

The Catholic Irish soldier in the First World War: the 'racial environment'

In recent years there has been a lively historical debate on English perceptions of the Irish. The growth and persistence of 'racial' stereotypes that go back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and which survive even today, have been traced.¹ The Irish, the Catholic Irish above all, were usually perceived in England in an unfavourable or a downright hostile fashion, which reflected the often troubled colonial relationship between England and Ireland. The mass emigration from Ireland to England in the nineteenth century, which brought millions of Irish into direct contact with the English, intensified both the fear of the Irish and the patronising attitudes which accompanied that fear.² Historical research has, undoubtedly, added considerably to our understanding of the complexity of anti-Irish feeling: how it depended on class as well as ethnic prejudice; and how it often existed alongside an idealised, sentimental picture of the Catholic Irish as a vigorous and 'pure' race, with a culture unsullied by the corrupting influence of modern industrial civilisation.³

The British institution that the Irish made the greatest impact on, certainly in terms of numbers, was the army. Yet the study of the Irish as a distinct group in that army has received surprisingly little attention; and the research that has been undertaken has generally concentrated on the question of the pattern of Irish recruitment in terms of numbers, or on that of the political loyalty of Irish soldiers.⁴ How the Irish were perceived as fighting soldiers within the army is a topic that has been almost entirely ignored. Although this article will concern itself with the period of the First World War, we need to place the years 1914-18 in the wider context of the historical role played by the Irish in the British army.

¹ F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939* (Oxford, 1979), pp 11-13, and Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland* (London, 1988), pp 363-4, give overviews of the subject.

² L. P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: a study of anti-Irish prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, Conn., 1968); Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in the Victorian city* (London, 1985).

³ Sheridan Gilley, 'English attitudes to the Irish in England, 1789-1900' in Colin Holmes (ed.), *Immigrants and minorities in British Society* (London, 1978), pp 81-110; L. P. Curtis, *Apes and angels: the Irishman in political caricature* (Newton Abbot, 1977).

⁴ Peter Karsten, 'Suborned or subordinate?: the Irish soldier in the British army' in *Journal of Social History*, xvii (1983), pp 31-64; H. J. Hanham, 'Religion and nationality in the mid-Victorian army' in M. R. D. Foot (ed.), *War and society* (London, 1973), pp 159-81.

Significant numbers of Catholic Irish began serving with the army in the 1770s, although strictly speaking their recruitment at this time was unlawful. From the early 1790s, with the creation of the 83rd, 87th and 88th regiments of foot, Irish Catholics formed a sizeable proportion of 'the thin red line'. Recognition of their services was formalised in 1802 with the provision of Catholic chaplains and the exemption of Catholic soldiers from ordinary church parades.⁵ In the early nineteenth century the Irish element in the army reached its maximum. By 1830, 42 per cent of the army was Irish; and many nominally English or Scottish regiments contained numerous Irish.⁶

The recruitment of Catholic Irish at the end of the eighteenth century coincided with a period of particularly intense xenophobia and chauvinism among the English. The Irish, indeed all 'foreigners', were regarded with a mixture of hostility and contempt. It was in the 1790s that the 'Irish joke', which in some form had existed for centuries, began to establish itself in the popular consciousness of the English. The Irish were portrayed as mercurial and restless, as charming but untrustworthy and stupid. At a deeper level there was real animosity: some of the most savage public order disturbances in the eighteenth century involved attacks on Irish migrant haymakers. There was a fear of the 'wild Irish', as the English had long termed the native Catholic peasantry.⁷

Such popular prejudices against the Catholic Irish soon attached themselves to the Irish soldier. The Irish regiments acquired a reputation for indiscipline and brutishness which they never completely shook off. In the Peninsular War, General Picton told the 88th Foot: 'you are not known in the army by the name of Connaught Rangers but by the name of Connaught Footpads' and followed this with 'some unnecessary remarks on their country and their religion'.⁸ Correlli Barnett, in the standard modern history of the army, remarks of this period: 'although the Irish were hardy and brave, they were also ignorant, mad for drink, violent and without self-discipline'.⁹

The Irish regiments gave distinguished service throughout the nineteenth century and although, as noted above, this was a period of acute anti-Irish feeling, the more blatant prejudices against the Irish soldier tended to disappear. Not completely, however, as the 2nd Royal Irish Regiment found when they were withdrawn from the Tirah expedition on the Indian frontier in 1897, owing to a false report that the battalion was saturated with malaria; for rumours 'most injurious to their character as soldiers' soon appeared in the press. Only after a bitter struggle was the battalion's reputation vindicated.¹⁰ But the courage and loyalty of the Irish regiments in the Boer War seemed to set the seal on the full acceptance of the Irish soldier. The addition of the Irish Guards to the army list in 1901 was an important step in this process.

⁵ Karsten, 'Suborned or subordinate?', p. 36; Felix Lavery, *Great Irishmen in war and politics* (London, 1920), pp 156-61.

⁶ Karsten, 'Suborned or subordinate?', p. 36; R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the age of imperialism* (Oxford, 1979), p. 61; C. T. Atkinson, 'The Irish regiments of the line in the British army' in *Irish Sword*, i (1949), p. 23.

⁷ Michael Duffy, 'English xenophobia: first prize in the lottery of life' in *Listener*, 6 Mar. 1986, pp 11-12.

⁸ Sir Charles Oman, *Wellington's army* (London, 1913), p. 133.

⁹ Correlli Barnett, *Britain and her army* (London, 1970), p. 241.

¹⁰ C. Le Grettton, *The campaigns and history of the Royal Irish Regiment* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1911), i, 300-3, 414-15.

