

WHERE NEXT IN RURAL HISTORY?

Future directions in rural history: Ireland, the First World War and the search for historical evidence

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Abstract

A social history of Ireland (encompassing rural communities) is needed if historians are to fully come to terms with what really happened between 1914 and 1918 and to properly tackle the question of ‘consent’ and ‘constraint’ in relation to the war effort. In addition, historians need to devote a comprehensive book-length research to the April 1918 Conscription Crisis in Ulster (but more generally to the anti-conscription movement in Ulster), determining if the urban/rural – Belfast/countryside divide existed (and, if so, what its magnitude was). Finally, in a few years’ time, anyone will be able to say if the Republic of Ireland of today opted to anchor the global conflict in the collective memory of its people, or if the Centenary of the First World War was just a politically motivated parenthesis to commemorate a lost generation that still struggles to find its rightful place in modern Irish history.

Rurality and socio-economic concerns in wartime

As civil war was about to break out in Ireland between nationalist and unionist paramilitary factions, the First World War operated as a *deus ex machina* and stopped any possibility of armed conflict between ardent supporters of the Home Rule project and die-hard unionist populations.¹ Leaders of both communities found themselves more or less compelled to acknowledge that the international diplomatic imbroglio left little room for a peaceful resolution of Irish domestic affairs and was undermining any possibility of political compromise.² Spokesmen in favour of voluntary recruitment (whether nationalist or unionist) consistently bound the future of their community to Britain’s interests in the conflict. Edward Carson militated for the protection of the motherland and the British Empire whereas John Redmond maintained that the future of devolution lay in the victory of the Allies. By September 1914, Redmond had elaborated a wartime rhetoric encompassing the defence of small nations, the quest for international justice and the inner conviction that his country ought to fight alongside Britain (and France) against German imperialism.³ This triggered a shift among the Irish Volunteers (the nationalist paramilitary organisation), to the extent that nearly half of them rejected the Irish Parliamentary Party’s call to arms. In Galway, for instance, a predominantly rural area, the Committee of the Galway City Volunteers objected to endorsing the Irish Parliamentary Party’s vision of the conflict.⁴ A study aimed at determining the extent to which the split among the Irish Volunteers in September 1914 mirrored a rural/urban – city/village divide within the country would be groundbreaking. Indeed, a piece of seminal research has recently stunned Irish/British academia in debunking the myth according to which Ulster (as a loyal unionist province in wartime) had answered the call wholeheartedly in August 1914. In spite of the evidence that a defeat (or invasion) of Britain could lead to severe repercussions for the Irish, rural loyalists in Ulster did not rush to the colours. Belfast ‘provided disproportionately high number of recruits’,⁵ but in the rest

of the province, grassroots unionists expressed considerable reluctance to enrol. Here, if Timothy Bowman, William Butler and Michael Wheatley convincingly demonstrate that a myth has been sculpted according to which Ulster unconditionally backed the war effort, special attention needs to be given insofar as there remain significant differences between loyal rural communities in Ulster and nationalist farming populations objecting to the war effort.

Furthermore, the various strands within the Ulster unionist community might not necessarily be directed by similar interests. After Easter Week 1916, Ulster loyalist populations certainly feared that another rebellion might completely reshape the administrative regime of the island if Republicans succeeded in overthrowing Dublin Castle. It could be worth wondering if partition already haunted the minds of the Unionists and how this could deter them from backing even more the war effort. Did a third political 'front' open up for Ulster Unionists, along with the 'Western Front' and the 'home front'? Did Ulster Unionists foresee what would happen next and feel compelled to enact the partition of Ireland? In light of such future work, it would be relevant to determine how northern Protestant communities responded to the lack of enthusiasm to engage with the Great War from southern rural populations. Had Ulster Protestants and their leaders already come to terms with the fact that by sacrificing for Great Britain on the battlefields of the Somme they weakened the reservoir of potential loyalists capable of protecting their families and traditions from a republican hegemon?

