

Green Fields of France

by Michael Joyce

“The Green fields of France”

The circumstances and feelings which gave rise to Eric Bogles writing and composing of the Green fields of France would reflect our own experiences and sentiments if we visited war cemeteries while on holiday in France. This song makes among others the important contribution of helping us to identify the obscene casualty figures as representing myriad personal and family tragedies, not at all dissimilar to that of Willie McBride and his family.

The statistics which deal with World War I are just so unreal and unimaginable that they leave no impression – no personal impact. Somehow or other they almost come between us and our appreciation and understanding of what really happened.

To fully appreciate the catastrophe

Is it possible to see each one as a personal and family tragedy with not alone the immediate loss and pain but also the prelude of terror and suffering and the postscript of mental breakdown, unemployment, the feeling of being ignored and abandoned?

There were many Irish men in the “non-Irish” Regiments of the army and the military statisticians found it difficult to determine in all just how many served. There were, however, three identifiable Divisions: the 36th (Ulster) Division and the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions. The casualty lists revealed a considerable mixing of unionists/Nationalists, Protestants and Catholics. Because of the way Regiments were organised on a geographical

(County) basis information on casualties and the progress of the war flooded home with the returning wounded despite the propaganda and optimistic reports from the Army Commanders.

The dreaded telegrams following the 5,000 casualties in the 36th Ulster Division on the first day of the Battle of the Somme plunged whole towns into mourning, grief and tears.

The Soldiers – Who Are They?

Examination of the Rolls of Honour tell us how absurdly young some of the volunteers soldiers were. John Condon from Waterford had not attained 14 years when he was killed in Flanders. His family only discovered he was in Belgium when they were notified by the British Army after he went missing in action on the 24th May 1915. His body was not discovered until 10 years later by a farmer and his remains were laid to rest in Poelcappelle Cemetery near Ypres. In February 2008 his grave was visited for the first time by his family. John’s grave is known to be the most visited soldiers’ grave in that country because he is regarded as a great hero by the Belgians. Janice Turner recently went to France with her 12 year old son to retrace the steps of her grandfather a veteran of World War I who never spoke of his experiences but would never take jam because while in the trenches they had used it to sweeten their tea. Janice on a visit to one cemetery saw a grave where a father and son lay buried side by side – a boy of 15 years and a man of 67.

The Irish Independent August 11th 1916 carried a photograph of Lance Corporal Miller of the Royal Munster Fusiliers

*Well, how do you do, Private William McBride,
Do you mind if I sit down here by your graveside?
And rest for a while in the warm summer sun,
I've been walking all day, and I'm nearly done.
And I see by your gravestone you were only 19
When you joined the glorious fallen in 1916,
Well, I hope you died quick and I hope you died clean
Or, Willie McBride, was it slow and obscene?*

*Did they beat the drum slowly, did they play the pipes lowly?
Did the rifles fire o'er you as they lowered you down?
Did the bugles sound The Last Post in chorus?
Did the pipes play the Flowers of the Forest?*

*And did you leave a wife or a sweetheart behind
In some loyal heart is your memory enshrined?
And, though you died back in 1916
To that loyal heart are you forever 19?
Or are you a stranger without even a name,
Forever enshrined behind some glass pane,
In an old photograph, torn and tattered and stained,
And fading to yellow in a brown leather frame?*

*The sun's shining down on these green fields of France:
The warm wind blows gently, and the red poppies dance.
The trenches have vanished long under the plow;
No gas and no barbed wire, no guns firing now.
But here in this graveyard that's still, No Man's Land
The countless white crosses in mute witness stand
To man's blind indifference to his fellow man.
And a whole generation who were butchered and damned.*

*And I can't help but wonder, now Willie McBride,
Do all those who lie here know why they died?
Did you really believe them when they told you “The Cause?”
Did you really believe that this war would end wars?
Well the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame
The killing, the dying, it was all done in vain,
For Willie McBride, it all happened again,
And again, and again, and again, and again.*

<i>Number of British Casualties at the Somme</i>	<i>419,654</i>
<i>Number of British Dead 1914 – 1918</i>	<i>908,371</i>
<i>Number of Irish Men who died 1914 – 1918</i>	<i>49,400</i>
<i>Number of dead French, German, Austrian, Hungarian</i>	<i>4,331,500</i>

who at that time was thought to be the youngest surviving soldier in the Irish Brigade “He was 15 years and some months and had been in the trenches in France close on a year.”

Who were these men?

Gilbert Rogers (the Official War Artist) suggests “that these men – or perhaps more accurately these boys who fought in the great war were not supermen but ordinary citizens who were caught up in a war they really did not comprehend.....”

