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Historiography 1918-Today (Ireland)

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This historiographical article surveys key interventions in scholarship of Ireland during the First World War, exploring how the war has moved from the margins of historical scholarship to being considered a pivotal event in Ireland's 20th century. It charts the development of histories of Ireland's military participation and home front experience, and the eventual integration of the war into studies of the Irish revolution.

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Introduction

Ireland's First World War historiography has been dominated by the idea of forgotten or hidden histories. In 1967 Francis X. Martin (1922-2000) coined the term 'national amnesia' to refer to the unwillingness of most Irish people to admit a connection to the men who served with the British Army, in contrast to those who claimed association with the rebels of the 1916 Easter Rising.[1] Although public and private commemorations persisted for decades after the Armistice, the war was nonetheless marginalised in both academic scholarship and popular memory. The First World War occupied a contested place in Ireland's history, with the 1916 Easter rebellion and the subsequent War of Independence taking precedence in accounts of the early 20th century. The extensive participation of Irish people in the British war effort was an inconvenient fact that did not sit well with the founding myths of the new Irish state. In 1988 Robert Fitzroy "Roy" Foster asserted in his landmark survey that the war "should be seen as one of the most decisive events in modern Irish history".[2] However, this was not a majority opinion in Irish historical scholarship at the time. Indeed the period 1914-1918 was seldom considered a distinct era in Irish history. The brief references in the survey histories of Ireland's 20th century treated the war "as an external factor" of little importance to ordinary people's lives.[3] This view has changed significantly in the past two decades, however. Taking a thematic approach, this article charts the historiographic treatment of the war from "national amnesia" to its integration into the Irish revolution story.

Military mobilisation and the Irish soldier

In Ireland, as in many other combatant countries, the earliest histories of the war were focused on military participation. There were several commemorative histories of various Irish infantry regiments of the British Army published in the 1920s after the units were disbanded. The books typically replicate material in the official war diaries and are focused on exploits in battle.

Timothy Bowman describes them as “antiquarian” but notes they provide useful first-hand accounts by officers who served in the units during the war. Of particular value is Cyril Falls’ (1888-1971) History of the 36th Ulster Division (1922). Falls was an officer in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and also a distinguished professional military historian. The book combines detailed research with his own impressions from his first-hand experience. As noted by Bowman, Falls intends his work to serve as a reminder to Ulster Unionists and the British government “of the sacrifices that Ulster had made for the Empire”![4] Other veteran accounts include memoirs completed in the 1920s such as that by Frank Laird which emphasises the camaraderie of the wartime military experience, and later anti-war accounts which view the war as pointless slaughter.[5] The latter include the 1929 novel *Return of the Brute* by Liam O’Flaherty (1896-1984) derived from his experiences on the Western Front.[6] Although Sean O’Casey (1880-1964) was not a veteran, his play *The Silver Tassie* was another important cultural response to the war. First staged in London in 1929, it came to the Abbey theatre in Dublin in 1935 where it had a short but acclaimed run. It emphasised the futility of war and the suffering of the ordinary soldier. Another notable anti-war account is the memoir *Inglorious Soldier* (1968) by Monk Gibbon (1896-1987).[7] He charts his journey from idealism in 1914 to pacificism and disillusionment in 1917, influenced by his experience as a reluctant bystander to the murder of journalists during the 1916 Easter Rising by the British military.

