

IRELAND'S SOUTH AFRICAN WAR 1899–1902

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Abstract

It has been estimated that around fifty thousand Irishmen fought during the South African War, many of whom were at the forefront of a number of key engagements, serving in Ireland's thirteen infantry battalions and three cavalry regiments. Ireland's Imperial connections were further reinforced by the country's impressive civilian contribution to the war effort. At least thirty-three militia battalions were mobilised during the course of the war, with seven units being despatched to the front, thirteen companies attested for the Imperial Yeomanry, many civilian Irish nurses and doctors enrolled into the army medical services, and tens of thousands of pounds were raised through various Irish war charities. Notwithstanding the immense Irish military contribution and contemporary civilian interest in the war, very little modern research or public knowledge exists on the subject. The dearth in research is perhaps due to Irish Nationalist historiography and sensitivity during the twentieth century, which has arguably distorted our perspective of Ireland's shared history with the British Empire. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to present an alternative Ireland, which has largely been ignored, by discussing Ireland's military contribution and experience during the course of the war. In addition, the article attempts to recall the Irish public's active demonstration of Imperial support and highlights the relationship that existed between Ireland and the British Empire during the conflict.

Introduction

A corporal of the First Australian Horse observed the variations of the English language amongst Her Majesty's soldiers during the South African War:

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There were few distinctions in dress as the campaign grew older, and most men looked alike, but one was generally able to locate a man's habitat in the Empire as soon as he opened his

lips to speak. From the rounded, full-voiced English, the broad Scotch, or the Irish brogue, the Canadian twang and the Australian drawl ...¹

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Ireland was a distinctive member of the British Empire. The Irish citizen increasingly played a role in Imperial development, finding employment in administration, politics, the civil service, and in the military and the navy. The once strong military tradition that existed between Ireland and the British Empire was reflected during the South African War (SAW), where it has been estimated that nearly fifty thousand Irish soldiers fought for the British during the conflict.² At the end of Queen Victoria's reign, it was the largest muster of Irish troops ever to be assembled for a British campaign, eventually surpassed only during the Great War. In addition to the vast numbers of serving Irish soldiers, the SAW also witnessed more Irish generals engaged than any other conflict during the nineteenth century.³ Notwithstanding the imposing military contribution by the Irish and the impressive civilian support, little modern research has engaged with Irish involvement – an understandable omission in Irish and military historiography had participation been insignificant.⁴ Overall, there is minimal information and research that highlight the extent of Irish participation in the British army during the South African War. The evident absence of modern research and the continued focus on the role of Irish Nationalism, the Irish pro-Boer movement and their military contribution, ultimately have the effect of distorting the country's historiography and its perceptions of its past.⁵

Indeed, the Imperial connections between Ireland and Great Britain are understandably inconvenient for Irish Nationalists and the Irish state. Historian Ciarian Wallace writes,

it has long been a part of the diplomatic image projected by independent Ireland that the Irish were never invaders or colonisers ... It does not fit Ireland's official self-image ... to recall the significant contribution made by Irish administrators, civil servants, police and soldiers to creating colonies and maintaining the Empire.⁶

Hiram Morgan deemed Ireland's links with Britain "an uncomfortable Irish heritage".⁷ Certainly, there is a cultural, historical and political interest in presenting Ireland as a nation of revolution against the British Crown. Nevertheless, there has been a significant increase in interest over the past number of years on Ireland's 'Imperial' participation, and this is reflected by a growing number of researchers and Irish universities providing studies that highlight Ireland's military tradition within the British Empire. This growing trend has been supported by the

Royal visit to Ireland in 2011, and the coming centenary of the Great War (2014 – 2018). Therefore, it is an ideal period for historians and the public to revisit certain aspects of Ireland's historiography and reflect on the importance of the country's shared history and past traditions with the British Empire. Failure to do so, argues Kevin Kenny, distorts our ability to understand the full conditions in which Ireland came to constitute and define itself as a nation-state in the modern era.⁸

The main objective of this article is to introduce sections of Irish society that actively participated in the British war effort. This will be argued through several case studies that reveal the extent of Irish involvement and experience, and present the country's home front as an active and supportive member of the British Empire, notwithstanding growing anti-English sentiment amongst Irish Nationalists. Such heralded responsiveness to the war effort, and the Empire in general, led English poet, George Meredith, on the eve of the Great War, to consider Ireland as being "No longer England's broken arm".⁹

