

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Blood-debts and Battlefields: Ulster Imperialism and Masculine Authority on the Western Front 1916–1918

Jane McGaughey

Volume 20, Number 2, 2009

Social History of Empire

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/044397ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/044397ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McGaughey, J. (2009). Blood-debts and Battlefields: Ulster Imperialism and Masculine Authority on the Western Front 1916–1918. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 20(2), 3–27.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/044397ar>

Article abstract

Men's bodies were one of the more notable sites of conflict in Northern Ireland after the 1918 armistice. Long before the war was over, Ulstermen had become part of a public legacy of blood-sacrifice and the epic mythology of warrior manliness surrounding the 36th (Ulster) Division. The predominantly Protestant north-east of Ireland revelled in heroic language and romantic sentiment about their losses and the consequences of their sacrifice. For years after their most famous battle at the Somme on the 1st of July 1916, Unionists maintained a vibrant communal memory that pointedly excluded the achievements and sacrifices of the 16th (Irish) and 10th (Irish) Divisions, to the detriment of northern Nationalist veterans. More importantly, the ramifications of northern society's understanding of soldiering masculinities directly led to some of the more infamous physical events of The Troubles from 1920 to 1922. These episodes included the violent shipyard expulsions in Belfast, the intimidation of shell-shocked ex-servicemen, membership in vigilante paramilitary societies, and government-mandated floggings of Catholic veterans in a society that prized service in the Great War as the greatest hallmark of modern Irish masculinity. The language of sacrifice within the public sphere, witnessed in public discourse and literally imprinted upon the bodies of those deemed unworthy and unmanly, mythologized one group of men at the expense of another, making the legacy of the Great War and the actions of and upon male bodies highly significant and influential factors in Northern Ireland for the rest of the twentieth century.

Blood-debts and Battlefields: Ulster Imperialism and Masculine Authority on the Western Front 1916–1918

JANE MCGAUGHEY

Abstract

Men's bodies were one of the more notable sites of conflict in Northern Ireland after the 1918 armistice. Long before the war was over, Ulstermen had become part of a public legacy of blood-sacrifice and the epic mythology of warrior manliness surrounding the 36th (Ulster) Division. The predominantly Protestant north-east of Ireland revelled in heroic language and romantic sentiment about their losses and the consequences of their sacrifice. For years after their most famous battle at the Somme on the 1st of July 1916, Unionists maintained a vibrant communal memory that pointedly excluded the achievements and sacrifices of the 16th (Irish) and 10th (Irish) Divisions, to the detriment of northern Nationalist veterans. More importantly, the ramifications of northern society's understanding of soldiering masculinities directly led to some of the more infamous physical events of The Troubles from 1920 to 1922. These episodes included the violent shipyard expulsions in Belfast, the intimidation of shell-shocked ex-servicemen, membership in vigilante paramilitary societies, and government-mandated floggings of Catholic veterans in a society that prized service in the Great War as the greatest hallmark of modern Irish masculinity. The language of sacrifice within the public sphere, witnessed in public discourse and literally imprinted upon the bodies of those deemed unworthy and unmanly, mythologized one group of men at the expense of another, making the legacy of the Great War and the actions of and upon male bodies highly significant and influential factors in Northern Ireland for the rest of the twentieth century.

Résumé

Au lendemain de l'armistice de 1918, en Irlande du Nord, le corps masculin s'est révélé l'un des plus remarquables lieux de conflit imaginables. Bien avant la fin de la guerre, les habitants de l'Ulster s'étaient trouvés investis de l'héritage public du sacrifice du sang et de la mythologie épique de la virilité guerrière entourant la 36^e division (Ulster). Pendant des années après leur plus célèbre bataille, celle de la Somme le 1^{er} juillet 1916, les Irlandais du Nord-Est, à prédominance protestante, se sont délectés d'un langage héroïque et

d'un sentiment romantique pour évoquer les pertes et les conséquences de leurs sacrifices, donnant lieu à un vif souvenir collectif construit à l'exclusion des réalisations et des sacrifices des 16^e et 10^e Divisions (Irlande), au détriment des anciens combattants nationalistes du Nord. Par-dessus tout, la conception nord-irlandaise de la virilité militaire a directement conduit à certaines des confrontations tristement célèbres des Troubles, de 1920 à 1922. Parmi ces épisodes, il faut citer les expulsions violentes des chantiers navals à Belfast, l'intimidation d'anciens combattants commotionnés, les actions de sociétés paramilitaires d'autojustice et les flagellations d'anciens combattants catholiques autorisées par le gouvernement dans une société valorisant le service de la Grande Guerre comme sceau suprême de la virilité irlandaise moderne. Le langage du sacrifice dans la sphère publique, attesté dans le discours public et littéralement gravé sur le corps des hommes jugés indignes ou lâches, a eu pour effet de transformer en héros mythiques un groupe d'hommes au détriment d'un autre, faisant de l'héritage de la Grande Guerre et des gestes posés par les hommes (et sur leur corps) des réalités très significatives et d'une grande influence en Irlande du Nord pendant tout le reste du XX^e siècle.

On 1 July 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, 2nd Lieutenant John Leslie Stewart-Moore of the 12th Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles, 36th (Ulster) Division walked through Thiepval Wood toward the front lines. "As I made my way there along the path," he recalled:

I met a deserter coming in the opposite direction. I reasoned with him and tried to persuade him to return to his duty but he was obdurate, even if I had persuaded him to go back there was no likelihood that he could ever find his unit and rejoin it. I suppose that by the strict letter of Military Law I should have placed him under arrest and brought him before a Court Martial. In circumstances that was quite impossible, we were just two men in a wood and he was probably the more powerful of the two so reluctantly I let him go and said nothing — wonder what happened to him.¹

Stewart-Moore's private tale of desertion and circumvented duty was the exact opposite of Captain Wilfrid Spender's prominent publication, "The Ulstermen's Charge," in which Spender famously declared:

I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, on the first of July, as I followed their amazing attack, I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world Beginning at a slow walk over "No Man's Land", they then suddenly let loose, as they charged over the two front lines of the enemy's

1 Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), 77/39/1, J.L. Stewart-Moore, "Random Recollections," 35.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

trenches shouting “No surrender, boys” The Ulster Division lost very heavily, and in doing so sacrificed itself for the Empire.²

Together, these two accounts — Spender’s epic image of the 36th Division going over the top and Stewart-Moore’s matter-of-fact description of desertion occurring the very same day — capture the essential tensions between public and private representations of Ulster masculinities on the Western Front during the Great War. Spender was an example of Unionist propagandists who had no conception of desertion in their version of the war, while Stewart-Moore was a soldier on the front lines without a party affiliation or political agenda.³ As with other soldiers in the First World War, the discrepancy between appearance and reality of Ulstermen on the battlefield was very wide.

This paper examines idealized representations of Unionist Ulstermen in the Great War,⁴ and the political ramifications this warrior imagery created in the years following the armistice. Representations of Ulster masculinities in the popular press were statements of power about what seemed to be real, as opposed to actual fact. Obviously, this theme was not restricted to the north of Ireland. The association of masculine virtue with soldiering and a martial atmosphere was a source of national strength for numerous countries during the era of the Great War. The notion that a true man had to serve a higher ideal stood as a central idea behind the militarization of masculinity.⁵

What did set Ulster apart, however, was the blatant use of the war by pro-British politicians and their supporters to propagate the stereotype that the north-east corner of Ireland was uniformly Protestant, Unionist, and loyal to the 36th (Ulster) Division, which had gone over the top on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916. Unionists believed that their war experience had been unique and that the men who had fought in the 36th Division had redefined heroism unlike any other unit in the war. Depictions of the Ulster Division’s manliness on the Western Front facilitated revisionist histories of the war in the years immediately after the armistice that were heavily biased in favour of Ulster Protestant-Unionism, at the expense of nationalist and Catholic veterans. The actions of the 36th (Ulster) Division at the Somme in July 1916 were commandeered by biased politicians, newspapers, and, occasionally, historians who transformed the image Ulstermen in uniform into a monolith of

2 Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), Carson Papers, D.1507/A/18/2, Captain Wilfrid B. Spender, “The Attack of the Ulstermen by a Staff Officer,” 2 July 1916. Courtesy of Deputy Keeper of the Records at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

3 IWM 77/39/1, Stewart-Moore, “Random Recollections,” 11–12.

4 “Unionist” denotes a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, while “unionist” represents the broader community which wished to maintain the British connection. The same style is also used for “Nationalist” and “nationalist.”

