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Catherine Wynne

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Soldier Stories: The Irish in the Army from the Late Nineteenth Century to the First World War

CATHERINE WYNNE*

University of Hull, UK

Email: c.wynne@hull.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

By drawing on soldiers' writings and their broader cultural representations, this article enables new ways of seeing Irish soldier identity as socially and politically mobile. Using Lady Butler's famous 'Listed for the Connaught Rangers: Recruiting in Ireland (1878) as its starting point, it explores the Irish soldier's positioning from the late Victorian period to the First World War. Analysing narratives of William Butler, John Lucy, Francis Ledwidge and Patrick MacGill, alongside fictional and visual representations of Irish soldiers, it is demonstrated how Irish soldierly identity was responsive and shifting during this period of complex political and social change for Ireland.

Introduction

A group of men is coming along a country road. The background is picturesque: a heathery glen surrounded by mountains. The artist captures them at a moment when they are passing a ruined cottage. Its desolation is not recent as grass is growing on its crumbling front wall. The mud road is wet from recent rains but the sky has cleared to blue with scattered clouds. With his raised step, hands in pockets, clay pipe in mouth, the central, most striking figure, stares ahead out of the picture's frame. His companion, almost identical in attire, is looking back at the swirling smoke faintly seen in the valley beyond the bridge which the men have recently crossed. The earthy-coloured apparel of both is in keeping with the surrounding countryside – they are of this land. A hint of red protrudes from the shirt of the central figure and his

*Dr Catherine Wynne is Reader in Victorian and Early Twentieth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures and Associate Dean for Research and Enterprise in the Faculty of Arts, Cultures and Education at the University of Hull, UK.

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companion's jacket has blown back to reveal a red shirt.¹ In this sense, they are aligned in colour with the red-uniformed recruiters of the Connaught Rangers, their four companions on the road. The recruiters' red apparel contrasts with the muted browns and purples of the County Kerry countryside in Ireland's southwest. The two young men are on their way to war, their recent enlistment evident in the bright recruiting ribbons on their hats, mirrored in the ribbons of the recruiting sergeant.

This is Lady Butler's '*Listed for the Connaught Rangers: Recruiting in Ireland (1878)*' and these future soldiers are in transition from their rural Irish homes to the British army. This reading of Elizabeth Butler's famous painting encapsulates the shifting position of the Irish soldier. It is a 'political painting' which 'occupies two contradictory positions': as a patriotic piece it depicts an Ireland which, despite its social difficulties, still produces recruits for the army, but it simultaneously showcases how economic conditions in the 1870s, evident in the prominence of the ruined cottage and the positions of the two recruits, one looking back, the other ahead, compel Irish men to join the army.² It is argued here that the Irish soldier is positioned at the crossroads of these interpretations. Focusing on the late nineteenth century to the First World War, this article examines how the Irish soldier in literature, art and memoir occupies different and seemingly conflicting identities at once. His position is fluctuating, contingent and situational. Mobility, change and non-uniformity are embedded in the Irish soldier's identity, as this reading of Elizabeth Butler's painting suggests. An analysis of Irish soldiers' writings, in conjunction with their representation by others, produces novel readings and understandings of how they saw themselves and how we can see them, a hundred years after the disbandment of Irish regiments from the British army.

¹A 1909 publication describes the indigenous red dye found in Irish dress as similar to a 'red carnation' and not an 'offensive scarlet'. Robert Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland*, (London: Mills & Boon, 1909), p. 210.

²See Catherine Wynne, *Lady Butler: War Artist and Traveller, 1846-1933*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2019), p. 103.



Figure 1: 'Listed for the Connaught Rangers: Recruiting in Ireland, 1878. Oil on Canvas, 107 x 169.5cm.. © Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre / Bridgeman Images

The Nineteenth-Century Soldier Story:

I. William Butler: Soldier-Writer

When the artist first encountered Ireland, she was also in a period of transition. Recently married, she changed her name from Thompson, under which she achieved fame with her historical war painting, *Calling the Roll After an Engagement, Crimea* (popularly known as *The Roll Call*), in 1874. She had established her reputation as Victorian Britain's leading war artist by the time of her marriage. In her first encounter with her husband's native land on honeymoon in 1877, she describes how she was struck by its beauty, its 'tracts of glorious bog-land', a picturesque vision coupled with deprivation, as she notes the 'hard struggle for existence in this stony and difficult land of Kerry'.³ She returned to prepare *Connaught Rangers* in the region of Glencar the following year and found two Kerry cousins for her models. An interpretation of this work in progress appeared in the press in January 1879, four months before its Royal Academy exhibition:

³Elizabeth Butler, *From Sketch-Book and Diary*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909), p. 4 & p. 10.

Mrs Butler (Miss Elizabeth Thompson) is at work on a picture of Irish life, at once military and pacific, and containing a more elaborate study of landscape than she has made before ... Two broad-shouldered young peasants of the West of Ireland are quitting a wild glen with its ruined cabins, having just taken the QUEEN'S shilling from the sergeant, who marches with them. There is no effort at sentimental pathos, and the young fellows step out briskly, with little show of regret. The scheme of colour is subdued and exceedingly powerful, every detail having been studied on the spot under a thoroughly Irish atmosphere.⁴

Elizabeth Butler recalls how she was invested in her husband's project to get more men like these recruits into the army. Major (at the time of his marriage) William Butler was an advocate of army reform, noting in the preface to his Canadian travel narrative, *The Wild North Land* (1872), that during the 1870s 'everybody had something to do with military matters', as the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) had 'caused the panic-stricken British people to overhaul and reconstruct.'⁵ This was a period in which his wife's novel approach to war art, which focused attention on the condition and welfare of the ordinary soldier, flourished. A Catholic from County Tipperary in the south of Ireland, William Butler was also a campaign veteran of the Red River Expedition (1870) in Canada, and the Second Anglo-Ashanti War (1873-4) in Africa by the time of his marriage. A passionate critic of the take-over of the lands of other peoples, William Butler also fought for the control of such foreign lands. His story, captured in his writings, reveals a figure who, despite achieving the rank of general by the end of his career, exhibited shifting and seemingly contradictory opinions and allegiances.

William Butler's sole novel, *Red Cloud, The Solitary Sioux* (1882), explores his political positioning. The story's protagonist starts life in the Glencar of Elizabeth Butler's earlier painting. This fictional vision is idyllic: his family's cottage in Glencar is set against a 'mountain, heather-covered, and sprinkled here and there with dwarf furze bushes.'⁶ The cottage had been purchased by his dead soldier father as a relief from his army duties. It is from this glen that his son ventures forth, inspired and trained by a neighbour, Sergeant McMahon, a veteran of the Peninsular Wars:

⁴Press cutting, 5 January 1878. Meynell Archive, Greatham, Sussex.

