

The Celtic Cross at Limburg an der Lahn: A Sentimental Journey

My visit to Limburg in May 2000 fulfilled a long-standing ambition which was prompted by an old framed photograph, and aided by my good German friends Dieter and Maja Langendorff. The photo in question features a magnificent Celtic cross erected by Fr. J.T. Crotty O.P. and Irish prisoners of war who were interned in Limburg Camp during World War I. The cross commemorates 45 Irishmen who were buried there, some of whom had died there, and others who had died in other German prison camps. My father, Lance Corporal T.P. O'Brien, a Munster Fusilier, had been among the internees in Limburg and had presented the framed photo to the Limerick branch of the British Legion during his term as secretary. It had hung in the Legion hall in Lower Hartstonge Street for many years, and when the branch ceased to function after the death of R.S.M. Jack Ring M.C. D.C.M. in 1960, it was returned to our family. I came to appreciate its historical importance in recent years and set about tracing its location and researching the subject and what follows is the result.

Visit to the Graveyard (Friedhof)

I had feared that the Celtic cross had not survived World War II due to Limburg's proximity to Frankfurt-am-Main, which was heavily bombed. Although bombs did fall near Limburg, the graveyard and its memorials remained undamaged. I was delighted, therefore, and indeed very moved, when I entered this sacred and solemn place, located near the village of Dietkirchen, a few kilometers south-east of Limburg-an-der-Lahn. It is known officially as the Russian Friedhof for reasons that I will give later, but in spite of this title the Celtic cross dominates the one acre site, and after 80 years it is in remarkably good condition. It bore the names of 34 Irishmen, P.O.W.s, when it was erected, but weather and some flaking of the stonework have seen the obliteration of some names. Those that remain are quite legible, with Regiments, and, in most cases, Regimental numbers, drawn, as they were, from most of the Irish infantry regiments and the Irish Guards. The side panels mark the involvement of Fr. Crotty O.P. in German and in English:

by Anthony O'Brien



The Celtic Cross at Limburg. The surround has since been removed.

"In memory of our comrades-in-arms who perished during their imprisonment in 1914/18. Erected by their beloved Chaplain J.T. Crotty and the Irish Prisoners of War in Limburg an der Lahn."

Remarkably, the memorial was erected at the height of the war in May 1917¹, and the cost of 6000 marks was donated by the prisoners. It was crafted by Johann Klein from Münster to the design of A. Meister of Bochum. Made from a single block of sandstone, it is three metres high, and the pictures and reliefs are chiselled out of the stone and show Christ and St. Patrick on

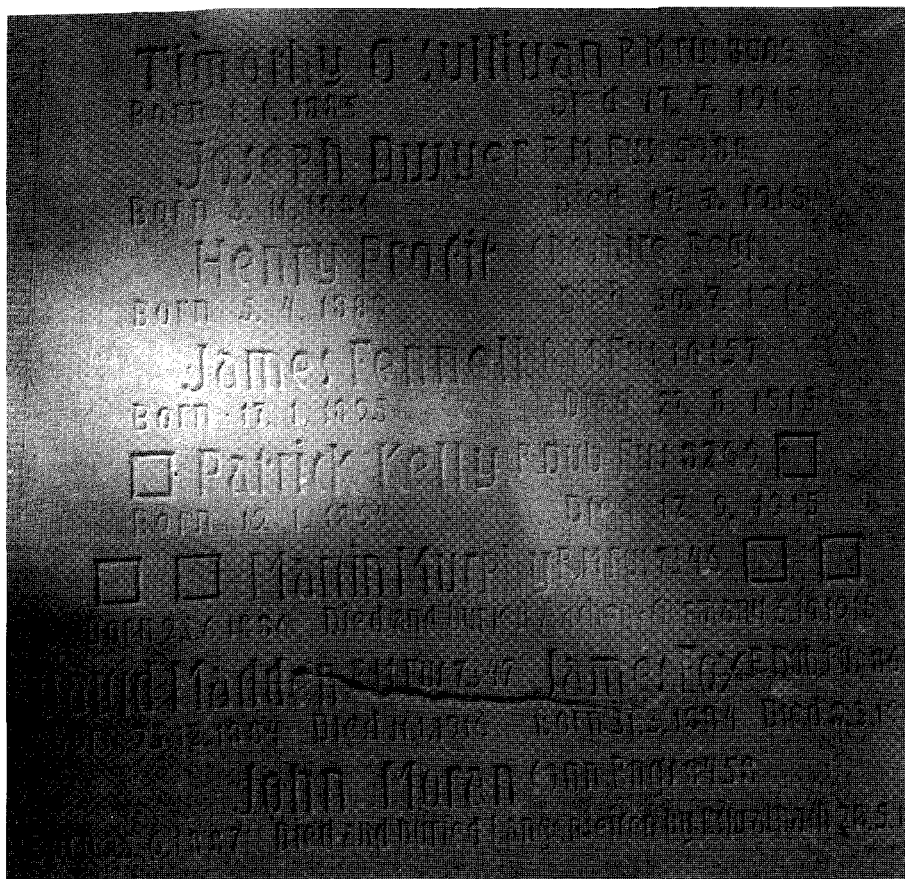
the front. On the back are depicted the rising sun and a cross, representing hope, and a dog, denoting vigilance, and higher up there are four Irish heraldic signs including the Harp.