5 George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44.

Protestant-Unionist sensibilities. This modern mythology simultaneously lionized the men of the 36th Division while discounting the experiences of the all-Irish divisions who fought together on the western front. An analysis of the 36th Division's manly reputation deepens our knowledge of masculinities in the First World War by underscoring the political manipulation of masculine imagery and language, and by adding the complexity of gender analysis to the traditional paradigm of Protestant-Catholic relations in the period before the partition of Ireland.

World War I has been and continues to be a site of extensive debate within studies of masculinities.⁶ Militarization was an important part of the relationship between Irish communities and constructs of masculinity. In *A Military History of Ireland* (1996), Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery propose that Ireland is an island where war and the threat of war have shaped all aspects of society and that it would not be surprising if further examinations reveal that "an Irish military tradition turns out to be central to the Irish historical experience, and a key element in modern Irish identity."⁷ I do not want to suggest that expressions or ideals of manliness were by themselves the agents of change, either on the battlefield or the home front; rather, I prefer to align my research with Michael Roper's suggestion that investigations of masculinities tend "to work within, rather than to recast, established topics and chronologies."⁸ In the following argument, masculinity serves as a lens for analyzing interpretations of militarization, nationalism, loyalism, and communal identities. As R.W. Connell has written, examinations of manliness and masculinities highlight issues of marginalization and resistance and illuminate the implications gendered scenarios have in terms of bodily experience, identity construction, and cultural expression.⁹ Perceptions of manliness in a martial environment are measures of power relationships between men, incorporating such characteristics as fraternalism, heroism, fellowship, and, conversely, adversarial fractiousness. Different expressions of manliness in a given society can reveal not only social ideals and dogma, but histories of the emotions and the concept of war as a gendered experience for men.

6 For example, see T.G. Ashplant, *Fractured Loyalties: Masculinity, Class and Politics in Britain, 1900-1930* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering The Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Mosse, *The Image of Man*.

7 Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, "An Irish military tradition?" in *A Military History of Ireland*, eds. Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

8 Michael Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-1950," *Journal of British Studies* 44 (April 2005): 343.

9 R.W. Connell, *The Men and The Boys* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 8 and 29.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

Masculinities within the context of Ulster's participation in the Great War involve the popular images of soldiers, as depicted in newspapers and political propaganda, as well as the private thoughts of the men themselves recorded in war diaries, letters, and memoirs. Irish Unionists, particularly those in Ulster, the north-east province of the country, wished to maintain all political and social connections with Great Britain, whereas Irish Nationalists desired some form of increased independence from Westminster, ranging in form from Home Rule to militant republicanism.¹⁰ While often heavily biased, newspapers are crucial to this time period, both for their printed opinions and for their conflicting reports of key events that divided the Protestant and Catholic communities in Ulster. The *Belfast News-Letter*, *Northern Whig*, *Belfast Weekly News*, and *Belfast Evening Telegraph* consistently demonstrated unionist readership and sympathies. Conversely, the *Irish News* and *Irish Independent* were notably nationalistic in their tone and editorials, although not necessarily republican. Newspaper coverage of the First World War exemplified cases of manly appearance versus reality taken to an extreme level, with public representations of heroism and sacrifice overwhelming the actual experiences and motivations of individual men in uniform, not in the least because, by 1916, the Western Front had become an extension of Irish domestic politics.

Throughout their various political and cultural campaigns, each camp greatly influenced idealized images of Ireland and of Irishmen within the public sphere. Unionist society expected Ulstermen fighting in France and Flanders to correspond to a specific image of warrior masculinity that incorporated the popular mythology of Ulster's sacrificial blood-debt, the belief that by dying in battle for the empire, Unionists would forever bind Ulster to Great Britain as its "Imperial Province," a haven for Protestant loyalist soldiers and their supporters.¹¹ Violent bloodshed also characterized part of the nationalist vision of Irish manhood. Patrick Pearse, the organizer of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, believed that bloodshed was "a cleansing and a sanctifying thing."¹² For Pearse, and those who shared his interpretation of violence within nationalist and unionist circles, martyrdom was an indisputable means for men to prove their worth as Irishmen. As George Mosse argues, dying on the battlefield produced analogies to Golgotha and Christ-like male sacrifice for some men in

10 For key histories of the Third Home Rule Crisis, see Timothy Bowman, *Carson's Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force 1910–22* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History, 1800–2000* (London: Phoenix, 2003); and A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule 1912–1914*, first published 1967 (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1997).

11 PRONI, T.2346/1, Sir Edward Carson addressing the Ulster Division, 1919.

12 Pádraic H. Pearse, *Collected Works: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix Press, 1924), 98–9.

arms, so that “pain and suffering combined with the will to sacrifice counted toward an education in manliness.”¹³

While nationalist imagery stemming from 1916 focused on the martyrdom of the Irishmen in the Easter Rising, unionists created their own cultural space for those who had sacrificed their lives on the battlefields of France and Flanders the same year. The living legacy of the unionist blood-debt was visible in commemorations of the war, including public parades and memorial dedications that combined notions of Ulster’s patriotism and loyalty to the Crown with the attendance of local Orange and Protestant societies.¹⁴ The role of local remembrance after the armistice, as opposed to mandated public ceremonies organized by the Belfast Parliament, increased the relevance of unionist sacrifice in people’s daily lives.¹⁵ It was within this tension between public legend and private lived experience that communities throughout the north of Ireland were able to fashion the most potent representations of Ulster masculinities in war. These depictions found expression in popular imagery, iconography, ideals, social stereotypes, engrained communal assumptions, and chronicled observances of both a personal and public nature. The apparent power of men over other men in the trenches and Unionist society’s need for its soldiers to fit the trappings of traditional heroism helped to shape the debate about Ulster’s future within the British Empire and greatly affected how the First World War was remembered in Ireland.

Many of the depictions of Ulstermen in the Great War trace their origins to the near-civil war that occurred in Ulster from 1912 to 1914, as Unionists and Nationalists threatened each other over the implementation of the Third Home Rule Bill. The idea of a domestic parliament based in Dublin appealed to Irish Nationalists, but caused Ulster Unionists to take an extremely defensive position in political and social circles over what they saw as a blatant attack on their rights of British citizenship. Hostilities increased to the point where Unionists threatened armed resistance in the Solemn League and Covenant of 1912 and smuggled in some 20,000 rifles and two million rounds of ammunition during the Larne gunrunning of April 1914.¹⁶

Popular representations of masculinities during the Home Rule Crisis involved images of men bound together through fraternal societies such as the Protestant Orange Order or the Catholic Ancient Order of Hibernians, and as

13 Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 112.

14 Catherine Switzer, *Unionists and Great War Commemoration in the north of Ireland 1914–1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 113.