The 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966 led to an upsurge in academic and public interest. The wartime context of the rebellion was given due weight in works by Francis X. Martin and Conor Cruise O’Brien (1917-2008), for example.[8] The first substantive history of Irish military mobilisation appeared in 1969: a study of Irish regiments in the First World War by Henry Harris (1913-1983).[9] Despite Harris’ flawed use of statistical evidence, it is a valuable and detailed account of the service of Irish soldiers from mobilisation in 1914 to the Armistice. Harris was a retired British Army Major and his work is a conscious effort to recover this neglected history of the men who went to fight “for what they believed to be the cause of freedom”.[10] The marginalised place of the war in Irish popular memory is emphasised in the foreword by the historian Gerard Anthony Hayes-McCoy (1911-1975). He condemns the “arrogance of the scornful dismissal of the dead Irishmen who wore khaki” and questioned whether it was right for Irish society to remain “unchangeably, even vindictively, selective of our past”.[11] Many studies of the war published in the intervening decades have expressed similar sentiments concerning selective remembrance. In his 1992 examination of the 16th (Irish) Division, Terence Denman described Irish participation in the Great War as a “historical no-man’s land”. He reflected that those attempting to research this history were greeted with “indifference, embarrassment or suspicion”.[12] In the book’s foreword, Keith Jeffery (1952-2016) reflected on the two opposing perceptions of Ireland’s role in the war: one view centred on a “unionist image of Irish Protestants loyally and exclusively rallying to the flag in 1914” and the other which viewed Catholic nationalist soldiers as “misguided Irish youths duped into taking the “king’s shilling” by worn-out politicians, who are slaughtered in France at the altar of British imperialism”.[13] T hese dupes are contrasted with the heroic rebels who sacrificed themselves for Ireland in the 1916 Easter Rising. As noted by Jeffery, the truth lies between these two extremes.[14]

Since the 1980s there has been a surge in studies examining Irish military participation in the First World War, supported by the efforts of journalist Kevin Myers to raise public interest in Irish war service through his *Irish Times* articles.[15] Notable examples include the statistical analysis of Irish recruitment by David Fitzpatrick (1948-2019), and various studies of the soldier experience and of particular regiments by Terence Denman, Myles Dungan, Tom Johnstone, Timothy Bowman, and Philip Orr amongst others.[16] These studies vary in the extent to which they include discussion of thesocial and political context in Ireland or consider the specific experience of Irish soldiers and how this might have differed from those who enlisted from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Valuable contributions by Bowman and Denman involve investigations of the contemporary perception of the “excitable, gullible and incorrigibly ill-disciplined” Irish soldier and the extent to which Irish soldiers were more likely to be subjected to court martials.[17] Denman concluded that these stereotypes were ill-founded and reflected long-standing anti-Irish prejudices rather than any specifically Irish characteristics in the actions or behaviour of the Irish soldiers. The socio-political context of Irish enlistment is explored further by Richard Grayson in his works on Belfast and Dublin.[18] Combining extensive use of newspapers with trawling through digitised army service and pension records, Grayson’s work offers a “socio-military history that begins in the street rather than the trench or training ground”.[19] His work *Belfast Boys*, for example, examines the interwoven stories of Protestant and Catholic soldiers from west Belfast, rather than focusing on specific battalions or divisions. Similar methods are employed in his book on Dublin which also extends the chronology to include the War of Independence

period. His works are particularly valuable for their intersection of the military history with the wider home front experience.

One of the key issues in Irish historiography has centred on the complex issue of motivations. Given that conscription was not implemented in Ireland, why did over 200,000 Irish men voluntarily enlist in the British military? Many histories focused on the economic incentive of the separation allowance, or on the influence of political factors such as use of the Home Rule issue by both the Irish Parliamentary Party and Ulster Unionist leadership. David Fitzpatrick and Keith Jeffery have both offered a wider range of potential motivating factors, including the influence of peer pressure, and the desire for excitement and independence.[20] The reasons for the decline in recruitment after 1915 have also been the subject of some debate, focusing in particular on the impact of the 1916 rebellion and the heavy Irish casualties at Gallipoli in 1915.[21] In the most substantive study of Irish wartime recruitment to the British military, Butler, Wheatley and Bowman concluded that the decline in recruitment in Ireland can be attributed, in part at least, to the slow recognition of the government to the need to establish local recruiting efforts aimed at addressing the specific social, economic, and political conditions in Ireland.[22]

