

The Immortal Deed of Michael O'Leary

CÓNAL CREEDON



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I dedicate this book to my mother, Siobhán Blake of Crooha, Adrigole on the Beara Peninsula, and her nine sisters, Anne, Dinah, Eileen, Elizabeth, Margaret, Martha, Maura, Kit and Theresa. Therein lies the greatest history never told.

About the Author

Cónal Creedon is a novelist, playwright and documentary film maker.

His work has been translated into German, Bulgarian, Italian, with English extracts published in China. His books include: *Pancho and Lefty Ride Out* [1995], *Passion Play* [1999], *Second City Trilogy* [2007].

His stage plays include: *The Trial Of Jesus* [2000], *Glory Be To The Father* [2002], *After Luke* [2005], *When I Was God* [2005], *The Cure* [2005]. Creedon's stage plays were received with critical acclaim in Ireland and were subsequently produced in Shanghai, China and New York, USA. The New York productions picked up a number of accolades at the 2009 & 2013 Irish New York Theatre Awards, including: Awarded Best Director [2009], Best Actor [2013], Nominated Best Playwright [2013].

Cónal has written over 60 hours of radio drama, his work has been broadcast on RTÉ, BBC, Radio 4 & BBC World Service. His radio drama featured in the *Irish Times* radio critics list of best radio of the year for 1994 & 1997.

Cónal's film documentaries include: *The Burning of Cork* [2005], *Why the Guns Remained Silent in Rebel Cork* [2006], *If it's Spiced Beef* [2007], *Flynnie: The Man Who Walked Like Shakespeare* [2008] – shortlisted for the Focal International Documentary Awards in London UK, *The Boys of Fairhill* [2009]. Creedon's documentaries have been screened by RTÉ TV [Irish National Broadcaster] and have had numerous public screenings, including at the Irish Pavilion in Shanghai China, during World Expo 2010.

www.conalcreedon.com



Studio Portrait of Sgt Michael O'Leary VC – June 1915.
Taken during his first visit home after his immortal deed
at Cuinchy near La Bassée Canal, February 1st 1915.

Before I Begin

As a non-historian, it is true to say that, over the past while, I have regularly found myself bogged down in the blood and the gore, and entangled in the love and the lore of history, and for some odd reason I am reminded of Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart VC.

Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart VC, who is buried on the banks of the River Lee just east of Iveleary in the shadow of the old McCarthy castle at Carrigadrohid, was a one-eyed, one-handed war hero who fought in the Boer War, World War One and World War Two. An irrepressible combatant, he fought in three major conflicts across six decades. He escaped prisoner of war camps, survived plane crashes, was shot in the face, lost his left eye, was wounded in the groin and the knee – he was shot through the skull, hip, leg, ankle and ear. It is said he was the most wounded officer in the British Army, having been hit a grand total of 11 times, yet he died in the full of his health, in his own bed at the ripe old age of eighty-three. Sir Adrian is remembered for his quote: ‘Frankly, I enjoyed the war.’

Why do I think of Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart VC at this time?¹ Well, as I prepare this final draft for publication I am concerned that I have omitted some pivotal moment in the life and times of Michael O’Leary VC. But I take heart when I think of Sir Adrian, because in the first edition of his fascinating autobiography ‘Happy Odyssey’² there were a number of such omissions.

He neglected to include any mention of his first wife, his two daughters and, for some reason, he made no reference to his Victoria Cross.



There is that story about a visiting history professor who came to Cork. One morning, walking out of his hotel, he turned right instead of left and found himself lost. Heading east along MacCurtain Street, he stopped a local man and asked for directions to UCC. As the Corkonian pondered the multiple combinations and permutations of quays, bridges, laneways, thoroughfares, tree-lined avenues and boulevards that might best lead the disorientated academic to the university gates – he proceeded to explain:

‘Y’see, the river Lee has two channels...

...and that’s the root cause of your confusion. Right now, you’re on the northern bank of the north channel heading east. The College, that’s where you want to be, is on the southern bank of the south channel heading west. But it’s not a simple matter of crossing two rivers and heading in the opposite direction of the compass.

Y’see, between the two channels is a maze of little streets that have the knack of looping back on themselves, and if you’re not careful you could easily find yourself back on the north channel again, thinking you had reached the south channel, and if that happened you’d automatically turn right thinking you were heading west, but of course in reality you’d be heading east – bringing you right back here to where you started...

See what I mean?’

The professor had an inquiring mind, and was intrigued by the conundrum presented by the helpful Corkonian, so he stood there listening.

‘Now if you were visiting Cork a few hundred years ago, you wouldn’t have a snowball’s hope. See, back then, all the main streets in this town were rivers. In fact, we had so many waterways that Venice was known as – the Cork of the south.’

‘Really?’ said the professor and raised an eyebrow of disbelief.

‘On me mother’s soul,’ said the Corkonian. ‘But you don’t have to take my word for it. If you go down along Patrick’s Street or up along the South Mall, you’ll see some of the old boat houses, still sticking out of the ground floor of the buildings, with the steps down either side to street level to where the waterway used to be.

In fact, if you look at the Cork coat of arms, that ship between the

towers is actually a representation of modern day Castle Street by Daunt Square. Can you believe that? Left and right – the King’s Old Castle and the Queen’s Old Castle, and a ship in the middle of Castle Street. You won’t believe this, but I read somewhere that some fella, to this very day, still holds a permit to moor his ship on the Grand Parade outside the Capitol Cinema. A ship on the Grand Parade? That’d be some how d’ya do, all the same, hah?’

The helpful Corkonian was in full flight about the arrival of the Danes back in the 10th century. He told how they set up their base along the Kiln River near present day John Street, and explained that the Danes were a better class of Viking. He made the point that it was no coincidence that John Street led to the ancient settlement of Blackpool, otherwise known as Linn Dubh; meanwhile in Dublin a similar settlement was established by their more blood-thirsty and rowdy Viking cousins called Dubh Linn.

‘You’d have to ask yerself, why Linn Dubh in Cork – is called Dubh Linn in Dublin?’ he said. ‘I mean, if you were drowning in a black pool of water, would you say that you were in a ‘black pool’ or a ‘pool black?’ ‘Eh? A black pool?’ mused the confused visitor. ‘Fair enough,’ said the Corkonian. ‘But if a lifeguard came along would he want to know where you were drowning – or would he be more interested in the colour of the water?’ ‘He’d want to know where I was drowning of course,’ said the academic. ‘The colour would be secondary.’ ‘Exactly!’ said the Corkonian. ‘And that’s why in the Irish language we say: ‘linn dubh’ – ‘pool black’. Not ‘dubh linn’. D’ya see what I mean?’

Noticing the addled eyes of the academic, the Corkonian attempted to clarify his theory,

‘See, here in Cork we say Linn Dubh, but in Dublin they say Dubh Linn. The point I’m making is that even way back then, Viking Dublin was more influenced by the Anglo – whereas the Cork Danes were Gaelgóirs to the core. D’ya know what I mean? Like one of our own...’

And he was off talking about something else.

He told how St. Finbarr had been a teacher up in the College, and he said something about the Black and Tans burning the city to the ground. In between curly tales he managed to ask the professor if he had ever eaten tripe and drisheen, or held a hurley in his hand, pucked a sliotar in anger; had he played the Shandon bells, kissed the Blarney Stone, visited the English Market, gone down the river Lee in a currach and he mentioned that:

‘...the ordinary working class people of the Northside of this city are recognised the world over as the greatest aficionados of Grand Opera.’

And without taking a breath, he made the bold claim that,

‘...Murphy’s was a summer stout, Beamish was a winter stout and Guinness was for rubbing into greyhounds’ elbows.’

Every now and then he anchored the plausibility of his narrative with a liberal sprinkling of names such as The Great O’Neill, Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh, Perkin Warbeck, Cromwell, Fredrick Douglass...

‘...and did you know Charles Dickens read from the stage of the Cork Opera House? Not once – but twice! And that was the ‘old’ Cork Opera House...’

...and like salt on a stew he continued sprinkling anecdotal details of famous people: Terence MacSwiney, John F. Kennedy, The Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson – the list went on and on.

‘...did you ever hear of Father O’Flynn up in The Loft? Devoted his life to teaching Shakespeare to the poor children of the Northside. What that man didn’t know about Shakespeare wasn’t worth knowing...

A great man for curing stutters was Father O’Flynn. By all accounts, he was invited to Buckingham Palace to cure George VI’s stutter. Did you know that?

‘Eh, No?’

‘Oh yes, over to Buckingham Palace he was invited...’

‘And did he go?’ asked the academic.

‘He did in his hole,’ said the Corkonian. ‘He turned them down flat, saying he had a prior engagement with Richard III.

...have you tried O’Flynn’s sausages? The real O’Flynn’s sausages,’ he corrected himself.

The professor glanced at his watch and realising that *tempus fugit*, he waited for a gap in the gobbledegook.

‘Sorry to interrupt you,’ he said. ‘But the University? How do I get there from here?’

The Corkonian paused for a moment, and with one eye half-closed and the other half-cocked, he shook his head,

‘From here, you say?’

‘Eh, Yes.’

‘On foot, you say?’

‘Eh, Yes.’

‘Tell you the truth, if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here at all.’

I recount this well-trodden, hoary tale because, when I began to write this book, it soon became apparent to me that a non-historian finding his way around history can be a bit like a non-Corkonian finding his way around Cork – it’s not easy, and there’s every chance you’ll get distracted along the way. As an historian friend of mine put it,

‘The problem with history is that there’s too bloody much of it.’

History does not unfold in a linear narrative like a neat row of stepping stones paving the way through time, nor does it follow predictable plot-points laid down by the simple laws of cause and effect so that future generations can just join the dots to form the perfect picture. No. History is more like multiple splatters of ink on a blotter spreading out in all directions at once. It is an ever-evolving narrative fuelled by the unpredictable complexity of human nature, extenuating circumstance, random acts of chance, and, of course, the historian’s point of view. It falls to historians to convert the convoluted streams of consciousness of the past

into a logical narrative sequence in the present, so that it might be understood in the future – or something like that.

History telling, like storytelling, has a tendency to become subjective, where plot points are assembled and expressed as a point of view. Despite the best practice of professional impartiality and integrity, point of view tends to dictate the heroes, the villains, the winners and the losers of history. Maybe that explains why one man's patriot is another man's terrorist and the liberator of one nation is an agitator to another. Of course, historians differ, conflicting points of view can become entrenched and ne'er the twain shall meet. Maybe that explains why conflicts resolved through the steel end of a gun in the far distant past continue to be the source of such aggravated academic argument in the present.

I am not a historian, I'm a storyteller, and my primary focus has always been the exploration of character rather than the fabrication of narrative. I take the view that a well-drawn character is a narrative in itself. Consequently when faced with the task of presenting the story of Michael O'Leary, I did not feel an urgency to fill in the blank spaces of history, or to painstakingly join the dots along the timeline of his lifetime. Rather I was drawn to understand a sense of the man, a sense of his background, his heritage, a sense of his time and place, a sense of how he arrived to that time and place. If it's a history book you're looking for, this book may not be for you; in these pages, you'll find more question marks than exclamation marks.

Unsure where it might lead, I set out on my quest to uncover the beating heart of Michael O'Leary of Iveleary. Along the way I encountered diversion at every turn of the road, and regularly found myself enticed off course by a whole cast of fascinating characters who seemed to be waiting in the wings for their moment in the limelight.

It soon became apparent to me that each successive generation of the O'Leary clan begat a new crop of remarkable men and women who stood head and shoulders above all the rest. While, beyond the confines of the bloodline, I encountered so many spellbinding characters in supporting roles. One example was the clairvoyant, Ms. Nell St. John Montague of Leamlara, who mesmerised the highest echelons of British society with her magical monkey, Judy, and blazed a trail to superstardom on stage and screen. I found myself enthralled by the resilience of ancient Norman families such as the Fitzgeralds of Desmond, the Standish Barry dynasty of Leamlara and the Ulster Scott, Innes-Cross clan from Newry, Co. Down. Closer to home, I was mystified by the extraordinary story of Michael Creedon of Illauninagh, a man who single-handedly banished supernatural forces, then went on to do battle with the forces of nature – and won.

It is true to say I have been disorientated, and at times, overwhelmed by the spider's web of interconnection that is Iveleary. But just at that crucial moment, when abandoning the project seemed like the only salvation for my sanity, destiny always intervened, and a chance encounter would inevitably lead me to a fireside, where I would drink tea and listen, and all would become clear again.

I have been surprised and inspired by my attachment to a people: the O'Learys, Cotters, O'Riordans, O'Deas, Cronins, O'Mahonys, Creedons; and to a place: Cooleen, Kilbarry, Inchigeela, Illauninagh, Currahy, Keimaneigh, Gougán. Sometimes this connection can be as broad as Iveleary itself. But, more often than not, it is confined to a specific location such as a bend on the river at Carrignacurra, or a twist in the road at Casadh na Spride in a place known as Drom an Ailigh.

As I travelled the land of the O'Learys, I have walked through ancient graveyards, climbed the ruins of crumbling castles and scrambled across clapper bridges that somehow seem to span time and link the present to the past. Along the way I have been privileged to find encouragement and support from so many people, including Michael O'Leary's granddaughter, Sharon Brown, and his great-granddaughter, Charlotte, who shared personal insights and memories, and offered access to their family photographs for inclusion in this book. Likewise, I was delighted to make contact with Gretta Hegarty's great-grandniece – Grete [Gretta] Hegarty from Ballyvourney, and the O'Deas of Kilbarry, who had been such a positive mentoring influence to the young Michael O'Leary throughout his short formal education and who stood loyally by his side long after his school days were over.

There are so many others whom I just happened to chance upon such as Mary Rose O'Mahony and her sister-in-law, Sheila O'Mahony [Kelleher], who were so welcoming and generous with their time, knowledge and hospitality. Likewise, I found a kindred spirit in Peter Murphy's personal interest in Michael O'Leary – I was fascinated to discover that Peter's family history intersected with mine on so many levels.

The many periodicals, such as *The Irish Political Review* and *History Ireland*, which continue to keep my mind open by breaking new ground on historical perspectives, have been invaluable to me. I was fortunate to have encountered Seán Ó Súilleabháin, of Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh during the early days of this project. I greatly appreciate the freehanded access Seán gave me to his research and his depth of local insight into Iveleary. The Cumann Staire is a living archive of a people and I am indebted to its many contributors, far too many to mention here by name. Long may this priceless resource continue to grow – long may it be preserved.

It was reassuring to know that help was always just a phone call away from people such as Bríd Cranitch and the team at Ionad Cultúra in Baile Bhúirne. On a number of occasions when I found myself confounded by convoluted detail I was grateful to be able to rely on Manus O’Riordan’s help, whose work and detailed research I tapped into throughout this project. I am privileged to be able to climb onto the shoulders of those who went before and access the writings of those no longer with us, including the countless sagas recorded and recounted by the O’Leary bards, poets, seanchaithe and scribes down through the centuries, that stand testament to a once proud and prestigious clan. I am especially appreciative of the writings of the more recently departed Peter O’Leary, whose contextualised presentation of the past has become a primary source for the Clan O’Leary of Iveleary.

I am also privileged to have a whole host of friends and fellow-travellers who were just an email away: the power poet, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, who was always ready and willing to help out with translation; Jim Herlihy, whose research of the various police forces in Ireland is second to none; Gerry White, whose collaborative research with Brendan O’Shea reveals an expansive body of work – from the formation of the Irish Volunteers right through to the Irish Civil War, stopping off along the way to compile the mammoth book *A Great Sacrifice* – the definitive tome on the Cork servicemen and servicewomen who died during or as a result of World War One.

There are a number of people without whose help this book would not have been possible. From the outset, Liam Ronayne of Cork City Library has been the instigator and a continuing source of encouragement for this project. It would not have made it to the bookshelf without his support. I am grateful to Stuart Coughlan for his tasteful eye for design and presentation of the finished product. I’d like to thank my neighbour John Cowhie for his morale-boosting chats and his detailed insights into Irish history, my friend John Borgonovo for his good company and his incisive and well-informed view of the past and Dominic Carroll for giving me the right advice at the right time. My continuing gratitude to Tina Neylon, who has been a long-term supporter of my work, for readily offering her expertise when ever it was needed – and a special thanks to Danny Morrison who agreed without hesitation to down tools and write the introduction to this book during a particularly busy phase in his own writing.

My deepest gratitude to my cousin and good friend Joe Creedon goes without saying. Cousin Joe has been a pillar of support, a mine of gold-nugget information and an inspiration; for many years he has been my host and trusted guide to Iveleary. Of course my heartfelt appreciation and grateful thanks to the wonderful

Fiona O'Toole for her natural ability to laugh in the face of adversity and continue dancing long after the band has packed up and left the stage.

Finally, a special go raibh míle maith agat – to the photographer assigned to this project, my niece, Ruby Kearney-O'Toole – for her keen eye and astute map-reading skills as we crossed rivers, climbed mountain trails and trundled our way through the lattice-work of ancient tracks and boreens of Iveleary.

Cónal Creedon.

Introduction

What drove so many Irishmen to join the British Army and the Royal Navy in the 1914-1918 War? What drove them to fight for Britain hundreds of miles from home, in Flanders, and much further away in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia? By the same token what drove Croats and Slovenes to fight their fellow Slavs, under the banners of the Austro-Hungarian Empire? Like so many across Europe, we are remembering World War One, and trying to make sense of its meanings and legacies.

Irishmen had, of course, been fighting and dying in Britain's colours for many years before 1914. Cónal Creedon quotes a British prime minister from a century before:

‘We want the men, Ireland wants a vent for its superabundant population;
could not these two wants be reconciled’

The extraordinary life of Michael O’Leary from Inchigeela is just one example of this complex web of push and pull.

In this period of cascading centenaries it can seem that we are being asked to remember unconnected events from a century ago, events unconnected to us and events unconnected to each other. For the people who lived through these events – the Gaelic revival, the start of the War, the Rising and more – they were anything but unconnected, one fed into the other. Thus the dismay at the unceasing slaughter combined with the fear of conscription to radicalize Irish society in the middle years of the War, feeding into how the Easter Rising was perceived after the dust had settled in Dublin, and preparing the ground for the conflict in the years after.

What, if anything, have we to learn from these events? Most people would accept that it was in this decade, from 1913 to 1923, that the Ireland we have inherited was forged. But is this only a matter for history buffs? This decade of commemoration gives our country a unique opportunity to hold up a mirror to contemporary society, and anything which prompts us to discuss the lessons we might learn from the events of one hundred years ago is to be welcomed.

The Immortal Deed of Michael O'Leary is so much more than an account of his 'immortal deed' on 1 February 1915, and of the 'making of a hero', the creation of O'Leary mania, as Cónal describes it, in the months that followed, all designed to bolster the war effort. It is Cónal Creedon's journey through the life of O'Leary and of his home place, Uíbh Laoghaire – the land of the O'Learys, a 'spider's web of connections' in Cónal's words. Cork City Libraries are delighted to publish this important and fascinating book.

Liam Ronayne
Cork City Librarian

Foreword

DANNY MORRISON

You can almost feel Cónal Creedon's frisson of excitement at his serendipitous find of an old shoe box containing letters and handwritten speeches by Michael O'Leary, the World War One Irish soldier and Victoria Cross-recipient to whose life and times Cónal has become compulsively drawn, through family connections and with the forensic curiosity of a writer beholding the artefacts of a man's history. I know that feeling of privilege, having once been given a diary, photographs and love letters written by a young Canadian soldier, my wife Leslie's great Uncle Bob Conklin. His aura infused every page and ink-written sentence, especially his vows of love to his sweetheart Isobel Howes whom he planned to marry. I held in my hand and read the telegram his mother received from the Director of Records regretting to inform her that on the 29th August 1918, Bob died of gunshot wounds, sustained at the Battle of Arras. It arrived on 6 September, the day on which Bob would have been 21, just five weeks before Germany sent out her first peace note.

Eerily, because of the delay of mail from the Front, the Conklin family kept receiving letters from Bob after they learnt of his death:

'Give my love to all and don't worry on my account;
Someday I'll be able to say what I would like to, I think, if all goes well,
and then there won't be any need to close as follows. Well, my news is
finished, so I'll ring off. I will write mother in a few days. Love to all.
Bob.'

Cónal's quest to discover the spiritual DNA of Michael O'Leary is an excursion through beautiful Iveleary-Inchigeelagh in West Cork, its folk and folklore, its mysteries, myths and truths, and the omnipresence of history in our lives. The distant past is actually in touching distance, if you think about it. Michael O'Leary

was born in 1888. Seems a long time ago. But my Granny White was born in 1884 and knew people who survived the Famine.

Iveleary-Inchigeela, where Michael O'Leary was born, had a tradition of soldiering going back centuries and - until World War One – the stigma attached to those Irish who 'took the Queen's shilling', as the pejorative expression goes, was fairly muted because the breadwinner of so many hungry families throughout the length and breadth of Ireland either became dependent on this source of revenue to survive or had to emigrate, with or without loved ones.

O'Leary himself hailed from the rural poor and was reared by his grandmother on a few acres, and so deprivation, along with John Redmond's powerful rhetoric invoking guilt, duty and reward, explain his decision to voluntarily join the British Army.

It is true that down the centuries Irishmen took up arms in military conflicts in Europe and the Americas, sometimes as mercenaries. But I don't believe that Irish people are predisposed to belligerency any more than any other people. But the myth of the 'Fighting Irish' persists, and I have read claims that Irish warriors invaded Greece with King Darius, served the Pharaohs, acted as bodyguards for Cleopatra, and crossed the Alps with Hannibal.

Robert Graves (who wrote a fine, revelatory and shocking memoir about his experiences in World War One, *Goodbye To All That*) immortalised this Irish military tradition in his novel *Sergeant Lamb of the Ninth*, based on the journals of the real life figure of Dublin-born Roger Lamb who, as an infantryman in the British Army's Welsh Fusiliers, went off to suppress the American Revolution and was eventually taken prisoner.

But it was General Robert E. Lee, leader of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia during the American Civil War who, as far as I can see, invented the nickname "the Fighting Irish" in response to the bravery of The Fighting 69th (the Irish Brigade), formed in New York from Irish immigrants.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that given the prevalence of this military tradition, if not a stoic acceptance of its persistence, that nationalism and republicanism would attempt to recruit those Irish into the British Army and exploit their expertise.

Irish history is littered with examples of soldiers and former soldiers putting to use their military training in the service of Irish freedom. The Fenians had 15,000 men in the British Army, 8,000 in Ireland alone, making nearly a third of the 25,000 troops stationed here. IRA men like Tom Barry and Emmet Dalton were former soldiers. In 1921 Sean Murray, ex-Sergeant Major of the Irish Guards Regiment (O'Leary's old regiment), was the training officer for the IRA Volunteers in Iveleary.

The IRA during the War of Independence had infiltrated Dublin Castle with its spies (in an ironic reversal for Britain, used to being *the* spymaster) and had, of course, many allies in the Royal Irish Constabulary providing it with information and intelligence.

Even in more recent times the IRA was quick to recruit ex-soldiers for their military know-how. Former paratrooper Paul Marlowe trained the IRA in 1969, became an IRA member and was subsequently killed on an IRA operation. In 1971, after the introduction of internment, the Catholic Ex-Servicemen's Association, which claimed a membership of several thousand, was set up in Belfast and other nationalist areas with the stated aim of using their former British Army training to protect their neighbourhoods from attack. (Incidentally, the first soldier to be killed in the North during the Troubles was Trooper Hugh McCabe, shot dead by the RUC, while defending the Falls Road in August 1969 when he was home on leave from the British Army.)

Ireland was not the only colony to supply Britain with military might. The cannon fodder came from all continents, all colonies, and they sacrificed themselves in all theatres of war without their sacrifices translating into freedom for their nations, big or small.

Why? Why did the Irish fight and die in such large numbers?

One quarter of a million Irishmen (including the UVF's 36th Ulster Division) marched to war under the British banner. Among them was Michael O'Leary, and 4,000 young men from Cork City and County who were to lose their lives.

Think about that: one quarter of a million Irishmen. The nationalist contingent of the Irish Volunteers, a majority of whom had sided with John Redmond, were led to believe by the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party that in fighting for the freedom of small nations such as Belgium they were advancing and securing Irish claims to Home Rule. Factor in the dependents of these men and the many other Irish people working in war-related service industries and you get a sense of the national involvement, indeed the mass *political* investment in that war; the mass *trust* in Britain keeping its promise regarding Home Rule. And you also get a sense of the mass *disillusionment* (if not shame, but certainly deep and bitter regret) that would follow in the wake of Britain renegeing on its promises.

From the unionist point of view, their men fought to prevent Home Rule and to maintain the union with Britain for all thirty-two counties or, failing that, for Ulster's nine counties.

While Carson unionist and Redmond nationalist were away at the Front, the

Irish Republican Brotherhood struck at home and at Easter 1916 declared a Republic. The Rising was brutally suppressed – how else could an imperial power react to such audacity.

As Yeats put it, dramatically, succinctly: ‘All changed, changed utterly.’

The writer, Tom Kettle, who was to be killed in September 1916, was appalled by the actions of Pearse and Connolly, denouncing the Rising as madness. Yet after the murder of his brother-in-law, the pacifist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, and the executions of the republican leaders, Kettle knew his own position with the British Army at the Somme had lost whatever validity it initially had.

That huge disparity in numbers between, for example, those who fought and died in Dublin during the 1916 Rising (318 rebel and civilian fatalities) and those Irish who died during the disastrous eight-month siege of Gallipoli (2,800) inspired Canon Charles O’Neill, the parish priest of Kilcoo, County Down, to write *The Foggy Dew* whose lyrics contain these bitter, haunting lines:

*‘Twas far better to die ‘neath an Irish sky
Than at Swla or Sud el Bar.*

Britain’s betrayal of the estimated 35-50,000 Irish who died (the true figure is unknowable), undermined and destroyed Redmond’s Parliamentary Party which became quickly supplanted by Sinn Féin. Britain’s betrayal shattered and overshadowed the lives of returning war veterans who faced public apathy and animosity in a land experiencing a political revolution.

Support for the republican cause was confirmed by the massive increase in support for Sinn Féin in the December 1918 general election, with 73 elected out of 105 TDs. The suppression of Dáil Éireann coincided with the rise of the Irish Republican Army, the War of Independence, Partition and Civil War – the ramifications of which are still with us today.

A new narrative was being written, in Irish blood for Irish freedom, and not for the Empire. The story of the returnees, about what they had endured and sacrificed, the loss of comrades, the bloodshed at the Front, hundreds of miles from home, was totally eclipsed by a new reality - raids by the Auxiliaries, the Black and Tans, the British Army, the murders and harassment of the civilian population, Collins’ guerrilla war and the activities of Flying Columns, most famously in West Cork.

Though many ex-servicemen would be shot as spies and some, like Barry, would take their military skills into the fledgling IRA, Cónal makes the point that a soldier of valour like Michael O’Leary was free to come and go in rebel Cork where he was held in great respect.

My own grandfather, Grandda Jimmy Morrison, from the Falls Road, joined the Royal Flying Corps (later known as the RAF) in 1917 and worked as part of the ground crew. I have no information to suggest that he was ever cold-shouldered in West Belfast after he was demobilised.

What I do know was that shortly after his return he was arrested and charged with raising funds for the IRA. He defended himself, was acquitted, went south and joined the National (Free State) Army, deserted, returned to the North (where his 11-year-old brother was killed by a British army lorry in 1922, at the time of partition), and married my grandmother Ellen Pyper.

When the 1939 war broke out he re-joined the RAF and was based in Malta during the Luftwaffe bombardment. Towards the end of World War Two my father joined the RAF for a short time and was trained in an aerodrome called Long Kesh (where I would be 'based' as a republican internee two decades later!).

I am also aware that my maternal grandfather, Grandda Billy White, would not let his own brother Paddy cross the door of his Falls Road home when he returned from World War One. Paddy was told:

'Come back when you have taken that uniform off and then you can come in!'

I cannot be sure if there were different attitudes in 'the North' (which had yet to be established as the 'Northern Ireland' state) than in 'the South' towards the returnees. Perhaps there was a greater forgiveness or generosity or dependence in the North, particularly in Belfast, from nationalists who feared for their safety and would require the skills of these veterans in the event of a crisis (which is what did happen).

Unionists, on the other hand, after 1918, scented victory. It dawned on them that the reality of a Catholic-Protestant, evenly-divided Ulster, temporarily opting out of Home Rule, didn't give them the monopoly on power which they wanted. The Ulster Unionist Party would subsequently ditch its brethren in Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan in return for 'a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant People' in the six counties. Those in the 36th Ulster Division could take pride in their war and what they had achieved. They made the wearing of the poppy synonymous with their cause, thus creating a barrier for nationalists had they wanted to honour their war dead.

Irish people were not the only ones fooled by British promises. In 1914 India was in a state of growing political unrest and the National Congress was seeking independence. Encouraged to believe that the cause of independence, or at least

self-government, would be served by fighting for Britain, Indians flocked to the war. But they too were badly let down. It was to be 1947 before India was granted independence (which included the partitioning of the subcontinent).

In the Middle East, in 1916, Britain promised the Arabs (including those in Palestine) 'complete and final liberation' if they would rise up against the Turks. After the war Britain reneged on its pledges, drew borders here and there and partitioned the region regardless of the wishes of the local inhabitants. The Palestinians are still waiting for their independence.

One hundred years distant from these events, we who honour Ireland's patriot dead should feel able to acknowledge the selflessness and patriotism of those thousands of Irish men and women who participated in World War One. They were quite innocent – they were not to know that their victory would be turned into their defeat. Clearly, they were brave and selfless men.

The difficulty, of course, is to separate commemoration and memory of the war dead from support for the British administration in Ireland or the cause of British military adventurism today. Recently, a former Fine Gael Taoiseach, John Bruton, even argued that 1916 was 'a mistake', shouldn't have happened, and that because Home Rule was on the statute book (albeit suspended for the duration of the war), a Rising was unnecessary.

Some revisionists put up obstacles to republican participation in the act of remembrance through the invective they use. Some seek to create a sense of public guilt. By exploiting the war dead and war veterans, by making often disparaging comparisons between the warfare and sacrifices of those Irish who fought against the British in Ireland and those who fought with the British abroad, they seek to subtly, or explicitly, demonise the IRA, almost a return to the days when captured prisoners, Pearse and Connolly were spat on as they were marched through the streets of Dublin.

In the view of these revisionists/partitionists the IRA's War of Independence should be rejected, its heroes tarnished (and in the process the cause of Irish reunification). Undoubtedly, some of this is related to their discomfort with obvious parallels between the aims, objectives and modus operandi of the IRA during the War of Independence and the IRA's armed campaign in the North from 1970 until the ceasefire.

We heard similar commentary in 2001 at the re-interment of Kevin Barry and nine other IRA Volunteers in Glasnevin Cemetery, men who had been court-martialled and executed by British forces in 1920–1921.

'Why could they not be exhumed and reburied in private?' asked the *Sunday Times*. The funerals, wrote Fintan O'Toole in the *Irish Times*, will offer 'a great

boost to those who want us to feel that the only difference between a terrorist and a patriot is the passage of time.’ Kevin Myers, also in the *Irish Times*, complained that the event was all about reaffirming ‘a single narrative of suffering and sacrifice.’ Such commentators would have Ireland feel guilty about its past, without begging the same moral question of Britain about its disastrous role in Irish affairs. The funerals, they said, ‘are sending a dangerous signal to impressionable young people’ and ‘will be widely and dangerously misunderstood’. What they actually meant was that ‘the people are stupid and we have to save them from themselves.’

It was nonsense to suggest that the reburials made Irish people retrospective conspirators to shootings and bombings, or that it legitimised the most recent IRA campaign, or acted as a recruiting sergeant for the IRA. If you were to ask any ex-republican prisoner or former IRA Volunteer to name who influenced their decision the most to join the IRA, the answer would not be Kevin Barry but would be, ‘a British soldier’.

I decide for myself how to honour those republicans who fought and died for Ireland. I decide for myself how to honour and do justice to those who fought in World War One believing they were fighting for the freedom of small nations, and those who fought fascism during World War Two.

Last year in Malta I visited the Siege Bell Memorial overlooking the Great Harbour of Valletta which was erected to honour the 7000 people who were killed during the German bombardment. On a sunny afternoon I sat alone at a table on a small street café, bought a local beer, a type that my Grandda might have liked, and toasted the life of one who took part in two wars only to die from emphysema at the age of 61, the age I am now.

Ten years ago my wife and I, her mother Sheila, her sister Wendy and brother-in-law Terry took the road out of Paris, driving for several hours up the A1, past the road to the Somme. We left the main road and went through Arras and out into the expanse of open countryside.

We turned off for the village of Ligny-St Flochel. There, the old church appeared to have tilted from the plumb, its limestone spire pock-marked as if by shells or gunfire, leaving nooks in which bickering crows were nesting. We took a fork to the left and after a few kilometres came upon a small, neatly kept cemetery of almost seven hundred graves. The day was bright but the wind was cold and cutting, leaving us sniffing as we buttoned up our coats.

We had the number of the grave – Plot II, Row F, Number 22 - and it took only a few minutes to find.

Two photographs were found on Bob Conklin when he was killed. Again, I remember holding these precious photographs which had sat next to his heart.

One was of his mother and his sisters Dorothy and Isabel feeding some chicks, taken in June 1918 on holiday on the shores of Lake Ontario. The other was of Isobel Howes and on the back of the photo she had written: "How do you like my 'wedding clothes'?" In 1919, Isobel, broken-hearted since Bob's death a few months earlier, died in the Spanish influenza epidemic that swept Europe after the war.

Wendy bent down and sprinkled over the small plot some earth she had brought from the grave of Bob's mother and father in Toronto and took a little from Bob's grave to bring back to Canada. Leslie buried beneath the soil a copy of the photograph of Isobel Howes in her 'wedding clothes' that had survived his shooting. Reunited symbolically.

Sheila was unable to speak. Here she was at the grave of her own mother's adored brother - the *first* member of Bob's family ever to visit Ligny-St Flochel. Terry noticed a metal casket in a nearby wall. It contained weatherproofed notebooks detailing the names, ages and regiments of all the soldiers buried there who had died in trenches or crossing no-man's-land in 1918. Another was for comments from visitors.

The date was 26 March 2004 and Wendy entered into the notebook the simple message: 'Sorry it took us so long to get here...Thanks.'

And that is what Cónal Creedon has done with this book which is really dedicated to the volunteers who risked everything, who suffered physical and psychological wounds, who were 'forgotten'. It is to those 50,000 who died, and to Michael O'Leary and his comrades who fought for Ireland at the Somme, Guillemont, Ginchy, Messines, Salonika, Gallipoli, Basra and Gaza.

'Sorry it took us so long to get here...Thanks.'

Danny Morrison

[Danny Morrison is a writer and a commentator. He is a former National Director of Publicity for Sinn Féin and was imprisoned several times in Long Kesh Camp and Crumlin Road Jail. As well as writing, he is the secretary of the Bobby Sands Trust and was for many years, until 2014, chairperson of *Féile an Phobail* (the community festival founded in West Belfast in 1988).]



Michael O'Leary VC – poster boy of World War One, sweetheart of the music halls.

Iveleary

The Land of The O'Learys

The parish of Inchigeela, or as known by its tribal name Iveleary or Uíbh Laoghaire [The Land of the O'Learys], is remote in the seclusion of the mountains, cut away from the rest of the world. Until a comparatively recent period there were no means of communication. This isolation had the effect of preserving intact the language and traditions of the inhabitants, themselves a fine manly race.¹ [Rev. Patrick Hurley, 1903]

Michael O'Leary was born in Iveleary [Uíbh Laoghaire: The Land of the O'Learys]. This green and leafy valley is a land where history and story go hand in hand, fact and fiction seem to dovetail together seamlessly and the spiritual and the natural complement each other without contradiction or contrivance. No shroud of mystery conceals the powers of Gobnait when she sent out her squadrons of bees to defend neighbouring Ballyvourney and Coolea. No suspicion surrounds the story of Finbarr when he raised his arms above the water and banished the lake monster Luiwee from Gougán. There is nothing extraordinary about the triumph of mortal ingenuity over supernatural power in the land of the O'Learys.

Iveleary is a land of poets and patriots. Ever since cradle days, I had heard tales of the wild and fiery Auliffe O'Leary who rode with the Great O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell against the forces of Queen Elizabeth 1. There was Chieftain Daniel² Mac Art O'Leary who was banished to Connaught by Cromwell, and, later, brave Kedagh O'Leary of Inchigeela, described as 'Lieutenant to the King', who led the men of Iveleary at the head of James II's Jacobite army.

The renowned exploits of the dashing and vainglorious fugitive, Art O'Leary, who taunted Sheriff Abraham Morris from the hills of Carriganime, still echo from Kilcrea to Raleigh in the words of his wife, the poet, Eibhlín Dubh, who took no prisoners in her passion-fuelled verses. I had heard the lyrics of Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire [O'Leary] and the actions of her rebel brother Conor Ó Laoghaire.

My childhood curiosity was held spellbound by the seanachaoí-inspired writings of An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire, and later my boyhood imagination ran wild with the swash-buckling escapades of Daniel Florence O’Leary, his sabre flashing in the South American sun as he rode with Simón Bolívar’s Liberation Army across the wide open plains. Closer to home, the mysterious and enigmatic Captain Rock served neither King nor landlord in his relentless quest to defend the defenceless. From the Gearagh to Gougán and every townland in between, this caped crusader fought the good fight; he struck at the heart of oppression concealed in the darkness of night. I was weaned on stories of the Fenians, such as ‘Pagan’ O’Leary from Inchigeela. As a child I was confused by the simple message of his war cry, ‘No Crown! No Collar!’ Then on to the next generation – the valiant boys of the West Cork IRA who led the Black and Tans on a merry dance around the hills of Iveleary before driving them into the sea and away from our shores, just as Patrick drove out the vermin.

The history of this land has been handed down from one generation to the next, word for word, in a tradition where the extraordinary needs not be embellished nor the banal banished. When I first decided to collect the story of Michael O’Leary VC between the covers of a book, I assumed it would be a straightforward tale of an ordinary man who rose to the challenge of an extraordinary situation; a story that climaxed, like some operatic grand finale, in a daring dash across a pockmarked foreign field and into the pages of history. But as I peeled back the layers I soon found myself entangled in detail; disorientated in a no-man’s-land of history.

From the very beginning, the story of Michael O’Leary of Iveleary presents an apparent contradiction; the State Register records his date of birth as 11th October 1888³, yet the church register records his baptism as 9th October,⁴ implying he had been baptised two days before he was born. When faced with such anomalies, presented by such infallible sources as church and state, I soon realised my task would not be as straightforward as I had first assumed.

I checked O’Leary’s official Connaught Rangers military records and found his date of birth is stated as 2nd September 1890, a date that contradicts the State Register by almost two years. Of course, there are many cases of young recruits adding a few years in order to meet enlistment age requirements, but I have yet to encounter a case of a recruit presenting himself as two years younger than his actual age. I subsequently found O’Leary’s date of birth recorded by the Western Front Association as 29th September 1890, while his Irish Guards Regimental records state he was born on 9th October 1888, and his date of birth as registered with the Royal Navy is 2nd December 1888. So, as I set out on this journey of discovery into the life and times of Michael O’Leary, I must admit that I have been unable

to ascertain his date of birth, and I probably never will and that's the God's honest truth. Then again, a declaration of uncertainty is a truth in itself.



Caught up in the slipstream of the current centenary commemorations of World War One, the faint echo of Empire days has the tendency to unsettle subliminal-memories and stir the ghosts of a painful colonial past. Memories that prompt some to instinctively reach for the pike in the thatch, while others choose to ignore the past and look to the future, rather than open old wounds on the scabs of age-old sores of unsettled scores to be picked raw.

The Irish colonial experience is not unique. Many former colonies right across the globe are questioning their own participation in a bloody conflict that could be facetiously described as a squabble in Victoria's nursery, between the cousins; Georgie, Willy and Nicky, otherwise known as King, Kaiser and Tsar.⁵ But whatever the reasons for the Great War, the outcome was predictable; put succinctly by the old East African proverb, 'When elephants go to war, it is the grass that gets trampled.'

Clearly, the debate surrounding the almost quarter of a million Irishmen who marched off to the slaughter of World War One presents a number of contradictions, not least concerning those Irish nationalists who joined the British Army to fight for 'the freedom of small nations'⁶ – while at home in Ireland, on Easter Monday 1916, another brand of Irish nationalists formally declared war on England to secure the freedom of the small nation of Ireland.

From this distance of time, it strikes me as odd that so few stopped to question why Britain should uncharacteristically choose to defend the integrity of a small nation such as Belgium. It seems incompatible with Britain's policy regarding so many other small nations and indigenous peoples across the globe – in its heyday, the British Empire ruled over one-fifth of the world's population, and engaged in asset stripping almost a quarter of the Earth's land mass totalling 33,700,000 km² for the benefit of monarch and country.⁷

In the context of the Irish situation, this glaring anomaly was explored by George Bernard Shaw when he wrote:

To attract [Irish recruits] walls were covered with placards headed: REMEMBER BELGIUM. The folly of asking an Irishman to remember anything when you want him to fight for England was apparent to everyone: FORGET AND FORGIVE would have been more to the

point. The recruiting ended in a rebellion, in suppressing which, the British artillery quite unnecessarily reduced the centre of Dublin to ruins, and the British commanders killed their leading prisoners of war in cold blood morning after morning with an effect of long-drawn out ferocity.

John Bull does things in a week that disgrace him for a century, though he soon recovers his good humour, and cannot understand why the survivors of his wrath do not feel as jolly with him as he does with them.

On the smouldering ruins of Dublin the appeals to remember Louvain [Belgium] were presently supplemented by a fresh appeal. IRISHMEN, DO YOU WISH TO HAVE THE HORRORS OF WAR BROUGHT TO YOUR OWN HEARTS AND HOMES? Dublin laughed sourly.⁸

The words of George Bernard Shaw proved to be eerily prophetic. Despite the quarter of a million Irishmen who had fought for king and country, within two years of the Great War ending, the horrors of war were brought to Irish hearts and homes, but not by the murderous ‘German Hun’ as we had been warned – instead the horror was brought by our former allies in arms and that great defender of small nations, the British.

On 11th December 1920, the forces of the Crown unleashed an unimaginable night of terror in my home city of Cork.⁹ It was a night of murder, rampant acts of assault and widespread looting, which culminated in large tracts of the city being burnt to the ground.

The words ‘The Burning of Cork’¹⁰ seem to roll off the tongue like some semi-mythical battle of ancient times, but, considering that I grew up within living memory of this devastating event, it somehow makes it extremely current. The scale of the destruction inflicted in such a short few hours is frightening. On occasion, I have walked the streets with a view to understanding the extent of the devastation. I have paced out the acreage of demolition – city block after city block – yet, the sheer sense of terror as experienced by the citizens of Cork that night at the hands of the forces of law and order remains elusive.

The incendiaries set to work with military precision, beginning in the residential area of Dillon’s Cross, followed by the utter destruction of the commercial heart of the city centre, and finally they desecrated the seat of democratic administration when they destroyed the City Hall, the Carnegie Library and surrounding areas.

Three days later on the 14th December 1920, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported:



Photo of the destruction of Cork City in December 1920.

The Burning of Cork surpasses in grim horror and fierce injustice the crimes of Louvain. If this is the liberty that the English government would force upon Ireland, who can blame the immense majority of the Irish people for rejecting it, backs to the wall? [...] Better a thousand times to die by the bullets of English anarchy in defence of true liberty.¹²

Examining photographs taken the following morning – the shock is apparent in the faces of the citizenry as they emerged into the streets. I find it difficult to fully grasp the fear and the sense of collective trauma they must have experienced to find their city reduced to a smouldering heap of rubble.

The people of Cork had been preparing for Christmas; they awoke to find their city gripped by fear, with homes, shops, restaurants and places of employment wiped from the landscape. It begs the question: who do the citizens turn to when their city is looted and destroyed by government forces of law and order?

This was by no means an isolated incident.¹³ The actions of the forces of the Crown that night were part of an ongoing campaign of indiscriminate violence against the Irish civilian population and the wanton destruction of private property.¹⁴



The painful irony of all this is that – a short few years earlier hundreds of thousands of Irishmen followed John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party’s call to arms and volunteered to fight with the British Army in World War One.¹⁵ Prior to the War, many viewed themselves as fully committed, patriotic Irish nationalists. They had stood shoulder to shoulder with Connolly, Pearse, MacDonagh, MacCurtain and MacSwiney in the ranks of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army and various other paramilitary organisations, prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, ready to fight and die for Ireland’s right to self-govern. Yet, they enlisted to go to Flanders to fight with the British, believing they were fighting for Ireland, trusting that the Irish 3rd Home Rule Bill [1914 Government of Ireland Act] would be passed into law by the British Government when the crisis of war had passed.¹⁶ No one seemed to stop and question the glaring anomaly that the post-war expectations of the nationalist and unionist population in Ireland were mutually exclusive. But, the 1916 Rising brought the incompatibility of a one-stop solution to the ‘Irish question’ into sharp focus.

Despite John Redmond’s support for conscription¹⁷ during the early months of the war and his endorsement of the ‘firmness’¹⁸ with which the leaders of the 1916 Rising were treated by the British Government, by the end of World War One public opinion had undergone a dramatic shift. The nationalists’ sense of horror, following the protracted schedule of executions of those involved in the Easter 1916 Rising, turned to anger when the Government of Ireland Act [The Irish Home Rule Bill] was presented as a dual policy with the British Military Service Bill.¹⁹ This unexpected pairing of legislation effectively extended into law the privilege of conscription into the British military to the Irish nation.

Militant nationalists and constitutional nationalists²⁰ were united in their outrage, and the swinging pendulum of public opinion seemed to come to the conclusion that constitutionalism had failed at a very high cost to Irish lives. This marked a turning point in the popular support for the Irish Parliamentary Party and presented the militant nationalists with a mandate to take hold of the reins of Ireland’s destiny, and paved the way for the Irish War of Independence.²¹

This dramatic swing in opinion is best represented by those Irish soldiers who returned home from World War One, having spent a number of years fighting for the British Army, only to switch sides and join the Irish Volunteers/Irish Republican Army [IRA] to fight against the British in the subsequent Irish War of Independence.

In the context of West Cork and Iveleary there are numerous well-documented examples of this – the guerrilla leader Tom Barry²² springs to mind and men such as Sean Murray, the ex-Sergeant Major of the Royal Irish Guards Regiment,²³ who became the training officer of the local Iveleary IRA. But there were many others: Emmet Dalton held the rank of Major in the British Army, yet after the war he became a senior figure in the Irish Republican Army [IRA], he later described this contradiction as: fighting for Ireland with the English, and fighting for Ireland against the English.²⁴ The story of Éamonn Ceannt, a son of a Royal Irish Constabulary Officer, who went on to become one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, presents a fascinating example of the complexities of the various strands of Irish nationalism at that time. While Éamonn was in Kilmainham Gaol awaiting execution for his role in the 1916 Rising, his brother William was a Colour Sergeant-Major in the British Army stationed at Fermoy Barracks in County Cork.²⁵

It seemed that every question I probed untangled conflicting points of view and exposed contradictory answers with roots that stretched back hundreds of years to the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland.²⁶ To put it simply, it's complicated. And so, I found myself sitting at my desk looking out on downtown Cork City, pen poised, wondering where to begin this story. The opening passage of Flann O'Brien's classic novel, *At Swim Two Birds*, came to mind:

A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author.²⁷

So maybe it is best that I begin at the very beginning.

One Morning in May

Michael O'Leary from the townland of Cooleen in the heart of Iveleary first came to my attention sometime around 19th May 1979, and though that very specific date is indelibly etched in my mind, it would be inaccurate to say that I have a vivid memory of that particular day. It was over thirty-five years ago, but yet the

cornerstone of history telling is in our ability to recollect a story, and to the best of my recollection, this story began for me one morning in May, some thirty odd years ago.

Home for me was then, and is now, a spaghetti bowl of streets centring on Three Points Corner, where Coburg Street, Devonshire Street and Leitrim Street melt into one. My family has lived and traded here for generations. I grew up ham acting at the meat slicer, behind the counter of our small newsagent and grocery shop. A shop first opened by my grandfather Connie Creedon and run by my grandaunt Julia Cotter as a city outlet for butter and eggs and an in-season selection of garden-fresh vegetables from the home farms of Iveleary/Inchigeela and surrounding townlands.

To the best of my knowledge, my father left Iveleary for the bright lights of the big city as a young man to serve his time as a shopkeeper's assistant under the maternal eye of my grandaunt Julia, and, in the fullness of time, the shop assistant became shopkeeper. In the years before his grand adventure to the city, my father had spent his youth shunting around the leafy tracks of Iveleary delivering goods to and from my grandfather's general merchant store in the village of Inchigeela. His fascination for the open road became a lifetime occupation and, once he was old enough, he took to driving for the Road Freight and eventually with C oras Iompair  ireann [CI ]. By the time I was born, my mother had stepped into the driver's

'Little Iveleary': Three Points Corner: where Coburg Street, Devonshire Street and Leitrim Street melt into one. (Courtesy of *The Irish Examiner*)



seat of the shop, while my father divided his time behind the shop counter and the steering wheel of a bus.

We didn't call it the inner city, it was just plain downtown, and there we lived and traded on the northern bank of the River Lee, just a stone's throw from Patrick's Bridge and the main shopping thoroughfare of the city. Looking back on that time, it seems to me that our shop never closed – it was a busy little enterprise, more social than commercial. Upstairs, and in the rooms beyond, lived my parents, twelve siblings and a string of guests who came to dinner and stayed. It was the kind of house where people seemed to congregate; a house where the kettle never knew cold and tea was always on tap.

Outside, the streets were bustling too, with families talking and taking air. Gangs of boys and girls, dogs and cats – like coursing greyhounds, chased an inflated pig's bladder up and down the street until a shower of sparks from quarter-irons off the road would send the pig's skin squealing and rattling the back of the corrugated iron onion sack that was McKenzie the seed merchant's gate. As a child growing up, it seemed to be a magical place, a city of steps and steep hills, more steps and steeples. A city of shawlies, where women like Annie sold fruit from a barrow on Carroll's Quay, and Connie the Donkey, with his jennet and cart, sold sawdust for soakage to the O'Connells who butchered beef, the O'Sullivan's who cured bacon and the O'Brien's who served the creamiest pints this side of the river. Each morning I'd awaken to the dawn chorus of the men of Blackpool and the Red City of Gurrabraher walking and whistling their way to work down the docks or to the Motown of Ford and Dunlop – it was a bit like living in a musical.



I have memories of my father's friend, Timmy [Pheg] O'Leary, sounding the bell as he prised open the shop door with his elbow, and, without a hint of irony in his voice, he'd call in to my father:

'I'm going to Cork, Connie. Do you want anything from Cork?'

As if Cork was a world away, and the hustle and bustle of city life was some far-off exotic place, that happened to be located just around the corner.

Our small community in the centre of the city had a village-like self-sufficiency, where traders and their families lived above their shops. This warren of streets was our world, catered to by our own teasshops, shoemakers, butchers, bakers, fishmongers, furniture-makers, undertakers, and a string of public houses for when the legs needed a rest or the mind needed exercise. We even had our own picture house and brewery, and to this day that lingering aroma of fermenting hops and malt belching from Murphy's Stack, blending with the ebb and flow of the River Lee at Carroll's Quay is locked in the memory of my senses as the defining scent of home. While, above the heads of the merchant paupers and princes, the golden fish on the belfry of St. Anne's Shandon looked down on us, casting a knowing eye over our little hamlet, where every lamppost, doorstep and crack in the pavement continues to record a living history so vivid to those of us who know.

The Inchigeelagh Dairy, the name on the fascia board over our door, was an echo to Cork's colonial past; a throwback to a time when the mighty Butter Exchange in Shandon was the financial powerhouse of the city, and the port of Cork was a hub of trade servicing the furthest reaches of the Empire.²⁸ However, there was always the little bit of cream skimmed off the top for the locals. This gave rise to a proliferation of micro-dairies throughout the city.

The Inchigeelagh Dairy traded right up to the threshold of this current millennium; it was the last of its type in the city. But it was by no means unique. At one time there were a number of such outlets dotted around the town – the Newmarket Dairy on King Street [Mac Curtain Street] and the Ballingear Stores run by my father's cousins, the O'Riordans, over on Adelaide Street – with the home-place of origin emblazoned across a shop front, shining out like a beacon as a place to meet for those who had moved to the city from the outlying hills and townlands.



Inchigeela [Inchigeelagh], at the heart of Iveleary, was my father's home village, and coincidentally, just east of the village was the birthplace of the subject of this book, Michael O'Leary of Cooleen. Iveleary, as the name suggests, [Iveleary: Uíbh Laoghaire: Land of the O'Learys] has long been the ancestral home of the O'Leary clan and that may explain why my father had a disproportionate number of friends from the various septs of the O'Learys.

It was a long time ago, but I can still see them leaning on our shop counter, laughing faces and cavorting: the brothers Jimmy and Connie from Drimoleague, there was Teddy O'Leary, the meat merchant, and Tadgh O'Leary from The Cork Arms, who worked with my father in CIÉ, and of course my father's life-long friend, Timmy [Pheg] O'Leary. Timmy [Pheg] was another CIÉ man who travelled the road from Iveleary to Cork with my father when they were both young lads. It was a friendship that no man could pull asunder, and remained intact 'til death did them part.

My father had a very close, yet loose, sense of kinship. Anyone from west of the Gearagh in Iveleary was likely to be called cousin, although he reserved the title of brother for one man only, his brother John, who continued to trade out of the family business in Inchigeela. Though it didn't seem so at the time, the two brothers



The brothers Con and John Creedon with their wives Siobhán [Blake] and Gretta [White], and twenty-five of their twenty-six children. Twelve children born to Con and Siobhán and fourteen children born to John and Gretta. The author Cónal Creedon is seen here sitting on his father's knee. (Courtesy of Joe Creedon)

and their wives lived hectic lives; working the rounds of the clock while rearing twelve and fourteen children respectively, yet they somehow managed to find time to be together – always unplanned and impromptu and often ending in a song.

Our neighbourhood in downtown Cork City, as defined by The Inchigeelagh Dairy on Devonshire Street, The Iveleary Bar on Coburg Street and Tadgh O’Leary’s, The Cork Arms, further along MacCurtain Street – was like a little-Iveleary in the heart of Cork City – a place where Iveleary exiles would meet.

The far counter of our shop, just behind the coal bags, became an unofficial parcel office where priceless packages such as some mother’s homemade brown bread, baked on a turf-fired bastible in Iveleary, would be dropped off for collection by a son or daughter living in the city. Moreover, urban luxuries like a swath of fabric from The Munster Arcade, or rural necessities such as a scythe blade would be delivered by the next available car heading west. Then, on Friday afternoons, a string of scholars, civil servants and seminarians would gather on the windowsill of our shop, peeling off in ones and twos for the unscheduled yet inevitable lift home.

The Inchigeelagh Dairy was an outpost of Iveleary. By extension, it served all points west beyond Keimaneigh and into O’Sullivan country at Carriganass Castle and all the way to my mother’s homeland in the faraway hills of the Beara Peninsula. Maybe that explains why this boy, born and reared in downtown Cork City, grew up with a sense that home was someplace else. Over time I realised that, for the people of Iveleary, fifty miles may as well be five thousand when you’re away from home, and, like immigrants who gather anywhere across the globe, home is the birthplace of past generations and is always defined as another place in another time.

Iveleary people came to our shop counter for that taste of home, the milk, eggs, butter and cream, but most of all they came to talk. They found comfort in the past, and the past was never some faraway place. It was nothing out of the ordinary to hear the Irish language spoken at our shop counter. It was the language of Iveleary and, regardless of religion or political conviction, lovers of the native tongue would drop by for an opportunity to joust their eloquence ‘as gaeilge’.

They talked of births, deaths and marriages, and the antics of Johnny Jerry’s sow, while escapades of guerrilla days were recalled in the hushed tones of a need-to-know basis and the tales of Tim the Tailor and his wife Ansty were always good to fill a gap. Age-old challenge matches between rival townlands were re-played, blow-by-blow like ancient battles between warring clans, and, of course, there was always that County Championship when my father and his brother John lined out for Iveleary. Like gladiators of old, the contest became more epic with each re-

telling. The words of Patrick Kavanagh beautifully capture the essence of the tales of the townland:

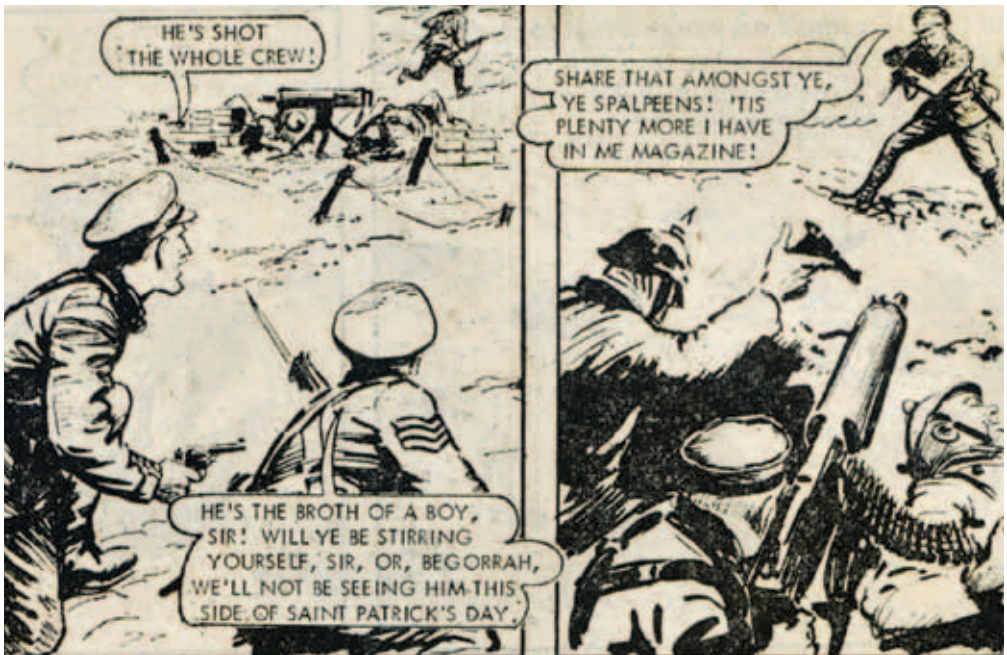
‘Til Homer’s ghost came whispering to my mind
He said: I made the Iliad from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance.²⁹



But getting back to that day in May 1979. It was a Saturday morning, just like any other. As I arranged the papers, magazines and comics along the counter I would have noticed Stephen Spielberg staring back at me from the cover of *Time* magazine. The headlines of the broadsheets were screaming blue murder because a spiralling crisis in the Middle East was beginning to inconvenience the West; Ireland had ground to a standstill, paralysed by the grip of petrol rationing. The glossies were all abuzz that Blondie’s *Sunday Girl* was about to topple Art Garfunkel’s *Bright Eyes* from the number one slot in the UK charts. Eric Clapton’s marriage to Pattie Boyd, the ex-wife of ex-Beatle George Harrison, had the red tops in overdrive with speculation of a Fab Four reunion. It had been rumoured that John, Paul, George and Ringo would be attending the wedding, and some anticipated that such a re-grouping could spark an impromptu jam session that might lead to something more permanent.

The good news on the home front reported that RTÉ was preparing to launch itself into the modern age with the announcement of a new sister station RTÉ 2. Meanwhile the progressive agenda in Britain celebrated the election of the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the arch conservative, Margaret Thatcher. While far away in the frozen north they were still rejoicing because, Kalaallit Nunaat, better known as Greenland, had achieved Home Rule from Denmark.

To the best of my recollection, Timmy [Pheg] O’Leary was sitting on the coal bags outside the counter, keeping my dad company. I must have been thumbing through a *Victor* comic, or maybe I was writing the name of one of the local youngsters across the masthead before I set it aside for collection later. Whatever I was doing, as I flicked through the pages of the *Victor*, I came across the section, *A True Story of Men at War*, where each week the fictional character, Bob Millar, would encounter a real-life person who had played a pivotal role in some documented military action, and for those few assigned pages, fact took over from fiction, as history was relayed to a new generation in comic book style.³⁰



The first thing that struck me was the speech bubbles with their amusing interpretation of Hiberno-English revealing the Irish ethnicity of this real-life hero.

‘He’s a broth of a boy, Sir! Will ye be stirring yourself, Sir. Or begorra we’ll not be seeing him this side of Patrick’s Day.’
 ‘Share that amongst ye! Ye spalpeens!’

The final picture-cell depicted a young soldier, and beneath him the words:

Lance Corporal Michael O’Leary got his VC,
 and never was a decoration so gallantly won.

If comic books are to be trusted as a reliable source, the story of a battle that took place on 1st February 1915 in the brickfields of Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal in northern France unfolded picture by picture, speech bubble by bloody speech bubble.

For days the Irish Guards and The Coldstream Guards had been suffering huge casualties, losing ground and men in equal measure. All attempts to advance were cut short, as the rattle of lead from the German machine gun nests mowed them

down like a sharpened scythe through a meadow of ripe hay. Retreat seemed to be the only way forward.

Isolated, decimated and cut off from a reliable line of command, fifty Coldstream Guards and a band of thirty Irish Guards regrouped in a makeshift hollow. Not really what could be described as a strike force, yet, against all the odds, it was decided that attack would be the best form of defence, so over the top they went. My eyes were glued to the unfolding madness, as Mick O'Leary took off on a solo run, charging headlong across the sepia-toned pages of the comic book.

He took the first German machine-gun position, leaving no survivors. Then, without pausing for breath or consideration for his own health or safety, he continued his charge across the burnt-out barbed wire, death and destruction of no-man's-land. By the time he reached the second German line of defence he had shot and killed three more of the next machine-gun crew and his ammunition clip was empty,³¹ but so fear-struck were the remaining defenders that they surrendered en masse without putting O'Leary's firepower or accuracy to the test, and the rest, as they say, is history. Some accounts record that O'Leary, single-handedly, took as many as eighteen German prisoners that day.³²

A Heritage of Heroism

Ever since childhood I had heard the songs and stories that unlocked the history of the 'Land of The O'Learys'. Songs such as the battle hymn, *Cath Chéim an Fhia* [Keimaneigh], or the epic lament, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* [Art O'Leary], or the Fenian love ballad *My Inchigeela Lass*, or the more recent *Boys of Kilmichael* – are sung in a living tradition that continues to record the story of Iveleary and surrounding townlands. From my earliest age, I became aware that these songs and verses were not just local ditties to be rattled off in a come-all-ye singsong sing-a-long. No. These songs were much more than that. They stood testament to a people, a place, a past, and always commanded respectful order and a level of dignified reverence that is reserved for the veneration of ancestors.

In an endless stream of names, dates and events, I had heard of every O'Leary who had been eulogised in song, verse and story – every O'Leary who had swung a sword, shouldered a gun or had sharpened the quill of a pen. But, for some strange reason, the story of this Michael O'Leary – immortalised in the *Victor* comic, had somehow eluded me. My eyes trawled to the top of the comic strip searching for some clue to the identity of this Lance Corporal Michael O'Leary VC.

It hadn't occurred to me that Irishmen who fought in the English Army were

seldom recorded in the roll of honour of Irish history, but it did cross my mind that maybe this Michael O’Leary was not of Iveleary. So, I interrupted my father and Timmy, who were deeply engaged in their own world, and pointing to the comic, I asked,

‘Is this Michael O’Leary an Iveleary O’Leary?’

I may have mentioned something about the Victoria Cross.