15 Ibid., 153.

16 National Archives at Kew, London (hereafter NA), Chief Secretary’s Office, Judicial Division (hereafter CSOJD), CO904/93, Inspector General’s Monthly Confidential Report for April 1914, 3.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

enthusiastic volunteers in paramilitary organizations, particularly the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish National Volunteers, both of which had over 100,000 recruits by 1914.¹⁷ The stereotype of the Unionist Ulsterman at this time was of a stubborn and dour northerner who was business-oriented as opposed to artistic, wearing an Orange sash and a bowler hat as he affixed his name to the Solemn League and Covenant of 1912. Ultimately, the “honest Ulsterman” was a relic of Victorianism and the Irish Protestant Ascendancy to his enemies and a symbol of strength, solidity, reliability, and shared values to his supporters.¹⁸ Unionist and Nationalist propaganda each depicted their communities as romantic defenders of hearth, home, and faith against an aggressive enemy. The pro-unionist *Northern Whig* revelled in the fact that there were “tens of thousands of men who are prepared to surrender personal advantage, personal ambition, and personal ease in order to defend their altars and their hearths,” while the nationalist *Irish News* felt events like the public signing of the Ulster Covenant was not “anything better than the device of bullies.”¹⁹ By the summer of 1914, tensions between these groups and the British government had escalated to the point where the looming threat of war came not from Sarajevo or Berlin, but Belfast.

However, this shadow of violence was just a beginning. The most telling assessment of Ulster’s martial masculinities was not decided in Belfast or Derry, but on foreign battlefields with Unionists and Nationalists both serving as volunteers in the British army. The Great War became the ultimate event that judged whether or not Ulstermen were worthy of the heroic accolades that had been bandied about in the public sphere prior to August 1914.²⁰ Once the conflict moved to the western front, the sense of manly adventurism associated with drilling and gunrunning during the Home Rule Crisis combined with Victorian and Edwardian romantic imagery to inform Ulster Unionism’s popular vision of imperial heroism and martyrdom.

The figure of the masculine hero at the turn of the twentieth-century centred on notions such as adventure, bravery, and sacrifice, tracing its lineage back to the medieval chivalric code and the image of the “perfect knight.” Victorian culture’s keen interest in medieval romanticism meant that, by the time of the Great War, conditioning in courtly manners had become so engrained, its characteristics were an expected style of behaviour, particularly among upper and middle class men, many of whom were about to become offi-

17 Ibid., CO904/94, Inspector General’s Monthly Confidential Report for July 1914, 11; David Fitzpatrick, “The Logic of Collective Sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army 1914–1918,” *The Historical Journal* 38 (December 1995): 1027–8.

18 Clare O’Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1987), 41.

19 *Northern Whig* (30 September 1912); *Irish News* (27 September 1912).

20 *Larne Times and Weekly Telegraph* (2 May 1914).

cers in the trenches.²¹ For instance, the Young Citizen Volunteers, originally formed in Belfast in September of 1912, used this idealistic philosophy in the language of their constitution, noting their desire “to cultivate, by means of modified military and police drill, a manly physique, with habits of self control, self respect, and chivalry.”²² Although the outfit claimed to be a non-political organization along the lines of the Boys Brigade or the Boy Scouts, by 1913 it had aligned itself with the Ulster Unionist Council and the Ulster Volunteer Force.²³ Within two years of their founding, the Young Citizen Volunteers was transformed into the 14th Royal Irish Rifles of the 36th (Ulster) Division, bringing popular notions of gentlemanly-heroism with them into Kitchener’s New Army.

The popularity of muscular Christianity further enhanced this vision of the noble warrior in a modern war, adding the requisite elements of religious fervour and physical achievement to the dignified morals of the fighting gentleman. Muscular Christianity presented the entire male body as a robust symbol of virility, strength, and courage.²⁴ This philosophy merged with the cult of chivalry at the turn of the century to create high expectations for modern military officers. Discipline, duty, and willing sacrifice on the battlefield were idealized themes that established common ground between officers of the middle and upper classes, so that the chivalric code itself became a site for reconciliation between warrior masculinities from different social strata.²⁵ Soldiers from the 36th Division, who had been no strangers to the confluence of religion and militarization during the Home Rule Crisis, would be able to demonstrate their devotion to the Crown, the empire and Protestant ideals during the Great War, while simultaneously proving their mettle in battle.

The Somme perhaps best encapsulated the dichotomy of public representation and private experience within Ulster masculinities. Beginning some ten weeks after the Easter Rising in Dublin, the Somme held special significance for Ulster Unionists and Protestants. According to the Julian calendar, the first of July corresponded with the 12th, the most important day in the Orange calendar, a coincidence which historians later used to underscore the mythical portents of the day. According to historian D.G. Boyce, the Somme was a key symbolic event that proved Ulstermen’s “emergence as a distinct people with a special history, one almost guided by providence.”²⁶ Similarly, historian Philip

21 Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 16–17.

22 PRONI, D.1568/3, Constitution and Bye-Laws of the YCV of Ireland.

23 David Fitzpatrick, “Militarism in Ireland, 1900–1922,” in *A Military History of Ireland*, 383.

24 Mosse, 49.

25 Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 108–9.

26 D.G. Boyce, “‘That Party Politics Should Divide Our Tents’: Nationalism, Unionism and the First World War,” in *Ireland and the Great War: ‘A War To Unite Us All’?*, eds. Adrian Gregory and Senita Pašeta (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 191.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

Orr wrote, “From the Boyne to the Ancre, the thread of history seemed to run clear.”²⁷ By going over the top on the original anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, the story of the men of the 36th was characterized to demonstrate that they not only fought to prove their prowess and position within the empire, but also to defend the cultural legacy of Protestant Ulster.

According to written reports and historical legend, the traditions of Ulster’s fraternal societies were in evidence the morning of 1 July 1916, as the 36th Division climbed out of the trenches. There are accounts, possibly exaggerated, that some men in the line wore orange lilies in their tunics to commemorate the anniversary of the Boyne, while others wore Orange sashes and held impromptu lodge meetings in the trenches.²⁸ The historic battle-cry of “No Surrender” allegedly led the Ulstermen into the fray, with the soldiers of the 36th becoming a modern tribute to the Apprentice Boys from the Siege of Derry in 1690, although the probability of hearing such a shout is rather dubious.²⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Ambrose Ricardo of the 9th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, was one of those who watched the waves of men walking forward toward the German lines. According to official history of the division written by 36th Division veteran Cyril Falls, Ricardo

stood on the parapet between the two centre exits to wish them luck. They got through without delay; no fuss, no shouting, no running, everything solid and thorough — just like the men themselves. Here and there a boy would wave his hand to me as I shouted a good luck to them through my megaphone. And all had a cheery face.³⁰

Falls’ account was typical of an official military history that indulged in optimistic rhetoric and nostalgia.³¹ At first, the division succeeded in achieving its objectives, capturing five lines of German trenches; however, without support from other divisions along the front lines, the men were soon stranded in enemy territory. Once the counter-attack began, the division’s success quickly slipped away. By nightfall, some battalions were still clinging to German lines, but at a heavy price. Near midnight, Stewart-Moore recalled that “an Infantry officer came into our dugout completely exhausted: ‘We have been fighting all day,’ he said, ‘And we have got nowhere’.”³²

27 Philip Orr, *The Road to the Somme: Men of the Ulster Division Tell Their Story* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1987), 161.

28 Ibid., 164–5.

29 PRONI, Carson Papers, D.1507/A/18/2, Captain Wilfrid B. Spender, “The Attack of the Ulstermen by a Staff Officer,” 2 July 1916.

