



remembrance ni

John Redmond, the Ulster unionist chaplain who comforted Willie Redmond, a dying Irish nationalist MP, on WW1 battlefield

It is a scenario which would defy most Hollywood script writers. One of the most human and profound incidents in the First World War, is the death of Major Willie

Redmond (photo right). A Catholic and nationalist political leader, he was a member of the Westminster parliament. He was ministered to by a Unionist Protestant chaplain, with



whom he shared the same surname. During his last moments he received spiritual comfort from the Reverend John Redmond, a 36th (Ulster) Division chaplain, who came from Tartaraghan in County Armagh.

Major Willie Redmond

William Hoey Kearney Redmond was born on 15 April 1861 into a Catholic gentry family of Norman descent that had been associated with County Wexford for seven centuries. His father, William Archer Redmond, was the Home Rule Party MP for Wexford Borough from 1872 to 1880.

Willie Redmond's older brother was John Redmond who became leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party; he also had two sisters. His mother Mary was of Protestant stock from County Wicklow and a daughter of General R H Hoey of the Wicklow Rifles and the 61st Regiment.

Willie Redmond grew up in Ballytrent, County Wexford and like his father was educated at Clongowes Wood College from 1873-1876 after previously attending the preparatory school at Knockbeg College and St Patrick's College, Carlow (1871-72). On leaving school he apprenticed himself on a merchant sailing ship before taking a commission in the Wexford militia, the Royal Irish Regiment, on 24 December 1879.

He became a second lieutenant in October 1880 but then resigned the following year to join the Irish National Land League, which would see him imprisoned three times for his activities as a land reform agitator. He and his brother John travelled to Australia to raise funds for the Land League and

whilst there met two sisters who would eventually become their wives. Willie married Eleanor Mary Dalton.

Willie was elected in absentia as MP for his father's old Wexford Borough constituency, subsequently taking his seat in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. When the Wexford Borough constituency was abolished during the 1885 general election, he was returned for Fermanagh North constituency. In 1892, he was elected MP for the Clare East constituency, from which he was returned unopposed from 1900 until his death.

With the advent of the First World War, John Redmond, then the leader of Irish Parliamentary Party, called on Irish Volunteers to enlist in the Irish regiments of Kitchener's New Service Army, namely the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions, in the belief that it would strengthen the cause to later implement the Home Rule Act, which had been suspended for the duration of the war.

At 53 years of age, Willie Redmond was one of the first Nationalist Volunteers to volunteer for the army after hearing that a German Zeppelin had bombed civilian targets in Britain. In doing so, he addressed vast gatherings of fellow Volunteers, Hibernians and the UIL, encouraging voluntary enlistment in support of the British and Allied war cause and "for the greater good".

In November 1914 he made a famous recruiting speech in Cork; "I do not say to you go, but grey haired and old as I am, I say come, come with me to the war. If Germany wins we are all endangered."



Two nuns and three young girls at the grave of Maj William Redmond in Locre, Belgium, during the first World War. Redmond was mortally wounded during the Battle of Messines.

He felt that he might serve Ireland best in the firing line and was one of five Irish MPs who served with Irish brigades.

Willie Redmond was commissioned as a captain in his former regiment, the Royal Irish Regiment, and went to the Western Front with the 16th (Irish) Division in the winter of 1915-16. He was soon in action and was mentioned in dispatches by Sir Douglas Haig. Willie Redmond was promoted to the rank of Major on 15 July 1916 but the promotion took him away from the action much to his displeasure and he only succeeded in returning to his beloved 'A' Company of the 6th Battalion the night before the Battle of Messines on the 6 June 1917, where according to his commanding officer Major Charles Taylor, "he spoke to every man".

One of the nineteen mines blown on 7 June was at Macdelstede Farm immediately in front of the Royal Irish Regiment's 'A' and 'B' companies, which then advanced shoulder to shoulder with men of 36th (Ulster) Division in the great attack on Messines Ridge and towards the small village of Wytschaete (now Wijtschate).

On reaching their first objectives the remainder of the battalion ('C' & 'D' Coys) passed through them and took Wytschaete. But Major Willie Redmond, who one of the first out of the trenches, was hit almost immediately in the wrist and then in the leg; unable to carry on he could do no more than urge his men forward.

