

Irish Soldiers in the British Army

"Irishmen are known to be the bravest race in the world if her [Queen Victoria] leaders ever turn with cruelty on the Irish race I will be the first to raise my sword to fight against her." A Galway lad included this emphatic qualifier in his 1898 enlistment letter to the local British Army recruiting officer. This young Irishman's conflict of enthusiasm to serve in the British Army with an unwavering loyalty to Mother Ireland makes a student of Irish history wonder why so many young Irishmen over the centuries fought for England. Who were these volunteers? How many? Why volunteer? What conflicts of loyalty were faced? How did the volunteers respond?



The despotic "Penal Laws" of the 17th century (see The Hedgemaster February-March and April-May 2007 and the archives at irish-society.org) had excluded Catholics from England's military service. Then, in the early 1790s, England felt threatened by the probability of war with France following the French revolution and determined a strengthening of her military was essential. This led to an initial relaxing and, in 1799, the complete lifting of the Penal Law ban to British Army service. The response was a flood of Catholic volunteers to the army ranks.

As to who and in what numbers were these Irish volunteers, early on they were young men of meager income, from rural areas, farmers, weavers, "navvies" or laborers; many were Catholic. These new recruits were used in battle against their countrymen during Wolfe Tone's United Irish Uprising of 1798. Successor recruits later participated in enforcing cruel evictions and poteen raids across the countryside. By 1815 some 159,000 Irishmen had joined the British service prompting Daniel O'Connell, the much celebrated "Catholic Emancipator," to complain that Britain was "taking away our native army from us." Those soldiers, however, did willingly enlist. By 1830 over 42% of all non-officers in the *entire* Army were Irish born. The officer ranks would be of English birth or Anglo-Irish aristocracy, overwhelmingly Protestant, while Catholic volunteers to the rank and file grew to predominance by 1868. The mid 19th century witnessed new Irish patriotic movements such as the Young Irelanders of 1848 and later the Fenian Rising of 1867-68. The British Army in Ireland, with considerable numbers of Catholics in its ranks, was called to suppress these patriotic movements, once again pitting Irish against Irish. An example of one potential conflict of loyalties played out during the Fenian Rising. John Devoy, one of the heralded leaders of the Fenian movement, reportedly told of administering the Fenian oath to over 7,000 soldiers, more than one third of the total British force in the country. With this suborned support the Rising would surely succeed, except that the expected manpower advantage was offset by military intelligence's use of oft-cursed informers and the subsequent redeployment of suspect units to overseas garrisons. Devoy's action emphasized the inherent conflict of loyalties faced by soldiers. Later, in the First World War, there would be more examples of this same test.

WWI drew Irish volunteers from all trades, professions and social strata. The Anglo-Irish gentry "flocked to the colours" following the calling of "*noblesse oblige*," serving, of course, as officers. Countrywide recruiting events witnessed nationalist demonstrations against enlistments resulting in fewer but not an insignificant number of Catholic volunteers. Contrasting war and peace time enlistments, Catholic volunteers were proportionately greater in peace time and lesser in war years. A combination of nationalistic loyalty and pressures against war time enlistments would account for this Catholic / Protestant volunteerism disparity.



To the question of why Irishmen joined the British Army, Peter Karsten in his research paper, "Irish Soldiers in the British Army, 1792-1922," presents many readily understandable reasons. Foremost was economic opportunity since most volunteers were of minimal means. Regular pay, daily sustenance, medical services, pension benefits, and post-service government jobs were strong inducements. Next was the spirit of adventure. Historical tales covering the Flight of the Earls; the Wild Geese; the Irish in the American Civil War; the San Patricios Mexican War venture; and more such military enterprises testify to the spirit of adventure common to the Irish. One tale of appealing to this Irish attraction took place at a

County Clare recruiting rally in the 1790s. The organizers spoke of “the glorious prospect of returning to Ireland loaded with SPANISH GOLD” for service in the West Indies. Such recruiting efforts may very well account for the Irish names associated with that part of the world. Over the years enlistments became more common leading to family traditions of military service, yet another reason for joining the British Army. Lastly, and still true in modern times, young men joined simply “to be with me pals.”

