

# From North Leitrim to the North Island

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## *with a Flanders connection*

**GERRY COMISKEY** *writes about courageous men whose roots are in Newtownmanor*



*Bishop Owen Dolan with Pope Francis in Rome.*

**I often think** of emigrants from Leitrim. During the 1980s and 1990s, I spent a few summers in New York and got to know and understand the ordeal that it was then for many young people who were forced to leave their native places and head for a better life in the Big Apple.

Even when I was at primary school I used to hear my parents talking about their brothers and sisters who had to emigrate to England and the United States of America. A common topic of conversation in the homes of Newtownmanor families was letters from relatives living abroad. A neighbour of ours, Mary Ellen Dolan, used to talk about a man called Patrick Dolan, who left our community in the early 1860s. When we would gather in the little cemetery at Carrickatemple for the November prayers for the dead and for funerals, she would always draw our attention to an impressive headstone that was erected by this man in memory of his parents. She used to tell us that his grandson became a Bishop. Sometimes when I walked around the little roads at home I would wonder about this man and his grandson.

In 2002, I was going on a short

trip to Australia and by way of preparation, I made contact with Bishop Owen Dolan in the Diocese of Palmerstown, New Zealand. He invited me to come and visit him for a few days. As it turned out, Mary Ellen was correct and Bishop Dolan is indeed the grandson of Patrick. It was a privilege to be in his company and to hear the story of his family. His grandfather emigrated from the shores of Lough Doon when he was about sixteen years old in the company of two neighbours. First, he went to Queensland, Australia and then on to New Zealand. We know very little about his early life in that country, but he must have found life in a developing colony satisfactory enough because he did very well. At one stage, he owned a stationery shop, a country hotel and several small commercial properties. The part of the New Zealand colony in which he settled had a proportion of Irish settlers, but Irish and Catholics had never been more than fifteen percent of the national population. It was an age of strong divisions, both on ethnic and religious grounds. Yet Patrick Dolan must have been highly respected in the community because he was appointed a Justice of the Peace.



He married Catherine Hall in 1888. Her mother was Healy who, coincidentally, was also from County Leitrim. They had a family of five. The Bishop's father was the fourth born. Patrick died in 1901 leaving his wife with five small children.

As a result of the time we spent together, the links between North Leitrim and the North Island were cemented. On the feast of St Peter and St Paul in 2002, the Bishop came to the Church of Mary Mother of God, Newtownmanor to celebrate Mass. This is the church where Patrick Dolan was baptised and attended Mass as a child. It was here and in his home that his faith

Reinforcement: 22nd **HISTORY-SHEET.** [E.F. Form No. 34]

Unit: P Coy Rank: Pte Surname: Dolan Christian Name: Owen John No. 37992

Occupation: *Surveyor's App.* Religion: Roman Catholic Last New Zealand address: Beach Road Hawera

Last employer: J S Murray R C

Name, relationship, and address of next-of-kin (if not resident in New Zealand, insert also name and address of nearest relative in New Zealand): Mrs C Dolan Mother (Hawera)

**Service**

No. 37992 Rank: Pte

Name: Owen John

Address: Beach Road Hawera

Periods of Service. Theatres of Operation.

In New Zealand: ... years 800 days.	Australasian
Overseas ... years 393 days.	Egyptian
Total service ... 1 years 988 days.	Egyptian E.F.
Date commenced duty: 16-10-16	Balkan
Date finally discharged: 30-7-18	Western European
	Asiatic

Decorations: *Left leg amputated*

The foregoing particulars are correct. BRITISH WAR MEDAL VICTORY MEDAL Signature: *O.J. Dolan*

**Wounds**

Overseas ... years 853 days. Egyptian E.F. ✓

Total service ... 1 years 988 days. Balkan ✓

Date commenced duty: 16-10-16 Western European ✓

Date finally discharged: 30-7-18 Asiatic ✓

Decorations: *916*

The foregoing particulars are correct. BRITISH WAR MEDAL VICTORY MEDAL Signature: *O.J. Dolan*

**Sick** ...

**Killed in action** ...

**Discharge** ...

**Pension** ...

\* Strike out words not required.

Record sheet for the soldier Pte Owen John Dolan

was nurtured. Several generations of Dolans in New Zealand can trace their Catholic faith and values to this place and to these people. Bishop Owen was quite emotional when he was able to visit his great-grandparents burial place and to see the headstone that was erected by 'their son Patrick Dolan of New Zealand'. He remarked that even though he had come from the other side of the world to Leitrim he did not feel he was visiting someone else's country but rather 'coming back to my own place'. As a young priest, Owen spent several years as a Missionary in Latin America. His father's final words to him as he drove away for the first time were 'don't leave

your bones in a foreign land'. He was using the only phrase that the Bishop had ever heard which had come from his grandfather. The story handed down from one generation to the next was that Patrick Dolan's mother called out to him as he got into the cart which took him from the Manor to Sligo town and away from his native place forever was 'don't leave your bones in a foreign land'. When Bishop Owen was leaving Ireland in 2002 he went to Flanders Fields in Belgium to visit the place where his father served with the New Zealand Army during the First World War. His father Private Owen John Dolan joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on 3 October 1916. At the time he was 20 years old and like some many young men of the time he joined the famous ANZACs for adventure and the freedom of small nations. In February 1917 Pte. Dolan was shipped overseas to see action in France and Belgium and in October 1917 he took part in the Battle of Broodseinde near Ypres. He was one of the 1,853 soldiers from New Zealand killed or wounded during the battle. There were more than 26,000 other British and Australian casualties and more than 35,000

German casualties. The battle lasted for only a few days in early October.

The winding country roads around Broodseinde are not unlike the country lane ways that Patrick Dolan left behind in North Leitrim and while the land is more fertile and productive, no doubt Owen would have readily swapped the mayhem and carnage for the peace and tranquillity around Lough Doon. After his injury, Owen was shipped to London for treatment and recuperation and this would be the closest he would ever come to the place of his ancestors in Newtownmanor. He shipped back to New Zealand in December 1917 and as a result of his wounds, his war was over. He went on to marry and raise a family, with Owen Junior being born in 1928. Owen Senior died in 1982.

During last August, my nephew, Gary, and I spent a few days in Flanders Fields. As we walked the quiet country roads, we were of course reminded of the little roads in Leitrim. We thought of the courageous Dolan men, Patrick who left his home in North Leitrim in the 1860s and Owen Senior who left his home in New Zealand in 1916. Thankfully, Bishop Owen's father made a great recovery from the injuries he sustained. His son, the Bishop, like his father and grandfather, was courageous in that he set out as a missionary for Jesus Christ in Peru. Bishop Owen celebrated his 90th birthday on the 28th September 2018. He is very alert and in pretty good health. He communicates with his friends in Leitrim and Sligo by email. Those of us who hear from him are always delighted to read his lovely messages.