⁵William Butler, *The Wild North Land: The Story of a Winter Journey with Dogs Across North America*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1915), p. 3 & p. 5.

⁶William Butler, *Red Cloud, The Solitary Sioux: A Story of the Great Prairie*, (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1896), p. 1.

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He taught me the 'extension motions,' the 'balance step without gaining ground,' the manual and platoon exercises, and the sword exercise. He also showed me the method of attack and defence with the bayonet.⁷

He also tells him 'stories of bivouac ... of nights on outlying picquet, of escapes when patrolling, and of incidents in action'.⁸ This is coupled by the stories of a local priest, who had met Napoleon:

The little parlour would fade away, the firelight became a bivouac, and I saw in the grim outside darkness of the glen figures dimly moving; the squadrons charged; the cannon rumbled by; and the pinetops swaying in the storm, were the bearskin caps of the old Guard, looming above smoke and fire!⁹

His destiny is not the army as he is too poor to buy a commission, William Butler's comment on the purchase system, abolished in 1871, whereby 'promotion [was] regulated by money'.¹⁰ Instead the narrator sets out, with his childhood companion, to North America: 'we went not to annex, to conquer, nor to destroy; we went to roam and rove the world'.¹¹ Here he travels with Red Cloud, a 'Mandan Sioux'.¹² Red Cloud sees the narrator as the 'first white man' he has 'ever met who came out' to their 'land' with the 'right spirit': 'You do not come to make money ... you do not come to sell or to buy, and to cheat and to lie to us.'¹³ Red Cloud recounts a story of colonisation as the 'soldiers of the United States' pushed the inhabitants off their lands, forcing them to move 'farther and farther into the west'.¹⁴ Red Cloud refuses to remain 'an idle spectator' as the Mandans resist further incursion into their territories.¹⁵ His father, captured by a trader called MacDermott, and sold to the Americans, was 'hanged as a traitor in sight of the very river by whose banks he had been born'.¹⁶ The trader's Irish name is undoubtedly deliberate as William Butler positions the Irish, the narrator and the trader, on opposite sides of the colonising enterprise. Red Cloud's mission, on which the narrator, his Irish companion, a Cree and an Assiniboine accompany him, is to find MacDermott. After MacDermott is swept away in a cataract, Red Cloud and the narrator's journey ends. Knowing how the

⁷Ibid. p. 7.

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

⁹Ibid., p.10.

¹⁰Butler, *Wild North Land*, p. 4.

¹¹Butler, *Red Cloud*, p. 32.

¹²Ibid., p. 44.

¹³Ibid, p. 31.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 44 - 45.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁶Ibid., 49.

narrator's world functions, Red Cloud equips him with the gold that he will need to survive when he goes back. He leaves him in a manner evoking the backward glance of Elizabeth Butler's painting: 'At a bend in the trail he turned to look back: it was but a moment, and then the mountain path was vacant, and I saw him no more.'¹⁷

This romanticised adventure story explores its author's thoughts on colonisation, a theme earlier articulated in *The Wild North Land* in which William Butler describes how the inhabitants of these lands are viewed: 'the impediment to our progress – the human counterpart of forests which have to be felled ... he is an obstacle, and he must be swept away.'¹⁸ This interpretation extends beyond William Butler's experience of North America as he sees similar patterns in Africa. He observes in *Far Out: Rovings Retold* (1880):

One hundred years ago it was considered right to cheat the black man out of his liberty and to sell him as a slave. Today it is the natural habit of thought to cheat the black man out of his land or out of his cattle.¹⁹

In the same year that Elizabeth Butler exhibited *Connaught Rangers*, he published an essay, 'A Plea for the Peasant', in which he criticises the 'Highland clearances in Scotland and the unjust system of land tenure in Ireland', policies which 'deprived the army of valuable recruits.'²⁰ His writing condemns commercial exploitation and the erosion of cultures. His method of negotiating his identity as a soldier is through the championing of the rights of indigenous peoples and through his interpretation of the role of the soldier. He expresses this in *Red Cloud* through the combined forces against the trader as Sioux, Cree, Assiniboine and the two Irishmen become 'bound by a sympathy of thought, by a *soldier* [author's italics] instinct which was strong enough to bridge the wide gulf' which separated them and enable them to 'unite in a real brotherhood'.²¹

In the same year that *Red Cloud* was published, William Butler was involved in war in Egypt. At the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir on 24 August 1882, British forces under Garnet Wolseley's command, suppressed the nationalist army of Colonel Ahmed Arabi in revolt against the Ottoman empire and its representative in Egypt, the Khedive. Writing to his brother-in-law, the journalist Wilfrid Meynell, from Egypt on 11 September 1882, William Butler notes that 'the Khedive has no following, the mass of

¹⁷Ibid., p. 237.

¹⁸Butler, *Wild North Land*, p. 52.

¹⁹William Butler, *Far Out: Rovings Retold* (London: William Isbister, 1881), p. x.

²⁰Wynne, *Lady Butler*, p. 105.

²¹Butler, *Red Cloud*, p. 148.

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the people are with Arabi.²² After Arabi's defeat, William Butler was only one of two British officers who saluted him in his transport to prison. At the 1885 Royal Academy exhibition, Elizabeth Butler exhibited the return from victory, led by Wolseley, with William Butler on his left flank. Her husband's apparent disapprobation of a commemoration of the victory led to *After the Battle* being cut up.²³ Only the part of the original with her husband on horseback remains. After the defeat of Zulu forces in southern Africa in the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), William Butler brought rushes for King Ceteswayo from Zululand during his imprisonment at Cape Town castle, so the king could have sleeping mats woven for him. The king's words on receiving the rushes were translated for him: 'say to him that he has brought sleep to me: now I can rest at night.'²⁴ William Butler also subscribed to a Parnellian vision of a Home Rule Ireland, and his dedication to Parnell, after the Irish leader's death on 6 October 1891, is commemorated in a poem published five days later:

Keep alive his sacred fire, oh! my Home-land –
Keep it burning on thy mountains and thy plains;
Listen not to Saxon-land or Rome-land
Should they tell thee to sit satisfied in chains.²⁵

William Butler's positionality, however, caused problems in the build-up to the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1901) when he was appointed to the military command in South Africa in late 1898, and as temporary High Commissioner in the absence of Alfred Milner. This, Elizabeth Butler, describes, was a 'dark period in his life ... brought about by the malice of those in power there and at home.'²⁶ He advised against going to war and his command ended in his being summoned home to experience the virulence of the 'Jingo and Yellow press'.²⁷ At a Royal Commission investigation following the war, he provided evidence that he had 'emphasised the seriousness of the conflict'.²⁸ 'His offence,' Elizabeth Butler notes, 'had been a frank admission of sympathy for a people tenacious of their independence and, knowing the Boers as he

²²William Butler, Letter to Wilfrid Meynell, 11 September 1882. Unpublished. Meynell Archive, Greatham, Sussex.

