

# Belgian Refugees in Limerick during the First World War

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*From 1914 to 1919 Belgian citizens who had fled their homes due to the German occupation of their country were accommodated in Ireland and some of these found temporary refuge and work in Limerick city and county where they were given a warm welcome and support.*

Refugees are an inevitable consequence of the disruption caused by war. When Belgium was invaded by Germany on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 many of its citizenry left and sought refuge in other countries: As Ireland was one of these countries, preparations had to be made for their welfare. The responsibility for looking after these refugees was vested in the Local Government Board (LGB) and it established a central Belgian Refugees Committee (Ireland) in October 1914, at 62 Upper Mount Street, Dublin.<sup>1</sup> The committee emphasised from the beginning that its main role was to alleviate the sufferings of these Belgians whose life was made unbearable by the German occupation and that it was not in existence as a mechanism for the supply of workers.<sup>2</sup> This suggests a fear that employers might exploit the situation, which would appear from the evidence, certainly in Limerick, to have been groundless.

When the idea of accommodating some refugees in Limerick was suggested, the Mayor, Alderman P. O'Donovan, convened a meeting in the Town Hall on 27 October 1914. An enormous crowd representative of every social class in the city attended it. Arising from this meeting in which 'a subscription list was opened and the sum of sixty pounds received', it was decided that the provision of accommodation for these refugees was of the utmost priority,<sup>3</sup> and a committee was established to oversee both.<sup>4</sup> This was not the first sum of money collected, nor the first indication of the generous attitude of Limerick people towards providing for the refugees. Some weeks previously a flag day collection had proved to be very successful.<sup>5</sup> By the time accommodation had been obtained for them in Mount Kennet House, Henry Street, the fund had received over £125.<sup>6</sup> Among the more generous contributors were Colonel O'Grady, C.B., High Sheriff, Co. Limerick, and William Nolan, Town Clerk of the City Corporation, who was also the Belgian Consul for Limerick, Clare, and Tipperary.<sup>7</sup> The Bishop of Limerick, Dr Edward O'Dwyer, offered his support to the efforts, as would be expected given that the Catholic dimension of Belgian suffering received much contemporary emphasis in Ireland. Speaking at the annual general meeting of the Limerick District Nursing Association held at St. Munchin's College, Henry Street on 11 November 1914 he called upon the people of Limerick rich and poor, to help 'the poor refugees from Belgium', and 'to make their stay amongst us if not

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<sup>1</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1915*. Cd. 8016 (London, 1915) Appendix K.

<sup>2</sup> *Freeman's Journal* (F.J.) 22 October 1914.

<sup>3</sup> *Limerick Chronicle* (L.C.) 29 October 1914 & *L.L.* 30 October 1914.

<sup>4</sup> *Limerick Leader* (L.L.) 23 November 1914.

<sup>5</sup> *L.C.* 29 October 1914.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 November 1914 & *L.L.* 30 Oct 1914. An advertisement had appeared in the latter seeking premises suitable for housing several families of refugees as well as subscriptions for the local fund, gifts of clothing, furniture, bedding and necessities.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 June 1918.



happy - that is impossible - at least tolerable and as far as you can by kindness to draw the sting of their exile'.<sup>8</sup>

The first refugees, numbering thirty-six in all, had arrived in Limerick that day by train and they were met at the railway station by the Mayor and other prominent citizens and 'an escort of National Volunteers accompanied them to their lodgings at Mount Kenneth House'.<sup>9</sup> They were greeted very enthusiastically by the people who gave them 'a wholehearted and thoroughly Irish welcome and created a visible impression on the recipients'.<sup>10</sup> Although the refugees included labourers, hawkers and the blind beggar, they also included members of the aristocracy, the professional classes, the artistic world, shopkeepers and tradesmen,<sup>11</sup> and citizens who may have belonged to the Belgian Civic Guard.<sup>12</sup> Many of these had lost their worldly possessions or, as one correspondent succinctly put it, 'all that was left to them after years of toil was the clothes they stood up in'.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear if Dr O'Dwyer used the term 'poor refugees' for these initial arrivals in a literal sense or more as a sympathetic comment on their suffering. However during the subsequent year 1915 the 'hawker and blind beggar' certainly disappeared for the refugees who came Ireland were now chiefly of the commercial or semi-professional class, and included some families of high standing in the country (Belgium).<sup>14</sup>