Kevin Myers in an Irish Times Irishman’s Diary,

“we do not do justice to the men of the Great War by visiting our vocabularies and 21st Century standards on them. They were 19th Century men with largely unquestioning acceptance of what life had in store. Indeed there is little evidence that they felt it wrong that deserters should be shot.” “In as much as they had opinions on anything They probably sensed that the short straw awaited them all sooner or later : the best way of coping was by being true to their mates, covering for one another in front of the N.C.O’s and officers and sharing whatever spoils came their way.”

“The Suffering, The Sorrow...”

Willie McBride died on the 22nd of April 1916. We know from the “The History of the 36th Ulster Division” the conditions he and his comrades were suffering on that day –

“On the 22nd and 23rd the infantry took up the positions it was to occupy during the bombardment ; the 9th Inniskillings in the right section of Thiepval Wood, the 11th Rifles in the left, and the 9th Irish Fusiliers in the Hamel trenches. These troops had a purgatory to endure. For the most part in the narrow slit assembly trenches, with the rain pouring steadily down upon them, they were under furious German bombardments that wreathed the wood in smoke and flame, and made the crashing of great trees the accompaniment to the roar of bursting shells.”

Kevin Myers tells us

“This is November, might I suggest that you drive out to the country, walk into a field and stand absolutely still for 10 minutes. That should do it – and then remember that the men of the Great War would spend two unbroken weeks in the front line. Two weeks without any

heaters or fires or dry feet or proper waterproof clothing, just wool and flannel and hobnailed leather, with absolutely no exercise by which to stay warm. Two weeks almost without moving as the wind blew down from the North Sea bearing sleet, snow or rain or endless penetrating damp. Two weeks immersed in bitter wet loam and their own cold excrement. Two weeks without sleep year after year after year”.

Again in the “Story of the Two Irish Divisions”:- we are told

“The story is black in tragedy, they were left in the line for 16 days before the Somme Battle and were shelled and gassed incessantly as they crouched in wet ditches. Every day groups of men were blown to bits until the ditches were bloody and the living lay by the corpses of their comrades.”

“If they had had the power to dry up miles and miles of waist deep mud there would have been some sense in it. As it was the Ypres battlefield just represented one gigantic slough of despond into which floundered battalions brigades and divisions of infantry without end, to be shot to pieces or drowned, until at last and with immeasurable slaughter we had gained a few miles of liquid mud which were of no use to anyone.”

(Irish Voices from the Great War)

One British divisional history recorded that two companies which had taken part in the Somme assault of November 18th had disappeared entirely being overwhelmed by machine gunfire.

“Once seen the landscape is an unforgettable one in this neighbourhood of villages meadows, woods and fields – there was literally not a

bush or the tiniest blade of grass to be seen, every hands breadth of ground has been churned up again and again, trees have been uprooted, smashed and ground to touchwood ----- hills have been levelled and arable land made a desert?”. (Ernst Junger – A German Soldier)

Despite the slow but progressive British Advance, poor weather – snow – brought a halt to the Somme offensive on the 18th November – The British and French attack had gained 12 kilometres of ground resulting in “420,000 estimated” British casualties.

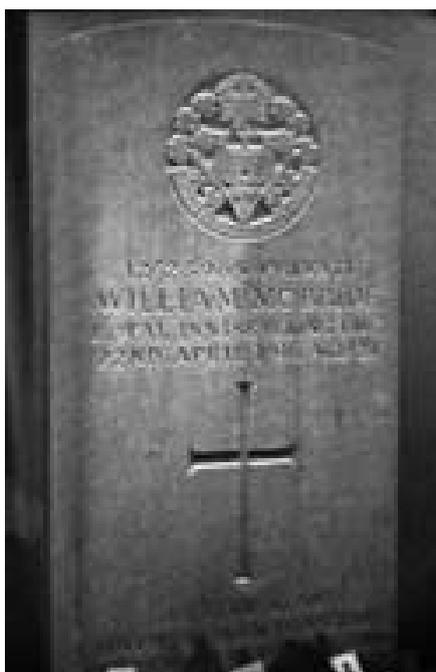
At the Battle of Albert, four of the five Battalions of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers lost more than half their strength. The five battalions combined casualty figure was 2,208 (from the Inniskillings).

Who Was Willie McBride?

The song has had various names “Willie McBride”, “No Man’s Land”, and “The Green fields of France”, and was composed by Eric Bogle, a Scottish singer from Peebles who had immigrated to Australia. The change of title of the song to “The Green fields of France” was attributed to “The Fureys” by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair who nominated the words as his favourite peace poem. The song is a powerful indictment of war and has been recorded many times since it was written in 1975. A version by Makem and Clancy is the largest selling folk single in Irish recording history.