There followed a moment of hesitation and a silence of intrigue, as Timmy eased himself off the coal bags, and my father shuffled around the counter in my direction. Though I can’t be certain, I think he may have hummed the opening bars of a jaunty old music hall song – the lyrics seem to grow stronger with memory:

Have you heard of Michael O’Leary?
He is Ireland’s pride and joy,
A slap, bang, here we are –
A broth of an Irish boy.
And of all the rest –
One of the best,
Is Michael O’Leary VC.³³

As sure as young boys lose interest in comics as they mature to become old men, there is nothing like a comic to make old men become young boys again. I found myself being gently pushed aside as my father and Timmy O’Leary huddled like schoolboys and examined each animated cell at every angle. Speech bubbles were read aloud, to gasps of, ‘t’anamandíabhal’ followed by the odd long drawn-out ‘moléir’ of disbelief.

For the rest of that day they talked about nothing else, and every visitor to our shop was treated to the full unabridged version of ‘The Immortal Deed of Michael O’Leary of Iveleary’. To my regret, I wasn’t listening, so I don’t have a memory of one word that was spoken that morning. But, I hazard a guess that the talk straddled Cunchy and Cooleen, and men like Jeremiah O’Dea and Sergeant Maunsell. Of course the women in Michael O’Leary’s life would have been mentioned: his mother Margaret and his elderly granny, Ellen Lucey, and the love of his life, Gretta Hegarty, from the Home Farm in Ballyvourney. Maybe they spoke of my grandmother as a young girl, Nora Cotter, and her people, the O’Learys of Currahy. I am sure Timmy [Pheg] O’Leary had a lot to say about the

O'Learys of Ballingearry and how they stood four square with the defenders at the eviction at Drom an Ailigh. The very mention of Drom an Ailigh would have spurred my father's memory of his granduncle, Michael Creedon of Illauninagh, and his cousins, the O'Riordans. He may have mentioned his father's cousins, the Cotters of Currahy who were jailed and sentenced to hard labour as ringleaders of the defenders who stood firm that summer of 1906. Without doubt, my father and Timmy [Pheg] laughed out loud, as they recalled some of the famous quotes attributed to Michael O'Leary's father.

Old Daniel O'Leary is well remembered in Iveleary as a man who was never found short of a few sharp and witty words when probed by visiting journalists for his views on his son's heroic deed. But the truth is, I just don't know. My memory of that day is vague, because for me, that morning in May was just a Saturday morning like any other.

That was my first introduction to Michael O'Leary of Iveleary, and I didn't really think much about him after that. But it's odd how memories can be rekindled.

Ten or fifteen years ago, while researching for a film documentary, *The Burning of Cork*, I found myself at the IRA ambush site in Kilmichael. Later that day I drifted over the hill into Iveleary and called to my cousin Joe in Inchigeela. As we chatted about this and that, Joe placed a photograph on the table. It was an old, frayed-around-the-edges photograph of a young soldier and a young girl. He identified the soldier as Michael O'Leary VC and said the photo had been taken while O'Leary was home on leave from the Western Front shortly after he had been awarded the Victoria Cross.³⁴ There stood Michael O'Leary beaming with pride and facing him was a young girl admiring the medal pinned to his chest. Joe asked if I recognised the girl in the photograph, and in the few moments of hesitation, he answered his own question.

'That's your grandmother,' he said.

Then he corrected himself,

'Our grandmother. Nora Cotter...'

Something about that photograph sparked my imagination. I had never known my grandmother – she had been long dead before I was born. In my mind's eye, I had always imagined her as an elderly woman, sitting posed and poised in the rigid Victorian manner of her time. It was fascinating for me to see her as a young girl on the cusp of womanhood. She seemed impishly coy in the presence of the young brave soldier; her demeanour was naturalistic and curious, maybe even a little flirtatious.



Nora Cotter and Michael O'Leary VC
outside Post Office in Inchigeela Village.
(Courtesy of Joe Creedon)

But it seemed incongruous that a young British soldier in full uniform, with his Victoria Cross pinned to his chest, would be peacocking around the village of Inchigeela at a time when mounting tension between slacker³⁵ and soldier was sweeping the land; a time when one man's Union Jack was another man's Butcher's Apron.³⁶

It was June 1915, and after a year of death and carnage, Ireland's role in the brutal reality of the conflict in Europe was being questioned. The first flush of blind exuberance following the declaration of war was on the wane, and with whispers of the introduction of conscription to replenish the 'wastage of war',³⁷ the mood in Ireland was beginning to change.

Coláiste Na Mumhan in Ballygeary had long been a bastion of Gaelic Ireland, dedicated to promoting all aspects of Irish culture. In 1914 its resolve was set in stone when the words 'An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire, Canónach, do chuir A.D. 1914,'³⁸ were inscribed on the cornerstone. It was a time when the wind of change was blowing up a Gael-force along the Lee valley,³⁹ as the republican volunteers of Iveleary were reorganising, drilling and actively coordinating with revolutionary leaders such as Seán O'Hegarty, Tadgh Barry, Tomás MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney,⁴⁰ because just beyond the horizon, a new day would dawn at Easter-tide 1916.⁴¹

Yet, here was this photograph of a young British soldier in full uniform, standing proud with a young woman, my grandmother, Nora Cotter, admiring the badge of bravery pinned to his chest. In the background, obscured by Nora, is another young girl, could she possibly be Nora's sister my grandaunt Julia?

The photo had been taken outside the Post Office in Inchigeela village where Nora was

Gaelic League Poster 1913



postmistress⁴² and her sister Julia was a telegraph operator. So there was every possibility that the second girl was indeed my grandaunt Julia. I examined the image forensically, wondering if that eclipsed glimpse of her side-profile was the only tangible trace of grandaunt Julia that exists for future generations – eclipsed in life and in death by her sister Nora.

Intrigued by the apparent family connection, I have returned to study that photograph again and again. But for some reason, the picture did not fit the narrative that I had been born into. Some time after that, I came across Manus O’Riordan’s powerfully intertwined article ‘Michael O’Leary, Kuno Meyer and Peadar Ó Laoghaire’, published in the *Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha’n Ghaorthaidh Journal*. In it, Manus identifies an interesting passage from Patrick J. Twohig’s book, *Green Tears for Hecuba*.

Twohig makes the point that the young Michael O’Leary VC had always been held in high regard by republicans⁴³ on his visits home to Iveleary, even at the height of the later troubles during the Irish War of Independence.⁴⁴

During the Troubles, he [Michael O’Leary] was well received by the republicans.⁴⁵

The mutual respect between Michael O’Leary and the republicans of Iveleary, as recorded by Patrick J. Twohig, seems to be validated by a relatively inconsequential, yet significant, incident during the funeral of Michael O’Leary’s father.

Due to the lack of documented corroborating evidence, I choose to present it as an anecdotal tale that offers a glimpse into the living soul of a community that had somehow come to terms with a traumatic decade. It was a time in which age-old lines of loyalties became confused, a time when nationalists were pitched against nationalists, neighbour against neighbour, O’Leary against O’Leary. It was a time when the national identity of Ireland was taking shape in a context of a multi-layered, rolling conflict that lasted eight years and included the World War, the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence, the Civil War – set against the traumatic struggle for women’s suffrage and violent birth of the Irish labour movement.

But getting back to the morning of the funeral – by all accounts, many years later when Michael O’Leary returned home for his father’s funeral,⁴⁶ he was collected at the train station in Cork and driven west by an Iveleary man who was described as a republican. The man who collected Michael O’Leary that day is long dead now and, though he was much older than my father, as an Iveleary man living in Cork City, he and my father became good friends in life – their friendship was the inspiration for one of my earliest attempts at writing fiction.⁴⁷

Michael O’Leary’s father – Daniel O’Leary making his infamous recruitment speech in the town square of Macroom.



Sometimes I think of that morning of Daniel O’Leary’s funeral – the rebel and the British Army veteran who had known each other since childhood, heading west in a car – I can’t help but wonder what those two Iveleary men talked about.

Of course, I’ll never know, but I’m sure they began with a few words of greeting in Irish,⁴⁸ the native tongue of Iveleary. Then just like the Iveleary men who gathered at our shop counter, I’m sure they talked of births, deaths and marriages and the antics of Johnny Jerry’s sow. Did they acknowledge departed friends and neighbours as they trundled past memorials to Irish Volunteers strung out along the road like beads on a rosary? I suspect a silence filled the car as they drove through Lissarda and the name Daniel Maunsell passed through both of their minds. Did they talk of age-old challenge matches between rival townlands that had played out like ancient battles between warring clans? I am sure they shared a knowing smile when they spoke of the man who was being buried that day, Michael’s father, Daniel O’Leary, the master of the sharp sound bite.

To this very day Daniel O’Leary is still remembered for his incisive wit, particularly regarding the apparent contradiction of Irish nationalists fighting for England during World War One. When he was invited to address a hastily organised recruiting rally to celebrate Michael’s daring deed near Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal, Daniel climbed up onto the platform in the square in Macroom and famously shouted out to the assembled crowd.

‘Join up and give the Germans hell like your forefathers gave the English.’⁴⁹

‘If you don’t [join the British Army] the Germans will come here and do to us what the English have been doing for the past seven hundred years.’⁵⁰

He followed that with,

‘[Join up] because if the Germans come over here, they’ll be a lot worse than the English, bad and all as they are.’⁵¹

Some time later a visiting journalist asked Michael’s father if he was looking forward to the end of the war and a return to more peaceful times. Having pondered a world without war for a few moments, Daniel’s response was predictably outrageous.

‘The Saints preserve us, and will there be no one to fight with? Heaven forbid.’

Then with a typical flourish of sarcasm he added:

‘Shure I’d forgotten, we’ll always have the police to fight.’⁵²

Daniel O’Leary’s wry humour would not have been lost on the local audience; the people of Iveleary/Muskerry had a long tradition of resistance to the English rule of law in Ireland. His barbarous one-liners are still quoted and, no doubt, misquoted, but never fail to raise a good hearty laugh.

For me, the car journey to Daniel O’Leary’s funeral that day represents a journey home for two men who had chosen to lay the ghosts of the past to rest. It is a journey that presents narrative possibilities that I personally find far more interesting than the cold facts of history. It is a narrative that offers a glimpse into the complexities of loyalties that had been established and tested again and again over a thousand years, ever since the O’Leary clan first came to this mysterious land and built their defensive ráth at Mannen in Inchigeela.⁵³ For this is Iveleary: Uíbh Laoghaire – Land of the O’Learys, a land where loyalties run deep, and blood will always be thicker than water.

And so I find myself sitting at my desk looking out on little-Iveleary here in downtown Cork City, pen poised wondering where do I begin.



The O'Learys of Iveleary

That old photograph of the proud young British soldier with my grandmother, Nora Cotter, as a young girl, unlocked a long-forgotten memory of a Saturday morning in May 1979. It was as if a portal to my past was opened and I was invited on a journey of discovery. A week or so later, on a cold and crisp autumn morning, I headed west in the hope that, by exploring the land of Michael O'Leary's birth, I might gain insight into the man he became.

Turning west at Hartnett's Cross always brings that sense of home to this grandson of Iveleary.¹ Every bend of the road revealing the magic of the beautiful Lee Valley, I stopped off at all the predictable places along the route: The Gearagh, Toons Bridge, Kilbarry, Lough Allua, Ballingearry, Gougán, Keimaneigh.

It was as if I had hoped that the landscape would somehow reach out, embrace me and reveal some long-forgotten secret. But in my heart of hearts, I knew I had set my expectations too high. It was late that afternoon when I turned the car for home, and it is true to say that, I was slightly disillusioned by my lack of progress.

Looking back on that time, my journey west may have been motivated by other more personal interests. My father had died sometime before that, and his passing created a void that was proving difficult to fill. Not only had I experienced a personal loss, but, with him, went his stories and songs and his connection to Iveleary that had been so much part of my life since childhood. In their place was emptiness, or at best a series of disjointed, rapidly fading, vague, incomplete memories. It occurred to me that, no matter how bright a candle burns, once that flame is quenched no lingering light remains.

As I approached the village of Inchigeela, the sinking sun in my rear view mirror cut sharp shadows along the road ahead of me. I decided to call to my cousin Joe. I found

Left: The ruin of Carrignacurra Castle is the last of the O'Leary castles still standing in Iveleary – located a mile from the original O'Leary 12th century ráth in the village of Inchigeela.

him in the front parlour layering paint in every autumnal shade of orange, brown, yellow ocre and burnt umber onto paper, putting the finishing touches to an abstract image of Lough Allua. He abandoned his art in favour of a cup of tea and a chat.

As we made our way from the parlour to the bar I mentioned that my interest in Michael O’Leary had been stoked ever since he had presented me with the photo of our grandmother during my previous visit. I went on to explain that I had set out from Cork that morning in the futile hope of finding some trace or insight into Michael O’Leary. Joe poured the tea, and then vanished back into the kitchen, returning sometime later with a folder and a stack of papers. He placed a treasure trove of old family photographs, faded newspaper clippings and hand-written notes, letters and books on the table in front of me.

For a moment I sensed a tingling feeling of excited anticipation, and for some reason my thoughts were of Howard Carter when he first uttered the immortal words:

‘Wonderful things...’²

I sat there mesmerised, trawling through each envelope and notelet. Those fragile and faded folios offered me an invitation to the past. It was as if destiny had dealt me a hand of cards, and I had no choice but to raise the stakes and stay in the game.

Afternoon stretched to evening, every now and then a neighbour or a distant cousin interrupted our flow to exchange a handshake and share a few words. As we sat there nattering, it was as if, for the first time, I became consciously aware of the soft rolling sounds of Iveleary. Sounds from my youth that meant nothing, yet said everything, seemed to slip in and out of conversation, revealing a whole lexicon of lost words that jumbled together in nonsensical logic,

‘Wishah t’anamandíabhal, moléir...’

It was as if I had been transported back to the little-Iveleary of my childhood, like I was back at our shop counter in downtown Cork City, listening to my father and the men of Iveleary talking about births, deaths and marriages.

It is difficult to describe the complex thoughts that coursed through my mind that afternoon in Inchigeela; call it a moment of revelation that had taken decades to crystallise. Maybe it was the stag’s head above the fireplace stirring up some long-forgotten memory of Keimaneigh, or the famed, framed photograph of the elderly Boys of Kilmichael, with General Tom Barry sitting proudly surrounded by his gallant crew, or the images of long dead relatives and family friends preserved

behind glass, or maybe it was the way Joe sang a verse of the local Fenian love song, *My Inchigeela Lass*. I'm not too sure. But as I sat there, wrapped in the warmth of a blazing fire, in the company of extended family, it slowly dawned on me that a new generation had stepped into the breach and the stories lived on. I learned a lot that day. I learned that Iveleary is not just a destination; it is so much more than that. Iveleary is a journey into time; it is a sound, a scent, a state of mind.

In the intervening years, I have found myself, from time to time, trudging through the old Inchigeela graveyard³ with cousin Joe. Sometimes he stops at an ancient tilting headstone, all traces of etched words wiped clean by time, yet he identifies the remains buried beneath the soil as some relative of brave Airt Uí Laoghaire [Art O'Leary]. Other times he will place his hand on an old lichen-encrusted sepulchre in the western corner of the graveyard and utter the words, Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire [O'Leary]. At the memorial stone on the southern wall dedicated to Daniel Florence O'Leary, or at the plaque erected just inside the eastern gate in memory of Michael O'Leary of Cooleen, Joe will pause and pay his respects to the memory of those whose mortal remains are buried in foreign lands. At each marker along the way Joe always finds a moment to remember those who went before, sometimes with an appropriate verse of a song or a line from a poem.

My quest to discover Iveleary, the land of Michael O'Leary's birth, seems as elusive now as it was then. But it's odd how words spoken and fleeting images can come together like the fragments of an incomplete jigsaw to give a glimpse of the big picture. It could be something as simple as the sound of frozen blades of grass crunching under foot, a field with one cow, an ancient crannóg, a clapper bridge spanning a river, a scraggy old blackberry bush laden with fruit, a blackthorn in full bloom, or a thorny old tale that somehow manages to connect: Daniel Mac Art O'Leary, The Great O'Neill, the Royal Court of Spain, Oliver Cromwell, the Royal Hungarian Hussars, the Liberation of South America and Michael O'Leary of Cooleen, to a bend in the river just outside the village, at a place known as Carrignacurra.

In time I learned that the history of Iveleary is sometimes unlocked in an intimate anecdotal vignette presented as an animated epic, be it a Whiteboy burning, a Rockite battle, an attempted eviction. But the story of Iveleary often harbours a twist of the supernatural, for this is the land where otherworldly spirits have been known to stalk the roads at night. Over the years I have learned that Iveleary can be as ethereal as a puff of turf smoke from a draughty fireplace, or as visceral as a cup of strong milky tea by a roaring open fire on a cold and crisp autumn day.



St Finbarr's Oratory
at Gougán Barra Iveleary



This Mystical Land

The 'Land of the O'Learys' and the neighbouring parishes nestled in the surrounding hills, presents a mysterious and enchanting world of holy men and holy women. Here mystics, monks and hermits⁴ have cast their spells and banished evil. This place of sacred wells and spiritual sites continues to offer comfort and protection to a people who share a collective memory, embedded in the landscape since before the Bronze Age. This is a land where pagan tradition and Christian belief become one. Like at Meribah, when Moses struck the rock of Horeb,⁵ the source of the River Lee seems to percolate from the rocks high up over Gougán and gathers below in a glacial lake at a place once known as Lough Irse, before setting off on its meandering journey through the green and lush valley of Iveleary and all the way to the city of Cork – on Corcach Mór na Mumhan – the gateway to the wild Atlantic Ocean.

It was here, in the 6th century, in the heart of Iveleary, at the Lake Isle of Gougán Barra, that Finbarr drove out the evil Luiwee, a lake monster immortalised in stained glass as a blood-red dragon crushed beneath Finbarr's feet.⁶ Finbarr is patron saint of these parts, yet, in Ballyvourney, just over the hill beyond Reinaree, as if by some supernatural reordering of gender equilibrium, there exists a thriving devotion to the female Gobnait. Further investigation along the nave of the oratory at Gougán Barra reveals another stained-glass window dedicated to Gobnait with her ever-vigilant bees circling. Just as Finbarr banished Luiwee, Gobnait spun her own animal magic when she sent out her squadrons of bees to defend the local population from invaders.⁷

The dedication to the divinity of this female is still palpable at the old abbey near Ballyvourney, which, incidentally, was the home village of Michael O'Leary's wife, Gretta Hegarty. There you will find Gobnait's miraculous 'Iron Ball' concealed within the wall as a touchstone for the faithful who come to seek favour. This hillside has been a place of worship for millennia. Pilgrims have come here to drink the life-giving water from the nearby well long before Patrick's bell of Christianity rang out across the land. As a reminder of that pagan past, a provocative Síle na Gig sensually stretches her thighs high up on the old abbey wall, offering unconditional fertility to each new generation.

To the uninitiated these beliefs and customs may all seem like an abstraction of some enchanting Arthurian legend but, for those who know, there is a strength

Facing page: Stained-glass in St Finbarr's Oratory at Gougán Barra: Finbarr crushes the lake monster Luiwee underfoot. Gobnait with her ever-vigilant defending bees.





Left: Gobnait's Stone, Ballyvourney. Right: Personal offerings: Tell-tale signs identify sacred locations that might otherwise remain invisible to the untrained eye.

to be found in the power of those who went before. Tell-tale signs identify sacred locations that might otherwise remain invisible to the untrained eye: a cluster of ribbons tied to a bush; a collection of personal effects by way of offerings left on some designated rock; coins dating as far back as anyone can remember embedded into a tree or post; or a row of cups and mugs placed invitingly near a natural spring for those wishing to drink from the sacred water.

These hills hold the secrets of stone circles and megalithic alignments. Bronze Age dolmens span time just as the ancient clapper bridges span the River Lee at Ballingearry and Gougán. This is a land where legend blends inconspicuously with the landscape. On the outskirts of Inchigeela, a prehistoric crannóg on Lough Allua was once a place of sanctuary to a long-forgotten people, yet their blood and sweat has enriched the soil for future generations, and the imprint of their footsteps laid the ancient lake shore trail for what is now the scenic South Lake Road. The ever-present tales of banished lake monsters, defending swarms of bees, or stories of spirits and otherworldly happenings, are not fables burdened by moralistic undertones. Instead they are passed down through the generations word for word, with a balanced measure of precise and plausible detail that seems to present a credible history.



Left: Gobnait's Well, Ballyvourney. Right: the ancient Clapper Bridge in Ballygeary.

I was surprised to find that one such supernatural tale involved my great-granduncle, Michael Creedon [Maidhc Mhichíl]. It may seem odd that this account of an otherworldly encounter would have, at its core, a real-life identifiable person. Yet, the true measure of a story is in the ability to stretch credibility to the outer limits of plausibility. It gives an insight into the complicated belief systems that existed in Iveleary when Michael O'Leary was a child. Originally recorded in the Irish language by Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin in his collection, *Seanchas an Táilliúra*, it was first related by the renowned Iveleary bard, Tim [The Tailor] Buckley, who lived at the western end of Iveleary at Garrynapeaka near Gougán; or more precisely The Tailor's address as described in his own inimitable words:

‘In the townland of Garrynapeaka, in the district of Inchigeela, in the parish of Iveleary, in the barony of West Muskerry, in the county of Cork, in the province of Munster – lives The Tailor.’⁸

My father was well acquainted with the Tailor Buckley and his wife Anastasia [Ansty]. In later years, the Tailor's son Jackie was one of the regular sons of Iveleary to visit our shop, the Inchigeelagh Dairy.

This particular story is a mere minnow in the Tailor's vast repertoire, but it offers a good example of how the real, the surreal, the natural and the supernatural all seem to blend together as one in the narrative of Iveleary.

It concerns Maidhc Mhichíl Ó Críodáin [Michael Creedon] and how he banished a spirit that was in the habit of killing people who travelled the road at a place known as Casadh na Spride [The Spirit's Turn] in Drom an Ailigh on the back road to Gougán just beyond the village of Ballingearry.

Casadh na Spride [The Spirit's Turn] is to be found on the road east at Drom an Ailigh. It's less than a quarter mile west from Ballingearry, located exactly behind Creedon's house, which is on the roadside. As long as I've known those parts, Púca have been associated with it. There was a spirit there long ago.

A man called Michael Creedon from Illauninagh took on the spirit. She used to take the shape of a woman, and no one would see her except a person who would be out late at night. Michael was heading home one night, and it was fairly late. The spirit stopped him on the road, right at that turn there. [The Spirit's Turn]

She used to put a riddle to people and, if it wasn't answered to her satisfaction, she'd kill you. I think she killed other people there, although I've no accounts of those others.



'A candle and a candle-bearer there,' said she. 'Now you must make a couplet of that for me.' That's what she used to say to anyone who might pass that way.

It was a punishment imposed on her that she was bound to wait there until someone might answer her riddle for her. She had done something wrong. That's the way things were for the spirits then; those people that were after dying.

And so, Michael Creedon had to answer the rhyme for her. So he said:

Left: Mícheál Ó Críodáin [Maidhc Mhichíl] of Oileán Eidhneach [Illauninagh] pictured with his wife, Máire Ní Chróinín of Gougán Barra.⁹ (Courtesy of Manus O'Riordan)

‘The holly that grows in a glen, to thatch a house’s head.’
 ‘That won’t solve my riddle,’ she said.
 She set him the rhyme a second time. She’d give you three chances.
 Michael gave another answer to the question,
 ‘A mill mangling a river, striking it near and far.’
 ‘That won’t solve my riddle,’ she said.
 She said the rhyme a third time,
 ‘A candle and a candle-bearer there,’
 To which Michael replied,
 ‘You’d be better in Heaven than a ghost, I declare!’
 Well the minute he had that much said, she disappeared up into the sky.
 No one ever saw her again.¹⁰
 [Translated from the original Irish into English by Doireann Ní Ghríofa]

The story of Michael Creedon and the spirit of Casadh na Spride may seem unlikely, but I recently came across another incident involving the same Michael Creedon, which is just as fascinating and just as surreal.

In a story recorded in *The Kentucky Irish American Journal*, published in Kentucky USA, August 1898, it appears my great granduncle not only battled with supernatural forces, but he also had a sparring match with the forces of nature. This report tells of Michael Creedon from Illauninagh, Iveleary, and his close encounter with a bolt of lightening.

On Friday a thunderstorm of unusual violence broke over Ballingearry and adjoining country, which extended to Inchigeela. Michael Creedon of Illauninagh was near his house when a storm came and lightening struck the ground a short distance from him – tearing up rocks and excavating a deep hole in the ground. On entering the house he found the lightening had played havoc with the furniture and utensils, everything being smashed. No person was in the house at the time. An old woman who was caring for cows was thrown violently to the ground. Another man was hurled to the ground and carried a short distance away by the lightening. The storm had caused much damage to the crops in the district.¹¹

Considering my great granduncle’s clever use of a rhyming couplet to banish the spirit at Casadh na Spride, I wonder could it be that the bolt of lightening was the spirit’s less eloquent response.

The narrative of Iveleary is enriched by the ease with which the natural and the supernatural complement each other. I remember as a child traveling the craggy Pass of Keimaneigh, and my father pointing skyward to an outcrop of rock at the crest of the sheer cliff face, identifying the exact point where a deer had made the incredible leap across the gorge to safety from a pack of bloodthirsty, baying hounds. My father explained that this extraordinary feat of nature had given name to that mountain trail, Keimaneigh: Céim an Fhia – The Deer’s Leap.

This land of magical stories is the land of Michael O’Leary’s birth. As a child he would have known to stay away from the treacherous waters of the enchanted lake at Gougán, for a monster may still lurk deep beneath. Instinctively he would never roam from the house as the darkness of evening came in, for there were mischievous spirits who travelled the roads at night. He would have learned that bees were not to be harmed, because the day might come when Gobnait would be called upon to once again send out her squadrons to defend Ballyvourney, Coolea and Reinaree, and in the meantime the bee could carry on with the important task of pollinating the plants and producing the sweetest honey west of the Gearagh and all the way to Tír na Meala.¹²

The Clan O’Leary

It can be difficult to conceptualise the enormity of time in a timeless landscape. The O’Learys first came to Iveleary almost a thousand years ago. But a millennium is a mere blink of an eye-lid for a clan who claim direct lineage to the Érainn tribe,¹³ a seafaring people who are said to have settled the south-west coast of present day County Cork sometime between 1000 to 600 BC.

If the ancient texts of the *Book of Munster* [1730], the *Annals of the Four Masters* [1632], the *Book of Lismore* [1450], the *Book of Lecan* [1397], and the even earlier *Book of Ballymote* [1390] are to be believed, the O’Leary bloodline has a rich heritage. The 11th century *Book of Invasions* is generally accepted as a pseudo-history of the Irish people – in it the Milesians are recorded as a dominant race that settled Ireland around 1000 BC. It seems that with the passage of time the historical accuracy of their arrival to our shores becomes immaterial. Because, with the formation of the Munster clans the Gaelic chieftains chose to assert a direct lineage to the Milesians of 1000 BC as a declaration of their sovereignty, dynastic right and military supremacy. This tradition is evident many hundreds of years later in a letter dated 7th June 1703 in which the Munster chieftains proclaim their ethnicity as ‘Milesian Princes’, and pledge their loyalty to the protestant

Queen Anne of England.¹⁴ This particular letter held at the Southwell collection¹⁵ identifies the Gaelic chieftains of Munster as:

All the Milesian Princes; Mac Cartie Mór, O'Sullivan Mór, O'Leary [...] the best gentlemen of the Irish of these parts, are in a manner, mad [eager] to be employed in her Majesty's service.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that Queen Anne's advisors did not trust the loyalty of the Munster 'Milesian Princes' and attached the following comment in the margin of the correspondence:

There is every reason to suspect a Jacobite; the whole body are silent favourers of the Stuart interests.

The O'Learys of Iveleary trace their clan to Fothach Cannan the fifth son of High King of Ireland,¹⁷ King Lugaid MacCon [173 – 230 AD]¹⁸ of the Corcú Loíghde tribe.¹⁹ The Corcú Loíghde, a progressive and cultured people, were chieftains of a territory that centred on the present day town of Rosscarbery.²⁰ It was there in the 6th century Saint Fachtna established a monastery and set up a highly regarded centre for scriptural study known as the School of Ross. *The Annals of Innisfallen* [12th-15th century] record the O'Learys as kinsmen to Saint Fachtna, making them the hereditary wardens of Saint Fachtna's Monastery at Rosscarbery. By the 12th century the prestige of this ancient monastic settlement and seat of learning was enshrined when it was granted Cathedral status,²¹ a distinction Rosscarbery continues to hold to the present day.

Sometime around 1192 AD the O'Learys left their ancient territory of Rosscarbery and moved inland.²² There are a number of detailed theories and accounts as to why they undertook this exodus from their traditional coastal homeland, but it seems to coincide with the arrival of King Henry II of England to Ireland on 18th October 1171.

King Henry II was following in the footsteps of Strongbow²³ and his hard-man Raymond Le Gros who arrived 1st May 1170²⁴ with a King's charter in one hand and a longbow in the other. Although originally invited to Ireland by King of Leinster Diarmaid Mac Murchadha,²⁵ [Dermot MacMurrough] but viewed with the hindsight of history, it seems these guests of our nation overstayed their welcome.

This influx of armies from our neighbouring island identified Ireland as England's first overseas colony and marked the beginning of eight hundred

years of official English occupation.²⁶ Their arrival caused a subtle reshuffling of traditional tribal lands that sent a ripple across the island of Ireland. It is recorded in Diarmuid Ó Murchadha's *Gaelic Land Tenure in County Cork: Uíbh Laoghaire in the Seventeenth Century* that the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland exerted pressure on the traditional homelands of the indigenous Irish clans. Consequently, the O'Donovan²⁷ and Collins clans²⁸ were compelled to move into the traditional O'Leary lands at Rosscarbery. In the process, the O'Learys were forced to move inland.²⁹

It seems that over time the O'Learys regained some of their former prestige in Rosscarbery. In 1584, Ellen Ní Leary is recorded as being the mother of Donnell O'Donovan, Chief of the O'Donovan clan of Rosscarbery,³⁰ and by 1659 as many as sixty-seven O'Leary landowners were recorded to be living in the area of Rosscarbery.³¹

Considering that the O'Donovan and Collins clans first came to the Rosscarbery area sometime around 1192 AD, as a result of being forced from their own traditional lands in the aftermath of King Henry II of England's invasion of Ireland, it is interesting to note that the area of Rosscarbery continues to be populated by the descendants of the Collins and O'Donovan clans. It is remarkable that seven hundred years later their descendants continued to be prominent in the war against the English Crown in defence of their homeland. [Jeremiah O'Donovan³² Rossa [1831-1915], the Fenian [IRB] leader and Michael Collins³³ [1890-1922] the rebel [IRB/IRA] leader, were both militant nationalists who came from the region of Rosscarbery.]

For the purpose of this volume, the question of why the O'Leary clan moved from Rosscarbery is a historical tangent too far. The fact remains that in 1192 AD the O'Learys moved inland, and set up a base in the relative safety of the hills and valleys around Lough Allua where the village of Inchigeela now stands. This new place of settlement became known as Iveleary [Uíbh Laoghaire – Land of the O'Learys] and, though landlocked on all four points of the compass, the O'Leary coat of arms still bears a sailing ship in its centre as an echo of their ancient seafaring 'Milesian' heritage.

The village of Inchigeela is at the heart of Iveleary. It was there by a ford on the river in 1192 that the O'Learys built their first ráth, a defensive position known locally as Mannen.³⁴ Their new-found home along the Lee Valley offered the security of nature's defenses. The north and south flanks were difficult to penetrate due to the disorientating, interlocking craggy hills and valleys that sweep down to the narrow fertile plain along the River Lee. The west was easily defended at the narrow mountainous Pass of Keimaneigh, while, to the east, a dense oak wood

forest on a post-glacial alluvial flood plain at the Gearagh made invasion extremely difficult. Secure in the inaccessible valley of Iveleary, the O'Learys thrived.

It seems the O'Leary clan had established themselves as freeholders of Iveleary prior³⁵ to the emergence of the local super-dynasty, the McCarthys of Munster. However, as the McCarthys came to prominence in the lands surrounding Iveleary, and eventually established their supremacy in Muskerry, the O'Learys formed close alliances with their powerful neighbours.³⁶ Little is recorded of the first four hundred years of the O'Leary settlement in Iveleary, but it is safe to assume that they flourished in relatively peaceful existence with their neighbours, the powerful McCarthy lords, who ruled large tracts of Munster through a network of castles from their base at Blarney. By the time history catches up with the O'Learys in the 16th century they were still a titled clan and continued to be one of the few freeholders in Muskerry, albeit subject to their McCarthy allies, from whom they received the White Sceptre of Power³⁷ as a symbol of the right to self govern.³⁸



O'Leary Carrignacurra Castle. From *Researches in the South of Ireland* by Thomas Crofton Croker. London: John Murray, 1824. Drawn from nature by Alfred Nicholson.

The O'Learys are on record as having been a fighting clan,³⁹ particularly under their fiery Chieftain Auliffe [Amhlaoibh] O'Leary.⁴⁰ Ireland was a violent place at that time – disputes between neighbours were often resolved by human butchery. The terrible slaughter of the O'Learys by the McCarthy Maol Reagh during the



The Pass of Keimaneigh, the Western Gate to Iveleary. Keimaneigh: ‘Céim an Fhia’: translates as ‘The Deer’s Leap’. Photograph by Clifton Adams.

1601 cattle raid of Ahakeera⁴¹ left the O’Learys temporarily leaderless. But, for the most part, an alliance of mutual convenience existed between the two clans. There is evidence to suggest that some of these alliances had been more than just militaristically strategic. Romance may also have had its part to play, as there are a number of marriages recorded between the two clans, particularly in the lands peripheral to Iveleary, east of the Gearagh and west towards Macroom and Millstreet.⁴² Around this time, the O’Learys began to fortify their hold on Iveleary with various castle-building projects. In 1515 Carrignacurra Castle was constructed a mile from the original ráth at Mannen in the village of Inchigeela, the fortified tower house at Carrignaneela followed in 1565, and, sometime between 1615-1625, Donoch O’Leary built Dromcarra Castle.⁴³

The Ancient Gaelic Order of Irish Chieftains

The heritage of the O'Learys of Iveleary put them at the heart of the ancient Gaelic order in Munster. During the one hundred and fifty years between 1550 and 1700, Ireland became a land of relentless war.

In rebellion after rebellion the hold of the Irish chieftains was whittled down, one generation after the next, as they battled the English Crown to retain sovereignty of their lands. Like some recurring bloody rite of passage, each new generation of O'Leary chieftains stood their ground against endless waves of the colonising English planters.

The Earls of Desmond were of Norman stock; they had established their power base in Munster around the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion. By the 1500s, they had extended their control right across the southern part of Ireland, in a process of cultural assimilation rather than cultural colonisation, the hugely powerful Desmond dynasty became Hiberno-Norman, and were considered to be 'more Irish than the Irish themselves'.⁴⁴

'forsaking the English language, manners, mode of riding, laws and usages, [they] live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies'.⁴⁵

Concerned that their colonial grip of Ireland would slip from their grasp, successive English administrations attempted to curtail the influence of the Hiberno-Normans and expand English control over Ireland, but the Lords of Desmond managed to maintain their independence from the Crown. The Irish Munster chieftains – the O'Learys of Iveleary, McCarthy Mór of Muskerry, and O'Sullivan Beare found common cause with the Hiberno-Normans and rallied to support the Desmond cause. The power struggle between the English Crown and the Desmond dynasty came to a head in 1569 in an ill-fated series of rebellions. The Desmond Rebellions are remembered for the brutal suppression of the Desmond dynasty and their Irish allies. The scorched earth policy of the English effectively laid waste to most of Munster, and inevitably caused a huge death toll through famine and plague among the indigenous Irish population.⁴⁶

The destruction of the Desmond dynasty during the savagery of the two successive Desmond Rebellions of 1569/73 and 1579/83 resulted in the Plantation of Munster by English planters.⁴⁷ Arthur O'Leary of Carrignaneela Castle, Iveleary received a pardon in 1573 for his part in the first Desmond Rebellion. He was also pardoned in 1584, 1585, and 1587. An inquisition held at Shandon Castle

in Cork City in 1588 found Diarmuid Óg O’Leary of Carrignacurra Castle and others of the O’Leary clan guilty of insurrection during the second Desmond rebellion. However, it seems the inaccessibility of Iveleary and the royal pardon of 1584 saved them, and so the authority of the O’Learys in Iveleary and their hold on Carrignacurra Castle, Carrignaneela Castle, Dromcarra Castle and surrounding lands remained intact.⁴⁸

No sooner had the Desmond Rebellions ended, than the Nine Years War, otherwise known as the Elizabethan Wars [1594/03], began. The Nine Years War between The Great O’Neill [Hugh Ó Neill, 2nd Earl of Tyrone] and Elizabeth 1, Queen of England⁴⁹ spread south beyond the borders of Ulster and all the way to Munster.

Auliffe O’Leary of Carrignaneela Castle was chieftain of Iveleary at that time – it is said his bloodline and ancestral genealogy could be traced back through twenty-five generations and, by all accounts, he was, by nature, particularly warlike.⁵⁰ From the very beginning of the Nine Years War, Auliffe joined forces with The Great O’Neill and Hugh O’Donnell and led the Iveleary men to battle against Queen Elizabeth’s forces. Contrary to the anticipated outcome, the campaign ended in disaster for the Irish chieftains just thirty miles south of Iveleary at the Battle of Kinsale [1601].⁵¹

Mahon Mac Donough O’Leary of Iveleary managed to escape to Spain with Don Juan de Aquila, the commander of the Spanish forces who had come to Kinsale in support of the Irish chieftains.⁵² The remaining O’Leary chieftains were found guilty of treason and subjected to a Bill of Attainder⁵³ for their role in the rebellion. However, because of the inaccessibility of Iveleary, the O’Learys continued to live comfortably and thrive as outlaws in safety, with impunity. There are accounts of a community of O’Leary outlaws living in and around Iveleary, and though they had lost legal tenure and rights to their titles and deeds, the O’Learys continued to live on their lands. This established Iveleary as a safe haven for outlaws and insurgents ‘on the run’. Crofton Croker writes of the ‘wild and marauding’ outlaw Owen ‘Labbig’ who came to Iveleary to avoid capture:

Intending to absent himself for a short while, he hastily retired to Iveleary, amongst whose inaccessible glens, he concluded the stranger had little chance of capturing him.⁵⁴



It is fascinating to read the numerous spelling variations of the name O’Leary in the lists of Crown confiscations drawn up in 1606: ‘Maymen in Muskerry, late

possession of Awliffe O'Flerry, chief of his sept attained'— refers to Auliffe O'Leary of Mannen. Also outlawed were: 'Teige Mac Arte O'Learie, Teige Merrigough Learye' of Carrignaneela Castle. At 'Carricleevan' [Carrleigh Castle] the lands of 'Donal Mac Dermott O'Learye and Dermot Oge O'Learie' were confiscated. It was also noted that the lands of 'Awliffe, Conogher, Teige, Donnel and Teige mac Art O'Learie slain in rebellion' were seized.⁵⁵

Much of Iveleary was conveyed to Richard Boyle⁵⁶ including the lands of the O'Leary chieftains 'Donoghe, Conoghor, Teige and Dermot Mac Teige Mac Fynin'.

I find it intriguing that Chieftain Auliffe O'Leary should appear on the 1606 Bill of Attainder, particularly, as previously referenced, he had been killed by the McCarthy Maol Reagh five years earlier during the 1601 Cattle Raid of Ahakeera. Peter O'Leary's article, *The Last O'Leary Chieftain – Donal MacArt (1575 -1657)*, makes the point that if word got back to the Queen's President that the clan chieftain [Auliffe O'Leary] had been slain as a result of in-fighting among the clans it could have resulted in the confiscation of O'Leary lands by the Crown. Consequently, the McCarthys and the O'Learys contrived a deception whereby it was put about that Auliffe had only been injured at Ahakeera. Eventually Donnchadh an Ghaorthaidh O'Leary – the 4th son of Conchobhar [Conor] O'Leary of Mannen – was elected the new O'Leary chieftain. In due course, it was announced that Auliffe O'Leary had died of natural causes.⁵⁷ This alliance of convenience between competing clans implies that an understanding existed between the clans that in-fighting and local disputes were secondary in the context of the shared enemy.

Despite the severe sanctions against the O'Leary chieftains in the aftermath of the [Elizabethan] Nine Years War, due to the inaccessibility of Iveleary, a number of the Crown confiscations were rescinded. Art Mac Diarmuid O'Leary and Firganenem⁵⁸ O'Leary were pardoned at Carrignacurra Castle in 1601.⁵⁹ Also pardoned were 'Donnough O'Leerie alias O'Leyerie and Teige Mac Awliffe O'Leerie and Donnough Ingearhie O'Leary of Maninge' [Mannen].⁶⁰ The aforementioned 'Donnough Ingearhie O'Leary of Maninge' refers to Donnchadh an Ghaorthaidh O'Leary, who had been secretly elected Chieftain following the death of Auliffe O'Leary at the cattle raid of Ahakeera. The Muskerry Survey [1640/41], published in 1656, records that Conor McAuliffe O'Leary, who was the son of the dead O'Leary chieftain – Auliffe O'Leary – still held substantial personal holdings of 1,800 acres in the parish of Inchigeela.⁶¹

In the aftermath of the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, the O'Sullivan clan from the neighbouring Beara Peninsula were not as fortunate as the O'Learys. O'Sullivan Beare had sent a petition of loyalty to King Philip III of Spain, pledging to continue the offensive against the English which was intercepted. Consequently, the Crown singled out the O'Sullivan's clan of Beara in West Cork for special attention.

The following year, the English forces, under George Carew, annihilated the O'Sullivan stronghold at Dunboy Castle near present-day Castletownbere. They then proceeded to slaughter all non-combatants of the O'Sullivan clan [women, children and elderly] at Dursey Island⁶² in what has become known as the Dursey Massacre.

In a desperate last throw of the dice, Donal Cam O'Sullivan, from his base at Carriganass Castle⁶³ near the village of Kealkill, just beyond O'Leary country west of the Pass of Keimaneigh, attempted to reignite the conflict between the Gaelic chieftains and the English Crown. He led what remained of his army into Iveleary and took hostile refuge at the O'Leary Carrignacurra Castle.⁶⁴ The hostilities were short-lived as the O'Learys joined forces with the O'Sullivans and together they proceeded to attack neighbouring castles at Carrignaphooca and Dundareirke⁶⁵ in the hope of provoking and escalating the conflict with England. But, in a period that became known as the Flight of the Earls, there was little support for this short-lived insurgency as many Irish chieftains had fled to the relative safety of other Catholic countries across Europe, in a bid to escape the inevitable persecution in the aftermath of the failed Nine Years War.

On New Year's Eve 1602 Donal Cam O'Sullivan decided to lead what remained of his clan on an epic march up the country to the O'Rourke's in Leitrim. From there he planned to continue the rebellion against the Crown. The exodus of the outlawed O'Sullivan clan through enemy-held lands in the depth of an extremely cold winter was an unqualified disaster. Of the thousand who set out, on what became known as the March of O'Sullivan Beare, only thirty-five individuals survived to tell the tale.⁶⁶ For O'Sullivan Beare, the writing was on the wall. He realised that any stand against the Crown at that time would be futile. With the support of their allies in the north of the country, the O'Sullivans followed the other exiled Irish chieftains such as The Great O'Neill, Red Hugh O'Donnell and Mahon Mac Donough O'Leary, and fled to Europe.⁶⁷

The lands of the exiled Irish chieftains were parcelled out to a new generation of English colonists in a continuation of the Crown policy of the Plantation of Ireland.⁶⁸ But, once again, fate was on the side of the O'Leary clan. For the most part, their lands remained safe and intact in the seclusion of Iveleary.

Despite the relentless generations of warfare, the Civil Survey of Muskerry [1641]

presents an insight into the hold on Iveleary by the O'Leary clan – Diarmuid Ó Murchadha describes the prestige of the O'Leary clan at that time in *Family Names of County Cork*.

Reading between the cold lines of official statistics we catch here a glimpse of what must have been one of the most tightly-knit and deeply rooted of the Gaelic clans [The O'Learys] to have survived into the mid-17th century.⁶⁹

This view is supported in Michael C. O'Laughlin's *The Book of Irish Families, Great & Small*.

In the census of 1659 O'Leary is given as a principal name in Cork City and Kerry. Family members are numerous among the ranks of fighting men on the continent.⁷⁰

Although, once again, the O'Learys featured prominently in the 1642 Bill of Attainder:⁷¹ Connor O'Leary of Carrignycorry [Carrignacurra Castle], and Auliffe O'Leary who had previously survived a penalty for his part in the Nine Years War, were included on a Bill of Attainder with fourteen other O'Leary Lords.⁷²

By 1641 Ireland was once again a battlefield in what became known as the Irish Confederate Wars, [The Eleven Years War: Cogadh na hAon Bhliana Déag]. The Irish Confederate Wars became an extension of the English Civil War, fought between the Cavalier Royalists and Roundhead Parliamentarians. Although the Irish Confederates proclaimed their loyalty to King Charles I and the Royalist cause, their primary focus remained in Ireland.

The Confederate Wars unfolded in a series of localised acts of chaotic violence. It became a brutal, religious and ethnic power struggle between the Irish Confederates, who comprised a loose affiliation of Irish lords and dispossessed chieftains, pitted against the English and Scottish Protestant planter colonists. But, rather than functioning as a cohesive, nationally orchestrated rebellion with concise strategic objectives, the Confederate Wars often degenerated into extreme levels of violence perpetrated by the previously dispossessed Irish, who were committed to exacting revenge on the local Protestant planters. The early phase of the conflict is on record as featuring a particularly horrific series of reprisals inflicted on the planter population.⁷³

The parallel conflict unfolding in England – the English Civil War – came to a bloody end with the defeat of the Royalists, the abolition of the Crown of England

and the execution of King Charles 1 in 1649. Oliver Cromwell was one of the signatories of the death warrant of King Charles 1, and, with the blood still wet on the executioner's axe, Cromwell took command of the English campaign in Ireland. His arrival to our shores in 1649 is remembered as a brutal and bloody time, typified by the burning of cities and towns, mass executions, and once again, the implementation of anti-civilian policies such as crop burnings causing widespread famine.

The Down Survey,⁷⁴ conducted by William Petty, presents a frightening record of the decline of the Irish population during that time. Michael St John Parker's *The Civil War 1642–1651*⁷⁵ highlights the incredible statistic of 600,000 deaths in Ireland, approximately forty per cent of the then total population.⁷⁶ Another 50,000 Irish,⁷⁷ including prisoners of war, were transported as indentured labourers/slaves to the English colonies of America and the West Indies.⁷⁸ The contempt of the English colonisers towards the indigenous Irish is evident in the state papers of Oliver Cromwell's spymaster John Thurloe.

It was a measure beneficial to Ireland, which was thus relieved of a population that might trouble the planters; it was a benefit to the people removed, which might thus be made English and Christians ... a great benefit to the West India sugar planters, who desired men and boys for their bondsmen, and the women and Irish girls... to solace them.⁷⁹

Cromwell's order 'To Hell or to Connaught'⁸⁰ demanded that Irish chieftains and clan leaders be exiled from their traditional homelands to Connaught, west of the Shannon. This decree was a brutal addendum to Cromwell's master plan, designed to clear the land of Irish Catholics to make way for the next wave of English Protestant planters. Eighty year old Daniel⁸¹ Mac Art O'Leary, the last elected chieftain of the O'Learys, was forced to leave his homeland of Iveleary and was banished to Connaught where he died in exile in 1657.⁸² Cromwell proceeded to seize large tracts of Ireland. By the time he sailed for home he had redistributed the confiscated land into the hands of his lieutenants.⁸³ The Cromwellian Plantation wreaked irreversible damage to the O'Leary clan in Iveleary.⁸⁴

The memory of Cromwell has been held in such contempt by the Irish that up to recent times the very mention of his name was often underscored by a spit of derision,⁸⁵ a tradition referred to in the lyrics of *Irish Blood, English Heart* by Morrissey:

And spit upon the name Oliver Cromwell,
And denounce this royal line that still salutes him.
And will salute him, forever.⁸⁶

When Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, his power and authority passed to his son Richard,⁸⁷ but within a year he had been removed as Lord Protector of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and the monarchy had been restored.

The Restoration of the English monarchy under King Charles II offered renewed hope to the Irish chieftains who had supported his father, King Charles I, during the Eleven Years War.⁸⁸ To a certain extent, the Irish chieftains were repaid for their loyalty; King Charles II returned almost a third of the confiscated lands back into Irish hands.⁸⁹ But the power of the new king was far from absolute – the restoration of the monarchy had relied on the support of Protestant allies, and King Charles II was restricted by the delicate balance that existed between the newly empowered Parliamentarians and the recently restored Royalists, and consequently many of the Cromwellian Plantations in Ireland remained intact.

The lands of the O’Leary clan were not restored, although between 1641 and 1679 their near neighbours, the McCarthy clan, increased their holdings from 82,000 acres to 161,000 acres.⁹⁰ This massive expansion of McCarthy land holdings was at the expense of the O’Leary clan and, despite the ancient alliances that may have existed between the two clans,

‘McCarthy of Macroom and Blarney had been scheming and plotting to obtain the freehold of [Iveleary] for some 200 years. Now he had succeeded.’⁹¹

Donough MacCarty [McCarthy], 1st Earl of Clancarty, now in possession of much of Iveleary, did facilitate a large number of leasing deals with the O’Learys, and the O’Leary lords regained their position of prestige in Iveleary.⁹² Nevertheless, the Cromwellian era had effectively annihilated the ancient O’Leary clan structure.

The Muskerry Civil Survey of 1654 records that the O’Leary clan leaders had lost their hold of Iveleary.⁹³ They were either dead, outlawed [under attainder] or had followed Daniel⁹⁴ Mac Art O’Leary in his exile to Connaught.⁹⁵ Yet, it is interesting to note that thirteen years earlier the Civil Survey of Muskerry 1641 records thirty-five O’Leary lords, who were described as ‘landowning aristocracy’⁹⁶ and listed as ‘Irish papists’,⁹⁷ held substantial tracts of property in Iveleary.⁹⁸

One of the principal names in the 1641 survey, a Daniel Mac Art O'Leary, instantly attracted my attention. Daniel Mac Art O'Leary is identified as the son of Art O'Leary, who had been a clan leader in 1592 based at Carrignaneela Castle.⁹⁹ In the Muskerry Survey 1641 Art O'Leary's son, Daniel Mac Art O'Leary is recorded as holding extensive lands at Kilbarry, Cooleen, Carrigleigh, Carrignaneela, Currahy, Illauninagh and other adjacent townlands.¹⁰⁰ This is significant because the specific townlands identified [Kilbarry/Cooleen] are at the heart of Michael O'Leary VC country.

Twenty-five years later in 1677, another Daniel O'Leary regained ownership of this land at Kilbarry and Cooleen when he obtained a 99-year lease from Donough MacCarty [McCarthy], 1st Earl of Clancarty. This Daniel O'Leary is identified as the son of the previous owner, Daniel Mac Art O'Leary – the son of the chieftain Art O'Leary.¹⁰¹

In light of the long-established tradition of certain Christian names being passed down through the generations of specific clan lines, it is fascinating to discover that this land was leased to yet another generation of O'Leary chieftains with the Christian name Daniel, linked specifically to the townlands of Kilbarry and Cooleen – the birthplace of Michael O'Leary VC, whose father, brother and son were also christened Daniel. It would be seductively tempting to link Michael O'Leary VC to the bloodline of the last O'Leary chieftain Daniel Mac Art O'Leary. But two-hundred and forty years of war, plantation and banishments [with the associated loss of clan records] would come to pass before the birth of Michael O'Leary VC – alas, at this point in my research it is too great a genealogical challenge to attempt to bridge the gap of kinship and claim an absolute ancestral connection between Michael O'Leary of Cooleen/Kilbarry and the various 'Daniel O'Leary' chieftains of Cooleen/Kilbarry.

The restoration of King Charles II to the throne did give the O'Learys a faint hope of re-establishing their power base in Iveleary, but any aspirations they may have had were crushed following the defeat of the Jacobites in the subsequent Williamite War.

The Williamite War [1688-91], also known as the Jacobite War, became known in Ireland as *Cogadh an Dá Rí: War of the Two Kings*.¹⁰² Once again the island of Ireland became the battleground in a power struggle for the English Crown. This particular war unfolded as a conflict between the Jacobite supporters of King James II and the Williamite supporters of Protestant Prince William of Orange. As one would expect, the O'Learys of Iveleary found common cause with James II and his

Jacobite army, in the hope of regaining the lands and sovereignty they had lost to the previous wave of Cromwellian planters. In the fullness of history we now know it was not to be; the defeat of the Jacobites sounded the death knell for any hope of restoring the former glory of the O'Leary clan.

The campaign lists published in 1689 include a Major-General O'Leary as one of the many O'Leary officers in the Jacobite army. Also listed is a Kedagh O'Leary of Inchigeela, who was described as 'Lieutenant to the King'.¹⁰³

With the defeat of the Jacobites on the banks of the River Boyne in 1690¹⁰⁴ all hope of a resurgence of the old Gaelic order of Irish chieftains finally came to an end. Having pledged their support for the Jacobite cause, two further generations of the Kilbarry/Cooleen O'Learys were outlawed, resulting in the loss of all their holdings in Iveleary.¹⁰⁵ The lands that had been leased to Daniel Mac Art O'Leary and later to his son, Daniel O'Leary in 1641, were rescinded in 1700 at Chichester House.¹⁰⁶

Many other members of the O'Leary clan featured on a Bill of Attainder at that time including William O'Leary, who lost all property, lands and rights of inheritance.¹⁰⁷ Although it is interesting to note that by 1699 Captain Kedagh O'Leary and Captain Cornelius O'Leary had taken possession of the traditional O'Leary stronghold at Carrignacurra – and Captain Daniel O'Leary had returned to his lands at Inchigeela.¹⁰⁸ But this glimmer of hope was short-lived. Within four years the English-owned Hollow Sword Blade Company¹⁰⁹ moved on all the outstanding forfeited property of outlawed and attainted Irish chieftains right across the country. By 1703 the O'Leary clan had effectively lost all influence over Iveleary and were dispossessed of their remaining property, including all three castles; Carrignacurra, Carrignaneela and Dromcarra.

Despite the massive expansion of McCarthy land holdings during the mid-1600s, by 1703 the Hollow Sword Blade Company swept all before them, and the McCarthy lords of Munster lost everything, including their stronghold at Blarney Castle¹¹⁰ to yet another wave of English planters.¹¹¹ This marked the end of the ancient Gaelic order of Irish chieftains.

But despite all the wars and revolutions of which this family were repeated victims, its lineal representative – The O'Leary – until recently supported the antique style of profuse hospitality within the district of his forefathers. The name is still frequent among the peasantry; but not a sod of the property belongs to the clan. 'The Governor and Company for making hollow sword blades in England,' long since had the disposal of that. Fame however has been partial to individuals of this [O'Leary] race.¹¹²

The Rise and Rise of the Ascendancy

Like death by a thousand cuts, the demise of the O’Leary chieftains and the once all-powerful ‘Milesian Lords’ of Munster was slow and painful; their sovereignty had been eroded over a period of two hundred years of war, rebellion and brutal oppression.

By the early 1700s, with the ancient Gaelic order finally dismantled, the dominance of the Anglican Ascendancy¹¹³ over the Irish population was copperfastened with the introduction of what became known as the Penal Laws. The Penal Laws cut straight to the marrow of the Irish nation, ultimately divesting the indigenous Irish of all property, power, education and freedom.

It would be convenient to define the conflict in Ireland as sectarian, and surmise that the battle lines of Irish history had been Catholic versus Protestant, but such a simplistic stereotype is inaccurate and a blunt instrument of measurement.¹¹⁴ The Penal Laws were inflicted on both the Catholic and Dissenter populations. Dissenters constituted approximately one fifth of the population of Ireland and included, among other denominations – Presbyterians, Huguenots, Quakers, Palatines, Baptists and Methodists.

William Blackstone, in his book *Commentaries On The Laws of England*, claims that the suffering inflicted on the Catholic population was more extreme than the sanctions inflicted on Dissenters. Blackstone makes the point that the intensity of the Penal Laws as experienced by the Irish Catholic population was driven more by temporal, political and cultural concerns rather than by any conflict of core religious belief or practice.

At a most fundamental level, Catholics had a primary allegiance to the Pope – not the head of the Anglican Church, who also happened to be the English monarch. By implication, Irish Catholics had common cause with other Catholic countries across Europe. Consequently the Catholic population, though subjects of the Royal realm of England, were viewed as enemies of the English Crown.

As to papists, what has been said of the Protestant dissenters would hold equally strong for a general toleration of them; provided their separation was founded only upon difference of opinion in religion, and their principles did not also extend to a subversion of the civil government. If once they could be brought to renounce the supremacy of the Pope, they might quietly enjoy their seven sacraments, their purgatory, and

auricular confession; their worship of relics and images; nay even their transubstantiation. But while they acknowledge a foreign power, superior to the sovereignty of the kingdom, they cannot complain if the laws of that kingdom will not treat them upon the footing of good subjects.¹¹⁵

In his book *The History of Ireland in the 18th Century*, the political theorist William Edward Hartpole Lecky makes the point that he could ‘with absolute justice substitute Irish for Catholic’. Lecky, who was of the Ascendancy class, claimed the Penal Laws were instituted to ‘deprive Catholics [Irish] of all civil life and reduce them to a condition of extreme, brutal ignorance and to disassociate them from the soil’. He then coldly added a fourth objective of the Penal Laws: ‘To expatriate the race.’¹¹⁶

The philosopher and humanitarian, Edmund Burke, who was also of the Anglican faith, said the Penal Laws were:

‘...a machine as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.’¹¹⁷

Dr Samuel Johnson, a devout Anglican, once described as ‘arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history’,¹¹⁸ gave his unambiguous response to the Penal Laws, when he said:

‘There is no instance of such severity as that which the Protestants of Ireland exercised against the Irish.’¹¹⁹

Professor Lecky summed up the Penal Laws when he wrote:

It was not the persecution of a sect, but the degradation of a nation. It was the instrument employed by a conquering race supported by a neighbouring power, to crush to the dust the people among whom they were planted. A foreign observer in Ireland noted that the Catholic could easily be told by his stooped carriage and subdued manner. It may be justly regarded as one of the blackest pages in the history of persecution.¹²⁰

Lecky outlined the Penal Laws as follows:

- The Irish Catholic was forbidden the exercise of his religion.
- forbidden to receive education.
 - forbidden to enter a profession.
 - forbidden to hold public office.
 - forbidden to engage in trade or commerce.
 - forbidden to live in a corporate town or within five miles thereof.
 - forbidden to own a horse of greater value than five pounds.
 - forbidden to own land.
 - forbidden to lease land.
 - forbidden to accept a mortgage on land in security for a loan.
 - forbidden to vote.
 - forbidden to keep any arms for his protection.
 - forbidden to hold a life annuity.
 - forbidden to buy land from a Protestant.
 - forbidden to receive a gift of land from a Protestant.
 - forbidden to inherit land from a Protestant.
 - forbidden to inherit money, property or possessions from a Protestant.
 - forbidden to rent land worth more than 30 shillings a year.
 - forbidden to reap from his land profit exceeding a third of the rent.
 - forbidden to be guardian to a child.
 - forbidden to leave his infant children under Catholic guardianship.
 - forbidden to attend Catholic worship.
 - compelled by law to attend Protestant worship.
 - forbidden to educate his child.
 - forbidden to send his child to a Catholic teacher.
 - forbidden to employ a Catholic teacher to come to his child.
 - forbidden to send his child abroad to receive education.¹²¹

The granduncle of Charles Stewart Parnell, Sir Henry Parnell, an Anglican by faith, presents a bleak analysis of the laws and their implications for the indigenous Irish:

If it were asked why the people of Ireland are illiterate? The answer that presents itself is, look to the Penal Laws that deprived them of education. If it be asked why they are poor? The same answer must be given. If it be asked why they eat vegetables only and live in hovels? Still the same answer, look to the Penal Laws.

If it be asked why there is no class of Yeomanry¹²² in Ireland like that of England? The answer is because the Penal Laws prohibited industry, and prevented the small landholder from acquiring property.

If it be asked why the people are discontented and dislike England? The only answer can be given, because from England they have been given this Penal Code, under which they have endured for above a century, every species of calamity, contrary to the positive stipulations of a sacred and solemn treaty.¹²³

The Penal Laws were extremely effective in consolidating the power of the minority Ascendancy population over the 85% majority Irish population.¹²⁴ By 1778 only 5% of Ireland was owned by what could be described as the indigenous Irish¹²⁵ who by that time were impoverished, uneducated, landless, leaderless and, in many cases, had become reduced to being a subservient caste to the Ascendancy overlords.

A satirical representation of the uncouth rabble who would constitute the Catholic Ascendancy in the aftermath of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation.



Gone were the clan structures and the resources to wage effective warfare, but in the context of Michael O’Leary and the greater narrative of Iveleary, the struggle of the indigenous Irish did not end with the dismantling of the ancient Gaelic order of Irish lords. Despite the curtailments imposed by the Penal Laws, it seems the need for secrecy in religious practice and all social and financial dealings became a binding force among Irish Catholics, and a sense of national identity seemed to consolidate under the conditions of oppression. From the shadows of secrecy the struggle for civil rights continued, sometimes erupting in outright insurrection against the Ascendancy who were viewed as a foreign power of occupation.¹²⁶

When one considers the relentless wars, plantations and oppression inflicted on the indigenous Irish during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, it is surprising to find that descendants of the O’Leary clan continue to live in and around Iveleary to the present day, demonstrating the tenacity of a people who have maintained an unbroken connection with the land down through the centuries since first arriving here in 1192 AD.

The outlaw mentality seems to have been characteristic of the O’Learys. Despite the ravages of wars and confiscations, they continued to regroup, move forward, and challenge the authority of the English Usurpers.¹²⁷

The speed and tenacity with which the local population established itself is surely a testimony to that sturdy independence which had permeated the way of life in Iveleary for generations.

It is hardly a coincidence that from this remote upland parish emanates some of the most notable of, what might be termed, anti-establishment personages and events throughout succeeding centuries, incidents which in Gaelic folk-memory have always had a symbolic impact far above and beyond their historical significance.¹²⁸

Michael O’Leary was born to such a family. He has been identified as one of the O’Leary Ríabhach,¹²⁹ of the ancestral O’Leary lords of Iveleary. By the time Michael was born in 1888, the glory days of the O’Leary lords were but a far distant memory, and he and his family lived as subsistence farmers of very modest means. Yet it offers an insight into the perseverance of his ancestors, who had stood against the raging tide of history, that Michael O’Leary grew up in a land that continues to be known to the present day as Iveleary: Uíbh Laoghaire – the Land of The O’Learys.

I recently came across an interesting newspaper article published in *The Straits*

Times Singapore, 30th July 1915. It tells of a time when Michael O'Leary first came to international attention on being awarded the Victoria Cross, and the world media converged on his home place. From America to Australia, stories of Iveleary were heralded across the globe. A surprised visiting journalist attempted to describe the depth of the O'Leary clan's connection to Iveleary:

[Iveleary] is in the heart of O'Leary country, there is not an O'Leary but has his relationship with Mike, though some go back ten generations, for here O'Learys are as plentiful as Germans.¹³⁰

Iveleary: In Song and in Story The Land of the Seanachaoí

I have heard it said that the Inuit have a hundred words for snow and the Bedouin have just as many for sand. Well in Iveleary there is no shortage of words to describe the tradition of people gathering at a fireside to tell stories and sing songs: scoraíocht, bothántaíocht, airneáilíocht to name but a few, and every townland in the parish had a rambling house or two.