²³Engravings of the original show Wolseley and his officers being saluted by the Gordon Highlanders. See Peter Harrington, *British Artists and War: The Face of Battle in Paintings and Prints, 1790-1914*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1993), p. 216. For a reading of the painting, see Wynne, *Lady Butler*, pp. 127-132.

²⁴Martin Ryan, *William Francis Butler: A Life*, (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), p.78.

²⁵'William Butler', Newspaper Cutting, Oct 1891. Meynell archive.

²⁶Elizabeth Butler, *Autobiography*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), p. 275.

²⁷'General Butler's Warnings'. *Morning Leader*, 12 February 1909. Meynell Archive.

²⁸Ibid.

did, he knew what their resistance would mean in case of attack.²⁹ From his new command of the Western District, William Butler addressed his soldiers on the eve of their deployment to the war in early November 1899. The speech reflects his views of soldiering:

Do your duty, no matter what may be the circumstances, no matter what may be the difficulty... [a soldier's] duty is to face the storm, no matter what the storm may be ... as it has been met manfully and bravely by your comrades in South Africa, I feel certain that you will meet it in the same warlike, soldier-like, Briton-like manner.³⁰

On the morning of William Butler's death in June 1910, the *Morning Leader* commented:

If ever a man lived to see his judgement vindicated and his critics put to confusion it was Sir William Butler ... Whether it was due to the wider sympathies of his nationality, or to sheer observation, that sagacious Irishman was able to give the Government of 1898 advice on the real condition of South Africa, the neglect of which – because it was distasteful to Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Milner – cost Great Britain cruelly dear in life, treasure and reputation.³¹

The article suggests that it was his Irishness which enabled him to see politics from a different perspective, while his soldier experience enabled him to read the military situation. As the next section explores, the Irish soldier's positionality is also reflected in his cultural representation.

The Nineteenth-Century Soldier Story: II. 'The Green Flag'

In Patrick MacGill's First World War autobiographical novel, *Red Horizon* (1916), MacGill's London Irish Rifles relieve the Scots Guards in the trenches. '[M]any of my Irish friends,' MacGill points out, 'belong to this regiment.'

In the traverse where I was planted I dropped into Ireland, heaps of it. There was the brogue that could be cut with a knife and the humour that survived Mons and the Marne, and a kindness that sprang from the cabins of Corrymeela and the moors of Derryneane.

²⁹Elizabeth Butler, *Autobiography*, p. 277.

³⁰'Address by Sir William Butler', *The Weekly Register*. 11 November 1899. Meynell Archive.

³¹'Sir William Butler', *Morning Leader*, 8 June 1910. Meynell Archive.

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Irish? I asked.

Sure, was the answer. 'We're everywhere.'³²

The soldier remarks that the Irish can be found in a 'Gurkha regiment', while another quips that MacGill has 'lost' his 'brogue'.³³ The Irish soldier is everywhere, even if the Irish soldier, Rifleman MacGill, whose claims to Irishness are secured by his County Donegal origins, is not recognisably Irish in the trenches. The point about the Gurkha regiments demonstrates the Irish reach into empire. It evokes Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) in which the protagonist, a young boy, is neither English nor Indian, but sits in-between as Irish. The son of an Irish soldier who dies in poverty in India, Kim, a waif who lives on the streets, has been grafted onto both the Indian and English cultures, leading him to question who he is, 'till his head swam.'³⁴ Identity for this young Irish boy is a process of self-interrogation and negotiation between cultures.

Arthur Conan Doyle's lesser-known imperial story, 'The Green Flag' (1893), explores the shifting identities of the Irish soldier. The story relates the experience of an Irishman forced to join the army through adverse circumstances at home. From a writer of Irish descent who struggled to integrate his Irish identity into a British imperial one, this story has much to contribute to notions of the positionality of the Irish soldier.³⁵ It opens with Dennis Conolly, a Fenian, who is in a predicament following the shooting of his brother by the constabulary. This is the 1870s, the period of the Irish land struggle and of Elizabeth Butler's *Connaught Rangers*. Conolly resolves to join the army to escape but '[s]eldom has Her Majesty had a less promising recruit, for his hot Celtic blood seethed with hatred against Britain and all things British.'³⁶

³²Patrick MacGill, *Red Horizon*, (New York: George H. Doran, 1916), p. 82.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁴Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, ed. Zohreh T. Sullivan, (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 101.

³⁵See Catherine Wynne, *The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism, and the Gothic*, (Westport CT., and London: Greenwood Press, 2002).

³⁶Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Green Flag', *The Green Flag and Other Stories of War and Sport*, (London: Smith, Elder, 1905), p. 1. Eva Ó Cathaoir notes that it was a Fenian strategy to infiltrate the Irish regiments. While 'an estimated 7000 soldiers took the IRB [Irish Republican Brotherhood] oath in Ireland and Britain', their 'potential remained unrealized' due in part to lack of organization and financing. *Soldiers of Liberty: A Study of Fenianism 1858-1908*, (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2018), p. 138. Conan Doyle encountered Fenian activity in Ireland in 1866 (aged 9). He describes it in his 1924 autobiography as a 'glimpse of one of the periodical troubles which poor Ireland has endured'. *Arthur Conan Doyle, Memories and Adventures*, ed. Douglas Kerr, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 7.

Conolly's response to his predicament is 'situational' – he needs to escape and enlistment offers a way out. The fictional regiment he joins is riven with complexity:

The Royal Mallows ... were as strange a lot of men as ever were paid by a great empire to fight its battles ... while [they] still retained their fame as being one of the smartest corps in the army, no one knew better than their officers that they were dry-rotted with treason and with bitter hatred of the flag under which they served.³⁷

On a Sudanese campaign, Conolly urges his platoon to mutiny to the horror of their captain:

[Captain Foley] saw several rifles were turned on him ... What is it, then?' he cried, looking round from one fierce mutinous face to another.

Are you Irishmen? Are you soldiers? What are you here for but to fight for your country?

