

# Ireland's New Memory of the First World War: Forgotten Aspects of the Battle of Messines, June 1917

RICHARD S. GRAYSON

*Goldsmiths, University of London*

Email: [r.grayson@gold.ac.uk](mailto:r.grayson@gold.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

*The narrative of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) and 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) divisions fighting side-by-side at Messines in June 1917 plays a major and valuable role in cross-community reconciliation on the island of Ireland. However, there is no sustained historical analysis of precisely who (in terms of geographic origin) was serving in the two divisions by June 1917. This article does that, concluding that around one-third of the men in each division had no Irish connection. This opens up the prospect of nuancing the Messines narrative so that it might play a part in British-Irish reconciliation.*

## **Introduction: Messines and memory of the First World War**

Prior to the opening of the Island of Ireland Peace Tower at Messines in 1998, there had been no all-Ireland First World War memorial which was felt to be owned by all on the island. There is a notionally all-Ireland memorial at Islandbridge in Dublin, but it has not been a major site of focus for Northern Irish, especially unionist, commemoration. Meanwhile, the Cenotaph in London could be claimed as 'all-Ireland', commemorating as it does all the dead of the British military in the First World War (and, as they took place, later wars). Yet while many unionists in Northern Ireland might look to the Cenotaph as a focus of their national remembrance, for nationalists, its place in London is problematic. Consequently, there has been an emphasis on two separate memorials on the Somme each specifically focused on soldiers from one community: the Protestant/unionist 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division at Thiepval and the Catholic/nationalist 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division at Guillemont. Both commemorate overtly divisions which were overtly political and draw on symbolism which struggles to be inclusive.

With the opening of the Island of Ireland Peace Tower (a round tower, which is a cultural icon recognised and accepted both north and south of the border), a new

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

phase of memory was initiated. The significance of Messines was that it was *notionally* the location of an operation on 7 June 1917 which included, among other divisions, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions. The location is only 'notionally' correct because the memorial is actually about three miles away from where the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions saw action. They actually fought in front of the village of Wytschaete, with New Zealanders at Messines itself.<sup>1</sup> However, since the operation was officially the 'Battle of Messines' it would be hard to quarrel with the Messines site as a memorial to action in the battle, unless official publicity adopted an 'on this spot, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup>...' approach (which it does not).

When the battle took place, it was, at that point, one of the most effective allied attacks of the war, but the Tower is not solely focused on that operation. The memorial also commemorates the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division, a non-political formation which was more denominationally mixed than the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> as they were first established, and which fought its war in the Gallipoli, Salonika and Palestine campaigns. The Tower can be (and is) held up as a symbol of a shared Irish story across religious and political divides, and it is symbolically Irish in several ways. In the first place, the 'Round Tower' design dates back to Ireland as far as the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. Meanwhile, some of the symbolism is very much all-Ireland, with its height of 32 metres representing the 32 Irish counties, and its four plots of yew trees matching the four provinces. A stone at the memorial site lists all the counties 'in continuous lettering symbolising that the counties are linked, connected and interdependent'.<sup>2</sup> It might be thought that such an all-Ireland tone might be problematic for unionists/loyalists, and issues around that will be discussed later. However, in general it has not been greeted with hostility by unionists/loyalists, and it was a genuinely cross-community creation. As a result, Messines, after the Somme (though, it should be stressed, very far after), is probably the most prominent battle in the popular story of the war across Ireland.

The extent to which the origins of the Peace Tower were partly found in changes in historiography, and in a new mood created by the paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland, has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the Tower was initiated by individuals following a visit to Western Front sites in 1996. One was Glen Barr, a leading figure in the Ulster Workers' Council strike which brought down the Sunningdale power-sharing agreement in Northern Ireland in 1974, who later moved

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 139-140.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.schoolforpeace.com/content/tower-and-park/43> [accessed 26 August 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Richard Doherty, 'Some thoughts on the Island of Ireland Peace Park', in Alan Parkinson and Eamon Phoenix (eds), *Conflicts in the North of Ireland, 1900-2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp. 56-69; Richard S. Grayson, *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 177-8.

from politics to community work. The other leading figure was Paddy Harte, a former Fine Gael government minister in the Republic of Ireland. In a piece on the website of the International School for Peace Studies, Barr reflects on the site of the project:<sup>4</sup>

Messines was selected because it was at the battle of Messines on 7th June 1917 that the Nationalist 16th Irish Div. and the Unionist 36th Ulster Div. fought and died together for the first time and where the young John Meeke of the 36th Div. risked his life to retrieve the badly wounded Major Willie Redmond of the 16th Div. from the battlefield. Two men from different traditions, both there for different political reasons, sworn enemies in Ireland, brothers in arms on a foreign battlefield fighting a common enemy.