Iveleary is a land steeped in the bardic tradition – the land of the seanachaoí, the storyteller, the singer of songs. It is a tradition that stretches back hundreds if not thousands of years, to a time when the O’Learys were chieftains of this place, and with the passage of time – when they had lost their castles and lands, the tradition continued to live on in the more modest setting of their hillside cottages.

As a child, Michael O’Leary would have gathered with his brothers and sisters around the open fireside at night-time to listen, as the history of Iveleary came to life in the flickering flames. Stories of his ancestors, Fothach Cannan and High King Lugaid MacCon of the Corcú Loíghde tribe, must have seemed like fantasy characters from a wondrous mythical saga. While the mass migration of the O’Leary clan from their coastal home at Rosscarbery, almost a thousand years previously, would have unfolded like some biblical exodus.

Michael would have learned that generations of the O’Leary clan had battled in a never-ending cycle of war with the Crown of England. He would have known of the continued brutal oppression of his people over hundreds of years in successive wars – and if proof ever be needed, he did not have to look any further than across the fields from the half-door of the dirt floor hillside cottage to the ruins of the O’Leary Castles of Carrignaneela, Carrignacurra, and Dromcarra to appreciate the enormity of the downfall of his kin.

Michael O’Leary grew up surrounded by the stories, the songs and the piseogs of Iveleary. He would have been familiar with the tales of An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire [O’Leary], a leading light of Gaelic Iveleary,¹ whose niece Magdalene Ní Laoghaire was married to the IRB/IRA leader Seán O’Hegarty. An tAthair Peadar, from the nearby Carrignacurra Castle branch of the O’Leary clan,² championed the richness of the Iveleary/Muskerry culture with particular interest in the Iveleary dialect of the Irish language.³ He is regarded as one of the founders of modern Irish literature, yet he always credited the oral tradition of the seanachaoí as his primary source of inspiration.⁴ *The Celtica Journal* [1954], lists four hundred and eighty seven articles and works attributed to An tAthair Peadar, including his highly acclaimed *Mo Sceal Féin*. He is probably best remembered for his ghostly tale *Séadna*, which tells of a Faustian pact with the Devil that unfolds late at night in an isolated hillside cottage, similar to the cottage in which Michael O’Leary grew up. The story of *Séadna* became an instant classic as it spread from fireside to fireside throughout the hills of Iveleary and beyond.⁵

As the young Michael O’Leary grew towards manhood, he would also have known of another famous Iveleary storyteller, Tim (The Tailor) Buckley, who was creating quite a stir over at the western end of the parish at Garrynapeaka. The Tailor’s story concerning my great-granduncle, Michael Creedon, and the spirit at Casadh na Spride, recorded earlier in this volume, pales to insignificance in the context of The Tailor’s vast repertoire of tales, songs, insights and words of wisdom. In his own lifetime, The Tailor’s fame reached far beyond the hills of Iveleary, as academics, folklorists, artists and anthropologists beat a path to his door just to sit at his fireside among the neighbours to hear and record his words. His place in history was guaranteed when a book, compiled by Eric Cross, *The Tailor and Ansty* came to national and international



An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire



Tim [The Tailor] Buckley and his wife Ansty

attention when the Irish government censor banned it, and the clergy forced The Tailor to burn his personal copy of the book in his own fireplace.

The ensuing debate instigated what must be the most farcical, if not surreal, exchanges in Seanad Éireann [the Irish Senate], when the State stenographers were instructed to cease recording the debate because it was deemed that if the vile and debased language of The Tailor was recorded in the notes of the Senate, it might somehow contaminate the records of the Upper House of the Oireachtas of Dáil Éireann.⁶

The following is an extract from the records of Seanad Éireann:

Sean Keane:

The word indecency shall be construed as including suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave.

Prof Magennis:

I suggest to the Chairman that an instruction should be given to the official reporters not to record it. Otherwise, we shall have some of the vilest obscenity in our records...

I would not foul my lips nor defile the ears of this House by quoting the passage. I do not want it recorded. Some fig-leaf language can be used to describe it, but it must not be referred to merely as a piece of harmless, if coarse, jocosity.⁷

[Seanad Éireann - Volume 27]



In my quest to discover the land of Michael O'Leary's youth, to better understand the man he became, I found myself being drawn into the age-old oral tradition of Iveleary as it was first presented to Michael. It soon became apparent that the narrative of Iveleary and the surrounding parishes is not limited to saintly acts, ghostly tales or ribald fireside stories. At the heart of this land are stirring accounts of flesh and blood, gritty realism recorded orally and passed down through the generations in verse, with none more vivid than the epic lament for brave Airt Uí Laoghaire [Art O'Leary].

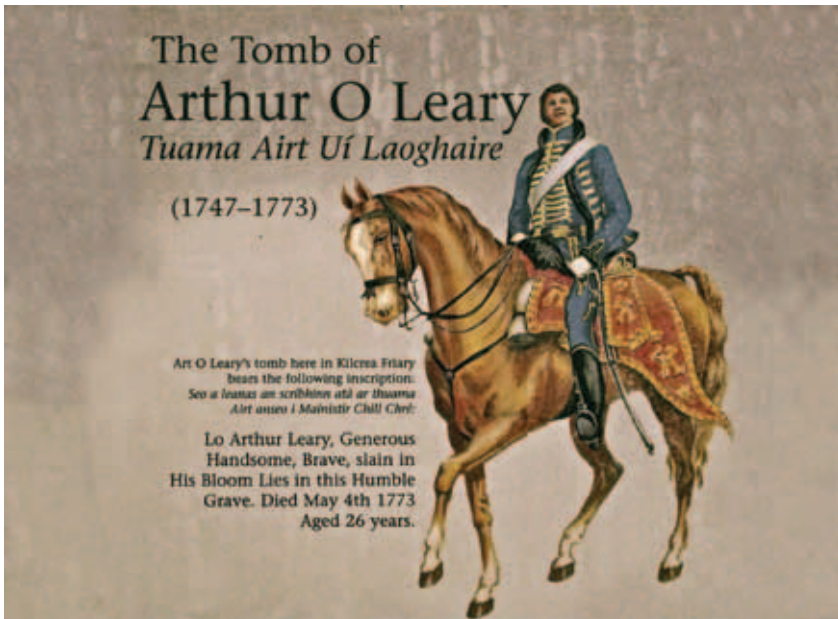


Image of Art O'Leary mounted on a plaque over his grave in Kilcrea Abbey.

Lament for Art O'Leary

The words inscribed above his tomb in Kilcrea Abbey a few miles east of Iveleary, set up the story:

Art O'Leary was born at Raleigh near Macroom in 1747. He was a member of a prosperous Catholic family, who, despite the Penal Laws, managed to retain extensive land holdings between Macroom and Gougane Barra.

Denied educational and career opportunities at home because of the Penal Laws, Art, like many Catholic young men, went abroad where he served as a captain in the Hungarian Hussars.⁸ [In the Austrian Army]

At the age of twenty-five, Art returned home from the European wars. As a Catholic on horseback with attitude, Art's homecoming proved to be a difficult re-integration, not least because he was once again obliged to kowtow to the Penal Laws.⁹ Seemingly, when Art arrived back from Austria with a magnificent steed, the local Protestant High Sheriff, Abraham Morris, insisted on having the horse at a knockdown price. Morris antagonised Art by citing the Penal Law that Catholics

could not own a horse exceeding the value of £5. In the subsequent escalation of hostilities between the two men, the impetuous Art discharged his pistol at Morris. Art was forced to become a fugitive. He spent the following two years on the run in and around the hills of Iveleary and the surrounding parishes.¹⁰

As a teenager, I identified with the pursuit of Art O'Leary by High Sheriff Abraham Morris; the story conjured up such strong similarities with Sam Peckinpah's epic Western movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*.

On 4th May 1773, word reached Sheriff Morris that Art had left the safety of Iveleary and was drinking in a tavern at Carriganima. By all accounts he was boastfully claiming what he would do if Morris ever came within range of his musket ball. Sheriff Morris rounded up a posse of militia and set off for Carriganima¹¹ and, in true Western fashion, Abraham Morris tracked him down, and shot him down – O'Leary rode into the Sheriff's ambush and was shot dead.

As is often the case with the history of Iveleary, there is an addendum to the tale. There are a number of versions to what happened next, but it seems that two months later, on 7th July, Art's younger brother, Cornelius O'Leary, rode into Cork City, looking for the man who had shot his brother. He was heavily armed and on a mission.¹² Cornelius was tipped off that Sheriff Morris was staying at the house of a Mr Boyce on Hammond's Lane. It was reported that Cornelius 'had been seen to advance deliberately up Peter's Church Lane, guns in hand. Boyce's was the corner house, north side of Peter's Street.'¹³ In a blind rage of revenge he shot Morris three times. Sheriff Abraham Morris never fully recovered from his wounds, and died in September 1775.¹⁴

Just as Bob Dylan immortalised *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid* in his haunting sound track and lyrics to Peckinpah's film, Art O'Leary's place in history was guaranteed, when his grief-stricken wife, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, composed *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire: The Lament For Art O'Leary*. Peter Levi, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, described *The Lament for Art O'Leary* as the greatest poem written in these islands in the 18th century.¹⁵

In Eibhlín Dubh's distraught and heart-wrenching lament for her dead young husband, grief and bitter revenge are apportioned in equal measure in her epic poem. It is interesting to note that the conflict between O'Leary and Morris was personal in nature, yet in Iveleary and the surrounding parishes it was perceived as being part of the greater ongoing national struggle.

The Lament For Art O'Leary/Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire
by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill [Translated by Frank O'Connor]

Grief on you, Morris!
Heart's blood and bowels' blood!
May your eyes go blind.
And your knees be broken!
You killed my darling.
And no man in Ireland.
Will fire the shot at you.

Destruction pursue you,
Morris the traitor
Who brought death to my husband!
Father of three children.
Two on the hearth
And one in the womb
That I shall not bring forth.

'Tis known to Jesus Christ
Nor cap on my head,
Nor shift on my back
Nor shoe upon my foot,
Nor gear in all my house,
Nor bridle for the mare
But I will spend at law;
And I'll go over sea
To plead before the King,
And if the King be deaf
I'll settle things alone
With the black-blooded rogue
That killed my man on me.

Rider of the white palms,
Go in to Baldwin,
And face the schemer,
The bandy-legged monster,
God rot him and his children!¹⁶

Art O’Leary’s wife, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, was Daniel O’Connell’s aunt. Some decades later, Daniel O’Connell became known as ‘The Liberator’, a title he earned due to the success of his campaign for Catholic Emancipation.¹⁷

Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire

Just as Eibhlín Dubh recorded for future generations the killing of her husband, Art O’Leary by Sheriff Abraham Morris – the memory of the Rockite¹⁸ Rebellion lives on in the words of another Iveleary woman, Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire [O’Leary].¹⁹ Máire Bhuí composed the epic *Cath Chéim an Fhia* [The Battle of Keimaneigh] in response to a Rockite battle at the western end of Iveleary in 1822. It tells of how the Iveleary Rockites gathered at the Pass of Keimaneigh during the bitterly cold January of 1822.²⁰

It seems that the protracted conflict of the Land Agitation period during the 18th and 19th centuries has been overshadowed in the timeline of Irish history. For some reason it appears to have been eclipsed by the more romantic, almost chivalrous, cape and sword rebellions of Wolfe Tone [1798] and Robert Emmet [1803],²¹ and the later unprecedented success of Daniel O’Connell’s eloquent constitutional campaign for Catholic Emancipation.

The Rockite Rebellion was a conflict of gritty, dirt-under-the-fingernails, brutal acts of violence by the disenfranchised, indigenous Irish peasantry against the minority, all-powerful landed Ascendancy.

It is difficult to pinpoint a precise reason why the Land Agitation period does not register large in the story of Ireland’s struggle for national identity. However, it seems many factors contrived to wipe it from our collective memory, not least the secrecy of the time coupled with the absence of an identifiable flesh-and-blood leadership figure. There was also the lack of an enduring rallying emblem such as a flag to wrap around the movement, or an iconic speech from a dock, or an archived paper trail – or maybe it was simply a question of class. The unrecorded heroes of the Land Agitation period were predominantly from the peasant class, whereas Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet and Daniel O’Connell came from a more literate, educated, landed class – whatever the reason, the Rockites and the many other secret agrarian societies seldom feature in the greater vista of the national struggle.

Captain Rock – The Rockites and the Land Agitation Period

In my naiveté, I had always assumed that the Rockite Rebellion and other agrarian insurrections had been no more than a series of low-level, disruptive and localised acts of irritating vandalism – fuelled by frustration and carried out in the darkness of night by small gangs of disparate local rabble. On reading the many first-hand accounts recorded in the English newspapers at the time of the Battle of Keimaneigh, it becomes apparent that, despite a lack of resources, weaponry or orchestrated command structure, the Rockite Rebellion was vicious and widespread, and achieved a certain level of success.²²

The roots of the agrarian discontent, as with many of Ireland's other conflicts, can be traced back to the Anglo-Norman invasion and the arrival of King Henry II of England to our shores in 1171.²³ But more specifically, the Penal Laws created a seismic sectarian divide between the indigenous Irish and the ruling Anglo-Ascendancy class, and ultimately generated a profound sense of injustice and outrage amongst the predominantly Catholic indigenous Irish population, who had been divested of property, rights and political representation.

By 1800 the indigenous Catholic population, some of whom could trace their ancestry to the ancient Gaelic order of Irish chieftains, had been displaced to the lowest levels of society and lived among the ranks of the destitute, unemployed and unskilled labourers. Some struggled to survive as tenant farmers, trapped in an increasingly oppressive cycle of poverty, orchestrated by sectarian-based curtailments of land ownership and inheritance, as enforced by the Penal Laws.

The injustice of the Penal Laws cast a long and dark shadow of discontent across Ireland. This deep-seated apartheid that existed between planter and the indigenous Irish has been at the root of the many recurring flashpoints of Irish history, with reverberations that can be felt right to the present day.

The tithe system of taxation required one-tenth of all farm income or labour to be paid to the established Anglican Church of Ireland.²⁴ The payment of tithes was an excessive financial burden and a morally unjust tax that caused widespread dissatisfaction among the impoverished Catholic and dissenter classes.²⁵ This dissatisfaction was fuelled at a local level by the Catholic clergy, who found themselves at the sharp end of the wedge of Catholic poverty – reliant as they were on charitable donations from an ever more financially squeezed congregation.²⁶ Under increasing financial pressure, and continued unsustainable oppression, the peasants rebelled in local acts of insurgency.²⁷

This period of Iveleary history was typified by the Iveleary Rockites terrorising 'landlords and their agents. But they usually attacked tithe proctors, agents of the

Church of Ireland, who collected contributions.²⁸

The reasons behind the Rockite Rebellion are far more complex than a single issue such as the payment of tithes, particularly when viewed in the context of the ongoing sectarian disparity caused by the Penal Laws. But it is fair to suggest that the payment of tithes to the Ascendancy Church of Ireland became the umbrella grievances for a host of sectarian injustices²⁹ such as discriminatory laws on land ownership and issues such as fair rent, fixity of tenure and free sale.³⁰ Consequently, rent disputes and evictions regularly pitched the Ascendancy class and their agents in violent conflict with the tenant and cottier class.³¹

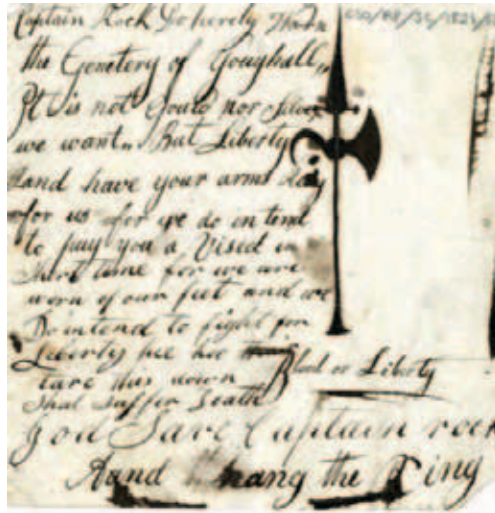
There was also an inherent and fundamental injustice in the enforcement of the law of the land. The indigenous Irish Catholic population continued to be subjected to laws imposed by the London government that naturally favoured the Ascendancy, whose interests were protected by a judiciary and magistrates drawn from their social class, and enforced by forces of the Crown and a local auxiliary yeoman militia. It was a time when justice for the Catholic Irish tenant farmer class was non-existent and any dissent was crushed brutally; evictions, hangings, hard labour and transportation were the order of the day.³²

The Landlords were the embodiment of British Rule in Ireland and wielded unlimited power.³³

To combat the overwhelming odds, the Irish peasants retaliated with acts of violence: burnings, mutilations and killings. Just as the Whiteboys of a previous generation evoked the mysterious Joan Meskill in times of trouble,³⁴ the Rockites had a secret weapon of their own, in the possibly mythical figure, Captain Rock, who was liable to strike with extreme violence in the dark of night anywhere in the country, then vanish as mysteriously as he arrived. Often reports of multiple atrocities occurring simultaneously were attributed to Captain Rock. The very mention of this enigmatic avenger was enough to strike fear into the hearts of the landed elite. The spiralling cycle of reciprocal violence during the Rockite Rebellion pushed society in rural Ireland to the point of total breakdown.³⁵

The Rockite Rebellion of the first half of the 19th century may not register large in the annals of Ireland's national struggle for freedom, but contemporary sources reveal that Captain Rock was perceived as a very real and present danger. Within two years of the Battle of Keimaneigh, memoirs of Captain Rock became regular features in many English newspapers.³⁶

Real or imaginary, Captain Rock was viewed as a quick-thinking escape artist, always one step ahead of the law. He was the original super-hero with a secret



Left; The elusive Captain Rock. Right; A Rockite threat notice to the gentry of East Cork – declaring the Rockite intent to fight for liberty and signed by Captain Rock.

identity, a precursor to literary creations such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel*³⁷ and *Zorro*.³⁸

Reminiscent of the scene at The Admiral Benbow Inn in Robert Louis Stephenson's, *Treasure Island*,³⁹ *The Cork Examiner* reported two threat notices received by a Rev. Mr Trail, and an RIC constable by the name of Greene, who were treated to a Death's Head and Cross Bones notice from Captain Rock.⁴⁰

Satirical letters from Captain Rock lampooning the Crown of England's legitimacy as the head of the Church regularly featured in the English newspapers.

Henry VIII, who was as fond of theology as dancing, executed various pirouettes in the former line, through which he rather unreasonably compelled the whole nation to follow him.⁴¹

The letters were attributed to a correspondence between Captain Rock and his just as elusive accomplice Captain Terry. Like Batman and Robin or the Lone Ranger and Tonto, this pairing of Captain Rock and Terry became the template for the mysterious avenger and sidekick duo. Rock and Terry were presented as being bold and daring, issuing warnings through the press that cut right to the heart of the British establishment of the consequences if government policies did not redress the dreadful conditions that had been inflicted on the Irish population.

If the Lord in his well-known discernment but spares me to look after Ireland's affairs we shall soon such a region of devilment make it, that Old Nick himself, for his own may mistake it.⁴²

The landed elite found it inconceivable that an uneducated, rural rabble could co-ordinate an insurgency without an intelligentsia at its core. Some assumed the Rockite Rebellion was masterminded by a United Irishman general of the failed Wolfe Tone or Robert Emmet era, still lurking in the shadows and orchestrating the actions of the rebels.⁴³ *The Morning Chronicle* [London] of Saturday 25th June 1836 concluded that the often published correspondence between Captain Rock and his United Irishman subordinate, Captain Terry, had been 'justly attributed to the pen of Thomas Moore'⁴⁴ who had been a known friend and associate of the executed Robert Emmet.⁴⁵ This contributed to the growing myth and mystique of the Captain Rock persona.

A good example of the very real threat posed by Captain Rock can be found in a hilarious courtroom exchange between the Prosecuting Council and the defendant, Patrick Moran, recorded in *The Morning Post* [London] of 16th August 1828.

When the Prosecuting Council attempted to extract from Patrick Moran that he was personally acquainted with Captain Rock, the exchange degenerated into high farce and total disorder in the court. By the end of his questioning, the only admission conceded by Moran was that the 'small kipeen – a thin light twig of a branch' he had in his hand at the time of the Rockite riot was in fact a pickaxe handle.⁴⁶



It was not the usual tactic of the Rockites to stand and fight in open conventional battle. They were neither trained nor equipped for such warfare, but preceding events dictated a battle would take place, and in the narrow gorge of Keimaneigh at the western end of Iveleary the Rockites made their stand.⁴⁷

The arrest of Máire Bhúí Ní Laoghaire's two sons in the round-up following the battle was the inspiration for her composition *Cath Chéim an Fhia*. Her sons had been incarcerated in Cork Prison for nine months; they were facing the death sentence, charged with the murder of soldier John Smith of the 39th Regiment during the battle.⁴⁸

Extract: Cath Chéim An Fhia by Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire.
English translation: Donnchadh Ó Luasaigh

From the west came the sound of battle horses' hooves,
of armours rattle, which quaked the hills
in displeasing fashion, loathsome to report.
So they came viciously like a pack of venomous hounds.
I pity those valiant men for whom no leader can be found.

No man, woman or child was left in their dwelling or house,
without grief-cries and thousands of wailing,
As they watched the guard vigorously surrounding them.
Shooting and loading and firing in their direction,
the cry that went out far and wide:

It was what every Prince who wished to be on the move said:
Move fast the battle is being fought and let us go to meet it.
The heroes joined the Clan na Gael at a mountain recess,
and they drove the fat rabble away down the slope.⁴⁹

Máire Bhuí's concern for the fate of her sons was not unfounded. Justice had been dispensed swiftly following similar incidents of insurgency at nearby Kilmichael, Inchigeela and Carriganima.

On 28th February, Thomas Goggin, Patrick Lehane, Cornelius Murphy and Daniel Murphy were hanged by the road-side at Carriganime. Three days later, a gallows was erected at Deshure Cross in the neighbouring parish of Kilmichael, and Daniel Cronin, Richard Drummy, Timothy Hallahane, and Denis Murphy were executed⁵⁰ – Edward Ring [also known as O'Brien] was also hanged at Kilmichael for his part in the battle of Keimaneigh.

In this day and age when we hear the word 'gallows' it conjures up images of men in tricorne hats, powdered wigs, sash and cape, flashing sword blades and a dazzling blast of powder from the splayed end of a muzzle loaded blunderbuss. The word 'gallows' has the power to transport us to the past, back to the last days of chivalry; back to a time of galloping horses with lightening in their eyes and fire in their breath, a time of feathered plumes and brightly coloured coats trimmed in gold brocade. But that is the past as presented on a silver screen during a Saturday Matinee at the picture house.

What happened at Carriganima, and Deshure Cross in Kilmichael was not Disneyland. The men and boys who were hanged there that day were very real people, their descendants still live on the small plots of land that they farmed. These were not trained soldiers of a standing army; they were local men: labourers, tenant farmers, cottiers – some brighter than others. These brothers, cousins, fathers, uncles and grandfathers armed with sticks, stones and farm implements – stood to do battle against the greatest army the world had ever known. These men were not fighting for some convoluted conceptual cause, they were fighting for their very survival. Maybe that explains why so many women stood shoulder to shoulder among the ranks of their menfolk. No. What happened at Carriganima, and Deshure Cross in Kilmichael was not Disneyland.

It was a biting cold February in West Cork, wind-driven sleet clotted on dirt-matted hair; barefoot men and boys in shredded clothing, unrecognisable by congealed blood on scars inflicted while incarcerated, were manhandled, in full view of their families, towards a makeshift wooden scaffold. Children and mothers wailing, some on their knees reciting rosary – they looked to their beads for the repose of the souls of their loved ones; and they prayed to God that the living might survive, come springtime, without a man to pull the plough.

What happened at Carriganima, and Deshure Cross in Kilmichael was very real. The memory of so many men dangling from ropes at the side of the road that day was imprinted in the minds of those who witnessed it. When one considers the graphic and brutal memory of what happened that day, it may offer some insight into, what is sometimes perceived as, the over-vitriolic celebration of an IRA ambush in Kilmichael that took place less than a hundred years later in 1920, in which the local IRA wiped out a convoy of British Auxiliaries.

Extract: *The Boys Of Kilmichael* [1920]

But when they came to Kilmichael
they suddenly came to a stop
For they met with the boys of the column
Who made a clean sweep of the lot.

In some versions of this song the language of the last line is somewhat more triumphalist. ['Made shit of the whole fucking lot.']

As referenced previously, Daniel O’Connell was the nephew of Eibhlín Dubh, the Iveleary poet, whose husband, Art O’Leary, had been killed by Sheriff Abraham Morris. Because of Daniel O’Connell’s Iveleary connection I was not surprised to find that Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire’s sons were defended in court by O’Connell and were eventually acquitted of the murder of the soldier, John Smith, of the 39th Regiment.

In another twist to the tale, it is said that Smith had actually been killed by Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire’s brother, Conor Bhuí Ó Laoghaire [O’Leary], and not by her two sons who had been arrested for the offence.

In Fathers O’Donoghue, Sweeney & Burke’s account of the battle, a rebel by the name of Seamus Walsh attempted to shoot soldier Smith at close quarters, but twice his gun misfired. Walsh then levelled Smith with the butt of his gun. It is said that John Smith begged for mercy, at which point Conor Bhuí Ó Laoghaire stepped forward and roared,

‘The devil have mercy on you!’⁵¹

Then he plunged his bayonet into Smith. Smith’s death was said to have been particularly gruesome.

Smith lay belly down on the black-heathered heath.
His bare backside and ugly features were loathsome to behold.
May they come to no better end, those foreign cubs of Calvin,
Whose God was pomposity and not the Christ I’m told.⁵²

I have come across an account of soldier Smith being decapitated, and his head paraded on a stick by the Rockites during the battle to strike fear into the Yeomen and forces of the Crown.⁵³

There are also a number of newspaper accounts that report a decapitation, but not specifically linked to the death of soldier Smith, although, the *Morning Chronicle* [London] does record the killing of a soldier, – ‘The murder of the above unfortunate individual was marked with peculiar ferocity’.⁵⁴ But without further confirmation, the particular detail of soldier John Smith’s decapitation remains with Smith in the grave.

Incidentally, after the battle, the insurgents buried Smith’s body in Túirín Dubh for a few days, then it was re-buried in Gortluachra bog [Gortafluidg] at a place known in Iveleary as Smith’s Hole.⁵⁵ Sometime later, James Barry,⁵⁶ a much-reviled

High Sheriff, living in Iveleary at that time, ordered Smith's corpse exhumed from the bog and reinterred in the old Inchigeela churchyard⁵⁷ in a plot that, ironically, he now shares with two generations of the O'Leary family.⁵⁸

As I have come to expect in details of Iveleary history, there is yet another account of the killing of soldier John Smith. Patrick Casey of Inchigeela presents a slightly different version. In a letter published in *The Cork Examiner*, he credits Seamus Walsh with the killing of Smith.⁵⁹ Seamus Walsh went on the run after the battle. Walsh was eventually captured and stood trial for the murder of soldier Smith.

No plaque marks the spot where soldier Smith was buried in Túirín Dubh, but on the roadside stands a commemoration stone, in memory of an IRA Volunteer, Christy Lucey, who was shot during an Auxiliary raid on Iveleary during the Irish War of Independence in 1920. Across the fields from the roadside marker, high up on a mound, stands a lone white cross, marking the place where the unarmed Christy Lucey had been killed – a location not far from the spot where soldier Smith's body had been hastily buried by the Rockites almost a hundred years previously in the aftermath of the Battle Of Keimaneigh.⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that Christy Lucey was the great grandson of Seamus Walsh, the Rockite who had allegedly killed soldier John Smith.



The recurring family connections in the ongoing national struggle are particularly evident in a locality such as Iveleary. The attachment to the land, coupled with the confined and defined nature of the landscape, nurtures the memory of previous generations as a tangible living history. Historians tend to label the various battles as being component parts of distinct and separate wars. Although in Iveleary it seems that these battles, waged by sons, fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers and so on, back through the generations, all the way to the Anglo-Norman invasion, were in fact perceived as part of one ongoing campaign against British rule in Ireland.

In Manus O'Riordan's detailed article, 'The Ballingearry Moonlighting Case 1894',⁶¹ he writes a fascinating account of an incident involving Richard and Michael Walsh, two Moonlighters⁶² who were descendants of the Rockite rebel Seamus Walsh.

Richard and Michael Walsh form a further stepping stone that bridges the genealogical link between Christy Lucey, the IRA Section Commander who was killed at Túirín by forces of the Crown in 1920, and his great grandfather, Seamus

Walsh, the Rockite who killed soldier John Smith at the Battle of Keimaneigh a hundred years previously in 1822. Incidentally, Richard Walsh was a granduncle of Manus O’Riordan’s father, Mícheál O’Riordan [1917-2006, Fianna Éireann, IRA, Connolly Column, Spanish Civil War 1936-39, founding General Secretary of the reunited Communist Party of Ireland 1970].⁶³ Mícheál O’Riordan’s grandmother, Máire [Cronin] Creedon, was a sister of Maggie Cronin, the wife of Richard Walsh the Moonlighter, and of course, Máire [Cronin] Creedon was the wife of my great granduncle, Michael Creedon of Illauninagh, the man who famously banished the spirit at Casadh na Spride – who then went on to do battle with a lightening bolt and won.

This offers a relatively simplified linear strand of the interconnectivity that exists in a landscape such as Iveleary. In reality, when the numerous other layers of kinship are taken into account it presents an impenetrable interlocking web of exponential complexity that spreads right throughout Iveleary from the Gearagh to Gougán and every townland in between.

In a further adjunct to the story, I recently met Peter Murphy who has also been researching the life and times of Michael O’Leary VC – similar to my own personal quest, Peter’s initial interest in O’Leary was ignited by a family connection to the story.

In 1915, Peter’s grandfather was inspired by Michael O’Leary’s action in Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal – so he wrote a verse on a blackboard and placed it outside his premises in Inchigeela village. International journalists, who happened to be in Iveleary at the time, to report on O’Leary’s visit home from the Western Front, recorded the poem and it was subsequently published in the press.

Mike O’Leary VC

Once again our well-known hero,
from the strains of war is free.
And on leave has just returned,
to his homestead by the Lee.
You may guess that what has happened
by the bonfires, near and far.
And a loud Céad Míle Fáilte,
For our Irish fighting star.
Hear the voices across the waters,
each a welcome, grand and true.
Every nation seems to utter,

‘Michael, we are proud of you.’
And his name in history ever,
as a hero brave, will stand.
And will prove itself immortal,
In the annals of our land.
[Patrick J Casey 1915]

I first met Peter Murphy a few months ago, when he visited my home on New Year’s Eve. He brought with him a fascinating personal collection of photographs, memorabilia and articles related to Michael O’Leary VC, and kindly offered them to me for use in this publication. As we drank tea and chatted that afternoon, it became apparent that Peter’s grandfather was the Patrick Casey referred to previously, who had written to *The Cork Examiner* to clarify the point that it was Seamus Walsh who had killed soldier Smith at the Battle of Keimaneigh, and not Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire’s brother, Conor Ó Laoghaire [O’Leary].

As is the way with Iveleary, it wasn’t long before a family connection was established, when I realised that Peter’s grandfather was the famed J.C. Murphy, of Coachford, who had travelled to Butte Montana with my grandfather Connie Creedon, back in the days when Butte was Butte and the West was Wild. The only tangible evidence of their time in Butte Montana is an old framed photograph on the wall in Creedon’s Inchigeela – J.C. Murphy and Connie Creedon with the Wolfetones Football Club [Butte Montana. Circa 1906]

Having laboured and lived in Butte for some years, the two friends eventually returned home with tales of their great adventure – like the wild Atlantic salmon, the call of the River Lee enticed the two men to return to the land of their birth to settle down and begin a new generation.



The Battle of Keimaneigh has at times been dismissed as little more than a hillside skirmish, but, exploring the accounts published in the English newspapers from that time, it seems the unrest in the aftermath of the conflict spread rapidly to the surrounding parishes with particularly graphic reports of violence.

They were surrounded by a numerous party of insurgents, who commenced their horrible outrages by mortally wounding the horse, then dragged the unfortunate man to the ground and after wounding him in several places with bayonets and pikes, finished their atrocities

by severing his head from his body with a blow of a scythe. The same party [...] receiving an accession of forces made an attack on Friday on [Millstreet]. They assailed the Bridewell probably with a view to rescuing some prisoners. They were finally beaten off by the 39th Regiment.⁶⁴

All here is terror and confusion. The people are congregating from every part. The rebels are on the hills near this town [Macroom]. The army are on the march today but cannot get sufficiently near them. Unless troops are sent out with assistance, they will, I am sure, murder every one of us. I have not closed my eyes these two nights.

We have seen that the insurgents had 13 men killed. The army suffered, but not so considerably. The country between Millstreet and Macroom is said to be in possession of the insurgents. The insurgents to the amount of about 1,000 had approached the town about four o'clock on Friday [1st Feb] for the purpose of making an attack. Capt. Kapprock and Lieut. Green, with about thirty men of the 22nd Regiment, on the first fire of the military, several were killed and wounded. Forty-nine prisoners were brought in yesterday from Macroom by detachment of horse and foot.⁶⁵

You cannot conceive an adequate notion of the desperate resolution of the peasantry, every one of them it is said sworn and they express a determination of going to the utmost extremes.

On the 2nd several lives were lost in a conflict which lasted for an hour. The rebels shot a sentinel, killed four others and wounded many others. The murder of the above unfortunate individual was marked with peculiar ferocity.⁶⁶

The attack on Kilbarry, the residence of James Barry, was followed by the complete destruction of every article in the house, not a single thing escaped the destroying fury of the assailants. Mr Barry's family were in the house, and some hardened miscreants threatened to shoot his eldest daughter. The party concerned in this outrage could not be less than 3,000.⁶⁷

Contemporary newspaper accounts of insurgents numbering in thousands is significant by any measure, and the military response of drafting over a thousand troops into Macroom is an indication of how serious this conflict was perceived by the authorities.⁶⁸

Eventually the revolt did die down, and the insurgents handed in their arms. However it was reported in the international press⁶⁹ that the rebels of Iveleary

continued to hold out.

The inhabitants of Clondrohid and Kilmichael [ref: Keimaneigh Battle] near Macroom, where the late melancholy conflict took place between rebels and the military, have voluntarily surrendered their arms. The only rebels still holding out are in Iveleary.⁷⁰

The events that unfolded at Keimaneigh in 1822 are recorded for posterity in the newspapers of the time, and are now easily accessible, as more and more archives are digitised and put on line. However, long before the advent of information technology and the extended reach of the worldwide web, Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire's, *Cath Chéim an Fhia*, was the primary source record of the battle. Her narrative has been etched into the collective memory of Iveleary.

Cath Chéim an Fhia relates a very personal history of a people and a place. Without doubt, it was well known to the young Michael O'Leary, just as it is known to every man, woman and child of Iveleary to the present day. It is significant that Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire's lyrics are told from the insurgents' point of view in their language, and the story has been handed down from generation to generation for almost two hundred years. My father had a vast repertoire of Iveleary songs, yet when I think of *Cath Chéim An Fhia* I always think of him. I have heard his rendition at gatherings, be it a happy or sad occasion. It is reassuring to know that the baton has been passed on to the next generation and the ballad lives on in my cousin Joe's sweet rendition of the song.⁷¹



Daniel O'Connell – Liberator or Agitator?

Considering the pitched battles in places such as Keimaneigh and Carrickshock⁷² and the widely reported disorder throughout the country at that time, I sometimes wonder how successful Daniel O'Connell's non-violent campaign for Catholic Emancipation would have been without the spiralling guerrilla-style activities unfolding in the background to help focus the minds of the Ascendancy.

Daniel O'Connell publically and unequivocally distanced himself from the insurgents and all violence, yet it seems he had an intangible and indistinct direct line to the militants – as mentioned earlier, his aunt was married to the fugitive Art O'Leary [who was killed in an ambush set by Sheriff Abraham Morris, and Art's brother Cornelius in turn killed Sheriff Morris]. O'Connell was an admirer of the

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Clare by-election, which was won by O'Connell, he chose to play a high stakes game when he decided not to take his seat in the House of Parliament because of his objection to the Oath of Supremacy. O'Connell must have been aware that the threat of an escalation of Catholic agrarian violence, as a result of being prohibited from taking his seat, would spur the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, and the Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel into action. O'Connell's gamble paid off – the following year in 1829 the right of Catholics to sit in Parliament was established, and O'Connell retook his seat unopposed.⁷⁶

John Mitchel wrote in his *Jail Journal* that there were two distinct movements in Ireland during this period; one was the nonviolent, legal and constitutional Catholic Emancipation campaign led by O'Connell; the other involved the extreme violence and guerrilla tactics of the agrarian secret societies such as the Rockites and Whiteboys. According to Mitchel, Great Britain 'yielded to the first for fear of the latter'.⁷⁷

Daniel O'Connell is remembered in Ireland as the 'Liberator', meanwhile in the English press he was referred to as the 'Great Agitator'.⁷⁸ This presents a good example of the nature of history's conflicting points of view; one man's Liberator is another man's Agitator.

It seems the success of O'Connell's non-violent campaign for Catholic Emancipation had been facilitated by an unsanctioned dual strategy: his undeniable eloquence on the one hand – and the threat of a Rockite slash hook in the other.⁷⁹



Daniel Florence O'Leary

For a tale with a flair for dashing derring-do it is difficult to surpass the story of Daniel Florence O'Leary, whose family originally hailed from the nearby parish of Fanlobbus, Dunmanway.

Daniel Florence O'Leary made his mark in the history books of the far foreign lands of South America. A national icon in Venezuela, O'Leary's mortal remains are interred at the Venezuelan National Pantheon next to his friend and comrade-in-arms, 'The Liberator', Simón Bolívar.

The exploits of Daniel Florence O'Leary are not widely commemorated in present day Ireland, although descendants of Daniel Florence arrive to our shores regularly from Venezuela to visit the land of his birth. On one of my recent visits to Inchigeela, I met Fr. Filipe O'Leary of Caracas, Venezuela – who had come to walk the land of his ancestors. In addition, Peter O'Leary, the historian, whose

research I have referenced in this volume, was also a direct descendant to Daniel Florence O’Leary.⁸⁰ In retirement, Peter O’Leary relocated to Iveleary, many generations after his ancestor Daniel Florence O’Leary left Ireland to follow his destiny in South America.

An indication of the esteem in which the Venezuelan people continue to hold Daniel Florence O’Leary was seen in 1978, when ‘the Venezuelan military top brass’ descended on Cork to unveil a plaque ‘in honour of one of the South American nation’s most feted patriots’ – General Daniel Florence O’Leary.

It was reported that Venezuelan Military Attaché, Colonel A.J. Hernandez-Arias, contacted the Irish Embassy in London, stating that his Government had independently made contact with the residents of Daniel Florence O’Leary’s former home in Cork, and had received permission to mount a plaque on the wall. Colonel A.J. Hernandez-Arias requested that the Irish Embassy would grant permission to a Venezuelan military party to visit Cork for the unveiling ceremony.

The Venezuelan party, which included the Minister for Defence, General Fernando Parades Bello, and more than twenty high ranking military officers, arrived at Cork Airport in two chartered planes. The plaque was unveiled at 1p.m. and, after lunch, with members of the Irish Armed Forces, the party departed back to London.⁸¹

Daniel Florence O’Leary’s life story reads like a 19th century adventure novel. During his own lifetime, the international press tracked every unfolding episode of this real-life action hero and reported it to a public eager to read the next instalment of his swashbuckling exploits.

Daniel Florence was the son of a butter merchant, Jeremiah O’Leary, who had hit on hard times during the economic collapse in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. At that time, Ireland was awash with fully trained, battle-hardened soldiers returned from the carnage of Europe and beyond, yet Daniel Florence, a son of a shopkeeper, with no military experience whatsoever, decided to follow the call of adventure. He left Cork in 1817 to fight in the wars of liberation in South America.⁸²

In Venezuela, he joined the Dragoon Squadron of the Guard of Honour under the command of General José Antonio Anzoátegui. It didn’t take long before



Brigadier General Daniel Florence O’Leary

O'Leary's aptitude for warfare became apparent to his superiors. Dispatches from various battlefields distinguished him for bravery and marked him out for rapid promotion. In July of 1819, it was reported in the Cork newspapers that he had been killed at the battle of Pantano de Vargas.⁸³ Although Daniel Florence did receive a serious facial sabre wound at Pantano de Vargas, the announcement of his demise was premature,

There is a striking similarity between the experiences of Daniel Florence O'Leary and Michael O'Leary VC; not only were the military careers of both men defined by an exceptional meteoric rise through the ranks, but the mistaken press reports announcing that both were killed in battle is remarkable.

By early 1819, Daniel Florence O'Leary had been promoted to the rank of First Adjutant of the Dragoons, so began his stellar military career. Within months, he was assigned as aide-de-camp to General Anzoátegui. By September of that same year, his exploits had come to the attention of Simón Bolívar. Reading Robert F. McNerney's translation of Daniel Florence O'Leary's memoirs,⁸⁴ it becomes apparent that O'Leary and Simón Bolívar instantly struck up a firm bond of friendship. In due course, Bolívar promoted O'Leary to the Order of Liberators and made him his own personal aide-de-camp.

Following the wars of liberation in Latin America, Daniel Florence became the Venezuelan Foreign Affairs attaché⁸⁵ to some of the most powerful courts of Europe, including Spain and the Holy See of Rome. Later the British Government appointed Daniel Florence O'Leary to the position of Her Majesty's Consul, and later he was appointed Chargé d'Affaires and Consul General to New Grenada.⁸⁶

The English press followed O'Leary's every appointment and escapade as he moved from exotic location to exotic location across the globe, including his visits home to see his family in Cork.⁸⁷ Daniel Florence O'Leary's wild escapades in South America and his subsequent marriage to the sister of the president of Venezuela, who also happened to be the niece of President Simón Bolívar, captured the imagination of an adventure-hungry public.⁸⁸

The marriage of Daniel Florence O'Leary, son of Jeremiah O'Leary, of Cork to Sulta Soubllette, sister to General Soubllette [President of Venezuela] and niece to President Bolívar.⁸⁹

Together they had nine children; Daniel Florence named his son Simón, after Simón Bolívar as an affirmation of the strong bond of friendship between the two men.

Brigadier General Daniel Florence O'Leary was at Simón Bolívar's bedside when

he died at Santa Marta in 1830. O'Leary died twenty-four years later in Bogotá in 1854.⁹⁰ His obituary recorded in *The Brooklyn Eagle* [New York] describes O'Leary as the British Minister Chargé d'Affairs to Columbia.⁹¹ As a mark of respect, the people of Venezuela had his remains exhumed twenty-eight years later, and reinterred in the Venezuelan National Pantheon by the side of his friend and mentor Simón Bolívar. Daniel Florence O'Leary's place in history was assured when his son, Simón O'Leary, compiled, edited and published his father's personal papers in thirty-two volumes, under the title, *Memorias del General O'Leary*.⁹²

Of course, not all the songs and stories of Iveleary and surrounding parishes tell of adventure, swash-buckling swordsmanship, or some futile stand of a rebel band on a windswept mountain pass. Some are of a more tender nature, such as the 'Fenian' love story where guileful deception won the day.

The Inchigeela Lass

Beneath a crumbling stone marker near the church in the old Inchigeela graveyard, is the final resting place of Máire Uí Rathailigh. Though little is known of Máire Uí Rathailigh, her memory has been immortalised in song.

My Inchigeela Lass is said to have been composed by Harold Delaney in memory of Máire. Popularly known as a 'Fenian' love ballad, the song tells of a time when Delaney was on the run from the forces of the Crown and had taken refuge in Iveleary. By all accounts, the authorities anticipated that Delaney would be at church in Inchigeela, and so a cordon of armed soldiers surrounded the churchyard. Harold Delaney was there that day, but narrowly evaded capture with the assistance of Máire Uí Rathailigh when she exchanged her cloak and shawl with the fugitive in the nave of the church, and so, disguised as a woman, Delaney escaped and fled from Iveleary. He made his way to Cork and boarded a ship to America. Delaney lived out his life in Boston, Massachusetts, never to return to Iveleary. He composed *My Inchigeela Lass* in Boston, in memory of Máire.⁹³

Extract – *Inchigeela Lass* by Harold Delaney

Like all the boys along the Lee, I joined a rebel band.
And pledged myself to freedom's cause for dear old motherland.
An outlaw, I was chased from Cork to Keimaneigh's famed Pass,
and forced to flee from Erin's Lee and my Inchigeela Lass.

Iveleary, oh Iveleary, far away across the wave
 You own what I prize most on earth,
 my Máirín's moss-grown grave
 My present habitation is in Broadway, Boston, Mass.
 And the Buachaill Rua is always true to his Inchigeela Lass.



Ever since the Flight of The Earls in 1601 and the exodus of the Wild Geese in 1691, there has been a tradition of Irish rebels going 'on the run' to evade capture. In Iveleary, these pathways to freedom were first established by successive generations of O'Leary lords who had been outlawed under Bill of Attainder, yet, found that they could live with impunity in the secluded safety of their homeland. It is on record that other outlawed rebels, including the last remnants of the ancient Gaelic order such as Dónal Cam O'Sullivan, came to Iveleary seeking refuge after the

Dursey Massacre 1601. Consequently, a well-established system of safe houses had been in place by the time of the Penal Laws, when Irish Catholics found it necessary to celebrate mass in secrecy and offer sanctuary to fugitive priests and teachers.

Going 'on the run' is very much part of Irish revolutionary culture and lore, like a rite of passage that has been handed down from generation to generation. It seems that fundamental to each generation has been a network of 'safe houses' that allows safe passage for fugitive rebels right throughout the country. During the more recent Irish War Of Independence [1919-1921] there are many examples of rebels finding safe haven in Iveleary. John P. and James D. Cronin present a vivid account of columns of armed Volunteers coming and going from



Iveleary and living off a system of safe houses for months at a time. The most dramatic account must be when Tom Barry led his column to safety during the 'Big Round-Up' in June 1920.⁹⁴ With a huge force of British soldiers closing in on all sides, Barry famously led his men from Castledonovan to Borlin and then over the mountains at Coom Rua and into the safety of Iveleary to Gougán to avoid capture.

Similarly, in the aftermath of the Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848, a number of fugitives made their way to Iveleary seeking sanctuary. It could be the case that local activists such as the notorious Patrick 'Pagan' O'Leary had identified Iveleary as a place of safety for rebels on the run.

Pagan O'Leary from Inchigeela is an unsung Fenian (1860s). Although his contemporaries considered him a significant Fenian activist – it seems that Pagan is destined to remain a footnote in the history of the movement.

Pagan O'Leary studied to be a priest, but is said to have turned his back on Holy Orders and scaled the seminary wall to go and fight in the American Mexican Wars 1846-1848. In an echo of the ancient claim of the O'Leary clan to be descendants of Milesian Princes, Pagan described himself as, 'Hereditary Rebel and Milesian Pagan'. Concerning the anglicisation of his name he wrote:

'The cursed English way of spelling my name is O'Leary, but the old ancient Milesian pagan way is O'Laegari.'⁹⁵

Pagan O'Leary detested England and the Roman Catholic Church in equal measure. While in America he actively argued the case that after driving the English from Ireland, the Fenians should then drive out the Catholic Church.⁹⁶ His hard-line stance against the Church alienated many Irish-Americans supporters.⁹⁷

Pagan was known to be a peculiar and somewhat eccentric man. His quirky behaviour was often attributed to a head wound he received while fighting in the American Mexican War – it is said that he was struck by shrapnel, which left an obvious and visible dent in his skull.⁹⁸ He has been associated with the phrase 'No Crown! No Collar!', which is resonant of the Irish Citizen Army's call to arms during the 1916 Rising – 'Neither King nor Kaiser'.

While in America Pagan O'Leary was instrumental in formulating the strategy of recruiting British soldiers of Irish nationality into the Fenian Brotherhood, he returned to Ireland to put his plan into action.⁹⁹ As was the destiny of many Fenians, he was eventually arrested and spent many years enduring the severity of prison.

John Devoy wrote:

No account of Fenianism in the British army would be complete without a sketch of ‘Pagan’ O’Leary, who was the first man appointed by James Stephens to take charge of the work. The ‘Pagan’ was a unique character. A fanatic on the question of Irish nationality and Roman interference in Irish affairs.¹⁰⁰

Harold Delaney, the composer of *My Inchigeela Lass*, was not the only Young Irelander to seek shelter in the relative safety of Iveleary. It is well documented that James Stephens¹⁰¹ and Michael Doheny also found sanctuary there.¹⁰² Doheny’s memoir *The Felon’s Track*,¹⁰³ explores a real-life narrative of two fugitives on the run from the Crown. They travelled from place to place, not knowing friend from foe, but eventually found secure lodgings in Iveleary. Doheny’s account tells how they arrived to Ballingearry frightened and exhausted, and were much relieved when the husband and wife at a hostelry in Ballingearry offered their own bed to the two rebels.

Reading Fr. D. O’Donnchadha’s *History Of Ballingearry* it becomes apparent that the only Inn in the village at that time was owned by the Shortens.¹⁰⁴ It is fascinating to find that, decades later, in a subsequent generation of the Shorten family, John Shorten was one of the founding members of the of Ballingearry Irish Volunteers, and is on record as being the first captain of the unit.¹⁰⁵

Shorten’s Bar in Ballingearry continues to be run by the Shorten family to the present day. As is the way in Iveleary, I didn’t have to scratch the surface too deep to find a family connection – Catherine [Shorten] Creedon is married to my cousin Bernard in Inchigeela.



Violent Opposition at Iveleary Eviction

I had always assumed that the agrarian strife and land agitation associated with tenant farmer evictions was a conflict from another time; an era captured in the wood-block etchings of the *London Illustrated News*, rather than the flash and silver-nitrate plate of the more modern photographic journalist. So, I was surprised to hear of an eviction in Iveleary that took place as recently as 1906/07.

The eviction at Drom an Ailigh of 1906 presents a snapshot of the heart and soul of Iveleary three years before Michael O'Leary left Ireland to follow a career in uniform. It was seven years before the formation of the Irish Volunteers, eight years before the outbreak of World War One, ten years before the 1916 Rising and fourteen years before the Irish War Of Independence – yet it becomes apparent from newspaper reports of the period, that the defenders of Iveleary viewed their conflict in terms of the greater national struggle, and the rule of law was perceived as the rule of foreign occupation.

The violent opposition to the eviction by the defenders was described in the international press:

A scene recalling the early days of the land agitation in West and South Ireland was witnessed in the little village of Ballingearry Co. Cork.¹⁰⁶

Intense violence and public disorder surrounded this eviction for over a year, with multiple clashes between police and the people of Iveleary, resulting in numerous injuries and arrests. The reported numbers of defenders during this protracted siege indicate that almost every household in the parish had been involved at various times throughout in the unfolding mayhem.

The agitation had spread beyond Iveleary and into surrounding towns and parishes. At one stage, Mr Patrick O'Keeffe, the leader of Macroom Town Band, was arrested and charged as a ringleader of the disturbances. Seemingly, at the height of one riot at the O'Mahony homestead, Patrick O'Keeffe led his marching band into the farmyard at the front of the house, playing at full tilt, bringing an increased level of discord to the spiralling chaos.¹⁰⁷

In 1906, Michael O'Leary was a seventeen-year-old farm labourer, underemployed on his father's 'two or three acres of land'.¹⁰⁸ The events during this particular eviction offer a powerful insight into a time when Michael O'Leary was still living in Iveleary. As a teenager on the cusp of manhood, Michael must have realised that there was no long-term future for him on the small plot of land being farmed by his father and his big brother, Timmy. I assume it must have been around this time that he first began to consider military service as a career.

Because the disturbance at Drom an Ailigh lasted for over a year, with reported outbreaks of violence in various locations throughout Iveleary, it is likely that Michael would have found himself among the defenders at the eviction, standing shoulder to shoulder with his father Daniel, his brother Timmy, maybe even his sisters Margaret and Hannah. The fighting spirit of the women of Iveleary received special mention during the siege. The women played a highly visible, active and

strategic role in the unfolding conflicts.

The young girls soon occupied the vanguard of the attacking party, they faced the police with much determination.¹⁰⁹

They found the place in possession of a dozen constables, armed with rifles and a demonstration of a hostile and formidable character took place. Seeing the feeling growing in intensity the police formed a cordon. Nothing daunted, the people continued to press forward with menacing demeanour, almost up to the muzzles of the guns. To check a further advance, the police were ordered to fix bayonets.

There were a large number of women among the demonstration, and assuming the constabulary would not use the bayonets on them they came forward and pressed close up on the rifles. As they were followed by contingents of young men, the situation became very grave. More than once the constables had to place the bayonets against the breasts of the foremost of the aggressors. Then stones were thrown from the rear of the crowd. A portion of the crowd attacked the house from the rear and the back door was broken down.¹¹⁰

Young girls were seen slinging eggs at the police, and were roughly handled. [...] The language of the women who mixed through the crowds at this juncture was very vigorous and incisive. [...] An unwholesome fusillade now fell about the police, and several were struck with eggs.¹¹¹

The resistance spread to surrounding villages, including a widely reported attack on the landlord's agent, Mr. Terry¹¹² and a contingent of Royal Irish Constabulary [RIC], which took place in Inchigeela, where once again the women of the parish were to the fore.

Several women seemed to have been severely handled, one having had some teeth knocked out and another sustaining a rather severe injury to her arm. While proceeding through the village of Inchigeela, a similar reception was accorded Mr Terry [landlord agent of the Grehan Estate] and a violent attack was made on him. A young girl who identified herself rather prominently with the demonstration, was taken into custody.¹¹³



I first came upon the story of the 1906 Ballingeary eviction by chance. On a summer's afternoon I was ambling through Iveleary, along the old back road to Gougán, when I first met Sheila [O'Mahony] Kelleher. We introduced ourselves, and standing there on the road, we talked about this and that and the amazing weather we were having. I enquired about a plaque on a nearby house and, such is Iveleary, I wasn't surprised when Sheila told me that the house had belonged to her great grandfather, Jeremiah O'Mahony. Sheila explained that the plaque had been erected to commemorate an attempted eviction that took place as recently as 1906-1907. Before we went our separate ways, Sheila invited me to drop in for a

Above: Jeremiah O'Mahony's home at Drom an Ailigh, Ballingeary, Iveleary – the scene of the attempted eviction of 1906/07. Below: O'Mahony's house, 1916, tenth anniversary of the attempted eviction.



cup of tea on my return journey later that afternoon.

There is something magical and evocative about this farmhouse and how it is set into the landscape, sheltering between a rock and a hollow on the small winding boreen to Gougán.

On entering the house, the first thing I noticed was a line of Gaelic text transcribed on the wall above the fireplace. This is not a framed sign, but rather the words are written directly onto the wall in the ancient Gaelic script, stretching almost the full length of the room. It announces boldly to all who enter the O'Mahony home:

Do Briseadh Ar Díshealbhú Sa Tigh Seo Samhradh na Bliana 1906.

[Our eviction was broken in this house in the year 1906.]

While the kettle boiled, Sheila gave me a guided tour of the house, and beyond into the yard and the outhouses – passing from room to room, I could sense the intensity of this ancient land through the filigree of lace curtains. It all seemed so vivid in the low-slung evening sun: outcrops of rock, furze, heather, stone ditches, babbling brook...

This landscape had changed little since the O'Learys first came here in 1192. Looking out on Drom an Ailigh, it was as if the wide expanse of history was within

The hearth in O'Mahony's home - as it is today - with the legend '*Do Briseadh Ar Díshealbhú Sa Tigh Seo Samhradh na Bliana 1906*' above a commemorative photograph of some of the defenders of the 1906 Ballingearry eviction.



my grasp. I could sense the defenders of Iveleary gathered just beyond the stone wall – warlike and furious, armed with spades, furze cutters and slash hooks. And just as described in the newspaper reports of the time, it was as if the Cotters of Currahy were still issuing orders and battle strategies to the rioting defenders from their vantage point perched high up on the wall opposite,

...a surge in the crowd, stones shatter slates, and smash glass...

Stored in a chest beneath the window is a family history recorded in newspaper clippings, handwritten notes and photographs. It soon became apparent that Sheila and I were related through Michael Creedon [Maidhc Michíl] of Illauninagh, the man who had banished the spirit at nearby Casadh na Spride. But my personal interest in the 1906 eviction was sealed when I came across newspapers reporting that a number of my father's people, the Críodáin [alternatively known as Creed or Creedons] from Illauninagh and Currahy had been charged with riot and assault on the land agent. I was fascinated to find a commemorative group photograph of some of the defenders¹¹⁴ and, there among them were my grandmother's people, the O'Learys of Currahy, and my grandfather's people, the Cotters of Currahy. I was to learn later that, among the numerous arrests that took place during this protracted conflict, not only the Creedon's of Illauninagh, but also the Cotters and the O'Learys of Currahy, had been identified among the ringleaders of the disturbances, and were jailed and sentenced to hard labour.

But it set me thinking, and I wondered did my grandmother Nora Cotter, as a young girl, witness her cousins standing breast to bayonet against the RIC. And what of Michael O'Leary from Cooleen? He was seventeen going on eighteen during the summer of 1906.

My mind conjured up an image of a warm summer's evening, and I wondered, if when they heard the call to arms, did they rise to defend the parish from invaders in some age-old rite of passage that had been handed down through the generations?

Like every other family from the Gearagh to Gougán, did the O'Learys of Cooleen assemble at the out-house in the yard and arm themselves with a slash hook, pickaxe and scythe – then march down from Cooleen, Daniel one stride ahead, instinctively leading his clan.

As they approached Kilbarry, did they see up ahead a gathering throng, and there among them, the teacher Jeremiah O'Dea with his sister Nora O'Dea and their young cousin Nora Cotter waiting by the schoolyard wall. Did friends and neighbours stretch out the hand of alliance, as all petty grievances concerning rights-of-way and common pasture were put to one side, because that day Iveleary would stand united against a common enemy? Did the swelling mass wait for the

men and women of the Gearagh and Toons Bridge to arrive before heading west along the road to join the defenders at Drom an Ailigh.

...and while they waited, did Michael O'Leary's father, Daniel, entertain those gathered by waving his stick above his head to demonstrate a killer blow struck during some faction fight from long ago. Did he tell how he had 'often laid out twenty men with only a stick'.¹¹⁵

Did they march as one past village and townland growing in numbers as they went? Was the memory of Keimaneigh evoked, when the band struck up the air, and a lone voice sang out Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghairé's haunting lyrics of *Cath Chéim an Fhia*.

Call it pure fiction, but such are the non-recorded narratives of history that genuinely interest me. That evening I returned to Cork City, and began my research into the events surrounding the eviction of Jeremiah O'Mahony.



The Evening Post [London] reported that the trouble began on the 24th July 1906, when agents of a landlord by the name of Stephen Grehan, with estates in Mallow, Banteer and Tipperary,¹¹⁶ served an eviction order on Diarmuid [Jeremiah] O'Mahony at his home at Drom an Ailigh on the northern road to Gougán towards the western end of Iveleary. A crowd rallied at the house, and a man by the name of William Simpson, identified as a land grabber, was driven from the property and assaulted, and Jeremiah O'Mahony returned to his house. In the rioting that day many injuries were reported and eleven arrests were made.

William Simpson was put in as caretaker. On the night in question, an immense crowd of people gathered on the road, and after much shouting and horn blowing, commenced to stone the house. Then called on the police to put out the grabber. He gathered some things and came out onto the road protected by police. More stones were thrown and Simpson was struck.¹¹⁷

Three weeks later, on 16th August, a second force of up to fifty armed police arrived to carry out the eviction and once again they met fierce local resistance. Having arrested nine of the defenders the police retreated, leaving Jeremiah O'Mahony still in occupation of the property.¹¹⁸

In the weeks that followed, the RIC conducted a series of dawn raids on Iveleary, but the population had been forewarned by an alarm system that had possibly been in place along the valley since the O'Leary clan first came to this land and set up their r ath at Mannen in Inchigeela, back in 1192. Or maybe it was the case that an alert telegraph operator relayed a warning of the impending raid.¹¹⁹

The Lichfield Mercury Newspaper of Friday 24th August picks up the story:

Being instructed to arrest these ringleaders, the constabulary entered Ballingearry just before dawn. They found that the people had heard of their intention and, with the exception of a few old women and decrepit men, the town was deserted. The police sent out and scouted the hills. They found villagers entrenched in force. A council of war was held and then the police, splitting into two parties, moved to assault. One body made a frontal attack, while the other crept round the hill to the back, with the object of taking the enemy in the rear.

Ten minutes later the police fled. They had been ambushed by young men of the village, who, armed with spades, reaping hooks, and furze cutters, had taken up position halfway up the hill.

A second council of war was just being formed when the loud and triumphant cries of villagers, concentrating on the hilltop, prepared to attack.¹²⁰

The police returned a week later, once again in a dawn raid. This time they managed to dislodge Jeremiah O'Mahony. A new land grabber named McDavid was placed in the house with three armed policemen for protection. Again, the people of Iveleary rallied to the defence of Jeremiah O'Mahony, and on 26th August, an attack was made on the house, the police who had taken up siege position inside fired shots and drove back the attacking defenders. A number of injuries were reported and six more prisoners were taken.¹²¹

More police were drafted into Iveleary and a siege at the house began, which erupted regularly in pitched battles between police and the defenders.

Police were met by a party of residents armed with spades and reaping hooks. The police charged them and arrested twelve men. In another incident police entered a farmer's cottage, and while they arrested several innocent persons in their night apparel, the parties really concerned escaped in their nightgowns through the back window.¹²²

The crowds of defenders assembled at the O'Mahony home were often addressed and encouraged by local leaders who made rousing speeches. Clearly, from the sentiments expressed, the conflict with the landlord Grehan was perceived as part of the national struggle, and independence from English rule was high on the agenda.

Mr. DC Kelleher of Ballyvourney announced to the crowds that the eviction of O'Mahony was,

'a small skirmish with a small landlord, who would not take them long to brush aside. It is, however, but the prelude to a larger skirmish on a larger scale. [...] If I got a free grant of Ireland I would not accept it unless it were also a grant of Independent Government and a country ruled in accordance with the wishes of the people [Cheers!].'¹²³

Then Mr. Jeremiah O'Leary took the platform to enthusiastic applause.

'He said he was delighted to see Iveleary turned out in full strength to help O'Mahony. They had come to the beginning of the last fight in the Ballingearry district against the Landlordism. It was going to be a hard fight, but they should make up their mind to face it.

They [The landlords] were dying like a mule, and will kick hard, but they would have to kick harder to take effect when they meet a Ballingearry man.'¹²⁴ O'Leary finished his speech by reassuring the crowds that they were fighting a just and fair fight and they would eventually taste victory.

In February of 1907 Daniel O'Leary, Conor O'Leary and James Cronin, were imprisoned and sentenced to hard labour. Once again, the women of the parish showed their mettle. They wrote a letter to Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Viceroy, to petition for mercy on behalf of the prisoners.¹²⁵ The Viceroy Lord Aberdeen and his wife Lady Aberdeen were strong advocates and active in their support for the cause of the urban and rural poor in Ireland.¹²⁶ Lady Aberdeen intervened and the prison sentences were substantially reduced.

