Irish Officers in the British Forces, 1922–45

STEVEN O'CONNOR

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To the memory of the men and women from the island of Ireland who died in the Second World War

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Abbreviations

ADM	Admiralty
AIR	Air Ministry
AMS	(British) Army Medical Service
ATS	Auxiliary Territorial Service
CBC	Christian Brothers' College
CF	Chaplain to the Forces
CJ	Northern Ireland Office
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
CYMS	Catholic Young Men's Society
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DIC	Department of Industry and Commerce
D/JUS	Department of Justice
DO	Dominions Office
DT	Department of the Taoiseach
FCA	Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil
G2	Irish Military Intelligence
GP	General Practitioner
HMC	Headmasters' Conference
IRA	Irish Republican Army
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IFS	Irish Free State
IMS	Indian Medical Service
ISC	Imperial Service College, Westward Ho!
IWM	Imperial War Museum
IWMSA	Imperial War Museum Sound Archive
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
NLI	National Library of Ireland

NRA	National Register of Archives
OTC	Officers' Training Corps
PREM	Prime Minister's Office
QAIMNS	Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RC	Roman Catholic
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TNA	The National Archives (UK)
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UDC	Urban District Council
UK	United Kingdom
VPSA	Volunteers Project Sound Archive
WAAF	Women's Auxiliary Air Force
WO	War Office
WPDL	Women's Prisoners' Defence League
YCW	Young Christian Worker

Introduction

It is now accepted that the phrase 'de Valera's Ireland' should be treated sceptically and that Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s defies simple labels.[1] Similarly, Irish veterans of the British forces rejected the label that they were 'West British': that having a positive perception of Britain or serving British interests negated being Irish, indeed that they were 'anti-Irish'.[2] Yet as recently as 2006 one letter-writer to the *Irish Times* found preposterous 'the notion that Irishmen in the British army either now or in the past deserve special attention because they claim to be Irish soldiers or to serve Ireland'.[3] Such a view does not do justice to the complexities of Irish history. Irish officers regarded themselves as Irish men and women, and enlistment gave no indication of their views of the historical rights and wrongs of British–Irish relations. Among them could be found the sons and daughters of unionists, home-rulers and republicans. Indeed many had had family relations who fought in the Great War and other relations who participated in the 1916 Rising. Similarly, they saw no conflict between joining the wartime British forces and, at the same time, firmly supporting de Valera's invocation of southern Ireland's right to remain neutral.

It is an indication of how the complexity of this period has come to be appreciated in the Republic that in May 2013 the Dáil with significant cross-party support passed a bill granting an amnesty to over 4,500 members of the Defence Forces who deserted during the 'Emergency'; many of these deserters went on to join the British forces. In his closing statement the minister for defence informed the Dáil that

> It is estimated that over 60,000 citizens of the then Free State and in the region of 100,000 who resided on this Island fought against Nazi tyranny during the Second World War. For too long in this State we

> failed to acknowledge their courage and their sacrifice and for too long their contribution was airbrushed out of official Irish history as taught in our schools and at third level. In recent years this has changed and the role played by them has been documented and written about. That is as it should be. I hope this Bill provides a statutory foundation to ensure they are never again ignored or forgotten in narratives covering the Ireland of 1939 to 1945.[4]

This book tells the story of the thousands of Irishmen and women who served as officers in the British forces from the setting up of the Irish Free State until the end of the Second World War. Who were these officers and why did this tradition of joining the British forces continue after southern Ireland's secession from the United Kingdom in 1922? What was it like to be an Irish person in the British officer corps? How many joined and how were they viewed back home? By using evidence from Irish and British archives, oral testimony and data derived from a sample of 1,004 officers (referred to in the text as the database of Irish officers) this book will try to answer these questions and more.

