

Archipelagic Poetry of the First World War

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For well over a century before the First World War, the British Army had played a significant role in cementing the Union of Great Britain and Ireland, offering escape, a way out of poverty, or the opportunity of adventure for young men from the impoverished regions and smaller nations of the United Kingdom. Scots and Irish soldiers in particular were mainstays of the Victorian army, at times almost outnumbering English soldiers in the ranks. In the twenty years leading up to the war many of the military's decision-makers had significant Irish or Scottish connections. Several Commanders-in-Chief of the Army in this period, including Viscount Wolseley and Roberts, were Irish and another, Lord Kitchener, had been born in Ireland. The man responsible for building the modern army as the Secretary of State for War in the decade before the war, Viscount Haldane, was a Scot. The first commander of the British Expeditionary Force, Field Marshal Sir John French came from an old Anglo-Irish family and its second, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, was a Scot. A smattering of key generals, such as General Sir Ian Hamilton, who commanded the Dardanelles campaign, were Scots or Irish: of the five wartime Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff two, General Sir Charles Douglas and Lieutenant General Sir James Wolfe-Murray, were Anglo-Scots and another, General Sir Henry Wilson, was an Ulsterman.

The Army before and during the war was, then, perhaps one of the most fully integrated structures of the British state, and one in which the dominant ruling-class English voice was strongly inflected by the diverse accents of its Celtic fringes. At the higher levels, the idea of an army drawn from different parts of the British archipelago was expressed through the hegemony of an intermingled English, Anglo-Scottish, and Anglo-Irish military caste; at lower levels it was cemented culturally by popular writers such as Rudyard Kipling, who in the poems of *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892) and in martial stories in collections such as *Soldiers Three* (1888) portrayed an imperial army in which a standard English intonation jostles with demotic cockney, Irish, and occasional Scottish voices.

But the First World War also occurs at a point of fracture in the Union. For it was during the war that the movement for Irish independence took a decisive step forward, driven largely by the British authorities' disproportionate response to the 1916 Easter Rising. The post-war period

would also see the first sustained nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales with the formation in 1925 of Plaid Cymru and the National Party of Scotland in 1928: with each movement having as its driving force, in Saunders Lewis and Hugh MacDiarmid respectively, a writer who had fought in the British cause in war but who came increasingly to resent what they saw as England's domination of the post-war British state.

The poetry produced during the war by Irish, Welsh, and Scots writers was, then, subject to a slightly different set of tensions than those that operated on English writers. All United Kingdom writers, whether soldiers or civilians, were subject to similar kinds of threat, whether that was to their own existences or those of their friends and families, and almost all shared a sense that this was – at least in its early stages – a just war which required a united national response, fought by a unified army with which they largely identified. But those from the state's smaller nations were subject to the countervailing anxieties common to minority partners in any enterprise, in particular the concern that their distinctive national identity and rights to self determination might be stifled rather than enabled by the vast machinery of a war effort driven from the English metropolitan centre. They might, in other words, share some concerns that in spite of their commitment and service this war was not their war, that there may, after all, be no place for them under the 'English heaven' evoked by Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier'.

For most wartime archipelagic writing, though, such tensions barely registered.¹ This was especially true of the war's public poetry, especially that which appeared in national and provincial newspapers in its early phases. This was uniformly supportive of the Allied cause, its content and form often following closely the rhetoric and rhythms of the Edwardian imperial poetry of William Watson and Henry Newbolt. Within two weeks of the war's outbreak, the *Scotsman* newspaper printed on its leader page a poem 'British Bugles', which is typical of those appearing at the same time in the *Western Mail*, the *Irish Times* (and papers like the *Birmingham Post*) in pledging the support of the Kingdom's regions and smaller nations:

Every island, every last stretch,
Where the ancient banner flies,

¹ The concept of archipelagic writing, denoting the interactivity of the literatures of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England, derives largely from John Kerrigan's *Archipelagic English* (2008), a work that demonstrates convincingly the pervasiveness of such interactions in seventeenth-century 'English' literature.

Hears the braying of the bugles,
And with one accord replies —

Answers straightaway, 'we are ready,
We are with you, Motherland,
Though the strife be long and deadly,
Armageddon be at hand.'