England is no country of ours, cried several.

You are not fighting for England. You are fighting for Ireland, and for the Empire of which it as part.

A black curse on the Impire!' shouted Private McQuire, throwing down his rifle.

'Twas the Impire that backed the man that druv me onto the roadside.³⁸

Foley, coincidentally, shares his surname with the two Kerry models in *Connaught Rangers* and Foley was also the maiden name of Conan Doyle's mother, Mary. Captain Foley identifies that he is fighting for his country, Ireland, correcting the soldiers' assumption that he is referring to England. For Foley and, indeed for Conan Doyle, Ireland is part of the empire. McQuire, by contrast, refuses any identification with the empire, citing it as the cause of his social condition. These Irish soldiers occupy different positions and different Irish identities.

When Conolly decides to break the square, Foley invokes the plight of their Irish soldier comrades: 'Think what you are doing, man, he yelled, rushing towards the ringleader. 'There are a thousand Irish in the square, and they are dead men if we

³⁷Conan Doyle, *The Green Flag*, p. 2.

³⁸Ibid., p. 17.

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break.³⁹ How Conolly intends to act on this invocation is paused as at that moment the enemy, described as ‘fiends from the pit’, breaks through.⁴⁰ Conolly realises that he is faced with an enemy with whom he cannot racially identify: ‘And were these the Allies of Ireland?’⁴¹ He rapidly shifts allegiances and, planting his rifle in a mimosa bush, attaches a green flag with a ‘crownless harp’ to it, while calling on his comrades: ‘Bhoys, will ye stand for this?’⁴² While the narrator ponders ‘for what black mutiny, for what signal of revolt, that flag had been treasured up’, in this context and in this foreign war, its meaning and interpretation changes. For the Irish soldiers at this moment their allegiance to the flag (representing Ireland) aligns them against the enemy and as such draws them into an alignment with empire.⁴³

What for the flag?’ yelled the private.

My heart’s blood for it! and mine! and mine!’ cried a score of voices.
God bless it! The flag, boys—the flag!

C Company were rallying upon it. The stragglers clutched at each other, and pointed. Here, McQuire, Flynn, O’Hara, ran the shoutings.

Close on the flag! Back to the flag!⁴⁴

C Company is annihilated, and the interpretation of the soldiers is left to the victors and survivors of the battle. The enemy leader, Sheik Kadra, takes the flag to send to his superior as a victory token: ‘By the colour it might well seem to have belonged to those of the true faith ... we think that, though small, it is very dear to them.’⁴⁵ For Sheik Kadra, the Irish soldiers are ‘other’, just as the forces of the Sheik are ‘other’ to Conolly, but he also identifies with the flag’s colours. Then a squadron of Hussars comes upon the Company:

The flag is gone but the rifle stood in the mimosa bush, and round it, with their wounds in front, lay the Fenian private and the silent ranks of the Irishry. Sentiment is not an English failing, but the Hussar captain raised his hilt in a salute as he rode past the blood-soaked ring.⁴⁶

³⁹Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 20.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 21.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 23.

The hussar salutes the soldiers' sacrifice within the context of imperial war, while the Sheik recognises their flag as 'small' and 'dear', unknowingly invoking Ireland. The Irish soldiers shift positions over the course of the battle, just as their interpreters see them from their differing viewpoints. The narrator interprets Conolly's original possession of the flag as a signal that he will mutiny against the British army, but on the field of imperial battle where Conolly cannot identify with the enemies, it becomes a rallying call to fight. Ultimately, the story 'situates Irish nationalist aspirations within the imperial matrix', testing the boundaries and revealing the complexities of both.⁴⁷

'The Green Flag' was illustrated by Charles E. Fripp, an established war illustrator who worked for *The Graphic* magazine, as did Elizabeth Butler in the early years of her career. Fripp's work had captured a variety of imperial conflicts, including the Anglo-Zulu war and the Sudan Campaign of 1885. In his first illustration for the story's publication in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, Conolly is presented outside his partly dilapidated cottage, clay pipe in mouth, hands in pockets. The image of social distress shares similarities with the *Connaught Rangers* in its presentation of a ruined cottage, but Fripp, unlike Elizabeth Butler, aligns Conolly's physicality, his prognathous jaw, with a representation of the rebellious Irish present in Victorian caricature and racial typology.⁴⁸ Another of Fripp's illustrations, also used as the frontispiece for *The Green Flag and Other Stories of War and Sport* (1905), is a conventional imperial war image presenting the Irish soldiers as successfully repulsing the enemy. In this image, Conolly is soldierly and heroic (his jaw modified) as he holds the green flag aloft on the bayonet of his gun while his comrades charge into battle. His change in allegiance, it would seem, changes his physicality. In the story Conolly plants the rifle in a mimosa bush, but Fripp's artistic license with the original tells his version of Conolly's transformation from Fenian rebel to imperial soldier. It also coheres with Fripp's heroic battle art, such as *Dying to Save the Queen's Colours* (1881).⁴⁹

⁴⁷Wynne, *The Colonial Conan Doyle*, p. 33.

⁴⁸For images of the rebellious Irish, see L. Perry Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England*, (Bridgeport, CT.: University of Bridgeport Conference on British Studies, 1968).

⁴⁹See Harrington, *British Artists and War*, p. 298. For various illustrations, see https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/The_Green_Flag

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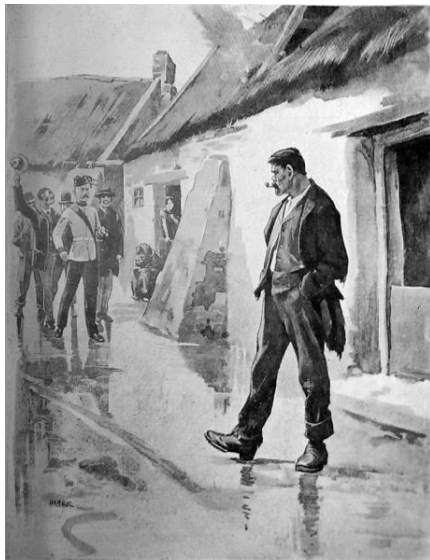


Figure 2: 'The Green Flag', *Pall Mall Gazette*, (June 1893), p. 209.



