get to Inishowen, if you know what I mean. For them to be comfortable to come South they had to go that route. And we know that it's working, for the groups are coming down here now fast and furious.

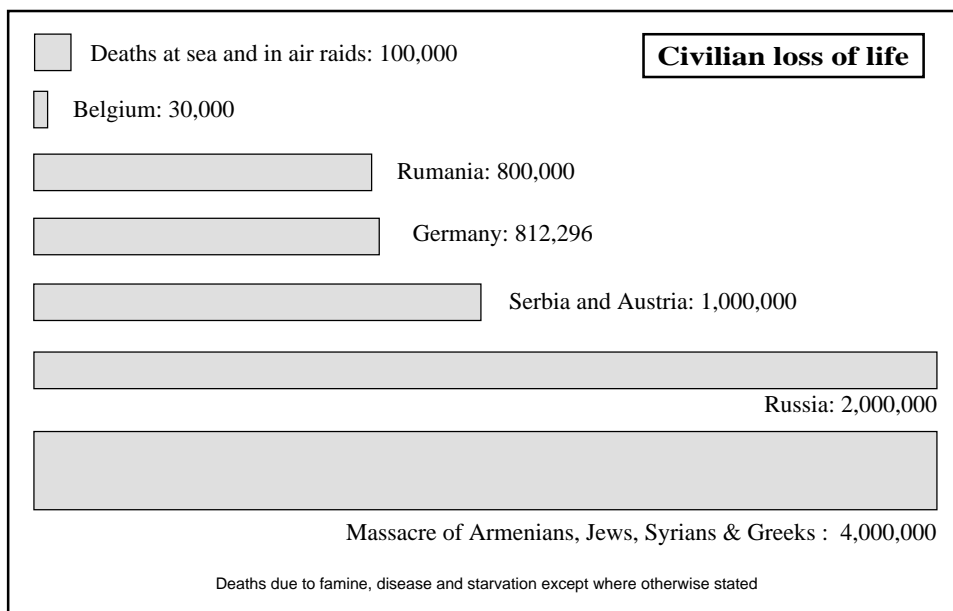
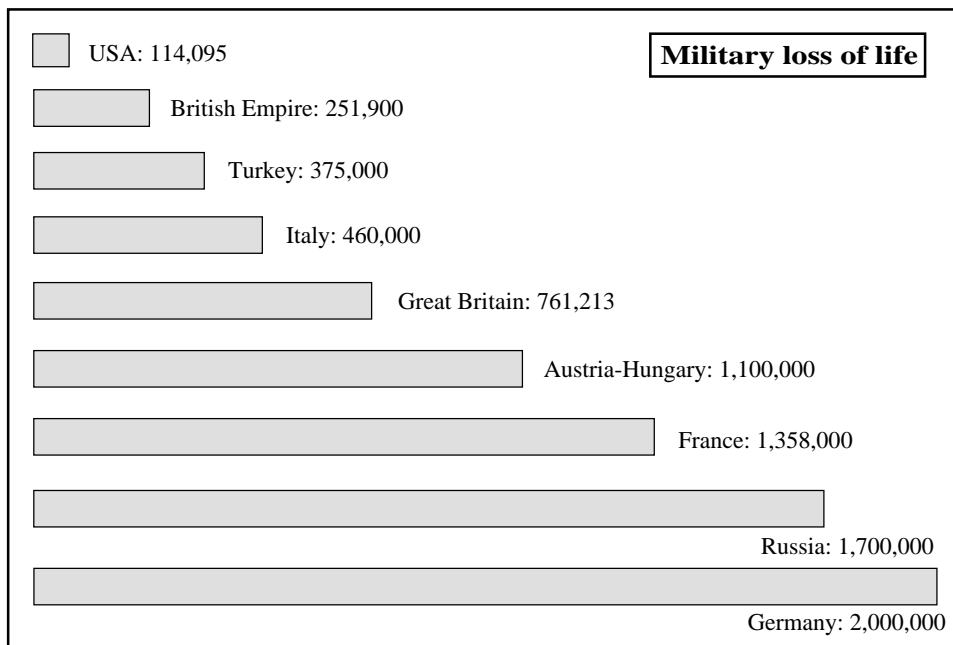
## The role of ex-combatants

In 2002 the Fellowship of Messines Association was formally constituted, the core of its membership being ex-combatants, both Loyalist and Republican.