Which from Erin, late divided,
Racked by discord, sore dismayed,
Thunders forth the glad assurance,
'We are one; be not afraid!'²

These civilian sentiments could be found, too, in the verses of serving soldiers that appeared in the United Kingdom's newspapers. Those of an 'Irish Fusilier', in the *Armagh Guardian* in January 1915, similarly celebrated – albeit with rather more enthusiasm than skill – the contribution of the archipelagic nations:

Now here's to good old Ireland and bonnie Scotland too,
The boys of merry England and the Welsh taffies so true.
The Yankees are all watching us and the Irish people too,
To see how we fight for the cause of our right
And the fame of the red, white, and blue.³

In Wales, where there was a relatively strong cultural nationalism and where a little less than half of the population were still speakers of the native language, Cymraeg, there was similarly vocal popular support for the war, largely encouraged by their countryman David Lloyd George in his wartime roles as Chancellor, Secretary of State for War, and then Prime Minister. A number of the war's greatest poets, including Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen, could trace their recent

² 'A.B.', "British Bugles," *The Scotsman*, 15 August 1914, 10.

³ Title of poem? Quoted in Jim Haughey, *The First World War in Irish Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002), 67.

family history to Wales but they, like most people of more defined Welsh identity, supported the war's aims and did not demur from its prosecution.

Another soldier-writer, the Irish-born Patrick MacGill might be said to typify the British hybrid identity of the time and to reflect the popular response to the war. Born in Donegal, MacGill emigrated to Scotland at the age of 15 in 1905 where he found casual work as an agricultural and industrial worker, before moving to Windsor in 1912 to follow a career in literature and journalism. He had first come to notice as a poet in Scotland with his self-published *Gleanings from a Navvy's Scrapbook* (1911) and as a prose writer through contributions to the *Daily Express* and a lightly-fictionalised autobiography, *Children of the Dead End* (1914). His war poetry, collected in *Soldier Songs* (1916), is based on his experiences as a rifleman and stretcher-bearer in the London Irish Rifles.

Although MacGill is often dismissed as something of a poetic naïf, his poem 'After Loos' written shortly after the traumatic experience of going over the top, and a month or so before he was wounded, is not untypical of his work in presenting a rich blend of simple, direct statement and symbolic suggestion. By choosing, uncharacteristically, to give the poem a subtitled date 'Michaelmas Eve, 1915', MacGill subtly leads our attention to the Archangel Michael, who in Catholic orthodoxy is both the pre-eminent warrior angel – victor over Satan in the war in heaven – and the angel of death who transports the souls of the dead to rest with God. In evoking this ambiguous archangel – who symbolises both a revelatory war of faith and triumphant judgement – MacGill hints at a comprehending spiritual dimension to warfare that is, however, quickly undercut by the poem's plain language and refusal to invoke further religious imagery. The poem's register is deliberately, flatly secular, denying the possibility of transcendent feeling by insistently dragging the reader's eyes down from heaven to earth:

Was it only yesterday
Lusty comrades marched away?
Now they're covered up with clay.

Seven glasses used to be
Called for six good mates and me —

Now we only call for three ⁴

At its most interesting, MacGill's poetry trades in these kinds of juxtaposition, undercutting elevated ideas with prosaic reminders of the commonplace horror and desolation of the war. While this is far from being an exclusive trait of the literature of the archipelagic nations, it perhaps hints at that literature's predisposition to exploring states of duality and its interest in shifting perspective and destabilising convention. This heterodox instinct can be used, too, to challenge assumptions closer to home, such as the easy nostalgia for an idealised Celtic homeland. In 'A Lament' MacGill's speaker's self-indulgence is curbed by a common-sense reminder from his NCO:

I wish that I were back again
In the glens of Donegal,
They'll call me coward if I return,
But a hero if I fall.

'Is it better to be a living coward,
Or thrice a hero dead?'
'It's better to go to sleep, my lad,'
The Colour Sergeant said. ⁵

In 'Death and the Fairies' MacGill employs juxtaposition again to make a sardonic comment on Irish credulousness, contrasting his formative years in Donegal ('Where every night the Fairies / Would hold their carnival') with his undeceived present life in Flanders where 'men like wheat-ears fall, / And it's Death and not the Fairies / Who is holding carnival.'⁶

Where his poetry exposes such fault lines, or where one poem contradicts the ideas of another, MacGill gets close to exposing not only the confusion of values felt by most early war writers, but

⁴ Patrick MacGill, 'At Loos' *Soldier Songs* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1917), 23.

