

August 1914: Tipperary and the First World War

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The editorial of the *Nenagh News* on 2 January, 1915, reviewed the proceeding year's events thus:

The year 1914 which closed yesterday, will go down to history as the year in which the recognition of the rights of small nations was acknowledged as a duty by great states... From the Irish political point of view, the year 1914 will stand out as the time when the old feuds between this country and Great Britain were buried, and the struggle for Irish liberty which lasted over a century, ended in the triumph of the popular cause.¹

The outbreak of the First World War on 4 August, 1914, made an editorial like this seem plausible. The war had defused the Home Rule crisis and averted the threat of civil war. Irish party leader John Redmond made a passionate speech in the House of Commons supporting Britain's war effort with popular opinion and the media supporting him. The following number of weeks in Ireland saw a surge in what has been described as 'war enthusiasm' on an unprecedented scale.² Reports of Irish Volunteers marching with British army reservists, cheering crowds for Crown soldiers and new understandings between unionists and nationalists filled the newspapers.

This article seeks to give a kaleidoscopic account of the opening two weeks of the war in Tipperary and will endeavour to examine whether this enthusiasm for war was unprecedented.

The Declaration of War

On 26 July, the Kings Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB) fired on a crowd of civilians in Dublin, following the Howth gun running by the Irish Volunteers. Three people were killed. Clonmel was the regimental depot of the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) and these shootings on Bachelor's Walk made a deep impression on this heavily garrisoned town.

Police reported strong feeling on the matter and in an attempt to avoid any clashes, the Royal Field Artillery (RFA) were confined to barracks. Rumours also spread across Clonmel that the local RIR reserves would not report for service.³ Clonmel also had a personal connection with the events of 26 July on Bachelor's Walk, as the father of Captain Hugh Cobden (an officer in the KOSB) lived in the town. The police acknowledged strong feeling on the matter, and arranged protection for Cobden. Their fears, however, proved unfounded.⁴

On 2 August, 1914, prayers for peace were made at most services across the county. The tension was rising. The declaration of war was not unexpected in Tipperary,⁵ and the

postponement of the Clonmel horse show and horse races, at which Lord Carbery, Ireland's famous airman, was to have performed his feat of looping the loop, caused the most inconvenience.⁶ Politically, John Redmond's call for the union of both Volunteer corps in the House of Commons on 3 August was considered a master stroke.⁷ The *Nationalist* credited Redmond with use of 'masterly tactics' and lauded his 'consummate tact and statesmanship' in offering the Irish Volunteers for home defence when England is 'face to face with one of the greatest European wars', but made it clear the Irish Volunteers would 'protect Ireland against invasion by Germany, thus enabling the regular troops to be deployed elsewhere'. The chairman of the East Tipperary United Irish League asserted that the 'blood of many Irishmen had been shed in cementing and building the [British] empire... knowing this they would stand against any foreign foe, but would demand, and demand in no uncertain voice, that Ireland would get management of Irish affairs'.⁸ In addition, the war deflected people's attention to personal concerns: 'Hundreds of people in and about Thurles whose sons, brothers, relatives and friends are away at the front are, of course most anxious about them, and eagerly watch for the smallest bit of news.'⁹

The Reservists Leave

The first troops left Clonmel on Wednesday, 5 August, by the 2 p.m. and 3.45 p.m. trains. They were local men (reservists, mostly Catholic) departing to their various regiments (the majority serving in Irish units) such as the RIR, Connaught Rangers (CR) or Royal Munster Fusiliers (RMF). Reserve men had already left Carrick-on-Suir (Carrick) and Cahir. The war had made its mark:

Nothing at all approaching it has ever been witnessed by anyone living. The local newspaper offices have been constantly besieged by crowds anxiously inquiring for the latest details of the crisis and all day long, the bulletins issued outside the *Nationalist* are scanned by hundreds.¹⁰

On 5 August, a large number of reservists along with Colonel Kellet from Clonacody in Fethard, who had been appointed to Lord Kitchener's staff, left for the front.¹¹ At about 9.00 p.m. 500 Irish Volunteers drilled at Clonmel rail station before a crowd of 1,500.¹² The train was already crowded with soldiers upon arrival at Clonmel and as it steamed into the station, fog signals were exploded and there was a great volley of cheers. The reserve men - many Irish Volunteers - repeatedly called for cheers for John Redmond and cheers for the Irish Volunteers, calls that the *Nationalist* reported were 'lustily responded to'.¹³ The Volunteers, under the command of Frank Drohan, were then inspected by Kellet who, 'with deep emotion' gave a short speech:

Men, this is indeed a fine sight, and it does my heart good to see you in such numbers and so well drilled here tonight. I must answer to the call of duty and go to the war (cheers). I am going out foreign to take my place in the fight that is being waged against the enemy by these islands. I know that here at home you will do your duty, and I hope to do mine (cheers). Thank God the day has come when Northerns and Southernns in this country have joined hands. In a very little time all those silly dissensions and party feelings will have been forgotten. Thank God, today we stand for a United Nation (great cheering).¹⁴

Colonel Kellet then entered the train as the crowd sang 'A Nation Once Again', and a reservist shouted 'the first volley we fire will be a volley for Ireland'. As the train pulled out a 'thunderous roar of cheering went up'. The *Nationalist* said it sounded like a 'salvo of artillery for the men who had gone to war'.¹⁵

At 8.30 p.m. the following evening, 330 men of the 2nd Battalion RIR, marched from the regimental depot to the station escorted by 500 Volunteers, the People's Prize Band and a large crowd. At the station, the Volunteers formed in single file near the platform creating an impromptu guard of honour. About 5,000 people were present. As the soldiers boarded the train, several exchanges took place:

Numbers of the soldiers called for three cheers for John Redmond, to which there was a ringing response by the men on the train. This was followed by calls for cheers for the Volunteers, which were also heartily responded to. Both people and soldiers sang 'Let Me Like a Soldier Fall', 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', and 'Auld Lang Syne' and as the voices rang out on the quiet night air one could not be struck with the pathos of it all.¹⁶

So moved were the military authorities that they wrote to the secretary of the Clonmel Irish Volunteers: 'On behalf of the officers, non-commissioned officers, and men of the Royal Irish, I should like to express my sincere thanks to the Clonmel Volunteers for the splendid send-off they gave the party of reservists,' wrote Major Welch at the depot. 'The farewell given them will ever be treasured in the annals of the regiment.'¹⁷ None of the RIR men would volunteer to remain in charge of the depot, as they were all 'anxious to go to the front'.¹⁸

Further departures from Clonmel continued into the weekend, 600 drafts from the 3rd Battalion RIR, left for the North Wall in Dublin on Saturday and 120 on Sunday.¹⁹ At Thurles, the curate, Father Michael Maher, wrote in his diary:

I went to the station with them [the reservists] and gave them my blessing saying a few words of encouragement to them. I was the only priest to do so in Thurles... The scenes at the station were heartrending. The wives, sisters, fathers, brothers and friends of the reserve men were there in force and gave expression to their grief, but the men were cool and faced the ordeal with manly self-restraint. A crowd of townspeople came to the station too and gave the fellows a hearty send-off. Many of us who were aware of the German forces felt that a good number of these young men would never come back or at least that they may return maimed for life. I was touched to the heart a few times when a young fellow after his confession would say: 'Give me your blessing Father, I'm going to the war'.²⁰

Similar scenes took place in Tipperary town, Thurles, Nenagh, Carrick, Cahir, and throughout the county. 2,000 soldiers were encamped at the racecourse in Thurles controlling and guarding sections of the rail line. Public transport was effectively under military control and train loads of soldiers were passing through Tipperary. Across the county, the outbreak of war controlled and dominated events. For example, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers passed through Thurles on 8 August, heading towards Queenstown (Cobh), Thomas Connors, a Volunteer instructor who had charge of training the Thurles corps, departed on 5 August, giving a speech at the station and at Tipperary barracks, the Shropshire Light Infantry had dispatched their regimental colours to their depot at Shrewsbury and were preparing to leave for France.