Irish participation and experience

From the outset of the conflict, thousands of Irishmen were intimately involved, serving in Irish and British infantry battalions, cavalry and artillery units, which were deployed across the operational theatre. For the majority of these Irish soldiers, this war would be their baptism of fire. From the first battles in Natal to the implementation of scorched earth, blockhouses and concentrations camps, the Irish were ever present in carrying out their duty.¹⁰ During the first year of the conflict, several Irish battalions and units were heavily engaged against the Boers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which further established the importance and the extent of Irish involvement in the British Army. During this period, the Irish soldiers experienced the harrowing conditions of modern warfare, as the Boers tactically exploited entrenchments and smokeless technology. This too was aided by British tactical inability to adhere to the changing environment of the modern battlefield. Despite the relatively little training the Boers had in 'European' and 'conventional' tactics, any preconceptions about the Boers inferiority would be quickly erased.

The British Pyrrhic victory at Talana, the battles of Ladysmith, the British reverses of 'Black Week' and the various engagements involving the British relief column during the Tugela operations, demonstrated the determination and military effectiveness of the Boers in utilising defensive positions and their ability to exploit the benefits of modern smokeless gunnery. Despite relative successes by Irish units at Talana and Elandsplaagte, the futility of the *arme blanche* and frontal assaults

against well-defended positions became increasingly evident. The British Army suffered unprecedented casualties, as their commanders continued to rely on the soldiers' outdated training, professionalism, motivation and stubbornness to carry forth a victory. The absence of innovation amongst higher-ranked officers added to the difficult situations within which the British Army found itself in South Africa.

The experience of the Irish soldiers during the war is vividly portrayed through an array of letters written by the protagonists. Several themes highlight the intensity of battle, the hardships of the campaign, the adverse weather conditions, the monotony of service, and their uncensored thoughts on their generals, the Boers and the Irish pro-Boers back in Ireland. As the war broke out, the difficulties of the campaign and the fighting ability of the Boers immediately became clear to Irish soldiers on the slopes of Talana, a mile (approximately 1,6 km) west of the coal-mining town of Dundee, Natal. In a letter to his mother, Private Patrick Campion, 2nd Dublin Fusiliers, remembered his experiences on 20 October 1899, stating, "ware [sic] is a terrible thing". He illustrated the concentration of Boer fire – "when the shell Come with whiss over you and the bullets fling by you you would think you would be shot every second".¹¹ Private Francis Burns, 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, detailed the unforgiving reality of battle, remarking on the marksmanship of the Boer: "When within a thousand yards shot and shell began to fly about us. There is no mistake they can shoot. Dead and dying were all around."¹² Despite the heavy British casualties and the failure to secure a decisive victory, the battle at Talana, in the words of the historian, Leo Amery, "created a respect for British valour".¹³ A soldier of the Dublin Fusiliers heralded the role of the Irish during the battle, stating that the hills were to be christened the "Irish Mountains".¹⁴

The following day witnessed the Battle of Elandslaagte, some seventeen miles (27 km) north of Ladysmith. On 21 October, following a successful extended frontal attack by the British, the Boer defences crumbled and their forces were compelled to withdraw from their positions. The 5th Royal Irish Lancers and the 5th Dragoon Guards were then ordered to cut off any retreat, and what followed demonstrated the effectiveness of cavalry against a retreating and demoralised enemy. "The virtual annihilation of the escaping Boers", wrote historian Bill Nasson, "left the republicans with a legacy of virulent hatred for British cavalry."¹⁵ The charge, which was reminiscent of the Zulu retreats at Gingindlovu and Ulundi in 1879, was illustrated by Private Head of the 5th Lancers, who remarked, "we got nicely amongst them, and made them cough".¹⁶ Notwithstanding the success of the traditional cavalry charge at the battle, as the war progressed, it was becoming increasingly evident that the British cavalry's traditional role was becoming defunct, with officers and commentators like Lord Roberts, General Ian Hamilton, Arthur

Conan Doyle and Irishman Erskine Childers, noting that the effectiveness of the *arme blanche* was coming to an end with the increasing levels of firepower on the battlefield. Learning from the conflict, the aforementioned individuals stressed the importance of arming the cavalry with carbines and the necessity of transforming them into mounted infantry. However, battles such as Elandslaagte provided a suitable example to General French of how effective and important cavalry charges were on the morale of the enemy.¹⁷ As a result, the lance and sabre were still a part of the cavalryman's kit at the beginning of the Great War.