⁵ 'A Lament', *Soldier Songs*, 31.

⁶ 'Death and the Fairies', *Soldier Songs*, 89.

the particular confusions of being a soldier in the army of a nation to which he does not wholly belong and to which his own nation has long been culturally and politically antipathetic. MacGill can write longingly about Donegal in a poem such as 'I Will Go Back', which begins in Yeatsian reverie, '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', but his poetry also recognises the hard fact (in 'After the War') that 'I'm a British soldier / With a British soldier's pay' and that it is England to which he and his like will return rather than an idealised Ireland.⁷

MacGill's poetry, though, does not always make enough of these opportunities to explore his dichotomous situation. It is, instead, generally content to express the sentiments held in common with many of the robust, sensitive young men who faced the war: of admiration for the doughty resolve of 'the ole sweats' of the Regular Army, the mocking, levelling humour of the homosocial military world, the quiet moments of nostalgic longing for home, the melancholic remembrance of lost friends. The conventions that dominate MacGill's poetry are those of Edwardianism, and the rhythms often those of what F. S. Flint would later characterise as 'the tumpty-tum of hurdy-gurdy verses'.⁸ His failure to create consistently a poetry adequate to the war's emotional and moral complexity and of his own position in it, can, as is the case with much of the war's poetry, be traced to his inability to slip off the genteel handcuffs of prevailing convention. That convention might chafe at him, but he cannot escape it. What makes this inadequacy especially noticeable in MacGill's poetry is the contrast it offers to his wartime prose. His unjustly neglected memoir *The Great Push* (1916) is one of the most mordant, disillusioned, and graphically brutal books of the mid-war period. *The Great Push* centres on the Battle of Loos, which is also the subject of 'In the Morning'. The poem features many of the familiar landmarks portrayed in *The Great Push*, especially two towers that loom over the town and provide a dangerous vantage point for the enemy:

The turret towers that stood in the air,
Sheltered a foeman sniper there –
They found, who fell to the sniper's aim,

⁷ 'I Will Go Back' and 'After the War', *Soldier Songs*, 99 & 111.

⁸ F. S. Flint, 'The Appreciation of Poetry' (1940), 2, quoted in J. B. Harmer, *Victory in Limbo: Imagism 1908-1917* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), 17.

A field of death on the field of fame⁹

Compare this description, with its archaisms and glib martial euphemisms, to the directness and simplicity of his account, in *The Great Push*, of a corpse over which he has sprawled in the dark: 'Worms feasted on its entrails, slugs trailed silverly over its face, and lean rats gnawed at its flesh. The air was full of the thing, the night stank with its decay.'¹⁰ Not much 'foeman sniper' or 'field of fame here', and even though MacGill allows himself the poeticism 'silverly', its use seems measured and appropriate to the context, standing out in its richness against the stark situating prose.

MacGill is far from being the only wartime poet from the British archipelago who found himself challenged less by national affiliation than by formal conventional constraint in attempting to construct a complex response to the war in verse. Joseph Lee, the so-called 'People's Poet' of Dundee sprung from a similar mould to that which produced MacGill. Having spent time adventuring round the world in labouring jobs, Lee had, like MacGill, settled down to a career in journalism in the years before the war, supplementing that work with occasional forays into demotic verse such as those collected in his *Poems: Tales o' Our Town* (1910). Like MacGill, Lee enlisted as a private soldier, and like MacGill his poetry veers from a demotic cockney modelled on Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads* (for example, compare MacGill's 'Matey' and Lee's 'Piou-Piou: The British Tommy Atkins to the French') to lyrics on the loss of comrades and remembrance of the landscapes of home. However, like MacGill, Lee rarely escapes the formal straitjacket of Edwardian popular verse. Where he does manage to break free, and create something like poetry, it is through simplifying his language and creating a terseness close to that of Imagism or Kipling's wartime epigrams, as in his short poem 'The Bullet':

Every bullet has its billet;
Many bullets more than one:
God! Perhaps I killed a mother
When I killed a mother's son.¹¹

⁹ 'In the Morning', *Soldier Songs*, 86.

¹⁰ Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push: An Episode of the Great War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2000), 114.

¹¹ Joseph Lee, 'The Bullet', *Ballads of Battle* (London: John Murray, 1916), 21.