In terms of economic benefits, the conflict might have accentuated a divide between the industrial north and the rural south. In the north-east of Ulster and Belfast, industrial sectors,⁶ shipyards and textile industries benefited from the conflict as demand expanded.⁷ When five state-run factories opened in Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Galway, they provided employment for the cities and the neighbouring rural districts. Overall, 2,148 civilians found employment in these national mills.⁸ But closer analysis reveals that rural populations equally reaped benefits during the conflict. In order to feed Great Britain and support its wartime economy, the rural south increased its productivity and shipped agricultural goods to Britain. From his office in London, France's military attaché, Colonel de la Panouse, realised that rural populations '[were becoming] rich thanks to the demand for agricultural goods'.⁹ That statement was written in December 1916, several months after the legendary (and overwhelmingly attention-grabbing) Easter Rising. Consequently, little had changed as rural and urban populations were still profiting from wartime demands (and this must be taken into account in future studies dealing with Ireland and the First World War instead of claiming that the uprising radicalised nationalist populations overnight). Inspectors from the Royal Irish Constabulary monitored popular agitation and seditious activities across the island throughout the conflict. From the rural districts of Connaught and the Midlands, it was claimed that farmers, labourers and shopkeepers 'felt their interests were strongly bound up with the British'.¹⁰ Opportunities for immediate material profits clearly existed and in all likelihood, a victory of Britain over Germany would reinforce economic gains not only for the United Kingdom, but for the whole British Empire.

In redirecting research towards a more socio-economic (rather than entirely political) history of Ireland and the First World War, research on the radicalisation of rural populations will fatally contradict a linear reading (and vision) of Irish history. First of all, save for some sporadic shootings across the island,¹¹ Easter Week 1916 remained confined to the capital. In addition, the first by-election following the rebellion (often deliberately ignored by the historiography) that took place in West Cork in November 1916 just returned the candidate of the Irish Parliamentary Party to power. When historians ponder over the four successive 1917 by-elections, they neglect a crucial reality; that conscription pertained all political speeches of Sinn Féin and that the seditious party restlessly frightened (and warned) rural localities that compulsion was about to be voted in the House of Commons.¹² Farming populations were lured into believing that, overnight, they could be forcibly enrolled in the British Army. Instead of drawing an artificial continuity between Easter Week 1916 and the victory of Sinn Féin in 1917, attention to how rural communities in North Roscommon, South Longford, East Clare and Kilkenny reacted to threats of conscription will completely redefine the historiography of the Irish Revolution. Tangible and

material threats might also explain why in Cork (and certainly elsewhere across Ireland), Sinn Féin gradually came to be seen as a saviour. A seminal and thoroughly researched project has shed light on how fears of famine enraged local populations in Cork City and its outlying rural districts by the end of 1917. In meticulously retracing the political evolution of Cork City through socio-economic developments in wartime, it has been shown that in the south of Ireland, attention revolved around feeding local populations. Sinn Féin launched a crusade against shortages of food. It supplied potatoes to 150 families in Ennis (County Clare), opened the Food Committee to relieve destitute families, and even threatened local butchers and cattle exporters to negotiate directly with them.¹³ Plagued by increasing prizes of local food coupled with the virtually uncontrolled ongoing exports to Britain, Dublin registered a staggering number of newly opened communal kitchens, as poverty became rife in the capital.¹⁴ By March 1918, the *Freeman's Journal*, a staunch support of the Irish Parliamentary Party, deplored that 'exportations had increased by 82% since 1914'.¹⁵ A different picture of 'the Irish Revolution' therefore emerges if particular attention is paid on socio-economic challenges rural populations had to face.