Eventually in April 1907, following arbitration by Fr. Timothy Murphy, the parish priest in Iveleary, the landlord Grehan agreed to allow Jeremiah O'Mahony remain at the house.¹²⁷ On 14th of August 1907, over a year after the eviction was first reported and the initial violence had broken out, the last of the three ringleaders were rounded up by the RIC and jailed. John Twomey and the Cotter

brothers, James and Diarmuid a'Choitir [the storyteller] from Currahy were found guilty of attacking the police and were sentenced to hard labour.¹²⁸

There is compelling evidence to suggest that the eviction at Drom an Ailigh was not perceived as an isolated incident between a landlord and tenant – the defenders of Iveleary viewed their stand as a continuation of the conflict of their forefathers at Keimaneigh – as far as the defenders were concerned the rule of law was the rule of foreign occupation. Almost a hundred years separated the Battle of Keimaneigh and the eviction at Drom an Ailigh, yet it is clear that Inchigeela poet, Dónal Ó Laoghaire [O'Leary] did not differentiate between the two events when he evoked the memory of the killing of soldier Smith in the same breath as Terry, the landlord's agent.

It is my regret that they did not leave
Terry stretched prone.
As *Smith was on his belly
on the top of **Diuchoill.
In the Parish of Uibh Laoire are
the bravest men under the sun.
Put Terry and his followers and strong forces
In every dyke, their pulse exhausted.
The bugles*** were blowing loud in the hillside
And thousands coming to our aid.
Let us put the flock at once out of Erin
And drowning of the stormy seas to them.¹²⁹
[translation from the original Irish]

*Smith: Soldier John Smith of the 39th Regiment.

**Diuchoill: A location near Keimaneigh.

***It is interesting to note that 'bugle blowing' or 'hooting' was very prominent as a strategy among the ranks of the defenders at Drom an Ailigh. 'Bugle blowing' was also recorded as significant during the Rockite insurrection at Keimaneigh of a hundred years earlier.

Contemporary accounts of the attempted eviction at Drom an Ailigh present a vivid insight into the mood of the people of Iveleary in 1906. Newspaper reports confirm that the events at Drom an Ailigh were part of the much greater national struggle. *The Lichfield Mercury* [England] of Friday 24th August describes the defenders as 'rebels and patriots'.



Jeremiah O'Mahony seated with some of the defenders of Drom an Ailigh.

Second Row - left to right: Patsy Dick Cronin, Keimcorraboula; Batty O'Leary, Gortafudig; Denny Carthy, (uncle of Lynch's Top of Currahy); Dan Lehane, Tooreenlahard; Bill Ger Cotter, Kilmore; Johnny Twomey, Currahy, (Tadhg Twomey's Father); Connie Hyde, Scrahanmore; Diarmuid A'Coitir, Currahy; Mickey Eoin Og O'Sullivan, Currahy.

Seated: Jeremiah Mahoney, Drom an Ailigh.

Front - Right of Jeremiah Mahony: Conchur A'Coitir, Currahy (Con Cotter's grandfather); John Cronin, The Lodge (Father of Jackie the Lodge); Neilus Sweeney, The Village; James Cotter, Currahy (Con Cotter's Father); Thady Jerry O'Leary, Currahy (Nelly Johnny Fox's Father).
(Courtesy of Marian O'Leary)

They were taken to the gaol, and there for hours the people of the countryside listened with delight to the strains of *The Boys of Wexford* and other nationalist airs, which were being sung by the prisoners. The rebels still singing, were afterwards taken before a special bench of Magistrates. They sang at intervals during the hearing of the case. When

they learned that they were to be tried at the Cork Assizes, the ambition of such patriots, their delight was unbounded.¹³⁰

And, like so many of the other histories of Iveleary, the memory of the Drom an Ailigh eviction has been recorded in verse.

The Eviction

[Extract from the local ballad – The Eviction]

‘Twas unknown to the natives of Keimaneigh and Ballingearry,
in the morning hours early this tenant was scared,
by sheriffs and bailiffs, police and caretakers.
With rifles and bayonets possession they claimed.

Possession being taken and Simpson there stationed,
the bloodhounds of Satan proceeded in haste.
To evict a poor labourer that lived quite adjacent,
but some students of Gaelic defended him brave.¹³¹

Terry the agent of the rack-renting Grehan,
the arrears he claimed they never were due.
His rent book was shameful, his oath it was careless,
therefore a decree he claimed for eviction most cruel.¹³²

On the night of the alarm with trumpets and horns*
our countrymen formed in crowds in a rage.
O’Neill and the sergeant it’s they who were guarding
They yielded when warned with stones on the slates.

Those treacherous bobbies next issued some warrants,
from the dark Dublin Castle our lads for to chase.
How slyly they acted in fixing that matter.
With the thieving transaction of their officer Dale.¹³³

* Once again, the hooting of horns is recorded as significant to the protest.

Michael O’Leary of Iveleary

Heroes of the Great War by GA Leask relates a story about Michael O’Leary’s childhood. By all accounts, one day while playing outside the cottage with a stick propped under his elbow like a gun, he charged across the yard sending terrorised chickens fluttering, squawking and diving for cover. Eventually the commotion drew his mother to the door. She called out to him,

‘What are you doing now, Mike?’

‘I’m a sodger! [soldier],’ he replied.¹

Michael O’Leary grew up in a world when imagination was the sole purveyor of virtual reality, a time when a Play Station was an accessory component of a clockwork train set, a time when playing soldiers was what young boys did. Like every other young boy of that time, Michael O’Leary would have delved into the furthest reaches of his imagination to become a warrior fighting the good fight. It set me thinking...

I am reminded of a time in the late 1960s. Around the time of the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising, the nation became gripped by a heightened awareness of Irish history. I was a child back then, so when we played soldiers we invariably became Irish rebels.

I have a vague memory of performing a highly animated and impromptu solo re-enactment of the Kilmichael Ambush in my Uncle John’s bar in Inchigeela to the amusement of all present. My memory of the details are hazy – our visits to Inchigeela usually centred around some birth, death or marriage, maybe an ordination Mass, or a football match, or possibly we were there for one of my father’s pike fishing expeditions. But, for whatever reason, we were in Inchigeela



that day, I seem to remember that our visit coincided with the annual Kilmichael Ambush Commemoration, and that might explain my dramatic improvisation.

It had been a long-standing tradition that, following the oration at the ambush site in Kilmichael, many of those attending the commemoration would regroup back in Creedon's in Inchigeela. So, when I re-enacted that defining episode of the Irish War of Independence, some of the men standing at the bar that evening had actually been involved in the ambush forty-five years previously, most likely Tom Barry himself was there egging me on.

I wonder what they made of my stylised performance of their reality. At six years of age in short pants and a cowboy hat, high on Tayto and Tanora, with some old republican's walking stick as my only theatrical prop – I gave it my best shot. Admittedly, my grasp of the fine detail of history may have been a bit homespun because, as I remember it, my representation of events had Patrick Sarsfield and James Connolly leading a charge over the ditch towards a division of English panzers, but the final outcome was on target. The rebels won the day, the forces of the Crown were defeated, and the crowd cheered and called out, – Arís!

But, of course, the rebels were not always victorious. Some years later, on one of those dark, dank and dusky winter evenings, we were making our way home from hurling practice after school, and, as usual, trailing behind us, was my friend Georgie's kid brother, small Paulie.

From the crest of Our Lady's Mount, high up on the Northside, we could see, beyond the valley of Blackpool and Murphy's stack, there below us, a blanket of coal smoke thrown across the twisted chimney pots and slate-clad buckled beams of our homeland in downtown Cork City. The column was tired so, rather than travelling the safer but longer route through the Fair Hill gate, our officer in command decided we should take a short-cut through the heart of enemy territory and down through the Lodge.

The Lodge was a tree-lined avenue that led directly from Redemption Road to the Brothers' HQ up in the North Monastery; a route strictly reserved for Christian Brothers, forbidden to us under threat of death or a fate far worse.

We made our way past the primary school gym and around the side of the secondary school wall. Then one-by-one we crossed the open ground of the basketball court at a dash to the relative safety of the technical school bicycle shed. Then, crouching, we darted down under the wrought-iron steps of the Scoil As Gaeilge and, skirting the back of the old red-bricked Brother Burke's science lab, we formed up in the bushes at the top of the Lodge. A quick headcount and, once all were present and accounted for, we moved out single file down into the enemy territory; fingers on triggers, eyes peeled, ears pinned.

I'm not sure who was on point that afternoon but, as we made our way down through the mist, the sound of whirring bicycle wheels and the crunch of hard leather-soled shoes on gravel alerted us to a Black and Soutane patrol coming our way. A quick relay of hand signals, and the column divided in two, taking up ambush positions in the dense undergrowth of the laurel bushes either side of the Lodge.

Not a sound, total silence, breath held, blood pumping through veins sending an adrenaline rush like a pulse pounding to the back of my neck and out through my chest. Weapon clenched tightly against my cheek, safety catch off, I flexed my itchy trigger-finger. This was my first engagement with the enemy. I had them in my sights as they rounded the bend – an officer and three privates. A whisper spread along the line that we were to take no prisoners, followed by the calming reassurances of:

‘Steady, lads. Steady. Hold yer fire. Don’t shoot ‘til you see the whites of their collars.’

Leaning into their bicycles against the hill and chatting, they made their way up the avenue, still totally oblivious to the fact that God had delivered them to us and, in one single volley, back to God they would go. Yet we all instinctively knew we would let them pass unchallenged, for ‘twas better to live to fight another day.

But just as they drew alongside and into the killing zone of our crossfire, small Paulie couldn’t control his enthusiasm and released one of his tory top² grenades. All we could do was to look on in horror as the knobbly seedpod sailed through the air and bounced feebly off Head Brother Hannon’s head.

Brother Hannon’s eyes turned skywards then darted left and right until a rustle in the bushes attracted his attention. His beady-eyed gaze scanned towards our position, then locked solid when he spotted our battery of hurley muzzles pointing directly at him out of the foliage. Any plan we had of letting them pass was scrapped there and then – we had no choice but to engage the enemy. Up went the order:

‘Fire!’

And so the Battle of The Lodge began.

We opened with a barrage of tory top grenades, most hitting their mark. Then time stood still during the firefight that seemed to rage for an eternity – but in reality only lasted all of thirty seconds.

‘Bang! Bang! Ping! Bang! Ping!’

The sound of imaginary bullets ricocheting off kerbstones and gravel.

‘Ping! Ping! Ping! Bang!’

And the echo of a Thompson gun,

Rat-at-at-at!’

When the sound of the gunfire faded and the smoke cleared, it became obvious that, although we had made our bid for freedom and one or two of our tory top grenades were on target, the enemy patrol was still standing; stunned but still standing.

They stood there in the middle of the avenue looking bemused and confused. Gradually it dawned on each and every one of us that our hurleys had been firing blanks. In those few moments of post battle uncertainty, they fell for the oldest trick in the book – we offered a false surrender. To the sound of rustling laurel bushes we stepped out from our cover, and into the open, hands held high, reaching for the sky. Then, just when they least expected it, up went the roar:

‘Remember 1916! Scatter!’

And such is the flexibility of guerrilla warfare that we managed to break through the grand roundup and encirclement of outstretched Christian Brothers’ arms. Then, criss-crossing in every direction, we sent bicycles flying and took off in disarray down the Lodge, to the sound of triumphant war cries,

‘Up the Republic!’

We regrouped in the waste ground on Wolfe Tone Street. Following a hasty debriefing we all agreed it was indeed better to fight and run away and live to fight another day. Monday morning would be that other day, and only heaven could tell what fate would befall us then, but in the meantime we were free and on the run...

So, mounting our barebacked piebald ponies, we slowly made our way past Gerald Griffin Street to the crest of Roman Street. We were a Dakota Sioux raiding party, below us John Redmond Street, the land of the Whiteman. Then, raising our Winchester repeaters above our heads, we slapped our arses and charged off down Eason’s Hill towards the brewery and into the bowels of the city...

‘Remember 1916!’

G.A. Leask’s story of Michael O’Leary’s death-defying charge across the farmyard against the unsuspecting chickens set me thinking. I wondered what went through that young boy’s mind as his imagination carried him into the deepest fantasy of childhood.

I assume he was a Rockite and not a Yeoman. Then again, maybe he was Daniel Mac Art O’Leary, the last chieftain making a bold but futile stand against Cromwell’s declaration: To Hell or to Connaught. Or was he an O’Leary prince? Did he ride with The Great O’Neill at Kinsale? Was he wild Auliffe O’Leary heading west on a cattle raid to Ahakeera to kill or be killed? Or maybe he was Kedagh O’Leary leading the men of Iveleary at the head of King James’ Jacobite army? I wondered if the young Michael O’Leary’s theatre of war extended beyond the familiarity of the farmyard and into the ancient burial ground of the O’Leary chieftains in nearby Kilbarry cemetery. Did he climb atop some tomb and become Daniel O’Leary defending Carrignacurra Castle from a new breed of English planter, or was he brave Art O’Leary crouched behind some tilting headstone, waiting in ambush for Sheriff Morris? Or could it be that he

blazed a trail, slashing the furze and the buchalán buí? Did he ride through the furthest reaches of his imagination and into the untamed landscape of South America by the side of Daniel Florence O'Leary and Simón Bolívar? Or was he 'Pagan' O'Leary, shouting out in his loudest voice:

'No Crown! No Collar!'

The possibilities of a child's imagination are boundless, and it crossed my mind that the young Michael O'Leary had a deep family history, with generation after generation of O'Leary ancestors to fire up his boyhood fantasy.

Michael O'Leary: The Early Days

As outlined at the beginning of this book, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise date of Michael O'Leary's birth. The various official records state he was born on: 9th October 1888, 11th October 1888, 2nd December 1888, 2nd September 1890 and 29th September 1890 and, to add to that long list of apparently random dates, I'm inclined to think his birth date was none of the above.

The parish records of Inchigeela state his baptism took place on the 9th October 1888³ at Inchigeela Church, in a ceremony that was witnessed by his sixty-eight-year-old grandmother Ellen Lucey. So, it is fair to assume he was born some days before his baptism.

At the time of the 1901 census, Michael was twelve years of age. It is generally reported that he grew up in Kilbarry / Inchigeela, but the census of 1901 and 1911 records his home address in nearby Cooleen / Inchigeela. Following enquiries in Iveleary, I understand that Michael spent the early years of his life in a cottage at Kilbarry Lodge. The family later moved a half-mile away to a similar cottage in Cooleen. I found a number of letters written by his mother and sister during World War One that give the family address as Gearagh View which, if topographically accurate, might suggest that at that time the family home was located a little further East towards the Gearagh.

Michael was the second of five children. He had an older brother, Timothy and two younger sisters, Margaret and Hannah. On examining the Iveleary parish records, it becomes apparent that he had a third brother, Denis/Donoch who was baptised on 25th September 1895.⁴ Denis O'Leary is not recorded in the 1901 census, he would have been five years of age at that time, so I assume he must have died sometime during the first few years of life.⁵



Michael O'Leary's parents, Daniel and Margaret O'Leary. Also included is his childhood home in Cooleen, and a fascinating interior photograph of the O'Leary cottage.

The O'Leary family lived a modest if not meagre existence as subsistence farmers. An indication of the size of their smallholding is referred to in the *Bureau of Military Witness Statements* archive. Liam de Róiste's diary entry for 12th July 1915 tells of a chance encounter with Michael O'Leary's father, just a few months after Michael had been awarded the Victoria Cross.

De Róiste was a Cork City based militant nationalist and a prominent member of the Irish Volunteers. At that time, in the aftermath of the Redmondite split in the nationalist movement, the Irish Volunteers were busy regrouping and preparing for the Irish Rebellion that would take place nine months later in 1916. On the day in question, de Róiste was traveling by horse and car to Iveleary for a committee meeting at Coláiste na Mumhan at the Western end of the parish.

While making his way through Kilbarry the jarvey slowed down to exchange a few neighbourly words with a man standing by the roadside. As they passed, he identified the man as the father of Michael O'Leary VC. De Róiste's diary entry describes Michael's father, Daniel O'Leary, as:

‘an ordinary small farmer type walking along the road.’

A little further along, the jarvey pointed to a field and said:

‘There's the spot where Michael was born.

His father has two or three acres of land thereabouts.’⁶

Considering Michael O'Leary was twenty-five years of age before he came to the attention of the greater world, there is little on record or known about his early life. The paper trail is paper-thin, but comparing the census returns of 1901 and 1911 gives some insight into his childhood.

At the time of the 1901 census, the six members of the O'Leary family lived

in a two-bedroom cottage, which they also shared with Michael's grandmother, Ellen Lucey and a seven-year-old girl, Ellen Fitzgerald, who is described as a boarder.

Ten years later, the 1911 census reveals the O'Leary household had undergone substantial change. Of the eight people living in the house in 1901, only four remained. Michael had departed Iveleary in 1909, to join the Royal Navy,⁷ and by the time of the 1911 census, he had left the navy and enlisted in the army with the Irish Guards.⁸ The seven-year-old Ellen Fitzgerald, who had been described as a boarder, also seems to have moved on and, with no listing for Michael's grandmother, Ellen Lucey, who would have been ninety-one years of age if still alive in 1911, I can only assume she had gone to her eternal rest by that time.

Michael's younger sister, Hannah is also absent from the census record. Further investigation of the 1911 Census return reveals that, of the five children born to Daniel and Margaret O'Leary, four survived, so, taking into account their son Denis who died in childhood, I can deduce that their youngest daughter Hannah, who would have been nineteen years of age, was still alive but not living in the family home. Searching the records of that time, I think I may have found Hannah. A nineteen-year-old Hannah O'Leary is recorded in the 1911 Census as a live-in servant in nearby Kilmichael.⁹

This Hannah O'Leary worked as a servant for a young Church of Ireland family – William and Catherine Godsil who had three children under the age of three. Their house comprised six rooms, and is described as having six windows to the front; their holdings were significant with a farmyard that included eleven outbuildings. They also employed a male servant, Connie O'Donoghue who, like Hannah O'Leary, was Roman Catholic.¹⁰

Considering the 'two or three acres' of land farmed by Daniel O'Leary, it is safe to speculate that due to financial necessity, Michael and his sister Hannah had little choice but to leave the family home and find their own way in the world once they came of age. The 'two or three acres' farmed by their father could not possibly support three families. This goes some way to explain why Michael O'Leary left Iveleary and decided on a life of military service.

Among the various other facts and figures in the Census, it is apparent that the O'Learys of Cooleen were a Catholic family and are on record as being bilingual, fluent in both Irish and English. This is hardly surprising as the western end of the parish around Ballingearry is, to the present day, a designated Gaeltacht area.

For me the most intriguing information to be found in the 1901 census is the implied life story of Michael's grandmother, Ellen Lucey.¹¹ Ellen Lucey was eighty

years of age at the time of the 1901 census, and is on record as being unable to read. It is revealing to consider that Michael O'Leary spent his formative years living under the same roof in a small two-roomed cottage with his granny Ellen, a woman who had been born before the Rockite Battle of Keimaneigh in 1822.

Ellen Lucey was born within living memory of the failed United Irishmen Rebellion. She grew up in a time when the legacy of Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone inspired a vision of Irish nationhood for generations to come. By the time she was seventeen, four monarchs had sat on the English throne, and the Victorian age was about to dawn.¹² Ellen was thirty-seven years of age when the famed Iveleary poet, Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire, died.

She lived through a century of turbulent and violent transformation in Ireland, particularly among the labouring and rural cottier classes. Ellen Lucey lived through a time when the path towards a new vision of Irish identity was being laid down by leadership figures such as William Thompson, Daniel O'Connell, Theobald Matthew, William Smith O'Brien, James Stephens, O'Donovan Rossa, Michael Davitt, Tom Clarke, Horace Plunkett, Charles Stewart Parnell, the list goes on; each individual a driving force for their own personal brand of what a new Ireland should or could be.

It was a century when the various political, paramilitary and cultural organisations struggled to establish a sense of Irish identity, often with common purpose but conflicting methods. Such organisations battled for the hearts and minds of a disenfranchised Irish population crying out for leadership. It was a time when the ever diverging strategies of constitutional nationalism and militant nationalism became polarised and entrenched; and like the eternal battle of Yin and Yang, there developed a tug-of-war within the consensus of Irish public opinion as to which drum-beat the nation should march, or which flag the nation should follow. This national consensus swayed with the prevailing winds towards whatever means, be it constitutional, militant, economic or cultural, promised the most expedient results at any given snapshot of time. It is a consensus that continues to sway to the present day.

Michael's grandmother was born into a time of extreme agrarian strife driven by the blatant sectarian and inequitable distribution of land and wealth, fuelled by absentee landlords or their agents, who financially squeezed the indigenous Irish tenants to service the demands of a lavish lifestyle. It was a time when the landed elite laid down the law and the indigenous Irish responded in a campaign of violence against landlords, agents and their enforcers. But for Ellen Lucey, the defining epoch of her life must have been the horrific years of famine in Ireland.

During the darkest years of the famine, Ellen Lucey was a young woman in

her prime. In the *Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal* of 1998, Dave Walden recounts the devastation wreaked on Iveleary during that time. Statistics show that the local population was slashed by a quarter, while the population of the neighbouring parish of Enniskean was cut in half.¹³ With accounts of people dying on the side of the road from starvation, it is difficult not to be moved by the heart-rending tale of Donncha Ó Cúill. A man at death's door from starvation, but yet Donncha carried the corpse of his sixteen-year-old daughter in a basket seven miles to the family burial plot at Inchigeela graveyard to ensure she received a Christian burial.¹⁴

Michael's grandmother, Ellen Lucey, lived through a time when whole communities left the land. Spurred on by hunger, homelessness and hopelessness, many walked the roads to Cork City seeking refuge. There are descriptions of starving people, no more than skeletal shapes, making it as far as the workhouse in Shandon just to fall down dead at the door.

In an open letter to the Duke of Wellington, published in *The London Times* on Christmas Eve 1846, Justice of the Peace, Nicholas Cummins described the conditions in West Cork and implored Wellington for help.

December 17th, 1846.

To His Grace, Field Marshall,
The Duke of Wellington.

My Lord Duke,

Having for many years been connected with the western portion of the County of Cork, as an example of the state of the entire district, I shall state simply what I there saw.

I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes that presented themselves were such no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of.

In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearance dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horse-cloth, naked above the knees. I approached in horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive, they were in fever - four children, a woman, and what had once been a man. It is impossible

to go through the details, suffice to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 of such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe. By far the greater number were delirious, either from famine or fever. Their demonic yells are still yelling in my ears, and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain. My heart sickens at the recital, but I must go on. In another case - decency would forbid what follows, but it must be told - my clothes were nearly torn off in my endeavours to escape from the throng of pestilence around, when my neck cloth was seized from behind by a grip which compelled me to turn. I found myself grasped by a woman with an infant, just born, in her arms, and the remains of a filthy sack across her loins - the sole covering of herself and babe. The same morning the police opened a house on the adjoining lands, which was observed shut for many days, and two frozen corpses were found lying upon the mud floor half devoured by the rats.

A mother, herself in fever, was seen the same day to drag out the corpse of her child, a girl about twelve, perfectly naked, and leave it half covered with stones. In another house, the dispensary doctor found seven wretches lying, unable to move under the same cloak, one had been dead for many hours, but the others were unable to move themselves or the corpse.

But I forget to whom this is addressed, My Lord.

You have access to our young and gracious Queen, lay these things before her. She is a woman; she will not allow decency to be outraged. She has at her command the means of at least mitigating the suffering of the wretched survivors in this tragedy. They will soon be few indeed in the district I speak of if help be longer withheld. Once more, my Lord Duke, in the name of starving thousands, I implore you, break the frigid and flimsy chain of official etiquette, and save the land of your birth - the kindred of the gallant Irish blood which you have so often seen lavished to support the honour of the British name and let there be inscribed upon your tomb, *Servata Hibernia*.

I have the honour to be, My Lord Duke,
Your Grace's obedient, humble servant,

N.M. Cummins, J.P.
Ann Mount, Cork.¹⁵

The Mayor of Cork, Mr J. F. Maguire, MP, wrote in 1847:

The famine is raging in every part of the afflicted country, and starving multitudes crowded the thoroughfares. Death is everywhere. For three months in 1847 the number of human beings that died in the Cork Workhouse was 2,130. Within nine months, 10,000 bodies were buried.

At the Church of St. Ann Shandon - men, women and children, and infants of the tenderest age - starving and fever stricken, most of them in a dying state, some dead...¹⁶

The horrific conditions of famine were intensified by the general unsympathetic attitude of the British administration towards the plight of the Irish. It was commonly reported at the time that while the population starved, ships loaded with food sailed from Irish ports. In 1846, Robert Mann, touring County Cork, reported seeing innumerable starving and desperate people – he was shocked by the amounts of food being shipped out of Ireland.

We were literally stopped by carts laden with grain, butter, bacon, etc. being taken to the vessels loading from the quay. It was a strange anomaly.¹⁷

In the same year, William Smith O'Brien MP reported:

The circumstances which appeared most aggravating was that the people were starving in the midst of plenty, and that every tide carried from the Irish ports corn sufficient for the maintenance of thousands of Irish people.¹⁸

Ships' logbooks from the time present a frightening picture as, day after day, ships sailed from a starving Ireland, their holds swollen with food and provisions.

From Cork harbour on one day in 1847 the Ajax steamed for England with 1,514 firkins of butter, 102 casks of pork, 44 hogsheads of whiskey, 844 sacks of oats, 247 sacks of wheat, 106 bales of bacon, 13 casks of hams, 145 casks of porter, 12 sacks of fodder, 28 bales of feathers, 8 sacks of lard, 296 boxes of eggs, 30 head of cattle, 90 pigs, 220 lambs, 34 calves and 69 miscellaneous packages.¹⁹

On November 14, 1848, one of three ships that sailed from Cork

harbour alone carried: 147 bales of bacon, 120 casks and 135 barrels of pork, 5 casks of hams, 149 casks of miscellaneous provisions (foodstuff), 1,996 sacks & 950 barrels of oats, 300 bags of flour, 300 head of cattle, 239 sheep, 9,398 firkins of butter, 542 boxes of eggs.²⁰

As an example of the prevailing attitude of the British administration towards the starving Irish, the words of Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury of England, with responsibility for famine relief, are damning. Trevelyan viewed the huge death toll as a mechanism for reducing surplus population, which, in his opinion, had come about through Divine design.

The judgment of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, The greatest evil we have to face is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the Irish people.²¹

Though the British administration had turned a blind eye to the horrific conditions of famine; the Church of Ireland rectors of Iveleary and surrounding districts were extremely vocal in their efforts to inform the English public of the plight of the starving Irish.

Rectors: Rev. Richard Kirchoffer [Ballyvourney], Rev. Henry Sadlier [Inchigeela], Rev. John Baldwin [Kilnamartyra], Rev. John Kayle [Clondrohid], Rev. Robert Warren [Canovee], Rev. Henry Mac Chulock [Kilmichael], Rev. Henry Swansey [Macroom] – penned a strongly worded letter which was widely published in the British press. In it, they insisted that famine relief public works schemes were totally inadequate. Furthermore, they challenged previously published reports that put forward the view that the conditions of famine in Ireland had been exaggerated, and rejected as ludicrous the notion that the Irish Catholic peasants were buying guns and ammunition rather than food.

Having for sometime observed the grossest misrepresentation published in the English press, representing the state of Ireland. We contradict in the most direct terms these misstatements.

Their appeal for assistance from England ended with the chilling statement,

Their [the Irish] strength is daily wasting away, thousands and tens of thousands must perish.²²

Under Trevelyan, famine relief for Ireland was at best inadequate, at worst counter-productive. It seems he was not alone in his views. The perspective of English civil servants towards the plight and conditions of the Irish is echoed in the preface to the *Irish Census Commissioners Report* of 1851. Commenting on the decline of the Irish population numbering in the millions it stated:

We feel it will be gratifying to your Excellency to find that the population has been diminished in so remarkable a manner by famine, disease and emigration between 1841 and 1851, and has been since decreasing, the results of the Irish census of 1851 are, on the whole, satisfactory, demonstrating as they do the general advancement of the country.²³

Michael O'Leary's grandmother, Ellen Lucey, had lived through the famine; she was one of the lucky ones to live to tell the tale. She had been a presence in Michael's life right throughout his formative years. The horrors she witnessed must have had a profound, if not subliminal, influence on the young Michael O'Leary. I cannot assume that his granny Ellen had ever shared with him in detail the pain of those dark days, but, even if she chose never to mention the famine, silence can be the strongest voice of all.

Michael O'Leary was born at a time when the trauma of the famine lived on in those who had survived. He grew up in a time when the Irish nation was still mourning its loss, and the providentialist overlords continued to delude themselves that the famine had been the wrath of God sent down on the Irish people, and the death of millions through starvation was no more than a God-sent, crude but effective land clearance scheme.

As a child growing up in Iveleary, Michael would have heard the stories, the songs and the poems. Like every Irish child of his generation, he would have known that famine had ravaged the land. He would have seen the deserted homesteads; roofless, crumbling and decayed like the O'Leary castles of old. I cannot assume that Michael ever actively contemplated the repercussions of famine days in Ireland but, in the context of the songs and stories that surrounded him from the cradle, I believe he would have instinctively understood that the population cull during the famine was just the latest onslaught against the Irish.

As a defiant reminder of those tragic days, the famine pot still stands at the western end of Iveleary on the outskirts of Ballingearry village.

There is little on record about Michael's family, though his father Daniel has been

described, in a number of newspaper articles of the time, as a man who excelled in sports such as weight throwing and football in his younger days.

It is at Cooleen, a little town not far from Cork that Daniel O’Leary, the father of the Guards man lives. Michael is evidently a chip off the old block, for his father was a great footballer and athlete and won many prizes for weight throwing.²⁴

The Iveleary GAA club records show that when Michael was three years old his father Daniel lined out for the parish in the epic 1891 County Championship against Clondrohid.²⁵

In the English press, Daniel O’Leary is reputed to have been an Irish nationalist. Although during the early years of World War One the British media did not differentiate between constitutional nationalists and militant nationalists, consequently supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party who followed John Redmond’s call to arms in World War One were cited as being Irish nationalists. Nevertheless, there is a certain amount of evidence to support a claim that Daniel O’Leary was inclined towards the more militant strand of nationalism.

Liam de Róiste’s diaries recalls, a conversation in which he asked a man from Iveleary if Michael O’Leary had been successful in raising recruits from that locality to go and fight in World War One,

‘No, indeed, sir,’ was the reply. ‘He nor his father wouldn’t advise anyone here to join the English army.’²⁶

There was also a report in *The New Tribune* newspaper that told of Michael’s return home to Iveleary with his newly awarded Victoria Cross pinned to his chest:

When he went home to Macroom in Ireland, and told of his heroism, his father chased the hero out of the house on learning that his victims were Germans and not English.²⁷

But the most compelling evidence in support of Daniel O’Leary’s leaning towards militant nationalism must be his quick-witted retorts at a recruitment rally in Macroom in 1915. When he was asked to express why Irish men should follow his son Michael and join the British army, Daniel spontaneously gave a number of memorable, if not misquoted, sound bites.

‘If you don’t [join the English Army] the Germans will come here and will do to us what the English have been doing for the last seven hundred years.’²⁸

‘The Irish never got their rights from England, but the Irish fought their battles.’²⁹

‘Join up and give the Germans hell like your forefathers gave the English in the olden times.’³⁰

‘[Join up] because if the Germans come over here, they’ll be a lot worse than the English, bad and all as they are.’³¹



Michael O’Leary’s parents at a recruitment rally in Macroom.

That was Daniel O’Leary’s first invitation to speak at a recruitment rally – and his last.

Michael O’Leary: School Days

Michael O’Leary attended Kilbarry National School, where his teachers were brother and sister Jeremiah and Nora O’Dea. The O’Dea siblings took over the running of Kilbarry School from their parents, Timothy and Anne [Áine] O’Dea;³² a commemorative plaque dates the opening of the new schoolhouse to 1884.

Kilbarry National School stands on a plot adjacent to the former Kilbarry post office, which was convenient, as Timothy O’Dea was also postmaster at Kilbarry.

When Timothy O’Dea died in 1898³³ his wife Anne took over the position of postmistress.³⁴

Comparing the census returns of 1901 and 1911, it becomes apparent that by 1911 the O’Dea family had reverted to the old Irish form of the family name Ó Deaghaidh, and the census form was transcribed in the traditional Gaelic script.³⁵ This is significant as it suggests the O’Dea/Ó Deaghaidh family had become active in the Gaelic Revival that had been gathering momentum in Ireland at that time. It also implies the success and spread of influence of the Coláiste na Mumhan in Ballingeary at the western end of Iveleary.

Michael O’Leary’s military record states that his formal education finished at ‘3rd Class’,³⁶ and though he left Iveleary in 1909 to join the British Navy,³⁷ he continued to remain in contact with his old school teacher, Jeremiah O’Dea. The correspondence that exists between the two suggests that Jeremiah was a positive mentoring influence on Michael’s life into adulthood and their friendship had matured beyond the formality of a pupil/teacher relationship.³⁸

Michael O’Leary on leave home from the Front. Standing at the far side of the wall, from left to right, Michael O’Leary’s former school teacher, Jeremiah O’Dea, his older brother Timmy O’Leary and his father Daniel O’Leary. (Courtesy of Peter Murphy)



My attention was first attracted to the O’Dea family because of the long-standing friendship between Michael O’Leary and his teacher Jeremiah O’Dea, but sometime later I was fascinated to be told that Anne O’Dea was my grandmother’s aunt. My grandmother, Nora Cotter’s mother, was Eleanor O’Leary of Currahy, and Anne O’Dea had been Anne O’Leary of Currahy before she married Timothy O’Dea. There is a further connection; Anne O’Dea was postmistress in Kilbarry,³⁹ while her niece, my grandmother, Nora Cotter became postmistress in nearby Inchigeela.⁴⁰

Nora Cotter’s sister, my grandaunt Julia, was also a telegraph/exchange operator at Inchigeela post office. Some years later Julia was offered the position of postmistress at the Cork Butter Exchange Shandon, but opted instead to take over the Inchigeela Dairy, on Devonshire Street, Cork City where I grew up. I believe it was under the stewardship and maternal influence of Anne O’Dea that her two nieces trained to become postmistresses.



By 1908, as a young man in his late teens, it must have become apparent to Michael O’Leary that he had no long-term future on the few acres being farmed by his father and his big brother Timmy. So, like generations of Iveleary men before and since, Michael would have looked towards Cork City for career opportunities.

Employment prospects in the city at that time were at an all-time low. The manufacturing sector had never fully recovered from the massive economic slump following the Napoleonic wars of the early 1800s⁴¹ and the city was still struggling under the social and economic legacy of the famine a few decades previously.⁴² But the most immediate and pressing issue facing Cork City was the impact of increased mechanisation and industrialisation resulting in cheap goods being dumped on local markets, pushing employment opportunities in manufacturing and the trades into severe decline. Census figures reveal the extent of this decline.

In 1841 over 700 coopers were working in Cork. By 1901, the number had been slashed by 60% to less than 300. Likewise, with manufacturing, in 1841, the percentage of males employed in manufacturing was over 40%; by 1901, the percentage had dropped to 20%.⁴³

For an unskilled labourer such as Michael O’Leary, career opportunities were few. So, while the bourgeoisie of the city basked in the afterglow of the Victorian age, dazzled by the spectacle that was the Great Cork Exhibition [1902 & 1903] with its royal visits, buntings, brass bands and parades,⁴⁴ conditions were abysmal

for the unskilled labouring class who were flocking into the city looking for work. Large tracts of the city centre had become densely populated in squalid tenements, while the research of historian Coleman O'Mahony testifies that many of the warrens of lanes north and south of the river around Shandon and Barrack Street were overcrowded and unfit for human habitation.⁴⁵



I recently came across the work of historian, Luke Dineen, who has been researching the early days of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union [ITGWU] and employment conditions in Cork City during the early 1900s. I was particularly interested in what was happening in Cork in 1909, the year Michael O'Leary decided to join the Royal Navy.

Dineen paints a bleak but clear picture of employment conditions in the city at that time. With the economy in recession, Cork was an employer's market. This led to the inevitable exploitation of workers. The mounting tension between employers and workers would inevitably erupt as violence on the streets of the city.

The newly formed Irish Transport and General Workers Union [ITGWU], under Larkin, Connolly and Fearon⁴⁶ had been busy organising the workforce in the city and their activities soon came to the attention of the employers. The ITGWU made its presence felt in May 1909 when union members marched in the first May Day parade in Cork City – a strike by over 100 dockworkers followed a few weeks later.⁴⁷

Confident of their position of power, the Cork Employers' Federation stood firm against the strikers. Frustration among workers escalated and violence spilled onto the streets. The battle lines were drawn when strikebreakers were recruited by the Employers' Federation to defeat the ITGWU, and extra police were drafted into the city in anticipation of trouble.

In June, a series of ITGWU marches led to clashes with the strikebreakers who were backed up by police acting in a supporting role to the Cork Employers Federation.⁴⁸ *The Sheffield Independent* of 19th June reports that on Patrick's Quay:

A baton charge was made, several being injured and conveyed to hospital. On the opposite side of the River Lee, a severe conflict ensued. The police arrived on the scene, a baton charge was ordered. As a result, many of the combatants were injured. Several were taken to the Infirmary suffering from scalp and other wounds.⁴⁹

The Employers' Federation moved to break the union by imposing a blacklist of ITGWU workers, which led to a spiralling of tension and further clashes between the strikebreakers and the ITGWU strikers. With 6,000 men on strike, locked out or unemployed by 1st July 1909,⁵⁰ a series of ITGWU marches through the city became flash points for violence. The escalation of hostilities that followed prompted James Fearon, [who was known as the third James of the ITGWU – the other two being James Larkin and James Connolly] to set up a Workers' Defence Force in Cork who armed themselves with sticks and hurleys.

The formation of the Cork Workers' Defence Force is historically significant as it is viewed by some as a forerunner of the Irish Citizen Army.⁵¹ The 1909 Cork Lockout was short lived. The actions of the Cork Employers' Federation did break the strike. However, the ITGWU learned a lot in Cork and was better prepared for the subsequent Lockout in Dublin four years later.⁵²

The events surrounding the 1909 Cork Lockout give an insight into employment prospects in Cork around the time Michael O'Leary decided to leave Iveleary to seek his fortune. Clearly, the city was a tinderbox of industrial strife and, for those lucky enough to find employment, they faced bad working conditions and horrendous living environment in the squalor of the tenements.



Military service must have seemed an obvious career choice for young men like Michael O'Leary.⁵³ *Irish Soldiers in the British Army, 1792-1922* by Peter Karsten presents many practical reasons why Irishmen joined the British military, and top of Karsten's list was the basic human need for food and shelter. It must have been the case that many joined out of sheer economic necessity. At a time of such little opportunity, young men were attracted by the allure of regular pay, daily sustenance, medical services, pension benefits, and the opportunity to acquire skills and training that would be useful for employment prospects when they returned to civilian life.⁵⁴ And with Britain's multiple military campaigns of expansion and containment right across the globe during the 18th and 19th centuries, creating an insatiable thirst for new blood to replace the wastage of war, the British Army was open for business and hiring.

Irish Catholics fighting in the British Army had been a relatively recent phenomenon; it was a tradition that had only been officially in existence since the Act of Union with Britain at the beginning of the 19th Century. When

viewed against the backdrop of the French Revolution [1799], the American War of Independence [1783], and the rise of Napoleon on Continental Europe, the decision to rescind the specific Penal Law prohibiting Irish Catholics from joining the British Army must be viewed with a certain amount of cynicism. Prime Minister William Wyndham Grenville identified this opportunity to the Irish Viceroy Secretary in 1806:

‘We want the men, Ireland wants a vent for its superabundant population; could not these two wants be reconciled.’⁵⁵

There followed a dramatic influx of Irishmen into the British Army.

Considering the unhappy history between Ireland and England, one might ask why any Irishmen would volunteer to join the British Army. It seems, from the point of view of the Irish Catholic peasant, this easing of a specific Penal Law, which had up to that point prohibited Catholics from joining the British Army, was viewed as a victory against centuries of oppression and exclusion. At that time, the right to fight in the British Army was perceived as a privilege. It became a right to be exercised, an opportunity not to be missed, and as an assertion of that right, Irishmen flocked to the colours. By 1815, 159,000 Irish Catholics had joined the English army, prompting Daniel O’Connell to complain that,

‘Britain is taking away our native army from us.’⁵⁶

By the 1900s, when Michael O’Leary of Iveleary was old enough to join the British Army, it had become a long-established tradition that Irish men would wrap the flag of the Union around them and march to the beat of the British fife and drum. The motivation of any generation can only be judged in the context of its own time. Over a hundred years has passed, so I can only speculate as to why so many young men of that time joined the British Army.

The early 1900s was a time before television, radio or mass media – a time when virtual reality was limited to the depth of one’s imagination. The imagination of that time was fuelled by the great adventure writers of the 19th century; writers such as Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, Daniel Defoe, Robert Louis Stevenson and Victor Hugo.⁵⁷ Titles such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island* and *The Three Musketeers* gave flight to the dreams of every young man and woman.

It was a time of insatiable appetite and fascination for adventure in far foreign lands. It was a time when military chivalry was in high vogue, a time when the

fashionable high-street master-tailors displayed variations on a military uniform theme in shop windows, and gold braid on scarlet was the hottest fashion statement of the day.⁵⁸ Polished boots, brass on khaki and the promise of a king's shilling was enough to motivate the young unemployed boys to enlist, and was sure to attract the eye of the young girls from the tenements.

But that generation stands out as being different from ours in one glaring distinction – at that time the heroism of war was actively celebrated rather than commemorated. For a whole generation of unemployed working class lads, a life in the military fulfilled the dream of the age when swashbuckling adventure was all the rage.

Michael O'Leary grew up inspired by tales of derring-do, with countless generations of O'Leary role models to fuel his wanderlust and sense of adventure. When considering the many and varied reasons why Irishmen joined the British Army it becomes obvious that Michael O'Leary's experience, his family heritage, career prospects, financial situation and the zeitgeist of his time, all contrived to lead him down a path that was typical of the many tens of thousands of young Irishmen who chose military service as an obvious career opportunity.

The Cork Recruit⁵⁹

One morning in March I was digging the land
with me brogues on me feet and me spade in me hand.

And says I to myself, such a pity to see
such a fine strappin' lad footin' turf round the Lee.

So I buttered me brogues, shook hands with me spade
then went off to the fair like a dashing young blade.

When up comes a sergeant he asks me to list.
'Arra, sergeant a gra, stick a bob in me fist.

Well the first thing they gave me it was a red coat
with a wide strap of leather to tie round me throat.
They gave me a quare thing - I asked what was that
and they told me it was a cockade for me hat.



Early photograph of Michael O'Leary [1909] as a blue-jacket with the Royal Navy attached to HMS Vivid II. Inset: the photograph as it appeared in newspaper articles - with the tagline; *'this portrait was taken several years ago.'*

Military Service

Because of the long established links between the Royal Navy and Cork harbour, a popular saying at the turn of the 20th century was:

‘Royal Navy ships were all metal on the outside and all Cork on the inside’.¹

On 10th April 1909, Michael signed on for a twelve year period of engagement as a Royal Navy Blue Jacket No: K3106, attached to the shore base at *HMS Vivid* II at Devonport. He later transferred to *HMS Cumberland* on 7th September that same year and, though his character reports always ranged between ‘Very Good’ and ‘Good’, it appears he did not spend a lot of time on the high seas. O’Leary was discharged from the Royal Navy eight months later on 29th April 1910, described as being ‘unfit’.² Various accounts state he suffered from bad knees, most commonly attributed to rheumatism.³ In an interview in *The Boston Globe* some years later Michael’s mother commented on his extremely short time with the navy:

As a boy, his fancy roamed through far-off lands and he waited eagerly for the day when he should be old enough to join the navy. This was as stoker he served on *Vivid* and later the *Cumberland*, but at Malta his health broke down and he got discharged. Home to Inchigeela came the lad crippled with rheumatism and hobbling on crutches.⁴

Despite that setback, it seems that Michael O’Leary was committed to a career in the military. Within two months, he was back in uniform. On 2nd July 1910, Michael O’Leary enlisted in the Irish Guards Regiment. Following basic training at Caterham Barracks, Guardsman Michael O’Leary No: 3556, was stationed at Wellington Barracks in London.⁵ His decision to join the army may have also been influenced by another less obvious factor.

Within the British military establishment, there had long been an active lobby group, among high-ranking military officers of Irish descent, for the establishment of an Irish Guards Regiment.

During the height of the Boer War, letters appeared in the British Press suggesting that an Irish Regiment should be inaugurated as a mark of respect for the valour and loyalty of the Irish soldier in the service of the Empire, ever since the Act of Union a hundred years previously. In a letter to *The Times* on 1st March 1900, MP for Southwark, Mr Cummings Macdona made an impassioned plea urging the British military establishment to bestow on Irish soldiers the honour they deserved.

Is there not one mark of honour that can be conferred upon them and their country? There are the Scotch Guards, the English Guards why not add to the role of glory a regiment of Irish Guards?⁶

In response to mounting public pressure, on 1st April 1900 the Irish Guards Regiment was established by order of Queen Victoria to commemorate the many Irish who had fought and died in the service of the Crown, with specific commendation for the bravery of Irish soldiers in the Second Boer War.⁷ The announcement of the formation of an Irish Guards Regiment, which would offer the opportunity for Irishmen to serve under Irish officers, was enthusiastically received in Ireland. It may be difficult to appreciate it from this distance of history, but in its own time, the formation of the Irish Guards Regiment was viewed as an exceptional privilege and considered a great honour for the Irish nation. Although some of the more conservative members of the British establishment were not convinced of the merit of such a regiment. In a letter to *The London Evening Standard*, concerns were raised regarding the fact that the new Irish Guards Regiment did not have a military heritage or history, making it somehow inferior as a regiment.

The objection is that the Irish Guards would have no history. The three existing regiments date from 1650 and 1616. Should not the Irish Guards have a similar history.⁸

But, despite that minor voice of dissent, the newspapers of the time were abounding with glowing stories of the heritage of Irishmen who had heroically served Queen and Country. Queen Victoria's proclamation on the formation of the Irish Guards eulogised the bravery of the Irish soldier and was reported word for word in the international press.⁹

Fashion writers scrutinised every detail of the new Irish Guards regimental ceremonial uniform, which included a bearskin busby and scarlet tunic with specially designed Irish decals.

...scarlet with blue facing buttons will be placed in groups of four. The collar badge will be a shamrock. Dress headpiece of the Irish Regiment will be bearskin with a plume of Patrick Blue, the colour of the ribbon of the premier Irish order of St. Patrick.¹⁰

The regiment celebrated its Irish ethnicity down to the detail of a mascot named Brian Boru, which had been donated by the Irish Wolfhound Club.¹¹

Heroes of the Great War by G.A. Leask recounts an incident during O’Leary’s basic training, which was confirmed by his then drill sergeant. Seemingly, on his arrival to Caterham Barracks, Michael O’Leary witnessed a fellow Irish Guards recruit being bullied by one of the Coldstream Guards.¹² The Coldstream Guards were considered to be military elite; the longest standing regiment in the British Army with origins stretching almost all the way back to the time of Cromwell’s New Model Army. It seems O’Leary was not impressed by pedigree, and, by all



Irish Guards Regiment recruitment poster. Note: Interesting sub-text: ‘Assistance given in finding occupations for all men of good character returning to civilian life.’

accounts, when he saw the young Irish Guard being persecuted he didn't hesitate to intervene and became embroiled in a fistfight with the Coldstream Guard. They fought until there was but one man standing, and Michael O'Leary walked away. It is said his actions instantly gained him great respect among his peers in both the Irish and the Coldstream Guards.¹³ Official military archives seldom record such barrack-room incidents – so is it difficult to source corroborating evidence that this event actually happened, but *The Greater Game: Sporting Icons Who Fell in The Great War*, by Clive Harris and Julian Whippy, testifies to O'Leary's reputation as a skilled competitive boxer while in the army.¹⁴

By 1913, having served three years with the Irish Guards, stationed at Wellington Barracks in London, Michael once again left military service and returned home. His stay in Ireland was brief. Almost immediately on his arrival at Iveleary, he applied to join the Royal Northwest Mounted Police [RNWMP]. Michael's decision to join the Canadian Mounties at that particular time set in motion a series of events that would have profound and far-reaching repercussions in his later life.



A few months ago, while driving through Iveleary on a wet, wintery Sunday afternoon, I stopped at Kilbarry to examine the commemoration stone set into the gable of the national school.

Kilbarry is at the heart of Michael O'Leary country. Just a few fields behind the schoolhouse is the townland of Cooleen where Michael lived as a child. A stone's throw to the south of the road is where the original family cottage once stood at Kilbarry Lodge and, just beyond the trees, a little further towards Inchigeela, on the far riverbank, stands the ruin of the O'Leary stronghold of Carrignacurra Castle.

In the schoolyard at Kilbarry I became aware of the profound sense of continuity in this place. This traditional cut stone, two-roomed schoolhouse, with its double-pitched gable to the front, was constructed in 1884 under the watchful eye of the schoolmaster Timothy O'Dea. On the adjoining plot stands the O'Dea family home with the distinctive original five windows to the frontage as described in the 1901/11 censuses. Still discernible, the original structure is tastefully balanced by later extensions on either side. Attached to the right wing of the original house is located the Post Office where my grandmother's aunt, Anne O'Dea, was postmistress and, very possibly, it was here, under the guidance of Anne O'Dea,

that my grandmother, Nora Cotter, and her sister, Julia, first learned the skills of telegraphy, which paved the way for their subsequent careers as postmistresses in their home village of nearby Inchigeela.

The O'Dea family had been postmasters and schoolmasters at Kilbarry for generations.¹⁵ In those days of low literacy skills among the subsistence farming population, the O'Deas were often called upon to assist the local population in composing and writing formal and official correspondence.

As I stood there in the schoolyard that day, I conjured up a scene of Michael O'Leary with his friend and mentor, the schoolmaster, Jeremiah O'Dea. They are in the classroom of the schoolhouse at Kilbarry...

Michael O'Leary, a grown man of twenty-two years of age, takes on the appearance of Gulliver in Lilliput; squeezed into a desk fit for a child. Having served in the navy and the army, he is back home in Iveleary, frustrated by his lack of career prospects. His friend and former teacher Jeremiah O'Dea is helping him to compose a letter of application to the Royal North West Canadian Mounted Police.

Master O'Dea lays out a crisp new sheet of notepaper on the desk and he begins again. Michael transcribes the corrected final draft in his own hand and then, placing a sheet of blotting paper on top, he presses down firmly. There will be no inkblots or smudges on his homework this day. The pupil then hands the letter to the teacher, who reads it one more time, before folding it and placing it in an envelope.

Michael writes two trial samples of the address on a spare sheet of paper. He blurts out a schoolboy laugh as he struggles with the spelling of Saskatchewan. Master O'Dea then places the envelope on the desk, and Michael proceeds to write the address in the broadest sweeping penmanship. Then, following one final examination by the master, he seals the envelope. The two men leave the classroom and walk the short distance across the schoolyard, then, over the low wall, into the garden of Kilbarry Post office.

Jeremiah's mother, the postmistress Anne O'Dea, is standing behind the counter. Her niece, Nora Cotter, full of the enthusiasm of youth, is the assistant, under the mentoring eye of her aunty Anne. Michael hands the letter to the young apprentice postmistress. Studying the address, she whispers the word, – 'Sas-kat-chew-an.'

Young Nora Cotter puts the stamp on the right-hand corner of the envelope. Placing it in the mailbag, it crosses her mind that Canada must be a long way away.



Michael O'Leary sailed for Canada and there enlisted as a private in the Royal North West Mounted Police, one of the best-organised and most efficient bodies of men in the empire. With this fine body O'Leary lived and worked, rough-riding the prairie and camping in the open.¹⁶

On 2nd Aug 1913 Michael O'Leary became Constable No. 5687 of the Royal North West Mounted Police [RNWMP] and, following training in Regina Saskatchewan, Canada, his first posting was in the town of Battleford, in the west of the province.¹⁷



Battleford Saskatchewan

The First Nations indigenous peoples of North America inhabited the area now known as Battleford long before non-native Canadians established a permanent settlement as a fur trading post in the 1870s. The town made international news headlines in 1885 during the North West Rebellion, when Battleford was attacked, looted and burned by native tribes.¹⁸ But by the early 1900s, with the arrival of the Barr Colonists, Battleford became a bustling and thriving town.

The Barr Colonists was an initiative spearheaded by Reverend Isaac Barr, with a view to keeping Canada English through a programme of planting and settling the frontier with English homesteaders.¹⁹ Despite Reverend Isaac Barr's best efforts, the plantation of Western Canada was not as successfully mono-cultural as the prototype plantations of Ireland of previous centuries. By the time Michael O'Leary arrived in 1913, Battleford had become a cosmopolitan, cultural melting pot consisting of, First Nation natives, Barr Colonists and settlers from cultures as diverse as Assyrians from the Middle East and farmers of Germanic and Slav origin.²⁰



While with the RNWMP at Battleford, O'Leary's courage was acknowledged, when he received a commendation for bravery and was awarded a 'gold ring' for his role in an action that involved a cross-country pursuit of fugitives that lasted two days.²¹ His daring deed was reported in *The London Times*.

All his patrolling is done on horseback and the average daily duty is 30 miles. O'Leary gave a taste of his cool courage in capturing two robbers after a running fight that lasted two hours. The thieves were armed with automatic revolvers. O'Leary was presented with a gold ring which he still wears.²²

Riding the wilds of Saskatchewan with the Mounties must have been so liberating for the young, adventurous O'Leary. Canada was an exciting and expansive new world – a land of grand vistas and vast horizons. For the first time in his life he was free of old-world intensity and out from under the ever present, oppressive burden of old-world history.



Saskatchewan

I have always had a high tolerance for the predictability of kitsch 1950s Westerns, so one Saturday afternoon I sat back for eighty-seven minutes and watched – *Saskatchewan* [1954 - Dir: Raoul Walsh. Starring: Alan Ladd and Shelley Winters].²³ There is something about the colonisation of the Wild West that echoes familiar undertones of the various plantations of Ireland. There is a sense that indigenous cultures were inferior; native people were impervious to pain, hunger and cold –

and were somehow less sensitive to the emotional trauma of the loss of loved ones – but above all nobody seemed to pause and ask the obvious question: Why are the natives so hostile, savage and blood-thirsty?

The story opens with an Indian attack on a wagon bound for Battleford. The plot thickens at a RNWMP outpost near Battleford during the First Nations uprising. Alan Ladd plays an Irish RNWMP Mountie called O'Rourke, who finds himself in constant conflict with his cardboard cut-out officer-in-command, Inspector Benton – who happens to be fresh off the boat from England and is badly in need of getting his edges softened by the wily Irishman.

Predictably, due to O'Rourke's Irish heritage and centuries of oppression he has an insight into the mind-set of the savage natives. Of course, it takes a full eighty-five minutes for Inspector Benton to learn, the hard way, that O'Rourke's intuition and strategy for dealing with the hostile natives had been right all the time. Uncharacteristically, in the final scene of the film, Inspector Benton apologises to O'Rourke for not bowing to the Irishman's empathy due to his first-hand experience of colonial oppression. As the final credits roll, O'Rourke rides off into the Rockies with the wagon and the woman, and they all live happily ever after.

Saskatchewan is a film in which the stereotypes are broad, political incorrectness is rampant, racial platitudes are extreme and history is left at the studio door. But *Saskatchewan* has its charms – not least the majesty of the landscape – filmed on location in living Technicolor. But do not adjust your sets, the Bluecoats are Redcoats.

Michael O'Leary was on horseback in the open air, riding the frontier of Saskatchewan with the dashing Royal North West Mounted Police, where pay and conditions far exceeded that of the British Army.²⁴ But his days of freedom came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of war in Europe.

The British Army recruitment campaign was just as vigorous in Canada as it was at home, and many members of the RNWMP left the force to join a Canadian Regiment. This caused a crisis of manpower for the RNWMP. Superintendent Walton Routledge, Officer Commanding F Division, RNWMP, outlined the situation:

Wartime enlistments by men of the Force had so depleted the ranks that many outlying detachments were closed and even divisional quarters were understaffed.²⁵

In order to protect their organisation from the total depletion of men, the RNWMP insisted that those who wished to enlist in the British Army or join a Canadian Regiment to fight in World War One would be required to resign from the Mounted Police without guarantee of reinstatement after the war. This ruling was to have serious, unforeseen implications for Michael O'Leary's career and his post-war employment prospects.

Along with the 53 others, he [Michael O'Leary] resigned from the Royal North West Mounted Police. The men were not allowed to obtain their discharges for the purpose of volunteering for active service. But as a result of a petition, they were merely discharged without any guarantees of reinstatement, and went as reservists. Could they have resigned and gone as volunteers, they would have received Canadian pay, which was better than Imperial pay, and more equal to what they received in the Mounted Police.²⁶

Despite the lack of guaranteed reinstatement with the RNWMP, it seems O'Leary, like so many others of his generation, became caught up in the exuberance and adventure of war. He discharged himself from the RNWMP and returned to England to rejoin his former regiment, the Irish Guards.

As a young man brimming with vitality and the invincibility of youth, it seems the implications of a short-term cut in wages for the duration of the war presented no great deterrent for O'Leary. With the propaganda machine pumping out the message that the war would be over by Christmas, Michael could not have anticipated the long-term implications of his decision to resign from the career security of the RNWMP.

On his return to England, he was mobilised with the Irish Guards Regiment at Wellington Barracks on 22nd October. As a fully trained soldier and skilled rifleman with previous military experience, Michael was soon on a draft to France.²⁷ Within eight weeks, he was on the Western Front, surrounded by the death and carnage of trench warfare. Michael didn't know it at the time, but his destiny would not be denied, and the scene was set for what was to become his life-defining moment in the brickfields of Cuinchy on La Bassée Canal.²⁸ Within three months he would be catapulted onto the world stage, dazzled by the spotlight of fame and heralded across the globe as the bravest soldier in the British Empire.

A Prologue

The Immortal Deed of Michael O’Leary

On 23rd November 1914, Michael O’Leary found himself in Cuinchy at La-Bassée Canal in Northern France. No longer a young innocent lad from Iveleary – at twenty-six years of age he had spent the previous five years serving in every code of military life; the navy, the army, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and at the outbreak of World War One he was back serving with his old regiment, the Irish Guards. Yet, with all his military experience, nothing could have prepared him for what he would witness on the Western Front.

Living in waterlogged, rat-infested trenches, surrounded by death, blood and gore, the sparkling allure of adventure must have soon dulled to a gunmetal grey. Michael must have realised that there was little glory in war. From the moment he arrived at the Front, he had seen friend and foe blown to smithereens, he had watched them die, heard them cry and, like every man who found himself in that godforsaken place, he must have stopped and questioned why. But he knew that from the moment he donned the uniform he had divested himself of the right to choose which battle to fight.

Michael O’Leary was under no illusions about the demands of the soldier’s code. The soldier in uniform serves without question the commands of his martial superiors and political leaders. Should the soldier’s conscience or moral judgement contradict his mission, and he decides to withdraw from battle, it is deemed an act of mutiny, treachery or cowardice, for which he will face the inevitable consequences and suffer the ultimate sanction. Or put more simply, the soldier’s code in the age-old words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

Theirs not to make reply.
Theirs not to reason why.
Theirs but to do and die.¹



A century has passed since World War One, yet one still feels a profound sense of hopelessness and despair emanating from the first-hand accounts of those boys and young men who endured trench warfare.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, man and machine had been set on a collision course. World War One presented the perfect conditions for that inevitable head-on impact that would send shock waves across the industrial world and bring the rampant expansionism, exploitation and classist society of the powers of continental Europe into sharp focus.

Statistics give little insight into human suffering, so it is impossible to fully comprehend the extent of the heartache and pain of World War One when measured against the carnage, bloodshed and destruction. But in four short years an estimated 37 million people were killed or wounded,² countries were laid waste, ancient and historic towns were levelled to the ground. A generation of European manhood was decimated while, in some localised cases, the impact was magnified by the infamous ill-conceived recruitment scheme of enticing friends to come together to form what became known as a Chums Battalion.³

This almost perfect recruitment ploy, which was fuelled and sustained by peer-pressure, led to the unforeseen, yet inevitable, tragic outcome; those who fought together would also die together. It was a strategy that occasionally resulted in almost every young man from a particular locality, brother, father, son or uncle being wiped off the face of the planet in an insane ten-minute dash across no-man's-land.

I find it unimaginable to consider the thoughts that crossed the minds of those friends and neighbours in the final moments as they fixed bayonets, before



charging headlong towards the guns, weighed down by full kit, sinking ankle deep into blood-soaked soil in ill-fitting hobnailed boots. Yet, forward they advanced, stumbling past the decaying bodies of friend and foe strung up along miles of blood-drenched barbed wire, suspended in mortal animation for eternity. The lucky ones died quickly as a result of, what was euphemistically known as, a clean hit but, for most, death was neither swift nor silent. Their journey from this life was agonisingly traumatic and slow. They died all alone, thousands of miles from home, in some death-ridden, pockmarked foreign field, for a cause most of them would never fully understand.

I have come across chilling accounts of boys and men dying out in no-man's-land. They were praying to God or crying out for their mothers. Sometimes they whimpered in pain, until eventually they surrendered to the finality of death as the only comfort they could possibly attain. It was a brutal reality beautifully captured in the words of Francis Ledwidge:

Then in the lull of midnight,
gentle arms lifted him slowly
down the slopes of death.
Lest he should hear again
the mad alarms of battle,
dying moans, and painful breath.⁴

Many of those who lived to fight another day returned home emotionally scarred, physically crippled, wounded and maimed. Haunted by what they had witnessed, they found hollow comfort in the promised glory of the recruiting sergeants' speeches with their puffed-up fife and drum patriotism, flag waving and cheers. Those walking casualties arrived home to a world that had changed.

In 2004, Lorna Martin of *The Observer* newspaper interviewed the 108-year-old Alfred Anderson, one of the last survivors to have served at Cuinchy. Ninety years had passed, yet in the report it was obvious he was still clearly moved by his wartime memories. When asked about his experiences in the trenches, he just stared off into the distance, his eyes filling with tears and then, bowing his head, he said:

I think about all my friends who never made it home.
But it's too sad to think too much about it. Far too sad. I saw so much
horror. I lost so many friends.⁵

What glory is war; a Hobson's choice of kill or be killed, driven by the warmongers who cynically perpetuate the cult of the warrior. Because at the end of the day, when all the bodies are counted and weighed against the accumulated cost of the destruction, it inevitably comes down to a handful of men gathering at a table to carve up what little remains, until a deal is done to silence the guns.

Sometimes I think of those left behind, the grieving parents or a young wife with child. I can only imagine the pain of receiving the telegram from the War Office bearing the tragic news and the helplessness of not knowing where or how their loved one died.

And though the pain of loss eventually fades, the memory lives on, often locked in time, with nothing but a photograph to remind future generations of a fresh-faced boy in uniform, standing proud in his first flush of manhood before it was so brutally stolen away. Maybe that is why the cult of the warrior continues to thrive to this very day. Because for those left to mourn the only consolation in the futility of it all must be the belief that their loved ones died not in vain. For the only solace to be gained from a warrior's death is to cling to the belief that they fought the good fight, and they died heroically in defence of some higher cause; but it poses the eternal anomaly that young men, on both sides of the divide, fought as they died, with God on their side.

A letter to the mother of Private Willie Riley, who was killed in December 1915, gives stark insight into how difficult it was to justify and explain the death of a young soldier to a grieving mother:

No doubt you will be greatly upset over this sad affair, but you have the satisfaction of knowing that your son died a hero's death. He died for a great cause, and a gallant hero too. If he had survived I dare say you would no doubt have been a proud mother of a VC hero. It was something like the feat of Michael O'Leary VC when he won the VC.⁶

In some skewed equilibrium of wartime logic the fact that young Willie Riley had killed seven Germans in action was offered as comfort to a grieving mother:

Young Willie jumped into the trench and as he did so, a big German officer got hold of his throat and tried to strangle him. But Willie blew this officer's head nearly off. After this he walked into the next traverse and killed six Germans.⁷

The loss of every young life is such a painful tragedy, and I can't help but wonder

about the mothers of those seven German boys who also died that day.