Another myth established itself: that the Catholic Irish, because of their harsh upbringing, were naturally tougher than the English and made better soldiers. Significantly, Sinn Féin drew on this idea in their anti-recruiting literature, declaring that 'England's cowardly and degenerate population won't make soldiers', for she 'has never fought her own battles, Irish traitors have ever been the backbone of her army and navy'. For 'without Ireland's help England will go down before Germany as she would have gone down before the Boers had not the Irish fought her battles in South Africa'.¹¹

Just before the First World War the percentage of Irish troops in the army had fallen to a level matching closely the percentage of Irish in the population of the United Kingdom; but during the war itself over 140,000 Irish volunteered, including 65,000 Catholic Irish.¹² But the years 1914-18 were to show that some prejudices concerning the Irish soldier were still extant. Sir Lawrence Parsons, an Irish Protestant who commanded the 16th (Irish) Division from September 1914 until December 1915, believed that Catholic Irish recruits must be dealt with firmly but with 'sympathy' for their national and religious predilections, and then the Catholic Irish 'peasant' could be turned into an 'Irish Tommy'. But Irish regiments 'could march round most English regiments' and Irish troops mixed with the stolid English could act as 'leaven in the dough', for they were hardy and brave and could endure bad weather 'like salamanders'.¹³ Sir Bryan Mahon, first commander of the 10th (Irish) Division in the First World War, although a Protestant Irishman and a unionist, believed that the 'best soldiers' in Ireland came from the Catholic south and west.¹⁴

The idea that the Irish were peculiar soldiers was widespread throughout the army. On 6 September 1916, Major Rowland Feilding, Coldstream Guards, reported to the 6th Connaught Rangers, 47th Brigade, 16th (Irish) Division and took command. Days previously the Rangers had lost their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lenox-Conyngham, killed leading the battalion against Guillemont. Lenox-Conyngham, an Ulster Protestant, had led the 6th Rangers since its formation in September 1914. 'No commanding officer was more beloved by those he commanded', recalled Stephen Gwynn, a nationalist M.P. and captain in the battalion.¹⁵ Feilding, who was not Irish, led the 6th Connaughts with distinction until March 1918. Feilding had no previous experience with Irish troops—the Rangers were overwhelmingly Catholic Irish — and wrote to his wife about the distinctiveness of his new command: 'so great is the contrast between their national characteristics and those of the men I have come from'.¹⁶

But what were those 'national characteristics'? To what extent were they based on stereotypes and preconceptions; and were they fed by stories about Irish soldiers spread by both their detractors and their admirers? For the traditional presentation of the Irish soldier was encouraged by Irish war writers, a fact seen

¹¹ From a Sinn Féin anti-recruiting leaflet of July 1913 (copy in P.R.O., CO 904/162 (2)).

¹² Keith Jeffery, 'The post-war army' in Ian F. W. Beckett and Keith Simpson (eds), *A nation in arms* (Manchester, 1985), pp 218-19; Patrick Callan, 'Recruiting for the British army in Ireland during the First World War' in *Irish Sword*, xvii (1987-90), pp 42, 53-4.

¹³ Denis Gwynn, *The life of John Redmond* (London, 1932), pp 400, 404.

¹⁴ Mahon to Kitchener, 3 Sept. 1915 (P.R.O., PRO 30/57/63).

¹⁵ Stephen Gwynn, *Ireland in ten days* (London, 1935), p. 84.

¹⁶ Rowland Feilding, *War letters to a wife* (London, 1929), p. 121.

clearly in the works of the Irish journalist Michael MacDonagh. MacDonagh was anxious to delineate what he termed the 'racial environment' of the Irish soldier.¹⁷ MacDonagh wrote with the assistance of John Redmond, leader of the Irish parliamentary party, who encouraged thousands of Catholic Irish to enlist. Redmond's introduction to MacDonagh's *The Irish at the front* emphasised the 'military qualities of the Irish race'. Irish soldiers were the 'cream of the army' for the Irish had 'a natural genius and gift for war'. For Redmond the Irish soldier was as capable in defence as in attack: 'it may be well to point out, for it bears upon one of the popular fallacies about the Irish character, that it is not only in the desperate charge or the forlorn hope that Irish soldiers have proved their worth in this or other wars'.¹⁸ One Irish M.P. told the commons that Irish troops were always the first to attack and the last to retreat.¹⁹ But MacDonagh emphasised the attacking qualities of Irish troops: for Irish 'imperturbability, springing from indifference to danger' and 'the fire and force of their passionate temperament' led Irish troops 'to attempt strokes more daring and rash than the occasion quite demands'. In the Peninsular War 'the wild yell with which Irish regiments sprang to the charge' had been noted. In the First World War the Irish troops were maintaining 'the ancient tradition of raising a wild terrific yell when they dash forward, a yell which sends the creeps down the back and impels the foe irresistibly to turn and fly for fear of what is to follow'.²⁰ Even Redmond, with his stories of the London Irish dribbling a football into the attack at Loos in 1915, reinforced such attitudes.²¹ Tom Kettle, Irish writer and nationalist politician, who served with the 16th Division, declared: 'in general, instantaneity has been the characteristic of Irish soldiers as it has been of Irish football forwards'.²² Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, pronounced the Irish regiments 'the finest missile troops in the British army'; a verdict which the Irish M.P.s quoted inside and outside the commons with satisfaction.²³ All in all, MacDonagh thought it certain that 'the Irish are best for brilliant and rapid attack'.²⁴

Whether such generalisations stand up to close examination is doubtful. The historian of the Leinsters says: 'the contrast between an Irish regiment and a British just before the battle is very noticeable. The Irish are much more nervy waiting for something to happen and almost a sigh of relief can be heard when the happening does eventually come along.'²⁵ But this does not mean that the Irish soldier charged wildly when the attack commenced. In describing the 16th Division's attack on Guillemont in September 1916, the official historian found it impossible to resist references to the 'impetuous' and 'eager' Irish whose 'ardour could not be restrained' and gave the impression that the division's

¹⁷ Michael MacDonagh, *The Irish on the Somme* (London, 1917), p. 57.

