Military History from the Street: Dublin's Great Wars [AQ5]

Eve Morrison [AQ4]

Eve Morrison is currently the Canon Murray Fellow in Irish History at St Catherine's College, University of Oxford. She is a historian of twentieth-century Irish and British history specializing in the Irish revolution (1913–23).

evemorrison4@gmail.com

Richard S. Grayson, *Dublin's Great Wars: the First World War, the Easter Rising and the Irish Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

In *Ireland and the Great War*, the late Keith Jeffery argued that the 1914–18 conflict was an essential context for the Irish independence struggle, and that the Easter Rising (1916), the War of Independence (1919–21) and Civil War (1922–3) were integral parts of the same story.[1] This is also the starting point of *Dublin's Great Wars*, a 'new military history' and prosopography of British soldiers and Irish republicans who resided in Ireland's capital city during these years. There is much to commend 'military history from the street', Grayson's methodology of using 'every source possible to draw in the military service of everyone from a given area'. Online sources have transformed the speed and ease with which researchers can search for and cross-reference information. The author's approach is predicated largely on the vast word-searchable collections of primary-source records relating to the First World War that have become available online in recent years.[2] Some marvellous material has been unearthed in British military pension and service records, diaries, newspapers, personal testimony and journals.

Sixteen of Grayson's twenty-one chapters contextualize and discuss the period up to the November 1918 Armistice. It is estimated that 210,000 men resident in Ireland joined the British armed forces over 1914–18, out of whom about 30,000 were killed and many thousands more wounded. This has been described by one historian as 'proportionately the greatest deployment of armed manpower in the history of Irish militarism'.[3] Grayson estimates that, in all, between 35,000 and 40,000 Dublin residents served in some branch of the British armed forces during the First World War, with over seventy percent fighting in the infantry. As with his previous study of Belfast, for the most part he eschews thematic analysis.[4] The book consists mainly of chronologically ordered battle narratives punctuated with statistics, snippets of battlefield folklore – like the apocryphal recapture of guns by the 9th Lancers at Mons in October 1914 and rumours of a Turkish female sniper found dead at Gallipoli wearing fourteen soldiers' identification badges around her neck – and biographical vignettes of individual combatants, their families and communities, some well known and some obscure.[5]

Grayson uses simultaneous events and geographical proximity to paint a convincing portrait of Dublin as a complex seeding ground for both opposition to and support for British rule. Grayson's chronicle of the participation of Dubliners on both sides of the successive conflicts between 1899 and 1923 suggests that most conflicts in twentieth-century Ireland were, to a certain extent, civil wars.[6] Irishmen with Dublin connections fought on opposing sides in the Boer War (1899–1902). The split in the Irish Volunteers fomented by John Redmond's pledge to support the war effort is set against the obvious signs of war enthusiasm in August 1914 and the mobilization and organization of the regular and new army formations of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. The experiences of 'Dubliners on the battlefield' in the various theatres of the First World War are juxtaposed and 'set alongside' the activities and actions of the separatists. As Roger Casement struggled to recruit a brigade from Irish prisoners of war in Germany, the 1st, 6th and 7th Dublins took part in the disastrous campaign at Gallipoli (February 1915–January 1916) and over four hundred 2nd Dublins died in the Second Battle of Ypres (April–May 1915), including three O'Donnell brothers from Bride Street.

Some of the finest chapters in the book deal with the two 1916s. The chronological interweaving of the Easter Rising with the horrifying gas attack on the 8th and 9th Royal Dublin Fusiliers in the 16th (Irish) Division at Hulluch

in April 1916 conveys very effectively why exclusive focus on the former 'can only offer a partial history of Dublin's experience of that time'. The Rising took place in Dublin neighbourhoods where hundreds of men were fighting the British military. From July to November came the 'other 1916', the Somme. Loyal Dublin Volunteers fought alongside members of the Ulster Volunteers in the 9th Inniskillings. Dublin lost more men on 1 July 1916 than any other day of the war. Some stories stand out even in the context of the bloody attritional grind of the Western Front. That of deserter Bernard McGeehan, who probably had learning difficulties, is almost unbearably sad: 'every time I join the trenches they throw stones at me and pretend it is shrapnel, and they call me all sorts of names'. McGeehan, one of the 306 British soldiers posthumously pardoned by the government in 2006, deserted in September from the front lines and was executed in November 1916. Narrative accounts of the main battles fought in the last two years of the war are also interspersed with details relating to its cost. The husband and son of Julia Carter, who lived on Golden Lane, were both dead by 1918. The deaths of well-known individuals like Willie Redmond and Francis Ledwidge intermingle with the Geraghtys of Middle Gardiner Street and the Cruess-Callaghans of Blackrock, who each lost three sons to the war.