What glory is death? Those young boys, be they Irish, English, French, Russian, German, or any of the many nationalities stretching all the way from the Balkans to the colonies, signed up to fight like they were possessed by some collective madness.

They willingly volunteered, of their own free choice, to march towards the sounds of the guns. But freedom of choice must be measured by degree. As they marched off to war amid flag-waving and cheers, singing rousing music-hall songs, had they been caught up in the spiralling mania of militarisation, overpowered by propaganda and the incessant bombardment of highly stylised graphic posters, peppered with snappy sound-bite patriotism? I question the level of free choice when that choice to fight is underlined by the threat of social isolation as a result of being branded a slacker, or the public degradation of accusations of cowardice ever looming. Of course, the great irony of being a free-will volunteer is that it precludes the right to 'un-volunteer'. Once in uniform, those boys had no choice but to remain committed to the cause until they had served the purpose of the war machine.

'The war that will end war',⁸ a phrase coined by HG Wells at the beginning of the conflict in 1914, became a call to arms and, when coupled with the nonsensical notion that the war would be over by Christmas, a whole generation of naïve, idealistic, thrill-seeking young men volunteered to enlist as the adventure of the Great War became the hottest ticket for the event of a lifetime, not to be missed.



Cuinchy

As 1914 drew to a close, over a million men found themselves lined up along the Western Front, facing out over the death and destruction of no-man's-land. The fighting had been particularly fierce over the previous few months, sending the casualty toll soaring exponentially. The relentless grinding nature and appalling conditions of trench warfare became ever more apparent, and the truth gradually filtered along the lines of friend and foe that the 'war to end all wars' would not be over by Christmas.

In autumn of 1914, the 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards had suffered unprecedented casualties during their futile stand and ultimate retreat from Mons. Following a month of non-stop combat at Ypres, the Battalion came off the line with only four officers surviving and less than a company strong.⁹ In those weeks before Michael O'Leary was to make his mark on history, the progress of war had stalled to a bloody stalemate.

At a huge cost of life, small gains made one day would be lost the next. Morale was low. It was as if the rank and file soldiers on both sides of no-man's-land had witnessed so much savagery over the previous months that they began to recognise in each other a kindred spirit. Because of their shared pathetic plight of hopelessness, it seems an empathy developed between enemies.¹⁰

Maybe the inhuman conditions along the Western Front forced humanity to the surface, or maybe their mission to kill or be killed nurtured the realisation that they were mere cogs in the killing machine of some warmonger's nightmare-ish dream. Whatever the reason, a creeping sense of co-operation between the foot soldiers on opposing sides and a noncompliance with the demands of their own officers began to take hold. This set in motion a series of events that came to a crescendo on Christmas Day 1914 in what is remembered as the most extraordinary incident of the whole war.¹¹

Trench Warfare 1914-1918, by Tony Ashworth, tells of the widespread disillusionment among the soldiers at the Front. This sense of mutual dissatisfaction led to low-level fraternisation between the opposing sides. In many cases the battle lines of opposing trenches were in extreme close proximity; it is said that they could hear the enemy talk, they could smell cooking from enemy trenches, opposing troops even spoke to each other across no-man's-land.¹² Unofficial ceasefires were initially established to allow for the retrieval of the dead and the wounded, but, over time, the ad-hoc unscheduled cessation of hostilities stretched to prolonged periods to accommodate such functional activities as mealtimes. This co-operation led to a number of non-hostile encounters that developed at times into playfulness

between sworn enemies.

In a letter home to his former teacher, Jeremiah O’Dea, Michael O’Leary tells of Front Line high jinks when he and his friend taunted and teased the Germans in the nearby enemy trench by blowing cigar smoke in their direction:¹³

We thoroughly enjoyed the cigars, me and my mate, and smiled when we blew the smoke towards the Germans.¹⁴

There are anecdotal stories of a football being kicked from a trench on one side of no-man’s-land to the enemy trench on the far side, with the inevitable cheer followed by a roar of ‘Goal!’ if it landed on target. Other times, it was said, they even indulged in games of target practice, each side goading and cheering as they propped up empty cans above the parapet as target practice for the enemy sharpshooters. It is true to say that in some situations an uneasy banter and surreal camaraderie developed between these cousins-in-arms, with accounts of mail being conveyed past enemy lines to be delivered to an address in occupied territory. There is even a bizarre incident of a German soldier entertaining the British troops when he climbed out of his trench and began juggling three bottles in full view.¹⁵ The commanding officers did not condone such activity, but it seems they adopted a look-the-other-way policy, justifying the fraternisation as a morale-boosting exercise that helped break the tedium of trench life.¹⁶

But headquarters could not have anticipated the scale of the unofficial truce that took place right along the Western Front that bitterly cold Christmas of 1914. There are many and various accounts as to how it all began, but most agree it was instigated by the German soldiers, when they erected Christmas trees along their trenches and began singing Christmas carols.¹⁷

In Timothy Bowman’s book *Irish Regiments in the Great War: Discipline and Morale*, he records the moment it was first noticed that something extraordinary was happening. At 8.30 pm on Christmas Eve an officer of the Royal Irish Rifles reported to HQ:

Germans have illuminated their trenches, they are singing songs and wishing us a Happy Christmas. Compliments are being exchanged but I am nevertheless taking all military precautions.¹⁸

The war diary of the Guards records an encounter between a Private Murker and a

German patrol out in no-man's-land:

[Private Murker] met a German Patrol and was given a glass of whisky and some cigars, and a message was sent back saying that if we didn't fire at them, they would not fire at us.¹⁹

Alfred Anderson, the last survivor of the Christmas truce, told of hearing singing from the German side, then a lone German soldier climbed out of his trench holding a small Christmas tree glowing with lights, and called out:

'Merry Christmas! We not shoot! You not shoot!'

All I'd heard for two months in the trenches was the hissing, cracking and whining of bullets in flight, machine gun fire and distant German voices. I remember the silence, the eerie sound of silence. We all went outside [...] and just stood listening. And, of course, thinking of people back home. There was a dead silence that morning, right across the land as far as you could see. We shouted, – 'Merry Christmas!'²⁰

The Christmas Truce: The Western Front December 1914 by Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, recounts another eyewitness account, which is held in the regimental archive:

The Royal Irish Rifles, with their national sense of humour, answered the enemy's salutations with songs and jokes and made appointments to meet in no-man's-land for Christmas Day.²¹

Officers on both sides were alarmed, yet oddly intrigued, at the rapid disintegration of the chain of command. In the War Diary entry, dated 27th December 1914, Major Trefusis, commanding officer of 1st Irish Guards at Cuinchy reports:

On Christmas day [...] some officers were invited by the Germans to come and have a drink. They went and asked the Germans to come back.²²

Then the unimaginable happened as, one by one, men laid down their arms and climbed, hesitantly at first, out of trenches and slowly, with uncertainty, they made their way into the death zone. The unfolding drama was detailed in Michael Jürgs' book *The Small Peace In The Big War* Jürgs paints a picture of men who had been

killing each other by the thousands in the weeks previously, spontaneously laying down their weapons, leaving the safety of their trenches and walking towards each other across no-man's-land. They shook hands, embraced, and before long they were singing songs, offering each other cigarettes, sharing rum, swapping tunic buttons and regimental badges as tokens of friendship rather than trophies of war. There are a number of reported incidents of games of football being played, even if sometimes it amounted to no more than a kick-about with empty bully beef cans.²³



The unauthorised Christmas truce spread like a virus across much of the 500-mile Front. The precise numbers of those involved is difficult to calculate, as the propaganda machine attempted to suppress news of the incident leaking out to the greater public. Stories of football-playing, carol-singing, merry-making Germans did not fit the profile presented at the recruiting rallies on the home front of the German soldier as a 'Murderous Hun'. It is estimated that on both sides, soldiers from 56 battalions, 3 squadrons of horse and 9 batteries of big guns, observed the unofficial truce.²⁴

Although the Christmas truce was widespread, it had little effect on the small section of frontline occupied by Michael O'Leary of Cooleen who was stationed with the 1st Battalion of Irish Guards near the town of Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal. The German guns continued to pound away at that section throughout Christmas Day. It seems the German artillery barrage was an attempt to breach the banks of La Bassée Canal with the objective of flooding the British trenches. It was reported that eight members of the 1st Battalion Irish Guards were wounded on Christmas Day 1914.²⁵

Letter From The Front

Michael had left Iveleary as a boy in his late teens; by 1915 he was a grown man of twenty-six. In the interim he had lived a full and varied life – having served in the British Navy at *HMS Vivid* in Devonport and *HMS Cumberland* at Malta,²⁶ he then joined the British Army with the Irish Guards based in Wellington Barracks London,²⁷ followed by a time with the Royal North West Mounted Police [RNWMP] in Saskatchewan Canada.²⁸ By the time he wrote this particular letter, Michael had returned to England, rejoined the Irish Guards and was deployed to the Western Front – and for the first time in his life he witnessed the real horrors of war.²⁹

In January 1915, while still enduring the depravity of life on the Front, Michael O’Leary wrote a letter to his former teacher, Jeremiah O’Dea. The letter displays a comfortable rapport and a strong bond of affinity between the two men. Clearly, the friendship between Michael and his former teacher had stood the test of time. It is interesting to note that this letter is dated 7th January, just two weeks after the total breakdown of discipline that led to the Christmas truce and three short weeks before Michael’s life-defining action at Cuinchy.

Thanks very much for your parcel of the 2nd. I was so glad to hear from you, I assure you they were welcome as I had just run out. We thoroughly enjoyed the cigars [...]

Remember me to the friends and neighbours and tell them I will be back someday victorious. I hope you got my card. [...] I know you will be glad to hear I am promoted to lance corporal and am getting on well. I am writing home this evening. Excuse scribble and haste.³⁰

There are many fascinating insights to be gained from the letter and, while it would be inaccurate to present any conclusions I might draw from the text as historical fact, it does offer some interesting narrative possibilities.

My first impression on reading this letter is a sense of cordial informality – Michael’s reference to a card he had sent to Jeremiah previously suggests an ongoing and sustained correspondence between the two men. We know from military records that Michael O’Leary had been promoted to lance corporal on 5th January,³¹ just two days before he wrote this letter. As a young man who left Iveleary with little education, qualifications or career prospects, one would assume his promotion must have given Michael a great sense of personal achievement. It is clear from the last line of Michael’s letter ‘I am writing home this evening’, that

he had not yet written to tell his own parents of his recent promotion to the rank of lance corporal. I find it intriguing that the first person he chose to inform of his promotion was his old school teacher Jeremiah O'Dea, and not his parents. It made me wonder if maybe Michael was reaching out to Mr O'Dea for paternal approval.

Michael's father Daniel was known for his quick-witted and humorous quips. But whether intentional or not, Daniel's barbed remarks often seemed to undermine his son's achievements. When asked what he thought of Michael's death-defying charge across no-man's-land and, in the process, taking two enemy machine gun positions single-handedly, killing eight enemy soldiers and taking a number of prisoners, Daniel dismissed his son's moment of glory with predictable sarcasm.

'I am surprised he didn't do more. I often laid out 20 men myself with a stick coming from Macroom Fair. It is a bad trial of Mick that he could only kill eight, and he having a rifle and bayonet.'³²

Daniel went on to say:

'Did he do that you say, the poor fellow, I wonder how many of them I could pike myself.'³³

I do not suggest that Daniel's intention was to ridicule his son, despite the report that he had been disappointed that Michael was killing 'Germans and not English',³⁴ I assume that Daniel O'Leary was extremely proud of his son, and his wry humour may have been an expression of his awkwardness when accepting compliments regarding Michael's achievement.

Daniel's unease with flattery and praise could well be interpreted as a lack of confidence, a trait common to many Irish subsistence farmers for reasons outlined previously in the remarks of Sir Henry Parnell.³⁵ It seems to have been a trait Daniel shared with his son. Reading the many newspaper reports, it becomes clear that Michael was also extremely uncomfortable with the accolades bestowed on him following his action at Cuinchy.

'There is one thing I don't like, and that is to be made a fuss of. I don't see what I have done more than any man, and I cannot understand the entire cry over me.'³⁶

SERGEANT O'LEARY, V.C. RETURNS TO THE FRONT.



Sergeant O'Leary, V.C., has left London on his return to the front. He was received by Lord Kitchener at the War Office before his departure. Our photograph shows Sergeant O'Leary leaving the War Office. He is accompanied by his old schoolmaster. (C.S.)

Jeremiah O'Dea
[Centre] with
his former pupil,
Michael O'Leary.
Photograph taken
in London, outside
the War Office in
July 1915.

There are numerous examples to support the claim that Michael's father, Daniel, had a natural talent for delivering crowd-pleasing one-liners – that was his way, no insult intended, no insult taken. But considering Michael had been promoted to lance corporal while enduring the horrors of trench warfare, maybe the response Michael craved was one of fatherly pride and a few words of encouragement rather than a derisive compliment.

As a teacher from a family of teachers, Jeremiah O'Dea understood the eternal truth of the 'seanfhocal' – 'Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh siad.'³⁷ Maybe that explains why the first person with whom Michael chose to share the good news of his promotion was his former teacher. It may also explain why O'Leary invited Jeremiah O'Dea to come to London later that year, to share in his moment of glory.³⁸

Another aspect of the letter to his former schoolteacher makes me wonder if Michael O'Leary had a premonition of his destiny. In a newspaper report published shortly after Michael's death-defying charge across no-man's-land – a Sergeant Daly, who served with Michael stated:

Just before he went he remarked to some of us: 'This is my chance boys. I am going out to do things, and am coming back with a decoration.'³⁹

Michael's choice of words in his letter to Jeremiah O'Dea also seem to be prophetic when he wrote:

'Remember me to the friends and neighbours and tell them I will be back someday victorious.'

The word 'victorious' stands out as an odd choice, particularly when one considers the levels of death and carnage he was witnessing on the Western Front. The priority of every soldier must have been to get home safely, yet Michael's use of the word 'victorious' implies that safety was not his primary concern. The use of the word 'victorious' is peculiar, in light of the defeat and retreat from Mons and the apparent well defended, impenetrable position held by the German lines on the far side of no-man's-land.

The Germans were well entrenched with the added support of machine gun posts dotted along the high ground of what was known as the 'Railway Triangle'. One would assume, for any soldier stationed at Cuinchy, the notion of an outright 'victory' would have been, at best, a faint light at the far end of a very long and dark tunnel. Michael's use of the word 'victorious' seemed to be a premonition of what was to come. Within three weeks of writing this letter to Jeremiah O'Dea, Michael O'Leary's name would become synonymous with the Victoria Cross. It was an honour that would follow him through good times and bad, all the way to the grave and beyond and, contrary to all expectations, just as Michael O'Leary had prophesised, he did indeed return home to Iveleary 'victorious'.

Michael's promotion to lance corporal would have made him acutely aware of the frontline censors, so, it is not surprising that Michael reveals no strategic information. Although his letter to Jeremiah O'Dea gives an insight into life in the trenches during Christmas 1914 and hints at the general sense of peace along the line.

'I hadn't a bad Christmas. We had some Christmas pudding sent by Princess Mary and enjoyed it as well as the cigarettes, pipes and tobacco. The fighting around Christmas was very quiet...'⁴⁰

Of course O'Leary's letter to his former school teacher was not merely a seasonal

note of festive greetings and yuletide salutations from the Front. The reader is snapped back to the reality of why those hundreds of thousands of men were living in the squalid, death-infested wormholes of Cuinchy that bleak midwinter. They were there to kill; death was the sole purpose of their existence. In those extreme conditions, when death becomes the norm, ordinary men in extraordinary situations become desensitised to violence. In an interview published in *The Cork Examiner* [20th February 2015], O’Leary is quoted as saying:

‘You would laugh if you saw us chasing them, mowing them down by the hundreds.... We have not yet properly started on them. God help them when we do, for there will be some slaughter’.

O’Leary’s letter continues:

‘...on St. Stephen’s night they thought to attack us. We had a two round contest. I said to my mate that this would be a three round contest but no, the shower of lead we sent across in the second round was too much for them. They know what the Irish Guards are to their grief – they are not so fond of attacking us now. They dread our steel and know to their cost that the Irish Guards are great bayonet fighters.

You should see them flee before us. It would remind you of one hitting a bunch of flies with his hand and they all make off.’

O’Leary had been promoted to lance corporal two days before he sent this letter. He had also been appointed orderly to, Newry born, 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes of the Irish Guards.

As orderly to 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes, Michael’s position would have been more commonly known as soldier-servant. As the title suggests, class privileges and birthright expectations in civilian life were carried into military service, yet, among rank and file volunteers, the opportunity to serve as a soldier-servant was a much sought-after position. For the most part soldier-servants had better conditions; usually exempted from the more unpalatable duties such as retrieving the dead and wounded, excavating latrines and trenches, they also served less time on frontline duty.

Because they were stationed in such close proximity to the living quarters and privileges of the officer class – soldier-servants usually received better rations and other favourable concessions. It was a position which often resulted in fast

promotion through the ranks, from lance corporal to corporal and even all the way to sergeant. In some cases, the position of soldier-servant presented employment security at war's end as personal butlers and valets to their officers in civilian life.⁴¹

O'Leary's duties as soldier-servant to 2nd Lieutenant Innes would have included such tasks as clothes washing, polishing boots and buckles, maintaining and mending his officer's kit: uniform, weapons and equipment. Sometimes soldier-servants were responsible for the personal grooming of their officers, with duties that included shaving and cutting hair. In effect, Michael O'Leary was 2nd Lieutenant Innes' personal valet. Of course, there were also military aspects to his role, such as conveying orders from his officer to subordinates, and most importantly, the soldier-servant became his officer's personal bodyguard in combat.⁴²

At the time of World War One, every officer was assigned a soldier-servant, chosen by the officer from among his men. So, the fact that 2nd Lieutenant Innes selected O'Leary implies that O'Leary was viewed as a man of integrity, a man who stood out from the rank and file, a man who could be trusted and relied upon. 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes' younger brother, 2nd Lieutenant Sydney Maxwell Innes had been killed in action two months previously on 27th October 1914. In light of the death of his brother, I assume that 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes would have considered his options carefully before he selected Michael O'Leary to be the man by his side in the heat of battle.

There is no reason to suggest that O'Leary did not embrace or even enjoy his comparatively prestigious position as soldier-servant. On a personal level, it would have given him access and an insight into the workings of the Ascendancy class. In civilian life, O'Leary would never have experienced such free association with the sons of gentry. In those days of extreme apartheid between the classes, it must have been fascinating to experience how the other half lived. I'm sure the inverse may also have been true – the sons of the Ascendancy who found themselves in the trenches as brothers-in-arms with the sons of subsistence farmers may have been just as intrigued to get a glimpse into the heart and soul of the Irish labouring class.

There are many recorded cases of friendships formed between officer and soldier-servant.⁴³ But regardless of how cordial the relationship between servant and officer, it could never be deemed a friendship of equals. Michael S. Nieberg, in his book *The World War 1 Reader* makes the point, 'an unfriendly or surly servant ran the risk of being returned to normal duty and forfeiting his privileged existence, so it was in the soldier-servant's interest to be pleasant'.

O'Leary's letter to Jeremiah O'Dea continues:

Our officers are very brave men; they dread nothing. When the Germans are advancing you can see them walking up and down the trenches among the men with a smile on their faces saying, 'Give it to them, boys.' And telling the sergeant, – 'Let the men at them.' Then comes the word, 'Fix bayonets, charge!'⁴⁴

Considering the clear-cut lines of class demarcation that existed in Ireland at that time, O'Leary would have instinctively recognised 2nd Lieutenant Innes as being of the privileged Ascendancy class. However, it seems the requirements of wartime may have cut through the barriers of class; without doubt, during the opening months of the war, the officer class suffered disproportionately high levels of casualties due of the convention of leading their men into battle.⁴⁵

Michael O'Leary's decision to pay such a tribute to his superiors in the letter to his old school teacher Jeremiah O'Dea was fortunate. He could not possibly have known that, within a few weeks, following his action at Cuinchy, this particular letter would be published word for word in newspapers right across the world.

The Innes Dynasty of Newry, Co. Down

The Innes dynasty were of the Ascendancy class from Newry, Co. Down, with clan lineage almost as lengthy as the O'Leary's of Iveleary. The Innes clan of Scotland has a long established bloodline that stretches back through the mists of time, an ancestry formally recognised in 1160 when they were accorded the status of Feudal Barons by charter of King Malcolm IV of Scotland. The Irish branch of the Innes clan was established by Alexander Innes, who came to Ulster sometime around the late 1730s, a few decades after the Williamite War, as part of the second wave of the Ulster Plantation.⁴⁶ Alexander took over lands formally controlled by the Magennis clan who had dominated most of south Co. Down since the 1300s.⁴⁷ Alexander Innes established his seat of power and manor at Donaghmore near Newry. By the 1800s, successive generations of the Innes dynasty had developed an impressive stately home on the estate, set in a beautifully landscaped demesne complete with man-made lake and acres of ornamental gardens and orchards – this landmark property became known as Dromantine House.⁴⁸

Almost two hundred years later, prior to the outbreak of World War One, 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes and his younger brother 2nd Lieutenant Sydney



Maxwell Innes, went by the double-barrelled surname Innes-Cross. This amalgamation of the two names came about when their widowed father, Arthur Charles Innes, married Sarah Jane Cross, and subsequently applied to the Royal Armoury License to officially conjoin the Innes family name with his wife's maiden name – to become Innes-Cross.

I find it interesting that it had taken over eight hundred years to establish the Innes dynasty, yet, Arthur Charles Innes felt the need to break with tradition and officially take on his wife's name. The Irish National Library Archive holds a copy of this new grant of arms to Arthur Charles Innes of Dromantine, Newry, Co. Down. The arms of Innes-Cross was granted to Arthur Charles Innes on 16th August 1888⁴⁹ [Incidentally: the same year Michael O'Leary was born]. And so, the Cross family name became officially conjoined with the Innes dynasty, becoming Innes-Cross – the union of the two names was officially registered with a new coat of arms designed by the Royal Armoury.

However, on the death of Arthur Charles Innes-Cross, his wife Sarah Jane Innes-Cross remarried. It seems that in a bid to protect, if not re-establish, the integrity of the Innes family name, Arthur C.W. Innes-Cross and his brother Stanley Maxwell Innes-Cross chose to drop Sarah Jane's maiden name [Cross] from their surname and revert to the original official arms of the Innes clan.⁵⁰

Though this exploration of the Innes-Cross family from Newry, Co. Down may appear to have little or no bearing on the story of Michael O’Leary of Iveleary, the narrative strand that interests me concerns the arrival of a man by the name of Eric Cross to Iveleary a few decades later. I must admit that, as I found myself being lured along on this particular tangent I was aware that my research could very well lead to nothing. But I decided to persevere and enjoy the journey. Over time, I became fascinated with the internal machinations of this Ascendancy planter dynasty – a clan that had fought the very same battles as the O’Leary clan, the only difference being that their view of history was from the opposite side of the battle field. And so, on the eve of World War One, the Innes family found themselves, like many others, on the cusp of great change.

Meanwhile, Eric Cross was a writer and a folklorist of Anglican Ascendancy background. He was born in 1905, near Newry, Co. Down – although, there seems to be some confusion regarding Eric’s date of birth. His headstone in Kappagh Churchyard, Mayo, records a conflicting date of his birth as 1903. There is also a question mark over the precise place of birth. Though most reports agree he was born in Newry, Co. Down, there is also a suggestion that he had been born in Cheshire in England. To add to the confusion surrounding his date and place of birth, as a young man he chose to discard his official birth name, James, and opted to be called Eric instead. He claimed he had been christened Eric after the patron saint of Norway, the land of his birth [Cross was known to jokingly pronounce Newry to sound like Norway]. It appears that Eric Cross was ambiguous, if not somewhat fanciful regarding his background. However, regardless of the conflicting details of his origins, James, better known as Eric Cross, was without question, inextricably linked to Co. Down as it is on record that his parents were from Newry.⁵¹

Educated in England and qualified as a chemical engineer, Cross is reputed to have been an inventor – credited to have been instrumental in developing the Oxo cube.⁵² He is also said to have developed a primitive prototype of the peat briquette,⁵³ in a process which involved rehydrating raw turf pulp such that the reconstituted consolidated peat briquette would burn longer and with more intensity, similar to the principle of the Oxo cube.

Fascinated by indigenous Irish culture, in 1939, Eric Cross came to live among the Gaelic speakers of Iveleary to research and record the folklore of the parish. As outlined previously in this volume, his work caused a national and international sensation, when his book *The Tailor and Ansty*⁵⁴ came to the attention of the Irish government censors and fuelled a heated debate in Seanad Éireann.

I was intrigued to know what prompted the Anglican, Eric Cross from the unionist heartland of Newry, Co. Down, to travel to the deep south of Ireland to live among the locals in the remote Catholic, nationalist, Gaelic-speaking parish of Iveleary. And maybe that explains why I found myself thumbing through old archives of the Innes-Cross dynasty of Dromantine Estate near Newry, Co. Down.

Could the arrival of Eric Cross to Iveleary possibly be connected to Michael O'Leary's action in Cuinchy? Could it be that there is a connection between Eric Cross and Sarah Jane Cross – the woman who married Arthur Charles Innes, the father of 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes of Newry, Co. Down?

2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes-[Cross] was Michael O'Leary's commanding officer at Cuinchy – and was awarded the Military Cross for his part in the same action that his soldier-servant [O'Leary] was awarded the Victoria Cross. From that moment forward, Michael O'Leary's daring deed at the brickfields at Cuinchy near la Bassée Canal was resolutely, and forever linked to the military history and lore of that particular generation of the Innes-[Cross] dynasty.

I think it's fair to surmise that Michael O'Leary and 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes-[Cross] formed a bond while serving at the Front, it may have been a bond of friendship, a bond of mutual respect, or merely a bond of mutual self-preservation. O'Leary's rapid four-week promotion in the field of battle from private, to lance corporal, to orderly and then to sergeant would have required the sustained support of his commanding officer. The initial petition for O'Leary's award of the Victoria Cross, and his ultimate promotion to 2nd lieutenant later that year, would have been sanctioned, if not instigated, by his commanding officer, 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes-[Cross]. It is also significant that during Michael O'Leary's short visit home to his family in Iveleary, following his award of the Victoria Cross, he undertook the arduous and time-consuming journey to the far end of the country to visit the Innes-[Cross] home territory in Newry, Co. Down. I assume his visit had been by invite of his commanding officer, 2nd Lieutenant Arthur C. W. Innes-[Cross] of Dromantine Estate.

While in Newry, O'Leary received a tumultuous welcome at a massive public reception – with letters of commendation from the King and Lord Kitchener read out to the enthusiastic crowd.⁵⁵ O'Leary's journey to Ulster is interesting, particularly when one considers that just one year earlier, before the outbreak of war, Ireland had been destabilised by the Home Rule crisis.

The unionist population of Ulster had been on a war footing because of their concerns that the introduction of Home Rule for Ireland would sever their link with the Crown and empire. They formed the Ulster Volunteer Force [UVF], an



Huge crowds turned out to welcome Sgt. Michael O'Leary VC at Dublin Mansion House in June 1915 – seen here with Lord Mayor of Dublin J.M. Gallagher.

armed militia ready to fight against the introduction of Home Rule in Ireland. They pledged, in some cases, a 'blood-oath' to fight and die to preserve the union with Great Britain.⁵⁶ In response to the unionist pledge, the Irish nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers [IV], and they also armed themselves and pledged to fight and die to defend the introduction of Home Rule – bringing pre-World War Ireland, as some might see it, to the brink of civil war.

So, when Michael O'Leary VC arrived to Newry, Co. Down with letters of commendation from the King and Lord Kitchener, it must have seemed to be an endorsement of the Crown's commitment to the Ulster unionists cause, and a symbolic gesture of some undefined common ground that existed between Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists.

The Observer in August 1915 reported on the screening of a Pathé newsreel of Michael's visit to Ulster. It appears that clever editing of two separate events, implied that the unionist and nationalist populations were fully united in the war effort.

At the Milnrow Empire Picture Palace on Monday night. Amongst the topical subjects illustrated by the *Pathé News Gazette* series was, *The Glorious 12th* showing all parties in Ireland united for the defeat of the common foe on July 12th and a 'Come Join Us' with Sergeant O'Leary VC. The humorous part of the programme was provided, introducing Charlie Chaplin.⁵⁷

I assume like most other Irishmen in the British Army at that time, Michael O'Leary was fully committed to the war effort, but was politically naïve. A powerful example of this general sense of political naiveté is identified in the words of the [Irish War of Independence] IRA guerrilla leader, Tom Barry, who had enlisted in the British Army to fight in World War One:

'I cannot plead I went on the advice of John Redmond or any other politician, that if we fought for the British we would secure Home Rule for Ireland, nor can I say I understood what Home Rule meant. I was not influenced by a lurid appeal to fight to save Belgium or small nations. I knew nothing about nations, large or small. I went to the war for no other reason than that I wanted to see what war was like, to get a gun, to see new countries and to feel a grown man.'⁵⁸

Hindsight is the greatest educator. I believe, at that moment in time, Michael O'Leary had no understanding of the greater significance of his visit to Ulster. It seems he was carried blindly on a wave of euphoria that swept the land following the award of his VC. Even the press reports of the huge public event hosted in Newry observed that Michael was overwhelmed by the exuberant reception he received, so much so, that when called upon to address the crowd, he was unable to speak.⁵⁹

But it set me thinking, could it possibly be, that the folklorist Eric Cross first became aware of this mysterious land, Uíbh Laoghaire, the 'Land of the O'Learys' where fact and fiction seemed to blend together seamlessly – when, as a ten year-old impressionable boy his fanciful imagination was set alight by the great war hero, Michael O'Leary VC from the Catholic nationalist deep south, who travelled the length of the country, to stretch out the hand of friendship to the Innes-Cross clan at Dromantine Estate in Newry Co. Down...

Incidentally, in 1922, the year after the Irish War of Independence, the Innes dynasty vacated Dromantine House after almost two hundred years in residence. The Dromantine Estate and manor was purchased by the Cork based, Society of African Missions, and became a Catholic seminary.



The Cuinchy Offensive

Following the breakdown of discipline during the Christmas truce, life in the trenches during January 1915 was typified by strict implementation and enforcement of military procedure and martial rule.

In the distance was the German stronghold of La Bassée. In the foreground an area that became known as the brickfields due to the numerous brick-stacks dotted across a relatively flat landscape, each one approximately 15 feet in height. These pillar-like structures offered cover to both defending and attacking forces.⁶⁰ The 1st Battalion's diarist recorded the worrying statistic that over half of the new officers had no pre-war experience of soldiering.⁶¹ Day after day men died as ground was lost and gained in a killing zone that became like a bloody game of musical chairs played out around the brick-stacks of Cuinchy. Robert Graves's wartime memoir *Goodbye to All That*, presents a graphic image of the brickfields of Cuinchy,

Cuinchy bred rats. They came up from the canal, fed on the plentiful corpses, and multiplied exceedingly...⁶²

Beyond the brickfields, a twenty-foot railway embankment ran adjacent to the La Bassée Canal. A section of this railway line, due east of the town of Cuinchy and directly facing the Irish Guards, formed a raised platform known as the Railway Triangle, which was held by the Germans.

The War Diaries at the British Archives give a clear picture of the conditions at Cuinchy during those last days of January 1915. They report continual heavy German shelling, making the job of completing and improving trenches impossible. Incessant rain had flooded communication trenches, while running battles of attack and counter-attack forced both sides to construct makeshift defensive positions between the brick-stacks. The fighting was fierce and relentless as they struggled to maintain possession of what brick-stacks they held. The Front Line was in constant flux, trenches were lost and regained, and knee-jerk counter attacks failed at a huge cost of life.

Arthur Conan Doyle knew first hand the brutal tragedy of war. In the course of the conflict, he lost his son Kingsley, his brother Innes Doyle and two of his brothers-in-law.⁶³ He wrote about the conditions in Cuinchy in his book *The Great War: The British Campaign in France and Flanders*.



A DEED OF VALOUR WHICH PROBABLY SAVED A WHOLE BRITISH COMPANY: SERGEANT O'LEARY,
BEFORE ADVANCING TO ATTACK THEIR NEXT



WELL AHEAD OF HIS COMRADES, SHOOTS THE WHOLE CREW OF A GERMAN MACHINE-GUN, BARRICADE BEYOND, IN THE LA BASSÉE BRICKFIELD.

The weather after the New Year was atrocious, heavy rain, frost, and gales of wind succeeding each other with hardly a break. The ground was so sodden that all movements of troops became impossible, and the trench work was more difficult than ever. A great number of the soldiers contracted frostbite and other ailments. The trenches were very wet, and the discomfort was extreme.⁶⁴

Rudyard Kipling also wrote of the conditions at Cuinchy in his two-volume history of the Irish Guards. Kipling's son John served with the Irish Guards – he was killed at the Battle of Loos in September 1915 just a few weeks after his eighteenth birthday.⁶⁵ Some accounts testify that his face had been ripped off by a shell blast.

In Kipling's *The Irish Guards in the Great War* Volume 1, he tells of the lead up to that fateful day of 1st February 1915 in Cuinchy.

Owing to the mud, the Cuinchy salient was lightly manned by half a battalion [...] Their trenches were wiped out by the artillery attack and their line fell back, perhaps half a mile, to a partially prepared position among the brickfields and railway lines between the Aire-La Bassée Canal and the La Bassée-Béthune road. Here fighting continued with reinforcements, and counter-attacks knee deep in mud till the enemy were checked and a none-too-stable defence made good between a mess of German communication trenches and a keep or redoubt held by the British among the huge brick-stacks by the railway.

The Battalion had just been reinforced by a draft of 107 men and 4 officers, Captain Eric Greer, Lieutenant Blacker-Douglass, 2nd Lieutenant R. G. C. Yerburgh and 2nd Lieutenant S. G. Tallents. They were under orders to move up towards the fighting among the brickfields that had opened on the 25th, and had not ceased since. Unofficial reports described the trenches they were to take over as, 'not very wet but otherwise damnable'.

Early in the morning of 1st February, a post held in a hollow near the embankment, just west of the Railway Triangle, a spot unholy beyond most, even in this sector, was bombed and rushed by the enemy through an old communication-trench.

No 4 Company Irish Guards was ordered to help the Coldstream's attack. The men were led by Lieutenant Blacker-Douglass who had but

rejoined on 25th January. He was knocked over by a bomb within a few yards of the German barricade to the trench, picked himself up and went on, only to be shot through the head a moment later. Lieutenant Lee of the same Company was shot through the heart; the Company Commander, Captain Long Innes, and 2nd Lieutenant Bloom were wounded, in spite of a verbal order to retire, held on till the morning in the trench under such cover of shell-holes and hasty barricades as could be found or put up. The Germans were too well posted to be moved by bomb or rifle, so, when daylight showed the situation, our big guns were called upon to shell for ten minutes, with shrapnel, the hollow where they lay. The spectacle was sickening, but the results were satisfactory. Then a second attack of some fifty Coldstream and thirty Irish Guards of No 1 Company under Lieutenants Graham and Innes went forward, hung for a moment on the fringe of their own shrapnel for barrages were new things.⁶⁶

Conditions were harrowing in the brickfields of Cuinchy, death was everywhere. With many of the officers dead, 2nd Lieutenant Innes moved forward to take command, by his side his soldier-servant, Lance Corporal Michael O'Leary. A small body of Irish Guards found themselves huddled in the most inadequate of defenses, cut off from effective lines of communication.

And so the scene was set for the action that was to propel Michael O'Leary onto the international stage and into the dazzling spotlight and glare of world media attention.



from a picture by F. Stantonia

HOW MICHAEL O'LEARY WON THE V.C.

The Immortal Deed of Michael O’Leary

There are many detailed accounts of Michael O’Leary’s action in the brickfields of Cunchy at La Bassée Canal on 1st of February 1915 – reproduced in this chapter are three such accounts.

ACCOUNT 1

The Irish At The Front

by Michael Mac Donagh

with a foreword by – John Redmond MP

The Irish At The Front was published as a sophisticated recruiting tool. The foreword by John Redmond MP is a direct call for new Irish recruits to replenish, what he describes as, the ‘wastage of war’.

This substantial volume was published in February 1916, a matter of weeks before the 1916 Rising in Ireland. The 1916 Rising marked a watershed in Irish history; it signalled the beginning of a dramatic shift in Irish public opinion away from constitutional nationalism and towards direct military action as a means of gaining Irish Independence.

It has often been suggested that the language used by the Irish rebel leaders of 1916 was overly dramatic, poetic and peppered with religious sentiment and imagery in an attempt to glorify the blood-sacrifice of young lives that would die for Ireland during the 1916 Rising. So, I was surprised to find that the language used by John Redmond in his foreword to the book *The Irish At The Front* is every bit as emotive, flowery and dramatic, so much so, that an unsuspecting reader could very easily mistake the rhetoric, imagery and phraseology used by John Redmond for the words and sentiments of Patrick Pearse.

...carrying with them their green flags and their Irish war-pipes; [...] exhibiting the character of the Irishman at its noblest and greatest—it is these soldiers of ours to whose keeping the cause of Ireland has passed today. It was never in worthier, holier keeping than that of these boys, offering up their supreme sacrifice of life with a smile on their lips because it was given for Ireland. May God bless them! And may Ireland cherish them in her bosom.

[Extract from foreword by John Redmond MP]

The following account of Michael O’Leary’s action at Cuinchy on 1st Feb 1915, is transcribed from, *The Irish At The Front*, by Michael Mac Donagh.

Finally, we come to the epic deed of Michael O’Leary, of the Irish Guards, which remains the finest and most amazing feat of the war. I remember well that afternoon of Friday, February 19th, 1915, when the announcement of the award of the Victoria Cross to O’Leary was given to the public. It was sent out in the afternoon, so that it first appeared in the evening newspapers. The record was one of a dozen, each of which told a tale of thrilling adventure. Yet all the London evening papers with one accord seized upon the exploit of O’Leary’s capture, single-handed, of two enemy barricades, thus saving his comrades from being mowed down by a machine-gun and killing eight Germans in the process, as the splash line for their contents bills. ‘How Michael O’Leary Won the VC’, ‘How Michael O’Leary VC Kills Eight Germans and Takes Two Barricades’, ‘The Wonderful Story of Michael O’Leary, VC’. Thus the streets of London flashed and resounded with the name of Michael O’Leary, that name which sounds so musically, and so irresistibly suggests the romance and dare-devildom of the Irish race, and under its spell people rushed to read the story of his deed. What appealed to the imagination was the touch of strangeness and fantasy in the exploit. How curious it all is, when one comes to think of it! As one is walking along a London street a name suddenly emerges out of the unknown, and lo! It is fixed in the memory with a halo forever.

It was in the brickfields at Cuinchy, on February 1st, 1915, that Michael O’Leary won his enduring fame. Taken by surprise, the Coldstream Guards had lost a trench and failed to recapture it. The Irish Guards, who were in reserve, were told to have a try.

No. 1 Company, in which O'Leary was lance corporal, formed the storming party. They were only too glad of any excuse to get out of the mud and slush of their trenches. Before the main body advanced across the open ground, a brickfield, with here and there a stack of bricks, O'Leary, who, in fact, was off duty, and need not have joined in the attack at all, slipped away to the left towards a railway cutting. He had set out spontaneously on his own initiative to give the enemy a bit of a surprise. What would be the nature of the surprise, O'Leary himself did not quite know at the moment. It would all depend upon the development of the situation and the actual circumstances when the time came for him to decide. But for days before as he lay in the trenches he had brought his powers of observation into play, and having grasped all the essential details of the geographical situation and the military position, he reasoned out a plan with himself.

According to that plan, the first thing he had to do was to get into the railway cutting on his left. This he did with all speed, and very soon afterwards he re-ascended to the top of the embankment and found himself almost in a direct line with the first German barricade, one of the brick-stacks, about twenty or thirty yards square, and about twenty feet high and solid. With five shots he killed as many of the German defenders. Then seeing the headlong and irresistible dash of his comrades across the field he came to the conclusion that the remaining Germans had no chance of escape. So he quickly disappeared down the railway cutting once more, and again came up to the top on the right front of the second German barricade. Here there was a machine-gun. In fact the officer in command had just slewed round the gun on the Irish Guards still busy at the first barricade, and had his finger on the button to let go the hail of lead upon them when he was dropped by a bullet from O'Leary's rifle. Michael also shot two other Germans, and the remaining five surrendered by putting up their hands to the deadly, unerring marksman on the embankment.

Thus it happened that when the No. 1 Company of the Irish Guards got to the second barricade without a single casualty, instead of, as they had expected, serious loss of life, their surprise was turned into amazement on seeing O'Leary there before them in sole and complete possession of the place, with a German machine-gun and five prisoners as spoil.

'How the divil did you get here, Mike!' Such was the exclamation of O'Leary's intimate comrades. Mike only realised that he had done something of importance and value, as well as of splendid gallantry, when officers and men crowded round him to shake his hand. The commanding officer, Major the Hon. J.F. Trefusis, promoted him to full sergeant on the field.

There must always be an element of chance or luck in such an abnormal achievement. But it is the man that is the thing. All the good fortune in the world would be without avail if the man were not of an exceptional type, possessed of perfect courage, marvellous self-confidence, and supreme resolution. Not less wonderful than what O'Leary did was the deliberate and efficient way in which he accomplished it. He knew that death might come at any moment. But he put the fear immediately aside lest it might in the least unnerve him in the pursuit of his purpose. Everything showed that he was in full possession of all his faculties.

No wonder, indeed. As Conan Doyle, the novelist, remarked: No writer of fiction would dare to fasten such an achievement on any of his characters. And only a few years before Michael was helping to mind his father's stock on a little farm at Inchigeela, County Cork. So they made him an officer, Lieutenant O'Leary, of one of the Tyneside Irish battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers. And rightly so, for he proved himself to be possessed of all the qualities of a leader; observation and reasoning, quick to receive impressions, and quick to act upon them, resource, daring, and yet discretion, coolness and self-mastery in an enterprise of difficulty and danger.

Well, Michael himself was never able fully to appreciate the gallantry of his action. What could be more modest than his letter to his father and mother on the subject:

Dear Parents—I know you will be glad to hear that I am awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous gallantry in the field. Hoping all are well, as I myself am in the best of health. From your fond son.—Michael.¹

ACCOUNT 2

First published in *The Cork Examiner*
February 1915

The following is the report from *The Cork Examiner* of February 1915. I first came across this account in the *Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal*, with special thanks to John and Mary O'Shea, Coolroe West, Iveleary for sourcing and transcribing the original. The words are attributed to Company Quartermaster-Sergeant J.G. Lowry of the Irish Guards. This is the first published account of Michael O'Leary's action at Cuinchy. This report is referenced by Michael Mac Donagh in *The Irish In the Front Line; For Valour* as having been published in the press on 19th Feb 1915. It was subsequently published widely in the international press. A selection of the numerous international newspaper reports include: *Marlborough Express* - 16th April 1915; *New Zealand Herald* - 6th April 1915; *Daily Times*, Australia - 14th April 1915; *The Straits Times*, [Singapore]; *New York Times* - 28th May 1915.

How Sergeant Michael O'Leary, the fair-haired Irish Guardsman, won his VC and promotion on the battlefield was related to a *Daily Mail* representative.

For more than a week, said Sgt Lowry, our first battalion had been holding trenches near La Bassée brickfield, and our losses were heavy. The Germans had excellent cover both in the trenches and behind the stacks of bricks, and the bombs thrown by their mortars cost us dearly.

The night before the taking of the brickfield, we lost two officers among the killed, and it was decided that the trenches were too expensive to hold. We had worked in 48-hour turns, fighting all the time, sniping and throwing hand grenades. We were up close to the Germans and we gave them as good as they gave us. The pace was fierce particularly at night.

We were all delighted therefore when the order came that the brickfield was to be taken by assault the next day at two o'clock. The French were on the right. My Company is No. 2 and Sgt O'Leary's is No. 1. They were on our left and on their left were some Coldstreamers.

At two o'clock exactly the next day the British and French artillery opened up on the brickfield. My company was ordered from our trench to keep up a hot rifle and machine gun fire across the German trenches and points of cover. Our business was to make the enemy keep their

Heroic Son of Erin wins Immortal Fame

AMONG the deeds of glorious heroism that were daily being added to the pages of our Empire's history, the story of Sergeant Michael O'Leary's exploit must stand alone. Other men have gained the Victoria Cross, but rarely in the annals of this most coveted decoration has it been so heroically won. At Quinchy, on February 1st, 1915, Michael O'Leary, of the Irish Guards, formed one of a storming party. Rushing ahead of his comrades, and in face of a withering fire, he shot and bayoneted five Germans holding the first barricade. He then attacked the second, sixty yards farther on, which he captured single-handed, after killing three more Germans and capturing two. Sergeant O'Leary practically won the enemy's position by himself, and so prevented the attacking party from being fired upon. Thus this brave soldier enters into the glorious company of Ireland's hero sons.



SERGEANT MICHAEL O'LEARY, V.C., CAPTURING THE BARRICADE AT QUINCHY ON FEBRUARY 1st, 1915. 173

heads down no matter how much they were troubled by the artillery.

The diversion we and the artillery caused led the Germans to expect something was going to happen from our direction and they devoted particular attention to our trench. After the rain of bullets and shrapnel had been kept up for twenty minutes, No.1 Company was let loose on

our left. They came out of their trenches with a yell; bayonets fixed and went for the enemy at the double.

They had from 100 to 150 yards to travel and they went at a tidy pace, but were easily out-stripped by Lance-Corporal O'Leary, as he then was. He never looked to see if his mates were coming and he must have done pretty much even time over that patch of ground. When he got near the end of one of the German trenches he dropped and so did many more a long way behind him. The enemy had discovered what was up.

A machine gun was O'Leary's mark. Before the Germans could manage to slew round and meet the charging men, O'Leary picked off the whole of the five of the machine gun crew. Leaving some of his mates to come up and capture the gun, he dashed forward to the second barricade, which the Germans were quitting in a hurry and shot three more.

Some of the enemy who couldn't get away quick enough faced our men but very little bayonet work was needed. The majority did not wait and we picked them off – a good lot of them from our trenches as they left their holes.

I had a job keeping my men in the trench. 'Why can't we go across?' they shouted at me, and I wanted to go as much as they did. We soon understood how necessary it was to keep up the steady fire. We actually lost more men than the storming party.

The brickfield was won inside half an hour. We went forward and occupied the German trenches and prepared for a counter attack but one never came.

O'Leary came back from his killing as cool as if he had been for a walk in the park and accompanied by two prisoners he had taken. He probably saved the lives of the whole company. If the machine gun had got slewed round No.1 Company might have been nearly wiped out. We all quickly appreciated the value of O'Leary's sprinting and crack shooting and when we were relieved that night, dog-tired as we were, O'Leary nearly had his hand shaken off by his comrades.

Next morning he was promoted on the field to full sergeant by Major the Hon. J.F. Trefusis, and I see in this morning's paper the major has won the DSO. If any man ever deserved it, it is Major Trefusis.

Sgt O'Leary has brought back the Victoria Cross to the Irish Guards. We lost ours when Brigadier-General Fitz-Clarence was killed. He won his VC in the South African War.

The 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards has been at the front since the beginning. We were in the retreat from Mons. Sergeant O'Leary joined us about three months ago. After his first three years service in the battalion he went to Canada and joined the North West Mounted Police. Although he is a quiet and unassuming chap he has many good tales to tell about his adventurous life Out West. I don't think he's 25 yet.

He seemed surprised that his comrades thought he had done something wonderful.²

ACCOUNT 3

'In the Cannon's Mouth'

The Victor May 19th 1979

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This three-page comic spread as published in the *Victor* on 19th May 1979. This was my first introduction to Michael O'Leary VC.



Bob Millar fights alongside one of Ireland's
greatest heroes of World War I!

IN THE CANNON'S MOUTH

By February 1915, World War One had been raging for six months and the battlefield was in the grip of winter. Bob Millar and his comrades of the Coldstream Guards were entrenched on the shattered brickfields of Cranchy, with the Irish Guards holding the trenches to their right.



"Old Mick can still run like a hare!"



The Coldstream Guards were forced to pull back and make a new position while the officers took stock of the situation.



THERE'S A DANGEROUS GAP IN YOUR LINE, NOW. IT COULD BE VERY NASTY IF THE GERMANS CHOOSE TO ATTACK.

WE CAN'T RE-OCCUPY OUR TRENCH UNLESS WE CAN TURN THE GERMANS OUT OF THAT POSITION THEY TOOK FROM THE IRISH GUARDS.

WE'LL MOUNT A COUNTER-ATTACK WITH HALF A COMPANY OF THE COLDSTREAM AND A COMPANY OF THE IRISH. ZERO-HOUR WILL BE 00.15 HOURS.



Before dawn the counter-attack was launched.



But the Germans had worked fast to strengthen their positions and a terrible fire was brought to bear on the British troops.



CRIP! I NEED A BIT OF COVER!



CORPORAL O'LEARY: HOW ARE YOU, MICK? GOSH! I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU SINCE WE TOOK PART IN THE CORONATION IN 1911. WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING WITH YOURSELF?

BOB MILLAR, BY ALL THAT'S WONDERFUL! FANCY MEETING YOU IN THIS DUMP! I TOOK MY DISCHARGE IN 1912, SAME AS YOU DID, AND JOINED THE CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE. I WAS OUT THERE WHEN I GOT MY ORDERS TO REJOIN THE BATTALION.



LOOKS LIKE THEY CALLED OFF THE ATTACK, MICK. THE MEN ARE MOVING BACK.

THEN 'TIS MESELF IS THINKING WE'D BEST BE DOING THE SAME, NOW, OR THIS MEETING IS LIKELY TO BE OUR LAST!



GOSH! OLD MICK CAN STILL RUN LIKE A HARE!



WELL, I'LL BE JOINING MY COMPANY, BOB. 'TIS GOOD TO HAVE SEE EYES ON YE AGAIN.

YES. SAME TO YOU, MICK - AND THE BEST OF LUCK.

And so the two men parted. Little did Millar think that he had just shaken hands with a man destined to become one of Ireland's greatest heroes.



With the failure of the counter-attack, the British line was in grave danger and the Divisional Commander decided to try again to drive back the Germans.



This time the artillery took a hand and every gun that could be brought to bear opened fire on the German positions.



In their trenches the men waited. The Irish Guards, on the right, mustered only 30 men, but among them was Lance-Corporal O'Leary. The Coldstream Guards, on the left, mustered 50 men.

"He's shot the whole crew!"



NEXT WEEK—The Canadians arrive in France and prove their mettle!

The Making of a Hero

By Christmas 1914 ‘the war to end all wars’ was far from over – if anything it had only just begun. The initial flush of euphoria¹ of the call to arms had subsided as a bewildered public struggled to come to terms with the futile and brutal reality of the conflict. The spiralling body count provoked an ever-increasing sense of horror and a deepening frustration with the lack of progress, as day after day news continued to filter through of more deaths and carnage on the battlefields of the Western Front.

But then a glimmer of light; Quartermaster-Sergeant J.G. Lowry’s report of Michael O’Leary’s death-defying charge across no-man’s-land was published in *The Cork Examiner*. It told the story of Michael O’Leary from the townland of Cooleen in Iveleary; an ordinary man who had risen to the challenge of an extraordinary situation. The military was quick to recognise that O’Leary represented the precise demographic being targeted by the recruitment machine to replenish the wastage of war.²

Within weeks, Quartermaster-Sergeant J.G. Lowry’s account had been published word for word in newspapers right across the globe, from Australia and New Zealand, to Canada and North America, to the furthestmost reaches of the Empire.³

For the first time, the world was introduced to Michael O’Leary of Iveleary. The pages of the international press told of this ‘unassuming’ yet ‘adventurous’ young Irish ‘farm-boy’, a heroic Irish nationalist fighting for king and country.

In an evocation of the epic tales of swashbuckling adventure of the 19th century, words such as ‘romance’, ‘adventurous’ and ‘dare-devildom’ became synonymous with Michael O’Leary’s exploits – exploits said to have ‘appealed to the imagination with the touch of strangeness and fantasy of the Irish race’.

A curse or a blessing, for better or for worse, it was a story that would follow Michael throughout his life, in good times and in bad, for rich or for poor, right to his dying day and beyond. Within weeks, the farm-boy from Iveleary had been elevated to the status of demigod.

What Michael O'Leary did beats anything attributed to Cú Chulain and Cónal Cearnach, and even Óisín might have hesitated before claiming such prowess for his respected parent Fionn MacCool.⁴

Michael O'Leary's action in the brickfields of Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal on 1st February 1915 was to become the defining moment of his life. From that day forward, the world as he knew it changed, and changed at an alarming rate. Three days later, on 4th February he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, and by 18th February, while still in the firing line of the Front Line, he had been awarded the Victoria Cross.

With that highest decoration of the empire pinned on his chest, Michael O'Leary's fate was sealed. Within days of being awarded the Victoria Cross, his name was splashed as banner headlines across the world: 'The Immortal Deed Of Michael O'Leary', 'How Michael O'Leary Killed Eight Germans', 'How Michael O'Leary Won the VC'.

Sergeant O'Leary, the new Irish VC, the story of whose amazing deed in killing eight Germans, taking two prisoners and practically capturing the enemy position, was on every lip yesterday.⁵

Such was the interest in Michael O'Leary that photographers and reporters from the international press descended on Iveleary. One correspondent for *The Daily Mirror* reported that he had travelled especially to get the reaction of O'Leary's unsuspecting parents.

Through forty miles of wild mountain country I travelled today to the cottage of Michael O'Leary VC, where I was the first to announce the good news to the hero's parents. O'Leary's home, as I found it, was a small cottage, with a hayrick beside it and, clustering under its eaves, plenty of fine fat hens and a sturdy calf.

I had the pleasure yesterday of announcing the news of the VC award to O'Leary's parents.

'May God preserve my brave boy,' were his mother's words.⁶

In a blatant invasion of privacy, the media prised open the half-door of the O'Leary family home for the world to peek inside at the sparsely furnished, mud-floored cottage. Photographs of Michael's family, friends and neighbours appeared in newspapers to satisfy the appetite of an increasingly inquisitive public.

In the very heart of O’Leary country, there is not an O’Leary but has traced his relation to Mike. Some go back ten generations or more, for O’Learys are as plentiful as Germans.⁷

With Michael still in the trenches, and so little to report in Iveleary, the media pounced on his father. Daniel O’Leary was always happy to oblige and stand out from the Greek chorus as a stereotypical Irish character, always ready and willing to deliver a sharp-witted one-liner.

O’Leary’s father is a man of sixty years of age, well over 6ft in height, of powerful frame.⁸

Meanwhile, back at the Front, Michael was oblivious to the escalating hype surrounding his exploits – his focus firmly set on the theatre of war and not the circus of propaganda.

✂

Examining the initial photographs published in the press one will notice that Michael’s parents appear to be of typical Irish, subsistence-farming stock; with unkempt appearance, little attention to grooming and dressed in well-worn tattered clothing. Soon after the first photograph appearing in the press – the hand of the propagandist becomes evident, when a new series of photographs were released in which Michael’s parents, Daniel and Margaret O’Leary had undergone a makeover, and were relaunched on an unsuspecting public, presented as country gentry, well-groomed and dressed in well-tailored garments.



O'Leary VC Killed in Action

Such was the rapidly changing nature of breaking wartime news that the story of Michael O'Leary could very well have been a one-week wonder or consigned to the waste bin as yesterday's chip wrapper, but for an unexpected twist of fate that unfolded a few weeks later.

Just as public interest in Michael O'Leary was beginning to wane, it was reported in banner headlines across the pages of the international press,⁹ the tragic news that the brave young Irish soldier laddie Michael O'Leary VC had been killed in battle. This mistaken report of his death is an echo of a previous generation of the O'Leary clan – when almost a hundred years earlier, it had been erroneously recorded in the press that Daniel Florence O'Leary had been killed at the battle of Pantano de Vargas in South America.¹⁰

The speculation surrounding Michael O'Leary's death whetted the appetite of the adventure hungry masses and paved the way for the public frenzy that was to follow. The story of the brave young Irish soldier, Michael O'Leary, who had died for king and country, was immediately rekindled in the public consciousness, as once again his daring deed was relayed across the world in a glowing obituary.

For a second time within months, the world media descended on Iveleary. On this occasion, they came seeking Michael's parents' reaction to the news of his death. *The Daily Mail* reported, 'his parents were waiting anxiously'. They had received a telegram from the War Office on Saturday 29th May, which read:

'No casualty yet recorded of Sergeant O'Leary. Inquiries being made'.¹¹

With O'Leary's death neither confirmed nor denied, a debate erupted in the press. Speculation was further fuelled when a number of letters from his comrades on the Western Front found their way into the newspapers.

The Daily Record published a letter sent by a Private Casey to his family who were neighbours of the O'Learys.

Private Casey: I tried to make proper inquiries about Sergeant O'Leary but I'm afraid he is dead. God rest his soul. Excuse my haste and bad writing, as I am very much upset over him and his poor people. God comfort them in their trouble. The fighting was awful this week, I am very thankful I am alive.¹²

The War Office issued a new statement, insisting that there had been no official

report of his death. But, as is often the case with the media, denial can be a most powerful catalyst to add wind to the sails of a news story.

Up to last night O'Leary's parents had received no official communication on the subject. But as the above statement was censored, it is feared that the sad news is correct. Although a postcard from O'Leary himself dated 21st May has been received at his home.¹³

On 1st June another letter appeared in the *Birmingham Gazette* sent by a Gunner James Wallace, also from Macroom, who wrote home to his wife, claiming O'Leary was alive:

I saw Mike O'Leary going to the trenches the other evening and they made a charge. They lost about two hundred, but O'Leary is still alive. His chums tell me he has the lives of a cat. A few days ago a shell dropped four yards from him and never exploded.¹⁴

Gunner James Wallace's account was confirmed in yet another letter written by a Sergeant Nelson:

Mike O'Leary was alongside me the whole time and he also escaped.¹⁵

To further confuse matters, on 22nd May an Australian born cousin of Michael O'Leary, a Private Thomas O'Leary from Victoria, was reported killed while fighting against the Turks at the Dardanelles. Thomas O'Leary and his younger brother James O'Leary, born in Victoria in Australia, were reported to have been cousins of Michael O'Leary. They had been stationed in the Dardanelles with the 3rd Contingent Australian Forces when Thomas was killed.¹⁶

The controversy was eventually brought to the attention of Michael himself, who had been unaware of the international furore surrounding the rumours of his death. On 29th May he responded to the speculation of his own demise. Once again, his words were reported in all leading newspapers from London to New York to Sidney and beyond:

VC READS OF HIS OWN DEATH

Sergeant Michael O'Leary VC, in a letter dated May 29th which his parents received yesterday, writes:- I have seen by today's paper that I have been killed in action. No. I am still at the firing line doing my bit. I

came out of the last battle with only a few scratches, thank God.¹⁷

For over a month the speculation surrounding O'Leary's death continued to resurface in the pages of the popular press, each report was accompanied by plot-point detail of his daring action at Cuinchy near La Bassée Canal. This fuelled the public's growing fascination for this invincible hero – Michael O'Leary was the man with the 'lives of a cat'; the man who escaped an 'exploding bomb'; the man who arrived back with 'only a scratch' from an assault that lost two hundred souls. Michael O'Leary may as well have risen from the dead – and when Rudyard Kipling wrote:

He [O'Leary] did his work quite leisurely and wandered out into the open, visible for any distance around, intent upon killing another German to whom he had taken a dislike.¹⁸

It presented O'Leary in the imagination of the public as a man impervious to enemy bullets, stalking around no-man's-land, killing at will. And so the myth of this immortal man impervious to enemy bullets was kindled on the home fires.

Around the hills of Iveleary news of the 'few scratches' he received were compared favourably to the sabre wound inflicted to the face of Daniel Florence O'Leary of a previous generation. For centuries the O'Learys of Iveleary had been in perpetual war, and battle scars had long been the ultimate decoration of honour – more coveted than a silk ribbon or badge of bronze, silver or gold – put succinctly by Michael himself when he said:

'The value of the Victoria Cross is a nickel and no more.'¹⁹

The propaganda machine was quick to capitalise on the huge public interest in the story. Five months had passed since that day in February - it was decided that O'Leary should come home, so that the doubting public could touch the flesh and dispel the persisting rumours of his death.²⁰ And so, the stage was set for O'Leary Mania.

O'Leary Mania

While the public obsession with O'Leary was escalating on the home front, Michael O'Leary was still out on the Western Front dealing with the bloody demands of



trench warfare. He was unaware that every detail of his life as a child growing up in Cooleen was being picked to the bone by the media, then served up and devoured in a feeding frenzy, by a public ravenous for good news war stories.

The prevailing wartime propaganda strategy appears to have undergone a dramatic change – the old style of instructing young men to become cannon fodder was replaced by a more light-handed approach of invitation and enticement.

The famous stark and dictatorial recruitment poster of Lord Kitchener with his finger pointing and his authoritative words in bold print commanding the masses: ‘Your Country Needs You!’ had been an overwhelming success at the outset of the war. But, as the body count spiralled exponentially beyond all expectations, public perceptions changed, and, in a masterstroke of military marketing, it was decided that Michael O’Leary would be the new friendly face of the war.

Presenting this Irish farm labourer as the poster boy for recruitment reflects a shift of emphasis in the propaganda campaign. As an Irishman of peasant farming stock, O’Leary was representative of the colonised nations of the British Empire, but, more importantly, his image on a poster was directly targeted at Irish nationalists, many of whom, for obvious historical reasons, remained resistant to joining the war effort. This new face of the war presented O’Leary as a young, cap-pushed-back-on-his-head, cocky, happy chappie. He was a hero for the common man, a one-of-our-own, who invited, rather than instructed, the masses to follow him to war.



Sometime ago a sculptor friend of mine was commissioned to create a bronze bust of a man who had reputedly been instrumental in the saving of many lives during the Famine. The sculptor trawled through libraries, newspapers and dusty archives until, eventually, she was forced to concede that neither a photograph, nor a wood block etching of this local hero existed. She struggled with the concept of how to create the likeness of an image that did not exist, and questioned the morality of creating a false portrait.

As an artist, she always lived her life within tight financial parameters, yet, faced with this moral dilemma of whether she could, in all conscience, create a phoney

likeness and present it as the real thing she confided in me that she was considering declining the assignment.

As I saw it, she had been commissioned for her creative talent as much as her technical ability. So, I recommended that she should rely on her creativity. After all, most of the accepted iconic images of long dead saints, apostles and demigods of history are no more than a representation of the tormented imagination of an artist. I suggested that she might find inspiration for her subject by studying the great icons of Irish history

And so she created a bust encompassing the forehead of Robert Emmet, the nose of de Valera and the double-chin of Daniel O'Connell. Eventually when the sculpture was unveiled, the committee were impressed that this dignified looking man was one of their own. In her public address at the unveiling ceremony, the chairperson of the committee commented that the statue had a peculiar familiarity about it.

That was back in 1998, during the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Famine. Almost twenty years has passed and the authenticity of the likeness has never been questioned. With each passing day, the image represented by that sculpture has become accepted as the true face of that local hero. It crossed my mind, that when future generations decide to reproduce his image on some commemorative stamp or local merchandising packaging – little will they know that the local hero is but a composite of Emmet, de Valera and O'Connell.

I was recently reminded of the sculptor's dilemma, when it was pointed out to me by my 11 year old niece Ruby, that the soldier in the iconic Michael O'Leary recruitment poster was not Michael O'Leary.

'The man in the poster is not the man in the photograph,' she said, in her own matter-of-fact way.