The shackles of convention also constrained the poetic efforts of Scottish and Irish soldier poets from higher up the social scale. Lieutenants Willoughby Weaving of the Royal Irish Rifles and Robert Sterling of the Royal Scots Fusiliers had both been students at Pembroke College Oxford, Sterling winning the prestigious Newdigate Prize in 1914. Weaving survived and produced two volumes of wartime poetry *The Star Fields and Other Poems* (1916) and *The Bubble and Other Poems* (1917) which won him the praise of Robert Bridges; Sterling was killed and his *Poems* appeared posthumously in 1916. In both poets, as in the work of other Anglo-Scottish and Anglo-Irish officers such as Hamish Mann, Alexander Robertson, and John Stewart, the attempts to convey the experience of war are derailed by the decorum and circumlocution of the traditions to which their education made them heirs. For these young officers, the temptations of classical allusion, Arnoldian melancholy, and Romantic nature-writing overpowered what desire they might have to write directly about the conditions of modern war; their war books are thick with poems such as 'The Stringless Lyre' (Weaving), 'Weep Not for Me' (Mann), 'If I Should Fall upon the Field' (Stewart), 'Rupert Brooke' (both Mann and Stewart) and 'Two Sonnets to Rupert Brooke' (Weaving). Each is capable of writing poetry of considerable technical ability and aesthetic quality, but none seems able to write a poem fully adequate to the experience of a twentieth-century attritional war. A poem like Weaving's 'Between the Trenches', for example, offers an interesting, at times moving, meditation on what it is to see a friend die and to consider how suddenly his spiritless corpse seems alien and uncanny:

What stranger did the bearers lift
In their soiled stretcher lightly laid
Where I had seen you fall adrift
From life—had time to be afraid ? —
That, all of you that had breathed and moved.
That, none of you that lived and loved,
A shell that so I seemed to hate
For claiming still its lost inmate,

A false pretence, a solid shade.¹²

Arguably, though, the poem's intellectual and affective power is dissipated by its form and diction. This is a poem about the sudden shock of confronting a friend's death, yet its tetrameters are unruffled while its simple rhymes chime with glib felicity; it risks the realism of a 'soiled stretcher' but euphemistically describes violent death in the trenches as a falling 'adrift / From life'. It seems that Anglo-Scottish and Anglo-Irish officer-poets, like the overwhelming majority of their English equivalents, were on the receiving end of a sophisticated poetic education that left them ill-equipped to deal with even the simplest of war's arbitrary brutalities: like so many dashing, highly-trained cavalrymen in a time of machine guns, barbed wire, and high-explosive ordnance.

If both popular culture, as expressed by MacGill and Lee, and the elite culture of the officer class tended to homogenise the British poetic response to war, there remained an alternative in the Celtic literary ideal which had been encouraged in the nineteenth century by the cultural theories of Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan and had lately flourished in the Irish literary revival and the Celtic and Doric revivals in Scotland, and in the persisting Cymraeg bardic tradition in Wales. Alan Mackintosh was a young poet with a similar background to the officer-writers discussed above. Scottish through ancestry but English by birth and formation, Mackintosh threw himself into the Celtic idea at Oxford and restyled himself as a highland poet, going so far as to learn Gaelic and the bagpipes. The persona that emerges in his poetry is that of a fatalist, drawing on a long tradition of Scottish defeat and lamentation to prepare himself for the sublime trial and inescapable suffering of war. This is seen most nakedly in 'The German and the Gael', which offers a kind of grim consolation by contrasting an enemy army sure in its purpose and confident of victory with Gaelic troops who advance, 'Hopeless as went our fathers' to what appears an inevitable, if fearlessly-faced, annihilation: the Germans 'dream the fight is theirs, / Therefore they will not flee, / But we go darkly out to meet / The fate we cannot see.'¹³

In the case of Mackintosh such fatalism may seem an acquisition rather than an imposition: the choice of a poetic mode and persona adopted primarily because it suits his own predisposition

¹² Willoughby Weaving, 'Between the Trenches', *The Star Fields and Other Poems* (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1916), 13.