It is a fact that Sinn Féin had already secured four seats by January 1918. But beyond the ability of Sinn Féin to reorganise into a political machine,¹⁶ socio-economic considerations seem to have been overshadowed (and neglected) by historians in their inner willingness to draw a continuity between the immediate infuriation of civilian populations in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and Sinn Féin's ongoing political accession to power by December 1918. No matter how annoying it will sound for some, the socio-economic history of Ireland and the First World War, with a particular focus on rural districts, has already, to a certain extent, called into question the contention that 1916 operated as a watershed event, or even as a turning point in the radicalisation of nationalist communities (urban and rural alike). Consequently, the 'Irish Revolution' might well have been triggered by the First World War rather than a politically motivated thirst for revolution. A provocative counterfactual history might claim that Easter Week 1916 without the First World War might well have led to a Home Rule Ireland (albeit without some unionist northern counties) and that the First World War without Easter 1916 might have potentially led to the same spectacular after-effect; namely the political accession of Sinn Féin in December 1918. It is perfectly true that 'the vocal and demonstrative anti-recruitment activities of many . . . radicals have been used as evidence to generalize about anti-war sentiment within Catholic Irish society at large'.¹⁷ It may equally be true that urban mobilisation for the war effort overshadowed a less enthusiastic response from rural communities. Further research will have to tackle these historiographical gaps, paying particular attention to rural communities living in close proximity to important military barracks (such as the Curragh) and more isolated rural counties of the Midlands and Connaught. What did civilians in the counties know of the war? How did they react to the outbreak of the war? Groundbreaking research will be able to demonstrate how the enrolment of a relative (on the local scale) shaped the mental landscape of a whole community and whether rural communities backed the war effort or simply reacted to wartime events (such as the sinking of the *Lusitania*). Here again, historians will have to refrain from trying to project onto Ireland the picture of a country wholeheartedly supporting the war effort, in an attempt to offer political justification for the place of Ireland within the European Union. Some often-neglected historians have convincingly argued that certain communities did not feel concerned with the war at all, based on unquestionable evidence of the period.¹⁸ Foreign historians (and by foreign I mean non-Irish/British academics) tend to minimise the impact of Easter Week 1916 and focus more on the direct consequences of the conflict in radicalising rural and urban nationalist populations.

Consent, constraint and the First World War

As a fully-fledged part of the United Kingdom by 1914, Ireland was dragged into the conflict. And the issue of 'consent' is a highly burning subject. As the conflict lasted, the April 1918

Conscription Crisis stunned British society. Historians prefer to emphasise the irreconcilable divide between the Irish Parliamentary Party and nationalist populations (a question which, following John Redmond's death, might have been more a rejection of Dillon than a general contempt for the old parliamentary party). It appears, however, that by April 1918 a gap had indeed widened between the rural and urban districts of Ulster and between unionist leaders and unionist civilian populations. Positioned as an unconditionally loyal geopolitical entity, Ulster had always been regarded as a homogenous area standing for the British Empire in Britain's hour of need. But further investigation needs to conclude whether there existed grassroots unionist opposition to compulsion in April 1918, and if so, to what extent and why. In Ulster, protestant unionists signed a pledge against what was described as 'military despotism'.¹⁹ In the House of Commons, on 10th April 1918, Thomas Harbison (nationalist MP) admitted that in unionist constituencies, conscription could not possibly be implemented.²⁰ Was it a political strategy to counter military service and warn the British government against a 'United Ireland'? Or did that imply that loyalist populations were actually prompt to stand up against conscription? Across the island, opposition to conscription turned into a political ironclad against any form of military compulsion. Conscription (rather than support for an Irish Republic or complete independence) may have well been the harbinger of revolution (as far as nationalist/republican communities were concerned). But what about rural unionism in Ulster? Anti-conscription agitation in Ulster certainly existed, insofar as rural communities (for reasons that will have to be determined) joined forces with nationalist communities and stood against compulsory military service. Does this, however, suggest that the ongoing (and century-long) 'polarisation between the protestant north and catholic south'²¹ had ceased to exist? Absolutely not. Historians of twentieth-century Irish history and academics specialised in the First World War will have to deliver an exhaustively researched account of anti-conscription opposition among loyalist unionist communities, in which they will measure the threats and implications (for Ulster unionism) in joining hands with Home Rule supporters and Sinn Féin advocates.