Barr's comments point to the centrality of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions in the story of Messines which led to the Peace Tower's inauguration. It also points to ideas of reconciliation, in terms of men sharing a common goal in 1917. Meanwhile, there is a sense of anger over this story having been lost (perhaps even consciously hidden), when Barr asks later, 'Why was I not taught this in my history class at school? Why was it kept from me?' Finally, there is a sense that in remembering this lost history, the shared story of 1917 can bring about a shared future, in Barr's reflection that,

Tens of thousands of young Unionists and Nationalists lie side by side in cold foreign graves cut down by German bullets which did not discriminate between Protestants or Roman Catholics, but I am convinced, that they can now Rest In Peace in the knowledge that through their joint sacrifice thousands of people from throughout the Island of Ireland who have made the pilgrimage to where they lie have found peace within and between themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Such views, in particular the idea of using history to build peace, were given state sanction when the Peace Tower was opened in 1998, jointly by the British, Irish and Belgian heads of state. At that opening, the Irish President, Mary McAleese, said:

The men of the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division and the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division died here. They came from every corner of Ireland. Among them were Protestants, Catholics, Unionists and Nationalists, their differences transcended by a common commitment not to flag but to freedom.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.schoolforpeace.com/content/glen-barrs-story/63> [accessed 26 August 2014].

<sup>5</sup> Cited in, Richard S. Grayson, 'The Place of the First World War in Contemporary Irish Republicanism in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 25, 3 (2010), 325-345 (342).

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

Today we seek to put their memory at the service of another common cause ...

Meanwhile, the Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, described it as ‘a symbolic moment of reconciliation’, while the BBC coverage set out what would become a familiar narrative:

In the battle for the Messines Ridge, Irish Catholics and Protestants from all over Ireland fought side by side against the common German enemy.

The clash, in June 1917, was the only time during the war when largely Protestant soldiers from the [3]<sup>6<sup>th</sup></sup> [sic] Ulster Division fought alongside Catholics from the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division, which was drawn from the south.<sup>6</sup>

The BBC was incorrect to state that Messines was the ‘only time’ the two divisions fought side-by-side during the war. As Keith Jeffery points out, they would do so again at Langemarck;<sup>7</sup> a failed operation. However, the BBC’s error points to an idea that was already entering public consciousness and after the Tower’s opening would continue to do so.

Following its opening, the Tower has been seen both as a symbol of changes which have already taken place, while also being a site which can be used as part of processes of future reconciliation. There have been two particular ways in which that has happened. In the first place is the International School for Peace Studies on the edge of Messines village which ‘uses the events of The Great War ... to engage participants in learning about their shared history, cultural heritage, peace and reconciliation, and the futility of war’.<sup>8</sup> Some of its work is focused on groups of young people through its Schools Links Project<sup>9</sup> and it also hosts a wide range of community groups. Second, is the Fellowship of Messines Association which aims to reconcile former paramilitaries from republican and loyalist traditions. Formed in 2002, the Association works on an ongoing basis, principally through discussion events. Its work has not been entirely without some loyalist hostility to the all-Ireland nature of some commemoration of Messines as a quotation from a community organiser in a 2007 report suggests:

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/212208.stm> [accessed 26 August 2014].

<sup>7</sup> Jeffery, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.schoolforpeace.com/content/project-summary/33> [accessed 26 August 2014].

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.schoolforpeace.com/content/schools-links/56> [accessed 26 August 2014].

I have been going back and forward to Messines some six or seven years now. I was one of the original guinea pigs among the ex-combatants, those who would have faced each other in the conflict here in Northern Ireland... I had assumed that the 'cross-community' message was now well and truly accepted. And then just last week I got a shock. I was organising a group of Loyalists to go to Messines, and some of them said, 'We'll not be going, because we hear there's Republicans going too And I said, 'Why not?' 'We're not walking on that sacred ground with Republicans, not a chance'. 'But people from both communities, and both parts of Ireland died there; Irish Nationalists from the Irish Volunteers joined the British Army and died over there'. 'We don't care, we're not walking on sacred ground with them'.<sup>10</sup>

However, such a view appears to be a minority one and both the Fellowship of Messines Association and the International Peace School perform incredibly valuable work. There has been a tendency across the island of Ireland for history to be part of an 'us versus them' narrative, where stories of past heroism are used to preserve existing divides. Messines, in contrast, is an example of history being used to reconcile in a way that the vast majority of people would welcome. It rests on one basic historical truth: that on 7 June 1917, two divisions which had been raised for very different purposes on different sides of the Home Rule debate, fought alongside each other. It also draws on the fact that there was contact between the two divisions, most notably in the case of the death of Major William 'Willie' Redmond, as discussed below.

Nothing that follows here is a challenge to any of this reconciliation work which is, after all, based on historical facts. However, two questions are asked. The first is to what extent those who fought at Messines in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> had an Irish connection? There is no doubt that the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions, as the two volunteer divisions raised in Ireland which fought on the Western Front, represented Ireland more than any other division there. However, there is a question as to who was actually serving in the divisions by that stage of the war. Second, does the popular narrative of the two divisions at Messines, focused as it is on their side-by-side service, tell us *all* that can be told of the symbolism of that battle? In other words, is there a still forgotten dimension to a story which is widely believed now to be well-remembered?