¹³ E. A. Mackintosh, 'The German and the Gael', *War, the Liberator* (London: John Lane, 1918), 18-19.

and premonitory fears of what the war will bring. But it is not at all dissimilar to the writing that comes in a rather less forced way from Celtic tradition. The Welsh soldier-poet Ellis Evans, known by his bardic name Hedd Wyn, is an example. Though he is now perhaps better-known as the subject of a 1992 film which features him as an anti-war poet exposing the fracture between Cymraeg Welsh culture and British militarism, his poems are not so much protests against the atrocities of war as mournful expressions of resignation at its effects. They are similar in manner to those of Mackintosh and to Scottish Gaelic poems of the war such as the beautiful and stark 'An Eala Bhàn' ('The White Swan') by Donald MacDonald (Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna), and the poems of John Munro (Iain Rothach). Hedd Wyn's 'Y Blotyn Du' (The Black Blot), for example asserts that sense of futility blankly, 'Nid oes gennym hawl ar ddim byd / Ond ar yr hen ddaear wyw' ('We can lay claim to nothing / But the tired earth's story), and his 'Rhyfel' ('War') goes further in emphasising the impotence of bardic poetry in the face of the war's suffering.

Mae'r hen delynau genid gynt
Ynghrog ar gangau'r helyg draw,
A gwaedd y bechgyn lond y gwynt,
A'u gwaed yn gymysg efo'r glaw.

(Like the old songs they left behind,
We have hanged our harps on the trees again.
The blood of the boys is on the wind,
Their blood is mingled with the rain.)¹⁴

[New paragraph? - Yes] Such resignation and lamentation similarly dominates the wartime Scots dialect poetry produced as part of the Doric revival in North-Eastern Scotland. John Buchan was, like Mackintosh, an ambiguous Anglo-Scot who, though born and bred in lowland Scotland, converted to a more overt Scottish cultural nationalism at Oxford. Alongside his punishing work as a novelist, historian of the war, and wartime Director of Information, Buchan published dialect

¹⁴ Hedd Wyn, 'The Black Blot' and 'War', *The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Welsh Poetry*, ed. By Menna Elfyn and John Rowlands (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), 67. Translations by Gillian Clarke.

poems. A poem such as Buchan's 'The Fishers' offers a convincing adaptation of Theocritan idyll to a Scottish context, while his 'Fisher Jamie' uses the simplicity of the Scots dialect to powerful effect – arguably a much stronger and more direct impact than Buchan was able to achieve in the stilted diction of his poems in English. 'Fisher Jamie' begins,

Puir Jamie's killed. A better lad
Ye wadna find to busk a flee
Or burn a püle or wield a gad
Frae Berwick to the Clints o' Dee.

And noo he's in a happier land. —
It's Gospel truith and Gospel law
That heaven's yett maun open stand
To folk that for their country fa'.

But Jamie will be ill to mate;
He lo'ed nae music, kenned nae tūnes
Except the sang o' Tweed in spate,
Or Talla loupin' ower its linns.¹⁵

There is, arguably, enough that is strange in the Scots dialect here to persuade the English reader of an intriguing and distinctive Scottish response to the war: a quality deployed to great effect in the elegiac wartime poetry of Doric poets such as Violet Jacob and Charles Murray, and that Hugh MacDiarmid would use in the short post-war Scots lyrics that kick-started the Scottish Literary Revival. However, much Doric wartime writing remained stuck in the promotion of Scottish rustic stereotypes of canniness and stoical patriotism, as seen in the popular poems of George Abel's *Wylins fae my Wallet* (1915) or in the boasts in Murray's 'A Sough o' War' that the

¹⁵ John Buchan, 'Fisher Jamie', *Poems Scots and English* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1917), 69.

'bairdly men, fae strath an' glen /An' shepherds fae the bucht an' hill, / Will show them a', whate'er befa', / Auld Scotland counts for something still.'¹⁶

There was similarly little in Welsh poetry, whether in English or Cymraeg (and excepting Owen), that protested against the war in emphatic terms or which dissented on grounds of nationalism from the Allied effort. The focus of much of this poetry, whether written at home or on active service, was on what Owen would characterise as 'the pity of war', which, while it might have a distinctive local impact, was generally seen as a suffering that transcended politics and the disputation of nations. Arguably the greatest modernist poet to emerge from the war, David Jones, was an Englishman of Welsh extraction and affiliation, who would much later detail both the war's mundanity and its grim horrors in *In Parenthesis* (1937) and relate those experiences to a narrative of the decline of the Brythonic-speaking ancestors of the modern Welsh in battles such as those of Catraeth and Camlann. Even here, though, Jones's modernist collage of war episodes and British regional voices has a centripetal rather than a centrifugal effect in emphasising the commonality of a shared British rather than a distinctive Welsh war experience.