Figure 3. Frontispiece, *The Green Flag and Other Stories of War and Sport* (1905)

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century Conan Doyle had converted from a Liberal Unionist position to advocating Home Rule for Ireland. Before and during the war years he called on his own Irishness to encourage Irish men to enlist. He quotes a letter from Major William Redmond, the brother of the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, who commends the Irish soldiers in the war:

No words – not even your own – could do justice to the splendid action of the new Irish soldier. They never flinched. They never give trouble, and they are steady and sober.⁵⁰

Redmond, also a Member of the Irish Parliamentary Party representing East Clare, describes himself as ‘an extreme Nationalist’ but concurs that ‘if others as extreme, perhaps, on the other side will only come half-way’ then ‘a plan to satisfy the Irish sentiment and the Imperial sentiment at one and the same time’ could be achieved. He encourages Conan Doyle: ‘I am sure you can do very much, as you already have done, in this direction.’⁵¹ The letter was received by Conan Doyle just before Redmond’s ‘lamented death’ after he was killed in action in Belgium on 7 June 1917.⁵² However, Redmond’s and Conan Doyle’s political positions were becoming redundant following Easter 1916. Ireland at the time of the publication of Conan Doyle’s autobiography in 1924 had just emerged from a War of Independence and a Civil War and Conan Doyle calls for Redmond’s letter to him to be posted at ‘every cross-roads of Ireland’ so Redmond’s ‘spirit’ ‘might heal the wounds of this unhappy country.’⁵³ During the war period the Irish soldier-writer, as demonstrated in the following section, explores and articulates his own positioning and identity during a period of rapid social and political transformation.

First World War Soldier Stories: John Lucy, Francis Ledwidge and Patrick MacGill

My chief asset was that I was alive, young, and hopeful, but I could not enjoy life. I had no right to breathe freely and savour the bewitching sights and scents of spring while death sneered in the offing above the rough graves of an incredible number of soldier friends freshly killed and rotting in France. My mind was slightly troubled, because I would have preferred to have pledged my body to

⁵⁰Quoted Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 282.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid. For Redmond’s account of war and his political position, see William Redmond, *Trench Pictures from France*, ed. E. M. Smith-Dampier, (New York: George H. Doran, 1917).

⁵³Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 382.

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the cause of Ireland, still in thralldom. It was her's by every right and every tradition, yet I felt bound in honour to England too, for I had attested on oath, and I was a British soldier as well as being an Irishman and a Catholic.⁵⁴

In this extract from *There's a Devil in the Drum* (1938), Cork-born John Lucy captures a period when he is at home recuperating in 1915. At this moment, Lucy occupies a position in-between: his allegiances are split between his identity as 'British soldier' and 'Irishman'. He continues: 'I disliked compromise on such big issues, and wished myself free of such complications.'⁵⁵ (320). These 'complications' can be interpreted as the varied positions of the Irish soldier in his narratives of war.

Lucy cites his reasons for his and his brother's enlisting in 1912: '[we] were tired of landladies ... of fathers ... The soft accents and slow movements of the farmers who swarmed in the streets of our dull southern Irish town ... and the talk of politics filled us with loathing. Blow the lot.'⁵⁶ Unlike the recruits in Elizabeth Butler's painting, Lucy and his brother avoided the recruiting sergeant: 'I objected to presenting myself to any of that bluff, florid beribboned type' and instead entered the local barracks.⁵⁷ Here they 'took oath' with 'some national qualms of conscience', choosing an Irish regiment as a 'sop' to their 'feelings'.⁵⁸ They travelled north to enlist in the Royal Irish Rifles.

Lucy's pre-war narrative describes his exposure to, and navigation of, sectarian tensions. '[B]igotry' and anti-Catholicism reigned in 'Ireland's quarter of [industrial] progress.'⁵⁹ With a balance that is a feature of his narrative, Lucy describes how he also 'saw with regret that some Catholics living here seemed just as much embittered as their Protestant neighbours.'⁶⁰ Later, stationed at Aldershot, he prevents a soldier from the Royal Munster Fusiliers, the regiment he would have joined had he chosen to enlist in his native Cork, from starting a fight with the Royal Irish Rifles. While the soldier's 'soft Cork accent' was 'music' in his 'ears', Lucy becomes concerned when the inebriated Fusilier claims he is 'only goin' down to have a look at the Belfast min.'⁶¹ Lucy neutralises the situation by 'lapsing into his way of speaking', questioning whether it is 'wan of our fellahs yeh know', thus discovering that the Fusilier's purpose is to

⁵⁴J. F. Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum*, (Eastbourne: The Naval and Military Press, 1992), p. 319.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 69.

find some 'Orangemin'.⁶² Lucy's shared Cork identity de-escalates a potential conflict between the regiments: 'Divil an Orangemun,' I lied. 'What would we be doin with Orangemin in the army?'⁶³ He reassures him that the 'Orangemin' are in Belfast, and urges him to not cause 'trouble ... between two good Irish regiments.'⁶⁴

On their way to the front, the French lining the streets cheer the 'Anglais.'⁶⁵ Lucy corrects them: 'Nous ne sommes pas Anglais, nous sommes Irlandais. They liked that and laughed with pleasure, and then shouted: 'Vivent les Irlandais,' and we cheered back at them: 'Vivre la France.'⁶⁶ Later, on the retreat from Mons, Lucy describes how his brother, Denis, in a sleep-walking state, dreams of Ireland: 'One more turn to the left now, at the top of Tawney's Hill, and we're home, my lad.'⁶⁷ When he denies that he had spoken, Lucy knows that Denis

had been asleep on the march and had been enthralled by the prospect of rest and refreshment in a farmhouse of our childhood days, where as little boys we had built forts in the summer meadows and practised mimic war in the role of Irish chieftains dealing death and destruction to the Sassenach.⁶⁸

In the childhood to which Denis returns in sleep, identities and allegiances are more defined. Enlistment and war generate confusion.

After an attack on the Aisne, Lucy draws on Elizabeth Butler's *Roll Call*:

The next few minutes reminded me of Butler's picture of the Crimean roll-call, when the senior N.C.O's listed our casualties from information given by the survivors: 08 Corrigan? Dead, Sergeant. I saw him too. Right, killed in action. Any one seen 23, Murphy? No answer. Right, missing. What about MacRory. Any one see MacRory coming back after he was hit? No answer. Right, wounded and missing, and the sergeant's stubby pencil scribbled on.⁶⁹

It is a roll call of recognisably Irish names. It is not until later that he learns that Denis is also dead after first being told that he was injured. His grief is mediated through an

⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 184.