¹⁸ Michael MacDonagh, *The Irish at the front* (London, 1916), pp 2-3, 9.

¹⁹ *Hansard 5 (commons)*, lxxvii, 373 (21 Dec. 1915).

²⁰ MacDonagh, *Irish at the front*, pp 30, 44-5.

²¹ Gwynn, *Redmond*, p. 453.

²² Thomas Kettle, *The ways of war* (London, 1917), p. 169.

²³ *Hansard 5 (commons)*, lxxxv, 686 (18 Oct. 1916); Stephen Gwynn, *John Redmond's last years* (London, 1919), p. 241.

²⁴ MacDonagh, *Irish on the Somme*, p. 59.

²⁵ F. E. Whitton, *The history of the Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment* (2 vols, Aldershot, n. d.), ii, 224.

assault was a frantic 'Celtic' charge.²⁶ *The Times* claimed that the 'chief trouble that the officers had was in holding their men' such was the 'irresistible dash of the Irish'.²⁷ But Lieutenant O'Sullivan of the 6th Connaughts recalled that although the battalion rushed from the trenches with a yell, the broken ground meant that the 'charge slowed gradually into a laboured jog-trot'. The 7th Leinsters, Lieutenant Staniforth wrote, attacked the village with 'none of the wild cheering rush one imagined . . . We stepped outside the parapet to straighten the line and then moved forward at an ordinary walk.' An artillery officer of the 16th Division who watched the infantry attack observed, rather than an undisciplined rush, the men advance in orderly fashion 'as if they were on Salisbury Plain'.²⁸

Commanders of Irish troops, like Irish writers, sought to portray their men as 'shock troops'. The 16th Division in particular built up a reputation for a belligerent approach to trench fighting. 'This is an aggressive division', Feilding noted of the 16th.²⁹ Hickie, the divisional commander, told his troops in July 1917 that the 16th had been selected for 'stormtroop' training because of its attacking qualities.³⁰ But this reputation owed more to aggressive commanders, like Hickie himself, or the fire-eating Pereira of the 47th Brigade, than to any innate characteristics of the Irish soldier. The Irish infantryman, if so allowed, enjoyed a quiet time in a safe sector of the line as much as any other soldier. But the 16th Division, as Feilding noted, was one where 'a case of trench feet will provoke far more correspondence and censure than a heavy casualty list, which provokes none at all'.³¹ When the 7th Leinsters began taking things easy in a quiet part of the line in the winter of 1916, Pereira told the battalion that 'it was our duty to beat up the enemy and give him no rest'.³²

Irish brilliance in the attack was generally set against the claim that they were not as reliable as English troops in defence. Robert Graves, in his classic memoir, *Goodbye to all that*, says that it was widely accepted that Catholic Irish soldiers could be relied upon to reach their objective going forward but 'too often lost it in the counter-attack'.³³ The 16th Division's reputation as a 'storm division' backfired when the Germans secured an early breakthrough on its sector on 21 March 1918, leading to claims that the Irishmen, as 'Celtic' troops, were not sound in defence.³⁴ Although it seems likely that the division's tiredness, lack of training and poor deployment were the crucial factors in explaining the division's defeat on that day,³⁵ there is no real evidence that Catholic Irish troops were deficient in defensive ability. Probably the most famous defensive

²⁶ Sir James Edmonds, *Military operations: France and Belgium, 1916: I* (London, 1932), pp 255-6.

²⁷ *The Times*, 12 Sept. 1916, p. 8.

²⁸ J. F. B. O'Sullivan papers, 'The 6th Battalion captures Guillemont', pp 30-31; J. H. M. Staniforth papers, letter of 12 Sept. 1916; F. H. T. Tatham papers, letter of 25 Sept. 1916 (all Imperial War Museum).

²⁹ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 201.

³⁰ Whitton, *Leinster Regiment*, p. 422.

³¹ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 140.

³² Wallace Lyon papers, typescript memoirs, p. 67 (Imperial War Museum).

³³ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to all that* (Penguin ed., London, 1960), p. 152.

³⁴ Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's battle* (London, 1978), p. 326.

³⁵ Feilding, *War letters*, pp 284-6.

action of the British army during the war took place at Étreux in 1914, when a battalion of the Munsters held off a German corps for many hours.