Grayson's last five chapters cover the War of Independence, Civil War, postwar readjustment, employment, pensions and commemorative activities. Again, a narrative of well-known events is peppered with fascinating and sometimes little-known details about the experiences of Irish First World War veterans, such as the War Office's bureaucratic pragmatism when dealing with two Dublin Fusiliers deserters whose whereabouts only became known when they requested their medals in the 1920s and 1930s. Particular attention is paid to some of the war veterans with Dublin connections who joined the insurgents, and the IRA's execution of war veterans as alleged spies. The overall focus of later chapters is narrower, however, and more reflective of Irish historiography's general preoccupation with the IRA's military campaign in the south of Ireland and the online release of the Bureau of Military History (BMH) witness statements and Military Service Pensions (MSP) records, which has had a transformative impact on historiography relating to the Irish independence struggle. As Grayson draws heavily on these collections for information about the IRA, they are worth discussing in more detail.

The BMH was a government-sponsored public history project that, from 1947–57, collected statements and documents about the 1916–1921 period from separatist nationalist veterans. It was opened in 2003 and has been online since 2010. The staggered online release of the Department of Defence's much larger MSP archive has been going on since 2014. Both, in different respects, were products of the massive thirty-two county reinvestigation into the organization and conduct of armed separatists during Ireland's revolutionary decade (1916–23), engendered by the newly independent Irish state's decision to award disability and military-service pensions to deserving former combatants under two main MSP acts passed in 1924 and 1934.[7] In the course of adjudicating pension claims, Defence amassed an enormous revolutionary archive. In 1943 it agreed in principle to make these still confidential records available for official efforts to gather material about the Irish independence struggle. With the advent of the BMH in 1947 MSP records became the single most important methodological and administrative control utilized by the BMH both for selecting potential interviewees and identifying topics for discussion.[8]

Used carefully and in conjunction with contemporary sources, interviews, personal testimony, memoirs and other retrospective account can be excellent sources of supplemental information, but inevitably both are heavily mediated and influenced by the circumstances in which they were compiled. BMH witness statements and MSP records, accumulated many years after the events described in them took place, are the equivalents of memoirs and oral history interviews in the British Library and Imperial War Museum, not contemporary First World War service and pension files. In some instances Grayson should have taken a bit more care. For instance, there are considerable discrepancies between MSP estimates of the IRA's strength at the truce (11 July 1921), used by the author (115, 446), and those recorded in the IRA Director of Organisation (DO) reports for October 1921 (54,464).[9] Given that by then IRA forces included a significant number of 'trucileers' who joined after the cessation of hostilities, even this might be too high for 11 July. Similar disparities exist between IRA GHQ and MSP strengths for the Dublin brigade in July 1921 (2,649 versus 5,464 respectively).[10] The context in which they were amassed is important. MSP assessments of IRA strengths were derived from membership rolls compiled in the wake of the 1934 MSP act by veterans' organizations who took particular objection to the 'Notional Grades of Rank' clause stipulating that officers in charge of larger IRA units were eligible for higher ranks and pension awards than their equivalents in charge of smaller brigades.[11] [AQ1]Were organizations' strengths deliberately inflated so that pension applicants would qualify for higher awards?

More research is needed, but this is one possible explanation. In the meantime, MSP figures should be employed with caution.

The demobilization of some five million men serving in the British armed forces from various war fronts was a major concern. The thousands of veterans who poured into Ireland after the 11 November Armistice were no exception. Over 100,000 veterans were back in Ireland by mid 1920, which was then in the midst of revolutionary upheaval against the very government for whom they had fought. Both the BMH and the MSP, and other collections of personal testimony like the Ernie O'Malley interviews, have made a substantial contribution to knowledge about the relationship between the IRA and returning First World War veterans. Grayson puts them to good use. Much of the scholarship relating to the experience of First World War veterans has been framed and informed by wider debates as to what role, if any, sectarianism and prejudice played in driving the behaviour of separatist insurgents. In the 1990s, pioneering studies by Jane Leonard and Peter Hart concentrated on war veterans who were executed by the IRA, arguing that most of them were killed for who they were rather than on any real evidence that they were spies.[12] More recently, Paul Taylor, Steven O'Connor, John Borgonovo, Emmanuel Destenay and now Grayson have challenged the presumption that ex-servicemen were a persecuted community, shifting the focus onto the contribution of First World War veterans to the IRA's military campaign during the War of Independence.[13]