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'aggressive reaction' to a survivor of his brother's section as he redirects his loss into violence.⁷⁰

Relieved on 19 November by London Territorials, Lucy surveys the battlefield on which he calculated that "ninety-six men out of every hundred had been killed or wounded"⁷¹. When the Londoner asks Lucy if his own regiment would be as 'good as those of the old army', Lucy surveys the destruction:

My eyes weakened, wandered, and rested on the half-hidden corpses of men and youths. Near and far they looked calm, and even handsome in death. Their strong young bodies thickly garlanded the edge of a wood in rear, a wood called Sanctuary. A dead sentry, at his post, leaned back in a standing position, against a blasted tree, keeping watch over them.

Proudly and sorrowfully I looked at them, the Macs and the O's, and the hardy Ulster boys joined together in death on a foreign field. My dead chums.⁷²

By the end of 1915, the professional army to which Lucy belonged had been decimated. Those remaining bonded with each other and Lucy became friends with two Orangemen. From Lucy's perspective soldiers had the ability to connect beyond sectarian or class lines. This is underpinned by his comments on John Redmond's visit to the troops at the end of 1915: 'Everyone – Orangemen as well as Nationalists – gave him a cheer. We buried the hatchet of bigotry during the war.'⁷³

The psychological breaking point for Lucy was the death of an Irish orderly with whom he had become friendly. Ryan's English medical officer had been killed and Ryan implores Lucy to kneel and pray with him. Shortly after Ryan goes out to tend the wounded after another round of shelling and is killed, 'his body brought back and placed on another stretcher beside his medical officer. Each had been killed in the act of binding men's wounds.'⁷⁴ Here Lucy invokes a language of shared sacrifice.

I went in slowly to visit the dead Ryan and his officer. I prayed for them both. These devoted men had died directly to save their fellows. There was something Christlike about them – the young English public-school Protestant and the

⁷⁰Linda Maynard, *Brothers in the Great War: Siblings, Masculinity and Emotions*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 219.

⁷¹Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum*, p. 285.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., p. 345.

⁷⁴Ibid. p. 347.

Dublin Catholic ... I patted [Ryan's] cheek in farewell. Then I stood up, and I could not move away. The world turned over.⁷⁵

Lucy presents a connection between the two dead men which crosses over class and national boundaries.

The fallout from the Easter Rising of 1916, however, is difficult for Lucy to come to terms with and this is reflected in a marked change in the narrative's equilibrium. It is also coupled with a deeper reflection on his sense of identity:

My fellow soldiers had no great sympathy with the rebels, but they got fed up when they heard of the executions of the leaders. I experienced a cold fury, because I would see the whole British Empire damned sooner than hear of an Irishman being killed in his own country by any intruding stranger.⁷⁶

Lucy recounts how his friend, a Welsh sergeant called Jim, introduces him to a 'chap [who] had something to do with your country-men in the rebellion last year.'⁷⁷ The unnamed sergeant confirms that he 'had the job of seeing them off.'⁷⁸ The sergeant is seeking reconciliation:

Knowing my sympathies by hearsay, he had come to me somehow like a man coming back to the scene of some doubtful act to attempt reconciliation. He was the first of a number of unhappy Englishmen who tried, and tried vainly, to square their acts against Ireland with me.⁷⁹

The sergeant describes the executions of Easter Week and offers Lucy what he claims are the rosary beads of Joseph Mary Plunkett: 'I touched them for a reason he would never understand, and said: "No. Keep the beads. I hope they will do you good," but really I did not hope that, because mentally I was wishing him and his like non-existent.'⁸⁰ Returning to Jim, he describes the encounter as 'devilish.'⁸¹ On their walk Jim 'discoursed on duty and the sergeant having no choice. He also said that the sergeant was uncertain and uneasy now in the presence of Irishmen, and was to be pitied.'⁸²

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid. p. 352.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 356.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 357.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

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Lucy's narrative demonstrates how an Irish soldier criss-crosses the complex field of identity at a time when the political ground is shifting beneath him. His Welsh sergeant friend translates, mediates and tries to make sense of Lucy's encounter with the English sergeant. Across his entire narrative Lucy is peace-keeper between regiments, a channeler of loss, who also experienced the profound grief of losing his brother in battle, a recorder of war and a confessor figure. The role he refuses is that of reconciler. What remains constant, however, is his commitment as a soldier as, shortly after this encounter, Lucy enters the ranks of the officer class and continues this route through the army and the war.

Like Lucy, Francis Ledwidge occupies the dual position of Irish nationalist and British soldier. Born in poverty in County Meath, Ledwidge's poetry was championed and edited by Lord Dunsany, who also introduced him to his Irish literary contemporaries. An Irish National Volunteer, Ledwidge enlisted in 5 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, a battalion in 10 (Irish) Division at the outbreak of war, the same regiment as Dunsany, rather than enlisting in 16 (Irish) Division, which was closely associated with the Irish National Volunteers. With his seemingly incongruous positioning, Ledwidge is seen to embody 'the contradictory spirit of his time in Ireland' and the complexities of reconciling an Irish nationalist identity with war service.⁸³ The war poet who eschews, unlike Lucy and MacGill, the grim details of war in his published writing, Ledwidge, nonetheless, becomes the poster poet of the Irish experience of the First World War. He was killed on 31 July 1917. He also serves a role in an understanding of Irish engagement with the First World War 'as a man of words, whose body of verse lifts the mask of anonymity from the 200,000 Irishmen who enlisted in the British Army.'⁸⁴ He conjoins disparate aspects of Irish social and cultural identity at a particular moment in time.

Seamus Heaney's poem, 'In Memoriam of Francis Ledwidge' (1980), conflates the rural Meath landscape of Ledwidge's upbringing with the war landscapes of the Dardanelles and Ypres, where Ledwidge fought and finally lost his life. Heaney's speaker is conscious that the 'Boyne water' represents one of Ireland's fractures.⁸⁵ Various Irish fractures would play out over the course of the First World War, the ensuing Irish wars, and beyond. John Redmond had instigated one such fracture which had implications for Ledwidge in 1914: he fractured the Irish Volunteers when he made

⁸³Thomas O'Grady, 'Places and Times: The Doubleness of Francis Ledwidge', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 104, 414 (2015): p. 145.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24347758>. Accessed 27 June 2023

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 144.