Many Irish battalions, in the early part of the war, acquired a reputation for careless behaviour in the trenches. An officer of the 7th Leinsters noted in January 1916: 'we have got rather a bad name in the English division to which we were attached . . . because the men would not keep under cover in the daytime and we had to put the sergeant major with a rifle loaded with candle grease bullets to keep them in the trenches'.³⁶ John Lucy, a regular serving in 1915 with the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles (an Ulster regiment, but this battalion overwhelmingly Catholic), found: 'the number of avoidable deaths in our battalion caused comment. The men flouted death by recklessly walking in the open and taking dangerous short cuts.' Any soldier in Lucy's battalion showing concern for his safety was dismissed by his comrades as 'windy', and officers and non-commissioned officers found it difficult 'to curb displays of unnecessary bravado'.³⁷ An Irish officer of the same battalion thought that 'three parts of the casualties in the trenches were entirely the men's own fault'. Although he noted that such devil-may-care courage meant that the men were often ready to rescue wounded, even the wounded of other regiments, from no-man's-land in broad daylight,³⁸ Graves thought that 'the Catholic Irish took unnecessary risks in the trenches and unnecessary casualties'. Serving near the 2nd Munsters in 1915, Graves says they would 'waste men wicked' by not keeping under cover in the support lines.³⁹ MacDonagh emphasised the 'foolhardy' nature of Irish soldiers and their 'dare-devilry', for the 'recklessness' of Irish troops was 'proverbial'.⁴⁰ Clearly some Irish battalions had trouble adapting themselves to the rigours of position warfare. But they were not incorrigible. When Feilding took over the 6th Connaughts he immediately tightened up trench discipline and reduced casualties.⁴¹

There were those in the army too ready to allege indiscipline on the part of Irish soldiers. When the 16th Division went overseas in December 1915, the senior railway staff officer found it 'the soberest, quietest, most amenable, best-disciplined division that has left Aldershot'.⁴² Upon arriving in France the division took over part of the line between Loos and Hulluch and here, on 27 and 29 April 1916, it was subjected to two vicious gas attacks by the Germans, causing many dead and wounded. Although no one questioned the division's courage, there was criticism of its discipline. The commander of the neighbouring 12th (Eastern) Division claimed: 'the 16th Division had not been long in France, and their state of efficiency left much to be desired. I remember well commenting at the time on their gas discipline, which could only be described as non-existent, and to which it was impossible to induce them to pay any attention.' Another officer, from the 15th (Scottish) Division, thought the heavy casualties in the 16th Division 'were due to bad gas discipline'. A staff officer alleged that the 'wild Irishmen' had 'completely lost their heads' and that 'had they kept

³⁶ Staniforth papers, letter of 30 Jan. 1916 (Imperial War Museum).

³⁷ John Lucy, *There's a devil in the drum* (London, 1938), p. 313.

³⁸ G. A. Burgoyne, *The Burgoyne diaries* (London, 1985), pp 9, 16.

³⁹ Graves, *Goodbye to all that*, pp 113, 152.

⁴⁰ MacDonagh, *Irish on the Somme*, pp 58, 60.

⁴¹ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 128.

⁴² Gwynn, *Redmond's last years*, pp 200-1.

quiet and obeyed their officers as regards putting on their gas masks' there would have been far fewer casualties. One officer claimed that Irish soldiers had cut holes in their masks 'to admit the stem of a pipe'. Others attributed the severe casualties to 'the Irish temperament', which would not submit 'to the irksome restraint imposed by anti-gas measures'.⁴³ Of course, the Easter Rising had broken out in Dublin only a few days before, and this may have prejudiced attitudes towards an Irish division containing thousands of nationalists.

Edmonds, the official historian, reached the conclusion that the heavy gas casualties in the 16th Division had been 'unjustly attributed to bad gas discipline'. He stressed that not one of the 16th Division's dead was found without a gas mask on. He also emphasised that the gas sack then in use was 'obviously insufficient protection against strong concentrations of gas'.⁴⁴ Hickie, the divisional commander, pointed out that the sack helmets were 'only serviceable in attenuated gas. When the clouds were really thick they were useless'.⁴⁵ The division's 48th Brigade reported 'four authentic cases of men gassed with their helmets on'.⁴⁶ The commanding officer of one of the 16th Division's field ambulances reported: 'a certain number were gassed before they got their helmets on, some others thinking their helmets were faulty had tried to change them and were caught. Some stated they were gassed through their helmets . . . The smoke helmets had been exposed so much for the past few days that they had lost their efficiency and protected only for a limited period.'⁴⁷ Far from ignoring the matter of gas discipline the 16th Division carried out several practice gas alarms just before the attacks.⁴⁸ On 5 May, Haig, the commander-in-chief, visited the 16th Division. The gas attacks, he wrote, 'seem to have been the most severe which we have yet encountered. The Irishmen did very well.' But Haig could not resist a dig at the Irish. He wrote of the divisional horse show: 'men, horses and harness were all splendidly clean and the turn out was excellent. A very difficult thing to get with Irishmen.'⁴⁹

The criticisms of the 16th Division at Hulluch cannot stand up, but are typical of the malicious stories often spread about Irish soldiers. The fact that Irish soldiers responded best to a particular form of leadership contributed, no doubt, to such fears. Feilding thought his Rangers were 'difficult to drive, but easy to lead';⁵⁰ sentiments echoed by one of his company commanders, who thought his men could 'be led anywhere and driven nowhere'.⁵¹ One officer, an Irish Protestant

⁴³ Archibald Solly Flood to Edmonds, 25 July 1929; Charles Grant to same, 30 Apr. 1929; J. K. D. Cunyngham to same, 20 May 1929; signature indecipherable to same, 30 Apr. 1929 (P.R.O., CAB 45/289); L. F. Haber, *The poisonous cloud: chemical warfare in the First World War* (Oxford, 1986), p. 103.

⁴⁴ Edmonds, *France & Belgium, 1916: I*, p. 196.

⁴⁵ Hickie to Edmonds, 6 May 1929 (P.R.O., CAB 45/289).

⁴⁶ War diary, 48th Infantry Brigade, 'Report on gas attacks, 27th and 29th April' (P.R.O., WO 95/1967).

⁴⁷ War diary, 113th Field Ambulance, report of Lt Col. Bennett, R.A.M.C., 29 Apr. 1916 (P.R.O., WO 95/1967).

