

LEITRIM ECHOES OF THE GREAT WAR

Padraig Griffin

THE 1983 Leitrim Guardian contained an article written by this author with the details of around two hundred and seventy Leitrim men who gave their lives during the Great War and the involvement Leitrim people in the conflict. This article came about as a result of research I conducted on seven volumes of the 1923 publication "Ireland's Memorial Records" from the Royal British Legion in Dublin and the remaining volume from Enniskillen Library.

There was no great interest in the 1914-18 War or appreciation of the sacrifices made by so many of our people at that time. While reasonably well attended ceremonies had taken place on Remembrance Sunday in November in earlier years the interest had died out, as those who were involved grew older and passed on. By that time, the most topical issue was whether or not the Irish army should participate in the Remembrance Service in St Patrick's Cathedral while the conflict in Northern Ireland was further polarising opinions. This attitude continued until the Good Friday Agreement was signed and heralded the beginning of a new era of tolerance and mutual respect.

One of the most striking manifestations of this was the coming together of a joint north/south committee led by former Government Minister Paddy Harte and former UDA leader Glenn Barr to establish the Island of Ireland Peace Park in Messines. The thirty four metre high round tower which is the centrepiece of the project was constructed by youth workers from both parts of the island using materials from all thirty two counties. It was officially opened on Armistice Day 1998 by President Mary McAleese in the presence



of Queen Elizabeth II and King Albert II of Belgium.

For the next two decades there was a revival of interest with lectures, seminars, local commemorations, the publication of articles and books as well as the research into and publication of local lists of those killed. Many descendants of Great War casualties began to take an interest in visiting their relative's grave or commemoration site in Europe or the Middle East and war medals long ignored in old suitcases or boxes in attics began to take on a new significance.

It was in this context that the operation culminating in the launch of "Leitrim Echoes of the Great War" by County Council Cathaoirleach Enda McGloin on July 1st 2019 occurred. This event took place on the hundred and third anniversary

Above and on right: Padraig Griffin with Councillor Paddy O'Rourke and Elvis Curran, the Orange Order representative on the Peace IV Working Group, at the unveiling of the Carrigallen Memorial in June.

of the first day of the Battle of the Somme where eleven Leitrim men were killed. The 1983 list was revised in 2010 and again updated in 2014. The original list based on the eight volume Ireland's Memorial Records had many inaccuracies and omissions. However, given that it was hurriedly produced in 1923 by the Committee of the Irish National War Memorial, the disturbed state of the country at the time and the lack of co-operation from many quarters, it did provide a useful starting point. Many of the inaccuracies were based on geographical misinformation and these had to be revised.



The website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was a tremendous source of information on those who were killed, providing in many cases details of next of kin. Other website sources included the "Forces, War, Records" website, Ancestry and Find My Past, the last three mentioned being subscription websites. Shortly before the commencement of the centenary commemoration in 2014, the Memorial Records were digitised, making it easier to check items which they contained.

Two years ago Leitrim County Council commenced a process of commemoration which was to lead to the Versailles Project earlier this year and culminated in the provision of a listing of Leitrim War dead on the Council website. The Project supported by the EU Peace IV Programme was led by Hugh Trayer and Susan Heffernan

from Mayo and organised a number of activities throughout the early summer. The list published on the website is the result of work completed by Margaret Connolly, Dr John Logan, Quincey Dougan from County Down, Tom Burnell and myself.

The book project ran parallel to the above and was supported by Leitrim County Council under the Decade of Centenaries Programme. It aims to tell the story of the Great War in readable fashion and in chronological order with casualties listed in order in which they fell. The information given in each case enables the reader to easily access the grave or memorial of each casualty. Side by side with the Great War narrative is the coverage of the history of what was occurring contemporaneously in relation to Ireland. The

campaign for Home Rule led by John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party along with the increasing level of support for complete independence from 1916 onwards leading to the establishment of the First Dáil in early 1919 and the subsequent War of Independence here are all referenced.

The story of commemoration in Leitrim, Ireland and abroad is outlined right down to recent times and includes that of the Carrick on Shannon Legion Memorial Hall opened in 1927. The unveiling of a commemorative plaque at the site of this Hall during this year's Remembrance weekend will bring a fitting conclusion to Leitrim's centenary commemoration of which "Leitrim Echoes of the Great War" was an important part and a permanent record.