I dismissed the 11 year-old's astute observation, but doubt had been planted, took root and soon began to sprout. In time I had to concede that maybe she was right. Like the cheering, flag-waving crowds in the fable of the *Emperor's New Clothes*, I had been blinded by peer pressure, carried along in a tsunami of mass hysteria and had not stopped to engage my own senses or critical faculties.

Over the past number of years I have accumulated an extensive archive of genuine photographs of Michael O'Leary, spanning every phase of his life – from his teenage days as a blue jacket with the Royal Navy, through to his time in the army and on to his later years as an elderly man. On inspection, it becomes patently obvious that the soldier in the poster is definitely not Michael O'Leary.

This spurious image of the cross-armed, confident, brown-eyed, broad-faced, square-jawed, strong shouldered, black-haired, roman-nosed, clean-shaven, cap-tilted-back-on-his-head, young soldier in the poster has been accepted without question as the true image of Michael O’Leary for a hundred years. This representation has endured in the public consciousness as the immortal image of Michael O’Leary VC, despite the fact that photographs of O’Leary present a likeness that is consistently inconsistent with the portrait depicted in the poster.

Contemporary press reports described O’Leary as – ‘freckle-faced’, ‘lean-faced’, ‘fair-haired’, ‘small-framed’, ‘pale blue-eyed’,²¹ with a ‘neatly trimmed-moustache’, wearing his cap typically ‘tilted down over his left eye’. Yet this false portrait had been embraced by a public eager to adore without question and, ever since it first raised its attractive head, this phoney photo has cropped up in newspaper articles, cigarette cards, badges, even book covers – as the bona fide image of Michael O’Leary right to the present day.²²

The discrepancy may suggest the poster had been designed in absentia, while Michael was still fighting at the Front. It must be remembered that a full five months were to pass following the daring deed at Cuinchy before he had an opportunity to return home. The soaring public interest in Michael during that time prompted many newspapers to reproduce artist impressions of him – some more successful than others, even the portrait painted by Lady Butler bears little resemblance to Michael O’Leary, although the soldier in Lady Butler’s representation does have a moustache. But the popular pseudo-photo of Michael that appears in the recruitment poster is the most enduring.

I wondered what template the designer used to devise this image – maybe the forehead of Daniel O’Connell, the nose of Parnell and the chin of Henry Joy McCracken? Alternatively, could it simply be a case of mistaken identity?

In a time before photographic contraptions such as the Kodak Automatic, the

The suspect image of Michael O’Leary VC as it appears on the renowned recruitment poster – seen here – flanked left and right by two contemporary verified images of Sgt Michael O’Leary VC.



Polaroid Instamatic or the selfie-obsessed craze of the Smart Phone generation, photographs were relatively rare commodities, usually restricted to the recording of some formal occasion. For the most part a visit to a photographic portrait studio was strictly a pursuit of the prosperous upper class and the aspiring middle class.



Pt. Michael O'Leary, Irish Guards Regiment - 4th from right in 2nd row.
Could the mystery soldier pictured here 2nd from right in 2nd row be the inspiration and the source of confusion regarding the immortal image of Michael O'Leary VC?

Obviously there are countless photographs of Michael O'Leary that had been taken after he became famous, but in the course of my research for this book, I have only managed to uncover one photograph of Michael O'Leary in his Irish Guards uniform²³ that had been taken prior to his heroic deed at Cuinchy. It is a group photograph which had been taken at Wellington Barracks in 1914 before the regiment shipped out to Flanders.

It is fair to suggest that this may be the only image in existence of O'Leary in his Irish Guards uniform prior to his day of glory at Cuinchy. This presents the possibility that the poster designer used the image of Michael from this group photograph as a template for the poster. Yet, this does not explain why the soldier in the poster bears no resemblance to Michael O'Leary. On closer inspection, I was intrigued to find that the soldier sitting second next to Michael in the group photo bears a resemblance to the soldier in the poster – not so much in specific features, but most definitely in demeanour, attitude and pose; including the iconic, incidental detail of the cap tilted back on his head.

In those days when photographic images were such rare commodities, could it be that the poster designer, while examining the original glass plate, mistakenly picked the soldier on the right rather than Michael O'Leary? I will never know.

Nevertheless, regardless of the identity of the unknown soldier in the poster, it

seems that overnight, with the full weight of the propaganda machine behind him, Michael O’Leary’s universal fame was guaranteed.

I was interested to read that a waxwork effigy of Michael O’Leary at Madame Tussauds in London²⁴ was a hugely popular exhibit throughout World War One. I would be fascinated to know what image they used to create the template maquette; maybe the forehead of Nelson, the nose of Wellington and the chin of King George V, thus presenting Michael O’Leary as an icon greater than the sum of his parts.

Incidentally, I also have my doubts regarding the veracity of the photograph purporting to be the young Michael O’Leary as a blue-jacket in the Royal Navy serving with HMS Vivid II. [See p. 114.] I fully appreciate that newspaper editors were under severe pressure to present an image of the hero, but on inspection, the young navy in the photograph seems to be more heavy-set than Michael O’Leary was as a nineteen year old youth. This photograph of a square-faced, wide-nosed lad with a broad forehead – clearly this brawny, broth of a boy, bears no resemblance to Michael O’Leary. Yet, this photograph of the young sailor was widely published in newspapers right across the world – and as if to fend off potential queries regarding the probity of the image, it always featured a concealed disclaimer in the tag-line:

‘This photograph was taken several years ago.’



A fascinating photograph. One wonders how difficult it would be to identify a loved-one in this group photograph of blue-jackets.



Meanwhile Michael O’Leary was out in Flanders – oblivious to the escalating mass hysteria of O’Leary Mania that was being fuelled by the wartime spin-doctors.

He had become the darling of the music halls, with numerous songs eulogising his exploits composed and recorded on both sides of the Atlantic. Jack Judge, who had written the soundtrack of the war including *It’s A Long Way To Tipperary*, was inspired to write the hit song *Have You Heard Of Michael O’Leary?*²⁵ Even the famed orchestral composer Howard Carr composed and performed a number of pieces in O’Leary’s honour.²⁶ Among the many songs about Michael O’Leary, one caught my attention. It was written by Mr. John McGrath of *The Evening Telegraph*, with music by Sir Fredrick Bridge, the organist of Westminster Abbey. The song was performed by Mr. Ben Davies in a concert at the Royal Albert Hall on 24th April 1915. It is a twee, light-hearted ditty, lacking political depth or insight – but King George V requested a copy of the lyrics as ‘he was anxious that his daughter should sing it’.²⁷ There is something incongruous in the notion of King George V and the extended royal family gathered around the piano at Buckingham Palace, listening to Princess Mary singing a song about the men of Inchigeela, where the mountains are ‘bare, nothing but furze and good feeding’.



Here's to the hero from Cork,
Here's to his father and mother.
Shout it from this to New York,
Michael O'Leary – Our brother!

Forward, O'Leary! They're there!
Don't you forget the old sheeling!
Mountains of Cork may be bare,
Nothing but furze and good feeding.

Yet you raise boys that are men,
Out on those mountains of heather;
Up from the hills and the glen,
Old Inchigeela they gather.²⁸



Michael was front-page news right across the world, his pseudo portrait smiling beneath banner headlines proclaiming his superhuman bravery. Yards of column inches were given over to the story of this unassuming young Irish man from the hills of Iveleary. A number of plays were written about him, including a one-act by George Bernard Shaw, commissioned by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin,²⁹ and a play written and produced at the Opera House in Cork by Mrs. Hélena [Nelly] Standish Barry.³⁰ Week after week poems and verses were published in newspapers across the globe celebrating O'Leary's deed of derring-do. The following extract from a poem by Mr E. A. Carroll published in the *Manchester Evening News* is of particular interest because it raises the complicating issue of Irishmen fighting for England in the context of Irish freedom.

I don't know how long it will last,
 But when it is done and we look to the past,
 Let England remember how we played our part,
 For that freedom that beats in each Irishman's heart;
 Remember O'Leary, who struck a great blow,
 For freedom when eight of the Huns he laid low.
 May freedom be there in deeds and not talk,
 Round the hills and the valleys of sweet County Cork.³¹

O'Leary's fame was initially driven by the wartime propaganda machine but, such is the power of the media, that once his celebrity was established in the public consciousness, it became an unstoppable self-perpetuating phenomenon.

Michael O'Leary was a good news story during a bad news time. The outpouring of public adulation was far beyond the level bestowed on other Victoria Cross winners. His mass appeal became like an epidemic that spread to every strand of the population, and soon everyone wanted a piece of Michael O'Leary VC.

There are many reasons why Michael was selected by the fickle finger of fame, not least the fact that he represented a diverse collective of disparate groups, all with a stake in his achievement.

Racist depictions of Irish as dim-witted apes.



Obviously, his regiment revelled in his success; the Victoria Cross brought a much sought-after credibility and military honour to the fledgling Irish Guards, and O'Leary's bravery under fire became a cornerstone of the regiment's heritage. Likewise, the Irish diaspora living in England took immense national pride in his achievement. For generations the Irish had been portrayed in English periodicals as drunken, brawling, dim-witted, pig-in-the-parlour, ape-faced savages. However, with the introduction of Michael O'Leary into the English consciousness, the racist stereotype of the ape with the caubeen was replaced by this model of manhood – a young, fit, heroic Irishman. So iconic was O'Leary's appeal that Lady Butler, one of the leading artists of the day, painted his portrait.

The British Government was keen to capitalise on the perception of an Irish nationalist fighting for Britain. Likewise the Irish unionists were validated by the notion of a Gaelic-speaking, Catholic Irish nationalist from the deep south fighting for the empire. The Irish Parliamentary Party was also quick to attach themselves to his mass public popularity – they organised music hall recitals and rallies that would ultimately contrive to put themselves centre stage to bask in the reflected glory of 'Ireland's greatest hero'.



(Courtesy of Peter Murphy)

For the first time in the history of the two islands it was fashionable to be Irish in England.

The wearing of the green is the fashion in London which for spontaneous enthusiasm and sincerity could not have been more striking had O'Leary been the foremost soldier in the land. Nine out of every ten persons you met sported flavours of green.³²

Everybody carried a small green flag in his hand, or supported a green O'Leary badge in his buttonhole. The Irish brogue was heard on all sides, and some of the men and women were talking in the Irish language.³³

To the young ladies of London, Michael O'Leary became a heartthrob matinee idol. *The Sunday Post* reported that his fan mail was being stored at a central location in London.

Parcels are piling up, they have been coming by every post, and by the look of them there are chocolates from admiring young ladies; invitations to garden parties, requests for autographs; and enough cigarettes to keep smoking for the rest of his life.³⁴

Five months were to pass before Michael would eventually get leave from the trenches – nothing could have prepared him for the wild scenes of adulation waiting for him on his return.



Sgt. Michael O'Leary VC:

Photograph taken in Iveleary during his visit home from the Front in June 1915.

Home is the Hero

On 21st June 1915, Michael left the trenches to take seven days' leave from the fighting. His plan was to pay a surprise visit to his parents, friends and neighbours in Iveleary. Little did he know that he would be hounded by journalists, photographers, film news cameramen and paraded through the streets of London to adoring crowds. He would be the guest of honour in palaces and cathedrals. He would dine with the Prime Minister, make small talk with the King and Queen, rub shoulders with lords and ladies and he would be presented to the Archbishop¹ at Westminster Cathedral.

Men would scrum around him to shake his hand. Young ladies would snatch a kiss;² some would swoon and faint in his presence.³ While the great unwashed queued in the rain outside Madame Tussauds to pay homage to his effigy, standing side by side with Napoleon and Wellington in the waxworks' Great Military Heroes Of The World Gallery.⁴ Yes, Michael O'Leary was coming home on seven days' leave, but the surprise would be all Michael's.

At one o'clock on the afternoon of Monday 21st June 1915, Michael O'Leary left the trenches and arrived at Wellington Barracks [London] the following day at 4 o'clock.⁵

He had come straight from the Western Front that day, and was described in the press as having 'the dust of the trenches still upon him, and carrying his pack and rifle'.⁶

Michael arrived to Wellington Barracks unrecognised and unnoticed.⁷ He was home for a short break from the living hell of the endless death of trench warfare, and had made arrangements to proceed on to Cork later that evening – from there he would travel west to Iveleary. *The Manchester Courier* picks up the story:



Crowds line the streets of London to welcome Sgt. Michael O'Leary VC home from the Front.

When the King learned that Sergeant O'Leary was on a visit to his old headquarters at Wellington Barracks, His Majesty decided to take the opportunity of personally bestowing on him the Victoria Cross. He caused a communication to be made to Colonel Proby, who presented himself at the Palace accompanied by the young sergeant.⁸

Considering O'Leary had arrived home from the Western Front having witnessed the most horrific scenes of carnage, I can't help but imagine the thoughts that must have passed through his mind that day as he made his way to Buckingham Palace to meet the King. Initially he must have thought it was some sort of a barrack-room prank. But as he made his way along the Mall and Buckingham Palace came into sight, he would have realised that his invitation to visit King George V was indeed a reality.

I wonder whether it occurred to him, if only for a fleeting moment, that ever since the O'Learys had been driven from their original homeland at Rosscarbery, and established their new base in Iveleary in 1192 AD, each and every successive generation of the O'Leary clan had been at war with England. Maybe searching for comfort did Michael O'Leary subconsciously yet instinctively whisper a verse of a song from childhood, a verse in Irish that recalled a time when the men and women of Iveleary stood against the forces of the Crown at a place called Keimaneigh.

Then again, as he approached Buckingham Palace that day, it is most likely that Michael was consumed by thoughts other than the history of Iveleary. In those pre-mass media days, the elusivity of Royalty made them godlike; the only access most commoners had to the King was the imprint of the monarch's head on money – Michael would have been awestruck at the prospect of the momentous occasion of his imminent audience with the King George V.

It must have been the most surreal moment of Michael O'Leary's life, to step out of a blood-soaked trench one day and into the opulence of Buckingham Palace the next.

The King and Queen were sitting in the grounds of the palace at the time and with them was Princess Mary. Shortly after the arrival of the Sergeant [O'Leary], Queen Alexandra and Princess Victoria also arrived at the palace.⁹

And so on the afternoon of 22nd June 1915, Michael O'Leary of Cooleen, Iveleary, found himself in Buckingham Palace exchanging small talk with the King and Queen of England and the extended royal family. Later that evening he continued his journey home to Ireland as planned.

He left Euston in London for Ireland, travelling via Holyhead to Cork. He has not advised his people, as he wants to take them unaware.¹⁰

Michael must have smiled as the thought crossed his mind of how surprised his family would be to see him. He probably wondered if they would believe him when he told them that he had been invited to Buckingham Palace that very day to have tea with the King and Queen of England. Did he throw his eyes to heaven in anticipation of what his father would have to say about it all?

As the train pulled into Cork station, it soon became apparent that his surprise visit home had taken on an energy and an agenda all of its own, and any plans he had for a relaxing break with his family in Iveleary had been derailed.

When O'Leary stepped from the train he was accorded a reception of a most enthusiastic character. At the station was the Lord Mayor Alderman Henry O'Shea the City High Sheriff¹¹ in his robes, attended by the mace bearers and other civic functionaries, two military bands and a large contingent of Irish National Volunteers. A large crowd lined



T.P. O'Connor introduces, a bewildered, Sgt. Michael O'Leary VC - to crowds estimated to have numbered hundreds of thousands at Hyde Park.

the route from the railway station to the hotel.¹²

In Cork the Lord Mayor drove with him through the streets packed with cheering people.¹³

Cork has been going so wild over sergeant Michael O'Leary VC that he says he must get back to the trenches for a rest.¹⁴

Photographs published in the newspapers at the time give a sense of the huge numbers that turned out to welcome him home. O'Leary's carriage was gridlocked by crowds, and unable to move through the streets. In one photograph published in *The Daily Mail*, it appears that Michael O'Leary is being dragged from the carriage by enthusiastic well wishers.

Following a brief stopover at the Imperial Hotel the cavalcade set out for Iveleary. *The Straits Times*, [Singapore] picks up the story:

... all the way to Macroom it was a triumphal procession. There, a correspondent of the weekly dispatch found him.

It's a long way to Michael O'Leary, says the correspondent.

When I arrived at Macroom where Mike lives I found the whole country talking of him. It was nothing but demonstrations, meetings and resolutions. Everyone was agog for his coming. While he was slowly progressing in one grand triumphal procession to his old parents who



Sgt. Michael O'Leary VC at home in Iveleary. (Courtesy of Peter Murphy)

had not seen anything of him for two years, they stood weeping with joy and pride in their little cabin. The countryside round about were pouring into the village in cars and on horseback. The children were preparing bonfires and erecting signs of welcome, but there was no sign of Mike. He finally arrived after the whole household had been up since dawn with neighbours all dropping in to start the family welcome. He was greeted with songs, cheers and speeches, even O'Leary songs were being sung.

We all burst out laughing, for there was Mike singing the blessed song about himself.

'God protect his innocent heart,' as Mrs O'Leary said. 'As if he never got the VC at all and he was thinking of somebody else, he was that happy to be with us.'¹⁵

Michael O'Leary was on leave from the slaughter of the trenches, he had returned home in need of a well-deserved rest from the traumatising experiences he had witnessed during the previous nine months. But he found little peace in the land of The O'Learys as reporters and photographers were embedded in Cooleen for the full duration of his stay. They followed his every move, photographing him in various locations around the village with family, friends and neighbours.

Having escaped the batteries of German guns, he is now faced with the battery of press cameras, which followed him into the seclusion of his home in Co Cork.¹⁶

An Interesting Montage of Photographs



This montage of photos was first published in *The Sphere Magazine*, taken during Michael O'Leary's visit home to Iveleary in June 1915. The images capture a snapshot of Iveleary at a time when Ireland was on the cusp of unimaginable change.

Photograph 1

The image on the left shows Michael being congratulated by Sergeant Daniel Maunsell of the Royal Irish Constabulary who was stationed at the RIC barracks in Inchigeela village. Sergeant Maunsell was well-acquainted with the O'Leary family; his signature features as enumerator on the O'Leary family census return of 1911.

By all accounts, Sergeant Daniel Maunsell was well liked and the people of Iveleary held him in high regard. But by 1920, the events of history had changed everything, and he became one of the casualties of the escalating violence of the Irish War of Independence. It is difficult to ascertain precisely why Sergeant Maunsell was killed, but circumstantial evidence suggests his death was connected to the arrest of Tadgh Callaghan and Dan Sullivan of Iveleary in early August 1920.

On 27th July 1920, the Iveleary Volunteers carried out a successful ambush at Keimaneigh in which eleven service rifles and eleven hundred rounds of ammunition were seized, thirteen British soldiers were also taken prisoner. It is said the soldiers cried and begged for mercy, and they were reassured that no harm would come to them. True to their word, the people of Iveleary treated the prisoners with dignity. The family of local volunteer, Dan Sullivan shared their own food with the captives, and they were later released, unharmed.

During the subsequent combined RIC/Auxiliary and military roundup in Iveleary, Dan Sullivan was recognised by one of the soldiers as the person who brought them food while in captivity. Sergeant Maunsell confirmed that Sullivan was one of the local Volunteers. Dan Sullivan and a seventeen-year-old youth, Tadgh Callaghan, were arrested and suffered extremely harsh treatment while in custody, in comparison to the courtesy that had been shown the British soldiers during their captivity in Iveleary.

Sullivan and Callaghan were held in Cork Jail where they joined the ongoing Volunteer hunger strike.¹⁷ The two Iveleary Volunteers were later tried by a military court, their defence was conducted by British soldiers acting as lawyers on their behalf. Convicted and sentenced to prison, Sullivan and Callaghan first served time in the dire conditions of a prison sloop off the coast of France. They were subsequently transferred to a number of other prisons including Winchester Jail, Pentonville Prison and Wormwood Scrubs.¹⁸

It is insightful to note that the ambush at Keimaneigh and the subsequent arrest of Dan Sullivan and Tadgh Callaghan occurred just three months before the ambush at nearby Kilmichael, which had a very different outcome.

On 21st August 1920, a week or so after Sergeant Maunsell identified Dan Sullivan as one of the local Volunteers, Maunsell was shot dead on the street in Inchigeela.¹⁹

Photograph 2

The image on the far right is of Michael O'Leary VC with my grandmother, Nora Cotter. As previously established, Nora was a cousin to the O'Deas of Kilbarry, whom she was related to through the O'Learys of Currahy. I mention this because, in view of the close friendship that existed between Jeremiah O'Dea and his former pupil, Michael O'Leary, it may explain the apparent familiarity that seems to exist between my grandmother and Michael O'Leary in the photograph.

This photograph of Nora Cotter admiring O'Leary's medal literally captures a snapshot in time. Within nine months of this photograph being taken, the 1916 Rising would take place.

Sometime later my grandfather Connie Creedon returned home from Butte Montana, USA; he met, fell in love with and married Nora Cotter. Local lore has it that during the War of Independence, the then Nora [Cotter] Creedon, in her role as telephone/telegraph operator at Inchigeela post office, had at times notified Ballingearry and other outlying areas of impending raids by forces of the Crown. But the nature of local lore is such that it remains unsubstantiated. As a postmistress during the subsequent Irish Civil War, and later during, what became euphemistically known in Ireland as, the Emergency²⁰ [World War Two], it would have been prudent for Nora to keep any such War of Independence activities strictly secret, although there are other well-documented examples of the role played by post office telegraph operators as intelligence officers for the IRA during the War of Independence, such as Siobhán Creedon²¹ who was employed at Mallow Post Office.

Five years after this photograph was taken, my grandfather Connie Creedon, no less than so many other men and women at that time, did play his small part in the War of Independence. Micheál Ó Súilleabháin's book *Where Mountainy Men Have Sown* recalls a minor role he played during the attack on Inchigeela RIC barracks in January 1920.²²

Sergeant Maunsell was stationed at Inchigeela during the attack on the RIC barracks on 3rd January 1920. The attack was called off following a three-hour gun battle. The Volunteers subsequently planned a second attack on the barracks for 11th March, but it too was called off when the Volunteers realised that Sergeant Maunsell's wife and children were inside the barracks at the time.²³ Five months later, on 21st August 1920, Sergeant Maunsell was shot dead on the street very close to where this photograph was taken.

I relate the minor activities of my grandparents to demonstrate the dramatic shift that had occurred in a very small village in Ireland over a period of a few short years. Between 1915 and 1919, the pendulum of popular opinion had swung away from constitutional nationalism in support of militant nationalism, resulting in a groundswell of support among the general population of Iveleary for the militant struggle. In view of the relatively insignificant part played by my grandparents, I feel it is important to direct the reader to the *Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal* 1997 for a more detailed roll of honour and a comprehensive analysis of the activities and key figures who had been active in the Iveleary Volunteers at that time. The following articles can be viewed online:²⁴ The Ballingearry IRA Personnel List 1919-1921. Ballingearry Volunteers 1916-1921; Ballingearry Volunteers 1920; Inchigeela Volunteers, History of E Company IRA 1917-1921.

A Postscript to this Montage of Photographs

In 2007, Michael Horgan, a great-great-grandson of Sergeant Maunsell, came to Iveleary hoping to uncover his family history. He found his way to Creedon's in Inchigeela where he met my cousin Joe, who, with the assistance of Jim Herlihy [Historian – with expertise in The Royal Irish Constabulary], had gathered a substantial amount of background details surrounding Sergeant Maunsell's death, including the location of his grave.

In August of the following year, Joe facilitated a service, which was held at Inchigeela church for the descendants on both sides of that particular incident. The family of Daniel Maunsell met with the families of Danny O'Leary, Mick O'Sullivan and Ted Quinlan, descendants of members of the Iveleary 8th Brigade IRA during the War of Independence. An article by Catherine Ketch *Healing the Wounds of History*, published in *The Irish Examiner* on 19th August 2008, presents a sensitive account of that day in the context of guerrilla days in Iveleary.²⁵

As an indication of the deep and conflicting loyalties of that particular time it is intriguing to note that Michael Horgan was the great-great-grandson of RIC Sergeant Maunsell on his father's side of the family, while on his grandmother's side of the family, Michael Horgan's granduncle was Joe O'Reilly, aide-de-camp to the IRA/IRB leader Michael Collins.²⁶

The day after Sergeant Maunsell was shot, a detachment of RIC was sent to Inchigeela to investigate the killing and retrieve Sergeant Maunsell's body – they were ambushed by the local IRA at Lissarda. The date was 22nd August 1920.²⁷

Fast forward two years later – the conflict in Ireland had moved on from the War of Independence and the country was in the grip of a bitter Civil War. On the exact same date two years later, 22nd August 1922, a short distance away, at a place called Béal na mBláth,²⁸ the local IRA ambushed and killed their former comrade and leader, Michael Collins.



In Oliver Fallon's insightful article 'Michael O'Leary Victoria Cross. Exploited Hero?', published in the *Journal of the Connaught Rangers Association*,²⁹ he makes the point that gallantry awards such as the Victoria Cross, were often presented to boost morale, and in some cases certain recipients were selected with a view to securing support from specifically identified sections of the population.

It is clear that the recruitment machine had identified O'Leary's potential almost immediately following his action at Cuinchy La Bassée Canal. *The Dynamics of*

War and Revolution in Cork City by John Borgonovo uncovered a communication between a leading Cork Redmondite, J.J. Horgan and John Dillon MP, which was recorded in March 1915, within weeks of O'Leary's daring deed. In it Horgan wrote:

I told a rather stupid recruiting officer here that O'Leary might be worth 200 recruiting sergeants if they brought him home.³⁰

Yet it seems that, despite the media circus that had set up camp in Iveleary during Michael's visit home from the Western Front, he was totally unaware that he had been selected to be the driving force of a new reinvigorated recruiting campaign in Ireland.

Following a week of relentless intrusion by the press, Michael was invited to Dublin by the newly formed Irish Recruiting Committee of the Department of Recruiting for Ireland.³¹

O'Leary arrived in Dublin last evening and was met at King's Bridge terminus by the Lord Mayor, who accompanied him to the mansion

Sergeant Michael O'Leary VC, during his visit home to Inchigeela. I am sure, as this photograph was being taken, one of the local wits, maybe even his father Daniel would have passed some barbed remark comparing Michael to Art O'Leary, or Daniel Florence O'Leary, or maybe even wild and fiery Auliffe O'Leary.



house. The passage through the streets was of the nature of a public reception. As a guest of the Dublin Recruiting Committee, O'Leary was met by distinguished company including John Dillon MP and Joseph Devlin MP.³²

I believe it was at this meeting in Dublin that Michael first became aware that he had been selected to spearhead a recruiting campaign. Up to that point, he had yet to make an official appearance on a recruiting platform, but that was soon to change.

Michael was presented with a gruelling schedule of rallies to attend before he returned to the war: Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Clonmel, and Waterford – including a trip all the way to Warrenpoint, Co. Down in Ulster. Considering the extremely tight timeframe and the geographical spread of his engagements, his schedule seems overly ambitious and extremely demanding, particularly in view of the fact that Michael had returned home for a much-needed rest.

Newspapers reported daily updates of his hectic timetable.

It is announced in Dublin that Sergeant O'Leary VC will leave tomorrow for the front after a visit to Limerick today, Clonmel and Waterford tomorrow. At Waterford he will be entertained by the Recruiting Committee at the Corporation. He has spent the past few days at his home in Inchigeela county Cork.³³

Glancing through the newspapers of that time, it soon becomes apparent that as O'Leary travelled around the country, he made unscheduled stops at every crossroads, village and town – to be met by a string of local dignitaries queuing up to shake his hand and celebrate his heroic deed. In typical whistle-stop tradition, at every train station and junction a band was waiting to strike up a medley of Irish airs, as the train paused to allow O'Leary just enough time to wave from the carriage. The sheer number of unofficial engagements undertaken by O'Leary reported in the press during his short break home from the Front is astounding.

The Times of 10th July gives an insight into one such unscheduled stop he made: 'he motored 80 miles and attended several scheduled meetings that day.' While passing through Glengarriff Michael decided to attend the funeral of Major Pratt and requested that he would be allowed march in the escort with the funeral party.

'Many hundreds of times he was asked for his autograph, and many hundreds of times did he comply.'³⁴



Michael O'Leary shows his Victoria Cross to his father, Daniel O'Leary.

Michael O'Leary giving a speech.



Bravery was something Michael O'Leary took in his stride, but it soon became apparent that he was a reluctant hero. He was a man who shied away from fame and celebrity.

A well-built son of Éireann, bashful and reticent in speech and manner, but full of grit and pluck.³⁵

The Irishman refuses absolutely to be made a hero of, and has disinclined to tell even his own family of his new distinction.

As to pride, there is not an atom of it in Mike's whole construction. His parents only found out by the merest chance that he had been awarded the Russian VC [the 3rd Order of St. George] and they would only mention it in secret, for fear Mike would get angry.³⁶

O'Leary's unease with publicity was noted in many newspaper reports. His recruiting speeches were typically short, self-deprecating and he always played down the heroism of his action at Cuinchy.

Several things have been done since equally as good, he said. And there has not been so much talk about them.³⁷

During his whirlwind tour of Ireland he was recalled to Cork where the Lord Mayor decided to host a proper official civic reception to honour their local boy. His return to Cork was reported in *The Auckland Star* [New Zealand]:

In Cork a reception was arranged in the Palace Theatre. At midday the placards 'House Full' were up, and when at last he came into the theatre there was perfect pandemonium. Those who could not get close enough were content with poking him with umbrellas and sticks.

One attendant took the original step of chalking those who had shaken hands to prevent them from trying to shake hands twice and thus prevent other patriots from getting their fair share of the honour. At one time O'Leary ventured to shake hands out of the box and was nearly pulled out into the orchestra; he was only saved when several members of the Corporation got him securely by the heels.

When O'Leary left the theatre the crowd rushed on him, and he had to be got out the back door amid appeals from the Lord Mayor for fair play.³⁸

At the recruiting rally in Warrenpoint in County Down, the home place of O'Leary's commanding officer at Cuinghy, 2nd Lieutenant Innes, Michael was treated to a stellar and rousing introduction that included personal messages from King George V and Lord Kitchener. But when invited to address the enormous crowd, it was reported that O'Leary's modesty once again got the better of him, and he had nothing to say.³⁹ The most telling account of his discomfort with public adulation is recorded in the Anson family archive held at the Waterford Museum.

When the 1914 war started, Pop was asked to arrange recruiting meetings. He managed to persuade a VC called Michael O'Leary, to come. He arrived at Waterford Town Hall, but when the meeting was about to begin he couldn't be found. Our governess, Miss O'Riordan, was determined to track him down. She saw a high-backed Victorian armchair turned facing the wall. She stood on a chair and peered over the back and there was the unfortunate young man, nearly mad with shyness. She pointed down at him, shouting at the top of her lungs,
– There he is! There he is! There's O'Leary! There's O'Leary!⁴⁰

Overwhelmed by the public adulation he received in Ireland, O'Leary returned to England physically and emotionally exhausted. He is on record as having said that he was looking forward to getting back to the peace and quiet of the trenches for a rest. Little did he realise that the scenes of hysteria he had experienced in Ireland would be surpassed by the reception that was waiting for him in London.

He [O'Leary] admitted he was tired of being lionised, and that his only wish was to disappear from public sight for few days prior to his return to his regiment next Monday.⁴¹

T.P. O'Connor of the Irish Party was one of the driving forces behind the United Irish League.⁴² With almost fifty years of unbroken service in parliament, he was Father of The House of Commons and considered the most powerful and influential Irish political representative in England. As the founder of a number of newspapers including *The Sun*,⁴³ he was well aware of the power and reach of the Fourth Estate.

O'Connor decided to host a public event for the Irish in England to be held during O'Leary's brief stopover in London on his way back to the Western Front. O'Leary's friend and former schoolteacher Jeremiah O'Dea accompanied him to London to see him off. Maybe Jeremiah had an inkling of what was in store for Michael in London and understood he would be in need of a trusted friend by his side.

The insanity of London began for Michael when he was invited to meet Lord Kitchener at the War Office.⁴⁴ Following the visit to the War Office, T.P. O'Connor escorted O'Leary to the House of Commons.

Sergeant O'Leary VC paid a visit to the House of Commons yesterday and had a round of hand shaking which he will not soon forget. He had the lion's share of attention both on the terrace and in the Lobby. Mr T.P. O'Connor introduced him to a host of interesting people, to dukes and doorkeepers, ministers and members.⁴⁵

He was introduced in the parliamentary lobby to several ministers, including Bonar Law, Mr Birrell [Chief Secretary of Ireland], The Duke of Devonshire, Lord Robert Cecil, Sir Edward Carson.

He was sorely tired by the autograph hunters who besieged him in the corridor, lobby and terrace.⁴⁶

From there T.P. O'Connor presented O'Leary to Archbishop Bourne at Westminster Cathedral. This was followed by lunch with the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁴⁷ After lunch, T.P. O'Connor had organised a procession through the streets of London that would culminate in a mass public meeting in Hyde Park. It was planned that a number of parades would set out from various locations across London and all would converge on Hyde Park; estimates put the crowd at hundreds of thousands.⁴⁸



Michael O'Leary VC en route to Hyde Park with TP O'Connor

Four processions were assembled in different parts of London and, headed by bands, they proceeded to Hyde Park. The procession was a snowball one. By the time they reached Hyde Park the crowd had assumed enormous proportions. People naturally endeavoured to get near the hero's carriage and the mounted police had as much as they could do to keep the crowds in hand. Thousands had already congregated in the park, and it was a wonderful scene that presented itself to O'Leary as he drove through the gates. As far as one could see there was a dense moving mass of men, women and children, all clamouring to catch a glimpse of Ireland's hero. Soldiers, sailors and civilians jostled each other in their enthusiasm to greet O'Leary...⁴⁹

The event was widely reported in the international press and newsreels were screened in cinemas right across the world. A number of short clips of the event survive and are available to view online. Pathé News Archive has a few frames of film that capture the dramatic scenes in Hyde Park with ecstatic crowds stretching as far as the eye can see, while his parade through the streets of Dublin can be viewed at the British Film Institute Archive. It is interesting to note that a number of newspapers reported a 'dazed look' of exhaustion in Michael O'Leary's eyes.

The ordeal of the progress to Hyde Park with appearance on the platform for its climax was about as much as his nerves could stand.⁵⁰

When he looked out on the sea of faces there was a dazed look in his eyes. It was clear that this reception had been too much for him.⁵¹

It was with difficulty that the police, aided by troops, could make way for the gallant hero to pass through the immense crowd to the central platform.⁵²

The loud cheer at the entrance told those nearest the platform that the hero was on his way. It increased in power till the volume of sound was louder than the booming of guns on the battlefield, and the crowd swayed backwards and forwards till it seemed as if the railings were to be carried away.

On all sides women were fainting, and even young recruits who had never experienced such gatherings were borne away by St. John's Ambulance.

Everybody carried a small green flag in his hand, or supported a green O'Leary badge in his buttonhole. The Irish brogue was heard on all sides, and some of the men and women were talking in the Irish language.⁵³

The mounted police had to ride at the people, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that he [Michael O'Leary] could be hoisted above the heads of the people.

Policemen, soldiers and civic guards could not keep the crowd back. When at length the cheering subsided Mr T.P. O'Connor addressed the crowd:

'I have been at many historic and great gatherings in Hyde Park, but this is the greatest I have ever witnessed in my life [cheers]. And I can tell our friend and countryman, Sergeant O'Leary, that no emperor, king or gentleman has ever received a mightier or more loving welcome from London than he has today. Cork and Dublin have given him a welcome but London has given him the biggest of all.'⁵⁴

Of course, the celebration of Michael O'Leary's bravery was a thinly veiled recruitment strategy. In his rousing speech, T.P. O'Connor made the point that if one Irishman such as Michael O'Leary could neutralise ten Germans, well then two hundred and fifty thousand Irishmen should be all that was required to finish the war. He suggested that the English Army and the forces of other nationalities should stand back and let the Irish finish the job. As expected the crowd went wild with delight.⁵⁵

When Michael O’Leary was called upon to speak, once again his discomfort with public adulation was evident. His response from the platform on Hyde Park that day was described as modest,

‘I have done nothing more than other men at the front would have done, and I don’t like a fuss. I don’t like being made a fuss of and handshaking.’⁵⁶

Michael O’Leary returned to the war a few days later. Before he departed, he gave a candid interview to *The Sunday Post*. His sheer exhaustion was evident, and, when asked about his heroic deed in the brickfields of Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal, he was unable to conceal his utter disillusion and contempt for the media circus that had followed him since he arrived home on leave.

He would not talk of himself or the deed, which won him the coveted decoration; to every questioner he replied the words,

‘It’s an old story’.

Sergeant O’Leary is longing for the old home in Ireland, for a quiet hour by the inglenook with his old folks before he goes back to the trenches.

He wanted to forget he was a hero and to enjoy an hour’s quiet amid the scenes of his boyhood, where he was Mick O’Leary, an unknown lad with his future before him.

‘I’m tired I am,’ he said. ‘Tired of the fuss they are making of me, and I would like to get back home after the work is done tonight. I’ve had a terrible time in my own country. In fact, I might say I haven’t had a minute to myself since I crossed over. Wherever I went the Irish folks were so enthusiastic that it is a wonder I ever got away.’⁵⁷

His energy depleted by the hectic schedule he had undertaken since he left the Western Front, the following day O’Leary cancelled a public appearance in Islington.

Michael O’Leary VC was a young single man in his prime – a real-life hero, the toast of London with every pub, club and music hall vying for his patronage – it is interesting to read the newspaper reports of how he chose to spend his only day of recreation before returning to the trenches. This report in the *Daily Mail* presents a powerful insight into his character and integrity:



The London Irish proudly rally under the Michael O'Leary Banner – July 1915.

Sergeant O'Leary spent his last day in London very quietly. Yesterday morning he paid a visit to the Irish Guards barracks, and subsequently called at the Wounded Soldiers Buffet at London Bridge Station.⁵⁸

First and foremost, Michael O'Leary was a soldier, and soldiering is what he did best. He was most comfortable in the company of his comrades of the rank and file – it was a personality trait that had been totally overlooked by his martial superiors and propaganda handlers. *The Daily Mirror* commented on his physical and emotional state,

Sergeant Michael O'Leary is still on British soil. He has been so knocked about by a succession of public receptions. The crowds waited in vain at Victoria yesterday.⁵⁹

A few days later, he was back in the more familiar territory of the Western Front. A letter home from a Sapper Albert Lloyd, an ex-footballer with Llanelli in Wales, mentioned how stressful O'Leary's visit home had been.

Sergeant O'Leary is back with us again. I was speaking to him yesterday. He said it was very trying in England, because everyone was after him, and he preferred being at the Front fighting.⁶⁰

Michael O'Leary was a modest man with little formal education. As a second son of an Irish subsistence farmer, he would have felt extremely uncomfortable being paraded before royalty, archbishops, and the mighty power brokers behind the throne. Without doubt, the media intrusion into Michael O'Leary's privacy must have been challenging for such an unassuming, reserved young man. It is disturbing to think that, without warning, Michael had been launched onto the international stage, totally unprepared for the spotlight of fame. One has to empathise with his situation when he found himself hounded by the media while on a break from the traumatic experiences of the Western Front. But yet, I must admit, I am grateful to those journalists, photographers and film crews who managed to capture the mass euphoria of O'Leary Mania, for, within that frenzied melee, they also recorded for future generations the words, images and the mind-set of Iveleary, a land on the cusp of change.

...and of course, it goes without saying that on a personal level, I am eternally grateful that the press photographers of that time managed to capture the only photograph in existence of my grandmother, Nora Cotter, as a young woman, and the eclipsed side-profile of my grandaunt Julia.

From the Balmy to the Bizarre

A peculiar aspect of Michael O'Leary's fame must be the numerous accounts of people impersonating him.

In August 1916, Samuel Herbert was arrested in an Edinburgh Hotel, charged with impersonating Michael O'Leary VC, and, under the assumed persona he perpetrated multiple cases of fraud, including swindling an estate agent by the name of Samuel Duffett of £39.¹ [equivalent to £4,000 today]

In April 1919, James Michael O'Leary, a discharged soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers was arrested in Montreal Canada, charged with impersonating his namesake, Michael O'Leary VC.²

Later that year in December 1919, police detained another man found wandering aimlessly around Exeter and Exmouth who insisted he was Michael O'Leary VC. But following an extensive newspaper campaign and public appeal, his true identity was revealed as a Private Allen Pu, who had been a patient at Maudesley Neurological Hospital in Exeter. Private Allen Pu had been first admitted to hospital in 1918 suffering from shell shock.³

The most peculiar case of impersonation occurred many years later in 1956, when a wheelchair-bound man by the name of Thomas Meagher decided that he would pass himself off as Michael O'Leary VC at Queen Elizabeth's VC Centenary Review in Hyde Park.

On the morning of the VC Centenary Review, Thomas Meagher arrived at Hyde Park in his wheelchair and proceeded to impersonate Michael O'Leary VC. Photographs of Meagher, in what was described as a 'bath chair', being presented to Queen Elizabeth, were widely published in the press. Later that afternoon he returned to work at the Ranks Cinema in Uxbridge, where he was employed as a car park attendant. What is most bizarre about this case of impersonation is that the real Michael O'Leary was actually present in Hyde Park that same day, and took part in the official ex-soldiers' march past the Royal viewing platform.⁴



Thomas Meagher impersonating Michael O'Leary VC at Queen Elizabeth's VC Centenary Review in Hyde Park 1956.

The Theatre of War

When Michael O'Leary returned to the Front he remarked that he was glad to be getting back to the peace and quiet of the war.

George Bernard Shaw's play *O'Flaherty VC*, which was said to have been inspired by Michael O'Leary, is a fascinating example of art imitating life. It tells of a brave young Irish soldier home on leave from the trenches, but because of all the fuss and commotion surrounding his recently awarded Victoria Cross, the young soldier decided to 'return to the dreaded trenches joyfully for the sake of peace and quietness'.⁵

George Bernard Shaw was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre to write *O'Flaherty VC* at the height of O'Leary Mania, during the Spring of 1915. The title character of the play was said to have been a thinly veiled caricature of Michael O'Leary VC, and consequently the play was often mistakenly referred to in the press as, 'O'Leary VC'.⁶

In typical Shaw fashion, the drama presents a cutting satire of the class divide between the landed gentry elite and the Irish peasant. In the play, Shaw probes the centuries-old, inequitable relationship between Ireland and England. In the context of war being the great leveller of class difference, he lampoons the blatant disparity between the indigenous Irish and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. He questions the role of Irishmen fighting for England in view of the oppression and neglect the Irish had suffered at the hands of the English. Shaw's personal condemnation of the war did not ease the way for the production. His anti-war stance is overtly emphasised in the play when the young soldier declares boldly, 'No war is good!'

Later when the young hero in the play struggles with the morality of being an Irish Catholic killing German Catholics, his priest advises him that he should continue killing the Germans,

‘...but then show your love for them and have a mass said for the souls of the hundreds of Germans you have killed.’

To which the young soldier replies:

‘Is it me that should pay for masses for the souls of the Boshes? Let the King of England pay for them, for it is his quarrel and not mine!’⁷

Before the play went into production, concerns were expressed that it would be perceived as ‘too much a recruiting play by the Irish and as an anti-recruiting play by the English’.⁸ A behind-the-scenes debacle erupted between the various factions in Irish political, religious and public life. The cash-strapped Abbey Theatre found itself trapped in the middle, trying to appease all sides, not least the author of the piece. Officially, the play was not censored nor was it banned,⁹ but the Abbey production did not go ahead.

Maybe it was a prudent decision by the Abbey Theatre not to proceed with the production of Shaw’s play, because another play inspired by Michael O’Leary that did manage to make it from page to stage, ended in pure farce.

An Irish Lead was a play written by Mrs Nelly [Hélène] Standish Barry; a fascinating woman born and raised in Madras, India – the daughter of Major-General C.B. Lucie Smith.¹⁰ In 1899 she married into the Standish Barry family in Cork; a Roman Catholic dynasty of blue chip, blue-blooded Anglo-Norman stock.¹¹ As an indication of their long-standing connection to Ireland, the Standish Barry manor house in Leamlara, Cork, was built in the mid 18th century with the stones from their former 14th century castle, on lands they had owned since the 12th century.¹² Though they were Catholic and had been settled in Ireland for almost eight centuries, the ancient Anglo-Norman birthright of the Standish Barrys placed them at the heart of the British establishment in Ireland and were inextricably connected and committed to the Empire.¹³ A predecessor of the family, Garrett Standish Barry, holds the distinction of being the first elected Catholic Member of Parliament for Cork after the success of Daniel O’Connell’s campaign that resulted in the introduction of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.¹⁴

In 1915, *An Irish Lead* by Mrs Nelly Standish Barry was viewed as a perfect vehicle for raising funds for the war effort. At the core of the play is a recruitment call specifically aimed at encouraging young Irish Catholics to enlist in the British Army.

In a subliminal reference to the ancient clan alliances that existed in Iveleary between the O'Learys and the McCarthys, the play tells the story of Sergeant Michael O'Leary VC and his love for Ms Nora McCarthy, but because Nora's family are vehemently opposed to Irishmen joining the British Army, they forbid young love to blossom. Therein develops a saga that sees young Nora running away to Europe to join a convent. The play ends in a crescendo of high drama; Nora by this time has miraculously risen to the rank of Mother Superior, and the German hoards are beating down the doors of the convent. They desecrate the church, murder the priest and, in a final act of savagery, they shoot Nora. Nora's dying words shatter the fourth wall, when, in a dramatic plea, she calls on Irishmen to join the British Army and defend the Holy Catholic convents of Belgium and France.¹⁶

The public reaction to Nelly Standish Barry's play is an indication of the dramatic shift in Irish opinion during the months that followed the 1916 Rising. The first production of the play was performed on 26th June 1916 at the Cork Opera House in aid of the British Red Cross Society (Co. Cork Branch) and Irish Prisoners of War.¹⁷ It opened at a time when Ireland was still reeling in shock following the protracted schedule of executions of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, yet the Opera House production went off without a hitch and was a great success. It was decided to mount a subsequent production at the nearby Palace Theatre a few months later on 9th December. In the intervening few months, all had changed, and public shock had turned to outrage.

A mob, estimated at close to two hundred militant nationalists and staunch Catholics, infiltrated the audience, and, from the moment the curtain went up, all hell broke loose as the drama in the auditorium took precedence over the play-acting on stage. They began to heckle the performance and taunt the actors; shouting out political slogans; cheering, jeering, and spontaneously bursting into song.¹⁸

In the face of escalating hostility the cast exited the stage, leaving Mrs Nelly Standish Barry standing centre stage alone in the limelight, defiantly shouting out her lines, until, eventually her voice was drowned out by the demonstrators. Due to the continuing uproar in the audience the play was abandoned, and the curtain came down midway through the third act.¹⁹

Considering that Mrs Nelly Standish Barry wrote, produced, directed and starred in the lead female role of *An Irish Lead*²⁰ it would be convenient to suggest that her play was merely a vanity project of the over indulged landed elite. But it would be a mistake to pigeonhole the production in this way. In the years that followed, Mrs Nelly Standish Barry proved herself as an extremely formidable and talented show-woman.

Ms Nell St. John Montague

A detailed exploration of the Standish Barry dynasty is far beyond the scope and remit of this volume, but because Mrs Nelly Standish Barry's play, *An Irish Lead* creates a link with Michael O'Leary VC, I will relate the little known but fascinating story of Ms Nell St. John Montague.

It seems the tragic death of Mrs Nelly Standish Barry's seventeen-year-old son, Charles Standish Barry, while fighting with the Royal Irish Regiment on 22nd June 1918,²¹ may have been a catalyst for the dramatic change in her life. Or maybe it was simply the addictive thrill of starring in her own play *An Irish Lead*, produced on the stage of the Cork Opera House, or maybe it was that surge of pride she experienced when she first held in her hand the text of her play, published between the covers of a book²² – whatever the reason, something changed, and over the next few years Nelly Standish Barry's life took an unforeseen detour.

Before she became famous, Nell's clairvoyant 'powers' had gained a reputation among her friends in Leamlara, Co. Cork, even if her mystic predictions were viewed as no more than after-dinner parlour games. Nell's first high profile psychic reading is on record to have happened in early 1916, during a visit to Leamlara by Lord Kitchener. At that time, because Kitchener's image had been used on the celebrated iconic recruiting poster, he was one of the most famous men in the British Empire. After supper that particular evening, Lord Kitchener invited Nell to read his fortune. Nell peered into the crystal and was taken aback by what she saw,

'You will meet death at sea, during a period of war, she predicted.'²³

Lord Kitchener drowned soon after that, on 5th June 1916 when *HMS Hampshire* sank west of the Orkney Islands, Scotland.

By 1922, Mrs Nelly Standish Barry had reinvented herself and suddenly, as if overnight, she erupted onto the London scene as a star of stage and screen and became the toast of the town. She emerged as a totally transformed persona under the nom de plume and stage name – Ms Nell St. John Montague.

Ms Nell St. John Montague's stellar rise to stardom took flight when she promoted herself as a mysterious and exotic clairvoyant. Her new-found fame opened doors to the world of London theatre and led to appearances on the silver screen in the fledgling silent movie industry. She appeared in films such as *A Gypsy Cavalier* [1922] and *The Glorious Adventure* [1922].²⁴ She also wrote a



Mrs Standish Barry of Leamlara, Co. Cork. – a.k.a. – The World’s Greatest Clairvoyant: Ms Nell St. John Montague with her magical monkey Judy.

number of books including: *The Red Fortune Book* [1924], *Revelations of a Society Clairvoyant* [1926], *The Poison Trail* [1930] and *How To Read Hands* – which was published posthumously in 1947. One of her short stories, *The Hallmark of Cain*, was adapted for film and produced under the title, *All Living Things*, directed in 1939 by Andrew Buchanan, with a remake produced in 1955, directed by Victor M. Gover.²⁵

As Nell’s fame spread, her magazine articles became hugely popular and widely published. Ms Nell St. John Montague’s name on the masthead guaranteed a huge boost to sales; consequently magazines regularly took out large picture advertisements in the daily newspapers and signed photographs of Nell were frequently offered as an inducement to buy the latest edition.²⁶

Free WITH EVERY COPY



A FAMOUS CLAIRVOYANTE'S MASCOT

MISS NELL ST. JOHN MONTAGUE
 The world-famous society clairvoyante, is a marvellous personality and possesses the wonderful gift of being able to solve the riddle of the future and reveal the mysteries which are hidden from us. As a little girl, born in far-away India, she discovered that she had this amazing power, and during latter years it has developed to such an extent that her help has been sought by the highest in the land, always with the most marvellous and successful results.

One of her most valuable possessions is "Judy," a sacred monkey born in an Indian temple, and given to her by an English officer, eight years ago. Ever since that day, Judy has been her constant companion, dearly-loved mascot, and good-luck bringer, and Miss Montague is confident that her mascot brings good luck to all who have a photograph of her or a picture representing her.

Because of the strength of Judy's power to attract good luck, Miss Montague has had many requests for copies of Judy in her home. These requests are made FREE with every copy of the week's PEG'S COMPANION. If you want good luck in life and love, be sure to get this mascot.

PEG'S COMPANION
 NOW ON SALE 2^d.

But Ms Nell St. John Montague's [Mrs Nelly Standish Barry] main claim to fame was as a clairvoyant to the upper echelons of British society. She was heralded in banner headlines variously as 'London's Best Known Society Clairvoyant' and 'The World Famous Clairvoyant'.²⁷ Such was her fame that Nell was chosen to feature in a number of television broadcasts in 1932, at a time when television technology was still in its infancy²⁸ – long before television as it is recognised today.²⁹ Her appearances on television became a catalyst that fuelled Nell's increasing celebrity.

It was claimed that Ms Nell St. John Montague first discovered her ability to foresee the future when she was a girl of three years of age living in India.³⁰ The legend of her childhood psychic powers³¹ and exotic tales of her encounters with the Maharaja and mystic fakirs circulated among the chattering classes of London. Nell oozed charisma and she continually fuelled speculation surrounding the mystique of her Indian childhood to a post-war British public fascinated by all things paranormal and hungry for exotic stories from the far reaches of the Empire. Nell nurtured the mystery of her past by appearing in public with her constant companion, a pet monkey called Judy.

Newspaper Advert for Nell St. John Montague's magazine page



Judy, the famous, luck-bringing crested monkey has been for years the pet mascot of Ms Nell St. John Montague, the world famous clairvoyant. Judy is the daughter of two sacred monkeys, born in the Monkey Temple in India. Now she brings good luck to all who come in contact with herself or her luck-bringing cards and charms.

Judy has been her constant companion, dearly loved, and bringer of good luck to all who have a photograph of her or a charm representing her.³²

Postcards and metal charms of 'Judy the Lucky Monkey' provided Nell with a very profitable income stream. Though it seems financial gain was not Nell's primary concern; as a measure of her wealth, Ms St. John Montague's social calendar was regularly published in the *Court Circular* with the super rich and famous of the day, in the company of such luminaries as the Prince of Wales, Sir Murchison Fletcher [Governor of Fiji], Viscount and Viscountess Bridgeman and Viscountess Astor.³³

Nell's memoir *Revelations of a Society Clairvoyant* [1926], revealed her illustrious client list, which included King George V of England and Queen Victoria Eugenie of Spain. It was claimed that Nell became an influential confidant to Queen Victoria Eugenie after she foresaw, in the crystal ball, her marriage to King Alfonso. Nell warned that their wedding day would be an occasion of death. Her chilling prediction came true. As the wedding party left the church, a bomb thrown into

the royal carriage exploded, and though the King and Queen escaped uninjured,³⁴ as many as 24 onlookers were reported killed and many more injured in the explosion.³⁵

As the accuracy of her predictions became public and her fame spread, Nell's patron list expanded to include some of the most powerful people in the world, so much so that she became known as 'The Power Behind the Parliament'.³⁶ It was even reported that she once read a sample of Adolf Hitler's handwriting. By all accounts, she was unaware of the source of the sample, yet Ms Nell St. John Montague's response was instantaneous and direct:

'Whoever wrote this is as mad as a hatter,' she said.³⁷

I would be interested to know if she was responding to the content of the document, or the psychic energy she had received from it.

So many of her prophecies came true, in her own lifetime she was described as:

Ms St. John Montague, of South Kensington – The best modern scryer.³⁸

Such was the respect for Nell's mystic powers that Scotland Yard recruited her talents to help solve the famous Emily Kaye murder case.³⁹ Through her crystal ball, Nell identified the location of the body of Miss Kaye. The corpse was presented to the prime suspect, Patrick Mahon – and it was a breakthrough in the investigation when Mahon admitted that he had known the victim Miss Emily Kaye.⁴⁰ On 3rd September 1924, Patrick Mahon was executed at Wandsworth Prison. The public interest in the Emily Kaye murder case attracted an estimated crowd of a thousand people to the prison gates on the morning of the execution.⁴¹

One of Nell's more fascinating predictions came about when she turned the powers of the crystal ball on herself and foretold her own violent death.

'I saw a fiery streak,' she said. 'Then a red mist spread over everything...'

Nell knew from experience that there was no ambiguity in the interpretation of the 'red mist' she saw in the vision. A 'red mist' always meant a violent death with blood. But she had difficulty deciphering the meaning of the fiery streak. However, the significance became clear a few weeks later. Nell St. John Montague died when a German flying bomb with its distinctive fiery streak, struck her London home in South Kensington.⁴²

The November 1944 edition of *American Weekly Magazine* dedicated a full page to Nell's obituary. In it they stated that the world's greatest clairvoyant had lived to see many of her wartime prophecies confirmed, but a shadow of doubt was cast over Nell's clairvoyant powers when one of her more public and high-profile predictions had not come to pass at the time of her death.

I must admit her unfulfilled prediction came as a surprise to me, especially when one considers the article I was reading had been published back in November 1944 – it was chilling to find that with the hindsight of history, Ms Nell St. John Montague's prediction had been fulfilled, many decades later, from beyond the grave.

Her prediction? Before she died, Nell predicted that Lord Louis Mountbatten, British commander in Burma, would some day find a watery grave.⁴³ Back in 1944, the editors of *American Weekly Magazine* could not possibly have known that thirty-five years later Nell's prediction would come to pass, when Lord Louis Mountbatten would die in an IRA bomb explosion on board his boat just off the west coast of Ireland, close to the fishing village of Mullaghmore, County Sligo.⁴⁴

The Recruiting Officer

As the war in Europe raged on through 1915, both sides developed ever new inventive and effective killing machines. As one might expect, the numbers of deaths and casualties soared exponentially because when 19th century battle tactics were deployed against 20th century technology, the carnage was on an industrial scale.

In October the *Freeman's Journal* reported the incredible statistic that 1,100 new Irish recruits were needed every week to resupply the wastage of war.¹ When I first came across this report, I read it a number of times, as I struggled to comprehend how such a high demand on human life could be reported in such a blasé, if not triumphal, manner. The following day, the entire front page of the *Freeman's Journal* was given over to recruitment.

50,000 Irishmen To Join Their Brave Comrades In Irish Regiments

IRISHMEN!

You cannot permit your regiments to be kept up to strength by other than Ireland's sons! It would be a deep disgrace to Ireland, if all her regiments were not Irish.²

The blind belief that a sustained level of killing on such a massive scale was the way forward is disturbing. Obviously, this insatiable thirst for young blood exerted an unsustainable pressure on recruitment and so the highly controversial and unpopular notion of conscription in Ireland began to surface.³



Ever since Michael O’Leary was awarded the Victoria Cross, it had been regularly reported in the press that he should be commissioned as an officer. It was a suggestion Michael rejected.

Like most heroes he is constitutionally a modest man, and has been bored and embarrassed by the attention bestowed upon him. It is characteristic of the young soldier that, having been offered a commission in the army, he respectfully begged to be excused, saying he should not feel at home in an officers’ mess. He is quite content with the position indicated by the sergeant stripes on his arm.⁴

In July, following much speculation, it was reported in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, that O’Leary would accept a commission with the Tyneside Irish Brigade. But a few days later on 27th July, the same newspaper reported that their announcement had been premature.⁵ Throughout August and September of 1915, speculation was rife in the media as rumours continued to surface that O’Leary would take up a commission with the Tyneside Irish Brigade.⁶

Then on 23rd October 1915, it was announced that Michael O’Leary VC had been commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant into the Connaught Rangers.⁷ It seems his superiors had been so encouraged by the overwhelming public response to his whistle-stop tour of Ireland back in June that they decided Michael would be most effectively deployed, not on the Western Front, but on the home front – on the recruiting platforms of Connaught.⁸

In November 1915, 2nd Lieutenant Michael O’Leary VC of the Connaught Rangers, set out on a recruitment drive in towns and villages throughout Roscommon, Sligo, Galway and Mayo.⁹ But the wild scenes of public adulation as witnessed back in June did not materialise. The voice of opposition to the gritty reality of war was beginning to gather momentum. The political landscape in Ireland was beginning to shift ever so slightly away from the parliamentary process of constitutional nationalism.

Only a year had passed since the Irish Volunteers split,¹⁰ when John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party’s call to war shattered the organisation. It is estimated that, out of an original membership of 182,000 Irish Volunteers, only 12,000 remained post split.¹¹ This schism seemed to have marked the end of militant nationalism for that generation. But by autumn 1915 the Irish Volunteers were actively recruiting and re-arming. Once again they became a visible force, hosting training camps throughout the country. British army recruitment rallies were regularly disrupted and heckled as the Irish Volunteers became more assertive

in their opposition to Irishmen joining the British Army.¹²

A letter by Bishop of Limerick, Edward Thomas Dwyer, published in *The Cork Examiner* in November 1915, reflected the growing anti-war movement in the country:

The present war is not Ireland's, but England's. What has England ever done that Irish men should fight for.¹³

It was a sentiment that seemed to be on everyone's lips, a sentiment that had been expressed a few months previously by Michael O'Leary's father, Daniel, when he shouted from the recruitment platform in Macroom Square:

The Irish never got their rights from England, but the Irish fought their battles.¹⁴

It was a sentiment expressed in Shaw's play, *O'Flaherty VC*:

It is his [the King of England] quarrel and not mine!¹⁵

A week later, another letter appeared in *The Cork Examiner* from the pro-Redmondite Councillor, Jeremiah O'Mahony, in which he openly criticised John Redmond and The Irish Parliamentary Party's support of the war.¹⁶

As 2nd Lieutenant Michael O'Leary VC toured the west of Ireland in his 'newly-tailored officer's uniform of the Connaught Rangers'¹⁷. Selling the war to potential recruits, he must have noticed the change that had come over Ireland.

At a recruiting rally in Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon, O'Leary faced considerable hostility when he was 'hooted' by members of The Irish Volunteers. The strategy of 'hooting' was significant and symbolic. Not only did it drown out the recruiting speeches, but the sound of hooting horns conjured up memories of tenant resistance during the land agitation period. Hooting had been used to great effect by defenders at evictions as both a warning system and to instil fear. When one considers that most recruitment drives in Ireland were organised by the unionist landlord class, and targeted at the young catholic sons of tenant farmers, the act of 'hooting' identified and re-defined ancient battle-lines, consequently the sound of the bugles and horns became a powerful, if not subliminal, deterrent to potential recruits.

Similar incidents at recruitment rallies around the country were considered

relatively inconsequential and passed without comment. However, because of O'Leary's fame, the Ballaghaderreen incident made headline news: 'Hero Hooted In His Own Land', and was widely reported in the press. The 'Hooting of O'Leary VC' soon became a subject for discussion in the House of Commons.

In a heated debate, Laurence Ginnell, the Independent Nationalist MP for Westmeath North, challenged the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Mr Birrell MP, on the action taken by the Roscommon magistrates, who had withdrawn the Irish Volunteers' right to drill and hold route marches¹⁸ in response to the hooting of O'Leary.

Liam de Róiste records in his diary that, as a result of the hooting of O'Leary, the British military planned to deploy armed guards at future recruiting rallies. This high level of official censure and public debate played into the hands of the militant nationalists, as it served to highlight the Irish Volunteers as a force to be reckoned with and a viable alternative to joining the British army.¹⁹

On November 30th, the Irish Volunteers and a newly invigorated Sinn Féin were greatly encouraged by the public show of support at the Manchester Martyrs Commemoration Rally in Cork.

An interesting photograph of fully armed Irish Volunteers marching in Cork city on St. Patrick's Day just a few weeks before the 1916 Rising.



Tens of thousands on the streets of Cork openly declared themselves Irish nationalists. From the platform we could see an immense throng, closely packed along the whole length of the Grand Parade and down the South Mall.²⁰

Yet, most Irishmen serving at the pit face of World War One were too deeply invested and preoccupied with the bloody demands of the task in hand to notice or consider the changing mood in Ireland. But those with a finger on the pulse of the nation sensed that support for constitutional nationalism was teetering on a knife-edge. With the Irish Republican Brotherhood looming in the background of every cultural, sporting and paramilitary organisation, nationalist Ireland had become extremely militarised. Paramilitary groups such as the Irish Volunteers, Hibernian Rifles, Cumann na mBan, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, Citizens Army, Sinn Féin and Fianna Éireann had found common cause and were openly bearing arms and marching in public.²¹ This surge of militant nationalism in the months leading up to the 1916 Rising did not go unnoticed in the halls of power. On 13th December 1915, it was reported that:

It is understood that the authorities have information of serious things going on behind the scenes.²²

The leaders of the Nationalist Party [Irish Parliamentary Party] fear Sinn Féin, which week by week is drawing adherents from them. [...] Is it wise that the Government should allow the further widening and growth of the disaffection that is so apparent in every observant resident in Ireland?²³

Like the calm before the storm, Liam de Róiste's diary entry for 18th December 1915 reflects an informed anticipation of what lay ahead:

...nearing Christmas, things seem normal. I wonder if I am judging things right in thinking that we are approaching a crisis in Irish History.²⁴



Ever since the spotlight of international fame first shone down on Michael O'Leary, he made no secret of the fact that he was uncomfortable with the trappings of celebrity. One would assume that his deployment as a recruiting officer stationed in the West of Ireland, far away from the horrors of trench warfare, would be

a much sought-after position, but it appears O’Leary was a man of action, not words.²⁵

Examining his military records, it becomes patently clear that O’Leary found very little personal fulfilment as a recruiting icon. His discontent may have been compounded by the hostile reception he received during the recruitment rally in Ballaghaderreen. Maybe he was beginning to question whether he was being exploited, and had unwittingly become a mere cog in the British military propaganda machine.²⁶ It is on record that, within weeks of his appointment to the relatively comfortable position on the recruitment circuit with the Connaught Rangers, Michael became ‘most anxious’²⁷ to return to the war.