Local government bodies were also affected: Carrick Urban District Council passed a resolution condemning the 'aggressively militant party in Germany in embroiling Europe in a terrible war' and the monthly meeting of Clonmel Corporation summoned for Thursday evening was cancelled as all the members were at the station seeing off the RIR. During a debate on the Bachelor's Walk shootings among the Tipperary Guardians, a board member said 'the soldiers have enough to do now besides shooting down women and children'.²¹ Even the society marriage arranged to take place on 8 August between Miss Connellan and Captain Solly Flood of the Rifle Brigade was postponed and newspapers such as the *Clonmel Chronicle* and the *Nationalist* published pages of war telegrams in each edition.²²

A more sinister development was the case of Gunner Larred, RFA. It was alleged he had spread false reports of injuries received by men who were serving in the war, and who had relatives in Clonmel. For example, in one case it was alleged he told the parents of one soldier from Clonmel that their son had been wounded in the arm and chest, when they had a letter from their son stating he was still in England.²³ It was also believed 'alarming reports entirely devoid of foundation have been circulated in Clonmel with regard to the fate of Irish regiments at the front'.²⁴ Larred was remanded for court martial as the military authorities were taking 'active measures to deal with parties who go about spreading false reports of fatalities and injuries to British troops'.²⁵

British Troops Leave Clonmel for the Front

The British troops were also leaving. On Friday, 15 August, a thunderstorm swept through Tipperary: torrential rain, thunder and lightning persisted into the early hours of Saturday morning. During the storm, the 86th Battery RFA, left Clonmel for Belgium. Howitzers, commandeered horses, officers and men left on three special trains. Despite the hour, and the weather, the people of Clonmel turned out 'in their thousands' to send them off.²⁶ The 86th was composed mostly of Englishmen so the nature of the send-off was of some interest. The press reported that the people of Clonmel clearly felt an affinity for the gunners: 'The scene on the platform all through the night and far into the morning was a remarkable one, soldiers and civilians fraternising pleasantly, and joining together in snatches of song.'²⁷

When a large group left at about 3.30 a.m., in answer to the cheers that were reverberating around the station, Major Hardman, commanding the battery, 'stood at the salute at the carriage window' and the battery moved 'out in the dark of the morning, followed by the plaudits of a stranger people who had learned to like them'.²⁸

In Fethard, the 43rd Battery enjoyed a similar reception. The Volunteers paraded at 5 a.m. and the town band played the troops to the station where two special trains sped them on their way. The 2nd Brigade RFA, made their delayed exit from Cahir on 18 and 19 August. On Wednesday 19, St Mary's Brass and Reed Band 'headed a large number of soldiers on their way to the train station'.²⁹ There they played 'Let Erin Remember', 'A Nation Once Again' and 'Auld Land Syne' and about 1,000 people converged at the tracks. Each soldier was given something to eat and dispatched with a parcel of food - 'the gift of a number of local ladies'. Eleven trains were required to convey the batteries from Cahir and the police under District Inspector (DI) Potter, and a large number of military guarded the station.³⁰

These newspaper reports convey some of the chaotic and vibrant nature of army mobilisation. After the Bachelors Walk incident, soldiers were confined to barracks and

rumours that the reserves would not report were widespread. While the media, in general, supported the British war effort, the reports of unionist officers being applauded and Irish reservists in the Crown forces being cheered out of the station over a week later have a certain resonance.

Commandeering of Horses

5 August, 1914, was fair day in Clonmel. Accentuating the tension and nervous excitement regarding the war was the influx of traders, dealers and low-level merchants. Business continued in the town despite the closure of the banks. The War Office immediately began commandeering horses, which lent a 'wholly new and novel aspect to the fair'.³¹ Once mobilisation orders were dispatched most horse owners in the locality received government notices of the War Office's intention to commandeer animals. A 'sensation' was caused when a number of artillery men marched to the Thomas Murphy & Son Brewery where twelve horses were taken.³² Throughout the day, officers and detachments of soldiers visited several establishments in the town, including W Phelan and Sons, Cleeves milk factory (eleven horses were taken from here) and Clonmel Corporation. These animals were paraded outside their workplaces, while veterinary surgeons and military officers made selections. About 200 horses were taken by the authorities during the day.³³

Private owners also had their animals requisitioned; Richard Burke (master of the Tipperary foxhounds) for example, was requested to supply fifteen hunters.³⁴ In Tipperary town, posters stated that the government was purchasing 11,000 horses. War Office buyers requisitioned a large number of animals at double what they might command in ordinary time.³⁵ The work was continued at Clonmel and Fethard - a veterinary surgeon and Sergeant Booth RIC, commandeering horses in both towns. One hundred horses were taken in Fethard.