It is remarkable that Ireland's story of Messines has not been subjected to much forensic analysis, despite its importance to Ireland's new memory of the war.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cited in, Michael Hall, *A Shared Sacrifice for Peace* (Belfast: Island Publications, 2007), p. 26.  
[www.bjmh.org.uk](http://www.bjmh.org.uk)

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

Historians tend to be critical when it comes to contemporary uses of history, yet there has only been one serious attempt to interrogate the new story of Messines.<sup>11</sup> In that, Richard Doherty asked, ‘Did the men of the two Irish divisions fight “shoulder to shoulder” in common cause voluntarily? Or is this a case of the organizers [of the Peace Tower] trying to make past events fit a template that suits their modern, laudable, purpose?’<sup>12</sup> In answer to his questions, Doherty points out that the men from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> did not share trenches as they were fighting in separate (though adjoining) parts of the front. He also shows that there were Protestants serving in the 16<sup>th</sup>. Of course, some of those could have been nationalists, but Doherty offers evidence to suggest that some were probably (though not certainly) signatories of the Ulster Covenant against Home Rule in 1912.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Doherty rightly argues that there is little evidence of men in either division being aware of which units they were fighting alongside. Despite these problems, Doherty concludes that ‘while the organizers may have tried to make the events of the First World War fit a modern-day template, they have done so with admirable rationale and their efforts deserve to meet with success’.<sup>14</sup> Few will depart from that view, but there is more that can be said about who fought at Messines and the significance of that.

### **The structure of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines**

The popular image of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions is closely tied to paramilitary antecedents. The 16<sup>th</sup> is seen as having contained large numbers former members of the Irish National Volunteers, who had joined at the behest of John Redmond, the leader of Irish nationalism, believing that fighting for the British in their time of need would advance the cause of Home Rule. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division is even more closely associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force, since UVF members enlisted *en masse* and its battalions were based on the UVF’s geographic formations. However, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines were not the same divisions which had left Ireland. Far from all their members could even remotely be viewed in any political context for two reasons. First, the divisions’ losses at the Somme meant that they were supplemented by fresh recruits. In many cases these were from Ireland, and included men who had enlisted in 1914-15 but been placed in reserve battalions. However, as we shall see later, many were transferred from non-Irish units and would not have joined those units on the basis of the political convictions attributed to members of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup>. Second, the original structure of the 16<sup>th</sup> Division was transformed

---

<sup>11</sup> Richard Doherty, ‘Some Thoughts on the Island of Ireland Peace Park’ in Alan F. Parkinson and Eamon Phoenix eds., *Conflicts in the North of Ireland: 1900-2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp. 56-69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-62

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66-69.

through reorganisations. By June 1917, two of its battalions had been disbanded, with a further two merged, and three regular battalions of Irish regiments joining in their place.<sup>15</sup>

This change in the structure of the 16<sup>th</sup> Division meant that although the two divisions lined up alongside each other at Messines in June 1917, former members of the UVF and INV were not necessarily close together (see Figure 1). As the battalions took their positions close to the village of Wytschaete, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division was to the right of the 16<sup>th</sup>. On the 36<sup>th</sup>'s left flank (adjoining the 16<sup>th</sup>) were the battalions of the 109<sup>th</sup> Brigade. These were three battalions of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers<sup>16</sup> plus the 14<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles.<sup>17</sup> Most Belfast volunteers were in the 107<sup>th</sup> Brigade, to the right of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division and not adjoining the 16<sup>th</sup> Division. Instead, 107<sup>th</sup> brigade adjoined the 25<sup>th</sup> Division, which consisted largely of battalions associated with the north of England.

**Figure 1: the battle order of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions at Messines, 7th June 1917<sup>18</sup>**

19 <sup>th</sup> (WESTERN) DIVISION	<b>16<sup>TH</sup> (IRISH) DIVISION</b>		<b>36<sup>TH</sup> (ULSTER) DIVISION</b>			25 <sup>TH</sup> DIVISION			
	<b>49<sup>th</sup> Brigade</b>		<b>109<sup>th</sup> Brigade</b>				<b>107<sup>th</sup> Brigade</b>		
	7 <sup>th</sup> Inniskillings	7/8 <sup>th</sup> RIrishFus	7 <sup>th</sup> Leinsters	6 <sup>th</sup> RIRegt	11 <sup>th</sup> Inniskillings		14 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles	9 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles	8 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles
	2 <sup>nd</sup> RIRegt		<b>108<sup>th</sup> Brigade</b>				12 <sup>th</sup> RI Rifles		
	8 <sup>th</sup> Inniskillings	1 <sup>st</sup> Munsters		11 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles	<b>107<sup>th</sup> Brigade</b>				
	<b>48<sup>th</sup> Brigade (in reserve)</b>		10 <sup>th</sup> Inniskillings				9 <sup>th</sup> Inniskillings	15 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles	10 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles
8 <sup>th</sup> Dublins		6 <sup>th</sup> Connaughts			<b>108<sup>th</sup> Brigade (in reserve)</b>				
2 <sup>nd</sup> Dublins		9 <sup>th</sup> Dublins			9 <sup>th</sup> RIrishFus & 13 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles				
7 <sup>th</sup> RIRifles		Also in reserve: 33rd Infantry Brigade, 11th (Northern) Division							

## Who Died?

As regards the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, their brigade which adjoined the Ulster Division was the 47<sup>th</sup>. This brigade was probably the most overtly political as it had been almost

<sup>15</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers were disbanded, with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers merged as the 7/8<sup>th</sup> battalion. In their place came the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment. These changes began even before the Somme, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Munsters joining and the 9<sup>th</sup> Munsters being disbanded in May 1916.

