

## Irish Recruits in the British Armed Forces (1800-1923)

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The 1878 painting, "Listed for the Connaught Rangers: Recruiting in Ireland," by Elizabeth Southerden Thompson, Lady Butler (1846-1933), depicts a scene in rural County Kerry just after two strapping Irish country youths have "taken the Queen's shilling" and enlisted with the Connaught Rangers, an Irish line infantry regiment of the British Army. One of these recruits smokes while he walks confidently ahead, matching strides with the recruiting sergeant, while the other young man looks back at the stone farmhouse that he is leaving, perhaps for good.<sup>1</sup> This painting, which is on permanent display in the Bury Art Gallery & Museum in Greater Manchester, UK, and the numerous war memorials gracing the walls of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, recently caused me to inquire into the history of Irish soldiers serving in British armies and especially the factors that influenced Irish men during the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries to enlist in the British Army. As discussed below, Irish recruits after the Act of Union that melded Great Britain and Ireland into a United Kingdom joined the British armed forces in significant numbers during this period, even during the early years of World War I, when their lives and limbs were placed in jeopardy by enemy artillery barrages, poison gas attacks and machine gun fire. As this war developed quickly into a deadly stalemate along the Western Front during 1915, and especially after the Easter Rising in late April, 1916, the number of these enlistments began to decrease noticeably. By 1923, the year when 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland achieved self-government by securing dominion status in the British Empire, Great Britain had dissolved most of its separate Irish regiments that had traditionally recruited in Southern Ireland, including the Connaught Rangers and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers.<sup>2</sup>

### **A. The Beginnings: Irish Kerns and Gallowglasses to the Gradual Repeal of the Penal Laws (Pre-1800)**

Irish soldiers were well familiar with the battlegrounds of their homeland by the time Richard "Strongbow" de Clare and his Anglo-Norman mercenaries landed in southeast Ireland in 1170 to assist Diarmalt Mac Murchada in an internal Irish power struggle. Irish "kerns," which functioned as light infantry, and "gallowglasses," heavily-armed infantry originally from the western coast of Scotland, fought for kings and lords of Celtic Ireland during the Middle Ages, and often went abroad to serve in continental armies for pay. There exist notable mentions of these soldiers in the art and literary records of the day. For example, Albrecht Dürer produced a drawing in 1521 of these two types of Irish fighters, and Shakespeare specifically mentions them in *Macbeth*.<sup>3</sup>

Irishmen of the Roman Catholic faith were barred from serving in the British army beginning in 1607 by the infamous "Penal Laws" enacted after the "Gunpowder Plot" of 1605 and the "Flight of the Earls" from Ireland to Continental Europe. However, the American Revolution of 1776 and the emerging threat from France beginning in 1793 stimulated Parliament to revoke many of these laws during the latter half of the Eighteenth Century so as to strengthen Great Britain's armed forces.<sup>4</sup> By the effective date of the Act of Union on January 1, 1801, Irish Roman Catholics could enlist and serve in Britain's armed forces, but promotion to the higher echelons

of officer rank was limited. In the second half of the Nineteenth Century, the British Army created a spate of special Irish regiments in the British Army were created, such as the Connaught Rangers and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, as a consequence of the Childers Reforms to the British Armed Forces in 1881.

### **B. Irish Soldiers in the Napoleonic Wars: From Trafalgar to Waterloo (1800-1815)**

Irish soldiers and sailors fought in large numbers and with great valor for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in the Napoleonic Wars. These men particularly distinguished themselves at the crucial battles of Trafalgar (1805) and Waterloo (1815). In 2013, the British National Museum with assistance from the UK National Archives estimated that approximately 25% of the British sailors who fought under Lord Nelson's command off Cape Trafalgar on the Spanish coast were of Irish descent. As reported by the Irish Times,

"A quarter of his men who can be identified were Irish, according to the UK's National Maritime Museum and the UK National Archives. They have examined the surviving records for all involved in Nelson's fleet as part of a new exhibition in London which analyses the time in the 18th and 19th century when Britannia really did rule the waves. Nelson's fleet consisted of 33 ships and approximately 18,000 men, of whom records survive for about 12,000. Some 3,573 sailors came from Ireland including 893 from Dublin, 632 from Cork, 187 from Waterford, 154 from Limerick, 116 from Wexford and 112 from Antrim. There were 94 Irishmen on the flagship *HMS Victory* on which Nelson lost his life during the battle. There were 77 Ryans, 59 Murphys and 32 McCarthys involved."<sup>5</sup>

