

# Remembering together

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**Remembering the First World War has obliged the Irish to reaccess how the war changed the course of Irish history**

David Cameron and Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny visited First World War sites at the town of Ypres in Belgium

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War, and the British government has said that commemorations over the next four years will reflect the fact that some 200,000 Irish soldiers participated in the conflict, of whom at least 30,000 never returned home.

The commemoration will build on tributes dating back to 1996 that have provided the occasion for further reconciliation between Britain and Ireland, as well as between the different communities within Ireland.

During her historic visit to Ireland in 2011, Queen Elizabeth laid wreaths at the Garden of Remembrance in Parnell Square in Dublin and the National War Memorial at Islandbridge on May 18. The reverence and very visible respect Her Majesty displayed at the Garden of Remembrance comforted and impressed many Irish people who may have been initially somewhat ambivalent about the visit.

The British monarch bowing her head in recognition of the Irish men and women who sacrificed their lives between 1914 and 1918, mirroring the ceremony held at the Cenotaph in London every November, was a truly significant occasion.

Later that day, the Queen was joined by the then Irish president, Mary McAleese, at another act of homage to

the Irish dead of the First World War. Mrs McAleese has worked tirelessly over the last two decades to use the Irish memory of the First World War as a way to find common ground, and thus common feeling, between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. In this context, Mrs McAleese and the Queen had already appeared together in public at the opening of the cross-community Island of Ireland Peace Tower at Messines in Belgium in 1998. The park, the brainchild of two retired politicians, Glen Barr from Northern Ireland and Paddy Harte from the Republic of Ireland, is to promote peace in Ireland by commemorating the men and women from the Island of Ireland who lost their lives during the First World War. The park is divided into four sections representing the provinces of Ireland. The Peace Park is located in the region where the 16th (Irish) and the 36th (Ulster) Divisions fought side by side in June 1917.

## Increased awareness of history

Remembering the First World War has obliged the Irish to address how the war changed the course of Irish history, unleashing forces that still influence the politics of today. The increased awareness of the Irish aspects of the War have helped to put those forces to positive use by allowing people from the two major traditions to meet on common ground. That said, any analysis of Ireland's involvement in the First World War will be coloured by the struggle for independence.

In the summer of 1914 most minds in Ireland and Britain were not on events in far away Sarajevo, but on home rule, which now finally seemed about to happen. And the prospect had prompted the Unionist opposition to organise the Ulster Volunteer Force and to import weapons from Germany in April that year. In response, the Nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers also imported arms from Germany.

The Home Rule Bill was given the Royal Assent on the 18th September 1914 but its operation was suspended for one year or for the duration of the war when it would be reviewed with a view to securing the general consent of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

When Great Britain declared war on August 4th, 1914, there were some 20,000 Irishmen already serving in the regular British Army with another 30,000 in the first line reserve. The total army strength was 247,000 with 145,000 ex-regular reservists. In contrast to the other major European powers, Britain's military



might was based on its naval power, and the British Army relied on volunteer soldiers rather than on National Service. Thirty new divisions were formed and volunteers were assigned to new battalions of existing regiments of infantry in what was known as the New Army. But following huge losses and a decline in volunteers, conscription was eventually introduced in January 1916. It was not applied to Ireland.

John Redmond, the leader of Ireland's Nationalist Party, and who was widely expected to be the first Prime Minister of the new Irish Parliament, called on the Irish Volunteers to enlist. Irish soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force had already been in action in Flanders. The German advance through Belgium, the rumours of atrocities and refugees and the near capture of Paris had created an emotional atmosphere. The organisation split with those who followed Redmond being called the National Volunteers. About 12,000 of the 180,000 retained the Irish Volunteers title and set themselves the objective of gaining full independence for Ireland, by force if necessary.

Redmond wanted all Irish regiments organised into a single fighting unit. About 80,000 men enlisted in Ireland in the first 12 months of the war, around half of whom came from Ulster. The First New Army of 100,000 soldiers, contained the 10th (Irish) Division which was formed in late August, 1914. It had three brigades. One had regiments with bases in all four provinces. The second was based in Ulster and the third was based in the other three provinces. The 16th (Irish) Division of the Second New Army was formed in September, 1914. One brigade was from the province of Ulster. The 36th (Ulster) Division was authorised on the 28th October 1914. It was based on the formation and membership of the Ulster Volunteer Force to which a London based artillery unit was added. It contained men from all nine counties of Ulster.

Irishmen also joined Irish regiments such as the Irish Guards, the London (Irish), the Tyneside battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers and the 1st/8th (Irish) Kings Liverpool Regiment. Many also joined other English, Scottish and Welsh regiments, the Royal Artillery, the Royal Flying Corps, the Medical Corps, the Army Service Corps, and the Royal Navy. Women served as nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachment in the front line. Irish emigrants also enlisted in the armies of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and the United States.

Irish troops played a vital role from the first days of the war until the Armistice was signed. The first shot fired by the British Army in the War was discharged by Corporal E. Thomas of the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards just north of Mons on August 22nd. On the following day, Lt Maurice Dease from Mullingar, who

was serving with the Royal Fusiliers, attempted to stop the German advance into the city with his machine gun unit. He died fighting and was awarded the first posthumous Victoria Cross of the War.

After the war, returning soldiers found a changed political climate in Ireland. The election in December 1918 was a clear endorsement of Sinn Fein outside of the traditional Unionist areas. The sacrifices made in the war were sidelined in the southern provinces, whereas the losses at the Somme became part of the heritage of the new Northern Ireland.

### A shared legacy

Those who went to fight could not have envisaged the changed world that would exist in 1918. The reasons for enlisting were as varied as the individuals. Some joined out of economic necessity. Others had the hope that the experience of serving side by side against a common enemy would forge friendships that would transcend the historic differences.

Now, a century later, those differences are finally being addressed by a new generation of leaders committed to forging new friendships based on shared suffering and loss.

President Higgins, who will lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey during his visit, will continue the work of reconciliation and remembrance. As he noted last year: "We can use the experience of remembrance, if approached in an inclusive manner, with an openness to the experiences and views of others, and willingness to interrogate our own preconceptions, to transcend the historical divisions and understand more about our neighbours and in doing so, ourselves."

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Irish and British wreaths being laid at the grave of Major Willie Redmond, brother of John, who fought with Irish volunteers in the British Army during the Great War