Friday and Saturday saw further 'extensive purchases of horses in Clonmel'.³⁶ In Nenagh, the town presented 'the appearance of a horse fair so numerous were the animals exhibited for sale to the government representatives'. The RFA, however, believed that 'the class of horse arriving is considered very bad on the whole and unlikely to last any length of time on service'.³⁷ This commandeering not only affected businesses, but also the Volunteers. At a Fethard Volunteer tournament at the end of August, a small party of the Fethard Cavalry turned out under Instructor Higgins. They would have made a 'bigger show', but for the fact a great many horses in the district had been taken for 'army purposes'.³⁸

Perspective

What must it have been like to have witnessed these events? The newspapers of August 1914 are intoxicating and frenetic, filled with exuberant reports on the Irish Volunteers and the evolving continental landscape. Police reports, though far from neutral, seem to confirm this:

The war is naturally the absorbing topic of interest in this Riding. A strong feeling of loyalty to the Crown has been espoused, with the exception of a few people (and those mostly ignorant) who have adopted the position of 'we have no quarrel with Germany'. This feeling of loyalty has been intensified by the atrocities perpetrated by the German army, specifically in the burning of Louvain and other towns and the assassination of women and children.³⁹

This report illustrates the prejudices of the police, but it still provides a useful spotlight on public feeling at the time. The southern parts of the county were sketchier, as the police believed that the Volunteers desired to be armed and trained by the government:

From some parts [of the region] come reports of genuine loyalty and readiness so to act. From other parts reports of dissatisfaction... but there is a growing lack of enthusiasm pending the government's decision and a suspicion is entertained that the government may intend that they should forego the Home Rule Bill.⁴⁰

In the garrison town of 'Karrigeen':

The outbreak in August 1914 was full of local importance. The English regiment, stationed in the barracks, was ordered to the front, and the whole town was out to see them off. Our brass band led the march to the railway station playing all the sentimental tunes it knew. The people were on the side of the soldiers. They had little time for Germany and did not know much about it. Vaguely, it was the place where toys were made. Somewhere out there it had loomed across the border of Belgium and its shadow was falling as far as Karrigeen.⁴¹

Much of this has been viewed as 'war enthusiasm'. August 1914 was not, however, a unique or isolated occurrence and the send-off to the British forces should not be viewed as unprecedented. Reservists and soldiers were afforded similar receptions prior to departing on active service to South Africa in 1899 and to the Crimea in 1855. The Boer campaign, for example, was an unpopular one in Ireland, and most Irish national parties opposed it, but politics were eschewed when it was a case of supporting the troops.

Shortly before three o'clock the detachment of reservists with their arms and full equipment left the barracks and proceeded to the railway station, headed by the band of the 4th Battalion, and followed by an immense crowd of townspeople of all classes, including the immediate friends and relatives of the men themselves. Amongst the airs played by the band were 'Soldiers of the Queen', 'Garryowen' etc... About a quarter past three, after the men were entrained, the train took its departure amidst waving of handkerchiefs and considerable cheering from the assembled crowd, in which the soldiers seemed full of enthusiasm, after they had taken farewell of their relatives and friends... The train moved off slowly, several fog signals being exploded in honour of the men leaving for the front.⁴²

Accounts from the beginning of Crimean campaign are also quite similar:

At ten minutes to four o'clock, p.m., the barrack gate, which had been closed during the day, was reopened, and the gallant 13th marched out amidst the vociferous cheering of the immense concourse of people congregated outside to accompany them on their way to the train, and give them a farewell cheer when parting. The men seemed in the best possible spirits and re-echoed the shouts of the assembled throng with a redoubled vigour, but amidst their enthusiastic plaudits might be heard the miserable heart-rending cries of the soldiers' wives as they bade farewell to their husbands who, in all probability, were about to be separated from them forever. With difficulty, the poor creatures were dragged away from the afflicting scene... All the arrangements being complete, the engine whistled and away went the train with its living cargo, amidst the loudest cheering of both soldiers and bystanders. So long as the train remained in sight, we could perceive several of the gallant fellows hanging out of the windows of the carriages and cheering most lustily.⁴³

The obvious difference between 1914 and previous campaigns was the belief that Home Rule was within grasp. During these weeks of August 1914, county Volunteer instructors donned khaki; future IRA supremos were reviewed by British colonels; Crown force regulars were cheered; and Tipperary's garrison towns witnessed jubilant and intoxicating scenes of departure. In the established garrison towns such as Clonmel and Cahir, the movement of troops was nothing new and the examples from the Boer and Crimea illustrate that memorable send-offs to local reservists and soldiers were not unusual. The departures and speeches of August certainly had an edge, but it was not the first time something like that had happened. In towns that did not have a garrison presence, such as Thurles and Roscrea, there was still a similar reaction to the conflict. Politically, there had been a positive response to the war, with police reporting most of the population, if not fanatically for Britain, then at least on the side of the Allies and against Germany.