These Irish soldiers faced many conflicts of loyalty. WWI presented several examples of such conflicts particularly against a backdrop of the thrust for Home Rule, the Easter Rising of 1916, the Irish War of Independence (1919-21), and the Irish Civil War (1922–23). Ireland provided an astounding 300,000 men to the English Army in WWI. Terribly, some 49,000 (16%) lost their lives and many more were maimed. Ulster Province accounted for 51% of the volunteers while the predominantly Catholic Provinces (Leinster, Munster, and Connaught) supplied 49%. The story of Irish soldiers fighting for the British in WWI is powerfully told in Tom Phelan’s novel *The Canal Bridge*.



An early conflict at the time of the “War to End All Wars” occurred when John Redmond, Member of Parliament and heroic advocate for Home Rule, urged Irishmen to volunteer for British Army service. Those who followed his call were booed by nationalist adherents as they boarded ships bound for the battlefields of France; yet, they marched on. A notable incident occurred when soldiers of the Irish Guard regiment, believing they were to be left behind as the First Battalion embarked for France, according to Karsten, “stormed headquarters in a riotous fashion to demand participation.” Tom Kettle and Francis Ledwidge were Irish-Catholic enlistees, from strongly nationalist families, who also followed Redmond’s call to war service. Each wrote to friends describing opportunities to abandon army service in favor of the nationalist cause for Ireland’s independence. Ledwidge wrote, “It is against my principles to desert” and Kettle told of “having two chances to leave my comrades in arms... and preferring to stay with them.” Both died in battle choosing commitment to oath over the cause of nationalism. Conversely, a significant example of nationalistic fervor was James Connolly, a

martyred leader of the 1916 Rising. He had earlier served in the British Army, and in the midst of the “Great War” he chose to use this time of British preoccupation in France to strike a blow for Irish independence. There was also the lesser known plan of the zealous patriot Roger Casement to form an anti-England “Irish Brigade” from a Germany based prisoner of war camp; Casement was run out of camp by the vast majority of Irish POWs who subsequently wrote to the Kaiser declaring: “in addition to being Irish Catholics we have the honour to be British soldiers.” Over the years there were reports of mutinous behavior related to conflict of loyalties by some Irish soldiers but the vast majority was considered to be good soldiers, fine pals, and cooperative to military order by their comrades in arms and the officer corps. One “mutiny” of soldiers serving in India at the time of Ireland’s War of Independence (1919-21) had some typical Irish humor to it. After the mutiny was quelled the offenders were placed under guard. Some mutineers “managed to slip away from their guards ... walk eight miles to a canteen, steal some food and cigarettes and then return to the guardhouse.” Lighthearted as this may read, one soldier was tried and executed for his role in leading an assault on a weapon’s storage hut.

A final note on this conflict of loyalty to the cause of Irish independence or to one’s personal oath of enlistment involved Michael O’Leary. Michael was Irish-Catholic, born to a nationalist supportive Cork family. He joined the Army in 1914 and rose to the rank of Sergeant followed by a battlefield commission to Lieutenant for his valor in France. Sergeant O’Leary received the Victoria Cross for single handedly overrunning two German machine gun positions, killing or capturing ten enemy soldiers. His portrait and deed of valor were used on a recruiting poster prominent in display at volunteer rallies throughout the country. Such recruiting rallies met with fierce disruptions from nationalist advocates. Happily, O’Leary survived the war and enjoyed an active life for many years, including British military service in WWII.

All in all, Irishmen who enlisted in the British Army served well, dealt with conflicts of loyalty, experienced adventure, economic opportunity, and recognition. Too many faced the horrors of war; too many were maimed; and, too many died, especially in the errantly labeled "War to End All Wars."

(Written by Dan McPartland, September 2011)

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