Nine days later, another notable incident occurred around Ladysmith, with the capture of 24 officers and 973 men at the Battle of Nicholson's Nek – the largest surrender of British troops since the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁸ The surrender, which involved six companies of the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, was considered a humiliation, and it damaged the reputation and confidence of Irishman General Sir George White, with some colonists comparing the general to his fellow countryman, the late General Sir George Colley.¹⁹ Interestingly, between 13 October 1899 and 5 June 1900, this was just one of fourteen surrenders considered by a Court of Inquiry that involved Irish units, which included the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles at Stormberg, the surrender of three companies of the aforementioned regiment at Reddersburg, and the surrender of three Irish companies of the Imperial Yeomanry at Lindley – a significant embarrassment for the British Army considering the public status of the combatants.²⁰

Following the British failure to obtain decisive victories at Talana and Elandslaagte, and the collapse of the coordinated attack which resulted in the capture of the British at Nicholson's Nek, General White withdrew into Ladysmith to await relief. The town of Ladysmith would remain cordoned until the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Redvers Buller, relieved the British garrison 118 days later. In order to lift the siege, General Buller decided to "force a passage" across the Tugela River near the town of Colenso. Of the two attacking brigades, General Fitzroy Hart's 5th Irish Brigade was given the task of attacking "one of the strongest natural positions in the world".²¹ The Brigade consisted of eleven companies of the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers (which included three companies of the 1st Battalion under Major Tempest Hicks with a fighting strength of 287), the 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers, the 1st Connaught Rangers and the 1st Border Regiment. The 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers were also present in the relief, forming part of the 6th Fusilier Brigade under Major General Geoffrey Barton.

The Battle of Colenso demonstrated the futility of frontal assaults, the incompetence of British command, the ineffectiveness of artillery bombardment on

well-constructed defensive positions and the importance of reconnaissance. The Irish Brigade was tactically naive as it advanced in massed quarter columns towards the river. As the men entered the 'loop', the mistake of deployment was not realised "until the Boers dropped a shell".²² The brigade immediately sustained effective fire as the Boers fired incessantly into their position. A private of the Connaught Rangers described it as "the same as pigs going to the slaughter yard".²³ From the evidence illustrated below, it appears, quite understandably, that encountering such an enemy was an incredibly trying and disconcerting experience for the professional soldier. General Buller, in his battle report to Lord Lansdowne, admitted that his men had suffered heavily, and told of his dispirited men "because they have not seen a dead Boer".²⁴ In the attempt to relieve Colonel CJ Long's artillery, Lance Corporal Hamilton Doake, 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, remarked, "we did not see a single boer", whilst exasperatingly, "not knowing whether we were doing any harm or not".²⁵ The Boers' adoption of smokeless technology left the British soldiers reeling in frustration, having never seen the enemy. "You see nothing but hills in front of you, and the bullets coming over your head", wrote an Irish survivor.²⁶

Due to poor reconnaissance, tactics and the Boers use of quick-firing artillery and rifles, the 5th Irish Brigade suffered heavy losses. Over 500 casualties were sustained by the brigade, with the Dublin Fusiliers accounting for 216 of that number.²⁷ The 5th Brigade Field Hospital admitted 24 officers and 285 of other ranks following the battle.²⁸ The extent of the wounds suffered at the battle was aptly illustrated by a survivor of the brigade. In a letter to his wife he recalled, "It was a terrible affair ... It was something pitiful to see the men getting carried away – some with bullet wounds in their legs hopping about, and others with their limbs blown clean off".²⁹

As soldiers reflected on their defeat, blame began to rest solely on the shoulders of General Hart. Interestingly, amongst the rank and file, soldiers' letters and reports of the battle withheld any criticism of their commander-in-chief. As several historians, including Edward M Spiers have noted, Buller maintained the respect of his troops despite the extent of difficulties during the Tugela campaign. In criticism, Private T Corcoran of the Connaught Rangers wrote, "We had a general in charge who led us into the mouth of an enemy without ever seeing them."³⁰ A Royal Inniskilling Fusilier blamed Major General Hart for "another Majuba".³¹ In addition, a private attached to the Irish Brigade held Hart responsible for the loss of so many lives, "We had a bad general in command of us, Fitzrophan, which was the cause of so many lives being lost. I am not talking to you of what I have heard but what I have seen."³²