While Mount Kennet House was the initial place of accommodation for the refugees on their arrival, people came forward and offered them homes in the city and county. One offer came from an unusual source, the War Office, which was prepared to allow them the use of the married quarters at the Strand Barracks. A house was provided at Castleconnell to facilitate six refugees; a Mrs Harding at Patrickswell gave three cottages for such families, and a Mrs Maunsell had agreed to provide one.<sup>15</sup> One family was housed at Furnittestown, Adare,<sup>16</sup> and Mr David Dwane, Post Office, Kilmallock, offered a cottage with garden to the refugees.<sup>17</sup> Others offered their services by holding concerts and football matches and forwarded the money collected to the relief fund. A lecture entitled 'Belgium, the Battlefield of Europe' was given by Mr Alfred Dobbs, FRGS, and was followed by a concert after which the funds collected were donated to the relief fund.<sup>18</sup> Two concerts were held in Newcastle west, and were very successful,<sup>19</sup> and Garryowen Rugby Football Club played two games and donated the proceeds of £12 10s to the fund.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>8</sup> L.L. 11 November 1914.

<sup>9</sup> PRO CO 904/95. RIC County Inspector's Report 1 January 1915.

<sup>10</sup> L.C. 24 December 1914.

<sup>11</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1915*. Cd. 8016 (London, 1915) p 401.

<sup>12</sup> F.J. 23 October 1914. The Belgian Civic Guard consisted of those who were not soldiers or reservists but were compelled as citizens to be members of that body. When the country was invaded the Civic Guard was treated as armed non-combatants and not considered as part of the fighting force. The Germans therefore felt that they were at liberty to execute these men.

<sup>13</sup> *Cork Examiner (C.E.)* 20 January 1915.

<sup>14</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1916*. Cd. 8365 (Dublin, 1916) p. xvii.

<sup>15</sup> L.L. 23 November 1914.

<sup>16</sup> C.E. 4 February 1915.

<sup>17</sup> L.L. 9 December 1914 & Mainchín Seoighe, *The Story of Kilmallock* (Kilmallock, 1987) pp 256 & 281. David T. Dwane (1882-1960) was a native of Clogher, Dromin, and a senior officer in Kilmallock Post Office. He was actively involved in the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin, and was involved in establishing a branch of the Irish Volunteers in Kilmallock. He later became the first biographer of Eamon De Valera with a book entitled *Early Life of Eamon De Valera* (Dublin, 1922).

<sup>18</sup> F.J. 28 September 1914.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 April 1915.

<sup>20</sup> L.L. 23 November 1914.



Dioceses held collections at churches throughout the country and published a list of the amounts collected. No record exists for the Diocese of Limerick and the reason remains unclear. No collection may have been held, as was the case in some dioceses. The spokesman for the bishops, Robert Browne, Bishop of Cloyne, explained that 'owing to local circumstances some Bishops have had to postpone the collection in very many parishes ...'<sup>21</sup> Although the Caherconlish Branch of the Teachers' Association decided against making any contribution on the basis that teachers had already donated in the areas where they lived, this would appear to have been the exception to the rule for the members of the Limerick Teachers Association gave a grant of £5 for the assistance of the refugees. One woman, Mrs McNamara, Springfield House, Kilmallock, decided that instead of sending the amount of money that she had collected for almost thirty weeks at 1s each week to the Limerick Fund, she would retain it for the maintenance of a Belgian family at Kilmallock.<sup>22</sup> With such generosity from people locally and nationally it is not surprising that the LGB could claim that out of the 3,000 refugees who came to Ireland in the first year two hundred<sup>23</sup> or '70 to 80 per cent were maintained in private or local hospitality, and without cost to local funds'.<sup>24</sup> Great credit was given to the refugees for their desire to be self-supporting and independent in that many who had never occupied themselves in work of a physical nature did not hesitate to undertake such work when it was deemed necessary.<sup>25</sup>