Some distance away from where Willie Redmond lay, Pte John Meeke of the 36th (Ulster) Division's 11th Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers was searching the battlefield for the wounded and saw the Major fall. Using what cover he could, he made his way to the 16th (Irish) Division officer he had seen and as he tended the Major's wounds they came under heavy fire resulting in Meeke receiving a wound to his left side.

The Major saw that the young Ulsterman was bleeding profusely and ordered him to return to the British lines. Pte Meeke refused and moments later was hit again. Again the Major gave Pte Meeke an order to return to the British lines and yet again he refused.

The two men were repeatedly fired on until they were eventually rescued by a patrol from the 36th (Ulster) Division who were escorting German prisoners back to British lines.

Major Redmond was carried off the field of battle to a Casualty Clearing Station located at a hospice in the grounds of the Locre (now Loker) Catholic Convent where, despite the efforts of field surgeons, died that afternoon and during his last moments he received spiritual comfort by a 36th (Ulster) Division chaplain, Reverend John Redmond.

On the road between Locre and Kemmel in southwest [Flanders](#), where the land gently rises, there stands a solitary war grave. The grave of Major [Willie Redmond](#) MP is simple, consisting of a limestone cross, paid for by his widow Eleanor, flanked in a triangular fashion by two stones from the old convent. Evergreen shrubs surround it.

When British soldiers died in the first World War, they were either buried in one of the hundreds of beautifully manicured Commonwealth [War Graves Commission](#) graves which are everywhere in this corner of [Belgium](#) or, if their bodies were not recovered from the battlefield, they were remembered on memorial walls.

Of the 174,000 British soldiers who died in Flanders in the first World War, only Redmond is buried apart, a testimony to his significance as the most famous Irish casualty of the Great War and a sitting MP.

Willie Redmond was an Irish patriot and a British soldier. That paradox was not so obvious when he signed up to fight at the age of 53 in November 1914.

In September of that year his brother John had challenged the Irish Volunteers to go “wherever the firing line extends in defence of right, of freedom and of religion”.

Willie Redmond fully subscribed to the notion of the war being for the defence of small nations declaring: “The Belgians never did the Germans any harm, and yet Belgium was invaded and the Belgian people were massacred and their homes and churches destroyed. If, in the time to come, we in Ireland could not show we had struck a blow for Belgium, then, indeed, I believe that our name would be disgraced.”

There was also a compelling personal reason for the Redmonds’ interest in the war. Their niece Dame Teresa had been a nun in the Benedictine convent in Ypres, a place that had been popular with generations of middle-class Irish Catholic women with a vocation.

Nobody expected Willie Redmond to volunteer; no one would have thought less of him if he hadn’t; yet in Cork in November 1914 he did just that, while addressing a crowd of Irish Volunteers.

He carefully set out his reasons for joining. He had been jailed three times; an ancestor of his had been hanged during the 1798 rebellion. Nobody cared more about the freedom of Ireland than he did. Nobody could question his patriotism, but home rule had been granted. The British empire’s war was now Ireland’s war, he told them:

“And when it comes to the question, as it may come, of asking young Irishmen to go abroad and fight this battle, when I am personally convinced that the battle of Ireland is to be fought where many Irishmen now are, in Flanders and France, old as I am, and grey as are my hairs, I will say, ‘Don’t go, but come with me’.”

In February 1915, at the age of 53, overweight and out of shape, William Redmond was commissioned into the Sixth Battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment.

He was kept out of harm's way during the battle of the [Somme](#). In March 1917, he made his last speech in the House of Commons. He began by assuring the house that, despite all that had gone on in Ireland during the previous year with the Easter Rising, "the great, generous heart of the Irish race beats in sympathy with the Allies' cause".

He then went on to make a last impassioned and ultimately doomed plea for reconciliation between Britain and Ireland. "What I want to ask, in all simplicity, is this: whether, in face of the tremendous conflict which is now raging, whether, in view of the fact that, apart from every other consideration, the Irish people, South as well as North, are on the side of the Allies and against the German pretension today, it is not possible, from this war, to make a new start."

His battalion was stationed near the hospice situated in the grounds of the convent in Locre. He regularly attended Mass there and developed a friendship with the nuns.

For three days prior to the battle, he and Fr Edmund Kelly, the chaplain to his battalion, slept in the cellar under the chapel at the hospice, which was also a field hospital.

Redmond pestered the War Office to be allowed to go over the top at the battle of Messines Ridge. Eventually Maj Gen [Sir William Hickie](#), the officer commanding the 16th (Irish) Division relented, but only to go in the third wave of the initial attack.