That brave performance on the seas was surpassed by Irish infantry nine years later when forces under the commands of Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington, and Prussian General Gebhard von Blücher put paid to Napoleon's last attempt to achieve hegemony in Europe at the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815. It was estimated in 2015, the 200th anniversary of that historic battle, that 30% of the Duke of Wellington's forces were Irish:

"Lieut Col Harvey's book *A Bloody Day - The Irish at Waterloo* will be published this Thursday, which marks the bicentenary of the battle that ended Napoleon's career and ushered in a long period of peace in western Europe. He estimates that 8,500 of the Duke of Wellington's 28,000 British soldiers, including Wellington himself, or 30 per cent of the total, were Irish. Based on a casualty rate of 25 per cent it can be ascertained that at least 2,000 Irishmen were killed or wounded at the Battle of Waterloo."<sup>6</sup>

One of the first instances of heroism by a British soldier at Waterloo was performed by an Irishman, James Graham, who hailed from the town of Clones in County Monaghan. Napoleon began the battle with an attack on Wellington's right flank, focusing on the Chateau d'Hougoumont, which was protected by an enclosed and high stone wall. The repulse of this attempt by the Coldstream Guards that day has been labeled as "decisive" by one Irish historian, who wrote as follows:

“The battle of Waterloo can best be understood in terms of five distinct phases. It began after 11am on the morning of 18 June. In the first phase the French attacked Wellington’s right flank at the farm at Hougoumont. This was a crucial strategic location, as capturing it would allow Napoleon to outmanoeuvre Wellington, and the French failure to break through the gates proved decisive.”<sup>7</sup>

During their assault, the French were able to open the gates to the chateau only once, when a number of their soldiers forced their way into the walled enclosure against stiff resistance. James Graham and a Scotsman, James MacDonnell, worked together to close these gates and lock them, after which the French soldiers trapped in this area were killed and the attack was repulsed.<sup>8</sup> At another point in the fighting, the 27th Foot Inniskilling Fusiliers, an Irish contingent consisting of 747 men, held an important strategic position in front of Wellington’s center and, by forming into squares, were able to repulse a ferocious charge by Napoleon’s cavalry. Wellington recognized this gallant group afterwards by proudly stating that “they saved the center of my line.”<sup>9</sup> Although the Duke of Wellington often made disparaging remarks about Irish Catholics, he was remarkably heavy in his praise of those in his army at Waterloo. He made these comments when, as Prime Minister, his party supported the Catholic Emancipation Bill of 1829, which was enacted by Parliament and became law. At that time, Wellington famously declared then before the House of Lords that “it was mainly due to the Irish Catholics that we owe our preeminence in our military career.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Napoleon was reported to have praised the defense of the 27th Foot Inniskilling Fusiliers when he remarked that “that regiment with the castles on their caps composed the most obstinate mules I ever saw; they don’t know when they are beaten.”<sup>11</sup>

### **C. From the First Opium War to the Anglo-Boer War (1839-1902)**

During the 103 years between the Battle of Waterloo and the 1918 Armistice, thousands of Irish residents, Catholic and Protestant alike, continued to enroll in the British Army and Navy, and many of those served with high distinction in their respective lines of service, in times of peace and war. Theatres of war and other armed conflict during this time included the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-1842), the three Anglo-Burmese Wars, the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Sepoy Mutiny in India (1857-1858), the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), and the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902).<sup>12</sup>

It was during this interregnum that Sir William Francis Butler (1838-1910), the husband of the painter of “Listed by the Connaught Rangers” described above, authored in 1878 an important pamphlet entitled “A Plea for the Peasant,” describing the large numbers of Irish recruited into Great Britain’s armies after 1800 and containing a plea for the improvement of the living conditions of the Irish, Scotch and English peasantry, because they formed the backbone of the United Kingdom’s armies.<sup>13</sup> Sir William was a Roman Catholic born and raised in County Tipperary and educated at Tullabeg College in County Offaly. Later, he enlisted in the British Army and eventually attained the rank of Lieutenant General. During his long military career. Butler fought, *inter alia*, at the Battle of Tel El Kabir, in the Ashanti Wars and in the Anglo-Zulu

War. Butler's *Autobiography* was published posthumously in 1911 by William Constable and Company, Ltd., with the assistance of Butler's daughter, Eileen. Notably, one of Sir William's earliest recollections recorded therein was his chance and enlivening encounter with the political prisoner, Daniel O'Connell, in June, 1844 in Dublin's Richmond Bridewell Prison.

