

The Great War

John Campbell

It has been said that however earnestly we may desire the end of all war and however we may believe that the shock that humanity suffers at the time will have lasting cautionary effects the conclusion cannot be avoided that men, women and children are deeply interested in war. Only religion and love share a similar fascination. The Great War, as it is known, which began with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand has certainly held that fascination for the generations that followed. The events of that great human tragedy are of continuing interest to many people throughout the world and each year new publications are added to the vast amount of literature which chronicle those events from so many different perspectives.

Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4th August 1914 was to have a lasting impact on the course of Irish history and on the lives of many families in our own locality. Many young men from this area answered the call to arms and this article attempts to tell a little of their story.

The official announcement that the country was at war read:— "Owing to the summary rejection by the German Government of the request made by his Majesty's Government that the neutrality of Belgium shall be respected his Majesty's Ambassador at Berlin has received his passports and his Majesty's Government has declared to the German Government that a state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany as from 11.00 p.m. on 4th August, 1914."

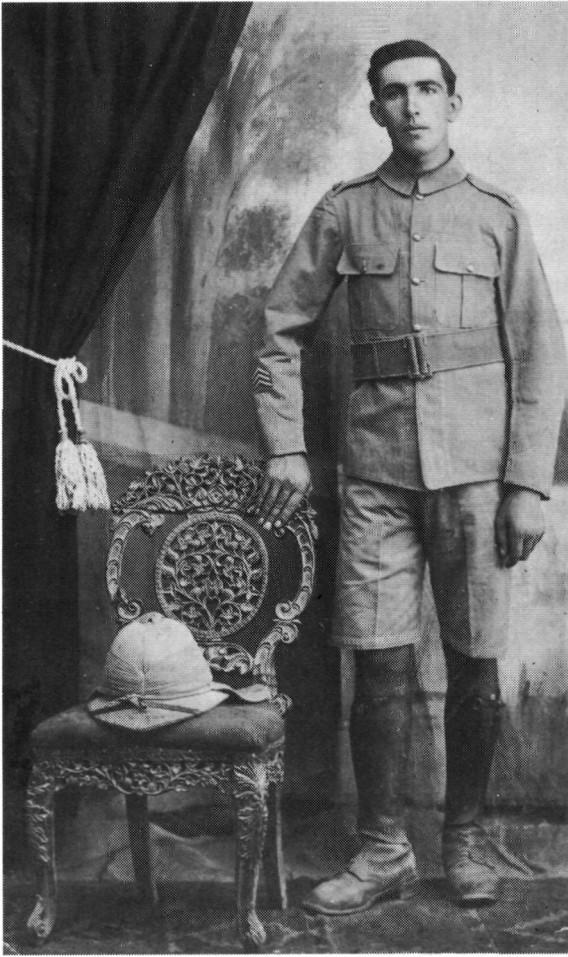
War had arrived at a critical time in the affairs of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1911 the British Liberal Government had introduced the 3rd Home Rule Bill the first two having been defeated in 1886 and 1892. William Ewart Gladstone the great Liberal leader had once described Home Rule as 'a debt owed by man to God' and saw a measure of political independence as the only means to pacify Ireland. The attempts to introduce Home Rule met with widespread opposition here and led to the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force when Unionists under Sir Edward Carson and Captain James Craig drew up plans for the formation of a provisional government should the Bill be passed. On what became known as Ulster Day 450,000 men and women signed the Ulster Covenant to oppose a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland and to refuse to recognise its authority if one should be set up.

In April 1914, the Ulster Volunteer Force succeeded in smuggling 20,000 rifles and 2 million rounds of ammunition into N. Ireland. The guns and ammunition had been purchased in Germany and in view of subsequent events it is difficult not to form the conclusion that the purchase was made at least with the connivance of the German authorities who wished to foment strife in Ireland.