⁴⁸ War diary, 49th Infantry Brigade, 'Gas attacks on 49th Infantry Brigade, Hulluch sector, 27 April 1916' (P.R.O., WO 95/1976).

⁴⁹ Haig's diary, 5 May 1916 (P.R.O., WO 256/10, p. 6).

⁵⁰ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 121.

⁵¹ C. A. Brett, 'Recollections, 1914-1918', p. 46 (National Army Museum, London, Brett papers).

servicing with the 9th Munsters, observed: 'a kindly familiarity which might injure discipline in a British regiment, will never be presumed on by the Irish; and if you have to correct them for minor irregularities it is better to do so with a smile than a frown'. He compared the easygoing relationships between officers and men in an Irish battalion to those found in Australian or Canadian units.⁵² An English officer with the 2nd Leinsters in 1915, when the battalion was still about 95 per cent Irish, believed that his men responded to a different form of discipline than the average British Tommy; he had 'to jump heavily on serious offenders and condone little things'.⁵³ An officer serving with the 1st Leinsters in 1918—over 80 per cent Irish and still at least 50 per cent regular—found that 'discipline was good but it was a freer discipline than I had been used to. The men were encouraged to look after themselves'; but there was little crime.⁵⁴

Feilding noted the exceptionally close bonds of loyalty and affection between the officers, nearly all Irish, of his battalion of Rangers and the men. The officers' messes of the 16th Division were exceptionally easygoing and pleasant places to spend time in, although they included 'many diamonds in the rough'. Feilding's officers came from a variety of backgrounds: a racehorse trainer, a master-of-foxcourts, an actor, a barrister, some minor gentry, a ranker from the Grenadiers, a banker, a quartermaster from the cavalry, a doctor from Canada, and an Irish M.P.⁵⁵ John Lucy, a regular Irish ranker, found the average Irish officer, regular and temporary, 'more democratic, or at any rate less feudal, in outlook' and more friendly, than was usual among the officer corps. Lucy observed that English officers who served with Irish regiments tended to adopt the more relaxed relationships with the men displayed by their Irish peers.⁵⁶ Francis Law, of the 1st Irish Guards (a largely Catholic battalion), believed that 'strong, personal, sympathetic leadership . . . is essential in the handling of Irish soldiers'. Law thought that 'an Irish background was enormously helpful, though it was not essential', for officers commanding Irish troops, as some vestige of the 'clan spirit' still survived amongst them.⁵⁷ Many of the officers in Irish regiments, especially in the early part of the war, came from non-Irish, Anglo-Irish or Irish Protestant backgrounds. Some of them were inclined to make wild generalisations about their men. Even Feilding, who had great sympathy for Irish troops, could tell his wife that his men came from 'an extraordinary and inexplicable race' and that Ireland must be an 'island of children with the bodies of men'. Graves believed that 'without officers' Irish soldiers 'became useless' in battle. It seems unfair, however, to single out Irish soldiers for what was, as the official historian admits, a general failing amongst British troops.⁵⁸

Irish troops may well have been used to a less stringent discipline in their day-to-day duties than was general throughout the army. And, undoubtedly, Irish soldiers could sometimes be a handful when out of the front line. Lieutenant

⁵² Sir Francis Vane, *Agin the government* (London, 1929), p. 249.

⁵³ Denis Barnett, *His letters from France and Flanders* (London, 1915), p. 43.

⁵⁴ J. E. Nelson, 'Irish soldiers in the Great War: some personal experiences' in *Irish Sword*, xi (1973-4), p. 177.

⁵⁵ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 128.

⁵⁶ Lucy, *Devil in the drum*, p. 68.

⁵⁷ Francis Law, *A man at arms* (London, 1982), pp 49-50.

⁵⁸ Feilding, *War letters*, pp 196-7; Graves, *Goodbye to all that*, p. 152; Edmonds, *France & Belgium, 1917: II* (London, 1932), p. 54.

Lyon of the 7th Leinsters found his men 'grand fighters' but 'very temperamental', especially when in support and away from the prospect of immediate action.⁵⁹ In May 1917, when the 6th Connaughts were in reserve and employed on almost continuous fatigue duties, Feilding noted an 'epidemic' of petty crime amongst his Rangers. Feilding says his men would 'report sick pretty readily' when there were drills and fatigues to be done, 'but when in the line I do not think the average is more than one or two per day for the whole battalion'.⁶⁰ The war diaries of the 16th Division reveal no serious disciplinary problems concerning the division during its service on the western front. The division's rates of military crime were no worse than other formations'.

Drink was regarded as a particular disciplinary problem with Irish troops. Brett of the 6th Connaughts agreed that his men 'got drunk on the slightest pretext, but usually when drunk behaved in a gentlemanly fashion'.⁶¹ Of the 2nd Leinsters an officer wrote: 'drunkenness is the main crime and that I suppose is a national failing . . . but beyond an occasional "blind" the men's discipline seems to be extremely fine'.⁶² Feilding certainly did not like putting temptation in the way of his Rangers. During the retreat in the spring of 1918, when the opportunities to loot were great, Feilding had guards posted outside all the cellars and *estaminets*, 'with the gratifying result that I neither observed nor heard of a single case of looting or drunkenness'.⁶³ The German troops, admittedly half-starved at this stage of the war, were less cautious, and their attack lost momentum as they took more interest in looting wine than engaging the British. In truth, drink and soldiers have always gone together, and it is probably unfair to single out Irish troops as particular offenders in this respect.