#### **D. The Beginnings of Organized Irish Resistance to British Recruitment, Home Rule and the Outbreak of the Great War (1899-1914)**

The Anglo-Boer War triggered off in Ireland strong resistance to this conflict and to British attempts to recruit Irish men to fight to retain their independence against what was criticized as an imperialistic land grab in the "Scramble for Africa." One of the first advocates of this resistance was the ubiquitous Maude Gonne, who spread this protest among the Roman Catholic clergy in Ireland and Irish nationalist organizations, such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Protest activities ranged from attempts to disrupt army recruiting efforts to harassing Irish recruits in uniform on the streets. This resistance did not taper off but strengthened and broadened as the storm clouds of war began to appear on the horizon.<sup>14</sup>

Concurrently, the movement for Home Rule in Ireland, which meant self-rule by the Irish in "domestic" matters via a separate parliament elected by the Irish people, was at the forefront of Irish since the grant of the vote to certain classes of the Irish in 1829. From 1782 through 1800, Ireland enjoyed such a parliament, nicknamed "Grattans Parliament," which was dissolved on January 1, 1801, the effective date of the Act of Union. In 1833, four years after the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Bill, Daniel O'Connell began his agitation for Home Rule, which would recreate a separate parliament in Ireland to legislate concerning internal Irish matters. O'Connell's attempts ultimately failed<sup>15</sup>, but the issue did not simply go away. It returned with a vengeance beginning in 1870 and ultimately succeeded in the passage of legislation by the British Parliament in 1912<sup>16</sup> and received Royal Assent, to become effective in 1914. However, World War I intervened before the planned effective date of the Act and Home Rule in Ireland was suspended until the completion of the war.

On August 4, 1914, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, the United Kingdom declared war on Germany on account of its refusal to remove its troops from neutral Belgium. Although conscription into the British Army was in effect for the rest of Great Britain and its Empire, Ireland was exempted from this practice for fear of stirring up nationalist ardor. Nevertheless, Great Britain increased its recruiting efforts in Ireland in order to satisfy the need to supply soldiers to oppose the German armies on the continent, primarily in Belgium and France. The Irish Parliamentary Party led by John Redmond, a Home Rule supporter, strongly encouraged Irish enlistment to defeat the Central Powers and, at first, these efforts at voluntary enlistment experienced success. Many people in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe expected the conflict to be short and decisive, on the pattern of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, which lasted only seven months and ended with France's surrender. Because of advances in weaponry and tactics since then, e.g., rapid-firing machine guns, long-distance artillery, and anti-personnel weapons including poison gas, shrapnel shells, barbed wire and trench warfare, such a quick disposition was never in the cards.

### **E. Stalemate on the Western Front, the Easter Rising of 1916, and Resistance to Conscription Attempts in 1918**

During 1915 and 1916, the war on the Western Front was locked in stalemate. In places like Ypres, Verdun and on the Somme, the day-to-day attacks and counterattacks across the No-Mans-Lands resulted in massive casualties and were essentially futile. The seaborne invasion in 1915 and early 1916 of the Gallipoli Peninsula near what was then the Ottoman Empire's capital of Constantinople was a complete failure that resulted in heavy casualties to the Irish regiments that participated. If troop and trench positions were advanced in one troop movement, they were often yielded shortly afterwards in an enemy counterattack. These sorry battlefield conditions began to disenchant the Irish populace as they dragged on and on, which thereby made British army recruiting efforts more and more difficult.

To complicate this situation even further, on April 24, 1916, an armed group of Irish nationalists took over significant parts of the center of Dublin and in some scattered places throughout the Island, e.g. Enniscorthy and, to some extent, Athenry. To address the Dublin rising, the British imposed martial law, moved army reinforcements into Dublin and placed a British gunboat in the River Liffey to bombard the city center. After being pushed back the GPO and some other areas in the city, the rebels surrendered and were promptly imprisoned. After summary courts-martial proceedings conducted by the British, 14 of the Rising's leaders were summarily shot in the courtyard of Kilmanham Jail, including the seriously wounded James Connolly, between May 3rd and May 12th. Many other armed participants in the Rising were imprisoned and ultimately released; among this group was Michael Collins.