Even though interpretations are conditioned, to a certain degree, by subjectivity, they mirror contemporary representations and are often influenced and (re)shaped by hindsight. Twenty-first-century narratives (perhaps due to European integration and the commitment to forging a common European identity) have been prompt in portraying the Irish as a people supporting Britain in its hour of need. In 2012, Catriona Pennell published her first monograph in which she claimed that in 1914, 'Irish people, whether unionist or nationalist, on the whole opted to support the war.'²² Originally, however, the Irish Parliamentary Party merely offered to protect the shores of the island.²³ Asquith convincingly altered John Redmond's vision of the war. Consequently, Redmond urged Irishmen to enrol in the British Army and fight. Beyond domestic concerns, Irishmen enlisted because, to a certain extent, they regarded the conflict as a 'moral crusade' against German militaristic imperialism.²⁴ Certainly, the Irish Parliamentary Party and middle-class urban communities morally supported the British. But more evidence from grassroots rural populations is needed to back such a claim. Niamh Gallagher, in her first single-authored book, argued that the First World War was 'an all-Irish effort'.²⁵ But with a focus on urban districts and middle-class communities, it remains nevertheless a partial picture. Upper- and middle-class Catholic Irish society from urban areas undeniably backed the war effort, by knitting socks, running support homes and providing assistance to Belgian refugees.²⁶ However, when rural Ireland is mentioned, it is merely by way of the remark that 'the efforts of rural Ireland to cultivate more tillage in early 1917 were an important means by which those who lived in agricultural areas responded to the demands of war.'²⁷ While they were directly affected by the consequences of wartime, rural populations were mostly concerned with issues of survival and possible economic benefits. This cannot be flagged as evidence that they supported the war effort. In fact, other historians have maintained that the Irish had adopted a 'mental neutrality'²⁸ during the conflict. A local study of Cork City during the war tends, however, to invalidate this claim, as clearly rural populations turned their back on the Irish Parliamentary Party and

on the British when economic complications arose at the end of 1917. When severe food shortages began, these same rural populations condemned the British and looked to Sinn Féin, in a posture of somewhat sentimental expectations.²⁹ There is a difference, however, between a nation infuriated by war weariness (and ready to overthrow its government and elect another party) and a people ready to sever its ties with an Empire to escape the reality of a conflict. As long as civilian populations benefited from the war, they would consent to a moral support, and turn a blind eye to Britain's participation in the conflict. This constitutes a rather harsh assessment. That was, however, the conclusions drawn by Inspectors of the Royal Irish Constabulary. In the Midlands and Connaught, 'many profess[ed] they did not care who wins the war.'³⁰ France's Consul to Dublin categorically endorsed the same conclusions.³¹