On the nineteenth anniversary of the Boer victory over British forces at Majuba Hill (27 February 1881), Buller's relief column broke through the Boer lines of defences, lifting the siege of Ladysmith. On 3 March 1900, the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers were given the honour of leading the relief column into the town of Ladysmith, "as special recognition of their devoted bravery". Captain Romer of the Dublins noted that it was an "honour that nobody grudged them".³³ In recognition of the part played by the Irish during the Tugela operations, Queen Victoria bestowed several honours on the Irish regiments and the people of Ireland – the introduction of the shamrock to be worn on Saint Patrick's Day, the creation of a new Foot Guard Regiment known as the Irish Guards, and a visit to Ireland from the monarch herself, the first since 1861. Despite the growing concerns of dissident nationalism in the country, the island received overwhelming admiration for their actions during the war. On 17 March 1900, Saint Patrick's Day, celebrations were witnessed across the main cities of the Empire, including London, Toronto, Montreal and Sydney.³⁴

With the capture of Bloemfontein (13 March 1900), Johannesburg (31 May 1900) and Pretoria (5 June 1900), the British believed that the war was reaching a successful conclusion. However, that judgement was premature, as the conflict entered a new phase of bitter, protracted guerrilla warfare, epitomised by the British implementation of scorched earth, containment and the introduction of the blockhouse system. This phase of the war lasted two years, resulting in the systematic destruction of the veldt, and the death of thousands of soldiers, insurgents and Boer women and children. The Irish soldiers remained involved in the war of attrition, manning blockhouses, guarding concentration camps, slaughtering livestock, burning wagons and destroying homesteads. With regard to the concentration camps in the Orange River Colony, a former employee of *The Irish Times* and serving soldier in the region, sought to describe to the Irish public the "truth" at Bloemfontein, Springfontein and Norvalspont. From his own experiences he stated, "[the women and children] get plenty to eat, have all kinds of recreation, education for their children ... medical attendance ... Poor Tommy himself would consider himself a lord of the veldt if he was only sure of getting the same rations as any man or woman in the refugee camp." He hoped that the content of the letter would transfer the "sympathies" of the Irish pro-Boers "to their own race".³⁵

Interestingly, as a result of pro-Boer sentiment in Ireland, many Irish soldiers expressed their anger and resentment at the extent of Irish sympathy for the Boer cause. Following the Battle of Talana, Private Hearty, 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers, told his parents, "I will shoot every member in Ireland for the way they are praising the Boers."³⁶ A soldier of the aforementioned battalion wrote, "I was reading the papers where the Irish people were subscribing to the Boers ... the Irish

people will want to be careful of themselves, or we will do the same as we are doing to the Boers".³⁷ From evidence, it appears that Irish soldiers believed that pro-Boerism in Ireland greatly misrepresented the country, and damaged the reputation of its people and traditions within the British Empire. Furthermore, this reaction is understandable and untoward given the extent of the hardship experienced by the Irish soldiers against their adversary and the many reported cases of Boer 'outrages' enacted against local British loyalists, Catholics and soldiers. Debatably, Irish soldiers and citizens were influenced by such anecdotal accounts. In December 1900, an Irish soldier named J Kelly wrote home to discourage the level of pro-Boerism in Ireland. He claimed, "the Boers are nothing but mere savages, the cowardly lot".³⁸ Accounts emerged throughout the Irish press from "eyewitnesses" claiming the Boers were destroying convents and churches.³⁹ On the battlefield, one soldier remembered when the Boers threw down their weapons and begged for "mercy". As the British approached in the open, many Boers reacted quickly and opened fire into the advancing soldiers. "I myself saw a Boer do this", recalled the Ulsterman, "but the old ruffian missed, and before he could fire again, he had a foot of steel through his ribs."⁴⁰ In 1900, Lance Corporal Hamilton Doake, 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, wrote home to his mother, expressing his distrust of the enemy, "The Boers are a very spiteful lot, If you went to one who was wounded + done all you would for him + turn your back, they would shoot you down like a dog."⁴¹ A private of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers also expressed that such acts of continued treachery altered the rules of the conflict from a "civilised" to a "savage" war.⁴² Notwithstanding the gravity of pro-Boerism in Ireland and the intention of many pro-Boers to incite mutiny and desertion, the Irish soldiers remained dutiful, trusted and unresponsive to Nationalist rhetoric. Individuals like Major General Sir William Gatacre, war correspondents, Winston Churchill and John Black Atkins, and members of parliament, praised the Irish soldiers for their loyalty to the crown, remaining staunch defenders of the Empire. This message was reinforced by the *New Zealand Tablet*, claiming, "Irishmen are guarding it [Natal] with all the magnificent self sacrifice and valour which are proud traditions to the race."⁴³