After the massive explosions that blew the Germans off the hillsides in Messines and the initial waves had gone over the top, Redmond charged out of his trench. An (unnamed) comrade told *The Tablet* that Redmond “had a joke and a smile for every man and, as we flew over the parapet to shouts of ‘up the county Clare’, Major Willie showed us a clean pair of heels”. He was soon hit by bullets in the wrist and legs.

The 16th (Irish) Division and the 36th (Ulster) Division fought together at Messines Ridge. The divisional boundary was marked by Redmond’s battalion on one side and the 11th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers on the other.

Redmond was rescued from the battlefield by **Private John Meeke**, a stretcher bearer with the 11th. Meeke dodged machine gun fire to attend to Redmond’s wounds. He himself was hit by shrapnel before the pair were rescued by a Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers patrol.

Meeke received the Military Medal for his actions on the battlefield that day. He survived the war, but could not survive the peace and succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 28 in December 1923. He died too late to be given a military grave. Instead he was buried in an unmarked grave in the Derrykeighan burial ground near Ballymoney in Co Antrim until 2004 when a headstone was erected by local people.

Redmond was carried to the safety of a field dressing station. His injuries were bad, but not life-threatening, or so it was believed. But he had been much too old for the privations of the trenches, which had left him physically weakened.

“His wounds were not grave, but he had overtaxed himself and in a few hours he succumbed to shock,” his fellow MP and British officer Stephen Gwynn observed.

“It was the death that he had foreseen, that he had always desired – a death that many might have envied him. He had said more than once since the rebellion that he thought he could best serve Ireland by dying.”

Hickie ordered a coffin and Redmond was taken to the convent chapel in Locré. He was buried in the convent grounds probably with a view to moving him to a war cemetery at a later date.

His death profoundly affected public opinion in Ireland and beyond. The pope sent a message of condolence, as did King George VI and Edward Carson. Poor, good-hearted, generous-minded Willie Redmond was gone. His fellow nationalist MP, Sir Walter Nugent, put it succinctly: “He was too good for politics.”

Redmond's grave

There are many reasons why Willie Redmond has a solitary grave, but none have anything to do with him.

He did not, as has been reported several times in the Irish media, make a request that, in the event of his death, he be buried apart from his fellow British soldiers in protest at the execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising. Such a request would never have been countenanced by the War Office; nor would Redmond ever have contemplated such an idea.

Redmond's is a lonely grave, but in life he was never a lonely man. “He had constant good humour and integrity

and his sense of fair play nobody ever questioned,” his brother’s biographer Denis Gwynn concluded.

“It is strange now to think that his forgotten grave, beside the convent, where he used to pray in those harrowing times, should have become known as the lonely Irish hero’s grave. No man was ever less lonely in fact and had so many devoted friends.”

Willie Redmond’s grave was already a place of pilgrimage when a delegation from Ireland visited it in November 1917. It could have been moved on many occasions over the next century.

Wife and French priest resisted move of grave

The founder of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, Sir Fabian Ware, found it intolerable that the grave could remain in situ while those of other men were moved into official war cemeteries, but Eleanor Redmond would not countenance it.

She wrote to the commission in 1919: “I should only wish to have my husband’s grave left untouched . . . I just want it left where it is in the good care of the nuns.”

In the intervening years, the occasional visitor remarked at how unkempt it had become. In March 1967, the commission made the decision to move Redmond’s grave into the nearby hospice military cemetery. It did so after getting the support of Willie Redmond’s closest relative, his great-nephew John Redmond Green, who wrote to the commission saying he was “fully in agreement” with the proposals.

The commission would have exhumed Redmond's grave were it not for the imminent 50th anniversary commemoration of his death, which was to take place in Locré in June 1967.

It had not reckoned on the righteous anger of an elderly local priest named Fr Rafaël Augustinus Debevere.

Debevere, the director of the nearby St Anthony Hospice, was dismayed by any attempt to move the grave. It would be against the "explicit wishes" of Redmond's wife, he told the commission.

Debevere conceded that in the past the grave had been unkempt, but "through my intervention the grave was cleaned from weeds and superfluous bushes and trees. Now it stands in a peaceful neighbourhood before seven maples."

The local commune was equally animated about the commission's proposals: "We request you in our name as well as in the name of Rev Debevere: do not do it! [their emphasis]."

The publicity generated by his campaign made newspapers in Britain and the United States too. The commission now had a public relations headache.

