

## **The Centenary of the First World War and the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland**

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The One Hundred Years Ago section in our July issue carried part of a report of a denominational outing to Beechmount House on the Falls Road. Today the building is an Irish language school in the heart of one of the areas that was most affected by the Troubles but in 1914 it was the home of the Riddel sisters, direct descendants of the Rev William Bruce and situated in semi-rural surroundings complete with servants and neatly maintained grounds. It was a poignant account of an ordinary event in Belfast in a world that was on the cusp of a terrible conflict that would bring about enormous change. This year is the centenary of the outbreak of the war and this milestone is being marked in many ways.

It is only right that as a denomination we give some thought to marking or commemorating the First World War in a fitting way. There are many projects that aim to do this.

As a first step to any commemoration that we might wish to make as a denomination we could begin by compiling a list of those who served in the First World War as well as recording a list of memorials and where they are sited. The purpose of this article is to illustrate some of the information that is available in the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian magazine. As minister of three churches in county Down I will particularly pay attention to them but they can be taken as illustrative of the whole and as demonstrating the way what has been published does not necessarily tell the whole story.

Our denomination is small enough to compile a fairly complete inventory of all aspects of the impact of the war on the church. Most of our churches have prominent war memorials, usually dating from a few years after the First World War. It would be satisfying just to record all of these and put them together in some form of

publication. In Downpatrick we have a large marble memorial fixed to the wall. In Clough there is illuminated manuscript painted by the artist J.W. Carey. Curiously there is no memorial at Ballee but most churches do have them often very prominently presented in the church vestibule. This would be the case in Banbridge, Comber and Rosemary Street, Belfast for instance. In All Souls' Church in Belfast the memorial was made and designed by the artist Rosamund Praegar. It is also interesting in that it is one of the few that also records the names of women who served in the war, in this case the Duffin sisters – one of whom, Emma Duffin - has been the subject of recent research by Trevor Parkhill (See *'Their sister in both senses'*. *The memoirs of Emma Duffin V.A.D. nurse in the First World War* in 'Faith and Freedom' issue 178 Spring/Summer 2014)

The Great War was a key phase in the development of European civilisation, the world was changed utterly by the First World War, an old order yielded in the mud and death and carnage of the trenches and a new one gradually emerged afterwards. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the war in terms of the development of our society as a whole.

There is much more research has to be done on the First World War and its effect on this denomination. One of the things I have done so far is look through the *Non-Subscribing Presbyterian* magazine at the time in order to pick out some of the ways it had an impact on us. In particular I have looked at how my own congregations have fared in the First World War.

The war brings about much comment and theological reflection from ministers and lay people but the extent of the impact only gradually comes to be realised as more and more members take up arms. The magazine decided to compile a Roll of Honour and in December 1914, four or so months after the outbreak, this was printed for the first time. Already it contained 141 names, all of them obviously volunteers, and representing 24 congregations, including four from Clough and eight from Downpatrick although none from Ballee are listed at this time. The list includes two who have been wounded and already the first loss – a member of the Dromore congregation - David Prentice who was lost in action on HMS Monmouth in a naval

engagement off the coast of Chile.<sup>1</sup> HMS Monmouth was an armoured cruiser that was built in 1901 and used mostly around Chinese waters. At the start of the First World War it was sent to the West Indies fleet and was part of the battle of Coronel, here it was sunk by the Germans with the loss of all hands.

In the next year the Roll of Honour is reprinted in March 1915, when it has been expanded to include 27 congregations. This time there are seven names from Clough, thirteen from Downpatrick, and one from Ballee. The one at Ballee is Captain William Crymble of the RAMC, who is recorded as being interned at Magdeburg since the battle of Mons, he was a prisoner of war. In January 1916 the list is updated when 360 names (including some women involved in nursing and other war work in some congregations) are listed in 29 congregations. From Ballee there are now two names, from Clough seven and from Downpatrick, thirteen, many of them names of families still in membership of all churches. To this denominational list an additional three names were added in February. For the denomination as a whole of these 363 names eleven are listed as killed, missing or lost.<sup>2</sup>

Having kept this Roll of Honour up until February 1916, strangely, it is not updated in the pages of the magazine again. At one point mention is made of an intention to publish on card the full roll of honour for the congregations.<sup>3</sup> Whether this was produced I do not know, it would be nice to think that it was and I'd like to see it if it exists. But both the total number on the Roll of Honour and the number of those killed in the war are likely to be far greater than this. There are, for instance, 16 obituaries of men killed in action (in two cases died of war wounds) in the magazine.<sup>4</sup> Of these only three died before the publication of the January 1916 list and they do appear on the Roll of Honour but of the other thirteen only seven are listed and six are not, possibly because they had not joined up until after that date. The number of fatal casualties is likely to be much higher and a perusal of each church's war memorial

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<sup>1</sup> NSP December 1914, 90, 2-4. See also Jeffrey Martin, *Dromore's Great War Heroes*, [Banbridge 2006], 24.

