



IRISH ANZACS PROJECT

Trace Your Families Australian Great War

By Dr. Jeff Kildea

The town of Cahir in County Tipperary is situated in a delightful setting on the River Suir at the eastern end of the Galtee Mountains. On a rocky island in the middle of the river stands the town's major tourist attraction: Cahir Castle, reputed to be one of Ireland's largest and best-preserved Norman castles. In its shadow stands a less well known landmark, one not shown in the postcards or mentioned in the tourist books: the town's war memorial, on which are inscribed the names of 'the officers and men of Cahir and surrounding district who gave their lives in the Great War'.

An Australian tourist visiting Cahir Castle, used to seeing war memorials

in almost every town and suburb in Australia, might not pay the memorial much attention. Yet, on closer inspection, our hypothetical Australian tourist might be surprised to see on the memorial in bold red lettering the word 'Australians', underneath which appear in black lettering the names: D Clohessy, J Lonergan and TP Holloway.

These names belong to just three of the approximately 6,000 Irish-born men and women who served in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the First World War, of whom approximately 900 paid the ultimate price. Most already called Australia home, having emigrated to the new land of opportunity in the South Seas. Some, however, found

themselves in Australia by chance when war broke out and enlisted there rather than returning home to join up, perhaps fearful that the war might end before they did so or in the hope that they might get a free passage home when the AIF sailed.

The Irish Anzacs Project aims to identify all those Irish-born men and women who enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the First World War, or as close to all as is feasible, and to compile a publicly accessible database containing information on each of them. Made possible by a grant in 2012 by the Irish government's Emigrant Support Program administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the database provides families with information on

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their Irish-born family members who served in the war as well as providing statistical information to assist researchers understand the contribution of the Irish to the Australian war effort.

The information in the database has been extracted from the service records held by the National Archives of Australia (NAA) in series B2455, and includes details on each person such as name, town and county of birth, date and place of enlistment, declared age, occupation, marital status, next of kin location, previous military service, religion, and the unit to which he or she was initially posted.

In addition, information has been added from sources maintained by the Australian War Memorial (AWM) such as the Roll of Honour (which records those who were killed or died as a result of their war service) the list of Honours and Decorations and the Australian Red Cross's files relating to wounded and missing soldiers and to prisoners of war. Over time further information will be added from the Embarkation Roll and other sources. Links to the NAA and AWM websites enable searchers to view the original records of the soldiers and nurses they are researching. Ultimately the database will provide for each soldier and nurse a comprehensive record of service in the AIF.

As a significant research project of the Global Irish Studies Centre at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) the database was launched on October 17th, 2014, by the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Charles Flanagan TD, and the Australian Ambassador to Ireland, Dr. Ruth Adler, at an event conducted simultaneously at University College Dublin (UCD) and at UNSW in Sydney by means of a Skype link.

The Irish Anzacs database contains details of those members of the AIF who were born in Ireland. The project is confined to those of Irish birth rather than of Irish descent for the pragmatic reason that, because AIF service records include place of birth, the Irish-born are capable of identification. In the case of Australian-born soldiers it is not possible

to identify from the records those with Irish parents or grandparents.

Construction of the Irish Anzacs database has involved finding among the 376,000-odd AIF service records those of the Irish-born. Fortunately the service records in series B2455 are available online and all but about 4,600 of them include in the searchable Item Title the soldier's place of birth (POB). Searching the POB has yielded a total of just over 5,740 Irish-born members of the AIF.

In addition to series B2455, the NAA has another document series MT1486/1 which holds a further 76,000 items most of which relate to applicants for enlistment who were rejected or which duplicate records in series B2455. However, about 1 in 4 of those items relate to those not in series B2455 who actually enlisted in the AIF, albeit for home service. Nevertheless, as such they qualify for inclusion as additions to the Irish Anzacs database.

Unfortunately, while the MT series Item Title is searchable on line a high proportion of the Item Titles do not include a POB and fewer than 5,000 of the records themselves are available online.



Gallipoli, 1915. A group of Anzacs making a meal.



Members of 13th Battalion, AIF, occupying Quinn's Post on the heights above Anzac Cove.



Dr. Jeff Kildea reading at Grangegorman Military Cemetery on ANZAC day April 25th, 2014.

Consequently, identifying the service records in the MT series relating to the Irish-born necessitates a physical search of the hard-copy files, which are located in Melbourne.

If the MT series has the same proportion

of Irish-born as series B2455, we would expect to find about 1,150 records relating to Irish-born applicants for enlistment of which about a quarter (approx. 285) would qualify for the database. At the end of the day, therefore, the database is likely to comprise a little over 6,000 names.

Individuals are able to find in the database a wealth of information about their Irish-born family member who served in the AIF. For historians, the database enables the gathering of statistics on a range of variables that will assist in better understanding the contribution of the Australian Irish to the war effort. For instance, from the database we learn that 58.43 per cent of the Irish-born in the AIF were Catholics and that outside of the counties in which Belfast, Dublin and Cork are situated, Tipperary had the most recruits to the AIF – among them those inscribed on the Cahir war memorial – followed by Kerry and Down.

Of course, these statistics mean nothing in particular without comparable figures on the proportion of Catholics among the Irish-born of military age in the general population or the proportions of emigrants from the various counties. But for historians with knowledge of the broader statistics the database provides reliable data from which they can draw meaningful conclusions.

An example of how the database's statistics properly analysed can provide useful information on a contentious historical issue concerns the proportion of Irish-born in the AIF. The database shows that Irish-born enlistments in the AIF represent 1.55 per cent of total enlistments. In 1911, the year of the last census before the First World War, Australia's population was just under 4.5 million of whom almost 140,000 were born in Ireland, i.e. Irish-born Australians were 3.13 per cent of the general population.

At first sight, this suggests that the Irish-born, at 1.55 per cent of AIF enlistments, did not support the war in proportion to their numbers in the population, a claim that was made at the time by anti-Irish elements in Australia including Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who complained to Lloyd George that

that non-Irish had sent their young men from Australia to fight, while the Irish remained at home to capture the reins of political power. However, a closer examination of the 1911 census reveals that the Irish-born in Australia were an aging population, with 74 per cent being 45 years and over compared to 19 per cent for the population as a whole.

This trend is due largely to the fact that in the second half of the 19th century Irish immigration to Australia slowed both in absolute terms and as a relative contributor to population growth, so that the Irish-born proportion of the population decreased from 15.4 per cent in 1861 to only 3.13 per cent in 1911, with 85 per cent of the Irish-born stating they had been in Australia for 20 years or more.

If one counts only males of military age (between 18 and 44 years), the proportion of eligible Irish-born males to all eligible Australian males is not 3.13 per cent but 1.8 per cent. Furthermore, if you regard the fact that in 1911 it was those aged 15-41 who would be of enlistment age in 1914, the proportion for that cohort is 1.41 per cent. Consequently, the enlistment rate of 1.55 per cent for the Irish-born exceeded the proportion of eligible Irish-born in the population.

This is but one example. The benefits of the database to family and local historians as well as to historians of Irish-Australia more generally are manifold, limited only by one's imagination.

An example of what you will find on the database.



Dr. Jeff Kildea

The Irish Anzacs database can be accessed at <http://repository.arts.unsw.edu.au>
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You can read more on this subject in Dr. Kildea's book 'Anzacs and Ireland', Cork UP, 2007 or by visiting his website: www.jeffkildea.com