If historians seek to really understand the extent of participation and 'consent' of the Irish before the April 1918 Conscription Crisis, they will have to encompass another evidence: the anti-British rhetoric that merged with calls for self-determination in 1917 and 1918. Even though it has clearly been demonstrated that anti-British narratives were motivated by a staunch refusal to back conscription, Sinn Féin activists were 'not ashamed to call for three cheers for the Germans and that God may bless their arms'.³² In June 1917, in Carran (a small village in County Clare), Éamon de Valera voiced out that Sinn Féin 'will have the ruins of the British Empire. It is my wish that the British Empire will be blown into ruins.'³³ Anti-imperialist advocates at the time would probably legitimate the candidate's statements, but they coincided with anti-Allied narratives. Rejoicing that 'England is sinking fast, thank God', in 1917, was indicative enough of a deleterious climate across the country. As thorny as it may sound, research on German support in Ireland among rural communities would significantly further the history of Ireland and the First World War. Indeed, support for Germany has been studied in relation to the limited impact of Easter Week 1916.³⁴ Beyond the narrowly focused spectre of negotiations conducted by Roger Casement and other republicans to obtain weapons and assistance for a national uprising, seditious narratives developed during 1917 and in 1918. A future research is vital to deal with this topic. In the minds of the 1916 leaders, Germany acted as a messianic saviour. In retrospect, a German invasion would have been impossible but republicans at that time thought it could well be an option through which to achieve self-determination (as some had envisioned a French landing to set Ireland free by the end of the eighteenth century).³⁵ A 'minority of a minority'³⁶ planned and orchestrated the uprising, with little support from the 'Irish people' as a whole. But little is known about (pragmatic rather than ideological) support for Germany as Sinn Féin was gradually mutating to become a political challenger for the Irish Parliamentary Party. This had been partly covered in a determining study of nationalist propaganda during the First World War.³⁷ Historians should now try to determine whether grassroots support for Germany existed as Sinn Féin grew stronger from 1917 onwards. In the minds of the young, unable to emigrate and unwilling to fight, the enemy had never been the Germans, but the century-old British government. Volunteers certainly fought for the rights of small nations, humanity and against (what Francis Ledwidge branded) an 'enemy common to our civilisation'.³⁸ But underground propaganda restlessly tried to minimise German atrocities in Belgium and France, arguing that they did not go beyond what the British had done during the Boer War.³⁹

It therefore seems that the course of the Irish Revolution was determined by the war. This is, anyway, what transpires from research crosses the strands of political and social history. In imposing conscription for Ireland, it has recently been argued, the British 'had negated the consent of the Irish people'.⁴⁰ The implication being that the Irish consented to a moral support for the war effort, and turned a blind eye to voluntary recruitment, but the 'Irish people' as a whole rejected to be conscripted. Instead of dealing with conscription from April 1918 only, repositioning the four 1917 by-elections within the context of the global conflict discloses important information. Rural populations dreaded the possibility of being conscripted, months before April 1918. While they did consistently benefit from the war, they categorically objected to participating in it. This is a problematic assessment, as it indirectly suggests that sacrifices had to be fully endorsed by the

three kingdoms of Great Britain but that it was morally and politically acceptable for Ireland to be exempted. In April 1918, Lloyd George (then prime minister) sought to quieten domestic protest within England, Scotland and Wales from elected MPs and civilians who objected to being sent to the front, while the Irish could be exempted. What had been granted to Ireland in January 1916 could no longer be sustained or justified in the eyes of British public opinion. As such, this is correct to assert that conscription for Ireland was actually the strategy of the British government. For this reason, conscription was described as ‘a cold-blooded piece of cynicism’.⁴¹ But wasn’t it cynicism to accept to be defended by the citizens of Great Britain without consenting to fully participate in defeating the enemy? Unless historians endorse the idea that a defeat of Britain meant a possible revival of the Irish nation (as many Irish-Americans, 1916 leaders and future elected republicans such as Éamon de Valera believed at that time),⁴² but this is something that must be clearly validated by historians. Most importantly, in portraying conscription as punishment, this entails that the supreme sacrifice could be required from Great Britain but not from Ireland. In the minds of local populations, compulsion was seen as a sacrifice ‘for Britain’ and not as a defence ‘for Ireland’, which is representative of the stance that would be adopted during the Second World War by Éamon de Valera. In short, this argument fatally contradicts the claim that the Irish people as a whole supported the war. If advocates of voluntary recruitment knew too well that conscription could not be possibly implemented as young populations would hide, flee or take arms rather than be sent to the army, this is enough to suggest that these people felt detached from the conflict, and did not consent to a sacrifice presented as necessary to protect Ireland, or (more precisely) felt that their country was not endangered during the conflict in the same way as Great Britain was. Any belligerent had to deal with ‘shirkers’;⁴³ but the unanimous uproar against conscription clearly spoke for the Irish people’s refusal to fight. In rural districts, young men left their homes, afraid to be fetched by the army. Others joined Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers overnight, hoping to seek refuge and protection.⁴⁴ Unintentionally, in focusing on the concept of ‘consent’ to justify the reaction of the Irish people in April 1918, historians might hope to draw a line between the free will of the ‘Irish people’ and the compulsion imposed by a ‘foreign country’. Claiming that the Irish refused to fight (and be conscripted) in April 1918 because the British government had decided for them is fundamentally inaccurate. The Irish Parliamentary Party consented to morally support the British in their crusade against Germany and called upon Irishmen to assist the United Kingdom. Let us not forget that by August 1914, Home Rule spoke for the expectations of a staggering majority of (nationalist) Irishmen and Irishwomen. And perhaps the First World War taught these communities that devolution would not shield Ireland from British international security concerns. After all, a Home Rule Ireland would have (most certainly) been dragged into the conflict, as the island was in August 1914. It is ironic (from a French point of view) to realise that the bitter divisions in French historiography between advocates of the theory of ‘consent’ and staunch followers of the notion of ‘constraint’ are gradually being projected onto the Irish case.⁴⁵