Finally, Ireland's impressive involvement is reflected by the extent of their losses and the vast array of awards and commendations that were bestowed on the Irish battalions. Throughout the entire campaign, Irish battalions suffered considerable casualties, with an estimated total of 4 879.⁴⁴ The General Registrar of Ireland reported 1 800 deaths of Irish soldiers.⁴⁵ Amongst those numbers, there were thirty-seven officers killed or who had died from disease, who were either Irish or had Irish heritage.⁴⁶ Their contribution and sacrifice were awarded throughout the war. Thirteen Irishmen won the Victoria Cross, whilst thirteen non-commissioned

officers (NCOs) and men of the Irish battalions were recognised for their special efforts during the Tugela Campaign.⁴⁷ It is obvious that the Irish were noticeable participants in this conflict, being heralded for their sacrifice and military prowess in some of the most fierce and celebrated engagements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The apparent “Irish genius” typified the respected role of the Irish soldier within the British Empire and the Imperial responsibility that was entrusted to them. “[S]o long as there is an Irishman at the head of affairs, surrounded by Irish soldiers”, wrote an Irish Independent politician, “there was little likelihood of the flag of England being pulled down”.⁴⁸

The home front

Historian Donal P McCracken, leading expert on the Irish pro-Boer movement, states that the loyalist response throughout the conflict was “fairly muted”.⁴⁹ Such a comment is deceptive, as it is plainly evident that substantial sections of Irish society responded with dutiful obedience. From evidence, it is apparent that the war was popular in Ireland with elements of Irish society responding with open enthusiasm. As troops departed for the front, Irish streets were decorated with the Union Jack and thousands of Irish citizens continuously appeared along the roads and docks seeing off each Irish and other British units. On 19 October 1899, over a week into the conflict, some one hundred students of Trinity College, Dublin, ‘The Anti-Boers of Trinity’, marched through Dublin city centre in an attempt to “discourage the nightly exhibitions of pro-Boer sentiment”, and vindicate the country’s honour, “for true patriotism and loyalty”.⁵⁰ Similarly to the scenes witnessed in Great Britain and across the British Empire, Ireland celebrated the relief of Mafeking and Ladysmith, and the eventual cessation of the conflict. Upon the arrival of General George White in Belfast, a remarkable one hundred thousand people gathered to see the “Hero of Ladysmith”.⁵¹ Elements of Irish society – the landed gentry, the military caste, the unionist and loyalist communities, home rulers, Catholic and Protestant – actively supported the war effort, and formed a commonality with the British Empire. The sentiment that prevailed amongst loyalists during this period was aptly surmised by an “Irish Imperialist” who maintained that Ireland’s position in the British Empire “was not compromised by a few cowardly scamps” like John MacBride.⁵²

Irrespective of pro-Boerism, the war was infectious in Ireland, and the interest that prevailed in Ireland manifested into the formation of several units of the Imperial Yeomanry and the creation of several Irish war charities. A degree of civilian military support was first witnessed with individuals expressing interest in

forming a “Loyal Irish Volunteer Corps” for immediate deployment in South Africa.⁵³ Although nothing materialised during this period, it was certainly indicative of the martial spirit that existed in the country. Following the events of ‘Black Week’, the War Office issued a statement declaring the formation of the Imperial Yeomanry, and across the United Kingdom, tens of thousands of men hurried to the recruitment depots, eager to form the units of the First Contingent. The contingent had 550 officers and 10 731 men in service, dispersed into twenty battalions containing four companies each.⁵⁴ This included the 45th Dublin Company, the 46th Belfast Company, the 54th Belfast Company and the 47th Duke of Cambridge’s Own, which consisted of “English and Irish men about town”.⁵⁵ The companies were formed into the 13th Battalion. In addition, the 60th Belfast Company and 61st Dublin Company were attached to the First Contingent, forming half of the 17th Battalion serving with the Rhodesia Field Force. Overall, thirteen Irish companies were formed and despatched to the front.