<sup>16</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> originally recruited from the Ulster Volunteer Force in counties Tyrone, Londonderry, Donegal and Fermanagh.

<sup>17</sup> Formed from the Young Citizens' Volunteers, with a large Belfast contingent.

<sup>18</sup> The National Archives: WO 158/416, 16th Division, Narrative of Operations from 3.10am 7 June to 4pm 9 June 1917; WO 95/2491, Narrative of Part Taken by 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division in the Operations against the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge 7 June 1917.

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

completely cleared early in the war to allow for an influx of Redmondite volunteers.<sup>19</sup> It included Belfast nationalists in the 6<sup>th</sup> 'Connaught Rangers and 7<sup>th</sup> Leinsters, plus other nationalists in the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment, alongside the regular battalion, the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers. In the initial attack, the soldiers from the two divisions who were closest to each other were the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment on the far right on the 16<sup>th</sup> Division's front, and the 11<sup>th</sup> Inniskillings on the far left of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division's. Later in the battle, as mopping-up took place, other units of the two divisions were alongside each other (though note that alongside means adjoining not inter-mingled). However, just as the 107<sup>th</sup> Brigade was alongside English units, so too was the 16<sup>th</sup> Division's 49<sup>th</sup> Brigade next to the 19<sup>th</sup> (Western) Division, consisting mainly of units from the west country and west midlands, but also some Welsh and north of England battalions. In the first wave, in the most bitter fighting, *more* battalions of each division would have had *no* contact with the other division than battalions which *did* have contact. Only three of the eight 16<sup>th</sup> Division battalions in action at Messines were directly alongside the Ulster Division at the outset, while the reverse applied to three of the Ulster Division's ten battalions. For the vast majority, their main contact would either have been within their own division, or with English/Welsh battalions.

### **Who fought in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines?**

Having set out the general nature of the battalions, it is necessary to look at their composition in more detail. In the one previous attempt to do this, Doherty focused on religious denomination and has looked in some detail at the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> battalions of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers,<sup>20</sup> using information from *Soldiers Died in the Great War (SDGW)*.<sup>21</sup> Certainly the question of denomination is an interesting one, but it is not the only way of telling how far the battalions in the two divisions at Messines represented the popular notion of their composition. It is also possible to consider geographic origin, and to place that in the context of changes since the divisions first went to the front. Meanwhile, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Inniskillings were only two of the twelve infantry battalions in the 16<sup>th</sup>, and of course can shed no light on the composition of the 36<sup>th</sup>.

This author has developed a 'military history from the street' approach for examining, as far as is possible, all those from a particular area who served.<sup>22</sup> Since that focuses

---

<sup>19</sup> Terence Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division* (Dublin: Irish Academy Press, 1992), p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Doherty, pp. 61-2.

<sup>21</sup> *Soldiers Died in the Great War* (London: HMSO, 1920), now available on CD-Rom published by the Naval and Military Press.

<sup>22</sup> For a full explanation of the methodology see Richard S. Grayson, 'Military history from the street: new methods for researching First World War service in the British military', *War in History*, forthcoming, November 2014.

on geographic areas rather than on specific army units it is not quite applicable here. However, some of the sources, methods and principles can be applied to a study of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines. The fundamental basis of 'military history from the street' is that for a soldier to be 'from' an area there should be some evidence of an address for the soldier themselves. In the absence of that, next of kin information can be used. The problem with adopting such an approach for a study of a unit is that while contemporary addresses are generally found in the WO 363/364 service/pensions<sup>23</sup> records, little more than one-third of the two collections (about 36 percent) survived the bombing of the Arnside Street repository in 1940. The chances of finding a record for a dead soldier are further reduced because such soldiers' files are only found in the WO 363 service records, and only around one-quarter of those survived.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, we will never have a complete picture of those who served in the First World War. Furthermore, even those records which survived are not searchable by battalion, and not very reliably even by regiment.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of nominal rolls for each battalion<sup>26</sup> it is not practical to find all those who served in a specific division at a specific time without a manual search of around 2 million records. Historians do not have decades of research time to put in to the production of one article.

However, we do have a clear idea of who died in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines and the dead can be used as sample.<sup>27</sup> They are found initially from two sources: SDGW and the online database of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC).<sup>28</sup> These can be searched by both date and battalion. Commissioned officers were not included in the sample used here partly because in *Officers Died in the Great War* a battalion is not usually included, but most importantly because officers would commonly not be from a local recruiting area even on the

---

<sup>23</sup> Held by the National Archives where they are free to use, but also online as part of a subscription with [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

<sup>24</sup> Grayson, 'Military history from the street'.

<sup>25</sup> In the online transcriptions, regiments are often mis-spelled or completely mistranscribed (for example, 'Leicester' for 'Leinster'). Moreover, there is commonly only one regiment shown in the transcription, even if the soldier served in more than one. Usually, this will be the final regiment served in, but sometimes it will simply be the one which is easiest to read.

<sup>26</sup> Only one Irish battalion has a surviving nominal roll: the 14<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, and that does not contain dates of service so it is not possible to be clear who on the roll served at Messines.