⁸⁵Seamus Heaney, 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), p. 177.

the famous speech at Woodenbridge on 20 September 1914 urging the Irish Volunteers to enlist, encouraging them to ‘account’ themselves ‘as men *not only in Ireland but wherever the firing line extends*.⁸⁶ Initially, Ledwidge sided with the anti-Redmondites but then decided to enlist. Ledwidge’s choice was situational: ‘I joined the British Army, because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions.’⁸⁷ In his introduction to Dermot Bolger’s edition to Ledwidge’s poetry, Heaney recognises in Ledwidge a figure who ‘faced the life of his times’ acting with ‘solitary resolve’ and expecting ‘neither consensus nor certitude’.⁸⁸

The Easter Rising, which took place when he was on leave, had a profound impact on Ledwidge. It also produced one of his finest poems: ‘Lament for Thomas McDonagh’. Here he laments that his fellow poet will not ‘hear the bittern cry’, an allusion to McDonagh’s translation of an Irish poem⁸⁹. A poem for McDonagh, it is also used to signify the subsequent loss of Ledwidge, as both poets, who occupied different positions in war, are memorialised in the ‘Lament’. Ledwidge’s poem is embedded in an Irish poetic tradition in which Ireland is symbolised by the ‘Dark Cow’ which will lift its ‘horn’ in pleasant ‘meads’.⁹⁰ The poem also entrenches allusions to war: ‘horn’, ‘fanfare’, ‘blows’.⁹¹ Writing to a University of Wisconsin professor on 6 June 1917, Ledwidge articulates his position from ‘the firing line’ in France:

I am sorry that party politics should ever divide our own tents, but am not without hope that a new Ireland will arise from her ashes in the ruins of Dublin, like the Phoenix, with one purpose, one aim, and one ambition. I tell you this in order that you may know what it is to me to be called a British soldier while my own country has no place among the nations but the place of Cinderella.⁹²

In ‘At Currabwee’, written in the immediate aftermath of the Rising, Ledwidge deploys the folklore of the fairy. The fairies sing of ‘Ireland glorious and free.’⁹³ The poem

⁸⁶Quoted in Alice Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet, 1887-1917*, (London: Martin Brian & O’Keefe, 1974), p. 76.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸⁸Seamus Heaney, Introduction, in Dermot Bolger, ed., *Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems*, (Dublin: New Island Books, 2017), p. 14.

⁸⁹Francis Ledwidge, ‘Lament for Thomas McDonagh’, *Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems*, p. 57.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹*Ibid.*

⁹²Quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge*, p. 130.

⁹³Francis Ledwidge, ‘At Currabwee’; *Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems*, p. 60.

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relates that both Joseph Plunkett and Patrick Pearse have heard the fairies. Ledwidge defers to Pearse's superior knowledge of the 'truth' before establishing his own place:

And I, myself, have often heard
Their singing as the stars went by,
For am I not of those who reared
The banner of Old Ireland high
From Dublin town to Turkey's shores
And where the Vardar loudly roars?⁹⁴

It is posed as a question, but it is also a call to recognition. Ledwidge, both in the manner in which he is posthumously remembered and in his writing, is a figure who occupies seemingly conflicting identities at once. The poet is captured, like the figures on John Keats's Grecian urn, at a particular moment in time, constantly in movement between positions.

Ledwidge shares, in part, a common identity with MacGill. Both the Meath labourer and the Donegal-born 'navvy' enlisted, both wrote and were published during the war. But MacGill came back from war, although he never settled again in Ireland. MacGill provides little clarity about why he joined, noting in *The Amateur Army* (1915): 'What the psychological processes were that led to my enlisting in Kitchener's Army need not be inquired into. Few men could explain why they enlisted'.⁹⁵ He points out in the preface that he 'had no special yearning towards military life'.⁹⁶ MacGill's searing social realist novels, *Children of the Dead End* (1914) and *The Rat Pit* (1915), draw on his experiences. Born into extreme poverty in County Donegal, MacGill was first sent to work on a farm, aged twelve, before joining the seasonal workers who left Donegal for potato-picking in Scotland, and who experienced the brutalities of itinerant labouring, before publication success secured work as a journalist, and a post as librarian at St. George's Chapel, Windsor.⁹⁷ Unlike Lucy and Ledwidge, whose nationalist identities are expressed alongside their identities as soldiers, MacGill evinces a sense of a national identity or sense of Irishness, but this is devoid of nationalist politics. Terry Phillips argues that he was disconnected early in life from Irish political and cultural nationalism through his childhood poverty, lack of education and emigration.⁹⁸ Instead he articulates the voice of the working class, the camaraderie

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Patrick MacGill, *The Amateur Army*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916), p. 13.

⁹⁶Ibid., n.p.

⁹⁷Brian D. Osborne, Introduction. *Children of the Dead End*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1999), p. xiii.

⁹⁸Terry Phillips, *Irish Literature and the First World War: Culture, Identity and Memory*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 55-6. See also, David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and*
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of the labouring poor, and his politics are rooted in a socialism generated through his lived experience. *Children of the Dead End* was a sensation on publication. Ledwidge read it in May 1916, before leaving his copy with a soldier friend in Belfast and promising to return to reclaim it.⁹⁹

The Red Horizon and *The Great Push* (1917), written during the course of the war articulate the immediacy of the experience, unlike Lucy's narrative which was published decades later. MacGill focuses on a trans-national camaraderie between men. In his description of his regiment, the London Irish, a name reflecting the mobile identities of the Irish, the camaraderie extends beyond an exclusively Irish-born identity incorporating those with no recognisable Irishness such as Cockney Bill Teake, those who are from Ireland such as Flaherty, 'a Dublin man with a wife in London', and those in-between such as Barty, a 'Cockney of Irish descent, and the undesignated Cherub, who 'had a generous sympathy for all his mates'.¹⁰⁰ In his role as stretcher-bearer, he finds Flaherty and Cherub dead in the wreckage after shell-fire, and carries Barty on his back to safety. When a Brigadier asks Barty how he is, he replies: 'Not bad. It will get me 'ome to England, I think.'¹⁰¹ Through the narrative, injury that get will get men home, wherever that home may be is welcomed. MacGill's narrative fuses realism with Gothic horror in his description of the loss of his comrades and the devastation of war. *The Great Push* describes those who are killed in terms of an absence which is felt to be present. As the men leave the trenches, the 'ghosts' of the killed come with them.

And when we sit us down to drink
You sit beside us too,
And drink at Cafe Pierre le Blanc
As once you used to do.¹⁰²

One of MacGill's most compelling character portraits is a soldier called Gilhooley, whom he first encounters in Café Pierre le Blanc. 'Gilhooley was an Irishman and fought in an English regiment; he was notorious for his mad escapades, his dare-devil pranks, and his wild fearlessness.'¹⁰³ But Gilhooley also challenges the reckless pursuit of glory when an English officer determines to stop a sniper:

the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 97.

⁹⁹Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge*, p. 160.

¹⁰⁰Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push*, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916), pp. 232-33.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, p. 23.