Robert Graves believed that Catholic Irish soldiers were none too clean in the trenches and in this matter compared them unfavourably with their Protestant fellow countrymen.⁶⁴ Irish soldiers, especially those from a rural background, may have been less squeamish about a certain amount of mud and dirt than the largely town-bred English. More likely, this was simply a traditional prejudice against the 'bog Irish' peasantry. Certainly in the regular Irish battalions there was the same traditional emphasis on 'spit and polish' that was general throughout the British army. Of the 2nd Leinsters an officer remarked that his men needed no real encouragement to keep their equipment clean and that they got themselves and their billets decent very methodically.⁶⁵ Another officer of the same battalion noted that 'even in the trenches the men turned out scrupulously clean'.⁶⁶ The Irish temporary battalions do not seem so very different. Feilding believed that his Rangers had 'reached a high state of efficiency in the noble art of cleaning up and are indeed second to none in this respect'.⁶⁷ An officer of the 8th Dublins noted that the day after his men had attacked Ginchy 'every man had

⁵⁹ Lyon papers, p. 58 (Imperial War Museum).

⁶⁰ Feilding, *War letters*, pp 141, 175.

⁶¹ Brett papers, p. 46 (National Army Museum).

⁶² Barnett, *His letters*, p. 43.

⁶³ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 277.

⁶⁴ Graves, *Goodbye to all that*, p. 152.

⁶⁵ Barnett, *His letters*, p. 41.

⁶⁶ F. C. Hitchcock, *Stand to* (London, 1938), p. 26.

⁶⁷ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 132.

all his brass work shining and boots cleaned'.⁶⁸ The 8th Dublins were known as the 'Shiny Eighth' because of the importance attached 'to cleaning up and polishing as soon as the men reached their rest billets'.⁶⁹ Feilding, writing from the mud bath of the Ypres salient in 1917, sums up the attitude of most soldiers, Irish or otherwise:

Spit and polish is the order of the day and I am all for it within reason. But when the men have just come out after sixteen days in the line, where they have been squeezed up in muddy dug-outs during the few hours in daytime when they were not on duty and could get a sleep . . . I think it is a bit thick when high-placed officers, who do not share their dangers and indeed never, or scarcely ever, go into the firing line, kick up hell's delight because the bayonet scabbards are not polished.⁷⁰

Once again, it seems that the 16th Division in particular was unjustly maligned because of the traditional image of the Catholic Irish soldier as dirty and untidy. The division's first sector of operations near Hulluch was notorious for the poor condition of the trenches, which had been fought over and shelled many times and which were dug in low-lying and often waterlogged terrain. In June 1916, Hickie was admonished by his corps and army commanders about the untidy state of the defences in the division's sector. Hickie claimed, with reason, that the trenches, already poor, were constantly being knocked about by enemy artillery and trench mortars and that proper maintenance was exceptionally difficult. The war diaries of the 16th Division at this time emphasise the vast amount of work being done on a daily basis to repair, strengthen and tidy the division's defences. But the First Army commander would accept no excuses and Hickie was ordered to report back regularly giving details of progress made.⁷¹

One outstanding characteristic of the Catholic Irish soldier was the depth of his religious feeling. Willie Redmond, John's brother, who fought and died with the 16th Division, commented: 'the fortitude the men draw from their faith is great and marked'.⁷² An officer of the Royal Irish Rifles, censoring his men's mail, found that 'a very strong religious strain runs through most of their letters', for they were 'extraordinarily religious these scamps of mine'.⁷³ Feilding, although a Catholic, was struck by the deep and abiding faith of his Rangers, which was 'quite remarkable'. Men would flock to religious services even when exhausted after long duty in the line, or when services were held within range of the German guns. 'Where mass is concerned they are never too tired to attend'. Just before a big attack in 1917, Feilding observed: 'for hours that evening the priests were engaged, the men crowding up silently, passing one by one to the canvas confessionals . . . dimly lighted by a candle or two for the occasion'. As a special concession the Catholic church allowed non-fasting communion before the troops went into action, although 'many of them in earlier days could not get over the idea that they were committing a sin by doing so'.⁷⁴ The close links

⁶⁸ Sir Edward Bellingham to Sir Lawrence Parsons, 20 Sept. 1916 (King's College, London, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Parsons papers).

⁶⁹ F. M. Laird, *Personal experiences of the Great War* (Dublin, 1925), pp 104-5.

⁷⁰ Feilding, *War letters*, pp 224-5.

⁷¹ War diary, First Army, 9, 10 Oct. 1916 (P.R.O., WO 95/164).

⁷² William Redmond, *Trench pictures from France* (London, 1917), p. 113.

⁷³ Burgoyne, *Diaries*, pp 41, 44.

⁷⁴ Feilding, *War letters*, pp 138, 141, 143, 226.

which the 16th Division maintained with the Catholic hierarchy were important in sustaining the loyalty of Irish soldiers. Cardinal Bourne, the archbishop of Westminster, inspected the 16th Division shortly before it left for France in December 1915, and visited it in the trenches in October 1917.⁷⁵

Yet the 'limpid faith' and the 'unaffected piety' of the Catholic Irish soldier were often sentimentalised. Irish soldiers, MacDonagh declared, were 'saintlike', for the Irish were 'the most religious soldiers in the British army'; and it was 'because they are religious that they rank so high among the most brave'. MacDonagh's story of the private of the Connaught Rangers who 'had the sacred heart badge on my coat and three medals, a pair of rosary beads and father's Agnus Dei around my neck' came too near caricature.⁷⁶ But the rosary in particular was a real support to the Irish Catholic soldier, one believing that it is 'like having someone strong and brave and comforting by you'.⁷⁷