30 Quoted in Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson and Orr, 1922), 52.

31 See Bryan Cooper, *The Tenth (Irish) Division in Gallipoli* (1918) for a similar tone and emphasis.

32 IWM, 77/39/1, Stewart-Moore, “Random Recollections,” 36.

British forces at the Somme suffered 60,000 casualties on 1 July 1916, nearly half of the infantry engaged, 20,000 of whom were killed. It remains the greatest loss for a single day of combat in British history. The Ulster Division experienced the fourth highest number of losses with 5,104 casualties, some 2,000 of whom died.³³ In the face of such suffering, however, the diary of the 14th Royal Irish Rifles immediately evoked the theme of epic bravery in recording of the death of 2nd Lieutenant Wedgewood, who “was only a child but had the heart of a lion.”³⁴ Corporal W.S. Nicol wrote to his mother that he was “sure the North of Ireland will be in an awful state when the news is all known, but it has to be done.”³⁵ When the news came, it was shocking, with reports that there had never been “anything finer than the way our successive waves of men marched, singing and cheering, into that bath of lead.”³⁶ As a whole, the Battle of the Somme cost Britain and the empire more than 400,000 casualties, and the territory gained was little more than six miles. In terms of winning the war, the 36th Division’s contribution was negligible. Yet Unionist Ulstermen claimed this battle as their greatest moment since the Boyne, a time that redefined who and what they were, and which lent new strength to the age-old question of what their position within Ireland and the British Empire would be. Following the slaughter of the Somme, communal belief in heroic martyrdom and the nobility of sacrifice became northern society’s strongest weapon against despair.

As news of the province’s losses became known, the *Northern Whig* publicly declared, “We were never prouder of our province and our race than we are at this moment, for it means more today than it ever did to be an Ulsterman.” An editorial the same day proposed that the Ulster Division was “a unique unit in the British Army. It is composed of Covenanters who had bound themselves together with the object of resisting attacks on their hard-won liberties The blood of the slain cries to heaven for vengeance, and we owe it to the dead as well as to the living to prosecute the war with renewed vigour.”³⁷ The *Belfast News-Letter* concurred, adding that the “heroism and self-sacrifice of the Ulstermen in particular continues to be the theme of mournful praise, and henceforth in Ulster the 1st of July will have a new and more glorious, if more sorrowful meaning, into which no shade of contention can enter.”³⁸ Willing sacrifice and undying loyalty were two of the revered characteristics from the code of warrior masculinities. After the Somme, newspapers and politicians

33 Peter Hart, *The Somme* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2006), 162.

34 IWM, DS/MISC/18, War Diary, 14th Royal Irish Rifles (YCV), 1915–1918, 1 July 1916.

35 IWM 85/4/1, W.S. Nicol, letter to his mother, 5 July 1916.

36 *Belfast News-Letter* (6 July 1916).

37 *Northern Whig* (7 July 1916).

38 *Belfast News-Letter* (5 July 1916).

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

used their authority within the public sphere to suggest that formerly impractical ideals had been made into a reality on the battlefield by the 36th Ulsters.

In the search for meaning after the Somme, those analyzing the 36th Division changed the reality of their appalling losses into a modern legend of Ulster manliness. Tributes came from private individuals and public figures. William John Lynas, a 27-year-old rifleman in the 107th Infantry Brigade, Royal Irish Rifles, was also an Orangeman and had been in the North Belfast unit of the Ulster Volunteer Force prior to the war. Nearly two weeks after the slaughter, he wrote home to his wife describing the heroics of the men he had fought with:

I need hardly begin to tell you about the gallantry of our boys for I am sure you have read more in the papers than I am fit to tell you. Their [*sic*] is one thing Mina they did not disgrace the name of Ulster or their Fore-fathers little did you think as you sat writing your letter on the first day of July that our boys had mounted the top and made a name for Ulster that will never die in the annals of history. No doubt Belfast to-day and the rest of Ulster is in deep mourning for the dear ones that has given their life so manly may the Lord comfort all of those who have lost a beloved Husband a Brother a Son ... their [*sic*] is one great comfort to know that they fell doing their duty for King and Country.³⁹

Lynas used the language of traditional chivalry in order to impress upon his wife his conviction that the “gallantry” and “duty” displayed by his fellow Ulstermen had been an act of historic consequence and had not dishonoured their ancestors. He believed that the men dying in “so manly” a fashion “for King and Country” would be a comfort to those receiving news of the battle at home, an opinion that underscored the links in Unionist society between masculinity, soldiering, and familial pride.

Lynas’ sentiments about duty’s role in the manly construction of the 36th Division echoed the *Belfast News-Letter*’s suggestion that the Somme had allowed Ulster to prove

the reality of her Imperialism. Her sons have demonstrated to all the world that their loyalty to King and Country is no empty thing, and when the first sharp sense of bereavement has passed the relatives of those who have paid the supreme price will derive comfort from the knowledge that in the winning of the great triumph which will surely come their fathers, sons, and brothers played a heroic part.⁴⁰

Another article in the same edition described how the division served as “a superb example of what discipline, good leading, and magnificent spirit can

39 IWM, 89/7/1, W.J. Lynas, letter to his wife, 15 July 1916.

40 *Belfast News-Letter* (8 July 1916).

make men capable of performing.”⁴¹ In agreeing with this assessment of the division’s character, the Most Reverend Dr. Crozier, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland, was reported to have said that he “expected nothing else. They are of the stock from which our heroes come and to whom our Empire owes so much — unconquered and unconquerable. I spent a considerable time with them last January in France and I can testify to their patience and pluck as well as to their chivalry and courtesy.”⁴² Clearly, chivalric heroism was a central aspect of the public construction of Ulster’s warrior masculinities after the Somme offensive. Military service and sacrifice stood as powerful symbols of Ulster’s loyalty to the empire. These beliefs, shaped by men in the field and in the consolation offered by the media and public figures, suggested that any man, regardless of rank, was capable of making a difference through commitment to the war effort and demonstrations of epic heroism and courage.

That opinion was strengthened by the glowing reports from Philip Gibbs, the official British correspondent at the front. Knowing that public support was vitally important after the forces had sustained such heavy casualties, he wrote that the Ulstermen’s attack on 1 July had been one of “the greatest revelations of human courage ever seen in history.” Making use of Protestant Ulster’s legendary traditions from the seventeenth century, he added that it was the men of the 36th

who shouted, “No Surrender!” as their battle-cry, and these tough, hard, gallant men forced their way forward over ground raked by every kind of shot and shell. The enemy’s trenches could not resist their attack, and they stormed their way through, killing many of the enemy who resisted them. In Thiepval Wood, where the trees were slashed by shrapnel, they collected their strength, formed into line, and stood the shock of several German counter-attacks. Then they charged and flung down the enemy’s ranks, taking more than 200 prisoners.⁴³

Gibbs publicly encouraged the idea that warrior masculinity, instilled in the Ulster Volunteer Force prior to the outbreak of war, had been actualized in battle. He wrote that the Ulstermen were “tough and “hard,” yet also “gallant,” killing the enemy by storming the trenches and charging the line, phrases which lent an air of knightly mystique to their achievements.

Similarly, at St. Anne’s Church of Ireland Cathedral in Belfast, Dean C.T.P. Grierson noted that the Protestant community was “proud of the Ulster Volunteers and of their sterling manhood,” a statement which strengthened the

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Philip Gibbs, *The Battles of the Somme* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), 63.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

link between demonstrations of epic bravery at the Somme and the soldiers' past membership in the Ulster Volunteer Force.⁴⁴ The Reverend Dr. Henry Montgomery, the 1912 Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, went even further at an evening service recorded at Albert Hall in Shankill Road on 9 July, declaring to his audience: "One little thought when in September 1912, the gallant youth of Ulster signed their Solemn League and Covenant that so many of them would before four years had passed have sealed it with their blood on the battlefields of France and Flanders."⁴⁵ This was the blood-debt realized for those who shared Montgomery's point of view, the culmination of all the efforts made during the Home Rule Crisis and after which publicly demonstrated the apparent unflinching fidelity and constancy of Ulster Unionists in uniform. The blood shed at the Somme now demanded Britain's allegiance to Ulster in return for the 36th Division's heavy sacrifice. This belief grew in popularity and prestige. In 1921, the *Belfast Telegraph* recalled the "bulldog tenacity and courage of our northern race," who had "volunteered and gave of their best on the bloody fields of Flanders and elsewhere."⁴⁶ The same year, the *Belfast Weekly News* noted that although three years had passed since the end of the war, "the heroism and devotion of those who died fighting for the Empire ... are remembered with pride and thanksgiving."⁴⁷ Ulster had fought and now England owed her an equal measure of loyalty.