The immediate reaction of Dubliners to the Rising was bewilderment at first. Normal citizens had no advance notice of the rebellion and did not know quite what to make of it at first. As the news spread and normal life in Dublin was disrupted, the initial reactions of Dubliners included anger at the trouble caused and worry concerning the repercussions. There were many reports during the conflict of Irish soldiers' wives cursing the rebels because of the perceived threat that the British Army may interrupt and even cease their periodic "separation payments" which kept their families afloat while their husbands were in France. After the executions mentioned above, public opinion in Dublin and throughout Ireland experienced a sea-change on account of what the Irish perceived to be a bloody and cruel overreaction by the British. This shift in opinion did not aid and indeed hurt future efforts by the British Army to enlist Irish recruits. In April, 1918, the British attempted to impose conscription in Ireland, but this was fiercely resisted by the Irish, especially the Roman Catholic clergy, trade unions and nationalist political parties, thereby earning the title of "The Conscription Crisis of 1918." The end result was that no Irish man was drafted into the British armed forces during the war, although many Irish men enlisted, especially during the early years of the conflict.<sup>17</sup>

### **F. The War of Independence and the Creation of the Irish Free State (1919-1922)**

The first shots in the Irish War of Independence (1919-1922) were fired on January 21, 1919 by two Irish nationalists on a lonely country road near Soloheadbeg, County Tipperary. Their targets were two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary who were guarding a cart of gelignite being delivered to a nearby quarry for blasting purposes. The bullets found their mark, killing both. Thus, the Irish War of Independence began, which was to last until 1921, when the Anglo-Irish Treaty establishing the Irish Free State was signed on December 6th of that year. In March of the next year, the British Army issued orders dissolving regiments that had previously recruited heavily in the south of Ireland. Concurrently on March 31, 1922, the Irish Free State (Agreement) Act was enacted by Parliament and became law, thereby officially giving rebirth to “a nation once again.”<sup>18</sup>

### **G. Conclusion: What Were They Thinking?**

There seems to be little debate over the overall brave performance of Irish soldiers and sailors in the British Armed Forces from 1800 through 1922. Of course, many of these volunteers were descendants of long-established, Anglo-Irish families of the Protestant confession and who held strong political, economic and religious connections with England and Scotland. Many of these came from families with a strong military tradition. But what of the Irish Roman Catholics who were recruited by these forces during this 122-year period, many of whom were fair to middling small farmers well beyond the metropolis of Dublin? What stimulated them to enlist and place their lives at risk to fight for an empire that had broken faith on several occasions with the Catholic majority in Ireland during this time?

The historical record, which lacks comprehensive and reliable, public opinion polling data for this time, contains evidence of what were likely the primary stimuli for this enlistment. One of these, and perhaps the strongest, was simple patriotism—these Irish felt a close bond with Great Britain and elected to defend their homeland against foreign enemies.<sup>19</sup> Another factor at play was the desire to obtain a living wage and even a useful trade to rely upon after service terms were completed. There is also evidence in the historical record that, especially after more Irish regiments were created after the Childers Reforms in 1881, groups of friends joined these units together as an element of their camaraderie. Others enlisted to escape personal troubles and disappointments, e.g., blacklisting by employers (especially after the “Dublin Lockout” of 1913),<sup>20</sup> family strife, broken engagements, fatherhood outside of marriage, etc. Finally with many recruits, there was also the desire for challenge and adventure, along with the romance of traveling to foreign lands and even wearing military garb.<sup>21</sup> As described above, however, strong social pressures on potential recruits were exerted by certain Irish groups to discourage enlistment, especially after the Easter Rising in 1916. By 1918 and the Conscription Crisis, enlistment in the British Armed Forces by Irish Catholics had substantially diminished.

1 Lady Butler was a renowned painter of army life and especially battle scenes, and a number of her paintings are in the Royal Collection, British museums and private collections. Her most famous works include “Calling the Roll After an Engagement, Crimea,” “The Defence of Rorkes Drift,” “The Dawn of Waterloo,” and the mournful, “Remnants of an Army.” Her husband, Sir William Francis Butler was a Roman Catholic who had earned the rank of Lieutenant General in the British Army, had served in many foreign conflicts and advocated the improvement of living conditions in rural Ireland as a means to improve the health and welfare of future Irish recruits.

2 David Murphy, *Irish Regiments in the World Wars*, p. 30, Osprey Publishing Company, Oxford (2007). For an excellent overview of this topic, see Peter Karsten, “Irish Soldiers in the British Army: 1792-1922: Suborned or Subordinate?,” 17 *J. Social History* at pp. 31-64 (1983) (hereinafter cited as *Karsten*).

3 See, e.g., William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 2.

4 See, e.g., Robert E. Burns, *The Irish Popery Laws: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Legislation and Behavior*, 24 *The Review of Politics*, p. 485 (Oct. 1962) (available on JSTOR). See also *Penal Laws*, accessible at [https://members.pcug.org.au/~ppmay/acts/penal\\_laws.htm](https://members.pcug.org.au/~ppmay/acts/penal_laws.htm).