The formation of the ‘Irish’ Imperial Yeomanry was an interesting development in the context of Irish military history, as the Royal Commission’s report into the war claimed that the “First Contingent consisted almost entirely of men superior to the classes ordinarily enlisted” (in the regular army).⁵⁶ The British Army, once considered a breeding ground for the unemployed, vagrants and the undesirables, was becoming increasingly popular and a respectable aspect of society. The majority of volunteers who enlisted into the Irish units of the First Contingent were predominantly middle and upper class. Eighty-nine per cent had employment or were currently students, and the other eleven percent, considered ‘unemployed’, would have needed private funds to secure the finances needed for enlistment. With an average age of 25,1 years, the previous occupations included clerks (17%), farmers (7%), grooms (6%), building trades (5%), engineers (4%), gentlemen (4%) and students (3%). Only ten percent of the men enlisted had previous military experience.⁵⁷ The most dynamic social group that engaged with the Imperial Yeomanry was the Irish landed gentry, providing unwavering support for the military and the Imperial mission. They offered their services to the Imperial Yeomanry by aiding its organisation in Ireland, providing financial assistance to men to buy equipment, engaging with the local and national press in promoting charitable assistance for the companies, and offering themselves as extra men in the rank and file. Their actions embodied the symbiotic relationship that existed between them and the military.⁵⁸

Considering the attestation of the Irish companies, it is apparent that economic motivation was not a decisive factor for enlistment. Indeed, at the Royal Commission, Irishman Adjutant General Sir Thomas Kelly-Kenny, observed that the

individuals who attested into the First Contingent did so through the spirit of patriotism.⁵⁹ It is debatable why these citizens decided to travel to South Africa and risk their lives in a dangerous environment; however, it is conceivable that they responded to the difficulties of the war in a patriotic and devoted fashion, with individuals enrolling with overwhelming enthusiasm. Following various press publications regarding the difficulties of the war and the extent of Irish casualties throughout December 1899, Trooper Maurice Fitzgibbon of the 45th Dublin Company suggested, “Why not let us go and do our best to retrieve their situation, or, if that was not to be, let us go down with them?”⁶⁰

The 13th Battalion suffered an embarrassing defeat at the Battle of Lindley (27–31 May 1900), which generated widespread criticism from Lord Roberts and other commentators, for their lack of training and military capability. However, overall, there were some positives. The development of the Irish Yeomanry led to the establishment of the South Irish Horse and the North Irish Horse, which played a significant role during the Great War.⁶¹ Sir Kelly-Kenny had deemed it appropriate to establish permanent yeomanry forces in Ireland, due to their patriotism and loyalty expressed during the SAW.⁶² It is important to stress the significance of the first Irish units of the Imperial Yeomanry, as it illustrates that hundreds of individuals enlisted, not for economic motivation, escape from creditors or bad marriages, but as loyal members of the United Kingdom, responding to the demands of the Empire and actively demonstrating unequivocal support for the war effort. Such a reaction has escaped the attention of Irish historiography.

Another dimension of Irish support for the war effort and interest in the welfare of their battalions can be demonstrated by the numerous war charities that emerged in Ireland. At the outset of the conflict, several war charities provided respite for Irish widows and orphans, as well as funding equipment for Imperial Yeomanry volunteers, clothes and basic goods for Irish soldiers on tour, and subscriptions for hospital beds and medical supplies. These charities began as a reaction to the vast numbers of soldiers participating in the war and the unprecedented high level of casualties. The most prominent charities were the Irish Regiments Widows and Orphans Fund, the Mafeking Relief Fund, the Transvaal Relief Fund, The Shamrock League, the Irish Imperial Yeomanry Hospital Fund, the South of Ireland Relief Fund and Lady Roberts’s (the wife of Lord Roberts) Irish branch of the Soldiers and Sailors Family Association. It is estimated that a minimum of £65 232 was collected on the island. To place that figure in a modern context, it would amount to a substantial sum of over EUR5,3 million, or ZAR41 753 441.⁶³ While this figure may be deemed comparably lower than the monies subscribed throughout Great Britain and the British Empire, it was a