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that information (especially in SDGW) is usually more specific for members of infantry battalions than for other units such as the Royal Field Artillery and Army Service Corps. Casualties in such units were likely to be low, especially in a successful operation such as Messines. It was possible to locate some Royal Engineers and members of the Royal Field Artillery, none who served in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 36<sup>th</sup> divisions' ASC units (or smaller formations such as the Army Veterinary Corps) were located as killed at Messines. It is possible that there were none.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx> [accessed 1 September 2014].

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

initial formation of a battalion. So, in assessing whether or not a unit was locally linked, the geographic origins presence of commissioned officers is less relevant than that of other ranks. Therefore, searches were made for other ranks killed in the two divisions on 7 June 1917 and those who died in the week after that (up to and including 14 June, covering the formal dates of the battle).

By examining the *SDGW* and *CWGC* records, and supplementing the information in them with material from service records<sup>29</sup> and medal index cards,<sup>30</sup> we can obtain a picture of the origins of those who were killed at Messines, if not others who served. That leads to data being found on 386 individuals from the two divisions who were killed or died of wounds between 7 and 14 June 1917, although 314 of these were on 7 June as the two divisions advanced. Of these, there is some kind of geographic information on all but one soldier.

Table I below sets out information on place of birth. The most striking point is the proximity of figures for both divisions of Irish and English born recruits. In both cases, around 60 percent of those who died were Irish-born, while around 30 percent were born in England. If we look in further detail at the Ulster Division, of the 130 born in Ireland, 116 (89 percent of the Irish-born and 54 percent of the division) were born in Ulster, with the remaining fourteen spread through the three other Irish provinces though most (nine) born in Leinster. This suggests that by the time of Messines, little more than half of the Ulster Division's dead came from its recruiting area, while less than two-thirds of the Irish Division originated from its all-Ireland area. It is worth noting that the fifteen from the 36<sup>th</sup> Division for whom there is no information on place of birth is much higher than the four from the 16<sup>th</sup> Division. If these were all born in Ireland than it would mean that the Irish-born figure for the 36<sup>th</sup> is as high as 68 percent. However, this seems unlikely. There is information on place of enlistment for fourteen of the men which places thirteen in England and only one in Ireland (Dublin). Place of residence was found for three, all in England, and the next of kin of a further six were also all in England.

Exploring the place of birth of the 16<sup>th</sup> Division's Irish-born men reveals less of a focus on one province than for the 36<sup>th</sup>, which is what one would expect since the Division recruited from nationalists across Ireland. The figures are: Leinster 37, Ulster 31, Munster 23 and Connaught 9 (the percentage being the same in each case as there are a total of 100).

---

<sup>29</sup> WO 363 and 364 at the National Archives and on [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

<sup>30</sup> WO 372 at the National Archives and on [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

**Table 1: Country of Birth, 16<sup>th</sup> & 36<sup>th</sup> divisions other ranks fatalities 7-14 June 1917**

	Ireland	England	Scotland	Wales	Other	No info
16 <sup>th</sup> Division (Total: 172)	100 (58%)	57 (33%)	5 (3%)	1 (<1%)	5* (3%)	4 (2%)
36 <sup>th</sup> Division (Total: 214)	130 (61%)	55 (26%)	10 (5%)	2 (1%)	2** (1%)	15 (7%)

Source: SDGW, WO 363, CWGC.

\* 1 Australia, 3 Channel Islands, 1 Malta

\*\* USA

However, place of birth is problematic due to migration. We might, for example, find that those born in Scotland were actually living in some part of Ireland by the time they enlisted due to long-established and often temporary migration between the two countries. The same might apply to the English-born. Meanwhile, the Irish-born might have left Ireland. So examining place of enlistment and residence information is also necessary.

**Table 2: Country of Enlistment, 16<sup>th</sup> & 36<sup>th</sup> divisions other ranks fatalities 7-14 June 1917**

	Ireland	England	Scotland	Wales	Other	No info
16 <sup>th</sup> Division (Total: 172)	89 (52%)	64 (37%)	12 (7%)	3 (2%)	3* (2%)	1 (<1%)
36 <sup>th</sup> Division (Total: 214)	134 (63%)	66 (31%)	11 (5%)	2 (1%)	--	1 (<1%)

Source: SDGW, WO 363, CWGC.

\* Channel Islands

As Table 2 shows, the proportion of men who enlisted in Ireland is lower in the 16<sup>th</sup> Division than Irish-born, which, on the assumption that that division was predominantly Catholic, could simply reflect greater levels of migration. Differences between country of birth and enlistment are smaller in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, though also with lower numbers enlisting in Ireland than being born there. To demonstrate this point, examining only those where the country of both birth and of enlistment are known, seventeen of the 100 Irish-born in the 16<sup>th</sup> enlisted outside Ireland (ten in England, six in Scotland and one in Wales). In contrast, only seven (5 percent) of 134 Irish-born in the 36<sup>th</sup> enlisted elsewhere (all in Scotland).

We can also assess how far country of birth/enlistment might relate to country of residence. Information on this in SDGW is far less complete than for birth/enlistment. However, next of kin information can be found in CWGC data and occasionally in the medal index, while addresses for soldiers and/or relatives are in the service records. Table 3 combines soldiers' addresses and (where there is no address for the soldier) next of kin addresses. As it shows, for the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, there is no

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

information on place for residence for 16 percent of those who died, while for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division there is no information on one-quarter.