2nd Lieutenant Michael O’Leary’s Connaught Rangers service records contain a number of requests for redeployment to the Front – first in December 1915 and again in January 1916. Aware that the Tyneside Irish Brigade, based in Newcastle upon Tyne, was preparing to ship out to the Western Front, another more urgent request for transfer to Tyneside Irish arrived, stating:

If [O’Leary] must be attached to a Battalion at the Front, he had better be attached to the 24th Battalion N.F. 1st Tyneside Irish Battalion, as they are under orders to proceed overseas and will probably leave in a week.²⁸

Eventually a telegram from Connaught Rangers Headquarters in Dublin arrived to Tyneside Irish Headquarters on 15th January 1916, stating that 2nd Lieutenant Michael O’Leary’s transfer to the Tyneside Irish had been granted; but the Connaught Rangers requested that O’Leary be allowed remain in Dublin until 2nd February.²⁹ The reason for the delay soon became apparent.

It was reported on 1st February 1916, the first anniversary of O’Leary’s action at Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal, that the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland had invited 2nd Lieutenant Michael O’Leary VC to the Viceregal Lodge in Dublin to be officially decorated with the [Russian] Cross of St. George, the Russian equivalent of the Victoria Cross.³⁰

In Dublin, the Lord Lieutenant decorated Second Lieutenant Michael O’Leary with the Cross of St. George conferred by the Emperor of Russia.³¹

Considering that O’Leary had been gazetted for this decoration nine months previously,³² back in June 1915, it seems likely that the timing of this high-powered official reception was an attempt by the recruiting machine to reignite the popular

frenzy that had gripped Ireland during the summer of 1915, but the moment of magic had passed, and no wild surge of O'Leary Mania swept the land.



In February 1916, 2nd Lieutenant Michael O'Leary reported for duty to the Tyneside Irish at Newcastle upon Tyne but, because of the delay in leaving Dublin, he had literally missed the boat to the Front. The 24th Battalion N.F. 1st Tyneside Irish had sailed two weeks previously, and so O'Leary was deployed with the 30th Reserve Battalion Tyneside Irish, who were actively recruiting at that time.³³

For Michael O'Leary it was a classic case of 'out of the frying pan and into the fire'. From the moment he set foot in Newcastle, he was once again sucked into the hysteria of recruitment rallies, with the associated crowd cheering, handshaking, and endless social functions. A glance through the newspapers of that time gives some small indication of his hectic schedule, particularly when one considers that every event reported in the press was bookended by numerous other unreported functions, recitals, concerts and speeches. For Michael the insane cycle of mass public adulation; the endless handshaking and autograph signing began all over again.

Michael O'Leary VC with the Tyneside Irish speaking in Newcastle in the weeks before the 1916 Rising.



Within a few short weeks, O'Leary had appeared on stage at the Empire Theatre in Stockton³⁴ – there followed reports of crowds waiting to meet him at Jarrow Station and public appearances at Flag Days. He was guest of honour at the Lord Mayor's reception at the Mechanic's Institute, from there he travelled to a reception at South Shields, where he was entertained by the Mayoress and members of the Queen Mary Needlework Guild and the Catholic Women's Guild.³⁵ A few days later he was carried shoulder high through the streets of Newcastle, and it was reported that when he eventually evaded the crowds he still managed to keep his commitment to visit 'several institutions'.³⁶

The next reported sighting of O'Leary was at St. Patrick's Irish Club, which was said to have been packed to capacity. This engagement was followed by a return to Newport 'to make amends' to the disappointed crowds at Stockton, who had been refused admission the previous Sunday because the hall had been full to capacity.³⁷ He was the star attraction at a public event hosted by the Lord Mayor of Middlesbrough, then he travelled on to Darlington for another round of public engagements.³⁸

Filled to overflowing with local Irishmen who had the opportunity to show appreciation of the courage of one of their own.³⁹

Michael O'Leary VC with the Tyneside Irish speaking in Darlington in the weeks before the 1916 Rising.



Understandably, the Irish diaspora in the North of England were ecstatic to have the famed Irish war hero, Michael O’Leary VC, endorsing their very existence – and it goes without saying that Michael O’Leary was honoured to be able to oblige. But the fact remained that Michael O’Leary was a private man, who shunned fame and was totally unsuited to the salesman-like demands of the recruiting platform. It seems he could not cope with the relentless and extreme levels of public adulation. His words were notably few – his reticence to speak did not go unnoticed:

Lieutenant Michael O’Leary was welcomed by the Mayor to South Shields for Irish Flag day. He said he could not make a speech. The more he tried the worse he got.⁴⁰

The hero is deeply sensitive of the warmth of his welcome, and in reply confessed that he was more nervous before such an enthusiastic outburst than when on the battlefield.⁴¹

Most telling of all was at a public meeting held at the Cowen Monument in Newcastle. Huge crowds and all the civic leaders of Newcastle turned out to see Michael O’Leary. He was introduced with rousing speeches by Col. Grattan Doyle of the Tyneside Irish, followed by further words of admiration by the Lord Mayor of Newcastle. Then Michael O’Leary was called upon to speak:

O’Leary responded to a call. He made a charming picture with his well-knit, smartly-groomed figure, and merry Irish eyes that enhanced the charm of a strong pleasing type of face. But he had nothing to say.⁴²

Michael O’Leary’s reticence to speak at recruitment rallies was not so much a dearth of personality, or indeed an inability to express himself. Michael had grown up in Iveleary, immersed in stories and the tradition of the seanachaoí, so it is not surprising that his comrades, such as Company Quartermaster-Sergeant S.J. Lowry, who served with him at Cuinchy, remembered O’Leary as a great storyteller with endless anecdotal tales.

‘[Michael O’Leary] has many good tales to tell about his adventurous life out West.’⁴³

O'Leary was well able to express himself, as is evident by the many lecture tours he undertook while in Canada,⁴⁴ and public talks he presented for the British Legion.⁴⁵ But it seems his inhibition at recruitment rallies was borne out of his discomfort with his newly elevated status of war hero⁴⁶ and his unease with public adulation, celebrity and the intrusion of the media⁴⁷ into his personal life.

Away from the public spectacle of the recruitment rallies, and in a more naturalistic setting of a one-to-one interview, it becomes apparent that Michael O'Leary was much like his father Daniel. There are numerous examples to support the view that Michael was a witty storyteller, with a sharp, wry turn of phrase. For example, when asked about the prestige of being awarded the Victoria Cross and his invitation to meet the Royal family at Buckingham Palace, Michael glibly dismissed it by saying:

The value of the Victoria Cross is a nickel and no more.⁴⁸
I couldn't get a nickel a week if I were crowned with Victoria Crosses.⁴⁹

And when Michael O'Leary's namesake, a man by the name of Johnny O'Leary, won the Lightweight Boxing champion title of Canada and became hugely famous and wealthy as a result of his sporting prowess – Michael famously quipped:

The gentlemen who fight with gloves instead of bayonets get glory and fortune. You'd think real fighting should pay better.⁵⁰

[There is a tragic irony in Michael's comment – within ten months Johnny O'Leary, who was a card-carrying member of the Boilermakers' Union, was shot dead on the streets of Seattle during a labour dispute – by a blackleg strike breaker named Frank Leslie.]⁵¹

Another example of O'Leary's ability to speak his mind becomes apparent when he was asked his opinion of George Bernard Shaw, a man considered the foremost wit of his generation, O'Leary dismissively replied:

'Most of the celebrities were terrible bores. Shaw is an old lady. I met him. I don't remember Shaw said anything clever when I chatted with him.
It's no joke being a hero of a fool play by Shaw.'⁵²

Easter 1916

Of all the many and varied functions Michael O'Leary attended during his time with the Tyneside Irish, one stands out as intriguing, if only in the context of what was happening in Ireland at that time.

On Good Friday 1916, just as the Irish Rebellion was about to take place, Michael was billed as the main attraction at Hull City football ground. It was widely advertised that Michael O'Leary VC would officially kick off the game between Hull City V Durham Light Infantry.⁵³ Clearly, like so many others, O'Leary had no idea of what was about to unfold in Ireland.

Exploring the numerous first-hand accounts and memoirs, it becomes apparent that most of the Irishmen fighting in World War One were too engaged with the demands of the conflict to understand or fully consider the events of Easter 1916. To the best of my knowledge, no record exists of Michael O'Leary's personal thoughts of 1916, but it is interesting to examine the views of other Irishmen who, like O'Leary, found themselves fighting in the British Army when they first heard of the Rising.

Emmet Dalton was a major in the British Army in 1916. Yet, he returned home after World War One and joined the IRA, becoming an integral member of Michael Collins' inner circle during the Irish War of Independence. Dalton was by Collins' side when he was fatally wounded in the ambush at Beal na mBláth during the Irish Civil War. In an interview with Cathal O'Shannon in 1979, Dalton recalled his feelings when he first heard about the 1916 Rising while serving in the British Army.

My feelings were the same as most of the men in camp with me. We were surprised, annoyed, and we thought it was madness. I felt confused. I couldn't understand it.⁵⁴

Similarly, Tom Barry, who was in the British Army in 1916, expressed feelings of confusion on reading of the Rising. After the war, Barry returned to Ireland and fought with the 3rd West Cork Brigade IRA. He went on to become one of the most celebrated guerrilla fighters during the Irish War of Independence period. In his memoir, *Guerrilla Days in Ireland* Tom Barry recounts how he first came upon news of the 1916 Rising. At the time he was in the British Army serving in Mesopotamia, and while on rest behind the lines, he read a communiqué pinned to a notice board headed 'Rebellion In Dublin'.

It told of the shelling of Dublin GPO and Liberty Hall, of hundreds of rebels killed, thousands arrested and leaders being executed. My mind was torn with questions. What was this Republic of which I now heard for the first time? Who were these leaders, Tom Clarke, Pearse, James Connolly and all the others, none of whose names I had ever heard? What did it mean?⁵⁵

While some experienced feelings of confusion when they heard of the 1916 Rising, others like Thomas Kettle expressed a sense of divided loyalty. Kettle was an officer in the British Army, commissioned to the 9th Battalion Dublin Fusiliers.

Before the outbreak of war, Kettle had been a committed nationalist. His father had been one of the founders of the Irish Land League and a signatory of Michael Davitt's *No Rent Manifesto*. Tom Kettle followed in his father's footsteps as a nationalist activist. He had been active in the campaign against the Boer War, and later was a prominent supporter of the workers during the 1913 Lockout and a member of the Irish Volunteers.⁵⁶ During his time with the Irish Volunteers he had formed close friendships with the men who went on to become the leaders of the 1916 Rising.

Ironically, Kettle was in Europe organising a gunrunning operation for the Volunteers when he witnessed first-hand the German aggression in Belgium.⁵⁷ This spurred him to follow John Redmond's call and join the British Army.

Kettle was initially appalled when he first received news of the 1916 Rising, but he is reputed to have cried when he subsequently heard of the executions of the leaders, and later said:

'I would have died for Tomás MacDonagh.'⁵⁸

The callous murder of Kettle's brother-in-law, the pacifist, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington,⁵⁹ seemed to bring clarity to Kettle's divided loyalty. He is probably best remembered for his assessment of how history would remember Irish nationalists who fought and died in World War One, when compared to Irish nationalists who fought and died in the 1916 Rising,

'These men will go down in history as heroes and martyrs, and I will go down, if I go down at all, as a bloody British Officer.'⁶⁰

Tom Kettle was killed leading his men at Ginchy during the Battle of the Somme.

But when attempting to come to grips with the confusion experienced by Irishmen who found themselves fighting in the British Army at the time of the 1916 Rising, the story of Francis Ledwidge is probably the most revealing of all.

Like Michael O'Leary, Ledwidge was born into impoverished, farm labouring stock. Unlike O'Leary, Ledwidge was highly politicised, he was a committed nationalist and a trade union activist.⁶¹ Francis Ledwidge and his brother Joseph were founding members of the Slane Branch of the Irish Volunteers, and are on record as having had close links to Sinn Féin.⁶²

Initially reluctant to enlist to fight in World War One, he eventually did join the 10th Division, Enniskillen Fusiliers in October 1914. Some say he joined because of a failed romance with Ellie Vaughey,⁶³ others claim he went to war on the encouragement of his mentor, financial supporter and the champion of his poetry, Lord Dunsany.⁶⁴ Ledwidge explained his position in his own words:

I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy of civilisation and I would not have her [England] say that she defended us while we did nothing but pass resolutions.⁶⁵

Ledwidge was a peasant poet – before the war, he had been a close friend of the poets of the 1916 Rising. He was home on leave from the Western Front in May 1916, and he was shocked by the news of the Rising. It is said he became traumatised by the relentless schedule of executions of his friends, which led to his being court-martialled and demoted for going absent without leave and being drunk in uniform. His utter disillusion with the war and the British Army is apparent in his comment:

If someone were to tell me now that the Germans were coming in over our back wall, I wouldn't lift a finger to stop them. They could come!⁶⁶

His poems: *O'Connell Street*, *Lament for the Poets of 1916* and *Elegy For Thomas MacDonagh* clearly reveal his sense of loss and his profound wish to have stood with the men of 1916.⁶⁷ But as an enlisted soldier, a warrior in uniform, he had no option but to return to the war. Francis Ledwidge was killed soon after he returned to the Front at Boesinghe near Ypres. The chaplain, Father Devas, recorded in his diary: 'Ledwidge killed. Blown to bits.'⁶⁸

In the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, it seems that the general emotion expressed

by the unsuspecting Irish public and Irishmen fighting in the British Army was a combination of disbelief, surprise, shock, anger and confusion. The events unfolding in Ireland must have stirred similar conflicting feelings in Michael O'Leary. It seems that a clear perspective of the events of Easter 1916 only came into sharp focus long after the conflict had ended and the smoke of the executions had cleared, and the groundswell of support for militant nationalism paved the way for the Irish War of Independence.

By June of 1916 Michael O'Leary's joie de vivre and lust for adventure of his earlier days in uniform seems to have been replaced by a profound need to get far from the madding crowd. Michael's only escape from the spotlight of fame was to return to the war. He actively and personally requested redeployment from the never-ending cycle of recruitment rallies and social engagements with the Tyneside Irish. In time his wish was granted, O'Leary was granted leave to return to his old regiment, The Connaught Rangers,⁶⁹ and was redeployed to Front Line action on the Macedonian Front.

In Jan 1917, O'Leary arrived in Salonika, Macedonia,⁷⁰ attached to the 5th Battalion Connaught Rangers with the 9th Indian Brigade. It seems a profound change had come over Michael O'Leary. Maybe it was the endless social engagements and hero worship of the recruiting circuit, or maybe he was attempting to process the events of the 1916 Rising in Ireland; whatever the reason, it becomes apparent from correspondence received by the War Office⁷¹ that Michael had become somewhat disconnected and aloof. He severed all contact with colleagues, friends and family and was not responding to letters.⁷²

His activities while serving in Macedonia seem to support the notion that O'Leary had become a loner. In Salonika, he decided to operate as a self-appointed, one-man sniper unit. He regularly set off on unsanctioned solo missions, which would have been considered extremely unconventional behaviour for an officer. Lieutenant Campbell of the Royal Irish Rifles recalls the worry O'Leary's actions caused his fellow officers.

We were glad to have him but were at a loss how to employ him. He had a habit of going on lone patrols and sometimes stayed away for days and filled us with alarm for his safety.⁷³

Michael's tendency to head off alone into no-man's-land was reported in the press, although the reports neglected to mention the concern expressed by his fellow officers.

Now a captain in Salonika, O'Leary is some sniper. Mike likes to go out with his rifle. If there are any Bulgars about it's bad for them. If no, he brings back a brace of hares. But he is credited with over a hundred Bulgars in his bag.⁷⁴

While on one of his sniping missions, O'Leary is on record as having captured two enemy deserters near Kjupri,⁷⁵ and his activities were mentioned in dispatches,⁷⁶ including General George Milne's despatch dated 25th October 1917.⁷⁷

Michael's service records show that he contracted malaria in September 1917 and never quite recovered his full health after that. Between September 1917 and August 1918 he was hospitalised on five different occasions with recurring bouts of malaria. During this period of illness he lost all contact with home. His military records hold a number of letters from his mother, expressing her worry and distress at not hearing from him:

... not having heard from him for six months – you will understand the state of unrest and pain of mind which I am going through. Let me know as to his whereabouts and state of his health, as we are very concerned about his welfare.⁷⁸

Another letter from Michael's mother, which was received by the War Office, a few days later stated:

I am very uneasy, my mind is upset very much over not receiving any information about him.⁷⁹

While examining Michael O'Leary's war records, it came as a surprise to find that towards the end of World War One Michael had ambitions to become a pilot, despite suffering from malaria. On 1st January 1918 he joined the No. 3 School of Military Aeronautics of the Royal Flying Corps for flight training at Heliopolis near Aboukir.⁸⁰ It is quite amazing to consider that in less than a decade Michael O'Leary had served with the Royal Navy, The British Army, The Royal North West Mounted Police, and then returned to the army to serve with the Irish Guards, followed by time with the Connaught Rangers, the Tyneside Irish and finally the Royal Flying Corps. On 14th Feb 1918, due to recurring bouts of malaria, he was redeployed from the Royal Flying Corps back to the Connaught Rangers. Though his time with the Royal Flying Corps was short, it gives a sense of Michael

O'Leary's irrepressible spirit of adventure.

On 19th Aug 1918,⁸¹ O'Leary was invalided home on the hospital ship SS Maheno. It was reported that, 'among the patients in the Officers' Convalescent home at Tuenham Park, Mullingar is Lieutenant Michael O'Leary VC.'⁸² Following his convalescence at Tuenham Park,⁸³ O'Leary returned to the war, but with the signing of the Ottoman Turkish Armistice at Mudros on 30th October, the war was all but over.

In 1919, Michael O'Leary was redeployed to England, stationed with 2nd Battalion Connaught Rangers at Dover. Considering all that he had witnessed in the previous decade, one would expect that, finally, with hostilities over and peace in Europe, 2nd Lieutenant Michael O'Leary, the highly decorated war hero, would enter a more comfortable phase of his life. But it was not to be, if anything, the real strife and conflict in Michael O'Leary's life was only about to begin...

After The War Is Over

The consensus of expert opinion takes the view that the first action of the Irish War of Independence took place on 21st January 1919. It was the day the First Dáil met in Dublin. It was the day Dan Breen and Sean Tracey set an ambush at Soloheadbeg, Tipperary. It was the day two RIC men, James McDonnell and Patrick O’Connell, were fatally shot.¹

However, Iveleary people tell it differently. On Sunday 7th July 1918, seven months before the famed action at Soloheadbeg, two RIC Constables, Butler and Bennett, were ambushed as they entered Iveleary at Reinaree – and two rifles and a hundred rounds of .303 ammunition were taken.² Of course there are some who say that the Irish War of Independence began even earlier than that, back on 17th October 1171, the day King Henry II of England first set foot on our shores – but, regardless of where or when it all began, by 1920 the Irish War of Independence was in full flow.

Stationed at Dover Barracks since the end of World War One, one would assume that Michael O’Leary had been removed if not sheltered from the escalation of hostilities in Ireland. But with reports in the *Evening Post* published on Tuesday 4th February 1919 that 2nd Lieutenant Michael O’Leary VC had married Miss Gretta Hegarty in her local parish church in Ballyvourney, Co. Cork,³ it becomes obvious that O’Leary’s courtship and subsequent marriage to a girl from the neighbouring parish of Ballyvourney, meant visits home would have been frequent.

As the War of Independence gathered momentum, Michael O’Leary would have become aware of the renewed intensity of the national struggle as Iveleary and the surrounding parishes such as Ballyvourney, Coolea, Kilnamartyra, Kilmichael, Macroom, became the nerve centre of operations for IRB/IRA commander Sean O’Hegarty.⁴ Iveleary and surrounding parishes became a stronghold of rebel resistance and a cockpit of the unfolding violence. O’Leary was faced with the contradiction of being in the British Army while his neighbours, friends and

relations were actively engaged in a war with England.

On 4th May 1920 2nd Lieutenant Michael O'Leary VC submitted his resignation to the 2nd Batt. Connaught Rangers.⁵ His stated reason for leaving the army is on record:

I would be in the army yet, but for the trouble in Ireland.⁶

Michael O'Leary did not follow men like Tom Barry and Emmet Dalton out of the British army and into the military struggle for Irish Independence. For O'Leary to do so may have been counterproductive. After all, the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of any guerrilla army is anonymity – the ability to be able to blend into the civilian population. O'Leary's universal fame and notoriety as one of the most famous soldiers in the British Empire would have rendered it extremely difficult to operate effectively as part of an IRA column.

Yet, Michael O'Leary did play an active and discrete role for the cause of Irish Independence – at a cost of great personal sacrifice.



One of the defining episodes of the Irish War of Independence was the arrival of the Auxiliary Division to our shores. In an echo of the anti-civilian, scorched-earth policy throughout the course of Irish history, as witnessed during the two Desmond Rebellions [1569–83], The Elizabethan Nine Year War [1594–1603], The Confederate War [1641], The Cromwellian War [1649], The Williamite War [1689] – the British strategy during the War of Independence seemed to revert to type. This policy inevitably caused great terror and suffering among the civilian population. The principal difference between the War of Independence and previous conflicts was that this time, the outside world was watching.

On 6th July 1920, two months after Michael O'Leary submitted his resignation to the British Army, the police adviser to the Dublin Castle administration in Ireland, Major-General Tudor, sanctioned the setting up of an Auxiliary Force to the Royal Irish Constabulary.⁷

The Auxiliaries, more commonly known as the Auxies, were a paramilitary police force recruited from the ranks of demobbed military officers, who had returned to England after World War One to mass unemployment. An estimated 70%⁸ of these

officers did not come from the privileged background of the landed gentry officer class. They had joined the army from the ranks of the unemployed, farm labourer and working classes, and like Michael O'Leary, they had been promoted from the ranks to officers in the field of battle. These men became known as 'Temporary Gentlemen',⁹ as their hard-earned status of 'Officer and Gentleman' did not follow them out of the carnage of the trenches and into civilian life after the war.

Many would have started out as idealistic young men who found themselves caught up in the exuberance of wartime militarisation. Fuelled by recruiting sergeants' promises of glory, they marched off to war singing, 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', but over time they became desensitised by what they had witnessed in the trenches and returned home to England, a tough, rough, battle-hardened and battle-scarred body of men. They found themselves out of work with few employment opportunities for their new-found skills that had been honed in the battlefields of Europe.¹⁰

The Great War was over and the world had moved on – so they enlisted to go to Ireland to stamp out a 'Fenian'¹¹ revolt. Armed and in uniform once again, the Auxiliary Division became a law unto themselves, apparently free to employ any methods they deemed fit for purpose. Frustrated by the guerrilla warfare as practiced by the Irish rebels, it became convenient for the Auxies to view every man, woman and child as a Fenian. This led to an indiscriminate campaign of violence against the civilian population and the wanton destruction of private property.¹²

Every townland, village and crossroads right across West Cork lived in dread of the distinctive sound of an Auxie Crossley Tender, and many households have a memory of terror from that time locked away in family lore. Peter Berresford Ellis writes of the fear instilled in the civilian population by the sound of the Crossley Tender:

I used to know some elderly folks in Cork who were children during this period. They still had nightmares about the sight and sound of those vehicles, which portended death and destruction.¹³

No less than many other family homes in West Cork, there is an account of a particularly traumatic Auxiliary raid on my mother's childhood home that has been passed down through the generations of my own family. My maternal grandparents reared their ten daughters on a relatively isolated, small hillside farm, located west of Iveleary, on the Beara Peninsula. This particular incident occurred when my mother's sisters ranged in age from toddlers to teenagers. There are a

number of accounts of the ordeal that unfolded in that isolated farmhouse that day, but in the absence of documentation, I choose not to relate specific details. The only tangible evidence of the visit of the forces of law and order to their home is the memory of a traumatised and terrorised family and a bullet hole in a linen trunk – and maybe it's best leave it at that.

To the best of my knowledge my grandfather [William Blake] did not play an active part in the national struggle at that time. He has been described to me as a 'quiet man'. Although his father - my mother's grandfather, Edmund Blake [described as 'a scholar' and 'reserved'], lived on that farm in the previous generation, and had been an associate of the Fenian [IRB] leader O'Donovan Rossa.

'O'Donovan Rossa often came to him [Edmund Blake] just to talk and talk [...] they'd walk all around the fields talking and then sit on a stony mound in a field near the house – and so they got into the habit of calling it Rossa's Hump.'

He [Edmund Blake] was the schoolmaster at Trafrask in Beara, 'gave up his school because he was continually harassed by inspectors for teaching Irish. He worked voluntarily from that on as chairman of the Board of Guardians – he had a vote'.¹⁴

Maybe because of the O'Donovan Rossa IRB/Fenian connection to the previous generation, their hillside farm may have been a suspected 'safe house' – but the truth is, I don't know. Any inquiries I have made lead me to believe that there was no valid reason why my grandparent's home was singled out to be raided on a number of occasions – I assume by J Company Auxiliaries stationed at the Eccles Hotel in Glengarriff under Company Commander Seafeld Grant.¹⁵ [Company

J Company Auxiliaries with company Commander Seafeld Grant outside the Eccles Hotel Glengarriff. Between December 1920 and February 1921 The Eccles Hotel in Glengarriff had been commandeered by J Company Auxiliaries. (Courtesy of David Grant)



Commander Seafeld Grant did not serve the full term of his enlistment – he was killed in an IRA ambush at Coolavohig near Ballyvourney on 25th February 1921.]¹⁶

There is a timelessness about the Eccles Hotel. Picture yourself hiking along a woodland trail that crosses the river Canrooska and leads all the way to Esknamucky waterfall, then on and on and into the foothills of the woods beyond Glengarriff. Follow the steep climb along a narrow, winding mountain track until you break the horizon at the summit – then make your way along the ridge until you come to that place, you'll know it when you get there, because there you'll see below you, Barley Lake – like a sparkling sapphire set in a most magnificent landscape, untouched by the hand of man for as far as the eye can see. Now picture yourself at the end of that day with a cup of Barry's best in your hand, leaning on the Victorian veranda of the Eccles Hotel, looking out on the sun going down on Bantry Bay and the wild Atlantic way, and the whole world seems to be in tune, in harmony in a magnificent symphony of sight, sound and scent.

The Eccles Hotel in Glengarriff has a special place in my heart. It stands sentinel to my mother's homeland, like a gatehouse to the ancient seat of the O'Sullivan clan on the Beara Peninsula.

David Grant's detailed research of the Auxiliary Division reveals the fascinating narrative of John Annan Bryce and his wife Violet who were the proprietors of the Eccles Hotel during the Irish War of Independence.

Violet came from a highly esteemed British military family. She had originally acquired the hotel in 1916 and set up a convalescent hospital that had housed hundreds of wounded officers during the course of World War One. Her husband, John Annan Bryce was the younger brother of Lord Bryce, one-time Chief Secretary for Ireland. In their own words; they were Protestant, unionist – loyal to King, country and empire. Yet, in the spiraling chaos of the Irish War of Independence it seems that many loyal unionist families also became victims of the Auxie culture of reprisal.

John Annan Bryce was extremely vocal in his condemnation of the atrocities carried out by Auxiliary Division – the looting, intimidation, and reprisals – including the shooting of a crippled man, a Mr. Crowley, in his bed, and numerous acts of arson.

They [the citizens of Ireland] suffer constant threats of reprisal, raids by night and by day, continual lootings, prohibition of markets and

fairs, wreckings and burnings of houses, shops and factories, bombings, shootings, killings, and countless other outrages, many never reported. My own village of Glengarriff was shot up in August. Every soul fled to the mountains, woods or fields, work was suspended for weeks, and even now many fear to sleep in their houses.¹⁷

John Annan Bryce also cited a number of examples of local prominent unionists whose property had been burned by the forces of law and order, including the stores of Mr. G.W. Biggs, ‘the principal merchant in Bantry’ and Mr. Leigh-White, both described as Protestant and unionist. Annan Bryce suggested that the premises of G.W. Biggs was burnt because he employed Sinn Féiners [Irish Catholics], and Mr. Leigh-White’s property was torched because he dared to claim that ‘in his forty years experience’ the Catholic population had not been anti-Protestant,

[Mr. Leigh-White] published a statement protesting against Orange allegations of Catholic intolerance.¹⁸

The primary concern of John Annan Bryce was the burning of his own property at the Eccles Hotel and threats his wife Violet had received from the authorities at gunpoint. He accused the British Government of a cover-up regarding the activities of the forces of law and order in Ireland. Annan Bryce was outraged when his wife Violet was arrested in Wales, while in transit to address meetings to inform the British public of the atrocities being perpetrated in Ireland. He outlined in graphic detail the conditions in which Violet was incarcerated and deported back to Ireland. Like so many others, John Annan Bryce evoked the irony of England’s pre-war call to defend ‘Little Belgium’:¹⁹

German outrages in Belgium? The reprisal outrages in Ireland, if proved, are worse, in that Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom, not a territory occupied in war.²⁰



Manus O’Riordan’s article in the *Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha’n Ghaorthaidh Journal* [Title: ‘Michael O’Leary, Kuno Meyer and Peadar Ó Laoghaire’] identifies an interesting passage in Patrick Twohig’s book *Green Tears for Hecuba*. It recounts an incident that happened in Ballingearry on 20th October 1920, when the Auxies raided Iveleary searching for local IRA commander, Jerh Lucey. Patrick Twohig

tells how the Auxies barged into the bar of the Hibernian Hotel in Ballingearry shouting:

‘We want blood! We’ll have blood!’

Jerh Lucey was in the bar that day, but luckily for him, so too was Michael O’Leary VC.

One of the Auxies snapped, – ‘You haven’t got your hands up!’ O’Leary, who was not in uniform, turned out the lapel of his coat and flashed the green ribbon of the Victoria Cross, the highest insignia for gallantry in the British Army. They immediately saluted. It was required military etiquette at the time. He let it sink in. Then in his best barrack-room manner he grated:

‘These boys are all friends of mine. Now, get out, you scum! They went, and that ended the searching for the night.’²¹

The Auxiliaries, finding an ex-British officer, the famous Lieutenant Michael O’Leary VC, sitting at the bar drinking with the local IRA is an example of how complicated the situation in Ireland had become. But I wonder how the Auxies would have reacted had they known that the training officer of the local Iveleary IRA Volunteers, at that time, was none other than Sean Murray, an ex-Sergeant Major of the Royal Irish Guards Regiment.²²

Throughout the autumn of 1920 the local IRA kept up the offensive, with attacks on RIC Stations and ambushes. Though most of the province of Munster was under strict Martial Law,²³ the continuing protracted hunger strike of Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, and the atrocities perpetrated by the forces of law and order against the civilian population began to filter out to the international press.

Within weeks of the raid on the Hibernian Hotel in Ballingearry, Tom Barry and his IRA Column carried out what must be the defining rebel action of the West Cork campaign, when they wiped out a convoy of Auxiliaries in the neighbouring parish of Kilmichael.

Though it is impossible to identify the precise motivation for any particular action, in what had become a fast-moving and increasingly personalised war of attrition, two weeks after the ambush in Kilmichael the Auxiliaries went on an orgy of destruction and burnt large tracts of Cork City to the ground.²⁴ Initial

reports from the time estimated the damage to Cork to have been in the region of \$25,000,000.²⁵

The Burning of Cork on 11th December 1920 was the most extensive single act of vandalism committed during the whole period of the national struggle from 1916 to 1921. But it would be a mistake to regard it as an isolated incident. In one month these forces of law and order had burned and partially destroyed twenty-four towns; in one week they had shot up and ransacked Balbriggan, Ennistymon, Mallow, Miltown-Malbay, Lahinch and Trim.²⁶

At that time, the British Labour Commission²⁷ and the American Commission for Conditions in Ireland [ACCI] had delegations in Ireland for the express purpose of investigating and recording the alleged atrocities inflicted on the Irish people. Their findings were instrumental in raising international awareness, support and relief for the Irish cause.²⁸ Armed with first-hand witness statements, photographic and documented evidence, the ACCI set about preparing their report for publication.

Cork City December 1920 the day after it was sacked by the Crown forces of law and order.



By the end of 1920 the War of Independence was raging out of control. IRA ambushes were met by indiscriminate reprisals on civilians – towns and cities had been burnt, elected republican officials had been murdered. Day after day newspapers reported shootings, lootings, burnings, and bombings in a spiralling cycle of violence.

In February 1921, it was widely reported in the English press that some senior commanders of the Auxiliary Division were demoralised and outraged by the continuing lack of accountability for atrocities committed by men under their command – in particular the events surrounding the looting and ransacking of Balbradagh, near the town of Trim in County Meath, on 9th February 1921.

The looting of Balbradagh was comparatively insignificant in the context of the extreme nature of the nationwide reign of terror by the Auxies against the Irish population, but it grabbed media headlines when it became apparent that one of the shops looted was owned by the Chandler family, who were described as unionists. Following an investigation, Brigadier General Crozier found 25 Auxiliaries guilty of looting the shop and mistreating Mrs Chandler.²⁹ The Auxiliaries were dismissed from duty as ‘unsuitable for the RIC’, but Crozier’s ruling was overturned by Lt. General Tudor, and the offending Auxiliaries were reinstated.

Following this incident Brigadier General Crozier resigned as commandant of the Auxiliary Division.³⁰ It sent a message to the very heart of the British administration regarding the gravity of the situation in Ireland. In his memoir ‘The Men I Killed’, Crozier specifically references details of the atrocities committed in Cork by the Auxiliary Division – and went on to explain,

‘I resigned [...] because we were murdering and shooting up innocent people, burning their homes and making new and deadly enemies [...] for the Crown regime was nothing more or less than a Fascist dictation cloaked in righteousness.’³¹

Lord Denbigh was reported as having ‘crossed swords’ with the Lord Chancellor regarding the conduct and activities of the Auxiliaries.³² A week later Captain Redmond MP accused General Tudor of condoning crimes committed by the Auxiliary Division in Ireland.³³

Within weeks, the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland [ACCI] published its interim report – a substantial volume including photographs and witness statements. It was unequivocal in its condemnation of the Auxiliary Division’s campaign of terror in Ireland.³⁴

The Imperial British forces in Ireland have indiscriminately killed innocent men, women and children. They have indiscriminately assassinated persons suspected of being republicans; have tortured and shot prisoners while in custody. House burning and wanton destruction of villages and cities by Imperial British forces under British officers have been countenanced.

A campaign for the destruction of the means of existence of the Irish people has been conducted by the burning of factories, creameries, crops, farm implements and the shooting of farm animals. This campaign has been carried on regardless of the political views of their owners, and has resulted in widespread and acute suffering among women and children.³⁵

While trawling through some old newspapers, I recently came across an insightful interview with Michael O'Leary. The interview was first published in New York and was subsequently reported in the British press nine months after O'Leary had left the army, and just six months after his reported standoff with the Auxiliaries, in defence of Jerh Lucey, in the bar of the Hibernian Hotel, Ballingearry.

On 17th April 1921, Michael O'Leary VC stated in *The Sunday Post* [London], that he had resigned from the British Army and had volunteered to work with The Knights of St Columbanus in Canada 'for the cause of relief in Ireland'.³⁶ From there he went to New York to meet with The American Commission on Conditions in Ireland [ACCI] to help the cause of the distressed in Ireland.³⁷

With his Victoria Cross in his cigarette case, and a picture of his twin babies in his vest pocket, Michael O'Leary VC paid a visit to New York City to help the cause of the distressed in Ireland.

O'Leary left the army last year but found the conditions in Ireland were such that he would not be able to provide a living for his wife and six-month-old twins. He therefore went to Canada. In Ottawa, he found a temporary job, and was engaged in relief work for Ireland promoted by the Knights of Columbanus.

It was as their agent that he came to New York to make a survey of the American Committee for relief in Ireland, in the hope of applying its methods to the cause in Canada.

O'Leary modestly stated that he never wanted to trade on his reputation, and he would have been in the army yet but for the trouble in Ireland.³⁸

Michael O'Leary had chosen a career in the military service back in 1909 – long before the Home Rule crisis in Ireland, or the formation of the Irish Volunteers and the subsequent call to arms of World War One – his decision to leave the British Army because of 'the troubles in Ireland' is revealing. From the day he left Ireland as a teenager he had committed to a life in uniform. His career trajectory

2nd Lieutenant Michael O'Leary VC. (Courtesy of of the O'Leary family)



had been the dream of any enlisted soldier. Without family connections or fortune to fast track promotion, Michael O'Leary had risen through the ranks on merit alone. By war's end he was an Officer in the Connaught Rangers, with the Victoria Cross, the highest military distinction of the Empire, and the Russian 3rd Cross of St. George pinned to his chest.

He was the pride of his regiment, a reluctant poster boy for the wartime recruitment machine – he had become the face of the war, the sweetheart of the music halls; celebrated by Tsar, King and Queen, embraced by the British establishment and the English public, lauded by the Irish at home and abroad. He had invested his life, his career, his future and the future of his family in military service.

So, when Michael O'Leary VC made the conscientious decision to leave the British Army, and stated in the media that he had resigned because of the 'trouble in Ireland', it was an unambiguous statement of his objection to what was happening in Ireland. His very public departure from the British Army at that time was an extremely damning indictment of British policies in Ireland.³⁹

Still mourning the tragic loss of their first-born child, who had died while they were living in Ballyvourney,⁴⁰ Michael and Gretta O'Leary had to fend for their two other young children, twin boys Daniel and Jeremiah. With newspapers reporting large numbers of ex-servicemen begging on the streets of London,⁴¹ Michael was well aware that he faced severe financial difficulties during the mass unemployment of the post-war era. But he was not the sort to sit around pondering the implications of his decisions; Michael had proven himself again and again to be a man of spontaneous action. At thirty-two years of age, he made the selfless decision to leave the financial security, stability and social standing the British Army offered him and his young family.

The 'troubles in Ireland' caused many Irish patriots to abandon their chosen career paths to answer the cause and suffer the financial and personal consequences of their actions. Michael O'Leary's decision was no less a personal sacrifice. From the day he made his stand against British policy in Ireland, he and his family were cut adrift from the only career he knew. He had walked away from the security he had worked so hard to achieve. It was a decision that was to have very far-reaching consequences for the O'Leary family – a decision that would have repercussions for many years to come.

Oh Canada!

By January 1921, the Irish War of Independence was at its height, and Ireland was in a state of unrestrained violence. In England, a traumatised public was still coming to terms with the tragic loss of life in the World War they had recently won. Meanwhile Michael O'Leary, despite the responsibility of providing for his young family, had very publically resigned from his chosen career in the British Army.

For Michael, memories of his youthful, carefree pre-war days with the North West Mounted Police, rough-riding the prairie and camping in the open,¹ must have seemed like a dream that was another lifetime away. On Saturday 26th February 1921, the breaking news of the day was that O'Leary would sail on *The Empress of Britain* from Liverpool to Montreal² to begin a new life in Canada with his wife Gretta and twin babies.³ At first, it must have seemed that relocating to Canada had been the right move for the O'Leary family. On his arrival in Ottawa, he was honoured with the highly coveted Gold Medal of the Canadian Veterans' Association.

Lt. Michael O'Leary, the famous Irish VC who is now in Canada, proudly wears the gold badge of the Great War Veterans Association of Canada, which was presented to him on arrival at Ottawa. Mr O'Leary is the fourth to receive the gold badge, the first being presented to the Prince of Wales, the second to Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa and the third to Earl Beatty.⁴

Two days later, on the 5th March, Michael was the guest of honour at a high-profile dinner of distinguished guests hosted by the Rotarians.⁵ The following day he was the main attraction at the Ottawa District Hockey Association when he was invited to throw in the puck at a Championship Hockey Game.⁶ A few days

later, O'Leary was introduced by Lt. Col. R.F. Parkinson to the Governor General's Foot Guards [GGFG] at a Gala banquet, where he was offered a commission with the Governor General's Foot Guards.⁷ Although it was reported that Michael had accepted the invitation to join the GGFG, it appears he didn't take up the post. A report in *The Ottawa Journal* two days later, under the headline 'VC's THREAT', may give some insight into why he declined the commission.

Lieut. Michael O'Leary VC called at the G.W.V.A [Veteran's Association] headquarters this morning and expressed his disappointment that the department was not going to declare a holiday tomorrow, St. Patrick's Day. He said he would hire a troop of bagpipe players to parade up and down outside the building all day unless the secretary relented.⁸

It is difficult to know if this incident was perceived as a real threat, as the headline implies, or if it had been no more than a light-hearted moment of high jinks. It may be totally unrelated to Michael not taking up his commission with the GGFG. Yet, it is worthy of mention here, if only because it echoes back the practice of hooting and bugle blowing by Irish insurgents, and to the role played by the Macroom Town Band during the unrest at the attempted eviction at Drom an Ailigh, Iveleary fifteen years earlier in 1906.

Having spent his entire adult working life in the military, O'Leary found himself at thirty-two years of age, unemployed, with a wife and young family to support. His skills set had not improved since he first left Iveleary as a teenager; consequently, he was under qualified and unsuited for most careers in civilian life. It was reported that that he had hoped to rejoin the Royal North West Canadian Mounted Police.⁹ But, as previously outlined, when Michael resigned from the RNWMP back in 1914 to rejoin The Irish Guards at the outbreak of the war, he departed Canada in the full knowledge that his position with the RNWMP would not be kept open for him should he wish to return after the war.¹⁰

World War One did not end by Christmas 1914 as expected, the conflict had dragged on for a number of years and Michel was no longer within the enlistment age profile required by the RNWMP. At thirty-two years of age, Michael exceeded the stated upper limit recruitment age for the Mounties by seven years.

In the intervening seven years, the Royal Northwest Mounted Police [RNWMP] had undergone many changes. It was no longer the freewheeling, gun-toting, rough riding law enforcement agency it had been at the turn of the century. By 1920 the Royal North West Mounted Police had merged with the Canadian Dominion Police to become the Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP], with centralised

headquarters in Ottawa rather than Regina, Saskatchewan.¹¹ Michael must have been disappointed when it became apparent that there was no future for him in the ranks of the newly branded RCMP.

Following this initial set back, Michael soon found part-time work with a publishing house in Ottawa and began giving public lectures on his wartime experiences.¹² Once settled in Canada, he became actively involved with the Knights of St Columbanus in Ottawa and worked towards securing 'relief for Ireland'.¹³ While with the Knights of St Columbanus he travelled to New York to meet with the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland with a view to setting up a similar organisation in Canada.¹⁴ By July 1921 a truce had been called in the Irish War of Independence. With the cessation of violence and treaty negotiations on the horizon, the activities of the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland were wound down.

The excitement of O'Leary's great Canadian adventure soon began to fade as the harsh reality of providing for his family came into sharp focus. By the end of 1921 he found himself in a precarious situation, unemployed with a young family to fend for, thousands of miles from home trying to make ends meet without qualifications, resources or the safety net of a regular army income.

Michael O'Leary VC is among 2,000 unemployed men who are registered in Toronto. He states he has been seeking work for three months. Two other Toronto men who also won the VC during the war are unable to find positions.¹⁵

Full-time employment was difficult to secure, but he had crossed the Rubicon – and was not in a position to relocate back across the Atlantic. Michael remained hopeful that Canada still offered him the best opportunity to provide for his family. The publicity surrounding his award of the Gold Medal of the Great War Association of Canadian Veterans gave a boost to his prospects, and O'Leary soon found a position with the Ontario Provincial Government as an enforcement officer of the Ontario Temperance Act.

In 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment to the American Constitution came into effect, and so began what became known as the era of Prohibition. With alcohol banned in every state across the Union, the tentative first steps of organised crime in North America found a foothold all along the porous Canadian border.

The Ontario Provincial Government needed men to patrol the wide and expansive borders of Canada. They were looking for men of integrity with initiative who would get the job done, men who were handy with a gun, men who were equally

as tough as the criminal bootleggers – Michael O’Leary was precisely that sort of man.

Lieutenant Michael O’Leary the Irish VC, who, since coming to Canada, has experienced great difficulty in obtaining employment, has been appointed by the Ontario Government a provincial officer in charge of the enforcement of the Ontario Temperance Act.¹⁶

His time as a prohibition enforcement officer came to an unexpected and abrupt end. The reason for the termination of his employment was simply explained in a press release from the official Canadian Government Press Bureau in London:

The Ottawa Authorities state he [Michael O’Leary] left – on account of trouble.¹⁷

It later became apparent that Michael had no choice but to leave his position as a Temperance Officer. In the course of his duty, he had stood up to the alcohol bootleggers and subsequently became a target of intimidation from the hard men of organised crime.¹⁸ Once again Michael was unemployed. A report in the *Monroe News-Star* paints a bleak picture of his situation.

Michael O’Leary, famous soldier, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for capturing more than a dozen Germans single-handedly, is wandering the streets with his wife and twin babies looking for a job, but heroism is not needed in times of peace.¹⁹

Eventually O’Leary found work as sergeant of police on the Michigan Central Railway, which ran between Bridgeburg Ontario and Buffalo in the United States. By 1925, Michael and Gretta O’Leary had four children, and his time with the Michigan Central Railway was a relatively stable time for the O’Leary family.²⁰ But having worked as sergeant of police for the railway for two years, O’Leary found himself on the wrong side of the law. On 18th January 1925, Michael was arrested and charged with smuggling an alien from Bridgeburg in Ontario across the frontier at Niagara into Buffalo, USA.²¹ It was reported that he was being held in custody without trial.²²

Arrested in January, Michael was still in jail awaiting trial in May; meanwhile Gretta and the children were north of the border in Canada in dire financial need.

Michael O'Leary is held in USA jail without trial. The Canadian Minister of Justice has been requested in the Dominion House Of Commons to take up the case of Michael O'Leary VC who is being held in jail in the United States on a minor charge but without trial.

Mr Earnest Papointe, Minister of Justice said he would make it his duty to investigate the matter. He has been asked to secure for O'Leary a speedy trial. The charge against O'Leary is: Complicity in smuggling aliens across the American border in the neighbourhood of Niagara Falls.²³

As a testament to O'Leary's integrity 'virtually the entire population of Bridgeburg and Fort Erie'²⁴ signed petitions demanding his release. Eventually he was released from prison in Buffalo on bail of £300.²⁵ O'Leary always protested his innocence, claiming that he had been set up by enemies he made among the criminal bootleggers while he was a Temperance Officer in Ontario.

On Wednesday 27th May 1927, it was reported in the press that O'Leary had been acquitted of all charges by United States District Court at Rochester.²⁶ Later that same year O'Leary was once again charged with irregularity in search for liquor. He explained his position in an interview with *The Daily Mail*:

I was with Michigan Central for two years. Unfortunately on the railway I came into contact with bootleggers and smuggling interests. A detective has to take bribes to keep his mouth shut or else these people are out to get him.²⁷

Michael had stood up to the bootleggers, and because he would not take a bribe to look the other way, he paid the price and became a target for the organised crime gangs. It seems their strategy was to have O'Leary removed from his position as sergeant of police on the Michigan Central Railway and replaced by someone more susceptible to their inducements of payola. Michael O'Leary was innocent on both counts, he was acquitted of all charges,²⁸ but his good name had been tarnished. He did not return to work with the Michigan Central Railway.²⁹ In an interview with *The Cork Examiner*, O'Leary expressed his sheer disillusion at that time:

I believe I had harder work chasing bootleggers than chasing Germans.³⁰ Twice I have been put on trial for offences I did not commit, each time winning an acquittal, despite being proved innocent I received no compensation for loss of employment.³¹

Over the past number of years I have explored reams of newsprint, handwritten letters, photographs, private and public archives – at times, I have stumbled upon fascinating nuggets of information pertaining to Michael O’Leary, yet I believe a newspaper article by Wilfrid Eggleston is the most important piece of information I have unearthed. It is significant because, although Michael O’Leary was innocent of committing any crime, there has been a certain amount of misinformation and innuendo in circulation ever since his time in Canada that continues to cast a shadow of doubt over O’Leary’s integrity and good name right to the present day. Even in the recent press coverage of the centenary commemoration of his deed at Quinchy, it has been regularly stated that following a term of imprisonment in Canada, Michael was deported. It is understandable to see how one might draw such a conclusion, but in reality that was not the case.

So to put the record straight, it is important to state categorically that Michael O’Leary was legally exonerated of the alleged crimes, all charges were dropped, and most significantly, he was not deported from Canada. His personal travel costs back to England were met by private donation [Mr Hartell & Co of Brightlingsea near Colchester] and not the Canadian Government as is often assumed.

I find it unthinkable that a campaign to blacken O’Leary’s name, perpetrated by the forces of organised crime almost a hundred years ago, seemed to find purchase and untruths from that time continue to reverberate down to the present. But there is redemption – in an interesting article written and published over forty years later in 1967, by the renowned and highly respected Canadian journalist, Wilfrid Eggleston,³² he recalled one of his first assignments as a young and enthusiastic journalist back in the 1920s.

At that time the O’Leary ‘scandal’ was big news on both sides of the Atlantic, and Eggleston had been sent by his editor, Mr Atkinson of *The Toronto Star*, to investigate the case of Michael O’Leary VC. Eggleston tells how he undertook his first assignment as an intrepid reporter with the zeal of youth, leaving no stone unturned in his quest to investigate in minute detail the accusations that had been levelled at Michael O’Leary while working with the Michigan Central Railway. Eggleston interviewed employees, colleagues, and neighbours in his attempt to uncover if there was any truth to the allegations. In 1967, forty seven years after he investigated the Michael O’Leary story, Wilfrid Eggleston stood over his original findings and conclusion – that Michael O’Leary was totally innocent, and stated categorically that ‘by no means was he [O’Leary] to blame’.³³

I believe the independent investigation carried out by Wilfrid Eggleston back in the 1920s, which only came to light six years after Michael's death, is an impartial objective voice that exonerates Michael of all wrongdoing or illegal activity during his time in Canada. Eggleston's investigation corroborates Michael's own assertion that his honesty had made him the target of a smear campaign designed to undermine the integrity of the O'Leary name.

For the sake of Michael O'Leary and his grandchildren and great grandchildren, some of whom I have had the privilege to encounter in the course of my research, I sincerely hope that this publication will clarify some of the confusion and 'bad-press' surrounding Michael's time in Canada.



Following a number of months without work, *The Daily Mail* reported in early August 1925 that Michael O'Leary had found short-term employment as the chief of police at a summer resort on Crystal Beach on Lake Erie.³⁴ But once again, Michael was unlucky with the law. It is recorded in the Town of Lake Erie Council Chamber Minutes [4th Sept 1925] that Michael O'Leary was arrested for impersonating a police officer at Crystal Beach. The misunderstanding was put right immediately when it was discovered that, such was O'Leary's enthusiasm for his new job, he had turned up for work as police chief in full uniform, a day early before his employment was officially due to commence.³⁵

The five years in Canada had been difficult for Michael and Gretta O'Leary and their young family. To make matters worse, ever since the wild scenes of O'Leary Mania back in 1915, celebrity hung like an albatross around his neck. Fame had followed him from good times to bad. Michael O'Leary had never sought fame nor courted publicity, but the curse of celebrity is such, that once a private life becomes public property, the trials and tribulations of later life will continue to fuel the flames of media interest. This added burden of public scrutiny and invasion of his personal life must have been extremely difficult for Michael, who was, by nature, a very private man.

Ever since the O'Leary family arrived in Canada, the hardship they endured had been played out in the international press like a serialised soap opera, each episode announced to the public in bold capital banner headlines: 'O'Leary VC In Search Of Work';³⁶ 'O'Leary VC Arrested In Buffalo'; 'O'Leary VC Among The Unemployed';³⁷ 'Michael O'Leary VC Vain Search For Work';³⁸ 'O'Leary VC Stranded In Canada'; 'Furniture Of O'Leary VC, Sold By Public Auction'.³⁹

As if to accentuate the depths to which the fortune of the O'Leary family had

descended, each report of their austerity was accompanied by a detailed account of the glory days of Michael's deed in Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal. By 1926 Michael O'Leary was out of work once again and, because of the media circus that seemed to follow his every move, gainful employment became ever more elusive.

Since his return to Canada, O'Leary has experienced an unfortunate inability to secure suitable employment, and, on several occasions, he and his family have been in great distress.⁴⁰

The media spotlight on the plight of the O'Leary family became a source of embarrassment for the authorities in Canada. In response, the Canadian Government put out a press release in which they attempted to exonerate themselves by making the point that it was not their responsibility to supplement O'Leary's income, due to the technicality that he had fought with the Imperial forces [i.e. a British regiment] during the war and not a Canadian regiment.

Mr. W.H. Price, Provincial Attorney-General of Ottawa, pointed out that O'Leary was an Imperial soldier without war disability, and therefore not entitled to relief from the Canadian Department of Soldiers Civil Re-establishment.⁴¹

This prompted a response from the British Authorities, who issued a reciprocal press release stating that:

The British Ministry of Pensions has not received any application for relief from O'Leary.⁴²

The response from the British Ministry of Pensions prompted a further public announcement by the authorities in Hamilton Ontario, stating that they would settle O'Leary's outstanding debts in Canada, and would also pay to repatriate the family home to Ireland or the UK.

With reference to the statement, the Hamilton Ontario authorities have advanced money to Michael O'Leary VC to enable him and his family to return to Ireland.⁴³

On 15th October 1926, it was reported that the O'Leary family were selling their furniture by public auction, packing up, leaving Canada and returning to Ireland.

FURNITURE OF MIKE O'LEARY VC,
SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION.

The furniture of Michael O'Leary VC was sold by public auction in Hamilton Ontario yesterday. Mrs O'Leary with Dan and Jerry the six-year-old twins, Michael Junior aged 4, Billy aged 3, and their aunt, were due to leave last night by train for Montreal to sail in the *Letitia*, en route for Macroom in County Cork.

The city of Hamilton paid for the passage of the O'Leary family, and an uncle has promised to look after them in Ireland.⁴⁴

At the last moment Michael had a change of heart and decided not to return to Ireland with his family. This is significant as it demonstrates that he was not under a deportation order.

Michael O'Leary remains with the prospects of a better job, following his recent hard luck and unemployment. As the family trunks were packed, he jokingly told his wife of another woman who returned to Ireland and came back to Canada on the same boat.⁴⁵

Michael's light-hearted jibe to his wife at the quayside was reminiscent of something his father, Daniel, would have said at such a time of heightened tension. By comparison, his wife Gretta's response was far more measured and considered:

Mrs O'Leary, arriving home on the *Letitia*, accompanied by her four sons, said: 'We left old Éireann in tears, and we return in tears.'⁴⁶

Because the plight of the O'Leary family had become such a big news story on both side of the Atlantic, Michael's decision not to return to Ireland with his wife and children once again set off another cycle of media coverage that exerted pressure on the Ontario Provincial Government to be seen to provide for him. Two days later it was announced by the Attorney-General of Ontario that he would attempt to find employment for O'Leary through the Soldier's Aid Commission.

Toronto, Monday: – Mr. W.H. Price, Provincial Attorney-General, Chairman of Soldiers Aid Commission, announces that a post under that body will be found for Michael O'Leary VC who, with his family, has been in difficulties owing to unemployment and was recently assisted to send his family back to Ireland.⁴⁷

This only served to fuel further media speculation surrounding the fortune of the O'Leary family. Then on 3rd December a report appeared in the newspapers stating that a Mr W.H. Hartell of Messrs Hartell & Co., Net Manufacturers, in Brightlingsea near Colchester, had sent Michael O'Leary his fare to return to the UK from Canada. Mr. W.H. Hartwell had lost his two sons in the war, and as a gesture of goodwill, he offered Michael O'Leary a share in the family business.

Michael O'Leary VC, who was stranded in Canada, has been offered and has accepted an appointment with Messrs Hartell & Co., Net Manufacturers, Brightlingsea. Mr W.H. Hartell states that when he heard of O'Leary's predicament he instructed his bankers to send him a hundred dollars for his fare home. He hopes to give O'Leary an interest in the business, as both his own sons are dead.⁴⁸

Michael accepted Mr Hartell's kind offer. On Friday 19th November, he boarded the *Ascania* at Montreal and set sail for England.⁴⁹ Such was the public interest in the O'Leary saga, that every detail of his voyage home to the UK was reported in the British and Canadian press.

Michael O'Leary disembarked from the *Ascania* in London to settle in this country. O'Leary's wife and five children sailed from Canada for Ireland a few weeks ago and are to rejoin him in Colchester.

The *Ascania's* concert organisers included in one programme: My War Reminiscences by Michael O'Leary VC, but O'Leary is far too modest and shy to accept an invitation of that sort.

When pressed he reluctantly consented to speak on his work among the bootleggers while a license inspector on the border between Canada and America at Niagara, but when the time arrived the VC's courage evaporated, and so the address was never given.⁵⁰

What I find most amazing about the Michael O'Leary story is the continued, almost obsessive, media interest in his personal life. Even the smallest, most inconsequential detail made international headlines. Michael had never been a self-publicist. From the very outset he had always resisted fame and resented the continued media intrusion into his life.

Eleven years had passed since his immortal deed in Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal, yet from the moment he put his foot on English soil the press were waiting.

O'Leary's response was consistently the same as it had been at the height of O'Leary Mania during the Summer of 1915 – once again he expressed in the simplest and most straightforward terms, that all he wanted was to be allowed live a quiet and peaceful private life, away from the glare of the media spotlight.

'I am going to live in Colchester. I want to settle down to a peaceful life.'⁵¹

Then, in an error of judgement, when asked about the hardships he had endured over the previous six years, O'Leary divulged his feelings about Canada.

Canada is no country for a poor man or an honest man. You've either got to have capital or be a crook.⁵²

Canada is not the land of milk and honey, if they could only raise the fare, hundreds would come home.⁵³

O'Leary's statement that Canada was a country of crooks prompted a predictable, if not extreme, response from the Canadian authorities. They were infuriated because, as they saw it, they had done all within their power and beyond the call of duty to facilitate the O'Learys in their time of need. A stinging press release from the Canadian Government Office in London was published in all the leading newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, and so began a whole new round of controversy which was once again reported blow-by-blow in the media.

The following letter has been received from the director of the Canadian Official Bureau in London:

Statements attributed to Mr Michael O'Leary VC have appeared in the press alleging that he has suffered unfair treatment during his residence in Canada. I am therefore desired by the Canadian Government authorities in London to call your attention to the following facts:

After a lecture tour in Canada, Mr O'Leary was offered, and held, the following positions: Licence Inspector under the Ontario Government; a post under the Michigan Central Railway; Chief Constable at Crystal Beach [Ontario] with the Canadian Westing-House Company. Hamilton; timekeeper under the Hamilton City Authorities. The first two positions, the Ottawa Authorities state, he left on account of trouble. The last two positions, the Ottawa Authorities state he left without notice, the other of his own accord.

Mr O'Leary is known to have occupied in all no fewer than seven jobs, none of which he held for any length of time. He is reported to have been offered other posts including a movie contract. These, however, I am informed, Mr O'Leary declined. Furthermore, Mr O'Leary's wife and family were returned by the city of Hamilton to their home [in Ireland] at their own request. Besides assisting them in every possible way the city expended on their behalf £160 for debts, rent, provisions and transportation.⁵⁴



Gretta and Michael O'Leary. (Courtesy of the O'Leary family)

Home in England

The years spent in Canada had been extremely challenging for Michael O'Leary, his wife Gretta and their young family. But by 1926 they were back in England, reunited as a family, living in Brightlingsea, Colchester, and Michael was gainfully employed with Hartell and Co.¹ Though he had finally managed to evade the prying eyes of the international press, his time with Messrs Hartell & Co., Net Manufacturers was short-lived. By 1929, the O'Leary family had relocated to Lambeth in London and once again they were struggling financially.

Mr Strauss [Lab. Lambeth] said that Sergeant Michael O'Leary, one of the most famous VCs, with his wife and five children, were living in one tiny little room.²

Most of us can remember the hero-worship that was showered on Michael O'Leary VC. He was feted and lionised. Memory fades quickly. O'Leary, with his wife and five children are living in a single room, 15ft. by 12ft. in the heart of London. His poverty is so abject that it was mentioned in the House of Commons. He was described as a modest, unassuming man who would be the last to exploit his decoration. 'A Land Fit For Heroes To Live In' – was that not the slogan on which the post-war election was fought and won.³

In October that same year, the British Legion, on hearing of Michael's plight, came to his assistance and found employment for him in the Poppy Factory at Richmond.

Michael O'Leary, whose name was once on everybody's lips as a man who captured an enemy position by himself, is now working in a Poppy Factory for the British Legion.⁴

Working in a Poppy Factory may seem to be a menial task for such a renowned war hero, but the British Legion's intervention and support at that particular time was precisely the lifeline Michael O'Leary so dearly needed. The Poppy Factory in Richmond London had been set up in the aftermath of World War One to employ disabled ex-servicemen⁵ – it became an invaluable resource to help pave the way back into civilian life for men who had been battle-scarred by the horrors of trench warfare.

When Michael turned his back on the British Army because of 'the troubles in Ireland' he cut himself off from the only life he understood; the only career he ever wanted. The following twelve years were marked by austerity, and the O'Leary family faced crisis upon crisis. But it seems, while working at the Poppy Factory, Michael began to get his life back on track. It was as if he found comfort to be once again standing shoulder to shoulder with men who truly understood what it was to be an ex-soldier.

As young men in the trenches, they had shared and survived the most horrific experiences. They had seen countless men maimed and mutilated, they had watched friends die, and only they knew the bloody, gory truth of the glory of war. Michael's time at the Poppy Factory marked a turning point. It signalled the beginning of the successful, belated reintegration of the O'Leary family back into civilian life.

For the first time in their married life, Michael and Gretta were in a position to set down roots. At last they had found well-deserved peace and stability, and Michael seemed to pick up the threads that had unravelled ever since he had left the army back in 1919.

Of course, he continued to be newsworthy, but the newspaper articles recorded happier and more positive times for the O'Leary family. I believe Michael found a deep-seated personal contentment to be once again engaged, if only in a peripheral way, with military life.

There will be several famous soldiers of the world's most famous constabulary, the Canadian Mounted Police, at the International Horse show. Captain Michael O'Leary VC, who is now lecturing for the British Legion, from fighting Indians, hunting illicit distillers over thousands of miles, to acting as midwives and nurses – there is no duty the Mounties have not performed.⁶

On 16th June 1932, Michael O'Leary was centre stage at a British Legion fundraising event held at the Mayfair Hotel in London in aid of the Journey's End Homes for

Disabled Officers of the World War. The Cavalcade Ball at the upmarket Mayfair Hotel attracted a gathering of distinguished guests including the former King and Queen of Portugal. The following report was published in New York.

It is doubtful if anything that has occurred since the armistice has more clearly brought to mind wartime memories and scenes than that which occurred at this fashionable function.