These poetic tributes are not to suggest, however, that the men themselves saw their exploits in such a triumphant or significant light. Most likely, few men in the field cared about what their actions said regarding the strength of Ulster manliness or the dominance of Protestant Unionists in Ulster, particularly when they were consumed with thoughts of the actual battle at hand. This was the context for J.L. Stewart-Moore's encounter with the deserter in the woods, a realistic moment between two men in battle that held no overtones of romanticizing violence or solidifying Ulster Protestant mythology. In 1966, during the 50th anniversary of the events of 1916, Malcolm McKee, a veteran of the 36th, went further and railed against the stupidity of the Somme, savaging those who over-mythologized the significance of the battle. "How many would have known the Boyne was fought on the first of July?" he asked, continuing, "I don't know why they plaster such incidents on our battle. Nothing was further from my mind than the Boyne on the Somme."⁴⁸

In spite of this anger, however, events like the Somme created cultural touchstones in Ulster. Although McKee might not have liked how the Somme was caught up in Unionist imagery, it cannot be denied that it became part of

44 *Northern Whig* (10 July 1916).

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Belfast Telegraph* (14 June 1921).

47 *Belfast Weekly News* (17 November 1921).

48 *Belfast Telegraph* (30 June 1966).

the new masculine mythology for the province. The romantic descriptions of Ulstermen going over the top were a distortion of actual experiences, but reactions to the symbolism of the 36th Division were very real. In *The Web of Government*, R.M. MacIver defined the difference between techniques and myths. "A technique," he wrote, "is a way of knowing that is primarily a way of control ... a way of manipulating objects, including persons as objects." Contrary to this, myths denote "the value-impregnated beliefs and notions that men hold, that they live by or live for."⁴⁹ Unionist authorities and propagandists used the technique of lionizing the manliness of the 36th Division in order to create a cultural myth that incorporated the political landscape of the Home Rule debate, the social schisms between Protestants and Catholics in the north, and Ulster's longstanding tradition of military strength. It was a legend that carried with it the authority of popular communal memories, completely overwhelming any public forum for personal experiences in the trenches that countered its powerful resonance.

Perhaps one of the most telling examples of this clash between the personal and the popular was the other blood-debt incurred by Irish troops at the Somme — this time by the 16th (Irish) Division in September of 1916. The 16th (Irish) was an outfit made up of both Protestants and Catholics, although the sectarian recruiting policies of the 36th Division ensured that nearly all Ulster Catholics who fought on the Western Front were part of the 16th, with the exception of four men, including John M. Regan, a future Catholic officer in the Royal Ulster Constabulary.⁵⁰ David Starrett, batman to Brigadier General F.P. Crozier, recalled in his war memoir that he had nearly been attacked in the predominately Catholic Scotland Road district of Liverpool while recruiting for the 16th Division, as his assailants thought he only represented "the bloody hand of Carson." However, as he recalled, "from shouting we fell to talking and presently some of them accompanied me to the office, saying up to now no one had told them we recruited Catholics as well as Protestants."⁵¹ Although the enlistment of the 16th Division generally reflected volunteers from southern Ireland, Ulster Catholics and nationalists enlisted at a rate that, according to historian David Fitzpatrick, was just as impressive as that of their fellow Ulstermen in the 36th Division.⁵² Scarcely two months after the 36th Division's assault at Thiepval, the 16th Division lost nearly half its 11,000 men and officers at Guillemont and Ginchy.⁵³ Like the Ulster Division's experience, success for the 16th in the September push had little effect, if any, on the general out-

49 R.M. MacIver, *The Web of Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 4.

50 John M. Regan, *The Memoirs of John M. Regan: A Catholic Officer in the RIC and RUC, 1909–48*, ed. Joost Augusteijn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 97–100.

51 IWM 79/35/1, David Starrett, "Batman," 29–30.

52 Fitzpatrick, "The Logic of Collective Sacrifice," 1030.

53 Myles Dungan, *Irish Voices from the Great War* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), 147.

come of the war. The Somme, with its great appetite for destruction, treated all Irishmen equally.

Among the dead at Ginchy was Thomas Kettle, the Irish Nationalist politician, poet, and scholar. Kettle has since come to encompass the irony of Irish Nationalists in British uniforms, motivated to fight not only because of the militarization sweeping across Ireland in that period, but also because of his sacrificial interpretation of Catholicism.⁵⁴ An article, written for publication only days before his death, described his hopes for reconciliation between northern Protestants and the rest of Ireland. He wrote that, during the war, he had

mixed much with Englishmen and Protestant Ulstermen, and I know that there is no real or abiding reason for the gulfs, saltier than the sea, that now dismember the natural alliance of both of them with us Irish Nationalists In the name, and by the seal, of the blood given in the last two years, I ask for Colonial Home Rule for Ireland, a thing essential in itself, and essential as a prologue for the reconstruction of the Empire. Ulster will agree.⁵⁵

Kettle set the Nationalist blood-debt into words with this passage, expressing the hope that Irish deaths in the Great War would force Britain to grant Home Rule immediately, which was the exact opposite of the blood-debt Ulster Unionists felt they had created at Thiepval. In the long term, Unionism's blood-debt proved to be the stronger of the two, despite Kettle's pointed desire for an end to sectarian tensions between Irishmen and his eventual adoption as a symbol of nationalist and unionist reconciliation for activists and scholars.⁵⁶ The death of Irish constitutional nationalism in favour of Irish republicanism by the war's end ensured that Kettle's proffered blood-sacrifice was tragically meaningless for decades after his death.

Moreover, the participation of thousands of soldiers from nationalist Ireland became a public embarrassment to the republican movement even to the point, according to historian Myles Dungan, that some ex-servicemen were shot by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Irish War of Independence.⁵⁷ Enlistment in the British army did not fit with either the manliness of the patriotic martyrs who had been in the Easter Rising of 1916, or with the actions of those fighting in the Irish War of Independence. By the time of the Irish Conscription Crisis in 1918, unionist newspapers such as the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* tarred Irish Nationalists as having been "petted and pampered for

54 Senia Pašeta, "Thomas Kettle: 'An Irish soldier in the army of Europe'?" in *Ireland and the Great War: "A War To Unite Us All"?*, 16.

55 Quoted in Rowland Fielding, *War Letters to a Wife. France and Flanders, 1915–1919*, ed. Jonathan Walker (Staplehurst: Spellmount Limited, 2001, first published in 1929), 81.

56 Thomas Kettle, *The Open Secret of Ireland*, ed. Senia Pašeta (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007), xiii.

57 Dungan, *Irish Voices from the Great War*, 202.

years,” acting like “spoiled children, crying that they do not get the moon when they ask for it They may have sentiment and poetry on their side, but sentiment and poetry will neither butter parsnips nor provide armies or navies or implements of labour or protection.”⁵⁸ According to the *Evening Telegraph*, Nationalists were guilty of unmanly softness and delicacy in a time of war.⁵⁹ The values and virtues of normative masculinity in Ulster, embodied by Unionist Ulstermen fighting in the trenches for the empire, were strengthened by creating a war of words with “the other”, in this case, Irishmen who did not support conscription and who were subsequently labelled as social enemies. The *Evening Telegraph* argued that Unionist men who supported conscription were the true symbol for martial manliness, providing the force behind economic strength and war-time employment while also serving as the active defenders of Irish society in contrast to Irish Nationalism’s feminine attributes of poetry, pampering, childishness, and indecision. This effeminacy could also be seen in a different manner, with pro-conscription and anti-conscription Irishmen representing a split family dynamic. In her discussion of American masculinity since Vietnam, Linda E. Boose proposes that war protestors and participants share in a “bad son/good son binary,” which ultimately involves “a matter of failing the father.”⁶⁰ Within the context of Ulster in the final year of the war, unionist newspapers proposed that the “good son” dutifully embraced martial masculinity, whereas the “bad son” was sentimental, effete, and, ultimately, failed to serve the king, the father-figure of British imperialism.