**Table 3: Country of Residence, 16<sup>th</sup> & 36<sup>th</sup> divisions other ranks fatalities 7-14 June 1917**

	Ireland	England	Scotland	Wales	Other	No info
16 <sup>th</sup> Division (Total: 172)	81* (47%)	51** (30%)	10*** (6%)	1**** (<1%)	2***** (1%)	27 (16%)
36 <sup>th</sup> Division (Total: 214)	100# (47%)	49## (23%)	8### (4%)	2#### (1%)	1##### (<1%)	54 (25%)

Source: SDGW, WO 363, WO 372, CWGC.

\* 52 soldiers, 29 next of kin      \*\* 36 soldiers, 15 next of kin.      \*\*\* 4 soldiers, 6 next of kin.

\*\*\*\* 1 next of kin      \*\*\*\*\* 2 soldiers, Channel Islands

# 36 soldiers, 64 next of kin      ## 20 soldiers, 29 next of kin      ### 4 soldiers, 4 next of kin

#### 2 next of kin      ##### Next of kin in Uruguay

The most striking figure in Table 3 is that for both the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions, 47 percent of the dead either had an Irish place of residence or their next of kin did. However, compared to the other tables, there is also much higher proportion of men for whom no residence could be identified, particularly for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. For around half of these 54 in the 36<sup>th</sup>, the residence probably was in Ireland because in almost all cases both the place of birth and place of enlistment was Irish (27 were both born and enlisted in Ireland, with only one born there enlisted in Scotland). However, the existence of a large gap in the residence information does make it difficult to compare country of residence to other figures. Yet if we exclude those with no information, and do the same for the other two sets of data, we find, as Table 4 shows, that there is a broadly similar set of results for the two largest figures in the three data sets: percentage in Ireland and percentage in England, which are highlighted in bold in the table.

**Table 4: Country of Residence, Enlistment and Residence, 16<sup>th</sup> & 36<sup>th</sup> divisions other ranks fatalities 7-14 June 1917, excluding soldiers where there is no information**

	Birth: Ireland	Birth: England	Birth: Scotland	Birth: Wales	Birth: Other	Enlistment: Ireland	Enlistment: England	Enlistment: Scotland	Enlistment: Wales	Enlistment: Other	Residence: Ireland	Residence: England	Residence: Scotland	Residence: Wales	Residence: Other
16 <sup>th</sup> no.	100	57	5	1	5	89	64	12	3	3*	81	51	10	1	2
16 <sup>th</sup> %	<b>60</b>	<b>34</b>	3	<1	3	<b>52</b>	<b>37</b>	7	2	2	<b>55</b>	<b>35</b>	7	<1	1
36 <sup>th</sup> no.	130	55	10	2	2	134	66	11	2	--	100	49	8	2	1
36 <sup>th</sup> %	<b>65</b>	<b>28</b>	5	1	1	<b>63</b>	<b>31</b>	5	1	--	<b>63</b>	<b>31</b>	4	1	<1

Source: SDGW, WO 363, WO 372, CWGC.

N for known country of birth = 168 for 16<sup>th</sup> and 199 for 36<sup>th</sup>; for known country of enlistment is 171 for 16<sup>th</sup> and 213 for 36<sup>th</sup>; for known country of residence is 145 for 16<sup>th</sup> and 160 for 36<sup>th</sup>.

For the 16<sup>th</sup> division, the percentage with an Irish connection in the categories is between 52 percent and 60 percent, with 34 to 37 percent for England. For the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, figures for Ireland are 63 to 65 percent and 28 to 31 percent for England.

This suggests that over one-third of those in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines were not from Ireland. However, the above data is sporadic in that often, fewer than three categories are filled for each individual, and in any case some information (that on residence and/or place of enlistment) might be only temporary. Therefore, we can also look at how many men had any kind of Irish connection, by examining how many met at least one of the criteria: birth, residence or place of enlistment. This helps to allow for temporary residence and migration, and can also go some way to reflecting the porous boundaries of Irish identities which is addressed below. Table 5 does this for 385 of the 386 soldiers analysed. The one excluded is a member of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division for whom there was no geographic data of any kind.

**Table 5: Born, enlisted or residing in Ireland, 16<sup>th</sup> & 36<sup>th</sup> divisions other ranks fatalities 7-14 June 1917**

	No.	%
16 <sup>th</sup> Division	108	63
36 <sup>th</sup> Division	142	67

Source: SDGW, WO 363, WO 372, CWGC.

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

In Table 5, there is a slightly higher number of those with an Irish connection than any of the single data categories, but only marginally so. However, the key pattern which emerges is that using all the data which can reasonably be used, around one-third of the men killed at Messines in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions had no demonstrable Irish connection, and instead had a connection to England, Scotland or Wales.

One issue which arises from this is whether the two divisions had always been like that, or whether there had been a change since their formation. The best way of assessing this is to examine the deaths in the first major engagement for each division. In both cases, this was on the Somme, though at different times (1 to 2 July 1916 for the 36<sup>th</sup> and 3 to 9 September 1916 for the 16<sup>th</sup>). With the vastly higher number of deaths in both divisions, a full study of other ranks using all sources used for Messines would require an entirely separate project. However, one source, *SDGW*, can easily be used as an illustration of the minimum numbers of those with any kind of Irish connection.