<sup>2</sup> NSP January 1916, 103, 3-6; NSP February 1916, 4.

<sup>3</sup> NSP February 1916, 104, 1.

<sup>4</sup> NSP June 1915, 96, 6-7; NSP November 1915, 101, 3-4; NSP December 1915, 102, 11; NSP May 1916, 107, 9; NSP July 1916, 109, 10-11; NSP August 1916, 110, 7-11; NSP December 1916, 114, 11; NSP October 1917, 124, 12; NSP April 1918, 130, 7; NSP May 1918, 131, 8-9; NSP October 1918, 136, 6-8; NSP November 1918, 137, 7-8.

would give the true figure. I would guess it is likely to be three times higher, this is certainly the case in Downpatrick for instance where there are three deaths recorded but only one on the Roll of Honour. In Clough there are seven names on the roll of Honour, and no fatalities. However, on the Roll of Honour in the Church there are ten names, three of whom were killed in the war.

But taking the denomination as a whole the Roll of Honour plus the additional obituaries makes a total of 24 killed in the First World War noted in the magazine in this way and this will certainly not be the final total. There are for instance at least five more just between Downpatrick and Clough.

Of the 16 obituaries in the magazine 14 are of officers and most include a photograph of the deceased. Four obituaries appear in the August 1916 issue, all of them of soldiers apparently killed on the first day of the battle of the Somme. Whether an obituary appeared or not seemed to be entirely due to chance but was very unlikely for those who weren't commissioned. There are in addition three brief notices, one of them of one of the sons of the Rev Alexander Gordon, and one mention of a death in a Rademon 'News of the Churches' report.<sup>5</sup> This would make a total of 28 names of men killed in the war mentioned in the magazine, again certainly not the final total.

The first day of the battle of the Somme was without doubt the bloodiest battle in the history of the British Army. There were almost 60,000 casualties in that one day alone, nearly 20,000 of them being killed. Many of them were members of the Ulster Division and there must have been more Non-Subscribers killed on the first day of the battle of the Somme than the four listed in the August 1916 issue of the magazine. Amongst the members of Clough, Robert Kirkpatrick of the Royal Irish Rifles was killed on the first day of the battle, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916.

Some of the obituaries in the *Non-Subscribing Presbyterian* tell us about some of our members. Most of the casualties were people who joined up at the start of the war but some had been career soldiers. On 26<sup>th</sup> September 1915 Captain Craig Nelson was killed in action. He was an officer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brahman regiment, part of the Indian

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<sup>5</sup> NSP September 1915, 99, 15; NSP September 1916, 111, 15; October 1917, 124, 13; NSP December 1918, 138, 14.

army and a grandson of Rev S.C. Nelson, minister of Downpatrick. His father was Dr Edwin Field Nelson, the fifth son of Samuel Craig Nelson, a senior surgeon in the locality who had himself attained the rank of Surgeon-Major in the local Militia and continued as medical officer for soldiers in the Downpatrick district during the war up to his death in May 1916. But his son, Craig Nelson, was killed the year before, his other two sons both serving officers in the navy or the army. Craig Nelson was a career officer who had been commissioned into the Royal Irish Rifles and served throughout the South African war. He subsequently transferred to the Indian Army and served first in Egypt and then on the Western Front.

The Rev M.S. Dunbar said of him:

We cannot help our feelings being moved when we think of the thousands of our countrymen who have fallen in this titanic struggle, but our feelings are still more acute when we suddenly learn of the fate of one who we knew, with whom we conversed not so long ago, and who, when we bade him good-bye, was in perfect health and the best of spirits. The War, with all its dread consequences, comes home to us as it never did before. Captain Nelson was brought up amongst us, and when on furlough from India, was always pleased to join in our service here, and to recall his associations with the church and the people connected with it.

From Ballee William Crymble, the son of the master of the school there, had trained as a doctor and had joined the RAMC, being a member of the 14<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance. This unit had mobilised from Dublin as soon as war had broken out and had gone straight to the front. Unfortunately he had been captured on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1914 and had been sent into Germany as a prisoner where he suffered many privations. This continued for over a year and in 1915 he was fortunate to be repatriated in an exchange of prisoners which apparently did take place in the First World War on a limited basis. Having been repatriated Surgeon Captain Crymble went to camp at Hollywood before returning to the front. Sadly within another year he was to be killed, dying on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1916. The sad news came back to Ballee where the Rev J.H. Bibby “made” said the magazine “touching reference to his death” at Sunday service.

