Anzac Day Commemoration 2017*

In 2014, I had the honour of giving the Anzac Day address here in Dublin. I commenced by saying:

> One hundred years ago the world was at peace, with little or no suggestion that in just a few months Europe would be plunged into a war that would kill millions and topple empires.

Three years on, we have commemorated numerous centenaries connected with that conflict: the outbreak of the war in August 1914, the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 that claimed the lives of so many, be they Australian or Irish, New Zealander or British, Indian or French, Newfoundlander or Nepalese as well as those who suffered the most – the Turks, in successfully defending their homeland. We have also commemorated the centenary of the Easter rising of 1916 and the battle of the Somme from July to November that same year, which again claimed the lives of so many from the nations represented here today: Irishmen at Thiepval on 1 July, Australians at Pozières and Mouquet Farm in July and August, New Zealanders at Longueval in September, Irishmen at Guillemont and Ginchy in September. And Britons, Canadians, Newfoundlanders, South Africans.

And here we are in April 2017, about to commemorate yet further centenaries this year. And while today we might feel a touch of centenary fatigue, at least we know when those commemorations will end, unlike the men in the trenches a century ago who after two-and-a-half years of fighting, with neither side gaining a significant advantage, must have wondered if it would end at all, short of their deaths.

And today we know something which they, on this day 100 years ago, did not know. In a word: Passchendaele. For in Belgian Flanders on 31 July 1917 there began the Third Battle of Ypres, commonly referred to simply as Passchendaele, a name which like the Somme still sends shivers down the spine. But for most of the survivors of the Somme, Passchendaele in 1917 would be an experience even worse than that dreadful campaign the year before.

Yet, in between was a battle that raised the hopes of the fighting men – from generals to private soldiers – that there was a better way to fight modern war. The Battle of Messines, commencing on 7 June 1917, was well planned and well executed, designed to minimise casualties, and a battle which had a successful outcome, up to then a rare occurrence for the Allies after 1914.

For Australians and Britons needlessly butchered at Bullecourt in April 1917, and even for Canadians who that same month tasted success at Vimy Ridge, Messines seemed to mark a turning point. A new dawn beckoned. No more were men to be marched willy-nilly and unprotected into the uncut wire, the machine guns and the artillery barrages of the enemy.

And for another reason the Battle of Messines holds a special place for Australians and New Zealanders and for the Irish from both north and south. For, on that battlefield on 7 June, the 16th (Irish) Division, the 36th (Ulster) Division, the New Zealand Division and the 3rd Australian Division advanced alongside each other towards Messines ridge, the high ground that had to be taken before the next phase of the Flanders campaign could begin. On the right, the Anzacs and the British 25th Division captured the village of Messines and the ground to its south, while, on the left, the 16th and 36th divisions

* Address given by Dr Jeff Kildea, Adjunct Professor in Irish Studies at University of New South Wales, at Grangegorman Military Cemetery, Dublin on 25 April 2017.

together took the village of Wytschaete. Irish Party MP Stephen Gwynn wrote, "The shoulder to shoulder advance of the two Irish divisions caught everyone's imagination: it was Ireland's day". [1]

Today the Irish Peace Park on Messines ridge, with its replica round tower, inaugurated in 1998 by President Mary McAleese, Queen Elizabeth and King Albert of the Belgians, reminds us of that day when the Irish divisions, divided by the politics of home, were united in the common cause abroad. In the wake of their success it was tempting to believe that the dream of John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, that the blood sacrifice of the war could lead to a reconciliation between north and south, might be realised. Another new dawn.