For the reasons mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, it might be expected that the Irish response would be quite different: that in a nation that had some justification for thinking itself a colony of, rather than a partner in, the United Kingdom there would be more outright opposition to the war and more anguished exploration of its tensions. But while the work of most Irish poets bore some trace of an Irish, or at least Celtic, distinctiveness that set them apart from English writers it was for the most part as ambiguous or evasive as the war writing of Scotland and Wales. The most celebrated contemporary Irish poet, W. B. Yeats, was largely oblivious to the war but wrote, in 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' and 'Easter 1916', a pair of poems that in their different ways encapsulate a sense of Irish dislocation in regard to the war's events. In the first, Yeats celebrates the valour of Major Robert Gregory, a scion of the Irish Ascendancy killed in the service of the British, and in the second he commemorates the Irish martyrs of the 1916 revolt against the British state and its occupying forces. Both poems, though, are deeply ambiguous. His Irish airman sacrifices himself in part for 'country', conceived as the nation's poor rather than the nation state, but mainly out of a sense of heroic excess, a 'lonely impulse of delight', that makes ordinary life seem undesirable and untenable. Desiring to celebrate the heroic act, but

¹⁶ Charles Murray, 'A Sough o' War', *Hamewith: The Complete Poems of Charles Murray* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1979), 70.

deploring its ultimate cause – service in the British military – the poem is transfixed and can say nothing meaningful about the war or the Irish experience of it. His revolutionary martyrs, on the other hand, are driven to their sacrifice by a national idea and a conception of a distinctive national history. But again, the poem is marked by a deep ambivalence, characterized by its recurring idea of a ‘terrible beauty’: a pervasive sense that for all its magnificence, there is something deeply troubling in the inhuman and unnatural action of sacrificing one’s life in the cause of an abstract, and perhaps ultimately unrealizable, national ideal. In Yeats’s poetic-world of war, then, it almost seems that there is little to choose between sacrificing oneself, however ambivalently, in the cause of the British nation and giving one’s life up to an idea of Ireland: the response in both cases is one of numbness and equivocation.¹⁷

Yeats’s Protestant background and his hesitations over vulgar forms of democratic nationalism perhaps partly explain this ambivalence. But nationalist writers from the Catholic tradition display many of the same signs of divided loyalty. This derives partly from the apparently paradoxical support given to the Allied war effort by John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, who led a suspension of nationalist political opposition to British rule for the duration. Two of the best-known Irish soldier-poets to die in the war, Tom Kettle, and Francis Ledwidge, were Catholics and active members of the nationalist Irish Volunteers who embodied this paradox by enlisting in the British army. Kettle was an academic and politician who exercised his sharp wit in writing political poetry in response to William Watson in ‘Reason in Rhyme’ and, in ‘Ulster’, delivering a biting riposte to Kipling’s ‘Ulster 1912’. Kipling’s poem had described Ireland as ‘England’s oldest foe’, to which Kettle’s memorably derisive response was that ‘Kipling’s banjo strings / Blaspheme a sacred text’.¹⁸ This undermining continued in ‘Paddy’, an acute parody of Kipling’s ‘Tommy’, in which Kipling’s assertions about British neglect towards, and routine devaluing of, the ordinary soldier warp, in Kettle’s hands, into nationalist accusations of British hypocrisy:

For it's Paddy this, and Paddy that, and
" Don't annoy us, please !"

¹⁷ W.B. Yeats, ‘An Irish Airmen Foresees his Death’ and ‘Easter 1916’, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 152 & 202-5.

¹⁸ T. M. Kettle, ‘Ulster’, *Poems and Parodies* (London: Duckworth, 1916), 69

But it's "Irish Rifles forward—Fast !"
when the bullets talk like bees,
When the bullets yawn like bees, my
boys, when the bullets yawn like bees,
It's "Connaught blood is good enough"
when they're chanting R.I.P's.¹⁹

But with the advent of war, Kettle followed Redmond faithfully in asserting his hopes that what he described as 'this tragedy of Europe' would ultimately be conciliatory, that it 'may be and must be the prologue to the two reconciliations of which all statesmen have dreamed, the reconciliation of Protestant Ulster with Ireland, and the reconciliation of Ireland with Great Britain.'²⁰