Earlier, towards the end of 1913 the Irish National Volunteers had been formed in Dublin with the aim of ensuring that Home Rule was granted and they followed the same route to Germany to purchase 1,500 rifles and 40,000 rounds of ammunition. Among those early leaders of the Irish National Volunteers there was a degree of admiration for their Ulster counterparts — a number of the Irish National Volunteer leaders were Ulster Protestants — and indeed it was argued by some that the movement in Northern Ireland was a genuine home rule movement as it demonstrated the determination of Unionists not to accept a solution imposed on them by a British Parliament.

There was considerable support for the Unionist cause in Britain and that, allied to a declared reluctance by British Army Officers to move against the Ulster Volunteer Force if ordered to do so, presented the Government with serious problems. The King called a conference in July 1914 of all parties in an attempt to resolve the situation. He asked them for a spirit of generosity and compromise and reminded them of the critical situation "with the trend towards an appeal to force and the cry of civil war on the lips of my people!" He wasn't far wrong as Ireland was a veritable armed camp with 100,000 men in the Ulster Volunteer Force and 180,000 men in Irish National Volunteers with large quantities of arms and ammunition at their disposal. Only the discipline imposed on both forces by their leaders prevented widespread sectarian bloodshed. The appeal to force was however to come from an entirely different source and when it did Winston Churchill in a reference to the earlier discussions said "The parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland."

The Home Rule Bill became law on 18th September 1914 but another bill passed at the same time suspended the introduction of Home Rule until the end of the War. The Bill was hailed by the nationalists as a victory — they shared the widely held view that the war would



David Cairns, Royal Army Service Corps.

be over by Christmas. Their political leader John Redmond encouraged them to enlist and thus demonstrate their good faith in the eventual introduction of Home Rule. Three days after the outbreak of war Lord Kitchener sought the Ulster Volunteers for active service and Sir Edward Carson agreed to the formation of a division in the British Army to be known as the 36 (Ulster) Division.

In Poyntzpass in that beautiful summer of 1914 a local tragedy shocked the community. A little girl, 3½ year old Magdaline McComb, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John McComb died when she fell into a bath of hot water that her mother had prepared to wash clothes. The coroners jury which carried out the inquest on the following day consisted of local men Hugh Rafferty (foreman), F. Monaghan, James Lennon, F. Murphy, S. Hudson, J. McClements, J. Magill, R. Carson, D. Bicker, J. Feehan, W. Griffith, P. Murray and H.

McDonald. Some of these people in common with lots of other families were later to share the grief of personal tragedy as a result of events in strange sounding places many miles from Poyntzpass.

The community received a first hand account of the war in November 1914, when James A. Purdy arrived home to a rousing welcome in the village. He had gone to France on 16th August and had been wounded three times. A crowd gathered at the station to welcome him and as the train arrived, fog signals were detonated and he was carried shoulder high to his home. He had earlier received minor wounds to his face and leg but a serious wound to his shoulder, when a shell burst in the trench killing his companions, resulted in his removal to hospital in England before coming home.

Another local soldier Bob Kimmons who came home injured at that time returned to the front in 1915.

Funds were raised locally to send comforts to men at the front and following an appeal by Mr. Judge, School Principal 8 local men received parcels containing 2 pair of socks, 2 lb. of tobacco, 125 cigarettes, 2 dozen boxes of matches, a pipe and some writing materials. The Belgian Relief Fund received £15-6-8 from a collection taken up in the Chapel.

Throughout the war a committee of ladies in Drumbanagher under Lady Muriel Close produced knitted mufflers, socks, mittens and other warm clothing for soldiers at the front and from time to time, garden fetes were held at Drumbanagher House. Concerts were held



John Campbell, Royal Irish Rifles.



Auxiliary nurses, pictured at Drumbanagher House.

in the village usually compered by George White with songs by Winnie Griffith and music for the dances that followed provided by James Shanks and Thomas McComb. In November 1914 came news of the death of a local soldier Private William Fulton of Ballymacaratty a brother of Joe Fulton of Taniiskey.