The Catholic faith was something Irish troops shared with many of the French and Belgian civilians they had come to defend. The 16th Division made much use of local churches. Willie Redmond wrote: 'when Irish regiments are billeted in a village, the church, large enough for the villagers, becomes at once too small'. Hickie, the divisional commander, told him that 'his division never left an area without the local authorities and notably the *curé*, coming to him to express their appreciation of the good behaviour of the troops and their admiration for their earnest devotion to their religion'.⁷⁸

A Protestant officer of the Leinsters recalled: 'it was said with justice that a Catholic chaplain was worth two extra officers to an Irish battalion, so great was this influence on all ranks, both Catholics and Protestants'.⁷⁹ Early in the war reports that Catholic Irish soldiers were dying without the attendance of priests caused an outcry in Ireland.⁸⁰ The provision of a suitable number of Catholic chaplains for the 16th Division in particular had been urged by John Redmond from its formation. Only after a 'prolonged struggle', Redmond claimed, was an 'adequate' number obtained.⁸¹ In the 16th Division the close links between soldier and chaplain were personified in the charismatic figure of Father William Doyle. Doyle died fighting with the 16th Division at the third battle of Ypres, where he was recommended for the Victoria Cross (having already won the Military Cross on the Somme). Doyle achieved almost legendary status within the division, serving as chaplain with several of its battalions. As well as being a fervent Irish patriot he was outstandingly courageous. Hickie believed him 'one of the bravest men who had fought or served out here'.⁸² Doyle often risked his life to give absolution to a dying man and would rarely deign to wear a steel helmet unless ordered.⁸³ Doyle believed it 'an admitted fact that the Irish Catholic

⁷⁵ War diary, 16th Division, 27 Oct. 1917 (P.R.O., WO 95/1965).

⁷⁶ MacDonagh, *Irish at the front*, pp 11, 104; MacDonagh, *Irish on the Somme*, p. 95.

⁷⁷ R. H. Kiernan, *Little brother goes soldiering* (London, 1930), p. 119.

⁷⁸ Redmond, *Trench pictures*, pp 33, 106-9, 135.

⁷⁹ Nelson, 'Irish soldiers in the Great War', p. 167.

⁸⁰ D. W. Miller, *Church, state and nation in Ireland, 1898-1921* (Dublin, 1973), p. 312; Jane Leonard, 'The Catholic chaplaincy' in David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Ireland and the First World War* (2nd ed., Mullingar, 1988), pp 4-5.

⁸¹ Gwynn, *Redmond*, p. 402; *Hansard 5 (commons)*, lxxxvi, 585 (18 Oct. 1916).

⁸² Michael Moynihan, *God on our side* (London, 1983), p. 175.

⁸³ H. F. N. Jourdain, *Ranging memories* (Oxford, 1934), pp 204-6.

soldier is the bravest and best man in a fight, but few know that he draws his courage from the strong faith with which he is filled and the help which comes from the exercises of his religion'.⁸⁴ Catholic chaplains saw themselves as savers of men's souls, in whatever physical extremity or danger the men might be. For only in the front line could the Catholic chaplain administer the sacraments, hear confessions and grant absolution to the dying.

Doyle's bravery, though extreme, was not unusual. MacDonagh devoted one chapter of his *The Irish at the front* to the Catholic chaplain: 'For cross and crown'. Father Wrafter of the 16th Division won the Military Cross; Wrafter was a 'universal favourite with all', the commanding officer of the 8th Dublins wrote.⁸⁵ Father Gleeson of the 2nd Munsters was renowned as a front line priest. Father Moloney of the 2nd Leinsters also. Francis Law recalled Father Gwynne of the 1st Irish Guards, killed at Loos in 1915, famous for spending most of his time with the forward troops.⁸⁶ Father Knapp of the 2nd Irish Guards was equally daring. Patrick MacGill, with the London Irish, remembered their Catholic chaplain, who 'went over the top with the battalion at Loos and then helped carry the wounded until every man was in . . . He was the pluckiest man in Loos'.⁸⁷ Not every Catholic chaplain was made of such stuff according to Major Jourdain of the 6th Connaughts. In March 1917 he complained that no Catholic chaplain had visited the battalion for seven weeks. A priest was immediately sent up. On his arrival, Jourdain claims, he merely asked for the address of one man and then left without even taking confessions. Jourdain, it should be noted, was an Anglican.⁸⁸ But the courage and devotion to duty of the vast majority of Catholic chaplains, when many of their fellow priests in Ireland were becoming vociferous opponents of Irish involvement in 'England's war', undoubtedly helped maintain the fighting spirit of the Irish regiments and divisions.

Doyle noted the tendency for his Protestant counterparts to stay in the rear while 'we with the Irish regiments live in the thick of it'. Graves's *Goodbye to all that*, and many similar works, portray Anglican padres as inadequate and craven, and treated by the fatalistic men with derision or indifference. This assertion, although overdrawn, probably contains a kernel of truth. An officer of Graves's battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers noted that in the early part of the war, when the unit was largely Birmingham English, 'only defaulters, detailed to make a congregation, attended a voluntary church service'.⁸⁹ Certainly, the religiousness of the Catholic Irish (and, to a lesser extent, the Nonconformist Welsh, the Protestant Irish and some of the Scots) contrasts starkly with the mass of English soldiers, in whom religious feeling does not appear to have been strong. No doubt this religiousness contributed to the picture of the Catholic Irish as gullible, emotional and superstitious.

It is interesting to note that during the First World War troops from Australia, New Zealand and Canada were often regarded in much the same way as Catholic Irish soldiers: as 'shock troops' with a reputation for unruliness and indiscipline.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Moynihan, *God on our side*, p. 179.