In trying to tell this story I have adopted a mixture of the chronological and thematic approaches. As the focus of the book is not a series of events but rather a group of people and their experiences over several decades, I have found that using such an approach enables the book to highlight what I consider to be the most important aspects of their story from an historical perspective. Thus, the first four chapters of the book examine the backgrounds and motives of those who became Irish officers. It begins by tracing patterns in recruitment during the interwar period and the Second World War, followed by comparisons with recruitment from other British dominions. Then Chapters 2–4 explore the principal influences on the officers in deciding to obtain a commission. An in-depth analysis is presented of the origins and evolution of family traditions of service, the school influence and the employment motive. The second part of the book is concerned with the experiences of the officers after they were commissioned. Chapter 5 examines how the British government and the respective services treated the officers, and how their experiences compare to the general Irish immigrant experience of Britain and to that of other Commonwealth contingents serving in His Majesty's Forces. Finally, a study of the responses within Irish society to British recruitment and the shared military past shows that there was little animosity towards this ongoing military connection and that in some areas British military service was explicitly valued as a legitimate career outlet. As is apparent from the above description

this book is not a comprehensive biographical portrait of individual Irish officers and their wartime exploits, for that we have the extraordinary accounts of the officers themselves retold in dozens of published memoirs over the last 50 years.[5] Rather, this book is a history of Irish people who became officers and the Ireland that shaped them.

This book will demonstrate that in an Ireland yet to establish a strong sense of nationhood, there were a variety of responses to the continuing economic, cultural and military connections between the two countries. Though Irish people joining the British forces were a small minority of the Irish population – and Irish officers a smaller part still – they came from all parts of the country and were indicative of wider patterns in Irish society, as can be seen from the prevalence of British popular culture in the Free State and the emigration of 190,000 people between 1936 and 1946, the overwhelming majority to Britain.[6] Nor should it be forgotten that Irish recruitment to the British forces was not a recent phenomenon in 1922, in fact it had been going on for centuries and awareness of this tradition formed an important context in which many took the decision to obtain a commission.

Irish recruitment to the British forces, 1750–1921

One of the central themes of Irish popular history is the story of Irish resistance to British rule. This narrative places emphasis on the various rebellions in Ireland through the centuries as demonstrating the Irish people's desire to be free from British 'occupation'.[7] However, what is rarely mentioned in this narrative is the fact that over the same period hundreds of thousands of Irish people served in the armed forces of the same country. Tens of thousands of Irish soldiers were recruited to suppress the American revolution and later to check the advances of Napoleonic France. The 1798 rebellion was largely put down by the Irish militia, a force comprised mainly of Irish Catholics. By the 1830s Irish Catholics comprised over 40 per cent of the British army and during the First World War over 200,000 Irish people served in the British forces. Therefore, British rule in Ireland produced a variety of responses: some actively resisted it while many others accepted it to varying degrees. But how did recruitment to the British forces start and why did Irish people join up?

Irishmen had served in English armies, and other European armies for that matter, since the Middle Ages but sustained large-scale recruitment only began in the second half of the eighteenth century. During this period in Ireland the penal code was still officially in force against

Catholics for their part in the Williamite War (1689–91). This included a prohibition on military service, which also prevented Protestant peasants from serving in the rank and file, for fear of weakening the loyalist population and also enabling Catholic infiltration. However, members of the Protestant landed gentry could obtain officer commissions in the Crown forces and it is estimated that they comprised about one third of all British army officers by the mid-1770s, increasing to 37 per cent by 1812.[8]

By the time of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) the ban on Protestant service in the ranks had been lifted and the government's attitude towards Catholics had also softened: the Royal Marines were permitted by the king to recruit 1,200 men from the predominantly Catholic south and west of the country and 20 per cent of the East India Company's soldier recruits in the early 1760s were Catholic (increasing to 44 per cent in 1780). Dublin Castle could justify this recruitment on the grounds that these men were being sent on overseas service and were unlikely to return and cause trouble. The impetus for Irish recruitment was Britain's growing need for manpower to defend an empire which now stretched from North America to India. Finally, the American War of Independence placed such pressure on British resources that a policy of 'no enquiry' was tacitly adhered to, thus allowing the regular army to raise 16 out of its 44 battalions for American service in Ireland.[9]