However, the two instances during the revolutionary period in which returned Irish servicemen had a really decisive impact – in the Northeast from 1920 to 1922 (especially Belfast) and in the Civil War – are the least studied. Headcounts of the numbers of ex-servicemen executed as civilian spies by the IRA in the south have been the standard but crude measure for exploring circumstances that were both complex and fluid. In the great majority of cases not enough evidence survives to be sure why they were killed. Many relevant issues remain unaddressed. Why was it, for instance, that so many Irish First World War veterans either re-enlisted or did not return to Ireland at all? How do their reintegration patterns compare with those of other combatants? Gaps in knowledge have often been filled by the assumptions of the researchers, and the level of hostility towards ex-servicemen may be either exaggerated or underplayed. Truth in history does not always lie on the median, but in this case, it seems to.

That a cohort of veterans fought with the IRA is not new information as such. It is still very hard to gauge actual numbers. Some of Ernie O'Malley's interviewees indicate that the largest influx was during the truce. If this is the case, it might well be that we will never be able to substantiate this simply because 'trucileers' who fought only in the Civil War were ineligible for pensions. It is to be hoped that they applied anyway. If so, their unsuccessful applications might one day become available. However, most likely no more than a few hundred veterans joined the IRA before July 1921, and around the same number of regular RIC men who enlisted then rejoined the police on their return.[14]

Although the level of IRA hostility towards ex-servicemen has been overstated it certainly did exist and predated the revolutionary period. Mainstream nationalist attitudes towards Irish soldiers was mixed for most of the nineteenth century, but with the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899 orchestrated hostility towards the British military became a central part of nationalist activism encouraged by organizations across the political spectrum.[15] As the utter tragedy of the First World War became apparent in the first months of the conflict, separatist nationalists propagandists became more sympathetic to the troops at the front, but they continued to oppose recruitment drives and to castigate the 'English' garrisons as vice-ridden, amoral and violent corrupters of Ireland's national soul.

After the war, returning veterans were at once potential threats and possible allies to all parties seeking hegemony in the social and political conflicts of the postwar period. Both the government and separatists combined suspicion and fear of war veterans with attempts to utilize them. The relationship between veterans and the IRA seems often to have depended largely on a complicated array of factors relating to their individual status in the communities to which they returned – their previous relationship with the Irish Volunteers, their social background, their own political beliefs and actions and the attitude of the local IRA towards them. A very important pull factor for a returning soldier ending up in the IRA was having pre-existing ties with the separatist movement. Sometimes, as with West Cork flying-column leader Tom Barry, it was sheer persistence.

Evidence suggests that the IRA could have availed of the services of far more war veterans than they did, particularly if they had made a concerted effort to recruit them in 1919. The skills of sympathetic individual ex-servicemen were utilized, but no organized attempt was made either to appeal to returning veterans as a body or to address the

prejudices against them. Sean Murray, who fought with the Irish Guards and trained Cork I Brigade IRA, told Ernie O'Malley that:

The ex-service men were not to be accepted by us in the ranks. That was a general order which had been made in 1920 … A contingent representing the ex-service men came up to Victoria Barracks to me, two men on behalf of 50 others, who wanted to fight on our side, but they wouldn't be accepted.[16]

Contemporary press reports suggest that a significant subset of returning soldiers were angry at what they viewed as Britain's failure to honour Ireland's right to self-determination. In July, the *Irish Independent* reported that two to three thousand ex-servicemen in Dublin refused to take part in the victory march in 'protest against the failure of the Government to satisfy the just aspirations of the Irish people'.[17] Meetings to found branches of the Comrades of the Great War were picketed and Lord Lieutenant French was in one instance heckled when he made an appearance.[18] So many recollections in witness statements and other veterans' testimony tell of Irish soldiers and veterans selling their rifles, aiding IRA prisoners, gathering intelligence, training and joining the IRA that it begs the question as to why the separatist movement did not take greater advantage. The fact that some 25,000 Irish ex-British military joined the Irish Army at the outbreak of the Civil War, and that over 600 Irish army officers were also British military veterans,[19] raises the possibility that their neutrality has either been exaggerated or misunderstood.