5 Ronan McGreevy, “England Expects, with a little help from Nelson’s Irish,” *Irish Times* (October 15, 2013), accessible at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/england-expects-with-a-little-help-from-nelson-s-irish-1.1560559>. See also Claire Heald, “Were they one of Nelson’s men?,” *BBC News* (June 25, 2005), accessible at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/4110478.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4110478.stm).

6 Ronan McGreevy, “Just how many Irish fought at the Battle of Waterloo?,” *Irish Times* (June 18, 2015), accessible at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/just-how-many-irish-fought-at-the-battle-of-waterloo-1.2254271>.

7 Patrick Geoghegan, “A Battle of Giants: Waterloo, Wellington and Ireland,” *History Ireland*, Volume 23, Issue 3 (May/June 2015), accessible at <https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/a-battle-of-giants-waterloo-wellington-and-ireland/>.

8 Frank McNally, “The man in the gap—An Irishman’s Diary about the Clones native who saved the day at Waterloo,” *The Irish Times* (May 30, 2015), accessible at <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/the-man-in-the-gap-an-irishman-s-diary-about-the-clones-native-who-saved-the-day-at-waterloo-1.2231217>.

9 Brendan Farrell, “Irish Central” (June 18, 2019), accessible at <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/battle-waterloo-irish>.

10 *Id.*

11 *Id.*

12 See generally, Desmond Bowen and Jean Bowen, *Heroic Option: The Irish in the British Army*, Pen & Sword Books, Barnsley, United Kingdom (2005) for a review of these various conflicts and Irish participation in them. See also David Murphy, *Ireland and the Crimean War, Four Courts Press, Dublin (2014)*, along with an article written by this author about this particular war: <https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/ireland-and-the-crimean-war-1854-6/>.

13 Sir William Francis Butler, “A Plea for the Peasant,” contained in a collection of his short works, *Far Out: Rovings Retold*, Wm Ibister, Ltd., London (1881) and accessible at <https://archive.org/details/faroutrovingsret00butl/page/242>.

14 These protests against recruitment are described in detail in Terence Denman, *The Red Livery of Shame: The Campaign Against Army Recruitment in Ireland (1899-1914)*, 29 *Irish Historical Studies*, pp. 208-233 (Nov. 1994).

15 The Liberator’s persistent attempts over ten years to secure Home Rule and their demise in 1843 with his calling off, in the face of British resistance, of a “monster rally” near Dublin in support of Home Rule are described in John Dorney, “Today in Irish History, The Repeal Meeting at Clontarf is Banned, 8 October 1843,” (Oct. 8, 2011), accessible at <http://www.theirishstory.com/2011/10/08/today-in-irish-history-october-8-1843-the-repeal-meeting-at-clontarf-is-banned/#.XOZDJ635yu4>.

16 Two earlier Home Rule Bills were introduced by Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1886 and 1893, but they failed to pass. The first bill was defeated in the House of Commons and the second was rejected by the House of Lords after approval by the House of Commons. A fourth Home Rule Bill was enacted by Parliament in 1920, but only became effective with respect to Northern Ireland, when a separate parliament was established at Stormont. The 26 southern counties were later granted dominion status as the “Irish Free State,” effectively dividing the island between two polities.

17 It has been estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 Irish served in the British armed forces during the Great War and that of the approximately 680,000 British fatalities, Irish men constituted between 40,000 and 49,000 of that total. Approximately 12.3% of Irish men of service age actually took up arms and 57% of these were Roman Catholics. Geoffrey R. Searle, *A New England?: Peace and War 1886-1918*, p. 753, Clarendon Press, Oxford (2004).

18 Title of song written by Young Ireland founder, Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-1845), which song was published in 1844. The song was later popularized by the Wolfe Tones and the Dubliners.

19 See, e.g., *Karsten, supra.*, at p. 31.

20 "Fitz," one of the primary characters in James Plunkett's sprawling novel of Dublin during the Lockout, *Strumpet City* (1969), was forced to volunteer to fight in the British Army to feed his young family after being blacklisted by his former employer.

21 In "I Knock at the Door," the first volume of Sean O'Casey's *Autobiography*, Pan Books Limited, London, at pp. 67-70 (1971), the Irish playwright recounts the excitement of his two brothers, Michael and Tom, upon their enlistment in the British Army and the anticipated fulfillment of their desires for glamour and adventure.