Lights in the ballroom were snapped out one by one, and a spotlight was trained onto Michael O'Leary VC of the Irish Guards standing in front of a huge Union Jack. A trolley was wheeled onto the stage and from two large jars, actually used in France during the war; he served out zero hour rum rations in tin mugs to the guests.⁷

Within weeks of the Cavalcade Ball, Michael O'Leary was once again back in uniform, this time he donned the doorman's top-hat and tails at the Mayfair Hotel. With his VC ribbon proudly pinned to his chest, his celebrity drew much attention from residents and visitors to the hotel.⁸

What happens to the people whose names are emblazoned in the headlines of the world's newspapers?

Is anyone sufficiently interested now in Michael O'Leary to be curious to know what has happened to him? Today he is commissionaire on the front door of a London hotel. He hands debutantes and dowagers out of their cars with unflinching cheerfulness and gallantry.⁹

He is a great attraction with his ribbon on his blue commissionaire's uniform at the Mayfair Hotel.¹⁰

Michael O'Leary VC, the first Irishman in the war, is now opening carriage doors for a living; he has a wife and seven children dependent upon him.¹¹

Over time Michael rekindled friendships with former comrades, and his attendance at various military functions and commemorations became a regular feature of his life. As a recipient of the Victoria Cross, Michael led a four hundred-strong delegation of Catholic ex-service men to the International Peace Pilgrimage to Lourdes.¹² On a number of occasions he featured as the wreath bearer at the Annual Ypres Commemoration at the Whitehall Cenotaph¹³ and the grave of the Unknown Soldier at Westminster Abbey.¹⁴



At last, at ease in civilian life, Michael became active in the London Catholic Football League, where he was secretary of the Referee Appointment Committee. Though the dizzying days of O'Leary Mania were behind him, his attendance at public events still managed to capture the headlines. *The Evening News* reported:

'The distinguished war hero, Captain Michael O'Leary VC, at the football match between Portsmouth Churches League and the London Catholic League at the Pitt Street Ground in Portsmouth, would bring added colour to the eagerly awaited game'.¹⁵

Of the many and various military events reported in the press, I was particularly fascinated to read of the Coronation Commemoration Concert at the London Palladium in November 1937. This glittering gala variety show hosted by the British Legion in aid of ex-servicemen, had King George VI as guest of honour – the king was also a war veteran, he had seen action during World War One at the battle of Jutland, serving with the *HMS Collingwood*.

It crossed my mind that every one of the two thousand ex-soldiers and war-wounded¹⁶ who had packed the full-house London Palladium that night would have recognised Michael O'Leary VC on sight. In the foyer of the theatre before the show, old soldiers, identifiable by their highly polished shoes, would have squared their shoulders and straightened their spines; they would have stood erect to become young men again, as they relived daring deeds of the past. Some may have stepped forward and introduced a son or daughter to the man from Iveleary, saying something like:

'You can tell your grandchildren that you shook the hand of Michael O'Leary VC, the Irishman who single-handedly saved the lives of a whole company of the elite Coldstream Guards from certain slaughter.'

I literally laughed out loud when I first read that centre stage at the Palladium that night was none other than the 'World's Greatest Clairvoyant', Ms Nell St. John Montague¹⁷ [Nelly Standish Barry]. I wondered if Nell's lucky monkey, Judy, had accompanied her to the Palladium that evening.

Twenty-two years had passed since Nell had written, produced, directed and acted in her ill-fated play, *An Irish Lead*, at the Palace Theatre in Cork. I wondered if Ms Nell St. John Montague was aware that the muse for her play, Michael O'Leary VC, was among the audience at the Palladium that night. Or maybe destiny dictated that the two would never meet. She was of the landed gentry,

O'Leary was the second son of a subsistence farmer; they came from opposite sides of the social and political divide. Yet, Nelly Standish Barry of Leamlara and Michael O'Leary of Iveleary had a lot in common. They had lived through war and rebellion, they had experienced the pain of the loss of a child, they had endured the curse of fame and the self-reinvention required to survive such ordeals. Above all, they both knew there was no going back – for Nell and Michael, home would always be someplace else, far away.

I wondered if, in those pre-politically correct days, tears of laughter gathered along O'Leary's wrinkled eyelids as Nell Standish Barry, the landed lady of Leamlara, under the pseudonym of Ms Nell St. John Montague, charmed the audience with a number of her classic Irish jokes – most notably the one about the proud Irish father and his seven fine, strong, strapping sons, whom Nell described as, 'sons of Éireann',

'Aren't they fine boys?' inquired the father. – 'The finest in the world! And I never laid violent hands on any of 'em... ...except in self-defence.'¹⁸

There is something sad about that night in the Palladium. In my mind's eye I can see Michael O'Leary in an auditorium surrounded by ex-soldiers and old comrades, some of whom had been damaged beyond repair by war, others who never managed to get their lives back on track to those carefree, youthful pre-war days.

I can see Michael with the love of his life, Gretta Hegarty, sitting by his side, the two of them held spellbound by the smoke and mirrors of show business, and I wonder if he cast an eye to the Royal Box and, seeing King George VI sitting there, did Michael gently squeeze Gretta's hand and, leaning close to her, did he whisper in her ear,

'I once visited his house, y'know. Had the tea with his mam and dad, so I did.'

Then with that O'Leary twinkle in his eye, did he add,

'Good people, like ourselves – fine, warm and welcoming people, so they were. Moléir! And 'twas a damned fine house, too.'

That night in the Palladium presents a fleeting, intangible vignette of the disparate lives of a king, a clairvoyant and a soldier. It seems to me that the hero in the theatre that night was not of royal blood, nor a star of stage and screen, but a hotel doorman from the townland of Cooleen.

Considering the adventure the O'Learys had undertaken: the good times, the hard times and the bad times – there is something about that night in the Palladium that somehow brings closure to a narrative where fact and fiction seem to dovetail together and the ghosts of the past were finally put to rest.



Michael O'Leary had a natural aptitude for soldering; happiest in uniform, it seems, in his case, that military life was a vocation rather than a political evocation. Joining the army was not simply a career choice – brass buttons, boots and uniform seemed to be part of his destiny. Since his teenage years, when he first donned the blue jacket of the Royal Navy, Michael had worn the tunic of the Irish Guards, the North West Mounted Police, the Connaught Rangers, the Tyneside Irish, the

Michael O'Leary VC – wreath bearer at the Annual Ypres Commemoration at the Whitehall Cenotaph, London. (Courtesy of Top Foto)



Royal Flying Corps; and when he eventually left the British Army, his career choices invariably saw him back in uniform as a Temperance Licence Inspector in Ottawa, a Police Sergeant with the Michigan Central Railway, a Chief Constable at Crystal Beach Ontario, and finally a doorman's uniform at the Mayfair Hotel in London.

However, his dream vocation of a life in military service was interrupted when it became complicated by the fact that it coincided with the most highly politically charged decade in Irish history. As any professional soldier will agree, the barrack-room is no place for political discourse,¹⁹ for such talk inevitably leads to treasonous if not mutinous thoughts.

In the ten years since 1913, when the sabre rattling of the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers brought the country to the brink of Civil War, Ireland had witnessed the World War, the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence, the Civil War, all set against the struggle for women's suffrage and the violent birth of the labour movement. Each conflict set new demands and moral dilemmas for the swinging pendulum of public opinion. In the context of such a rapidly changing political landscape, one wonders how any individual soldier could make an informed political decision or maintain political impartiality.

Michael O'Leary VC – Irish Guards - receiving shamrock at Wellington Barracks, London. (Courtesy of Top Foto)



O'Leary continued working as a concierge at the Mayfair Hotel until the outbreak of World War Two, at which time the British Army officially welcomed him back into the fold of his military family. In June 1939, it was widely reported in the press that Michael O'Leary VC had been called up from the reserve of officers.

For one more week, he will stand as he has for the past seven years, outside the Mayfair Hotel, Berkley Street. Six medals glittering on his pale blue tunic, his Irish eyes smile devoted to the arrivals and departures of Duchesses and debutants.

In a week he will change the top hat, blue and gold uniform of the West End carriage attendant for the Khaki uniform of an army officer, which he thought he had taken off for good twenty years ago.

Michael had always been a soldier at heart, it had been his boyhood dream; a dream he relinquished on a point of principle at the beginning of the Irish War of Independence. For over twenty years he had endured the consequences of his decision with dignity. But when asked his feelings about being invited back into military life after twenty years out in the cold – his response was spontaneous, heartfelt and emotional,

I'll be mighty glad to do it. That's how it is. I love the army.

In the first three months when I'll be back under canvas I'll grow ten years younger. I've never stopped being a soldier at heart.²⁰

In September 1939, at fifty-one years of age, Michael embarked for France with the first wave of the British Expeditionary Force as a captain in the Middlesex Regiment.²¹

The promotion is announced in War Office Orders of Lieutenant [Acting Captain] M. O'Leary VC to be Temporary Captain as of 2nd February last, in the Regular Army Reserve of Officers.²²

But O'Leary's health had never fully recovered from the malaria he contracted during the previous World War; Michael was invalided back to England before the evacuation of Dunkirk. Once recovered, he was redeployed to the Pioneer Corps where he took command of a prisoner-of-war camp in England.²³

Michael O'Leary, first Irish Guardsman VC in the Great War, is now to

guard German U-boat and airmen prisoners at a northern camp.²⁴

Major Michael O'Leary VC was discharged from the army in 1945,²⁵ and settled back into civilian life. He continued to keep in contact with his army comrades, and took much pride in the fact that his sons shared his dream and followed him into military service: William was a Chief Petty Officer with the Royal Navy;²⁶ Timothy was a Master Sergeant with the United States Air Force, while the twins Daniel and Jeremiah both had distinguished careers with the Air Force. Daniel was promoted to Flight Squadron Leader in 1956, and Jeremiah was commissioned Pilot Officer, Flight Lieutenant in 1953;²⁷ both were awarded the DFC [Distinguished Flying Medal] for valour and devotion to duty whilst flying in active operations against the enemy.²⁸



Michael O'Leary VC with two of his sons – Flight Squadron Leader Daniel O'Leary [DFC] and Flight Lieutenant Jeremiah O'Leary [DFC]. (Courtesy of the O'Leary family)

Since returning to England after their time in Canada, the O'Leary family set up home at Southborne Avenue, Colindale, later they moved to the quiet suburb of Edgware at Oakleigh Avenue and then to nearby Limesdale Gardens.²⁹ Michael lived out his life in the company of his soulmate and lifelong companion – a girl from the next parish, Gretta [Hegarty] O'Leary. Together they had witnessed war and peace, lived through good times and bad, and shared adversity and glory in equal measure.

Gretta O'Leary died on 10th May 1953³⁰; Michael died some years later in August 1961 at Whittington Hospital in Highgate. Following his funeral service at the Roman Catholic Church of The Annunciation at Burnt Oak, his coffin received an Irish Guards officers' salute.³¹ Accompanied by a bearer party of Irish Guards, Major Michael O'Leary VC was escorted to his final resting place in a dignified procession by a lone pipe and drum escort.³²

In July 1962, Michael's children presented his medals to his former regiment, the Irish Guards. O'Leary's medal set includes: The Victoria Cross [VC], the 1914 Mons Star and Bar, the British Victory Medal [BVM] with Mentioned In Dispatches Oakleaf [MID], the British War Medal [BWM], Cross of the Order of St. George, 3rd Class [Russian], Coronation Medals: George VI Coronation Medal 1937, the Queen Elizabeth Coronation Medal 1953 and the Defence Medal 1939–45. Michael O'Leary's Victoria Cross is currently on display at the Irish Guards Museum in London.³³

Michael was laid to rest in Paddington Cemetery in Mill Hill, London³⁴ – far away from the green and leafy hills of Iveleary. At the O'Leary Clan gathering in 1999 we were told that each year, on 1st February, the Irish Guards Association places a wreath on his grave.

The memory of Michael O'Leary is commemorated on a plaque at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Museum in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, and O'Leary Lake was named in his honour as part of the Saskatchewan Geo-Memorial Project.³⁵ On 1st February 2015, on the 100th anniversary of his action near Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal, a commemoration stone, dedicated to Michael O'Leary VC, was unveiled at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

A number of years ago the people of Inchigeela erected a memorial in his honour, near the eastern gate of the old Inchigeela Churchyard. Earlier this year, at the O'Leary Clan Gathering in Inchigeela, Iveleary, I was privileged to take part in the tribute paid to Michael O'Leary, when a stone dedicated to his memory was erected at Kilbarry National School. The memory of Michael O'Leary is held dear and will always live on among his own in the heart of Iveleary: Uíbh Laoghaire – Land of The O'Learys.

In Conclusion

Michael O’Leary’s life story unfolds in twists and turns, in an intricate Celtic knot that invariably leads you right back to the spot from where you first began. Like the road through Iveleary itself, my journey of discovery was neither straight, nor did it follow a single path; but was a veritable spider’s web of interlocking trails that enticed me deeper into the far distant past than I had anticipated. Yet anyone who has ever travelled from the Gearagh to Gougán, through the ‘Land of The O’Learys’ will agree: Let the road dictate your pace, and the magic of Iveleary will open up before your eyes in an Aladdin’s cave of hidden gems.

As if on a journey through time, I paused a while at Carrignamuc’s Bronze Age dolmen to ponder what giant lay buried beneath. I crossed the clapper bridge at Ballingearry just to see what was on the far side. I walked through ancient burial grounds and climbed the battlements of Carrignacurra Castle to look out across this landscape where great epics of history have unfolded.

Still lodged in my brain is a memory of that day in Ahakeera, when I took shelter from a lightening storm at the site of the bloody cattle raid, where the O’Leary chieftains were slaughtered by their sometimes-allies, the McCarthy Mhaol Reagh. I remember the streaks of fire in the sky that day, shooting out from behind treacherous black clouds and the rumbling of thunder echoing across the hills like the sound of horses’ hooves. It brought to mind images of Auliffe O’Leary in a wild fury as he and the men of Iveleary rode into the valley of death.

For me, the most compelling aspect of my journey west to explore the land of Michael O’Leary’s birth was that – every house I entered had a war chest of family history containing letters, photographs and newspaper cuttings stored in some box or drawer. On exploring the various personal histories, the interconnection between the families soon becomes apparent – the people of Iveleary are intertwined in word and deed to past adventures, in a living history that stretches back through the generations.

As I travelled, I always experienced delight to discover some little known plot point in the life and times of Michael O’Leary – but filling in the blank spaces along the timeline of history has never been my ambition. From the very outset, my mission has been to gain insight into the beating heart of Michael O’Leary himself. Yet, despite my best endeavours, I must concede that the true emotion of the past remains elusive, for the past can only exist in the realms of speculation, and any insight, observation or conclusion I may have formed along the way must be filed away under flight of fantasy – for I now know that my journey to the source can be no more than a water beetle skimming the surface of a very deep well.

But the fantasy of the past is the inspiration for the future. Without doubt, the adventure writers of the 19th century and the swashbuckling escapades of the O’Leary ancestors fuelled Michael’s wanderlust. ‘As a boy, his fancy roamed through far-off lands and he waited eagerly for the day when he should be old enough to join the army.’¹

Michael O’Leary’s life story was an adventure every bit as worthy of the pen of Scott, Dumas or James Fenimore Cooper. ‘His prowess has put the deeds of the Three Musketeers in the shade, for in comparison to O’Leary they are but drawing-room heroes.’² Like D’Artagnan, the hero of the age, O’Leary left his humble beginnings to follow his destiny and seek his fortune. Within weeks of arriving at the Western Front, he had distinguished himself in battle and had been awarded the highest military distinction for valour: the Victoria Cross and the Russian 3rd Cross of St. George.

When Michael O’Leary VC returned home on leave from the death and carnage of the Western Front, he was surprised to find he had become an international hero. From that moment forward, life as he knew it changed forever. Catapulted onto the world stage and dazzled by the spotlight of celebrity, Michael became the reluctant poster boy for the wartime propaganda machine – a sweetheart of the music halls, men scrambled to shake his hand, women snatched a kiss and swooned. With ‘the dust of the trenches still on him’, Michael was paraded before King and Queen, Archbishop and Prime Minister, while the great unwashed queued in the rain outside Madame Tussauds to worship his graven image, standing proud beside Napoleon and Wellington in the waxworks gallery of the Great Military Heroes Of The World. He was adored by crowds numbering hundreds of thousands; embraced by the British establishment, lauded by the English public and loved by the Irish at home and abroad – and, for a few short weeks during the summer of 1915, the streets of London turned green, as the downtrodden Irish diaspora walked tall and wore their Irish culture with pride, because, for the first time in the history of our two islands, London belonged to the Irish.³

Like all the great tales of adventure of the 19th century, romance was at the heart of Michael O’Leary’s story. The tag line of David Lean’s sweeping romantic epic film, *Doctor Zhivago – ‘A Love Caught In The Fire Of Revolution’*,⁴ would be just as applicable to the story of Michael O’Leary and Gretta Hegarty.

He was a British Army war hero, born into an Irish clan that had been in perpetual war with the Crown of England for seven hundred years. She was from neighbouring Ballyvourney, a hotbed of Irish militant republicanism and a cockpit of violence during the War of Independence.⁵ They were married at Ballyvourney Church in January 1919 – just as the smoke was clearing from the blood-soaked battlefields of Europe – and the opening shots of the Irish War of Independence echoed from the Mouth of the Glen at Reinaree across Iveleary – and so they began their life together in the eye of a revolutionary storm.⁶

As a young married couple living in Home Farm Ballyvourney, they knew the pain of personal tragedy when their child, a daughter, died in infancy.⁷ But united in love, Michael and Gretta persevered, and faced the adversities of life as one. They went on to rear seven children, six boys and one girl: Daniel, Jeremiah, Michael, Timothy, William, Mary and Mathew.

It is a saga of conflicting loyalty; O’Leary was of staunch Irish nationalist stock, yet he was committed to his chosen career in the British Army. But with the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence, when his loyalty to his nationalist heritage was put to the test, Michael took the brave decision to turn his back on military life because of the ‘troubles in Ireland’.

The years the O’Leary family spent in Canada were marked by austerity. They endured public humiliation as their misfortune was played out in the columns of the international press. Then, in an almost surreal subplot, Michael’s integrity brought him into direct conflict with the criminal underworld of 1920s gangster America. He found himself in a high stakes and dangerous game to defend his family’s good name, which had been tarnished by the forces of organised crime. It was a battle he ultimately won, but at a very high personal cost.



The Irishman [Michael O’Leary] refuses absolutely to be made a hero.
As to pride, there is not an atom of it in Mike’s whole construction.⁸

The distinction of hero never sat comfortably with Michael O’Leary. In every interview, he dismissed the heroism of his action at Cuinchy saying that he was just ‘a soldier doing his duty’, and that ‘there were many more like’ him. He

also rejected outright the trappings of fame and celebrity and always stated his resentment of the media intrusion into his life.

‘I won’t talk for publication. Don’t ask me for an interview.
I’m through with reporters. I don’t want any of their dirty publicity.’⁹

Michael O’Leary was a reluctant hero, yet his courage cannot be denied. It seems bravery runs deep in Iveleary and the surrounding parishes; previous generations of the O’Leary clan have been described as fearless, spontaneous, impulsive, impetuous, vainglorious, and valiant.

Men such as the fiery chieftain Auliffe O’Leary, who was killed in a blind rage of retribution during a raid against his neighbours, the McCarthy Mhaol Reagh, and brave Kedagh O’Leary of Inchigeela who led the Iveleary men at the head of King James II’s Jacobite army.¹⁰ Then there was the impetuous Art O’Leary who distinguished himself in battle with the Royal Hungarian Hussars, but was the architect of his own downfall when, on a point of principle, he discharged his pistols at the High Sheriff Abraham Morris; two years later Art was shot dead in an ambush at Carriganime. There was also Art O’Leary’s lesser-known younger brother Cornelius O’Leary, who fearlessly rode into Cork City and shot Sheriff Morris three times, in a cold act of revenge. Of course, the dashing Daniel Florence O’Leary also comes to mind, the butter merchant’s son, who decided, on an impulsive whim, to go to fight for the Independence of South America. With no military training or experience, his unbridled bravery singled him out for rapid promotion in the field of battle. In double-quick time Daniel Florence O’Leary had risen to brigadier general of the Venezuelan army and, to this very day, is celebrated as one of the great heroes of the South American Wars of Independence. Then there was the highly regarded Fenian, ‘Pagan’ O’Leary of Inchigeela, famed for his daring strategy of recruiting Fenians from the ranks of the British army. Michael O’Leary’s father, Daniel O’Leary, also left his mark as a man who always spoke his mind in a time when discretion was the better part of valour. He is still remembered for his outspoken statements concerning Irishmen fighting in the British Army during World War One.

The women of Iveleary were never found lacking in bravery. Their place in the roll of honour enshrined because of their frontline action among the defenders at the eviction of Drom an Ailigh, and the subsequent ambush of the landlord’s agent Terry at Inchigeela – while the passionate poets, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonail and Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire [O’Leary], live on in the furious outpouring of their seditious verses against the foreign oppressor.

Michael O’Leary VC of Cooleen was a man of action, not words. He will always be remembered for his daring deed in the brickfields at Cuinchy. But his display of bravery that day was not an isolated incident. Looking back on his life, it becomes apparent that his courage rose to the surface regularly and erupted spontaneously, regardless of the consequences.

The London Times reports a commendation for bravery awarded to Michael during his days with the Royal North West Mounted Police – when he set off cross-country on horseback on a two-day manhunt in pursuit of armed criminals, and in the true tradition of the Mounties, O’Leary got his men, when the outlaws eventually surrendered, following a gun battle that lasted a number of hours.¹¹

On another occasion, when he first joined the Irish Guards stationed at Caterham Barracks, Michael didn’t hesitate to step out from the crowd to defend a fellow recruit who was being bullied by one of the elite Coldstream Guards.¹²

Michael’s bravery also received an unambiguous endorsement when 2nd Lieutenant Innes selected him as his orderly [servant-soldier]. At a time when a disproportionate number of officers were being killed in action, 2nd Lieutenant Innes would have carefully chosen the man he wished to be by his side as his personal bodyguard in the heat of battle, particularly as the memory of his younger brother, 2nd Lieutenant Sydney Maxwell Innes, killed in action two months previously, was still fresh in his mind.

O’Leary’s courage surfaced again during the early days of the Irish War of Independence, when he made a defiant and dangerous stand in defence of IRA commander, Jerh Lucey, during an Auxiliary raid at the Hibernian Hotel in Ballingearry.¹³

And again, some years later, when he and his family relocated to Canada, Michael’s bravery was not found lacking when he stood up to bootleggers and the hard men of organised crime, during the days of prohibition – a time when liquor was expensive and life was cheap.

‘I believe I had harder work chasing bootleggers than chasing Germans.’¹⁴

But bravery is not always measured in one’s ability to face life-threatening fear. For me bravery is best measured by integrity. Michael’s integrity was put to the greatest test during the Irish War of Independence when he turned his back on his chosen career with the British Army. He further qualified his decision in a damning indictment of British policies in Ireland, when he stated publically that he would volunteer to work with the Knights of Columbanus in Ottawa towards ‘securing relief for Ireland’, and then travelled to New York to meet with

the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland, with a view to setting up a similar organisation in Canada.¹⁵



Michael left Iveleary while still only a teenager and, though he lived a very full and varied life in Canada, the USA, the UK and saw military service in Malta, France, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Palestine, I find myself looking to his childhood to gain an insight into the man he became.

To truly understand Michael O'Leary, I believe one must go right back to the innocence of his pre-war days; back before a daring dash across the brickfields in Cuinchy set his life spiralling out of control on a course he could never have anticipated; back before he was subjected to the public gaze of media-induced mass hysteria:

Through forty miles of wild mountain country I travelled today, to the cottage of Michael O'Leary VC. I found it was a small cottage, with a hayrick beside it and, clustering under its eaves, plenty of fine fat hens and a sturdy calf.¹⁶

I must go back to a time when he was Mike O'Leary of Iveleary, back to the little cottage in Cooleen where he lived as a boy:

There's the spot where Michael was born. In the very heart of O'Leary country, there is not an O'Leary but has traced his relation to Mike. Some go back ten generations or more, for here O'Learys are as plentiful as Germans¹⁷

Of the countless interviews given by Michael, the one published by *The Sunday Post* in July 1915 is profoundly poignant.

To put it in context – at the time Michael had recently returned to London following a high intensity, whistle-stop tour of Ireland. The insanity of O'Leary Mania was at its height, he had been paraded before royalty, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, parliamentarians and politicians, and led in procession through the streets of London to Hyde Park, where crowds, estimated to have numbered in hundreds of thousands, had assembled to greet him.

Emotional and exhausted, Michael found himself facing yet another battery of cameramen and journalists eager to hear and record what the great hero of the

Great War had to say – but, unable to maintain the charade of celebrity, Michael refused to speak.

He would not talk of himself or the deed which won him the coveted decoration. To every questioner he replied the words,

– ‘It’s an old story.’

Sergeant O’Leary is longing for the old home in Ireland, for a quiet hour by the inglenook with his old folks.

He wanted to forget he was a hero and to enjoy an hour’s quiet amid the scenes of his boyhood, when he was Mick O’Leary, an unknown lad with his future before him.

– ‘I’m tired, I am,’ he said. – ‘Tired of the fuss they are making of me, and I would like to get back home.’¹⁸

It was a heartfelt plea that fell on deaf ears. Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*,¹⁹ there is something profoundly sad in Michael’s statement that he ‘would just like to get back home’. Over the previous six months he had witnessed more horrific scenes of carnage than most people will witness in a lifetime.

There is something about his sentiment that rings true and familiar to my ears. Like a faint reverberation from my own childhood, I am reminded of the O’Leary men and my dad standing at our shop counter in little-Iveleary in downtown Cork City, where the talk was invariably of the past and home.

It occurs to me that I am now the same age as my father was then, and through mature eyes I realise that, concealed behind the thin veneer of cavorting and guffaws of laughter, was the profound realisation that the past is another place, home is another time and there is no turning back the clock.

I believe the perceptible sadness in the tone of Michael’s interview is because, deep down, he knew that from that fateful moment when he stepped out of his shell hole and took off across the bombed-out barbed wire, death and destruction of no-man’s-land, his life had changed, and from that day forward nothing would ever be the same again.



Shortly before this manuscript was due to be delivered to the publisher, I set off for Iveleary one more time. It was a Tuesday in February; one of those mild and misty winter mornings, not a leaf on a tree, the only sign of life was the handy work of spiders' gleaming silver in the morning dew. This ankle-high canopy of web was strung out from grass blade to grass blade and vanished off into the mist like some shroud covering the land.

I had been directed to the little cottage where Michael had grown up, a mile or so from the village of Inchigeela, in the townland of Cooleen. At the garden gate I hesitated. It crossed my mind that the earth beneath my feet had once been walked upon by Michael O'Leary – the sods in the nearby field had been turned by Michael's father, Daniel and his big brother, Timmy; farming methods in these small bumpy fields had changed little over the eight hundred years since the O'Learys first walked this land. The lie of the land looked much the same: the gorse, the heather, the scraggy whitethorn, the boltlike ash, and the perennial crop – the outcrops of craggy rocks dotted here and there in the landscape, like the brick-stacks near Cuinchy at La Bassée Canal.

A feeling came over me that I can't exactly put into words, but I had an expectation of what I would see if I peered through the window into that cottage. It was as if that window offered me a glimpse into the past; a past preserved intact like Miss Havisham's²⁰ wedding table.



MICHAEL O'LEARY'S HOME AT MACROOM.

But a soft voice of reason inside my brain informed me that my expectation of seeing the past would most inevitably meet in a head-on collision with the reality of the present, and a lot can change in a hundred years. So, I stood there at the garden gate, unsure if I should approach the cottage.

In my mind was an image of this place over a century ago. This small two-roomed cottage full of life and bustling with excitement...

...Daniel O'Leary coming around the side of the house, carrying an armful of turf, eleven-year-old Michael and his big brother Timmy are following behind carrying a few sods each. Daniel is encouraging his boys in his own inimitable way:

– Christ lads, is that the best ye can do! When I was a lad your age I'd be carrying twice as much at this stage.
And that's with one arm tied behind my back!

Michael's baby sister, Hannah, is at the half door, shooing a clutch of renegade chickens out of the kitchen, while a younger child, Ellen Fitzgerald, is looking on, amused and confused by all the commotion. Seven-year-old Ellen has been boarding with the O'Learys for some time now, it's a long story so I'll leave it at that.

The cottage is a beehive of activity making ready for the big night ahead. Inside, Michael's mother is in a mad frenzy of cleaning and tidying, while his sister Margaret and granny, Ellen Lucey, are busy baking currant and honey soda cake on the bastible.

This evening the O'Learys of Cooleen will host a night of Scoíreach, a night for the seanachaoí, a night of song, verse and story. The neighbours will be in. Jeremiah O'Dea has sent up word that he and his sister Nora will be along later. They will bring their young cousin, Nora Cotter, with them, but his mother the postmistress, Anne O'Dea, will most probably stay at home if the weather does not pick up.

And so I found myself standing there a few yards from the front door of the O'Leary homestead, and I decided not to take a step further. But rather conjure up the past.

A dark winter's night, the wind howling against the eaves of this small hillside cottage, causing the ivy to tap eerily on the window. Inside neighbours and friends from surrounding townlands and beyond are gathered at a roaring fire.

Among the cluster of children huddled on the steep stairs to the loft sits a small boy, his face pressed through the banister rails, he is entranced by the old people singing songs and telling stories. Below him, neighbours, family and extended family; the men and women of Iveleary flicker every shade of orange and red in the glow of the blazing turf fire, sending shadows dancing hauntingly around the walls.

A gallon jug of poitín punch flavoured with milk and honey is warming in the hearth. This magical potion has the power to animate and open portals to the imagination. In hushed tones, the elders whisper just loud enough for the children to hear of the scary monster, Luiwee, lurking deep in the waters of Gougán, and of a murderous spirit stalking the roads at night, who will trick you with an insolvable riddle, then damn you to hell.

An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire is evoked when Séadna's deathly dance with the devil is recited almost word perfect. Then, just at the crucial moment in the story when the devil calls to the house, a howling gale gusts from the north and wails down the chimney, causing the room to fill with a puff of ethereal turf smoke. Every man, woman and child lurch rigid in their seats with murmurings of, – t'anamandíabhal!

Fingers dart left, right and centre in a protecting sign of the cross. The small boy grips the banister rails, his knuckles whitened, frightened. Big brother Timmy puts his arm reassuringly around him, and whispers:

'You're alright, Mike. Nothing will harm you. You'll always be safe here among your own...'

The story turns to an incredible feat of nature – of a deer that made a supernatural leap from cliff-face to cliff-face across the mountain pass of Keimaneigh to escape the blood thirst of the baying hounds. Granny Ellen in her own understated way, speaks a few words of Irish; she says that the hounds were 'cubs of Calvin',²¹ belonging to the English Planters who had stolen the O'Leary lands at Carrignaneela and, after a pause of a few moments, she adds that the deer was a magnificent Irish Red Deer – a bold and fearless Irish stag who recognised no boundaries and lived his life under threat of death, yet free to roam his native land. There follows a loud cheer of victory and the clinking of mugs – and, with that, the message goes out loud and clear to a new generation and all those at the fireside listening, that the deer's leap at Keimaneigh was, in fact, a victory for the Irish from the oppression of the foreign Planter.

Entranced, the children huddle on the stairs, gnawing into wedges of current cake as cape and sword stories of the glory days of the Corcú Loíghde come to life

in the raging flames. They listen to recitations of sagas committed to memory, of how the O'Leary clan came to this place and built their castles, and of alliances with the McCarthy Kings of Munster, and how the White Sceptre of Power had been held by the O'Leary chieftains like a God-given right to self-govern – a right they had defended for seven hundred years. Then a voice from a visiting stranger in the corner says that the White Sceptre Of Power is still stashed in the thatch, held in safe hiding in Iveleary, because the day will come when the O'Learys will rise again.

The butchery of cattle raids and bloody battles between the O'Leary chieftains and the forces of the English Crown clash in the shadows cast around the walls and ceiling. A crack from a dry twig, encased in turf since prehistoric times, sends sparks like musket balls shooting across the flagstone, and someone says that Soldier Smith got no less than he deserved from wild Conor Ó Laoghaire on the hillside at Keimaneigh. A short but heated row erupts when a voice of dissent insists it had been Seamus Walsh who struck the killing blow that day. Then the matter is put to rest when the man of the house, Daniel O'Leary, gets to his feet and sings out loud the words of Máire Bhuí Ní Laoghaire, as if clarifying the ambiguities of history.

There is a call for the Caoineadh, and so it begins, the endless epic of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* in its never-ending circles and cycles expressed in different voices, stirring up scowls of anger, tears of pain, grumbles of dissent, and a loud cheer from the lads on the settle when she curses Sheriff Abraham Morris. This passion-fuelled lament for Art O'Leary ends with a rafter-rattling roar of glory for the O'Learys and defiance of the foreign overlords. As the noise subsides, one of the older men says that he had once met Harold Delaney. He swears he was in the church that day when Delaney evaded arrest, disguised in Máire Uí Rathailigh's shawl. A lone voice begins *My Inchigeela Lass*. The song stirs up memories of Fenian days; a voice from the dark corner shouts out, 'No Crown! No Collar!' in an evocation of Pagan O'Leary, then an elderly woman sitting close to the fire recalls that when she was a child, and her eyes were not as dim, she saw Stephens and Doheny walking along by the South Lake Road,

‘...that time they took refuge with the Shortens, west in the parish.’

She then interrupts herself – her eyes, glazed by cataracts, are locked, spellbound on the flames – she recites an aisling dedicated to the last chieftain of the clan, Daniel Mac Art O'Leary, who had been exiled to Connaught under the decree of the Lord High Protector of Ireland, Oliver Cromwell. There follows a hissed whisper:

‘Dia shábháil dúinn.’ [Lord protect us]

Followed by,

Dia shábháil dúinn, moléir?’ [Lord protect us, indeed?]

As if to say,

‘Lord protect us from the Lord High Protector.’

Some stamp their feet, some hiss and spit on the fire, and, as one, they curse that bad bastard Cromwell, as he is cursed at every other fireside across the land.

The night continues ‘til dawn...



And so I find myself sitting here looking out on, what was once, little-Iveleary in downtown Cork City. I’m thinking of the Iveleary men who gathered at our shop counter to talk of births, deaths and marriages, the antics of Johnny Jerry’s sow and the age-old challenge matches between rival townlands that were played and replayed blow-by-blow like ancient battles between warring tribes.

I find myself thinking of past generations. I’m thinking of Michael O’Leary of Uíbh Laoghaire: a land of the warrior and the poet. It is a land where history and story go hand in hand, fact and fiction seem to dovetail together seamlessly and the spiritual and the natural complement each other without contradiction or contrivance.



Before I Go

When I first set out to write this story, I didn't know where to begin, and now I'm not sure where to end. Having read this manuscript one final time - I ask myself, what is this book all about? In truth, it seems that my voyage of discovery is an unfinished journey that, at times, has revealed more about myself than Michael O'Leary. However, maybe learning about oneself is the ultimate achievement of all human endeavour.

If put to the pin of my collar, I would say, this book presents a perspective of the course of Irish history as viewed from the half-door of a hillside cottage in Iveleary. It is a story that thunders along the beautiful green and leafy Lee Valley – from the pinpoint of its mystical source high up over Gougán, leading all the way to the broad meandering latticework of waterways of that great southern delta of Corcach Mór na Mumhan.

This is a story of Ireland with the Clan O'Leary of Uíbh Laoghaire at its core. And, as has always been the way of the O'Learys, each new generation will strive to keep alive the memory of those who went before.

Mícheál Ó Laoghaire as Cuilín – ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann.

And so the time has come when I must finish this immortal tale with the mortal words,

The End

Endnotes

Chapter 1 – Iveleary

- 1 Miles Krassen; *O'Neill's Music of Ireland: 1850 Melodies*, 1903 [Oak Publications, 1976], No. 1384, p.258. Description of Iveleary/Inchigeela by the Rev. Patrick Hurley, a priest in Iveleary since 1888, the year Michael O'Leary was born.
- 2 O'Leary Chieftain identified as Daniel Mac Art O'Leary also known as Dónal Mac Art O'Leary. Dónal and Daniel are interchangeable as the Gaelic and English translation of the same Christian name. For example: Daniel Mac Art O'Leary, ref: Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names of County Cork* [Glendale Press, Dun Laoghaire], p.211. – is also known as Dónal Mac Art O'Leary, ref: Peter O'Leary; *The Last O'Leary Chieftain. Dónal Mac Art (1575 -1657)* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1997].
- 3 Births Registration; *Department Births, Deaths and Marriages Office Cork* - Ref: I.D. - 10117838.
- 4 Parish Of Inchigeela; *Church Baptism Records*; p.604. - Ref: I.D. - 434.
- 5 *The Telegraph* - 26th July 2014. 'King George V demanded Britain enter the First World War.' Ref letter: Edward Grey Foreign Secretary said: 'he could not possibly see what justifiable reason we could find for going to war.' King George V replied: 'it was absolutely essential that what ever happened we had to find a reason for entering the war at once.' Ref also: Catherine Clay; *Three Royal Cousins Who Led The World To War* [Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009]
- 6 Professor Keith Jeffery; *Ireland and World War One*. BBC History online. Ref: 'freedom of small nations' such as Belgium or Serbia. John Redmond of the Irish Parliamentary Party compared Ireland achieving freedom with the plight of gallant, Catholic little Belgium which was invaded by the militaristic German aggressor. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/> [Accessed: 05.02.2015]
- 7 Michael G.Pento; *End Of Empire, The Coming Bond Market Collapse: How to Survive the Demise of the U.S. Debt Market*. [John Wiley & Sons, 2013], Ch.6.
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- 9 Cónal Creedon; *The Burning Of Cork*. Documentary film. Seaview Films, RTE, 2005.
- 10 Gerry White & Brendan O'Shea; *The Burning of Cork* [Mercier Ltd, 2006].
- 11 *The Western Sentinel [USA]* - 14th December 1920: Front page headline announced: '\$25,000,000 is Estimated Loss From Fire In The City Of Cork, Ireland'. The New York Times [USA] - 13th December 1920: Lead story estimated between £2,000,000 and £3,000,000 damage was done. [Conversion: \$11,000,000] The cost of the destruction has been revised to £2,000,000 [Equivalent today: €94,177,850].
- 12 *New York Times* – 14th December 1920; *Washington Post* – 14th December 1914. Statement issued by Rt. Rev. Bishop Thomas Sheehan, Catholic University of America.
- 13 Florence O'Donoghue; *Introduction, The Burning Of Cork* [South Gate Books. Cork, 1978].
- 14 American Commission on Conditions in Ireland; *Interim Report*. Ref also: Sean Enright; *The Trial of Civilians by Military Courts: Ireland 1921* [Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012], p.29-33.
- 15 Gerry White & Brendan O'Shea; *The Formation Of The Cork Brigade of the Irish Volunteers 1913-1916* [Mercier Press, Cork, 2005], p.44-47.
- 16 The Government of Ireland Act 1914. Full title: An Act to provide for the better Government of Ireland. Popularly known as: The Third Home Rule Bill.
- 17 John Redmond; *National Library of Ireland Catalogue*. Statement by Redmond on 21st December 1915 at the House Of Commons: 'Conscription is not with me a question of principle; it is a question of expediency and necessity. If you prove that conscription is necessary to end the war, then the case so far as I'm concerned is conceded.' 21st December 1915.
- 18 John Redmond; *National Library of Ireland Catalogue*. Statement by Redmond on 3rd May at the House of Commons regarding the execution of the leaders of 1916: 'This happily seems to be over. It has been dealt with firmness which was not only right, but it was the duty of the Government to so deal with.' 3rd May 1916.
- 19 Dave Hennessy; *The Hay Plan & Conscription in Ireland During WW1* [Waterford and County Museum, 2004], p.5.

- 20 The terms 'militant nationalists' and 'constitutional nationalists' are inadequate and do not convey the complexity of nationalist opinion in Ireland at that time. Neither term reflects accurately the motivation of those who either fought in World War One – or those who fought in The 1916 Rising. I use the terms in the broadest context and do not intend to imply that those who fought in the 1916 Rising were non-constitutional or that the those who fought in World War One were non-militant. But for the purposes of streamlining the narrative of this book – I use 'constitutional nationalists' as an umbrella term to included those nationalists who supported the Irish Party and followed John Redmond's call to fight in World War One – while the term 'militant nationalist' is an umbrella term for those nationalists who supported the 1916 Rising.
- 21 Alvin Jackson; *Home Rule: An Irish History 1800 - 2000* [Phoenix Press, 2003], p.212-213.
- 22 Tom Barry; *Guerrilla Days In Ireland* [Mercier Press, Cork, 1989].
- 23 John P. & James D. Cronin; *Activities of Ballingear IRA 1920-1921* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1998].
- 24 Peter Cottrell; *The Irish Civil War*. p.60. Ref also: Cathal O'Shannon; *Emmet Dalton Remembers*. RTÉ [Television].
- 25 National Library of Ireland; *1916: Personalities and Perspectives. The Seven Members of the Provisional Government*. <http://www.nli.ie/1916/pdf/4.5.pdf> [Accessed: 08:09:2014].
- 26 Gerald H. Supple; *The History of the Invasion of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans* [W M Hennessy, Dublin, 1856].
- 27 Flann O'Brien; *At Swim-Two-Birds* [London: Longmans Green, 1939].
- 28 Cork Butter Museum, Shandon, Cork. <http://www.corkbutter.museum> [Accessed: 09:11:2014].
- 29 Patrick Kavanagh; *Collected Poems. Epic* [Penguin, 2005], p.184.
- 30 Victor; *DC Thompson & Co Ltd* - May 19th 1979.
- 31 Peter F. Batchelor, Christopher Matson; *VCs of the First World War 1915: The Western Front* [History Press, 2011]. Ref also: *Argus Melbourne*; *Australia* - 14th December 1940. Ref: It was reported that O'Leary's ammunition clip was empty on reaching the second German machine gun nest.
- 32 *The Wilkes-Barre Record (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania)* - April 5th 1921.; Ref also: *The Monroe News-Star (Monroe, Louisiana)* - April 16th 1921.
- 33 Verna Hale Gibbons; *Jack Judge, Michael O'Leary VC, Music Hall Songs*, from articles by Leslie Frost in the *Oldbury Weekly News*, 1962.
- 34 *The Sphere Magazine* - March 13th 1915.
- 35 Michael Laffan; *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* [Cambridge University Press, 2004], p.208. In its Irish context, 'Slacker' was a pejorative term for those who for nationalist reasons refused to join the war effort.
- 36 Ed McMahon; *The Butcher's Apron* [Createspace Independent Publications, 2014].
- 37 Michael MacDonagh; *The Irish At The Front* [Hodder & Stoughton. London, New York, Toronto, 1916]. Ref: 'wastage of war' is a term used by John Redmond in the introduction.
- 38 Fr. Donnchadh Ó Donnchadha; *Béal Átha An Ghaorthaidh, Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal*.
- 39 Population Census of Ireland; 1901 & 1911. A number of Iveleary families reverted to using the old Irish version of the family name between 1901 & 1911. Ref: Cotter became A'Choitir; O'Dea became O'Deaghaidh. 1911 Census forms were returned written in the Gaelic script. This is significant as it reflects the Gaelic Revival which was sweeping Ireland at that time.
- 40 Liam de Róiste; *Bureau of Military History Witness Statement*, File No. S.452.
- 41 Gerry White & Brendan O'Shea; *Baptised in Blood. Formation of Cork Brigade of Irish Volunteers 1913* [Mercier Press, Cork].
- 42 *Guy's Postal Directory* - Cork. 1914.
- 43 Republican: In the context of Irish history - republican refers to those actively involved in the struggle for Irish Independence - Not to be confused with the American political strand which is also known as Republican.
- 44 Manus O'Riordan; *Michael O'Leary, Kuno Meyer and Peadar Ó Laoghaire* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal].
- 45 Patrick J Whohig; *Green Tears for Hecuba: Ireland's Fight for Freedom* [Tower Books, 1994]. Ref also: Manus O'Riordan; *Michael O'Leary, Kuno Meyer and Peadar Ó Laoghaire* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal].
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- 47 Cónal Creedon; *Rites Of Passage* [Collins Press Cork, 1995]. A short story published in Pancho & Lefty Ride Out.
- 48 Newspaper report 1915. Ref also: Tim Newark; *The Fighting Irish: The Story of the Extraordinary Irish Soldier* [Constable & Robinson / Hachette UK, 2012]. p.98. ‘...he [Michael O’Leary] speaks with an accent rather inclined to English than to the brogue, he can talk Irish too, fluently.’
- 49 *Evening Telegraph [Sheffield]* - Friday June 11th 1920.
- 50 Manus O’Riordan; *Michael O’Leary, Kuno Meyer and Peadar Ó Laoghaire* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha’n Ghaorthaidh Journal] Ref also: Frank Gallagher [NDP-Dave Hogan]; *Four Glorious Years: Irish Press - 1953*. p.43.
- 51 John A. Murphy; *Irish Times* - 31 January 2014.
- 52 *Winnipeg Tribune* - 20th May 1916.
- 53 History of The Village; Inchigeela.net [Accesses 03.04.2015].
- Micheál O’Riordan. Photo: Courtesy of Maidhc Michil’s great-grandson, Manus O’Riordan.
- 10 Translation from Irish by Dioreann Ní Ghriofa; Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin; *extract from - Seanchas An Táilliúra* [Mercier Press, 1978]. Ref also: Michael Creedon and The Spirit; [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha’n Ghaorthaidh Journal].
- 11 *Kentucky Irish American* - Saturday 27th Aug. First Edition. 1898.
- 12 Tír Na Meala: Translation: The Land Of Honey. Located near Coolea, in the hills between Ballyvourney and Ballingearry.
- 13 Dennis Walsh; *Old Irish Kingdoms and Clans*. A Supplement to Ireland’s History in Maps. Ref also: Tomás Proinsias Ó Rathaille; *Early Irish History and Mythology*. [Dublin Institute for advanced studies, 1976]. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlkik/ihm/ireclans.htm>, [Accessed: 02.04.2014].
- 14 Gila Curtis introduced by Antonia Fraser; *The Life and Times of Queen Anne* [Weidenfeld & Nicolson. London, 1972]. Ref: Queen Anne [1665–1714] – Anne became Queen of England, Scotland and Ireland on 8th March 1702. On 1 May 1707, under the Acts of Union, two of her realms, the kingdoms of England and Scotland, united as a single sovereign state known as Great Britain.
- 15 Thorpe’s Catalogue; Southwell MSS. pp.277–228.
- 16 John D’Alton; *Illustrations, Historical and Genealogical: Of King James’ Irish Army List (1689)* [E.D. Webb Dublin, 1855], p.727.
- 17 John O’Hart; *Irish Pedigrees: The Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation* [Dublin, 1887], Vol.1. Part 2. Section 1.
- 18 Geoffrey Keating; *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*. Trans: Edward Comyn & Patrick S. Dineen. [Pub Ex-Classics Project, 2009].
- 19 John O’Hart; *Irish Pedigrees: The Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation* [Dublin, 1887], Vol.1. Part 2. Section 1.
- 20 John O’Donovan ed.; *The Genealogy of Corca Loighde, Miscellany of the Celtic Society* [Dublin, 1849].
- 21 Douglas Hyde; *A Literary History of Ireland* [London, 1899]; re-pub. with revisions by Brian Ó Cuív [London & New York, 1967, 1980].
- 22 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.206.
- 23 William Cooke Taylor, William Sampson; *History of Ireland: From the Anglo-Norman Invasion Till the Union of the Country with Great Britain* [J&J Harper, New York, 1833], Vol.1. p.45.

Chapter 2 – The O’Learys of Iveleary

- 1 ‘Grandson of Iveleary’ is a term I first came across in the writings of Manus O’Riordan. It captures that sense of ‘home’ as expressed by 2nd generation diaspora.
- 2 Nicholas Reeves, John Taylor; *Howard Carter before Tutankhamun* [London: British Museum, 1992], p.141. Ref: ‘Wonderful things’: Lord Carnarvon’s record of the first words uttered by Howard Carter when he breached the doorway of the chamber to King Tutankhamun’s tomb and peered in at the treasures, 10th December 1922.
- 3 <http://historicgraves.com/graveyard/inchigeelagh/co-inkl> [Accessed 12.11.2014].
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- 5 *The Old Testament [Bible]* - Exodus 17:6.
- 6 Thomas Baurley; *Archaeologist; Gougane Barra* [Technogypsic Productions [Article], 2013]. Ref also: Windows at Gougán Barra Oratory.
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- 29 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Gaelic Land Tenure in County Cork: Uíbh Laoghaire in the Seventeenth Century. Family Names in County Cork* [Collins Press, Cork]. Ref also: John Lyons; *Parish of Inchigeelagh* [Cork Historical and Archaeological Journal, Vol.ii], pp.77, 78. Ref also: ed. Patrick O'Flannigan, Cornelius G. Buttimer; *Cork History & Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on History of an Irish County* [Geography Publications, 1993].
- 30 Burke's Landed Gentry, pp.887,951. Ref also: John D'Alton; *Illustrations, Historical and Genealogical: Of King James' Irish Army List (1689)* [Ireland, 1855], p.886.
- 31 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.211.
- 32 Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa; *Rossa's Recollections, 1838 to 1898: Memoirs of an Irish Revolutionary* [Globe Pequot Press, 2004].
- 33 Gabriel Doherty, Dermot Keogh; *Michael Collins and the Making of the Irish State* [Mercier Press, 1998].
- 34 Peter O'Leary; *Donal MacArt O'Leary* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal]. Ref also: History of The Village; Inchigeela.net 2009. [Accessed: 12.11.2014].
- 35 Calendar of State Papers, 1589. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk [Accessed 09.11.2013]. Ref also: Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.206.
- 36 Peter O'Leary; *The Last O'Leary Chieftain. Donal MacArt (1575 -1657)* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1997].
- 37 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.207. Ref: The White Sceptre of Power or White Wand of Power, was a symbol of office – one assumes it was similar to a Royal Ceremonial Mace – its description as 'white' may imply it was made of silver.
- 38 Duaid Mac Fírbis; Giolla Iosa Mór, *The Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy-Fiachrach* [University Press, MH Gill], p.449.
- 39 *Boston Globe* - 29th March 1915.
- 40 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.208
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- 42 Peter O'Leary; *The Last O'Leary Chieftain. Donal MacArt (1575 -1657)* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1997].
- 43 Samuel Lewis; *Topographical Dictionary 1837. Vol.1* [S. Lewis & Co. London, 1837]. Ref also: An Clann Ó Laoghaire / The O'Leary clan. *Castle building projects: The O'Learys and Inchigeelagh*. <http://O'Leary.inchigeelagh.com/index.php/inchigeelagh-and-the-o-learys> [Accessed: 09.11.2013]. Ref also: Peter O'Leary; *The Last O'Leary Chieftain. Donal MacArt (1575 -1657)* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1997].
- 44 'More Irish than the Irish themselves' [Irish: *Níos Gaelaí ná na Gael féin*, Latin: *Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis*]: Is a phrase coined by John Lynce (c1599–1677) in his work *Cambrensis Eversus*, to describe a phenomenon of cultural assimilation by the Hiberno-Norman Lords.
- 45 This extract is found in the introduction to the text of the Statutes of Kilkenny, 1366.
- 46 Edmund Spenser; *A view Of The Present State Of Ireland*, [CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: A project of UCC —<http://www.ucc.ie/celt>] [Accessed: 02.02.2015]. Spenser: 'Out of every corner of the wood and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them; they spoke like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eat of the carrions, and one another soon after, in so much as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves; [...] that in a short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void of man or beast.'
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- 48 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.207.
- 49 Darren McGettigan; *Red Hugh O'Donnell and the Nine Years*

- War [Four Courts Press, 2005], pp.103,109.
- 50 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.208.
- 51 Peter O'Leary; *The Battle Of Kinsale* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1997].
- 52 Thomas Stafford; *Pacta Hibernia, 1633*. Ref also: John D'Alton; *Illustrations, Historical and Genealogical: Of King James' Irish Army List (1689) - 1855*, p.704.
- 53 A Bill of Attainder: act of attainder: writ of attainder: bill of pains and penalties: is an act of a legislature declaring a person or group of persons guilty of some crime and punishing them without privilege of a judicial trial. Usually involving treason the penalty involved being outlawed with loss of all lands, titles, protection and inheritance rights. They could be killed on sight, and anyone who offered them assistance would be liable to suffer the same fate.
- 54 John Windele; *Historical and Descriptive Notices of the City of Cork, etc* [Messrs. Bolster Patrick Street, Cork, MDCCCXL], p402.
- 55 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.208. Ref: Crown confiscations lists 1606-1607.
- 56 Michael MacCarthy-Morrogh; *The Munster plantation: English migration to Southern Ireland, 1583–1641* [Oxford University Press, 1986]. Ref: Richard Boyle, 1st Earl of Cork (13 October 1566 – 15 September 1643), also known as the Great Earl of Cork, Lord Treasurer of the Kingdom of Ireland, was one of the primary beneficiaries of the Plantation of Munster.
- 57 Peter O'Leary; *The Last O'Leary Chieftain. Donal MacArt (1575 -1657)* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal].
- 58 Firganenem – this name appears to mean 'Fear gan anim' [Translated from Irish: Men [or man] without a name]. I'm not sure if this particular Bill of Attainder refers to a specific O'Leary who shall remain nameless – or to an O'Leary who was a 'person unknown' – or if 'Firganenem' implies a blanket punishment on all members of specific sept the O'Leary dan.
- 59 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork*. [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.207.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p.208.
- 61 *Muskerry Survey* [1640/41], pub. 1656.
- 62 PW Joyce; *A Concise History Of Ireland: Retreat Of O'Sullivan Beare* [1909], pp.493-494.
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- 64 Peter O'Leary; *The Battle Of Carrignacurra Castle 1602* [Cumann Staire Bhéal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh Journal, 1996].
- 65 An Clann Ó Laoghaire / The O'Leary Clan; Ref: *Castle building projects: The O'Learys and Inchigeelagh*. <http://O'Leary.inchigeelagh.com/index.php/inchigeelagh-and-the-o-learys> [Accessed: 02.04.2013].
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- 67 Tadhg Ó Cianáin; *The Flight of the Earls* [M.H. Gill, 1916].
- 68 Jonathan Bardon; *The Plantation of Ulster: War and Conflict in Ireland* [Gill & MacMillan Ltd, 2011].
- 69 Diarmuid Ó Murchadha; *Family Names Of County Cork* [Glendale Press Dun Laoghaire, 1985], p.207.
- 70 Michael C. O'Laughlin; *The Book of Irish Families, Great & Small*, [O'Laughlin, 2013], p.175.
- 71 A Bill of Attainder: act of attainder: writ of attainder: bill of pains and penalties: is an act of a legislature declaring a person or group of persons guilty of some crime and punishing them without privilege of a judicial trial. Usually involving treason the penalty usually involved being outlawed with loss of all lands, titles, protection and inheritance rights. They could be killed on sight, and anyone who offered them assistance would be liable to suffer the same fate.
- 72 John D'Alton; *Illustrations, Historical and Genealogical: Of King James' Irish Army List (1689)* [,1855], p.705.
- 73 Pádraig Lenihan; *Confederate Catholics at War, 1641-49* [Cork University Press for the Irish Committee for Historical Science, 2001].
- 74 William Petty; *The Down Survey: a Survey of Ireland. 1655 & 1656*. The survey can be explored on-line - downsurvey.tcd.ie
- 75 Michael St John Parker; *The Civil War 1642–1651* [Pitkin Pictorials, 1993]. Ref also: Noel M Griffin; *How many died during Cromwell's Campaign?* [History Ireland, 2008], Issue 6. Vol.16.

- 76 Frances Stewart; *War and Underdevelopment: Economic and Social Consequences of Conflict. vol.1* [Queen Elizabeth House Series in Development Studies, Oxford University Press, 2000], p.51.
- 77 Sean O'Callaghan; *To Hell or Barbados* [Brandon, 2002], p.85.
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- 114 Because for the most part the many Anglo-Irish wars featured battle-lines of Protestant versus Catholic – there exists a stereotype that defines Irish nationalism in sectarian terms, Catholic-nationalist and Protestant-unionist, but of course this is inaccurate and does not reflect the true picture. A glance through the pages of Irish history reveals generation after generation of non-Catholics in the Irish nationalist roll of honour: Henry Grattan, Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken, Robert Emmet, William Smith O'Brien, Charles Stewart Parnell, Sam Maguire, Constance Markievicz, Erskine Childers, Douglas Hyde, the list goes on . . .
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- 121 Seumas MacManus; *The Story Of The Irish Race* [Devin-Adair Publishing Co., New York, 1921], p.454. Ref also: William Edward Hartpole Lecky; *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* [Longmans, Green, 1808].
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 - 126 Peadar O'Donovan; *Southern Star* - 19th August 1995. Ref: ‘The Landlords were the embodiment of British Rule in Ireland and wielded unlimited power.’
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 - 15 Michael Linehan; *Hidden Cork* [Mercier Press, 2009] p.71.
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 - 22 Fathers O'Donoghue, Sweeney & Burke; *The Poetry Of Maura Bwee O'Leary [Máire Bhúí Ní Laoghaire]* [Govt. Printing Office, 1931], p.21.
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Chapter 3 – Iveleary Song and Story

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- 9 Sir Henry Parnell ; *A history of the Penal Laws against the Irish Catholics: from the treaty of Limerick to the Union* [H. Fitzpatrick, 1808].
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- 69 *Newbern Sentinel North Carolina* - 13th April 1822.
- 70 *Liverpool Mercury* - Friday 8th February 1822.
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- 76 Oliver MacDonagh; *O'Connell: The Life of Daniel O'Connell 1775–1847* [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991].
- 77 John Mitchell; *Jail Journal, or five years in British Prisons* [M. H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1914].
- 78 *Leicestershire Mercury* - Saturday 26th November 1836; 'Daniel O'Connell: The Great Agitator is still striking terror into the hearts of the Tories and filling his country with hope.'
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Chapter 6 –

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- 7 *The Straits Times, [Singapore]* - 30th July 1915.
- 8 *Daily Mirror* - Saturday 20th February 1915.
- 9 *New York Times* - 28th May 1915; *Washington Post* - 30th May 1915; *Daily Mail* - Friday 28th May 1915.
- 10 *Freemans Journal* - Thursday 3rd February 1820.
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- 13 *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* - Thursday 27th May 1915.
- 14 *Birmingham Gazette* - Tuesday 1st June 1915.
- 15 *Daily Record* - Monday 31st May 1915.
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Chapter 9 – Home is the Hero

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- 4 *Middlesex Chronicle* - 31st July 1915.
- 5 *Manchester Courier* - Wednesday 23rd June 1915.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 *Lancashire General Advertiser* - Wednesday 23rd June 1915.
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- 11 *Birmingham Daily Mail* - Thursday 24th June 1915; Lord Mayor Alderman Henry O'Shea of Cork, went on to be knighted in 1916 shortly before the 1916 Rising. Sir Henry's name is recognised in Cork as the rock/rave/dance club venue of the 1970s-1990s, known simply as 'Sir Henry's', which was located on the site of his former business on the South Main Street.
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- 33 *Liverpool Echo* - Friday 16th July 1915.
- 34 *The Times* - Saturday July 10th 1915.
- 35 *Daily Record* - Monday 12th July 1915.
- 36 *The Straits Times [Singapore]* - 30th July 1915.
- 37 *Birmingham Daily Mail* - Thursday 24th June 1915.
- 38 *Auckland Star* - 11th September 1915.
- 39 *Dundee Evening Telegraph* - Friday 9th July 1915. 'The Modest VC – O'Leary objects to being made a fuss of, –'There is one thing I don't like, and that is to be made a fuss of,' he said. 'I don't see what I have done more than any man, and I cannot understand all the cry over me.'
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- 41 *Birmingham Daily Mail* - Tuesday 20th July 1915.
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- 43 Peter Geoghegan; *Irishman's Diary: T.P. O'Connor*. *Irish Times* - 17th July 2012.
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- 48 Michael Mac Donagh; *The Irish At The Front Line. XII. For Valour* [Hodder and Stoughton 1916] Ref also: Tony Spagnoly & Ted Smith; *Salient Points Three: Ypres & Picardy 1914-18* [Pen and Sword]. P.63.
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Chapter 10 – From the Balmy to the Bizarre

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Sheila O’Mahony [Kelleher]
Uta Baatz

Critical Review for Cónal Creedon

SECOND CITY TRILOGY – stage plays

Creedon's great gift seems to be observation, forty-five tense, funny and pointed minutes, convincing and memorably skillful. *When I Was God* is both a treat and a treasure.

Mary Leland – *The Irish Times*

Vigorously sustained by stylish performances and an ingenious script which marries comedy and pathos with a sure hand. They'll love it. It's impossible not to.

The Sunday Times – Culture

Cónal Creedon is back in town, he has won a fair few fans here [Shanghai] in recent years.

In a style charting the Human Condition life, death and all points inbetween.

Spontaneous and anecdotal, with a style that ranges from hilariously funny to insightfully poignant – already earmarked as a must see performance.

Arts Editor – *That's Shanghai Magazine* – 2012

Creedon's rootedness in Cork qualifies him to chronicle the transformations that not just Cork City, but all of Ireland, caused by the economic boom of the 1990s.

At times it feels Beckett-like, you might think the places and people are too unusual to exist, but they actually do.

Gwen Orel – NY City Arts – *New York's Review of Culture* – 2009

The highlight of last years theatre in Shanghai came all the way from Cork in Irish playwrights Cónal Creedon's double-header – powerful, yet punctuated with humour, lyrical, and richly colloquial. They were terrific.

That's Shanghai Magazine [China] Arts Editor – March 2011

UNDER THE GOLDIE FISH – radio series

Gold card radio with plums on – enough to make Gabriel Garcia Marques turn puce in a pique of jealousy.

Tom Widger – *The Sunday Tribune*

They were discussing what should go into the Irish Millennium Time-Capsule.

If they are looking for something to represent Ireland how about,

Cónal Creedon's *Under the Goldie Fish*? It's so off the wall, that it shouldn't ring true, but the most frightening fact is that it does...

Eilis O'Hanlon – *The Sunday Independent*

Michael O'Leary was born in Iveleary, the ancient tribal homeland of the O'Leary clan. It is a land of the warrior and the poet, where history and story go hand in hand, and the spiritual and the natural complement each other without contradiction or contrivance.

This is a story of Ireland with the clan O'Leary at its core. It offers a perspective of Irish history as viewed from the half-door of a hillside cottage in Iveleary. It is a saga that thunders along the beautiful green and leafy Lee Valley – from its mystical source high up over Gougán, all the way to the Gearagh and the broad meandering latticework of waterways of Corcach Mór na Mumhan.

Iveleary is not just a destination, it is a journey into time; it is a sound, a scent, a state of mind. Cónal Creedon invites you to join him on his voyage of discovery into the heartland of O'Leary country; a land where fact and fiction dovetail together seamlessly, and pagan tradition and Christian belief become one.

Critical acclaim for CÓNAL CREEDON

As written by Cónal Creedon, such moments resound with wince-inducing authenticity before they are eclipsed by an inspirational twist.

Words, inflected with the faintly Scandinavian accent of Munster, soar like a bracing breeze off the River Lee. [*The Cure*]

The New York Times – Andy Webster [2013]

This is contemporary theater that plays like the work of a past master. The work of Irish playwright Cónal Creedon, is quite simply a delight.

Underlying all is a love of language and a keen observance of detail. Creedon is lyrical, he uses rhyme and rhythm, without being showy, and enriches with the Cork colloquial without alienating. Come back soon, you are always welcome on the Shanghai stage.

[*When I Was God & After Luke*]

Talk Shanghai, China – Ned Kelly [2010]

Mr. Creedon's words are enough to create a world that is at once comic and dramatic, poetic and musical. [*When I Was God & After Luke*]

The New York Times – Ratchel Shaltz [2009]



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