I have been going back and forward to Messines some six or seven years now. I was one of the original guinea pigs among the ex-combatants, those who would have faced each other in the conflict here in Northern Ireland. And when we went out there it was astonishing the consensus feeling that developed about the futility of war. Furthermore, I think many people's perceptions, in all communities, have changed radically over recent years. The earlier denial or avoidance by those from an Irish Nationalist background has largely disappeared; even the Irish President acknowledged that people are now bringing the uniforms and the pictures out of the attics and dusting them down. So I had assumed that the 'cross-community' message was now well and truly accepted. And then just last week I got a shock. I was organising a group of Loyalists to go to Messines, and some of them said, 'We'll not be going, because we hear there's Republicans going too.' And I said, 'Why not?' 'We're not walking on that sacred ground with Republicans, not a chance.' 'But people from both communities, and both parts of Ireland died there; Irish Nationalists from the Irish Volunteers joined the British Army and died over there.' 'We don't care, we're not walking on sacred ground with them.' Some of them thought that it should only be a 36th (Ulster) Division celebration commemoration, and that it had nothing to do with 'them Taigs', and certainly nothing to do with Republicans. However, I really believe that this is now only a minority viewpoint, for when we replaced a Loyalist paramilitary mural in Tullycarnet [East Belfast] with one depicting the only Northern Ireland recipient of the VC during World War II – James Magennis, a Catholic from the Falls Road – the reaction was totally different. We initially thought we were going to get a lot of criticism and were quite anxious as to what the local response would be. We needn't have worried, because the people of Tullycarnet made it abundantly clear that it was a great thing to recognise someone like that. And when we brought people from the Irish Republic, and representatives of the Dublin Fusiliers and others, up to the unveiling ceremony, I was really pleased at how welcome the residents of Tullycarnet made them feel. I think they saw it as an opportunity to express something positive and non-sectarian about themselves, because they were sick of being stigmatised as bigots, and a lot of people in the Protestant community aren't like that at all.

Going to Messines provided a unique opportunity to get individuals from different organisations and allegiances to engage together, and to do so productively. I personally found it a very liberating experience. My grandfather was one of the first volunteers to join up in Belfast, one of those who listened to their political leaderships, people like John Redmond and Joe Devlin and the Irish Parliamentary Party – which basically represented Irish Catholic Nationalism on the island of Ireland at that time – and who told them to go and join up. Indeed, both sides joined up in their tens of thousands, a reflection of what was happening all over Europe. When we first developed the Messines

# The Human Cost of the Great War



Source: Purnell's History of the 20th Century

Fellowship I suppose some of us felt it would only be a short-lived thing – you might be able to get Republicans and Loyalists to meet together for a very brief period of time but it wouldn't be sustained. But not only has it been sustained it has grown. And it is being used in a very challenging and educational way. Not only do we deal with events like the Somme and Messines, but we ask each group: why? why did these guys think that this was the right thing to do at that time? what happened to them afterwards? I think that Irish Nationalism now has the maturity and the compassion to re-evaluate the actions of those men who were castigated and cast into the margins of history for nearly ninety years. When I first got involved in the Messines project I faced open hostility from people within the Republican movement – I was called a traitor, an apologist for imperialism – and I always responded: if you had grown up on the Falls Road, or the Shankill Road, or in any other town on this island at that time, and whether you were Unionist or Nationalist, would you have acted any differently, especially when you were being told by your political leadership that this is what you have to do? My grandfather was always proud of having enlisted with the Connaught Rangers, and fighting on virtually every front. He survived the war, but his brother was killed at Gallipoli. My grandmother's two brothers are buried within a mile of one another at Messines Ridge. The greatest indictment on our generation would be if we were to pass on our own inherited sectarian attitudes to another generation.

The decisions that we took in Inishowen were initially influenced by Glen Barr. Then when Glennie brought me to Messines for the first time and I met you guys that influenced us even more. When I saw people, who years before would have been shooting each other, grappling with all this, and being honest and sharing in the process, you don't realise how hugely influential that was on people like me. And you weren't trying to change each other's aspirations or identities, you were just striving for a shared understanding. And I thought: well, if such former deadly enemies can do this in the North, then we can surely do something on the Southern side.

I think thousands of ordinary people, either as individuals or through their community groups and organisations, are now working towards peace. Paisley has walked us up his last hill and he's not coming back down again, that's it this time. You have the politicians lauding all that they have done for peace, but I honestly think that it's through a quiet populist movement that it was able to come about. And I think everything that came from Belgium and Messines became an integral part of that dynamic for change.