As part of the recruiting campaign rallies were held throughout the country and whereas they shared the common aim of encouraging young men to enlist the message was often tailored to suit the loyalties of the audience. A recruitment rally at Loughbrickland early in the war was addressed by James Craig who told the assembly of Carson's promise to Lord Kitchener that the Ulster Volunteer Force would go to the front. He read a letter from Carson in which he paid tribute to the sacrifices already made and the need for more men to secure victory. Craig reminded those present of the British Army's reluctance to move against the Unionists and that they owed a debt to the Army which he hoped they would now repay by enlisting. In Newry at a recruitment rally a local priest Fr. O'Hare referred to the proud claim that Newry and Irish men had proved themselves ready to defend the principals of truth, honour and justice and that Catholic Belgium's call to Ireland had not been in vain. He quoted from

a poem by Russell Lowell:—

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide
In the strife of truth and false hood
For the good or evil side.

There was a parade of local bands and the proceedings ended with the playing of A Nation Once Again followed by God Save The King.

The local papers carried letters from soldiers to their parents in which they described the battles they had been in and usually ended by exhorting their friends to join up. One letter told about the wonderful sights a soldier sees for nothing and in another the writer referred to the 'splendid trenches'. A soldier was later to say about such letters "We described their war to them which satisfied them and we kept ours secret." For the majority of soldiers conditions in the trenches were appalling. The trenches were usually dug in low lying marshy ground and were invariably flooded. The gifts of knitted socks from the good ladies of Drumbanagher must have been very welcome to those who had to stand for long periods in mud and water. Many thousands of soldiers suffered from a condition known as 'trench foot' when their feet would gradually go numb or turn red or blue and if not treated gangrene

would set in resulting in the loss of toes or the whole foot. There were millions of rats, which fed on the large quantities of discarded food and on the bodies buried in the mud. Lice were a constant companion to the soldiers and years later Bob Kimmons often told of the various methods used to rid themselves of this pest which left a red bite mark on the body and spread disease.

Most areas prepared a scroll listing local men who had gone to serve in the forces and in Poyntzpass David Allen compiled a local roll of honour and the names were entered on a scroll by Charles Codd, father-in-law of George White the Station Master. The scroll contained the names of 40 men from the district 17 of whom were from the village itself. The list included four McDonalds, sons of Edward McDonald, Edward Junr., was in the Royal Navy, John, Joseph and Patrick were in the Royal Irish Rifles. There were three Bickers, George in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, Andrew and James in the Royal Irish Fusiliers. Andrew

was a tailor in the Army — he survived the war and lived at Newry Road, Poyntzpass before moving to Bradford in 1938 where he died in 1958. The list was not complete, a son of William Bicker, and half brother of Mrs. Edna Harvey, served in the war and was killed at the Battle of the Somme. In that battle the Ulster Division lost over 5,000 men when they went over the top on Saturday, 1st July 1916. The writer Patrick Magill who served with the London Irish Brigade described his feelings. "The moment had come when it was unwise to think. The country around was like a sponge; the god of war had stamped his foot on it and thousands of men, armed, ready to kill, were squirted out on to the level, barren fields of danger. To dwell for a moment on the novel position of being standing where a thousand deaths swept by, missing you by a mere hairs breadth would be sheer folly. There on the open field of death my life was out of my keeping, but the sensation of fear never entered my being."

MEN OF IRELAND! COME TO THE AID OF THE OPPRESSED.



"At Buecken many inhabitants were killed, including the priest, who was over 80 years of age. At Colbeck, a young girl, 16 years of age, was insulted by German soldiers, who stabbed her in the breast with their bayonets. . . . She received extreme unction from the Parish Priest."—(Extract from the Belgian Government Official Report.)

Irishmen! Your help is needed to prevent further crimes against civilization and order. Join the Army to-day and strike a blow for Liberty and Freedom.

From "The Newry Reporter", February, 1915.

OUR MESSAGE.