A number of the refugees who came to Limerick were from a farming background and were accordingly offered work on farms in the county, and gave great satisfaction wherever they were employed.<sup>26</sup> Again the fear that some farmers might be tempted to use them as sources of cheap labour is evident in the comments of the Chairman of Limerick County Council, Mr W.R. Gubbins, JP, who warned that 'it must be distinctly understood that the refugees must not be utilised as a means of obtaining underpaid labour'.<sup>27</sup> There is, in fact, no evidence of any such exploitation either intended or attempted. In Limerick, as elsewhere throughout the country, the Belgians were warmly welcomed and well treated. Apart from farm work employment was obtained for them in the munitions factories established for those who had skills to contribute such as metal workers, fitters, turners etc; while the unskilled were given employment as labouring men at these factories with good wages.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the four years of the war the number of families who came and went varied and many seem to have only remained for a relatively short period. One of the refugees, Madame Vlamynck, died while staying with her husband and some of her children in Limerick. She and her family had been accommodated at Mount Kennet House.<sup>29</sup>

By 31 March 1915 the number of Belgian refugees being catered for by the committees was

<sup>21</sup> C.E. 16 February 1915.

<sup>22</sup> F.J. 24 April 1915 & L.L. 9 December 1914.

<sup>23</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1915*. Cd. 8016 (London, 1915) p 400.

<sup>24</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1916*. Cd. 8365 (Dublin, 1916) p XVII.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XVII.

<sup>26</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1915*. Cd. 8016 (London, 1915) p 402.

<sup>27</sup> F.J. 2 November 1914, C.E. 13 January 1915 & L.C. 22 June 1918. His wife, Mary C. Gubbins who was involved in collecting money to ease the plight of the suffering Belgians, received a letter from the Auxiliary Bishop of Cardinal Mercier, Dr. C. De Waechter, thanking her for the cheque of £36. Another lady who was involved in making the Belgians as comfortable as possible while they remained in Limerick was Lady Quin, wife of Sir Stephen Quin, DL, an ex-mayor of Limerick. For her efforts the King of the Belgians awarded her the decoration 'Medaille de la Reine'.

<sup>28</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1916*, Cd. 8365 (Dublin, 1916) pp xvi-xvii.

<sup>29</sup> L.C. 17 July 1917. Madame Vlamynck was about 50 years of age and had other children in Belgium, who were either in the Belgian army, or territory occupied by the Germans.

1,426 and on the same date the following year there were 938, which meant that 829 refugees left the country and 341 had arrived.<sup>30</sup> There was a reduction in the number of refugees by 31 March 1917 of approximately 400, giving a total of 600 still being accommodated in Ireland.<sup>31</sup> At the same date the following year 527 refugees remained in the care of the LGB committee.<sup>32</sup> On 15 February 1919, just three months after the termination of the war, the remainder of the refugees, numbering 414, including those left in Limerick, numbering 15 in total, left Ireland for their homes in Belgium. During the four years and three months that the war lasted some 2,300 Belgian refugees 'were at one time or another in receipt of hospitality in Ireland'.<sup>33</sup> Many of these were catered for in Limerick, and all the evidence suggests that people of all social classes were welcoming and generous to the Belgian war refugees.

<sup>30</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1916*. Cd. 8365 (Dublin, 1916) p xvii.

<sup>31</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1917*. Cd. 8765 (Dublin, 1917) p. xxviii.

<sup>32</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1918*. Cd. 65 (Dublin, 1919) p. xxvii.

<sup>33</sup> *Annual Report of the LGB for Ireland year ended 31 March 1919*. Cmd. 578. (Dublin, 1920) pp xix & xxi & L.L. 17 February 1919.