The tragedy was that within a generation of the end of 'the war to end all wars' – a mere twenty-one years later – another generation were involved in an even costlier one. And when you visit the different battlegrounds – at the Somme, Messines, Ypres – and you hear all the different European languages being spoken by the visitors, you realise that all those countries are trying to comprehend what happened, and using it as a lesson. And that's what Europe has now done; it has constructed new ways of handling European affairs, and war is no longer an option. We must do the same here; we must prove Churchill wrong

when he said in 1918 that ‘the integrity of their quarrel will always reign supreme’. We work with the people who were at the hard end of things, and what we have tried to do through our programmes is not only to provide the physical experience of visiting the battlegrounds but afterwards to have panel discussions, often with invited speakers, and to engage participants on relevant themes. Basically to try and relate all that experience to our own community and where we are all at at the moment.

We look at the First World War, the conflict here in Northern Ireland, and what is going on in Iraq, and point out that the one common denominator is that when supposedly wise men stop talking young working-class lads end up on the front line getting killed.

I started off on a journey in the compounds in Long Kesh and that’s when I first got to know the likes of Billy Mitchell and Gusto Spence and people like that. And there was all this interaction, with papers exchanged and so forth, asking questions about where we’re at, who we are, what we believe in, what we are fighting for, why we joined our respective organisations, why we are prepared to kill and die for our different causes. These debates, dialogues, were going on in there in the mid-70s, even while the conflict was raging outside. People who were former combatants are usually condemned by ‘respectable society’ as the bad people in all of this: it’s all down to youse; if only youse would go away, everything would be wonderful. They don’t seem to realise that we are their delinquent children, because ‘the integrity of our quarrel’ has been passed down from generation to generation.

Ordinary people, including those who had been directly involved in the conflict, are now taking ownership of the ‘peace process’, There is a confidence there that wasn’t there before. The future of our cultures on this island depends on how we manage them; they need to be nurtured and we need *all* of them, in all their diversity.

I think things came about because of all the small things which have been taking place at the grassroots. It wasn’t the Bertie Aherns, the Tony Blairs, it was ordinary people who over the years made these things possible. We have a vital role to play, there is an onus on us, the people on the ground, to keep things moving forward.

*I remember too we were in a village close to the men of the 16th (Irish) Division, and a lot of Australians. This Australian, a great fella, but very overbearing... anyway, something happened and there was a row between some of our people and these Australians. How the Irish Brigade got word of it nobody knew, but down they came and beat up the Australians. Now I saw fellas arm in arm afterwards, fellas of the 11th Inniskillings with their orange and purple patches, and the other fellas with the big green patch on their arm....*

**Tommy Jordan**, veteran, interviewed by Farset Somme Project

## Learning lessons and reaching the new generations

There was a consensus belief that it was important that the younger generations were able to gain from this new awareness.

On one occasion when I was in Belgium during the Island of Ireland Week we were marching from the Menin Gate down to the square, and a young Belgian lad on a bicycle came riding down around the parade and was being a bit distracting. At first I assumed that this was just some youth out to cause trouble, for he was shouting and roaring, but as he got closer to me I realised what he was saying: 'Thank you! Thank you! You gave me my freedom, you are wonderful people!' And I thought: this is a young lad of eighteen or twenty years of age and he really means it. Although he was so many generations removed from that war he was still very serious in his belief that were it not for the Irish and the British and the other Allies coming to liberate his country he would not have had his freedom. And it stuck me quite strongly that there's an awful lot to be gained from keeping this memory alive, and using it to its fullest extent, but for the sake of peace. And we can consolidate our work for peace by involving young people like that Belgian lad.

As a child I can recall, when I visited my granny, seeing this big penny, which sat on top of a cupboard, and which was treated with a certain degree of respect. I later discovered that this was her brother's 'death penny' which had been presented to the family when he was killed at the Somme, just as my grandfather himself had been. In 1996 my bother and I went out on the anniversary of my grandfather's death and we were the first in the family to visit his grave. And that was a deeply personal experience for me. And yet, although this was a poignant bit of family story, when I went to school I learned nothing about Irish history, and even less about Ulster history, unless it impinged on British or European history. I think young people should be given the opportunity to go out there as part of the school curriculum. Education is like a huge oil tanker and trying to turn it around is difficult and slow. But there should be some way within the 'enriched curriculum' that this experience can be included.

Jackie and Ian have already mentioned the young people's reaction to that first ever Farset visit to the cemeteries. I was on that trip and I recall that when we took them to the Louvre and other places you were never quite sure just what they were getting out of the experience. But it was a different matter when they visited the cemeteries – they were immediately fascinated. There is something about that experience which resonates with everyone. Young people led the way then, and I think they can do so again.