The effects of August 1914, however, had obscured the nuances that divided nationalists and unionists,⁴⁴ and these would become more pronounced as the war developed. Indeed, there is some truth to Colonel Maurice Moore's opinion that if the war had lasted six months, then John Redmond's policy of supporting the British war effort might have paid off.⁴⁵

References

¹*Nenagh News and Tipperary Vindicator* (hereafter: NN), 2 Jan. 1915.

²Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (London, 1998), 79.

³Monthly Report of the County Inspector for the South Riding of Co Tipperary (hereafter: CI Monthly Report, SR), July 1914.

⁴Mac Giolla Choille, Breandán, *Intelligence Notes 1913-16* (Dublin, 1966), 81, and CI Monthly Report, SR, July 1914. (CO 904/94).

⁵*Nationalist*, 5 Aug. 1914.

⁶They were abandoned owing to the army's commandeering of horses and uncertainty over trains.

⁷*Nationalist*, 5 Aug. 1914.

⁸*Ibid.* 12 Aug. 1914.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Nationalist*, 5 Aug. 1914.

¹¹Kellet was accompanied by Captain Maling RFA, son-in-law of Dr Harvey RMS at Clonmel Asylum. Kellet was on John French's (Commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force) staff.

¹²*Nationalist*, 8 Aug. 1914.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.* 8 Aug. 1914, and S. Geoghegan, *The Campaigns and History of the Royal Irish Regiment from 1900-1922* Vol. II (Edinburgh, 1927), 8. Frank Drohan was a future IRA commander and leading figure in Clonmel.

¹⁵*Nationalist*, 8 Aug. 1914.

¹⁶*Nationalist*, 8 Aug. 1914.

¹⁷*Ibid.* 8 Aug. 1914 and *Chronicle*, 8 Aug. 1914. Both of these newspapers were Clonmel based, both were coloured by a slightly imperialist tone (*Chronicle* more so as it had been the paper of local unionism) and both, it must be acknowledged, supported the war.

¹⁸*Nationalist*, 8 Aug. 1914.

¹⁹*Ibid.* 12 Aug. 1914.

²⁰Michael Maher Papers, Tipperary Local Studies.

²¹*Chronicle*, 5 Aug. 1914.

²²*Ibid.* 8 Aug. 1914.

²³*Chronicle*, 22 Aug. 1914.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.* 22 Aug. 1914 and *Nationalist*, 22 Aug. 1914.

²⁶*Nationalist*, 15 Aug. 1914.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Chronicle*, 15 Aug. 1914.

²⁹*Ibid.* 22 Aug. 1914.

³⁰*Ibid.*, and see *Nationalist*, 22 Aug. 1914. Potter was shot by the IRA in 1921.

³¹*Nationalist*, 5 Aug. 1914.

³²*Chronicle*, 5 Aug. 1914.

³³*Nationalist*, 5 Aug. 1914.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.* 8 Aug. 1914.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷War Diary of 2nd Brigade Royal Field Artillery, 6th Division, (James Clavell Library and Archive, Royal Artillery Museum), 6.

³⁸*Chronicle*, 26 Aug. 1914.

³⁹CJ Monthly Report, NR, Aug. 1914. (CO 904/94). Tipperary was divided into two administrative regions, north and south 'Ridings' in 1898.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* SR, Aug. 1914.

⁴¹Neil Kevin, *I Remember Karrigeen* (London, 1944), 40. Both the author and the town are pseudonyms for Don Boyne and Templemore respectively.

⁴²*Chronicle*, 13 Dec. 1899.

⁴³*Chronicle*, 3 Feb. 1855. These were men of the 13th Regiment, while those that left for the Boer and First World War campaigns were RIR reserves.

⁴⁴Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland*, 79.

⁴⁵Patrick Callan, 'Voluntary Recruiting for the British Army in Ireland During the First World War', Ph.D. thesis (UCD, 1984), 206. Maurice Moore: from a Catholic gentry family; brother of novelist George Moore; served in the Boer War; member of the Gaelic League; and appointed Inspector General of the Volunteers when they were founded.