In the 9th Battalion there were three McBrides – one has no known grave and two are buried at Authuille Cemetery – one McBride is identified by the single initial “w” and the other by the full name “William McBride. W J Canning when writing “A Wheen of Medals” the history of the “9th Service Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers contacted Eric Bogle, the songs composer who replied confirming that the grave he sat by was that of William McBride of the “Tyrones” in the 9th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers who was the son of Joseph and Lena McBride, Roan Cottage, Lislea, Armagh (Commonwealth Graves Commission).

Willie McBride lived in Roan Cottage,



The grave of Willie McBride Autnuice military cemetery - The Somme

Private collection

Lislea, Armagh, attended the Temple Presbyterian Church (1st Keady) and went to Crosskeys National School where Miss Adamson was Principal. He served his time in the shoe trade, firstly as an apprentice in Aitkens, Cootehill. He then went to Irvinestown for a short time before moving to Allingham, North



Willie McBride

Street, Belfast. He enlisted in the army in Belfast nine months before his death. Willie had 3 brothers, one of whom went to Canada, his sister, Lena, sang in the choir at the Temple Church where his service in the 1914-18 War is commemorated on the War Memorial.

At the time of his death he was acting as Orderly for 2nd Lieutenant Kelly who was wounded shortly after William was killed. The funeral was attended by the Chaplain and an Officer from his Company was present on behalf of Lieutenant Kelly who was in hospital.

Mrs Lena McBride was initially notified by Lieutenant Colonel Ricardo the Commanding Officer of the 9th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers that William had been killed in the trenches by shell fire. Subsequently she received from his Platoon Commander Lieutenant Kelly the letter below.

John A Kelly, 2nd Lieut. 9th Royal Inniskilling Fus.

Dear Mrs McBride

I wrote to you on the 24th telling you of you

son's health, but I am sorry to say that owing to some mistake your address in our books was Roan Lodge, Lislea, Omagh. Your nephew, who is in the 9th Royal Irish Fusiliers, came over a few nights ago and I was able to get your correct address. Since, writing to you, I was given the enclosed photograph by an engineer officer. It was found near your son's body, and was thought to belong to an officer of the Royal Engineers who was killed by the same shell as your son. I recognise it as being very like your son, and probably was his. I need not tell you how much we all miss your son, and I am pleased to be able to tell you that I had recommended him to my company commander for bravery in carrying a message under very heavy shell fire on the night of the 10th of March.

You may rest assured that he died in a manner which will always to be an example to his comrades – doing their duty.

Yours sincerely,

John A Kelly, 2nd Lieut.

9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

Many recruits enlisted for the highest of motives, “The Freedom of Small Nations”, “The Liberation of Belgium” and the post war attainment of their political ambitions. As always has been the case many joined up through a sense of adventure.

The promise of early success “Home for Christmas”, the excitement, adventure and comradeship were all attractions for the teenage recruits of whom the Willie McBride in the song was typical. The recruiting Literature of the time exhorted new recruits to “Join With Their Chums”.

As well as the dedication, patriotism, bravery and sacrifice associated with the ‘Great’ War there is a sadness “at the lost generation” and the almost incidental cruelties where, for example, in the 6 hours after the signing of the Armistice and before the last shot was fired 863 soldiers from the British Army would die.

What is an appropriate epitaph for the lost youth their bravery and suffering? There is something haunting about Eric Bogle’s singing of the Greenfields of France which many regard as an appropriate 20th Century hymn of Peace. It in some way complements the work of the poets of the 1914-1918 War such as Francis Ledwidge, also a member of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, a countryman like Willie McBride who also died

too soon. Following the death of a young friend Ledwidge wrote.

*He will not come and still I wait
He whistles at another gate
Where angels listen. Ah, I know
He will not come, yet if I go
How shall I know he did not pass
Bare footed in the flowery grass
The world is calling, I must go
How shall I know he did not pass
Bare footed in the shining grass*



Roan cottage, Lislea, Armagh., his birth place

Acknowledgements

Mr Eric Bogle (composer – The Greenfields of France) Mr Mike Roden – Aftermath Publications

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Ulster Gazette May 1916

An Irishman’s Diary (Irish Times – Kevin Myers)

Miss Florence Nicholson

Mr Trevor Geary

The Kirk Session, 1st Keady Presbyterian Church

“The History of the 36th Ulster Divisions”

“Irish Voices from The Great War”

“The Story of the Two Irish Divisions”

“The Irish on the Somme”

Mrs Isobel Grimes

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The Staff of the Irish and Local Studies Library, Armagh