History of the Graveyard

The Irish prisoners' initiative in erecting a memorial is even more remarkable as the graveyard records² show 330 (later 700) Russians, 127 French, 60 Italians, 47 English, 7 Serbs, 2 Belgians, 1 Romanian, and an indefinite number of Poles, all without significant memorials. I could not fully establish if all the Irish had actually been buried at Limburg or were commemorated there, as some had died at Giessen and Aachen. A French sculptor who was an internee at Limburg did make a fine memorial in tribute to his compatriots in 1918, and it stood there until 1959 when it could no longer be maintained and was removed. A large upright slab was put in place in 1959 to honour the 947 Russians buried there from both world wars. Of this number 247 were buried between 1942 and 1945, some of whom were killed in December 1944 when American bombers accidentally missed their targets as strong winds had blown away the markers at nearby Freindiez. Three Russians who had been shot by the S.S. in 1945 and had been exhumed from a field near Oberweyer were joined with their fallen comrades in Limburg in 1954. The Russians later refused to reclaim their dead when requested to do so, thus giving the graveyard the title of the 'Russian Friedhof'. All others were reburied in their home countries or, in the case of the Irish, in Niederrzwehren near Kassel.

The Limburg Camp

At its peak in W.W. I, Limburg contained in the region of 12,000 Allied prisoners, guarded by soldiers of the 8th and 18th Army Corps. There were 2,000 Irishmen among the internees who had been serving mainly in Irish regiments of the British Army at the time of their capture, and some had been in Limburg since 1914. Many others, however, had been transferred there in 1915³ so that they might be addressed by Sir Roger Casement, who had hoped to form an Irish Brigade to fight for Irish freedom in



Names of some R.M.F. men on the Cross, Privates O'Sullivan, Dwyer, and Fennell.

Ireland. In this he was not successful, as a mere 30 or so men joined him in this venture. They never left Germany as a group and were probably sent back to other camps after Casement's departure in March 1916 because of the hostility shown them by their compatriots.

Treatment in the Camps

Heinrich Langroch⁴ was a boy of ten when prisoners arrived in Limburg Station prior to being moved to the camp. He has documented an account of joining other boys in assisting the walking wounded to get to their destination. The seriously wounded were conveyed on flat farm carts and with cobbled streets and bad roads the journey, though short, was quite a torture for the unfortunate prisoners. The boys had a cordial connection with the prisoners and buttons from uniforms, especially the British ones, were much sought after. Less so were the French ones, with only an anchor, and the Russian ones were considered useless. Herr Langroch, aged 96, still lives in Limburg and is active, mentally alert, and even paints.

There are many accounts of the treatment of the prisoners⁵ en route to camps, especially in the opening months of the war, though not specifically in Limburg. The civilian population were quite hostile in some places, and guards were sometimes rough and apprehensive. The Germans⁶ were overwhelmed by the numbers of prisoners taken and had no centralised system for dealing with them. Absolute power was invested in the corps commander in each district, superseding

those of the civilian authorities and even of the War and Foreign Offices in Berlin. Conditions varied from camp to camp, from the very bad at Wittenberg to the more enlightened at Giessen, near Limburg, where educational facilities were in place, and Limburg itself figured quite well in this regard. Mattresses were of simple straw and hammocks were also used, and stoves for heating were placed in the middle of the huts, which accommodated between 20 and 50 inmates. Food was scarce in all camps for prisoners and guards alike, except in Limburg while Roger Casement was recruiting for his Brigade, but it returned to the poor 'normal' diet when he left. 'Slender Jack'⁷ was in charge of the cookhouse at Limburg, a name that speaks for itself in

terms of frugality. Food parcels from home and from the Red Cross helped to supplement the poor fare and prisoners who worked on farms could, no doubt, eke out a little extra legally or otherwise. Prisoners had the use of wood for the making of handicrafts which were sold or exchanged locally, and the Russians were considered to be the masters in this field. There must have been leather supplied or bartered in Limburg because shoes were also made there and sold or exchanged in the surrounding areas.