**Table 6: Born, enlisted or residing in Ireland, 16<sup>th</sup> & 36<sup>th</sup> divisions other ranks fatalities in the Battle of the Somme**

	No.	%
16 <sup>th</sup> Division*	734	77
36 <sup>th</sup> Division**	1664	94

Source: *SDGW*.

Note: % is of all fatalities, not only those for whom there is some geographic data.

\* 3-9 September 1916      \*\* 1-2 July 1916

As Table 5 shows, simply taking data from this source shows a higher proportion of those with an Irish connection than the data for Messines does. It must be emphasised that the 77 percent and 94 percent figures are *minimum* percentages partly because they are of *all* those identified in *SDGW*, not merely those for whom data is included. Consequently, once gaps in data were filled from other sources, the percentage with any Irish connection could only rise. Thus we can with reasonable certainty say that between the Somme and Messines, the Irish composition of both divisions fell. In the 16<sup>th</sup>, it fell from at least 77 percent to 63 percent, while in the 36<sup>th</sup> it fell even more markedly from 94 percent to 67 percent. These division-wide figure masks some striking difference between battalions. For example, the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment appears to have been only 67 percent 'Irish' even on the Somme, with a sizeable proportion of its dead coming from the Channel Islands. These latter men had been in the battalion since the early days of the division.<sup>31</sup> The same can be said for the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles. Meanwhile, the overall figure of 94 percent 'Irish' for the

<sup>31</sup> Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers*, p. 53.

Ulster Division on the Somme, masks the facts that the average is greatly affected by one battalion, the 11<sup>th</sup> Inniskillings, which contained a large number of men from the north-east of England. Its 'Irish' figure on the Somme is only 67 percent, compared to seven battalions which had a figure of 100 percent, three with 96 to 98 percent and one on 90 percent.

One caveat must be added to those division-wide figures, relating to the point made earlier about which brigades/battalions were actually alongside each other at Messines. In terms of brigades, 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade (the one nearest the 36<sup>th</sup> Division at the frontline) had a much higher 'Irish' figure (78 percent) than the 16<sup>th</sup> Division as a whole, which is perhaps surprising given all the Channel Islands men in one of its battalions. In one battalion, the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers, all the men killed at Messines had an Irish connection, although this was only seven in number so might be affected by the usual risk of a small sample. However, the battalion closest to the Ulster Division in the initial attack, the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment, had a lower figure, at 73 percent. As regards the Ulster Division, its brigade closest to the Irish Division, 109<sup>th</sup> Brigade, was broadly in line at 64 percent with the division figure of 66 percent. However, its battalion closest to the Irish Division in the first attacks appears to have been only 51 percent 'Irish' (eleven of twenty).

So, while the 16<sup>th</sup> Division was almost as 'Irish' as it had ever been at Messines, the Ulster Division had been transformed after the Somme. That was, of course, affected by the much higher level of fatalities on the Somme for the Ulster Division, which lost over twice as many men, meaning that it took larger numbers of fresh drafts from than the 16<sup>th</sup>. Yet, even for those with 'Irish' connections, we should not assume that such men were necessarily part of the original 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions. Clearly that is the case for battalions which were transferred in from elsewhere, but it was also true for some other men.

Using the medal index and service records it is possible to establish the service history or at least the first date on which some men went on overseas service. Such data is apparent for the 49 in the 16<sup>th</sup> Division. If we exclude fifteen men of the battalions which were not originally part of the division (2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers), we are left with information on the date (and generally the place) of first service of 34 men. Of these, five first served in the Balkans between July and November 1915, which suggests that they probably were transferred to the 16<sup>th</sup> from the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division, and certainly were not part of the original 16<sup>th</sup>. Of those who first served in France, fourteen arrived in December 1915 on dates when the 16<sup>th</sup> Division was in the process of arriving. However, almost as many, a further twelve, arrived well before the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, suggesting earlier service in another unit. One had certainly served with the 6<sup>th</sup> Bedfordshire Regiment earlier in the war. Another, Daniel Smith, a Belfast man of

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, has a service number (15/11861) and an embarkation date of 4 October 1915 which suggests he might even have first served in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division with the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles. Three more men had found their way into the 16<sup>th</sup> Division after service in reserve or other units outside it. Overall, of the 34 men with an Irish connection in the 16<sup>th</sup> for whom there is first overseas service data, and who had not come in from battalions transferred into the division, more than half (twenty) do not appear to have been members of the original 16<sup>th</sup> division.

For the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, such data exists for 68 men with an Irish connection, of whom 58 (85 percent) have dates of first service of 4 and 5 October 1915 which suggest arriving in France with the original division. Of the other ten, six arrived in late 1915 and there is no evidence of other service. Three had served in France prior to October 1915 and one had served in the Balkans, James Bonner, a Templemore man serving in the 11<sup>th</sup> Inniskillings, and a probable transferee from the 10<sup>th</sup> Division. Though less stark than the data for the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, that for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division does point to some nuances in the nature of those with an Irish connection killed at Messines in the two divisions. Especially for the 16<sup>th</sup>, we should be wary of assuming that those in the divisions at June 1917 had left Ireland with the political zeal attributed to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup>. Some had played no part in that.