For Redmond personally, the price of that victory was high: the loss of his brother, Major William Redmond MP. Sharing John's dream, Willie volunteered to serve in the 6th Royal Irish Regiment of the 16th (Irish) Division. In May 1917 he wrote to a friend, "My men are splendid and we are pulling famously with the Ulster men. Would to God we could bring this spirit back with us to Ireland". At a dinner for the officers of the 16th and 36th Divisions just three days before the battle began, Willie made a speech in which he said he prayed "for the consummation of peace between North and South".[2]

Willie Redmond was well known in Australia. In 1883 he and John spent ten months touring the country promoting Irish home rule. During their visit John married an Australian woman Joanna Dalton and, shortly thereafter, Willie married her niece Eleanor Dalton. Over the years Willie and Eleanor made a number of trips to Australia. Following one such visit in 1904/05 Willie wrote of his travels in a book called *Through the New Commonwealth*, in which he expressed his affection for Australia and its people. In his speeches in the Westminster parliament Willie often held up Australia as a model for home-rule Ireland. His last visit was in the Australian summer of 1913/14 – the last summer of peace.

Shortly after leaving the trenches at 3.30 on the morning of 7 June, Willie lay wounded on the battlefield, hit in the leg and wrist by shell splinters. In the spirit of the new dawn, it was a soldier of the Ulster division, Private John Meeke, who found Willie and began to carry him back to the lines before he too fell wounded. Meeke waited with him until stretcher bearers of the Ulster division arrived and took Redmond to the division's Field Ambulance, where that evening he died of his wounds. Willie was buried in the garden of the convent at nearby Locre, with soldiers of the 16th and 36th Divisions forming a guard of honour.

The warmth with which Willie Redmond was regarded by Australians is evidenced by the fact that, after Passchendaele, when the Australian Corps was encamped near Messines, many Australian soldiers visited his grave at Locre, signing the convent's visitors' book. Among them was the 16th Battalion's Martin O'Meara VC, a native of County Tipperary.

As planned, the capture of Messines ridge was achieved with fewer casualties than in previous battles. For a short moment in time, Messines came to symbolise a hope that the soldiers' needless suffering might abate and that the difficulties of Ireland might be resolved. But such hopes, which Messines had encouraged, quickly dissolved.

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[1] Terence Denman, *A Lonely Grave: The Life and Death of William Redmond*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1995, p. 122.
[2] Ibid., p. 116.

At Passchendaele six weeks later, the 16th and 36th Divisions once again fought side by side, in the Battle of Langemark. But this time triumph turned to disaster in an action that was the antithesis of Messines. On 16 August, exhausted, ill-prepared and understrength after ten days under constant artillery bombardment, the Irish were ordered to capture a German strongpoint. This they did, against the odds. But a counter-attack soon forced them back to their start line. In the words of one commentator they were "broken to bits".[3] On that day another Willie, beloved by his men, was killed: the Jesuit chaplain Fr Willie Doyle.

To deflect from his own culpability, the 5th Army commander General Hubert Gough, cast aspersions on the trustworthiness of the Irish, driving a wedge between north and south by alleging, without evidence, that the 16th Division was not politically reliable.[4]

For the Anzacs, who joined the fighting on 20 September, their experience of Passchendaele was little better. While the battles of Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde are counted as victories, the human toll was enormous. And their attack on the ruined village of Passchendaele on 12 October was a tragedy without the consolation of success. On that day the New Zealand division lost 846 killed – its highest ever one-day loss of the war. In eight weeks the Australians suffered 38 000 casualties, 8000 of them killed.

The new dawn promised by Messines had proved to be a chimera – a false dawn. The cruel reality is that war once begun is not amenable to fragile human hopes. While accepting it is wrong to stand aloof in the face of injustice, time and again history teaches us that war is a blunt instrument that rarely achieves the sought-after justice without disproportionate cost and consequences unforeseen and often catastrophic. Like using a sabre rather than a scalpel to remove a tumour.

While we may be inspired by the selflessness of individuals, such as Major Willie Redmond and Fr Willie Doyle, and all those we remember today who gave their lives that others might live in peace and justice, surely it would have been better had they had the opportunity to pursue the peace and justice they sought through the contributions of their lives rather than the inspiration of their deaths.

Lest we forget.

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[3] Terence Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1992, p. 123.
[4] Ibid., p. 124.