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Wishing You a Happy
& Prosperous New Year,
and to our Country and
our Allies a Victorious one.

ALLEN BROS. & CO.,

:: :: POYNTZPASS. :: ::

Advertisement for Allen Bros , Poyntzpass. January, 1915.

There were many individual acts of bravery during the battle and at least one of the four VCs won by the Ulster Division was won for bravery in bringing in the wounded. Patrick Magill was a stretcher bearer, men who went out unarmed under fire to bring in the wounded. They struggled through water and mud up to their knees some times and they won the respect and admiration of their comrades. Private W.G. Stack of the Royal Irish Rifles who came from Tyrone Ditches was a stretcher bearer. He was killed on the night of July 7 1916. On the same night and from the same unit a neighbour of young Stacks, Corporal Sam Lundy from Carrickbrack was also killed in action. He had worked in Closes before joining and was 22 years old. After the battle Corporal W. Morrow, and Privates W. McMurray, J. McGivern and Thomas Whiteside wre posted missing. Thomas Whiteside, was an uncle of Mrs. Kellett and although Mr. and Mrs. Kellet have visited the War graves they were unable to find his grave. They did find the grave of Corporal George Parker of the Royal Irish Fusilers. The parents of Lieutenant Harry Best of Cloughinney who had served with the Royal Engineers received notification that

their son had been killed in action. A brother of Jack Best, Lieutenant Best had graduated the previous year from Queen's University. At the time of his death another sister Mollie was working with the Red Cross in France. The McDonald family received notification that two of the four sons serving had been killed in action. They were John and Patrick McDonald.

After the Battle of the Somme the remains of the Ulster Division were regrouped and in later offensives they were to fight side by side with other Irish Regiments drawn from all over Ireland. It was said that the only rivalry that existed between them was that of gallantry. The stretcher bearers of the Ulster Division were to bring in John Redmond's brother, Major William Redmond who at 57 had insisted on going forward with his men. He died later of his wounds.

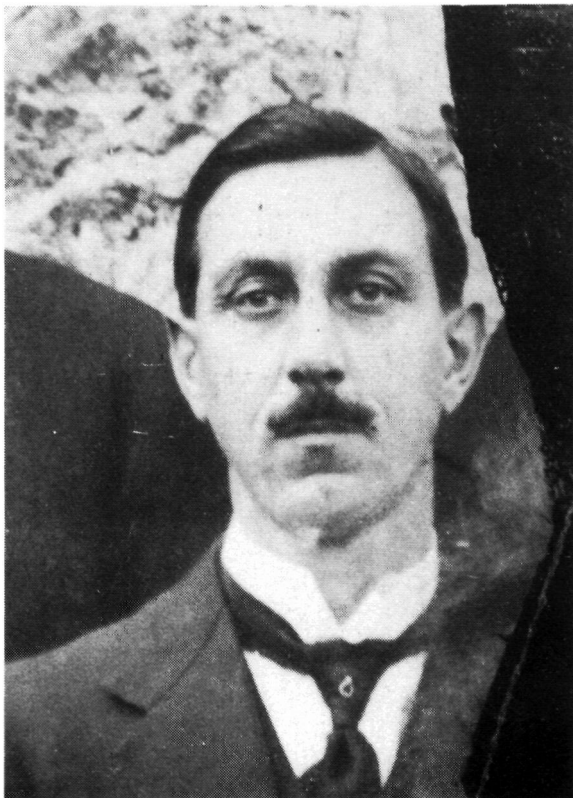
A 17½ year old Poyntzpass soldier, Corporal R. E. Robinson was awarded the Military Medal for Gallantry. He was a son of Adam Robinson and the citation read that he had continued to operate a trench mortar single handed when all his companions, were killed.



Edward McGrath, Royal Irish Rifles.

The Clegg family, of Ballinaleck were notified of the death of Sergeant Clegg who had served in the police in England before enlisting.