Even more potent, however, than imperial patriarchal relationships were the widespread signs of growing fraternalism between Irish divisions on the Western Front in 1917, particularly at Messines Ridge and Passchendaele. Fraternalism in this context refers to feelings of unity and fellowship created by means of cooperation and shared experience among men throughout the army corps. Sarah Benton has defined brotherhood as a system of organization stressing unity, selflessness, loyalty, and secrecy to such an extent that it shapes other social relations.⁶¹ In this argument, brotherhood includes not only these factors, but also incorporates the theme of sibling rivalry, as Irish soldiers overcame political and religious divisions through competition, sport, banter, and, ultimately fighting alongside rather than against each other. In the earliest days of the war, the Nationalist *Irish News* printed a poem submitted by a Belfast member of the Ulster Volunteer Force and a “prominent Irish Volunteer” from

58 *Belfast Evening Telegraph* (9 April 1918).

59 Mosse, 55.

60 Linda E. Boose, “Techno-Muscularity and the ‘Boy Eternal’: From the Quagmire to the Gulf” in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woolacott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 89–90.

61 Sarah Benton, “Women Disarmed: The Militarization of Politics in Ireland 1913–1923,” *Feminist Review* (The Irish Issue: The British Question) 50 (1995): 162.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

Antrim, which read: “Ulstermen, Munstermen, Connachtmen, Leinstermen / Faithful to Erin we answer her call ... / We have our differences, not very many, / Soon they’ll be fewer — we’re Irishmen all!”⁶² Once in the trenches, the iron-clad differences from the home front changed into something more sociable, even affable, supported by reports and memoirs meant for public consumption, including those by Bryan Cooper, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, David Starrett, and William W. Johnson.⁶³ R.F.E. Evans of the 36th Division recalled that Protestants and Catholics would

stand shoulder to shoulder with the other, though out of the line they often fought in the best North versus South tradition. What a set-to with fists and belts there would be in some estament [sic] behind the lines, where the men of the 16th were drinking, should some of the 36th barge in, provocatively shouting “To hell with the Pope!” But in battle this was all forgotten and they were the most loyal comrades in arms.⁶⁴

General Sir Alexander Godley corroborated this story of banter and fellowship in his memoir about life as an Irish soldier in the British military. He often arranged dinners between General Nugent and Captain Saunderson, both Unionists, and senior Nationalist Members of Parliament Stephen Gwynn and Willie Redmond, brother of John, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Godley recalled that during the meal, “the talk and arguments between the two Unionist Orangemen of the black North, and the two Southern Home-Rulers ... would at times become rather heated; but I need hardly say that they always finished by falling on each other’s necks and were in reality the best of friends.”⁶⁵ In this context, military friendships were stronger than domestic politics, at least while the men remained in the field.

While the officers discussed political issues at formal dinners, the rank and file often used sport as a way to bridge the divide between them. Rowland Fielding noted the attitude of the enlisted men during one of the many football matches scheduled between soldiers of the 16th and 36th Divisions. Once, he nearly had to stop the game because a German aeroplane appeared overhead. However, he felt that to halt a match “in process of being cleanly fought before a sporting audience between the two great opposing factions of Ireland, in a spirit of friendliness which, so far as I am aware, seems unattainable on Ireland’s native soil, was a serious matter; and I decided to let the game go on.”⁶⁶

62 *Irish News* (6 August 1914).

63 Cooper; *The Tenth (Irish) Division* (1918); IWM, 79/50/1, Papers of Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, 79/50/1, “The War: 1914–1918”; *ibid.*, Starrett, 79/35/1, “Batman”; *ibid.*, PP/MCR/75, Memoirs of William W. Johnson.

64 IWM, PP/MCR/75, “Memoirs of R. F. E. Evans.”

65 General Sir Alexander Godley, *Life of an Irish Soldier* (London: John Murray, 1939), 215.

66 Fielding, *War Letters to a Wife*, 106.

It is unclear whether this growing fraternalism occurred because different geographic locations changed the men's temperament and willingness to tolerate each other, or if it was a more pointed reaction to the fact that, while on the Western Front, their homes and communities were not threatened by the men who stood beside them in the trenches. Irish military historian Terence Denman has stated that these moments of fraternalism carried little weight in determining Ireland's future, noting that friendships formed in the trenches were far less important than what was occurring in Ireland itself.⁶⁷ Historian David Fitzpatrick concurs with this opinion, emphasizing in his work that, although political and religious distinctions dimmed in the theatre of war, the "comradeship of the trenches proved evanescent."⁶⁸ Although these criticisms are valid, I believe the development of private and popular fellowship in the trenches deserves greater emphasis, particularly within the historiography of Irish masculinities. Even though these nascent feelings of brotherhood between Irish Catholics and Protestants on the Western Front paled in comparison to the animosity and violence that erupted in Ireland once the war in Europe was over, it is important to remember that these feelings of camaraderie, fraternalism, and understanding did, in fact, exist. Whether a wartime reality or more of a cherished myth, this heralded "friendship" between the 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) Divisions was an important homosocial development that should be highlighted in the historiography primarily because it was forgotten so quickly after the war had ended.

One telling example of this brief period of mutual respect between Irishmen occurred at Third Ypres. When Father William Doyle, an extremely popular Catholic chaplain, was killed at Passchendaele, his death united both the 36th and 16th Divisions in grief and underscored the growing tolerance and understanding the soldiers had for one another within their paradigm of martial manliness. An anonymous Belfast Orangeman provided a eulogy for Doyle, printed in the *Glasgow Weekly News*, where he remembered:

Father Doyle was a good deal among us. We couldn't possibly agree with his religious opinions, but we simply worshipped him for other things. He didn't know the meaning of fear, and he didn't know what bigotry was If he risked his life looking after Ulster Protestant soldiers once, he did it a hundred times in his last few days. The Ulstermen felt his loss more keenly than anybody, and none were readier to show their marks of respect to the dead hero priest than were our Ulster Presbyterians.⁶⁹

67 Terence Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992), 150.

68 David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

69 *Glasgow Weekly News* (1 September 1917).

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

This public tribute emphasized Doyle's place within the hierarchy of martial masculinities as a brave and heroic comrade-in-arms, risking his life to bring religious consolation to soldiers and ultimately dying in that pursuit.

The unifying grief Father Doyle's death created between Ulster Presbyterians and Catholics in part fulfilled the desire expressed by Irish Nationalist leader John Redmond in the early years of the war when he prayed that "whenever a battalion of the Irish Brigade goes into action there may be a battalion of the Ulster Division alongside them."⁷⁰ Redmond's wish for Catholics and Protestants to shed blood together on the Western Front was a variation on the blood sacrifice motif. Redmond's envisioned blood-debt would not unite Ulster to Great Britain or grant Ireland independence, but instead bind Irishman to Irishman, whether from Wexford, Galway, or Antrim. The bond would still be fractious, as sibling relationships can be, but it would not be violent. However, by November 1918, Redmond was dead and his Irish Parliamentary Party near the same. In the months and years following the armistice, the power inherent in public representations of warrior masculinities controlled war remembrance in the north and further dampened any common feelings of fraternalism among Ulster's ex-servicemen.