Another area of substantive debate in the Irish historiography is the experience of veterans during the War of Independence (1919-1921). Influential research by Jane Leonard and Peter Hart (1963-2010) in the 1990s highlighted the murder and intimidation of civilian ex-servicemen by the Irish Republican Army, with Leonard arguing that ex-servicemen were seen as an acceptable target due to their military service, and that there was little outward condemnation of their murders from the wider community.[23] More recent work by Gemma Clark on everyday violence in the civil war has also concluded that ex-servicemen were among those particularly targeted by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).[24] This image of the persecuted and ostracised ex-serviceman has, however, been recently challenged by the work of Paul Taylor and Emmanuel Destenay. Taylor emphasised the integration of ex-servicemen into the Irish Free State and argued that intimidation of such men was not typically linked to their war service, and was geographically limited.[25] As suggested by Brian Hughes, the reality is likely in between these opposing interpretations.[26] Veterans had diverse experiences including assimilation and integration but also marginalisation and intimidation. Recent work by Michael Robinson on shell-shocked veterans highlights the value of such studies of the lived experiences of veterans in Ireland, north and south, moving beyond the political context.[27]

Home front and civil mobilisation

The Irish home front emerged as an important area of the historiography in the late 20th century, influenced by the development of social history methodologies in Ireland and elsewhere. The first effort to establish studies of the social and economic impacts of the war was a collection of essays derived from an undergraduate workshop led by David Fitzpatrick at Trinity College Dublin in 1986.[28] Similar thematic volumes of essays followed in 2002 and 2008. In the introduction to their 2002 collection,Adrian Gregory and Senia Paseta asserted that it was now “unthinkable that a general history of Ireland would fail to devote a significant section to the Great War”, indicating the substantial progress since 1986.[29] Their collection includes important studies of various aspects of socio-economic life on the home front, including working conditions and industrial controls in wartime, women’s voluntary war work, and the experience of landed gentry, as well as nuanced analyses of remembrance, the conscription crisis, and shell-shock. The book explores how the war united Irish society against an external enemy while simultaneously exacerbating existing fault lines, eventually cementing the idea of “two Irelands”. In 2008 John Horne edited a volume of essays derived from the Thomas Davis lecture series. It featured contributions from many of the leading historians of Ireland’s Great War as well as new research by Caitriona Clear on women and Niamh Puirseil on labour. The chapters emphasise the centrality of the war to Ireland’s social and political history in the early 20th century, presenting “Ireland as a protagonist, rather than merely a victim of British imperialism”.[30] In 2000 Keith Jeffery published the first monograph to examine the history of the war from a social and cultural history perspective.[31] It serves as a vital introduction to some of the key topics rather than a definitive account of Ireland’s war experience.

Civil mobilisation and Irish medical services in wartime have received growing attention in recent years, with studies focused on the participation of nurses and doctors and the development of the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot.[32] The response of the Irish population to the war in autumn 1914 has been masterfully explored in Catriona Pennell’s “Four Nations” study, *A Kingdom United*.[33] Niamh Gallagher’s 2019 monograph is the first detailed examination of civil mobilisation, focusing on the participation

of middle-class Catholics in the war effort in “Southern Ireland” and their attitudes towards the war.[34] It also moves beyond the island of Ireland to examine the mobilisation of the diaspora settler-Irish in the British Empire. Gallagher’s monograph sheds light on lesser known aspects of Ireland’s war experience including the impact of submarine warfare on Ireland’s coastal communities, and the participation of women. Although gender is widely acknowledged as an important category of analysis within the international scholarship, for many years it was identified as a gap within the Irish war historiography. In 2008, Caitriona Clear suggested that Irish women’s Great War experience remained in the “historical shadow”.[35] Significant progress in uncovering this history had taken place between 2008 and 2021. A special issue of the journal *Women’s History Review* in 2018 focused on aspects of Irish women’s war experience, including women’s voluntary war work, social morality, welfare, and politicisation. Efforts to untangle the class and gender implications of munitions work have also been undertaken recently in works by Sisson, Walsh and Thom.[36] Significant contributions to this field include the monograph, *Irish women and the Great War* (2020) by Fionnuala Walsh which represents the first comprehensive study of women’s lives during the war and its immediate aftermath. This study explores the Irish situation within its wider British and European context and argues that the war should be considered one of the defining events for women’s history in 20th century Ireland.[37]