Similar thoughts prompted Ledwidge to volunteer for the British army and dominated his early wartime poems. Many of these are Celtic-inflected nature idylls: poems that are typical of much of the nostalgic pastoralism of the war's soldier poets but which evoke a distinctive, romantic Irish landscape saturated in the drowsy historical myths of the Celtic Twilight. They benefit, too, from the use of the distinctive Irish *aicill*-rhyme, in which a line ending is picked up by a rhyme in the middle of the following line. In poems such as 'Ceol Shee', the sense of a critical comparison between a memoried Irish landscape and the desolate battlefields of France and Belgium is implicit only: the fairy music to which the title refers is a tune untroubled by war. In 'The Dead Kings', however, the contrast is more explicit and stark, with the war intruding to break enchantment's circle. The speaker of the poem dreams of Rosnaree and the dead kings of Ireland who have come to entertain him with their tales of 'ancient glory, sweetly told', but the reverie is curtailed and the poem ends abruptly: 'A bomb burst near me where I lay. / I woke, 'twas day in Picardy.'²¹

The tension between nostalgia for a remembered domestic countryside and the realities of the ruined, almost denatured landscapes of France and Flanders is a common one in the British poetry of the First World War. Though there was in this war, unlike other wars before and after,

¹⁹ 'Paddy', *Poems and Parodies*, 76.

²⁰ T. M. Kettle, *The Ways of War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 72.

²¹ Francis Ledwidge, 'The Dead Kings', *The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge* (New York: Brentano's, 1919), 258 & 264.

no real threat of invasion to the home countryside - in spite of a vigorous invasion-scare literature in the years before the war - there remained a strong sense in which the poets of England, Wales, and Scotland, considered themselves to be fighting, and writing, in defence of that landscape, if only as a token of the values which they considered it to embody.²² What Ivor Gurney's Gloucestershire, Charles Murray's Aberdeenshire, and Hedd Wynn's Meirionnydd share is a sense of the regional particularity that provides the strands of the rich national tapestry for which British soldiers fought: a Union in action through which local landscapes are woven into a national *patria*. But the Irish landscape, steeped in the folkloric myth of the Celtic Twilight, is inevitably other to this. Topographically, it does not form part of the same landmass, and imaginatively it is insulated by reason of its cultural and political history and by the strenuous and self-conscious attempts to de-Anglicize it by Douglas Hyde and Yeats. An Irish writer like Ledwidge, then, experiences an affective gap in his war pastoral – to what end does a nostalgic invocation of his homeland operate when that homeland is neither under physical or imaginative threat and when the history it embodies is alien to the larger cause for which he fights? He is not so much fighting in defence of that home landscape as fighting for a return to it – an Allied victory will not further the values manifest in it, will not even necessarily preserve them, but may simply allow him to get back and re-immense himself in them; if, that is, he can survive the war, which Ledwidge did not.

Such confused, dark undercurrents in Ledwidge's work are often obscured by the remarkable polish of his poem's surfaces, but they become at times a shade more apparent in his poetry after the Easter Rising, the aftermath of which he encountered when home on leave. He had been a friend of one of the Rising's leaders, shot by the British, Thomas MacDonagh, and wrote a poem in his memory. 'Thomas McDonagh', though, is a pastoral elegy with only the slightest hint of political symbolism in its bucolic imagery: as in the work of MacGill, one has to dig deeper to uncover the ways a distinctive, complicating Celtic element is providing a critique of the assumptions of Union. In prose, Ledwidge was bolder, writing to an American academic of his hope 'that a new Ireland will arise from her ashes in the ruins of Dublin, like the Phoenix' but also of his corresponding discomfort at being 'called a British soldier while my own country has no

²² See I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (1966) for the classic account of pre-war invasion literature.

place amongst the nations'.²³ This is a statement that Seamus Heaney incorporated into his poem 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' in *Field Work* (1979) to illustrate what Heaney reads as Ledwidge's disabling in-betweenness or double-mindedness, which renders him, as Heaney puts it, 'our dead enigma' in whom 'all the strains / Criss-cross in useless equilibrium'.²⁴ Ledwidge in his poetry, though, remained typical of the great majority of his fellow writers from the British archipelago in suppressing that double-mindedness, and choosing to march with his English comrades. As Heaney suggests, though, this was to march to the beat of a 'sure confusing drum' and to risk becoming, like many archipelagic war writers, a stranger to one's own country.

²³ Quoted in Alice Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet (1887-1917)* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe, 1972), 180.

²⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 186.