However, there was another Irish military tradition that was hostile to Britain and its armed forces. The proponents of this tradition, often referred to as the 'Wild Geese', were the families and vassals of the old Gaelic and Hiberno-Norman ruling classes who were forced into exile in successive waves after the Elizabethan, Cromwellian and Williamite conquests. They found employment in the armies of the Catholic kingdoms of Spain, Austria and especially France where the dethroned king of Britain and Ireland, James II, set up his court-in-exile in 1691. He brought with him an Irish army 16,000-strong and together with the Mountcashel Brigade, sent to France the previous year, they began the 100-year career of the Irish Brigades in the service of the French monarchy. Their battle honours included Cremona (1702), Fontenoy (1745) and Grenada (1779).[10] The Irish composition of this force was maintained through a network of priests and merchants, who could recruit and smuggle men to France, as well as through the remaining Catholic noble families still residing in Ireland whose sons filled the commissioned ranks of the Irish regiments. The practice of naming a regiment after its commanding officer meant the names Bulkely, Dillon, Walsh and Berwick among others became synonymous with, in the

minds of Catholics, Irish martial valour, or in the case of Protestants, Jacobite treachery.

The success and popularity of the Irish Brigade peaked with the French victory over the Duke of Cumberland's army at Fontenoy in 1745, in which the Irish soldiers played a leading part. Thereafter the number of Irish Catholics joining the Brigade's enlisted ranks rapidly declined, falling to between 10 and 12 per cent of total strength by 1789, although during the same period the officers remained overwhelmingly Irish.[11] The reasons for this decline was the discrediting of the Jacobite cause after its numerous failed plots, the easing of the penal laws particularly on land ownership and inheritance, and most importantly the opening up of the British army to Irish Catholics. The Catholics joining the army included not only unemployed labourers and artisans, but by the 1780s even members of the Catholic propertied classes, who held a number of commissions clandestinely. They were able to do so because no army officer had been required to take the oath of supremacy for some years.[12] Indeed, after finding that the desertion rates from Irish and non-Irish regiments in the French army, and Irish regiments in the British army to be broadly similar, Tom Bartlett and Keith Jeffery concluded that far from joining for principled reasons, 'the Catholic officer class enlisted in the French army because they were not permitted to enlist in the British army: when allowed to do so, they did so'.[13] Thus by the final decade of the eighteenth century the last obstacles were being removed to a reconciliation of the opposing military traditions and the catalyst was the French revolution.

To many of the Wild Geese officers in France, predominantly aristocratic and devout, the egalitarian and secular ideals represented by the revolution were an abomination and they began joining the royalist army forming at Coblenz. The British Prime Minister, William Pitt, soon to be a military ally of the royalist camp was also shocked by events and he took decisive action to secure Catholic loyalty in anticipation of war with the French Republic. In 1793 Pitt persuaded the Irish parliament to pass a groundbreaking Catholic Relief Act which gave Catholics the vote on the same terms as Protestants and legalised Catholic enlistment in the armed forces and their holding officer commissions in Ireland.[14] This opened the way for General Count O'Connell, uncle of the Liberator and French army officer, to cooperate with Pitt to form an Irish Brigade in the service of Britain. It would be officered by the Irish royalists from French service and the other ranks would be recruited in Ireland.[15] This was a situation unimaginable a few years previously and underlines the shattering effect of the French revolution on old

mentalities and perceptions. The Irish Brigade's transfer into the service of 'His Britannic Majesty' signalled the end of the 'Wild Geese' chapter in Irish history and it is difficult not to regard these events as a form of reconciliation between the old Catholic ruling class of Ireland and the Protestant state and their respective military traditions. To be sure, the reconciliation was on the Protestant ascendancy's terms: there was never any question of restoring lands to dispossessed Catholic gentry and they had to wait another 36 years for the right to sit in parliament. Nevertheless, by the time of France's defeat at the battle of Waterloo, the potent threat of trained and battle-hardened Irish military commanders returning to Ireland at the head of foreign armies had been eliminated – the majority of Wild Geese officers were either seeking transfer into British service or serving in an allied army.