One further characteristic of those in the two divisions merits some attention: the nature of those who had no Irish connection. Of 64 in the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, over half (34) had some wartime service with a previous regiment. Of the other thirty, we might wonder whether they were volunteers or conscripts. The data suggests the former since it is present for eighteen of the thirty, all of whom entered service before conscription came into force in Britain. In the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, of 72 with no Irish connection, 67 had previous wartime service, and one of the other five had joined after conscription had been introduced.

Where had these men come from? In the 16<sup>th</sup> Division, no more than three men shared previous service in the same regiment. In contrast, in the 36<sup>th</sup> there were larger cohorts of men from the same regiments: seventeen were transferred from the London Regiment, followed by seven from each of the Norfolk Regiment and the King's Royal Rifle Corps, and six from the Buffs (East Kent). Not only were these men transferred from English battalions in clusters, they also joined new regiments in clusters: all the Buffs joined the 14<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles (as did a smaller group from the Bedfordshires), while all but one of the Norfolks went to the 9<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles. Groups of men from the London Regiment went to a number of battalions, but especially the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles. It is harder to tell if the same pattern can be seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> Division because numbers of English-enlisted transferred in from other battalions were smaller (just 20) and no more than two came from any single regiment. However, both men who joined from the Bedfordshires went to the 7<sup>th</sup>

Leinsters, and both who joined from the Leicestershires went to the 7<sup>th</sup> Inniskillings. They might represent larger groups of transferees who were not killed. To add to this mixing should be added the point that several English regiments (Bedfordshire, Buffs, London, Middlesex, Norfolk, Rifle Brigade, Royal Sussex and Suffolk) sent men to both the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions.

## **Conclusions**

What then, do these figures mean for the story of Messines? In the first place, we must recognise that they can do nothing to illuminate what was in the minds of the men who fought in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions at Messines. As Richard Doherty has shown, evidence is scant, and among the ordinary soldiers, any thoughts of there being anything symbolic about the two divisions being alongside each other are hard to find. However, we do know that some were quick to comment on the significance in the context of the death of Major William Redmond. Serving with the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment, this nationalist Member of Parliament for East Clare was found wounded by a member of the 11<sup>th</sup> Inniskilling Fusiliers, Private John Meeke, from Ballymoney in County Antrim. Meeke was wounded trying to save Redmond, who was eventually collected by stretcher-bearers from the Ulster Division. He died at one of their field ambulance stations. It was an officer of the 108<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance who wrote to Redmond's brother, John, the nationalist leader, 'The 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions had a glorious victory today and they advanced side by side.' When he was buried at Loche on 8 June, the honour guard was provided by a battalion from each division: the 10<sup>th</sup> Inniskillings and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment, accompanied by officers from both divisions.<sup>32</sup> It is hard to doubt that these men were affected by what they saw, and perhaps some remained affected for years after.

However, while the Redmond case may well have a valuable and legitimate part to play today in cross-community understanding, it is only part of the story of Messines, and the figures discussed here suggest that the story should be more nuanced. In the first place, the figures raise issues for historians of the British army in its broadest sense about what constitutes a 'local' identity, and whether there is any formula we might apply to that. Second, as regards Messines and the 16<sup>th</sup>/36<sup>th</sup> divisions two more specifically, the story should be nuanced to reflect their likely lack of battlefield contact. Third, it needs to take account of the diversity of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions, not only Irishmen who had enlisted in the 10<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division at the start of the war but in particular the large numbers of Englishmen in their ranks.

---

<sup>32</sup> Terence Denman, *A Lonely Grave: The Life and Death of William Redmond* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), pp. 120-1.

## FORGOTTEN ASPECTS OF MESSINES

Perhaps some of these 'Englishmen' felt some kind of connection with Ireland. Irish identities are notoriously porous and persistent in the sense that those without any personal geographic connection to Ireland can identify with the island or parts of it. That is perhaps most markedly seen in the expression of an Irish-American identity by those whose families have been in the United States of America for generations.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, we need to be wary of suggesting that those who were killed at Messines in June 1917 could only have *felt* some kind of connection to any part of Ireland if they can be shown to have a personal geographic link. In communities in Glasgow, Liverpool, the north-east of England and elsewhere, there would have been many without a demonstrable Irish link in terms of place of birth, enlistment, residence (their own or next of kin) who nevertheless were part of an Irish diaspora.

However, the service in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions of so many whose only identifiable geographic connection is with some place other than Ireland does suggest that there is a story to tell beyond simply using Messines as part of a narrative which stresses commonality among Irish soldiers. John Morrissey has addressed the complexities of Irish military identities with regard to the Connaught Rangers.<sup>34</sup> These experiences become even more nuanced when one recognises the extent of service alongside soldiers from Great Britain. The story of Messines has successfully been used for reconciliation in Ireland, especially among former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. It might perhaps in future reflect an element of shared experience between Irish and British soldiers. Any loyalist or unionist who might find the all-Ireland nature of the Messines narrative to be uncomfortable, could find some solace in that.

---

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Mike Cronin and Daryl Adair, *The Wearing of the Green: A History of St Patrick's Day* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), pp. 210-222.

<sup>34</sup> John Morrissey, 'A lost heritage: the Connaught Rangers and multivocal Irishness, in: Mark McCarthy, ed., *Ireland's Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 71-87.