relatively impressive collection considering the low population and the significant number of pro-Boers and Irish Nationalists in the country. Moreover, it is imperative to note that the sum was not exclusively subscribed by just the wealthy, but rather the figure was made up of contributions by citizens of all social classes. Interestingly, evidence from the vast amount of subscriptions gathered illustrates the motivation behind many of the donations. Individuals expressed their willingness to support each Irish regiment, lauding their bravery and sacrifice during the campaign, expressing sympathy and understanding for the bereaved families and, in cases, using it as an opportunity to chastise the actions of pro-Boers in Ireland. Such sentiments and attitudes adopted by Irish loyalists did not go unnoticed by their peers in Britain. *The London Times* lauded the positivity of the charitable organisations in the face of dissident Nationalism.⁶⁴ The levels of support and devotion expressed at the turn of the century cannot be understated, as it ultimately foreshadowed the Irish loyalists' patriotic response in 1914.

Conclusion

Ireland's role during this conflict has largely been 'forgotten'. Despite the celebrated victories and sacrifices of Irish soldiers during the SAW, there remains a significant dearth in public understanding and knowledge of the county's participation. This is a consequence of Ireland's selective historiography and the occurrence of the Great War. When compared to the Great War, Irish participation in the SAW, as one historian suggests, "Officially at least ... is simply not worth remembering".⁶⁵ The bravery of several Irish regiments throughout the Tugela operations, the siege of Ladysmith and various other engagements, were overshadowed by the involvement and sacrifice of thousands of Irishmen during the Great War, many of whom were attached to the infamous 16th Irish Division and the 36th Ulster Division. In addition, it has been eclipsed by the pro-Boer movement and the military contribution of John MacBride's Brigade, a foreign volunteer force, attached to the Boers.

Following the conflict, as a response to Irish interest and participation, there are at least fifty-four public and private memorials, dedicated to soldiers who lost their lives during the SAW. Such monuments reveal the extent of the country's impressive military and civilian tradition and interaction with the British Empire during the war.⁶⁶ The most impressive of these war memorials is the Royal Dublin Fusiliers' Arch at Saint Stephen's Green, Dublin. Despite its prominent location in the heart of the city, very few people understand its significance and what it attempts to represent. In modern Ireland, the arch has adopted the colloquial name of

‘Traitor’s Gate’. Such a name provides an excellent example of how large sections of the Irish community have failed to address their history sufficiently and objectively. With such a selective memory and attitude towards certain aspects of Irish historiography, the public’s understanding of its own history would largely remain patchy at best and ignorant at worst. It is only in the last twenty years that Ireland has begun to readdress its role in the Great War and the British Empire and military as a whole, yet the Irish contribution during the SAW has relatively escaped the attention of Irish historians and the public at large.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Ireland continued to interact strongly with British society and the military. Notwithstanding the gravity of pro-Boerism and Nationalism in the country, Ireland’s participation was heralded across the Empire, with their contribution being a fitting reminder of how the country remained the bulwark of the British military and Empire. Lieutenant CRN Burne, attached to the Naval Brigade, praised the attitude and performance of the Irish soldiers during the war and could only wish that “the Irish nation is not more like the Irish soldier”.⁶⁷ It was not merely the Irish soldiers who reacted positively to the war effort – elements of the Irish home front remained staunch advocates for the British Empire. The examples provided throughout this article demonstrated a country that was unperturbed by insubordinate elements of Irish society. The war was an opportunity for Ireland to project its qualities and resourcefulness, whilst highlighting its patriotism for the benefit of the union. It is certain that the war was an important event in Irish history – not only for Irish Nationalists – galvanising Irish unionism, reinforcing the symbiotic relationship that existed between Ireland and the United Kingdom, and creating unparalleled support for Irish soldiers, which helped continue a healthy recruitment ground. This would all become apparent in twelve years’ time when Irishmen were once again called upon to fight for the Empire. Overall, this article offers an introduction to other aspects of Ireland’s colourful history, providing a wider understanding of the island’s past, and perhaps direct attention to wider historical considerations of both Imperial and colonial frameworks. Ultimately, however, the Imperial aspects of Irish society and culture still remain overshadowed by domestic events that secured the formation of the nation-state.

Endnotes

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