In the 1930s, Ginger O'Connell, IRA Assistant Director of Training during the War of Independence, remarked that: 'Ex-Servicemen would have joined up in considerably greater numbers were it not that serious and quite natural difficulties arose in the matter of employing them'.[20] O'Connell did not elaborate, but an army of disgruntled war veterans would have presented disciplinary challenges to the IRA. In March 1920, for instance, a Westmeath branch of the Comrades of the Great War discussed the possibility of 'marching in military formation to the residences of landowners mentioned to demand suitable allotments of untenanted land'.[21]

In the Northeast, war veterans were often at the forefront of unrest and sectarian conflict in 1920 and 1922. The IRA was much weaker in Ulster, and the influx of angry Catholic war veterans into the organization had a destabilizing impact.[22] Protestant ex-servicemen joined the Ulster Special Constabulary in large numbers and loyalist veterans joined the overtly violent and sectarian Ulster Ex-Servicemen's Organization and Ulster Imperial Guards. The former was established in the summer of 1919 and was at the forefront of attacks on Catholics and Labour organizations in Belfast during 1920 and 1921. Catholic protection squads of ex-servicemen were established to protect Catholic areas from attack. The Imperial Guards, which claimed to have 30,000 members at its height, was formed in November 1921 by 'ultra-loyalist' Robert Boyd and Richard Tregenna, a trade unionist who had been heavily involved in the shipyard expulsions in Belfast of 1920. The organization was difficult to control but was eventually absorbed into the part time 'C' Force of the Ulster Special Constabulary in 1922.[23]

Unfortunately, due to the disproportionate attention paid to ex-servicemen in the south, much less is known about any of this. The one major thematic study on the experience of ex-servicemen, by Paul Taylor, excludes the six counties that became Northern Ireland. This no doubt made his doctoral studies more manageable, but the retrospective application of partition is distorting. The entire island of Ireland mobilized for war, and partition did not become a functioning reality until the early 1920s. In an all-island context, the behaviour and experience of Irish First World War veterans is closer to European norms than has sometimes been argued. Taylor's study is however fully cognisant of the decisive role Irish First World War veterans played in securing victory for the pro-Treaty side in the Civil War. Their involvement was far more decisive in that conflict than during the War of Independence. Grayson spends comparatively little time on these veterans, however. The Irish Army and its role in the Civil War remains chronically understudied. The individual entries in the 1922 Army census, online and searchable since 2012, [AQ2] include next of kin, home address (Grayson's 'gold standard' for selection), religion, marital status, and could have been cross-referenced with enlistment books for the Irish regiments in the National Army Museum.[24] This was a missed opportunity.

Arguably, less narrative, more analysis and a tighter chronology might have allowed Grayson to linger on and develop themes suggested by the rich and often very moving biographies of his subjects. Nonetheless, he demonstrates to great effect how great events play out at local level and highlights how the nuance, contradiction and pathos of individual lives enriches historical understanding. As he notes:

In most cases, little is known about the people featured because the only footprint they have left on history is at one momentous moment such as their death, winning a medal, or when put on trial.[25] [AQ3]

Dublin's Great Wars is a fine tribute to them.

Endnotes

1. Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, Cambridge, 2000, p.2; Keith Jeffery, *1916: a Global History*, London, 2015, p.103.

2. Richard S. Grayson, 'Military History from the Street: New Methods for Researching First World War Service in the British Military', *War in History* 21: 4, 2014, pp. 465–95, 468.

3. David Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900–1922' in *A Military History of Ireland* , ed. Tom Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, Cambridge: 1996, p. 388, p. 397 and p. 501.

4. Richard S. Grayson, *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died together in the First World War*, London and New York, 2009.

5. For a general discussion of battlefield folklore see Owen Davies, *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith during the First World* War, Oxford, 2018, pp. 6–15.

6. Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and War in the Twentieth Century*, Magdalene College Occasional Paper no. 33, Cambridge, 2005.

7. Marie Coleman, 'Military Service Pensions for Veterans of the Irish Revolution, 1916–1923', *War in History* 20: 2, 2013, pp. 201–21, 205.

8. For a more extensive analysis of these collections as well as the Ernie O'Malley interviews (another equally important collection of veterans' testimony), see Eve Morrison, 'Witnessing the Republic: the Ernie O'Malley Notebook Interviews and Bureau of Military History Compared', in *Modern Ireland and Revolution: Ernie O'Malley in Context*, Dublin, 2016, pp. 124–40.

9. The DO reports are in the Richard Mulcahy papers(IRA Chief of Staff during the War of Independence), one of the largest and most important collections of contemporary IRA records available to historians: Number of Officers and Other Ranks [October 1921]: University College Dublin Archives [UCDA], Mulcahy papers [MP], P7/A/27/256; Divisions, Brigades, Strengths [December 1921]: UCDA, MP, P7/A/32/10-11). British Army intelligence estimated IRA membership in July 1921 to be around 80,000: Irish Command, 'Record of the Rebellion in Ireland in 1920–21', vol. IV, nd: The National Archives, Kew, War Office, WO141/93); Establishment of IRA 11 July 1921 and 1 July 1922: Military Archives of Ireland [MAI], Military Service Pensions Collection [MSPC]/RO/609.