Some of the soldiers who came home but died late of their wounds are buried in the local cemeteries. They included Private J. W. Templeton, Army Ordinance Corp who lived at Sandys Street in Newry. He was a cousin of the late Florrie Morton and is buried in Acton Parish Churchyard. At the Presbyterian Church graveyard in Meeting Street, Rifleman I. Croft is buried. He died 23 June 1920 and was aged 36 years. In the Chapel graveyard Private John Campbell of Drumbanagher is buried. He served with the Royal Irish Fusiliers and was severely wounded in the trenches in 1917 and was discharged on 8 November, 1917. Others who survived the war and are remembered locally included Ned McGrath from Aughan Park, who served 21 years in the Army and received severe wounds and shell shocks from which he suffered for the rest of his life. Robert Cobam of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, Alfie Hanna of the Irish Guards, Walter Morrow, Davy Cairns — the list goes on.....



George Whyte, Stationmaster at Poyntzpass, M.C. at fund raising functions.

Pro Patria		
1914 - 1918		
ROLL OF HONOUR		
Parish of Acton		
ALDERIDGE J.	HANNA E.	PURDY M.D.
ANDREWS J.	HOY R.	PURDY J.A.
BAIRD A.J.	KIMMINS W.	ROBINSON W.
BAIRD W.	KIMMINS D.	ROBINSON R.E.
BICKER D.	KIMMINS R.	ROBINSON D.E.
BICKER J.	LITTLE D.	RYAN T.F.
BICKER A.	MCDONALD J.	SHANKS R.C.
BICKER G.	MCDONALD P.	SHANKS T.H.
BICKER B.	MCDONALD J.	SHELS J.
CAIRNS D.T.	MCDONALD E.	STACK W.
CANAVAN P.J.	MELROY R.	SPERS W.
CLOSE R.	MULVANE A.F.	TAYLOR S.
COBAIN R.	MULVANE G.J.	TAYLOR J.
CROFT J.	MCDONNAN R.	TAYLOR W.
CUNNINGHAM F.	MULLA H.	TAYLOR J.W.
FULTON W.	MURRAY W.H.	TAYLOR D.W.
FULTON S.	MORROW T.	WILSON G.W.
GILKISON E.	MORROW W.	WILSON R.S.
GRAHAM W.	PORTER J.	WYLIE J.
HANNA A.	PORTER W.	WYLIE S.
HANNA A.	PORTER S.	LANGASTER M.D.L.

Roll of Honour, Parish of Acton.

They fought in a cruel and savage war which plumb-ed the depths of inhumanity with the use of chlorine and mustard gas which left men to die a slow agonising death from asphyxiation. They were badly served by their leaders who still believed in the grand charge. Winston Churchill was to write late "Accusing as I do all the great ally offensives of 1915, 1916 and 1917 as needless and wrongfully conceived operations of infinite cost I am bound to reply to the question what else could be done... If only the generals had not been content to fight machine gun bullets, with the breasts of gallant men and think that was waging war."

The war had cost over 10 million lives including over 50,000 Irishmen out of a total recruits from this country of 150,000 half of whom came from N. Ireland.

We must continue to question the morality of all war and violence and perhaps remember the words of Patrick Magill, stretcher bearer and novelist who wrote, "The Justice of the cause which endeavours to achieve its object by the murdering and maiming of mankind is apt to be doubted by a man who has come through a bayonet charge. The dead lying on the fields seem to ask. "Why has this been done to us". Why, have you done it brothers? What purpose has it served?"