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I'm going to stop that damn sniper, said the young officer. I'm going to earn the V.C. Who's coming along with me?

'I'm with you,' said Gilhooley, scrambling lazily out into the open with a couple of pet bombs in his hand.

'By Jasus, we'll get him out of it!'

The two men went forward for about twenty yards, when the officer fell with a bullet through his head. Gilhooley turned round and called back, 'Any other officer wantin' to earn the V.C.?'¹⁰⁴

However, Gilhooley loses his life to a sniper on a roadway in Loos, falling into a similar pattern to the officer. The scene of his death haunts MacGill: 'It was here that I saw Gilhooley die, Gilhooley the master bomber, Gilhooley the Irishman.'¹⁰⁵ The ruined houses become fantastical in MacGill's imagination, the 'desolation' generating 'morbid fancies.'¹⁰⁶ MacGill draws on his Catholic roots in this episode to make a connection with the Crucifix: 'I came across the Image of Supreme Pain, the Agony of the Cross. What suffering has Loos known? ... The crucifix was well in keeping with this scene of desolation.'¹⁰⁷

In his poetry collection, *Soldier Songs* (1917), MacGill brings the strands of his experiences together. In the Preface he establishes these soldier songs as consolidating a soldier identity, but they are also situational: 'the songs are no good in England', Rifleman Bill Teake notes, because they have 'too much guts in them.'¹⁰⁸ Equally, 'Tipperary' 'means home when it is sung in a shell-shattered billet, on the long march "Tipperary" is Berlin, the goal of high emprise and great adventures.'¹⁰⁹ The refrain of 'Loos in the morning' which ends each stanza of 'In the Morning' accentuates the horror of what they encounter: 'dead men' ... on a 'shell-scarred plain' with 'bones stuck over the ground.'¹¹⁰ The deprivations of life in Donegal sit alongside these poems of war. In 'The Farmer's Boy', as MacGill explains in a note, Donegal children, aged between twelve and fifteen, go the hiring fair in Tyrone where they are sold like cattle and work up to eighteen hours a day. In this poem home is 'cold and bare' and it is

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Patrick MacGill, *Soldier Songs*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1917), p. 13.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 85-6.

hard to pay the rent 'for all you dig and delve.'¹¹¹ Relief from childhood poverty and war is expressed in an imagined, bucolic version of Donegal in 'I Will Go Back':

I'll go back again to my father's house and live
on my father's land—
For my father's house is by Rosses' shore that
slopes to Dooran strand.¹¹²

But he has no land to return to. He transports himself 'In Fairyland' from the trenches to the supernatural realm. On the field of battle,

The field is red with poppy flowers,
Where mushroom meadows stand;
It's only seven fairy hours
From there to Fairyland.¹¹³

In a 'shell-shoveled hole' while on 'listening-patrol', MacGill reimagines the space between the trenches as inhabited by fairies in 'The Listening-Patrol.'¹¹⁴ Here MacGill echoes Ledwidge in his teleportation to an imagined Ireland of fairies. In a letter to Katherine Tynan, Ledwidge describes taking cover in a shell-hole and, in the time preceding the attack, he portrays how 'bright the nights are made' by the 'enemy's rockets' which are,

in continual ascent from dawn to dusk, making a beautiful crescent from Switzerland to the sea. There are white lights, green and red, and whiter, bursting into red, and changing again, and blue bursting into purple drops, and reds fading into green. It is like the end of a beautiful world.¹¹⁵

Realism and the supernatural converge in both poets' experiences of the battlefield. In 'Death and the Fairies' MacGill describes how '[a]t home' in Donegal, the fairies would hold a 'carnival', but here death holds its 'carnival'.¹¹⁶ The return home to Ireland in the imagination or in sleep is a feature of these narratives: Lucy's brother returns to the Cork of his childhood in his sleepwalking retreat from Mons. On home on leave Lucy seeks solace in the beauty of the Cork countryside, but he is tortured by images of the battlefield. Ledwidge avoids direct engagement with war in his poetry in favour

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 104.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 101.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 48.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹⁵Quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge*, p. 177.

¹¹⁶Ledwidge, *Soldier Songs*, p. 89.

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of a focus on home and nature. In a letter, he urges Tynan to go to Tara (in Meath) and asks her to 'remember' him to 'every hill and wood and ruin ... Say I will come back again surely, and maybe you will hear pipes in the grass, or a fairy horn and the hounds of Finn.'¹¹⁷ MacGill, the relentlessly realist writer of deprivation and suffering, sees fairies on the battlefield as he transports himself to an imagined Ireland. These soldiers of the First World War create their own Irelands as they attempt to come to terms with their positions in war. In an earlier generation, William Butler, who spent much of his life in wars of empire, imagines an idyllic Ireland of Glencar in *Red Cloud*, just as the fictional Irish soldiers in Conan Doyle's story invest their lives in a vision of Ireland encapsulated in a green flag with a harp.

In his play, *Walking the Road* (2007), an imaginative reworking of Ledwidge's story, Dermot Bolger presents Ledwidge as walking the road home alongside other soldiers. In limbo in Bolger's play, Ledwidge is trying to find his way back. For Bolger, Ledwidge is the 'Everyman, a representative of the thousands of Irishmen who walked the same road as him ... from every corner of Ireland.'¹¹⁸ Irish recruits walk towards an uncertain future in war in the nineteenth-century *Connaught Rangers*. What is certain is that central figure of the *Connaught Rangers* returns in Elizabeth Butler's representation of Lance-Corporal Michael O'Leary of the Irish Guards, who was awarded the Victoria Cross, for almost singlehandedly capturing an enemy position near Ypres on 1 February 1915.¹¹⁹ With his moustache and clay pipe, O'Leary's face is identical to that of the recruit in the earlier painting. The journey to imperial wars in *Connaught Rangers* ends in the First World War painting of *A V. C. of the Irish Guards* (1915). Irishmen travelled the roads to imperial and global wars and also travelled a journey in their stories in the ways in which they examined and expressed what it was to be an Irishman and a soldier in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. This work started this journey with them and, through a close examination of their own writings in conjunction with their broader cultural representations, revealed how the social and political identities of these Irish soldiers were situational, contingent and ultimately, mobile.

¹¹⁷Quoted in Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge*, pp. 183-84.

¹¹⁸Dermot Bolger, Author's Note, *Walking the Road*, (Dublin: New Island, 2007), p. 11.

¹¹⁹Paul Usherwood and Jenny Spencer-Smith, *Lady Butler: Battle Artist, 1846-1933*, (London: National Army Museum, 1989), p. 143.