These are the only two obituaries in the magazine that relate to my three churches although at least seven men were killed from the congregations in the First World War. But the sorrow that surrounds their deaths stands for the suffering of all the families at that time.

The magazine gives us other information from the time. It sometimes carried news of the war, in 1916 carrying a series of anonymous letters from the front written by a local soldier who included an account of the wearing of orange lilies on 12<sup>th</sup> July.<sup>6</sup> In 1918 there was an extended account of the British Expeditionary Force in East Africa, again this was anonymous, written by a serving officer who belonged to the denomination, it ran over six issues.<sup>7</sup>

There were also disagreements in its pages about war aims and the way German prisoners of war should be treated. In January 1918 the magazine reproduced an article written for the “Belfast Evening Telegraph” by the Moderator of Synod the Rev J.H. Bibby. Curiously the editor took the unusual step of distancing himself from the sentiments stating that “it represents the individual point of view of the writer, and is not to be taken in its entirety as representing the views of the Editorial Board”.

In his remarks the Rev J.H. Bibby said:

I do not waste words in the usual conventional Xmas expressions about peace and good-will among men for I feel too bitterly how much it would be out of place to do so. At the present time such talk is perilously like cant. Indeed I wish all our public men could be put under a self-denying ordinance of silence till things are brighter...I would however use the opening you give me – and in this I speak for myself – to urge a firm policy of reprisals. If I could have my way I would send out with every ship leaving our ports a draft of German prisoners, whose lives should be equally jeopardised with the lives of our own seamen.

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<sup>6</sup> NSP November 1916, 113, 4.

<sup>7</sup> NSP February 1918, 128, 9-11; NSP March 1918, 129, 6-7; NSP April 1918, 130, 5-7; NSP May 1918, 131, 8-9; NSP August 1918, 134, 8-10; NSP September 1918, 135, 9-11.

In the following issue S. Shannon Millin, a barrister then resident in Dublin but formerly of Belfast wrote that he hoped the Synod would dissociate itself from the Moderator's remarks, observing that:

If I thought for a moment that that body entertained such views, I would immediately sever my connection with a Church that, even in times of war, discarded the teachings contained in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>8</sup>

The war had an impact too in the numbers of ministers who saw service in some way. The editor of the magazine, the Rev Alfred Turner, went out to France to help the troops through the YMCA and on a number of occasions sent reports of his activities and what he had seen back to the magazine,<sup>9</sup> indeed I have a copy of the magazine sent out to him at his military post in France. In addition other ministers served with the YMCA including Eustace Thompson (Cairncastle), W.A. Weatherall (Cork), G.L. Phelps (Holywood), and Albert Whitford (Moneyreagh).<sup>10</sup> Percival Godding, the minister then at Ballyclare, joined up and was commissioned into the Royal Irish Rifles and A.L. Agnew, then a student for the ministry, served in the Royal Air Service.<sup>11</sup> Percival Godding did a lot of his training at Ballykinlar and preached regularly in Downpatrick, Ballee and Clough when he was in the camp. Percival Godding was later captured in the fighting and wrote a series of accounts for the *Non-Subscribing Presbyterian* of his experience as a prisoner of war during the last months of the war and the chaos in Germany at the time of the Armistice.<sup>12</sup> A distinguished layman, Dr John Campbell, also saw service in France, going out in 1916 as Chief Surgeon to the Anglo-American Hospital at Wimereux near Boulogne, one of the base hospitals of the British Expeditionary Force.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> NSP January 1918, 127, 1. NSP February 1918, 128, 2.

<sup>9</sup> NSP October 1916, 112, 7; NSP March, 1917, 117, 4-7; NSP May 1917, 119, 4-7; NSP June 1917, 120, 5-8; NSP September 1917, 123, 7-9.

<sup>10</sup> NSP January 1917, 115, 2; NSP February 1917, 116, 1; NSP March 1917, 117, 2-4; NSP November 1918, 137, 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> NSP November 1917, 125, 1; NSP December 1917, 126, 4; NSP February 1917, 116, 1.

<sup>12</sup> NSP January 1919, 139, 8-10; NSP February 1919, 140, 8-10; NSP March 1919, 141, 11-13; NSP June 1919, 144, 11-13; NSP September 1919, 147, 11-13; NSP November 1919, 149, 9-10; NSP December 1919, 150, 9-11.

<sup>13</sup> NSP September, 111, 1; NSP April 1917, 118, 5-6.

But these are just some points taken from the impact of the First World War on the NSP denomination. I hope to investigate further all aspects of the denomination's role. I would like to compile and produce a full list of all the memorials in the churches and produce, perhaps using them, a full roll of honour of everyone who served in the war and produce maybe some short volume.