10. DO returns for June and July 1921: UCDA, MP, P7/A/23/215–217.

11. Brigades of 1,000 men or more, battalions of 300 plus and captains of companies with a minimum of 60 men. First schedule, Military Service Pensions Act, 1934, (http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1934/act/43/enacted/en/print); Federation of old IRA Associations, To the Delegates, Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis [1935]: National Library of Ireland, Florence O'Donoghue papers, Ms 31, 270/1.

12. Jane Leonard, 'Getting Them at Last: the IRA and Ex-servicemen', in *Revolution? Ireland 1917–1923*, Dublin: Trinity History Workshop, 1990, and 'Facing the Finger of Scorn': Veterans' Memories of Ireland after the Great War', in *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Martin Evans and Ken Lunn, Oxford and New York, 1997; Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. & its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 9–18.

13. Steven O'Connor, '"It's up to you now to fight for your own country": Ireland's Great War Veterans in the War of Independence, 1919–21', in *Veterans of the First World War: Ex-servicemen and Ex-servicewomen in Post-war Britain and Ireland*, ed. David Swift and Oliver Wilkinson, Abingdon and New York, 2019, pp. 104–21; Emmanuel Destenay, 'Allégeances et transfers de loyauté: la contribution des anciens combattants irlandais de la Première Guerre mondiale à la guerre d'indépendance (1919–1921)', *Revue d'histoire* 20/21, 2019, pp. 61–74; Paul Taylor, *Heroes or Traitors?: Experiences of Southern Irish Soldiers Returning from the Great War, 1919*–1939, Liverpool, 2015; John Borgonovo, *Spies, Informers and the Anti-Sinn Féin Society: the Intelligence War in Cork City 1920–1921*, Dublin, 2007.

14. Jane Leonard, ‘Survivors’, in *Our War: Ireland and the Great War*, ed. John Horne, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 200,) pp. 217–19, p. 217.

15. Terence Denman, ‘The “Red Livery of Shame”: the Campaign against Army Recruitment in Ireland, 1899–1914’, in *Irish Historical Studies* 29: 114, November 1994, p. 212, pp. 232–3.

16. Sean Murray interview, 14 Nov. 1950: UCDA, Ernie O’Malley notebooks, P17b/112.

17. *Irish Independent*, 17 July 1919.

18. *Irish Independent*, 19 and 29 July 1919.

19. , Leonard, ‘Survivors’, p. 219.

20. [Ginger O’Connell] note, c.1935: MAI, Liaison and Evacuation papers, LE 24.

21. *Westmeath Examiner*, 20 March 1920.

22. Robert Lynch, *The Northern IRA and the Early Years of Partition: 1920–1922*, Dublin, 2006, pp. 28, 82.

23. Robert Lynch, *The Partition of Ireland: 1918–1925*, Cambridge, 2019, p. 98; Jim McDermott, *Northern Divisions: the Old IRA and the Belfast Pogroms 1920–22*, Belfast, 2001, pp. 24–5, pp. 120, 124, 13–2 and 291, n. 63; Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917–1923*, Cork, 1988, pp.178–9; Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants: the Formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary and the Royal Ulster Constabulary 1920–*27, London, 1983, pp.18–29.

24. Irish Army Census, 12–13 Nov. 1922: MAI, http://census.militaryarchives.ie/; Enlistment books for disbanded Irish regiments: National Army Museum, https://www.nam.ac.uk/soldiers-records/persons; *Irish Times*, 12 Nov. 2012.

25. Richard Grayson, *Dublin’s Great Wars: the First World War, the Easter Rising and the Irish Revolution*, Cambridge, p. 340.

Author Queries

Query: AQ1: How might that objection affect the figures?
Author Response: Answered within text

Query: AQ2: Add link in footnote?
Author Response: The link is in the footnote

Query: AQ3: Page ref needed
Author Response: The page reference is in the footnote

Query: AQ4: Please check all author names and affiliations. Please check that author surnames have been identified by a pink background in the PDF version, and by green text in the html proofing tool version (if applicable). This is to ensure that forenames and surnames have been correctly tagged for online indexing.
Author Response: Accept

Query: AQ5: **Permissions:** If your manuscript has figures or text from other sources, please ensure you have permission from the copyright holder. For any questions about permissions contact jnls.author.support@oup.com.
Author Response: Accept

Author Approve Comments

Author: Confirmed