In spite of the fact that at least a dozen Irishmen reached senior rank in the French revolutionary armies[16] and Napoleon formed an Irish Legion, the French connection had been effectively severed by 1791 with very few Irishmen choosing military migration.[17] Similarly, while a minority of educated Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, would lead four ill-planned and short-lived rebellions over the next 100 years, an estimated 159,000 Irishmen would serve in the British army during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars alone. By 1839 Irishmen made up 42.2 per cent of the regular army and by the 1850s they constituted over 50 per cent of the East India Company's army. As well as having their own regiments such as the Royal Irish Regiment, the 87th Foot (later 1st battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers) and 88th Foot (later the Connaught Rangers), the Irish filled a significant proportion of English and Scottish regiments, even forming a majority in two. Typical motives for enlistment included a mix of following in family tradition, an attraction to the military lifestyle and seeking adventure. Yet in a country where the average rates of pay for agricultural labourers were not only worse than those in England and Scotland, but were even lower than the nominal pay in the army, poverty had to be the primary factor.[18] The onset of the Great Famine and the subsequent demographic catastrophe took its toll; death and sustained emigration reduced the Irish share of the United Kingdom's population from about one third in 1840 to one tenth in 1900, similarly the Irish proportion of the army fell to 13.5 per cent by 1902 and 9.2 per cent by the outbreak of the First World War.[19]

At the beginning of a 20-year period when military leaders would be in great demand, the 1793 law was certainly passed at the right time insofar as many Catholics from the landed gentry and prosperous

middle classes were able to obtain commissions in the army and navy, as attested to by the Duke of Wellington and Prime Minster Grenville at the mid-way point of the Napoleonic Wars.[20] Although no religious breakdown is available, the army inspection returns indicate that 31 per cent of its officers were Irish in 1792, increasing to 37 per cent by 1812.[21] The contraction in the size of the British army post-Waterloo coupled with competition from the East India Company's army for officer recruits meant that the number of regular officers who were Irish receded to 17.5 per cent by 1854, where it remained unchanged until 1900.[22] Unlike the rank and file, the Famine and the changes it wrought would not have significantly affected the officer class, as its members were drawn mostly from the Protestant landed gentry with a modest proportion of Catholic gentlemen and a few Catholic ex-rankers (officers commissioned from the ranks due to merit).

The fact that the Anglo-Irish gentry, a very small part of the Irish population, composed almost one fifth of the British army's officers over a 50-year period, indicated the continued popularity of the profession among the Irish elite. This could only have been stimulated by the high number of garrisons in nineteenth-century Ireland and the close association this created between 'the officer class' and 'like-minded civilians'. As E.M. Spiers asserts, this connection not only encouraged a 'Loyalist standpoint' among the gentry but also influenced their entire social and mental outlook:

> Accordingly, many better-off Anglo-Irish families sent their sons to English public schools, partly to lose any Irish brogue, and thence into the armed services. Quite apart from following in a family tradition or of confirming social status, this choice seemed prudent as the career opportunities for scions of Anglo-Irish gentry were much more limited than those of their English counterparts. They lacked coal, railways and industrial sites to exploit on their land and there were relatively few appointments to be gained in Dublin Castle. Moreover, in the army they had plenty of time to indulge their passion for field sports…[23]

Indeed, the Indian army was particularly popular with Irishmen making up 30 per cent of its officers by 1900. Indian service had been attractive to the impoverished Irish gentry since the 1750s because it offered a cheaper alternative to the purchase system in the regular army and the high costs associated with the lifestyle of officers in British regiments. In addition, India offered opportunities to gain 'riches and honour' as

well as an exciting career, field sports and a possible transfer to a regiment in the regular army.[24] It also appealed to Catholic gentlemen seeking careers with British forces for similar reasons, but especially before 1793, owing to the East India Company's 'no questions asked' recruiting policy. Some Catholic recruits achieved considerable distinction, such as General Sir Garrett O'Moore Creagh VC, who joined the Indian army in 1870.[25] Although no figures are available for Irish Catholic officers in the Indian army, it is significant to note that in the ten years before the First World War almost one third of Irish recruits to the Indian Civil Service (ICS) were Catholic.[26] The ICS recruited from the same strata of society that provided army and naval officers and it therefore suggests that a similar number of Catholics took commissions in the Indian army.