Adapt, rephrase and reconcile

Until the late 1990s, save for some military studies,⁴⁶ historians remained silent about Ireland’s place in the First World War. For this reason, the Irish were often described as suffering from a ‘national amnesia’.⁴⁷ Since the rapprochement between President Mary McAleese and Queen Elizabeth II in Belgium in 1998, there has emerged the impulse to dig into the past of Ireland and excavate a forgotten chapter of Irish history. To a certain extent, the process of memorialising the First World War has paralleled a legitimate willingness to reconcile the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Commemorations of the First World War were propelled at the forefront of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Reconciliation between the two islands and within Ireland was to be shaped on the shared history of men

and women who had given their lives during the global conflict, under the same 'British' flag. Together the two heads of states opened up a new chapter in Anglo-Irish/British-Irish relations as the past stories of individual soldiers demanded to be heard. Pride stemming from having an ancestor who had fought in the 1916 uprising is now being substituted with pride arising from discovering that a relative had participated in the First World War. As such, 1914–18 has become the cornerstone of any diplomatic reconciliation between the island of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Paralleled by a thirst to rediscover Ireland's history and a willingness to bridge political differences between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, a new generation of Irish and British historians has contributed to the rediscovery of Ireland's past while memorialising the First World War. Following the publication of Nuala Johnson's groundbreaking study in 2003,⁴⁸ historians have revealed that commemorations took place in the 1920s across the thirty-six counties, and war memorials were erected as tokens of recognition to the dead. Though more emphasis has been given to the parades and politics of remembrance in Northern Ireland,⁴⁹ it has been concluded that private individuals and communities also gathered on 11th November to honour the fallen in the Irish Free State.⁵⁰ Consequently, a question remains: when did the Irish Free State/Éire actually lose interest in the Great War? This is of crucial importance, as it appears that a memorial gap opened up before the Second World War until the late 1990s. Could this be attributed to Éamon de Valera's political accession to power? Was it a direct consequence of the Free State's proclaimed neutrality during the Second World War? It seems the process of memorialising had been enacted in the 1920s before being eventually stopped for reasons which will have to be determined by future historians.

Arguably, the Republic of Ireland's national oblivion has now come to an end and it is indeed telling that the Decade of Centenaries has promoted a popular publication industry in Ireland that possibly matches popular works on the Great Famine. Current levels of interest in Ireland's role between 1914 and 1918 have transcended the academic world and spilt over all sections of Irish society. In the Republic of Ireland, the elderly and the young, the heirs of republican martyrs, along with the great-grandchildren of unionist communities, are gradually rediscovering a forgotten chapter of their nation's history. Multiple public engagement initiatives, both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, have furthered better understanding of the role of Irishmen and Irishwomen in supporting the war effort. For instance, the QUB-based 'Living Legacies 1914–1918 For Past Conflict to Shared Future' public engagement centre has reaffirmed its intention to dig out Ireland's heritage while contributing to knowledge making.