By the war's end, a pointedly political "industry of remembrance" existed in the north of Ireland.⁷¹ Ulster Unionist politicians and propagandists exerted the power of ideology and commemoration over the legacy of the province's ex-servicemen at a provincial and a local level.⁷² Those who had fought with the 36th (Ulster) Division became martyrs to the Protestant-Unionist cause, whereas veterans of the 10th (Irish) and 16th (Irish) Divisions pointedly were overlooked and their contributions to Ulster's military heritage ignored. When Belfast's Peace Day celebrations in 1919 were moved to 9 August instead of the date of 19 July ordered by Royal Proclamation, Catholic and Nationalist ex-servicemen boycotted the event, feeling the date had been changed only for political reasons.⁷³ At a meeting of the Derry Branch of the Irish Nationalist Veterans' Association, a resolution was passed protesting against the Peace Celebrations in Belfast and calling on all Nationalist ex-soldiers to refrain from participating in it.⁷⁴ An editorial in the nationalist *Irish Independent* that August stressed that it had

no desire to deprecate or minimise the gallantry and achievements of the men of the 36th Ulster Division. They took a prominent part in every battle in

70 John Redmond, *Mr Redmond's Visit to the Front* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1915), 37.

71 Nuala C. Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60.

72 Switzer, *Unionists and Great War Commemoration*, 157.

73 *Ibid.*, 45–8.

74 *Irish Independent* (9 August 1919).

which they were engaged, and are quite entitled to wear the laurels they so nobly won. All Irishmen are justly proud of their brave deeds, and Nationalist soldiers would resent any attempt to cast a slur on their Ulster comrades in the Great War. What we do object to is the deliberate attempt to represent the Ulster Division and the Ulster Unionists as the only Irishmen who responded to the call to the colours and took part in the world's Armageddon This is unjust and unfair alike to Unionists and Nationalists from the South of Ireland. It is unfair to the thousands of Ulster and Belfast Nationalists who voluntarily enlisted and joined other Irish regiments. It also ignored the many thousands of Irishmen who served in English, Scottish, and overseas regiments. If the Ulster Division has its heroes, who can deny to the 16th the honour of Major Redmond, MP, and Capt. Thomas Kettle? The sacrifices of these men and others who ... should not be forgotten, although they were ignored at Belfast on Saturday. The Ulster Division, petted and pampered by the Government, has no more glorious record than belongs to the neglected 16th Division.⁷⁵

The *Irish News* objected to the general tone of war commemorations in the north, with good reason, as the war increasingly became the play-thing of political and sectarian organizations. Two years later, the *Belfast Weekly News*, a newspaper with pronounced Unionist sympathies, reported that while Armistice Day in 1921 had been "solemnly observed" by Loyalists in Armagh, Nationalists living in that county had not joined in any public remembrances.⁷⁶

The ideological power inherent within war remembrances perhaps was used to the greatest effect by the Orange Order. Traditional Orange parades for the Twelfth of July and the organization's presence at Armistice Day services facilitated the Somme's incorporation into Orange iconography. In its coverage of the Twelfth of July in 1919, the *Belfast News-Letter* reminded its readers that alongside the historic Orange slogans of "No Surrender" and "Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right," the phrases "'Remember the Somme', 'Messines' and 'Thiepval' are also words and names that must forever thrill the hearts of loyal Irishmen, but especially those of Ulster birth, for they tell of unsurpassed deeds of gallantry and glory."⁷⁷ The *Irish News* reported in July 1920 that the "only fresh feature" in the Orange parades were new banners which "commemorated the engagements of the Somme instead of the usual hackneyed and highly-coloured paintings of 'Derry, Aghrim, and the Boyne'."⁷⁸ In 1921, Ruby, Lady Carson, wife of Sir Edward Carson, the leader of Ulster Unionism during the Third Home Rule Crisis, placed a wreath at the cenotaph in London from the women of St Stephen's Loyal Orange Lodge No. 133 with herself as the Worshipful Mistress. Its inscription read, "In undying memory of the

⁷⁵ Ibid. (11 August 1919).

⁷⁶ *Belfast Weekly News* (17 November 1921).

⁷⁷ *Belfast News-Letter* (12 July 1919).

⁷⁸ *Irish News* (13 July 1920).

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

brave Ulstermen of the Orange Order who made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War in order to preserve for all the world the ideals of liberty and freedom for which they lived and died.”⁷⁹ Lady Carson’s position as a leader of the Orangewomen emphasized the connection between Ulster’s political élite and the powerful Protestant organization. The Orange Order had enormous influence on the reconstruction of recent history. The Ulster Division at the Somme became an intrinsic part of Orange and Unionist interpretations of the First World War, separate from any history of the fraternalism and solidarity that had existed once between Nationalists and Unionists in the trenches.

By comparison, nationalist veterans saw their history in the war quickly turned into a badge of dishonour within the Irish Free State. The *Belfast Weekly News* noted in 1921 that “except among Loyalists, Armistice Day was not observed in Dublin. There was no general cessation of traffic and the vast halls of the pedestrians kept on the move during the two minutes period, obviously to mark their contempt for the anniversary.”⁸⁰ Their loss was the Orangemen’s gain.⁸¹ The order’s incorporation of and influence over memories of the Somme encouraged notions that Ulstermen had fought solely for British imperialism and the Protestant cause.⁸² Sir James Craig, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, announced at a Twelfth of July celebration in 1922,

From the ranks of the Loyal Orange Institution came the old Ulster Volunteer Force ... which saved Ulster in 1914. From the ranks of the Loyal Orange Institution came the grand 36th (Ulster) Division. There was no finer division in the great war. It was also from the ranks of the Loyal Orange Institution that our splendid Specials have come to protect our borderland.⁸³

These words linked the north’s position within current volatile Irish politics and the Ulster Special Constabulary to the wartime sacrifice of thousands of Unionist Ulstermen, all under the auspices of the Orange Order. Through the legacy of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the 36th Division, the government of Northern Ireland and the Orange Order put themselves at the head of Ulster’s tradition of Protestant fraternal societies, defining the character of the newly-partitioned state through homosocial alliances and the modern mythology of martial masculinities. Previously in 1919, the Lord Mayor of Belfast, J.C. White, had emphasised the bond between the war and Ulster manliness when he noted at a luncheon in memory of the 36th Division that “the frightful waste

79 *Belfast Weekly News* (17 November 1921).

80 *Ibid.*

81 Dungan, *Irish Voices from the Great War*, 203.

82 *Belfast News-Letter* (5 July 1920).

83 *Northern Whig* (13 July 1922).

of youthful vigour, in its first flush and pride, will not be fully realised till years have passed But against that incalculable loss must be set the display of a heroic self-sacrifice and romantic gallantry such as old war could never show on the same scale.”⁸⁴

Unionist political figures used the Great War as a communal symbol, underlining the grief the province felt with the seemingly romantic achievements of the dead, and the blood-debt incurred. Meanwhile, the *Irish Independent*, the pro-Home Rule anti-partition newspaper, proposed that for some Nationalist veterans, this kind of rhetoric showed “a deliberate design to glorify the 36th Ulster Division at the expense of the other Irish divisions and regiments ... for a political purpose,” even to the point where “the men composing the Ulster Division may not be conscious of the fact that they are being used.”⁸⁵ Protestant-Unionist Ulster claimed the war’s legacies of heroism and martyrdom as its own. This exclusionary revisionism removed the reality of Protestants and Catholics fighting alongside one another from the public sphere in favour of an ascendant Unionist mythology that constructed and confirmed the dominance of Protestant-Unionist masculinity in the north. Reporting on the dedication of the Thiepval Memorial at the Somme, the *Belfast Weekly News* stated that there were

many Ulstermen in other units than those who recruited to the 36th Division. But the 36th was our own Volunteer Division, and the site chosen for the memorial overlooks the battlefield on which our men were “blooded” and in which they proved their valour and earned a fame that will go down in history as one of the epics of the Great War The Ulster Division as a unit in the field was ... unique — it was the incarnation of the fighting spirit of the Loyalists of the Province.⁸⁶

Only after “victory” had been achieved in 1923 over northern divisions of the IRA did unionist newspapers, such as the *Belfast Telegraph*, mention that other Irish divisions had “fought with equal bravery in different theatres of war.”⁸⁷

The efforts of Ulstermen in the First World War, particularly at the Battle of the Somme, redefined public representations of martial masculinity for Ulster Unionists. The notions of Victorian and Edwardian manliness that emphasized the willing sacrifice of the gentleman-hero combined with new legends of valour and blood-debts on the battlefield to create a mythology that resounded with Unionists throughout the rest of the century. After the war, R.L. Greenway, a signaller for the 36th Division, believed that he would

⁸⁴ *Irish News* (11 August 1919).