The commission relented and in 1980 the local authority decreed that Willie Redmond's grave must never be moved.

In 1995, Terence Denman published the first biography of Willie Redmond, *A Lonely Grave*. He had cause to lament. "Willie Redmond, like all the nationalist Irish who fought in the Great War, has been pushed to the margins of Irish history. Realistically, his life may be seen as a tragic failure."

Sea change in Irish attitude to WW1 service

Yet, since Denman's book was published, there has been a sea change in attitudes to the nationalist Irishmen who served in the first World War. Redmond's message of peace and reconciliation between Britain and Ireland was an idea whose time had come.

Taoiseach Enda Kenny and the British prime minister David Cameron visited Willie Redmond's grave on December 19th, 2013.

Kenny left a laurel wreath on one ceremonial stone; Cameron left a wreath of poppies on the other. An Irish Guardsman from the British army and an Irish soldier stood by his grave.

Willie Redmond, who gave his life for a free and confident Ireland at peace with Britain, would surely have approved.

The centenary of his death will be marked by the unveiling of a new memorial commissioned by the local authority in Heuvelland. This corten steel silhouette depicts Redmond being carried off the battlefield by Meeke. It will be located at the exact spot where Willie Redmond died 100 years ago.

The people of Flanders have often taken a livelier interest in Willie Redmond and his memory than those at home. The symbolism of these two Irishmen from different traditions is not lost in Belgium, which has its own historic difficulties between the Flemish and Walloon people, though one that has never led to bloodshed.

Reverend John Redmond



The Reverend John Redmond came from Tartaraghan, Armagh. He obtained a BA in

1899. He was ordained deacon in 1912 and priest in 1913 by the Bishop of Down and Connor. He then served as curate-assistant of St Aidan's Belfast 1912 - 15 (Sandy Row area) and curate-assistant of Holywood 1915 - 1916.

Rev. John Redmond (Photo above) then offered to serve in the Royal Army Chaplains' Department. He was interviewed on 16/12/1915, deemed to be medically fit and was commissioned as a Temporary Chaplain to the Forces 4th Class (equivalent rank to a captain) from 01/01/1916. He served as a chaplain from 1916 - 1918.

He first served in Egypt. Rev. John Redmond CF then was assigned to the 36th (Ulster) Division. He arrived at the Somme on 16/06/1916 and witnessed at first hand the dreadful loss of life and terrible injuries suffered by the soldiers who took part in the Battle of the Somme and subsequent battles. He was based at a casualty clearing station a few miles behind the front and spent time with the pastoral care of the wounded, writing letters to the families of soldiers who had died and conducting funeral services.

Rev. Redmond was later attached to the 9th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers during their time



The Rev John Redmond in India in the early 1900s

fighting at Wijtschate when the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions fought alongside each other.

Serving as an army chaplain during World War 1 also had its dangers as from around 4,400 chaplains recruited 179 lost their lives in the conflict.

When John Redmond returned to clerical duties in Ireland he rarely spoke of his wartime experiences but he did keep detail of his time as a chaplain in his diaries. Canon Ted Fleming who was rector of Tartaraghan got to know Rev. John Redmond and through his neice had access to his dairies.

A padre's war dairies

When his casualty clearing station received the first convoy of wounded from the front, he wrote, "It is a most

heartbreaking sight to see a victim struggling in anguish for breath,”. On July 1, the infantry launched an attack on the German lines and the station was inundated with injured soldiers, admitting about 1,000 in three days.

There were some 60,000 British casualties (including 20,000 killed) during the first day of the assault, with the 36th Ulster Division suffering heavy losses. In the days and



The Reverend John Redmond, a chaplain, holding a dog. Near Dranouter, West Flanders, Belgium on 12th June 1917. Image courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

weeks that followed, the Rev Redmond spent his days visiting the wounded, writing letters for patients and to relations of those who had died, and conducting funerals.

Among those he tended on the battlefield was **James Emerson** from Louth, aged 21, who was posthumously awarded the **Victoria Cross**. The Rev Redmond wrote to the young soldier's mother telling her of his gallant actions and of his final moments "when he thought of you".

He wrote, "War is a barbarous thing and cruel and atrocious beyond words. This comes home to one with a shock as one sees young men coming in from the battlefield with the most terrible gashes and wounds - faces broken and swollen into all shapes and into no shape, limbs blown off and bones stripped of their flesh.