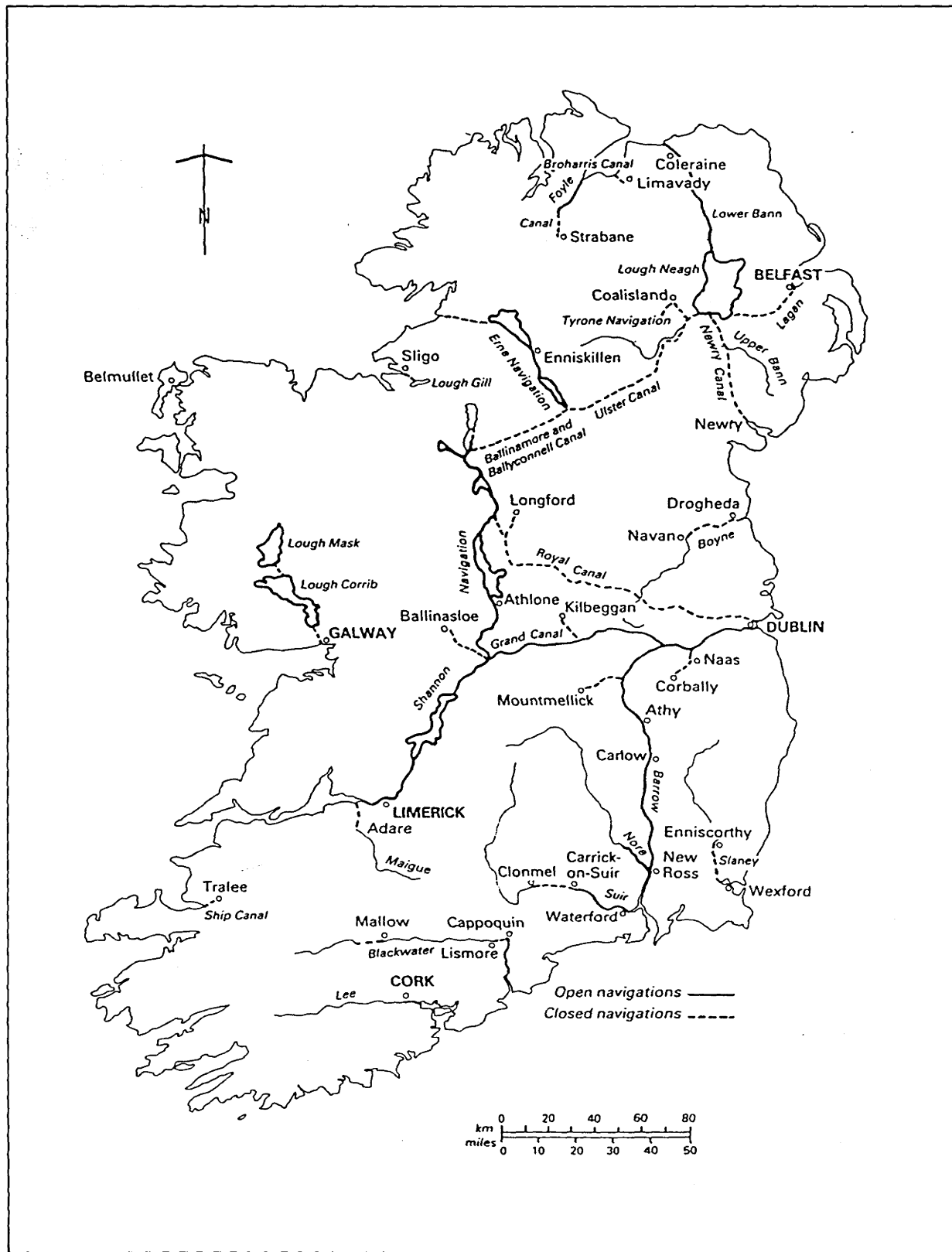


HE whom this scroll commemorates
 was numbered among those who,
 at the call of King and Country, left all
 that was dear to them, endured hardness,
 faced danger, and finally passed out of
 the sight of men by the path of duty
 and self-sacrifice, giving up their own
 lives that others might live in freedom.

Let those who come after see to it
 that his name be not forgotten.

Pte. Thomas Whiteside
Royal Irish Fusiliers

Pte. Thomas Whiteside, Royal Irish Fusiliers, Memorial Scroll.



The Canals of Ireland to-day