Time will tell whether national authorities such as the Department of Education (*An Roinn Oideachais*) will incorporate the memory of the Great War in history curriculums, thus reshaping the psyche and collective memory of their future citizens and furthering the memorialising of the First World War. In a few years, historians will then be able to determine whether the revival of interest surrounding the global conflict stemmed from a genuine thirst to remember or from a politically motivated (Europeanised) concern to give more visibility to the Republic of Ireland as an independent state within the European Union. Because nothing indicates that this vivid interest in the global conflict will not fade away in spite of all the attention it has caught.

As European citizens, during the Centenary, the Irish have joined all member states in commemorating, honouring and pondering on the sacrifice of their dead. When on 11th November 2018 *Taoiseach* Leo Varadkar sat next to other heads of states for the commemoration of the Centenary of the First World War in Paris, this clearly gave the impression that the Irish people (as a whole) had backed the war effort and that the sacrifices of Irishmen during the conflict were now being fully recognised and commemorated. But what Ireland was Varadkar in Paris to represent? John Redmond's? Sinn Féin's? Was it a diplomatic move to commemorate the participation of the 134,202 Irishmen who had volunteered?⁵¹ Diplomatic and political motivations certainly conditioned Ireland's representation in Paris and matched the political expectations of a country fully integrated within the European Union, which demanded to be recognised

for its sacrifice in 1914–18. A few years later, however, President Michael D. Higgins's refusal to attend service in St Patrick's Cathedral (Armagh) in October 2021 baffled British and Northern Irish public opinion (as well as many in the Republic of Ireland).⁵² What was the point of endorsing all Irishmen's fight in the First World War without recognising the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, given an important proportion of Irishmen who volunteered for the war were from Ulster and one of the three divisions was 'unionist'?⁵³ Such lack of consistency and earnestness jarred with the goal of inclusiveness and tolerance advocated during the Decade of Centenaries. Centenaries, commemorations and diplomatic strategies must not influence historians. As Cornelius Crowley has reminded historians, presentism is not desired as 'it ignores both the authority of history and the warning which awaits us in the historical real.'⁵⁴

This is the reason why, in light of all these above-mentioned lines of inquiry, a social history of Ireland (encompassing rural communities) is needed if historians are to fully come to terms with what really happened between 1914 and 1918, and to properly tackle the question of 'consent' and 'constraint' in relation to the war effort. In addition, in the continuity of Bowman's, Butler's and Wheatley's achievements, historians need to devote a comprehensive book-length research to the April 1918 Conscription Crisis in Ulster (but more generally to the anti-conscription movement in Ulster), determining if the urban/rural – Belfast/countryside divide existed (and, if so, what its magnitude was). Beyond the initially focused support of the architects of Easter Week 1916 for Germany, a future generation of historians will reveal whether the gradual shifting allegiance towards Sinn Féin from 1917 onwards implied some (ideological or pragmatic) incentive to support Germany against the century-old 'enemy' of the 'Irish people'. Finally, it will have to be determined when (and why) the memory of the First World War sank into oblivion in the middle of the twentieth century. In a few years' time, anyone will be able to say if the Republic of Ireland of today opted to anchor the global conflict in the collective memory of its people or if the Centenary of the First World War was just a politically motivated parenthesis to commemorate a lost generation that still struggles to find its rightful place in modern Irish history.

Acknowledgements. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Carl Griffin for his detailed comments on earlier drafts and for supporting the publication of the piece. I am also particularly thankful to Cornelius Crowley for his suggestions.

Notes

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