"It is pitiful to see the unconscious fling their arms, and the constant turning and rising and changing position of those who have fatal wounds; and to look at the patient and uncomplaining suffering of strong men, whose faces are now pale as death and lie helpless."

On a happier note, he noted that a soldier was brought in who had been lying for 13 days on the battlefields. "He had many wounds and was delirious when found, there were maggots in his wounds, but soon he was making a wonderful recovery."

At the beginning of September, feeling that he had done his share of hospital work, the Rev Redmond applied for transfer to the Ulster Division troops serving in the trenches, but was posted to a vacancy with the 64th Brigade. He was shocked to see the whole countryside "a wilderness of mud with troops, horses and transport ploughing through it".

His division moved up the trenches in October, coming under heavy attack. The Somme offensive ended with the battle of Ancre from November 13-18. The number of men killed on both sides over 140 days exceeded 1.3 million, which included 400,000 British casualties.

The Somme Heritage Centre in Conlig, near Newtownards, has artefacts of John Redmond's wartime ministry.

Redmond's post-war ministry

After the war John Redmond became curate-assistant of St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast 1918 -20.

The Reverend Wallace Fenton, who was baptised by John Redmond writes - In 1920 he was appointed Vicar of the large and sprawling Parish of Ballymacarrett. 'The Flock had grown at such a rate that the Vicar could not have expected to adequately serve all the needs of the Parish', so inevitably Mr Redmond made many changes and proved to be a brilliant organiser.



As a result of a door-to-door census of the Parish he found that 18,000 people claimed to be members of the Church, but around 13,000 never darkened the door. He was appalled at the number of people who never opened their Bibles, said their prayers or who could not repeat The Ten Commandments. He was distressed that there was little



Kilbride Parish Church

provision made to encourage children to follow in the ways of the Lord. To meet this urgent need he set about re-organising the Parish into six districts, each with a Curate Assistant, a Superintendent of Sustentation, and a band of workers who were to assist in the work of the Church and its outreach; and the building of new Halls in each section of the Parish. They in turn raised sufficient funds to enable the Parish to pay its way.

The Reverend Silver John

Due to the hard work and diligent ministry for a period of almost ten years it was inevitable that Mr Redmond was ready for a lighter charge as the stress and strain of it all led to a breakdown in his health. It was at this stage that he was obliged to resign as Vicar of St Patrick's, Ballymacarrett, and take up the 'light duty' at St Bride's Church in the Parish of Kilbride on 5th January, 1930.

After a short period of rest and recuperation in a small country parish the Reverend Mr Redmond began what has been described as 'a most faithful and successful ministry' for 22 years, preaching and teaching the Christian faith both in Church and in the local school. Although he never drove a car or rode a bicycle he visited his parishioners regularly on foot, together with his dog, a Great Dane, named Sheila. Always concerned about the needs of people in the entire district he was responsible for the building of six houses in the village of Doagh, known as Edenmore Terrace on the Burn Road, the income from which added greatly to the Parish economy.

Mr Redmond was well known in Doagh and Ballyclare district for his Annual Sports Day held at Dixon Park, the home ground of Ballyclare Comrades Football Club. Although the weather was seldom favourable for sporting activities in the middle of summer the competitions organised by the Rector drew large crowds from far and near and everyone seemed to enjoy the fun and excitement of the day. The Select Vestry and Parishioners always appreciated the Reverend John's endeavours, which were always successful, in helping to augment the finances of the church. In making a financial appeal his typical phrase

was: “No coppers please; just a silver collection!” hence the common name by which he was known was ‘The Reverend Silver John’!

Having completed a long, unique incumbency in the Parish of Kilbride, Mr Redmond retired from serving in parochial ministry on 30th September, 1951, and moved back to his homeland for a period of 16 years in happy retirement. He passed on to his eternal reward at the great age of 91 years on the 17th July, 1967, and his ashes were interred in Tartaraghan Parish Churchyard in the presence of a Kilbride Parishioner who was able to say: “Well done thou good and faithful servant: enter into the joy of the Lord”.

Acknowledgments

Terence Denman, author of the first biography of Willie Redmond, *A Lonely Grave*, published 1995.

Rev W Fenton

Canon WET Fleming

Imperial War Museum

Irish Times

Kilbride Parish Magazine

Lurgan Mail

Ronan McGreevy, Irish Times journalist and author of *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front*

Wexford Branch Legion

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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