⁸⁵ Bellingham to Parsons, 19 Dec. 1916 (King's College, London, Parsons papers).

⁸⁶ Law, *Man at arms*, p. 57.

⁸⁷ Patrick MacGill, *The great push* (London, 1916), pp 123-5.

⁸⁸ H. F. N. Jourdain's diaries, 27 Mar., 4 Apr. 1917 (National Army Museum).

⁸⁹ J. C. Dunn (ed.), *The war the infantry knew* (London, 1938, new ed. 1987), p. 430.

⁹⁰ Gloden Dallas and Douglas Gill, *The unknown army* (London, 1985), p. 48.

To give the matter a wider perspective we can look at the generalisations made about the black soldiers recruited by France during the First World War from her west African colonies, notably Senegal. *Les tirailleurs Sénégalais* were believed to possess 'the wild impulsiveness' (*l'impétuosité sauvage*) which made them ideal 'shock troops' (*troupes de choc*) for delivering the 'crucial attack' (*choc final*), because of their 'fierce ardour for hand-to-hand combat' (*fougueuse ardeur au combat corps à corps*). Yet they were often criticised for their alleged lack of discipline and cohesion in battle; and patronised for their supposed limited intellectual capacity and their childlike qualities.⁹¹ Such comparisons reveal interesting parallels with the 'colonial' attitudes towards the Catholic Irish in the British army. For the generalisations made about Catholic Irish soldiers—recklessness, negligence, credulity—too easily complemented claims that the Irish were incapable of organising their political life in a responsible way. As one observer wrote astutely in 1916: 'those who most doubt the Irishman's capacity in civil affairs are often the readiest to admit his fury and prowess in battle'.⁹²

The uneasy amalgam of admiration, sentimentality and distrust which had long characterised the military establishment's attitude towards the Catholic Irish in uniform took on an added significance during the First World War. The disputes in the early part of the war between the War Office and the Irish Party over the recruitment of thousands of avowed nationalists into the 'new armies'; the army high command's growing suspicions about the loyalty and fighting spirit of Catholic Irish soldiers; together with the consistent attempts made by the Germans to subvert Irish troops—all exacerbated traditional fears.⁹³

The Irish parliamentary party's attitude towards the Irish soldier in the First World War, as exemplified by John Redmond, was ambivalent. Enthusiastically embracing the traditional presentation of Catholic Irish soldiers, he extolled their 'natural military genius', their 'astonishing courage and their beautiful faith', for they were 'bringing with them a quality all their own to the sordid modern battlefield'.⁹⁴ The heroism of the Catholic Irish soldier would, Redmond thought, sanctify with blood Ireland's claim to statehood:

No people can be said to have rightly proved their nationhood and their power to maintain it until they have demonstrated their military prowess; and though Irish blood has reddened the earth of every continent, never until now have we as a people set a national army in the field . . . It is heroic deeds entering into their traditions that give life to nations—that is the recompense of those who die to perform them.⁹⁵

Yet, while taking pride in the pugnacity and 'missile' quality of Irish soldiers, the nationalists often alleged that they were for this reason being used for 'the most arduous tasks'; that they were suffering excessive losses; and that some

⁹¹ Marc Michel, *L'appel à l'Afrique: contributions et réactions à l'effort de guerre en Afrique Occidentale Française, 1914-1919* (Paris, 1982), pp 9, 19, 305-6, 332, 394-7.

⁹² Harold Spender, 'Ireland and the war' in *Contemporary Review*, Nov. 1916, p. 567.

⁹³ I have tried to cover some of these points in articles for the *Irish Sword*: Terence Denman, 'The 10th (Irish) Division, 1914-15: a study in military and political interaction', vol. xvii (1987), pp 16-25; 'Sir Lawrence Parsons and the raising of the 16th (Irish) Division 1914-15', vol. xvii (1987-8), pp 90-104; 'The 16th (Irish) Division on 21 March 1918: fight or flight?', vol. xvii (1990), pp 273-87.

⁹⁴ Stephen Gwynn, *Redmond's last years*, p. 201.

⁹⁵ MacDonagh, *Irish at the front*, p. 13.

'inexplicable fatality' was shadowing the Irish regiments.⁹⁶ Such beliefs, however ill-founded, were widely shared and did much to undermine Irish support for the war.

The Irish soldier, particularly the Catholic Irish soldier, came from a society very different in social, religious and economic terms from the rest of the British Isles, and one with a unique historical development and culture. It would be surprising, therefore, if there were not particular characteristics which distinguished Catholic Irish soldiers. However, out of a variety of motives, these differences were drawn attention to and exaggerated in a way that usually reflected badly on the Irish soldier. Feilding observed that 'people are apt to criticise Irish troops perhaps more than others'.⁹⁷ The Irish soldier was too frequently portrayed as excitable, gullible and incorrigibly ill-disciplined. This contributed to the patronising or hostile attitudes which formations such as the 16th Division met on the western front. Sadly, it was often Irish writers who helped cultivate this image. As John Staniforth wrote on Saint Patrick's day 1918 of MacDonagh: '*The Irish on the Somme* is a silly book. He tries to keep up the old stage-Irish tradition. Where would we be if we were really fire-eating mountebanks like that?'⁹⁸ The Catholic Irish soldier in the First World War clearly deserved better, both from his countrymen and the army he served so well.

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⁹⁶ Denis Gwynn, *John Redmond*, p. 443.

⁹⁷ Feilding, *War letters*, p. 277.

⁹⁸ Staniforth papers (Imperial War Museum).