I agree. We are involved with the School Links Programme and when the young people return you can tell from some of the presentations they make just how much they got out of it. My grandson is twelve and he wants to go back to Belgium. Messines provides a massive potential to engage and inform and give to the younger generation an opportunity that we never got, the

opportunity to explore it for themselves. And let them think it out for themselves. And it would be very difficult to think that they wouldn't come to the conclusion that we have come to regarding the futility of war. The strength of what we are doing is that it is *off* the people and *by* the people, the working-class people who were used as cannon-fodder.

I think it is vital that young people go out there. Many of them are of the same age as those lying in the graves, and it is critical that we target that age-group. You are never prepared for the emotional side of things. The German graves impacted on me, they are forgotten as well, they were mostly young lads too and are never spoken about. We talk about the people who died, but what about those who came back? What about the stigma they experienced; what was that like for them? What about the women who had to keep things going when their husbands didn't come back? I never heard my family talk about any of that. It was very emotional out there.

There was a family in the Shankill called the Maybins, and the mother had three sons who went to war. She got one telegram saying that one son was killed and a further two to say that her other two sons were 'missing in action'. And she wouldn't move out of that house for years afterwards in case the sons came home and didn't know where she was. In the Shankill graveyard there's a headstone to Stirling Ambrose who was fourteen years of age. He was a big six-footer by all accounts. The first time he went to join up his mother caught him on and dragged him home. But eventually he succeeded. There are all those stories. As well as taking groups to visit the main sites we hold discussion-based units on history and identity and conflict. And some of these discussions are amazing. There were two groups from Armagh who visited Messines last year, and although Armagh's a small place there are Protestant and Catholic young people who have lived there all their lives with no contact whatever. But with the relationships they have built up they're now going to the cinema and out for meals together. The parents have even booked a joint holiday next year. It is those stories which make it worthwhile. However, we could talk for hours, days, about the First World War, but you need to physically go out there and touch it, for then something happens within you.

Crana College should get a mention because there are the pioneering school on the south of the border in the School Links Project and the ones who travel there the most often, and schools from Dublin as well. And while those kids are over there they swap Bebo and e-mail addresses. Now, I'm sure much of it eventually peters out. But developments in technology now provide the means for them to maintain those relationships and the great thing is that they never seem to talk about politics or religion or identity at all; they talk about music, football and the things that young people are interested in. We had a group of community people there from Short Strand and Woodstock Road, an interface group, and on the second evening we went out for something to eat and somehow they all disappeared, and we were panicking. So we sat there and worried but eventually they rolled in saying that they had found a jazz club and had had a great time together. And we said that those guys didn't need us

to facilitate them coming together, it was occurring naturally.

I think the newcomers to Ireland will be bringing their own history too, and different family memories of the two world wars, as well as other conflicts. I think the work that we are currently doing will also help us with the issues which come up from the immigrant community.

I think that, when you look at all that has been done –from the first Farset involvement, the development of the Somme Association, and right up to what is happening now in Inishowen and out at the Somme and Messines –it was a marvellous feat and one of the most significant elements in the development of a peace process. Because, as has already been said, the peace process is not the outcome of a couple of days at Leeds Castle or a couple of days away at a hotel somewhere by a group of politicians. The peace process is a manifestation of what has gone on in the community over the years, what the community has been saying, what they have been doing, what they're sick of, where they want to get to... so all these things contributed to the peace process. And I genuinely believe that what we have all done, through our different projects, has been a valuable part of that.

## Further Information

*One of the best sources for information is the free on-line encyclopedia, wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) If you visit their website and use the search box you will find numerous articles on some of the topics addressed in this pamphlet. For example there are articles on the following:*

**10th (Irish) Division**  
**16th (Irish) Division**  
**36th (Ulster) Division**  
**Ulster Tower Thiepval**  
**Island of Ireland Peace Park**

*Information on the **International School for Peace Studies** can be found at [www.schoolforpeace.com](http://www.schoolforpeace.com)*

*Information on **Dunree Military Fort** can be found at [www.dunree.pro.ie](http://www.dunree.pro.ie)*

*Information on the **Somme Heritage Centre** is found on the **Somme Association** website ([www.irishsoldier.org](http://www.irishsoldier.org)) although there is nothing there about opening times and visitor fees. However, these can be got by visiting the Northern Ireland Tourist Board website ([www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com)) and putting 'Somme Heritage Centre' into the 'keyword search' box.*