⁸⁵ *Irish Independent* (11 August 1919).

⁸⁶ *Belfast Weekly News* (24 November 1921).

⁸⁷ *Belfast Telegraph* (29 June 1923).

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

never forget the good times we had together which, when I sit and think of them, sometimes it makes me believe that it wasn't such a bad old war after all ... It made Man kill Man, but it also taught Man to love Man, to stand by him to the last. It created bonds of fellowship which Peace could not, and never will, create.⁸⁸

In this light, Ulster masculinities were not in crisis during the Great War. If anything, they were enjoying their heyday. For those who found the Great War a time that brought Ulster Catholics and Protestants together through shared experiences and growing fraternalism, the main legacy of the war was one of fellowship. For those with overt political and sectarian agendas, the traditional language of noble sacrifice and duty fulfilled became a core part of their public speeches and propaganda campaigns.

However, shades of gallantry and gentlemanly heroism were not quite the themes of Captain William Montgomery's personal war experiences. Montgomery, a veteran of Messines Ridge and Passchendaele with the 9th Royal Irish Rifles, 36th (Ulster) Division, wrote to his parents of his realization that, as an Ulsterman, violent conflict was his natural province. "War," he wrote,

and the profession — the oldest man's profession of ARMS is to me the absolute acme of joy and excitement It is a sure thing now that real war not peace soldiering is my job The statistics are hard against me and my type, but just as soon as it starts bursting near me I go joyous mad and just run amok. I can't explain it. It has often puzzled me, but there it is and it is worse today after 22 months than it was when I started. Which of my ancestors had it? Some of them must have had it. Pure naked primitive raw red lust to kill with the naked hand, tear his throat out with long fingernails overlaid with the trained knowledge that I can do worse sitting in a dugout quite cool and comfortable.⁸⁹

Montgomery was fascinated by the martial identity he discovered within himself once he was engaged in battle. "The labour, suffering, strain, casualties, are unceasing" he wrote, "but still the spirit of our manhood triumphs. It does surely triumph, my parents, and I believe will finally conquer and vanquish. It must because it has not failed in extremis."⁹⁰

Montgomery's views on manhood and violence further complicate the role masculinities play within military and cultural history, when war "brought nationalism's aggressiveness into sharp focus" and "freed aggression from

88 IWM, PP/MCR/24, R.L. Greenway, memoirs.

89 PRONI, D/1294/1/1/30, Captain William A. Montgomery, letter to his parents, August 1917. Capitalization and emphasis as in the original.

90 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

restraint as men went over the top.”⁹¹ Captain Montgomery’s private experience of war made him realize important aspects about his own personality, but his focus was not on the blood-sacrifice of the public sphere, but blood-lust and the visceral enjoyment he personally derived from killing. These descriptions, which he intertwined with his belief in the undying nature of manliness on the battlefield, were hardly in keeping with the loftier sentiments of honour, duty, and noble sacrifice associated with Unionist society’s incarnation of heroism. One could argue that Montgomery’s sense of warrior masculinity was an example of the essentialist stereotype of the Berserker Celt, the widespread assumption that violence was ultimately an Irishman’s true nature.⁹² In *An Intimate History of Killing*, Joanna Bourke discusses the myth of the bellicose Irishman, where popular legend held that the Irish were innately combative and that “harboured within the breasts of Irishmen was a reservoir of aggression which needed to be released.”⁹³ Montgomery’s private reflections on his “primitive red raw lust to kill” superficially support this theory of Irish bellicosity. On further examination, however, his admissions were more complex. While Montgomery no doubt enjoyed the soldiering life as the “absolute acme of joy and excitement,” he also coupled his actions on the battlefield with religious belief and the “spirit of manhood.” This made his blood-lust both a visceral and an intellectual experience that he himself was able to analyze to a certain degree. In this respect, Montgomery’s love of warfare was a personal reflection on his manly nature that stood as more than an essentialist interpretation of the Irish- or Ulsterman as a cipher for violent behaviour. While flouting Unionism’s pure vision of an epic hero incurring an imperial blood-debt for the province in battle, Montgomery’s letters to his parents revealed the complexities of the warrior image among soldiers in the field and their evaluation of their own war-time masculinity.

Montgomery’s belief in his personal capacity for armed conflict also pointed to the realities of Ulster’s future in the postwar years with the onset of the Troubles between 1920 and 1922. Many Protestant ex-soldiers joined the controversial “B” Specials of the Ulster Special Constabulary, while some Catholic veterans joined the IRA or found themselves hated in their own communities for having fought with the British instead of against them.⁹⁴ As events progressed after 1921 under the newly-partitioned state of Northern Ireland,

91 Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 110.

92 St. John G. Ervine, *Irishmen of Today: Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster Movement* (Dublin: Maunsel and Co., 1915), 59.

93 Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta 1999), 106–7; Michael MacDonough, *The Irish at the Front* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1916), 111.

94 Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65–6; Denman, *Ireland’s Unknown Soldiers*, 145.

BLOOD-DEBTS AND BATTLEFIELDS: ULSTER IMPERIALISM AND
MASCULINE AUTHORITY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–1918

men with allegiances to Protestantism, the Unionist Party, and the 36th (Ulster) Division soon found themselves in positions of lasting authority and power over their Catholic-Nationalist neighbours and fellow veterans.

The public role Ulster Unionist masculinities played during World War I created a pillar of modern Northern mythology concerning the importance of imperialism, heroism, and sacrifice in the north, visible in public speeches, editorials, politicized war remembrances, and the loyalist murals of Northern Ireland. The power of public imagery and legend often overwhelmed actual lived experiences, an experience Ulster shared with other regions and nations that had fought in the Great War. However, the romantic language of heroism and manliness used by politicians and the press in memorializing Ulster's dead soldiers and living veterans contained biased interpretations of the war that enhanced the sectarian nature of manliness in the north of Ireland, particularly in terms of deciding whose participation in the war mattered the most. Instead of using the event to bring communities together in mutual suffering, public discourse on the First World War and the men it had produced divided Ulster's population along the familiar Protestant-versus-Catholic binary. The sacrificial gentleman-hero, the determined deserter in the woods, and the half-crazed warrior in the trenches were all valid representations of Ulster masculinities in the Great War; the difference was that romanticized visions of Ulster's sanctified unionist soldiers received more publicity and acclaim in a public arena geared to celebrate the achievements of the dominant population. In this way, the complex expressions of wartime masculinities were lost to the more simplistic vision of Unionist Protestant men laying down their lives for Ulster and the British Empire.

* * *

JANE McGAUGHEY is the 2009-10 National Endowment for the Humanities Keough Faculty Fellow at the University of Notre Dame's Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies. Her current research involves public discourses of manliness, government repression and street violence in Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972.

JANE McGAUGHEY est boursière chargée de cours Keough du National Endowment for the Humanities au Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies de l'University of Notre Dame, aux États-Unis. Ses travaux en cours portent sur les discours publics sur la virilité, la répression gouvernementale et la violence dans les rues en Irlande du Nord entre 1921 et 1972.