Popular and cultural memory and commemoration of the war have taken on increasing importance in the historiography. Scholars have explored the complex history of commemoration over the 20th century, in an effort to interrogate the concept of national amnesia. A key text in this area is Nuala Johnson’s interdisciplinary study of the relationship between social memory and space in representations of the war in Ireland.[38] This work has been further developed by Jason Myers.[39] He views memory of the war in Ireland as the story of “competing concepts of national identity”.[40] Although the republican identity initially became more entrenched and dominant in the decades after the war, Myers argues that the war slowly became part of official government understandings of nationalism and a means of promoting a pluralist and more complex Irish past.[41] This is evident in the works published in the past decade. It is worth noting however, that detailed historiography of the war was also slow to emerge in Northern Ireland, despite the prominent place of the Somme in Ulster loyalist identity. There were unionist commemorations throughout the 20th century but the historiography followed a similar trajectory to that for the Irish Republic, with the first major studies of military service emerging in the 1980s. Catholic nationalists were initially excluded from the war story and from remembrance events. The work of Philip Orr, Keith Jeffery, and Richard Grayson has been important in the emergence of a more inclusive examination of Ulster participation in the war.[42]

Integrated histories of war and revolution

The steady growth of scholarship examining various aspects of the war and its impact on Ireland has significantly gathered pace since 2011. The period 2012-2023 has been labelled the ‘Decade of Centenaries’ in Ireland and includes commemoration of events such as the Home Rule crisis 1912-14, the First World War, the 1916 Easter Rising, the War of Independence, establishment of Northern Ireland and the Free State, and the subsequent civil war. The pivotal year was 2016 when the centenaries of the Battle of the Somme and Easter Rising were marked, each representing the different political traditions on the island of Ireland. The decade has resulted in a significant expansion of studies of Ireland’s war experience, both from academic historians and members of the public. The war is now typically integrated into studies of the Irish revolutionary period, and its influence on the domestic political crises, both during and in the aftermath of the Armistice is widely accepted.

Heather Jones has noted a trend of “interweaving war and revolution history” evident in recent publications.[43] This is apparent in John Borgonovo’s study of Cork. He examines the pivotal years 1916-1918 in an effort to understand the shift in public opinion and allegiance in the city after the Easter Rising, synthesising “many strands of the war into a single local narrative”.[44] He views the Easter Rising through the prism of its wartime social and political context and argues convincingly for the importance of studying the war and the revolutionary period in tandem. Borgonovo’s work is part of a growing collection of regional studies of Ireland during the war, which provide valuable insight into the local experience and the varying extent to which the war affected communities across the island. These include the work of labour historian Padraig Yeates.[45] His four books on the history of Dublin from the 1913 trade union lockout to the civil war illuminate the socio-economic conditions in the city and the impact of conflict on ordinary lives. The Four Courts Press series of county histories also use 1912-1923 as the chronological parameters for the study of war and revolution in a localised context, while the First World War experience is integrated into vast volume: the *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (2017).[46] Studies of the Irish revolution have increasingly also

placed the Irish experience within the broader international context and have adopted comparative or transnational frameworks. These include Keith Jeffery's study of the global context of the 1916 Rising, Roy Foster's innovative study of Irish radicalism through the prism of the generational revolt evident across Europe, and Maurice Walsh's work which situated Irish events within the context of global anti-imperial tensions.[47]

Conclusion

Trends evident in the international scholarship such as the growth of social and cultural history perspectives, and the employment of transnational and comparative frameworks are visible in the Irish historiography but emerged notably later. There has been a plethora of new scholarship in the past decade, demonstrating the current strength and vitality of the field. In 2018 David Fitzpatrick suggested "historical aphasia" as a more accurate alternative to Martin's national amnesia concept, observing that the problem was not forgetting but an an inability to speak or write of Irish involvement in the war.[48] This inability is no longer evident and First World War scholarship is now thriving in Ireland. As noted by Gallagher in 2019, historians are now well placed to revisit some of the earlier conclusions made about Ireland and the Great War.[49] Informed by international scholarship, there is space for fresh perspectives and new approaches to the evidence while the digitisation of primary source collections has expanded the avenues for potential research.

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