The traditional interpretation of Irish recruitment during the First World War is that the initial response was enthusiastic, aided by the speeches of the leaders of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Ulster Unionists, but that it declined after the British army executed the 1916 rebel leaders. This enabled Sinn Féin to mobilise Irish public opinion in support of separatist nationalism, leading to its success in the 1918 general election. However, more recent scholarship on Irish recruitment has shown that its fluctuations broadly matched British patterns until the introduction of conscription there in March 1916: as in Britain Irish recruitment entered a lull during the summer and autumn of 1915, followed in winter by a brief recovery before terminally declining in early 1916. Interestingly, recruitment was actually entering a brief revival in the months after the Easter Rising, not declining.[27]

And what of the unionist claim that Protestants were more patriotic than Catholics? By examining recruitment on a county basis for 1915, David Fitzpatrick has found that equal proportions of Catholics and Protestants joined up in Ulster and the southern midlands, while fewer of either religion joined from the seaboard counties from Cork to Mayo. Therefore, it seems that recruitment transcended religious and political divisions, and that reluctance to join was more strongly influenced by traditional socio-economic factors, such as a farmer's unwillingness to leave his land.[28] In explaining why the war attracted about 150,000 voluntary recruits from Ireland (including several thousand directly commissioned officers) Fitzpatrick has argued convincingly that pre-war motives, such as seeking stable employment, were superseded by the collective pressure on those belonging to militias, fraternities and sporting clubs to follow the example of their peers. The high number of recruits from the Irish and Ulster Volunteers, the Boys' Brigade in Dublin and other groups, as well as the formation of the

'Pals' Company' in the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers, reflected the belief that 'the army offered the promise of an adventure whose dangers were outweighed by the pleasure of being with one's mates'.[29] Keith Jeffery has asserted that the sharp drop in recruitment from 1916 onwards was not only caused by British heavy-handedness after the Rising, but also 'a progressive disenchantment with the war itself, and the growing feeling that the continued prosecution of England's – or the Empire's – war had little specific to offer Ireland'.[30] This was reflected in the united opposition of the Home Rulers, Sinn Féin, the Catholic Church and organised labour to the planned introduction of conscription in 1918. Jeffery has even suggested that the progressive unwillingness of Irishmen to serve Britain and the empire 'may say as much about contemporary attitudes to the war throughout the British Isles as it does about political circumstances in Ireland'.[31]

The wartime recruitment of Irish officers for Kitchener's 'New Armies' was helped by the fact that several Irish schools and universities were participating in the Officer Training Corps (OTC) scheme set up in 1908, including Cork Grammar School, St Andrew's College, St Columba's College, Dublin University (Trinity College) and the Royal College of Surgeons in the south of Ireland, and Campbell College and Queen's University in Ulster. This military conditioning of the student body was reinforced by a widespread enthusiasm among the middle classes for competitive sports especially rugby, which it was believed reinforced the virtues of leadership, loyalty and corporate spirit. Consequently, it has been estimated that these OTCs provided approximately 20 per cent of the officers of the 36th (Ulster) Division.[32] Since these institutions were predominantly attended by Protestants and no Catholic schools or universities in Ireland had an OTC,[33] an assumption has developed that Irish officers of the Great War were overwhelmingly Protestant.[34] However, Anthony Quinn asserts that:

> It would be superficial and misleading to generalise about Protestant schools and colleges, and their sporting connections, as furnishing the only source of officer material in the army. Leading Roman Catholic schools catering for upward mobile business and professional classes emulated, to varying degrees, the sporting and imperial ethos of elite English schools and Irish Protestant educational institutions.[35]

Thus, discipline and training conducive to military service was equally instilled in young Irishmen who attended elite Catholic schools such as

Clongowes Wood, Belvedere, Castleknock, Blackrock and CBC Cork.[36] Significantly, in November 1915 the commander of the 16th (Irish) Division, Lieutenant General Sir Lawrence Parsons, reported that 36.7 per cent of his officers were Catholic.[37] This was as a result of intense recruitment from the Catholic middle classes. For example, by the summer of 1915 Belvedere College, a school that numbered only about 170 boys had recorded that 200 past pupils had flocked to the colours, and Clongowes Wood (250 boys) contributed 321 past pupils in the same period.[38] Furthermore, an analysis of the rolls of honour of Clongowes Wood, Belvedere, Castleknock and Blackrock Colleges, which recorded the name and rank of past pupils who died in the war, indicates that the overwhelming majority ranging from 73 per cent to 87 per cent served as officers.[39] Some obtained direct commissions, many were commissioned after training in the 16th (Irish) Division's officer cadet company and others were commissioned on the basis of their service in the Dublin University OTC, which like all senior division OTCs, was 'open, under the discretion of the university authorities and O.C. units, to gentleman who, though not members of the university are desirous of gaining certificates of proficiency'.[40] Therefore, the absence of OTCs in Catholic schools did not inhibit officer recruitment among this part of the population.

In spite of the Great War being immediately followed by the Irish War of Independence there is no evidence that this conflict had any significant effect on recruitment for the British forces: between 1919 and 1921 over 20,000 Irishmen joined or rejoined the postwar army, whose Irish proportion was almost as large as in 1913. And as before the war Dublin out-performed Belfast in recruiting, but surprisingly the Clonmel district (Tipperary to Wexford) recorded the highest returns as a proportion of the population.[41] It is clear that many more Irishmen were choosing the British army than the flying columns of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Then again, they were not competing for the same men. The typical British recruit was unemployed or an unskilled labourer, uneducated, apolitical, sometimes adventurous and he regarded soldiering as an occupation. For these recruits, especially married men, the army offered job security and enhanced future prospects. In contrast, the IRA rank and file were generally small farmers, shop assistants, skilled tradesmen and men from other lower middle-class backgrounds; they had a stake in society, were educated and most were ideologically committed to 'the cause'.[42]

The lines of difference between those Irishmen who became IRA officers and those who took the king's commission are less clear. Peter

Karsten and Tom Garvin have shown that the IRA officer corps, like Irish rebel leaders in the previous century, constituted an elite: 25 per cent were from families who owned the largest farm in their communities, two thirds were the eldest sons, only around 20 per cent were actually engaged in farming themselves (at a time when over 50 per cent of Irish Catholics earned their living in agriculture), almost half had received third-level education and most seemed ideologically committed.[43] In a more recent study, Peter Hart also found that farmers were under-represented among IRA officers and that the officers were much more likely to live in urban areas and to be employed in skilled and middle-class jobs than the IRA rank and file.[44] Similarly, Irish officers in the British forces constituted an elite and while it is true that the majority were Protestant, a substantial minority, especially after the First World War, were from the Catholic middle classes: the well-educated sons of large farmers, GPs and solicitors. They were nationalists too but supported Home Rule and answered Redmond's call to show Ireland's imperial loyalty. Yet they were not immune from the transformation in Irish public opinion and by 1922 it has been estimated that 600 British army officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) had transferred into the recently formed National army.[45] This ensured continuity between the new military establishment and its predecessor. In fact, the officer corps of the Irish army seemed to comfortably assume the mantle of its predecessor as an elite officer caste: in 1926 a visiting British captain noted with satisfaction that the recreations of leisured gentlemen, such as hunting, golf and bridge, were popular among the Free State's officers.[46]

The British forces and Irish history since 1922

The continuation of the Irish tradition of service with the British forces after southern Ireland's secession from the United Kingdom in 1922 remains a little understood aspect of the history of the Irish Free State. Histories of this period have tended to concentrate their attention on other topics, such as literary censorship, the 'Economic War' and de Valera's programme to destroy the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.[47] The preoccupation with these topics has not only emphasised Ireland as an insular society, but also a perception of British–Irish relations as dominated by the themes of perpetual conflict and change. The inadequacy of this framework can be seen during the Second World War when the Irish state declared neutrality, yet tens of thousands of its citizens joined the British forces and over 150,000 migrated to the United Kingdom to work in the war industries.[48] This discrepancy in the