The American ambassador to Germany, James W. Gerard⁸, represented Allied interests until 1917, when the U.S. entered the war. He visited many camps, including Limburg, in an effort to improve conditions and in this he was quite successful. He also investigated cases where prisoners had been shot and was less successful in this regard as many obstacles were put in his way by delays and the removal of the body in some cases. He considered that Irishmen did not take well to confinement and were prone to depression when incarcerated. No doubt they welcomed the chance to work outside in factories, farms and other works, and Herr Langroch recalls that the camp was empty during the day.

The Irish Commemorated at Limburg

The first prisoner to die in Limburg was an Irishman, Frederick Reilly⁹ of the Cheshire Regiment, on the 23rd of December 1914 and he was buried with full military honours. The funeral was attended by army veterans from Dietkirchen wearing top hats and tail coats and carrying the German flag, and a brass band played 'I had a Comrade'. The German guards at Limburg placed a notice beside the wooden cross with the inscription 'As a last honour from the German Barbarians'. I traced the names of six Royal Munster Fusiliers on the Celtic cross - Pv. Tim O'Sullivan, 8009; Pv. Jos. Dwyer, 5988; Pv. Jas. Fennell, 10157; L.C. Denis Murphy, 9885; Pv. M. Murphy, 7346; Pv. Thomas Sheehan, 7458. He was born in St. Michael's, Limerick, enlisted in



A general view of Limburg Prison Camp.



Inside a Barracks housing French P.O.W.s. Note the hammocks suspended from the ceiling.

Limerick and died on 1 February 1917. All had been in the first draft to go to France in August 1914, serving in the 2nd Battalion¹⁰ and forming part of the 1st Guard's Brigade. They had been captured at Etreux two weeks later during the retreat from Mons, and were re-interred at Niederzwehren near Kassel with seven other Etreux P.O.W.s in 1923. The official War Office Historical Records show all such men as having died of wounds in Flanders and France, and no mention is made of their sojourn in Limburg or other camps. My father, with other prisoners from Limburg who had health problems, were allowed to spend the final year of their imprisonment in Switzerland in the care of the Red Cross.

Fr. Crotty O.P.

The poor food and other defects common to prison life in those days were somewhat assuaged in Limburg by the presence of Fr. Crotty¹¹. He had been born in New Ross, was a Doctor of Theology and was Prior of the famed San Clemente Church in Rome when he was asked to go to Limburg to minister to the Irish prisoners early in 1916. Described as a stout man of middle height, he had a great facility for learning foreign languages and had a good sense of humour. He celebrated the Silver Jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood in November 1916 in Limburg camp and remained there until 1918.

It may have been felt that Fr. Crotty's nationalist background would facilitate recruiting for Casement's Brigade. He, however, dealt discreetly with Casement and generally confined himself to spiritual matters and was liked and trusted by all sides in the camp. He gave Casement¹² much solace during the latter's darker moments in Limburg when he could make no progress and had bouts of depression. Fr. Crotty returned to Rome for a further spell after the war and later had postings in Ireland, in Waterford, where he was Prior, and in Newry, where he died unexpectedly in 1930, having completed 39 years in the priesthood.

Limburg in Later Years

The City of Limburg, with its famed and beautiful Cathedral and its historic timbered houses, has not unduly encroached on the 'Russian Cemetery'. The prison camp and its hospital are long since gone and were last used as a transit camp for returning German P.O.W.s in 1920. The cemetery is still a haven of peace, and an adjoining picnic area does not intrude too much. Its history has been one of restoration and periods of neglect and the Celtic cross, the Russian memorial and Capt. Hasne's grave¹³, together with a few small stone crosses are all that still remain. There are many more trees now, which add to the peace and solemnity. Voluntary work was the order of the day in the 1960s, but since then regular soldiers and reservists have worked to embellish the grounds. Franz Prox, a retired



The Celtic Cross today. The author with German friend, Dieter Langendorf, on the left.

Sergeant-Major of the Federal Army, now takes care of the cemetery and regular attention is now bestowed on it, and long may it continue. He has made representations to the authorities in Wiesbaden for the restoration of the Celtic cross, and following my visit in May, I have also written to them, and to the Irish Embassy in Berlin. Orthodox services are held from time to time for the Russians, now the only P.O.W.s interred there. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission therefore has no function in maintaining Limburg and I think it appropriate to pay tribute to those Germans who, over the years, have striven to honour and respect their former enemies.

The last word must go to the poet who penned the following verses which appear on my framed photograph:

*'Unhallowed in glory in peace they sleep,
From homeland and friends far across
the deep,
For men must fight and women must
weep,
In the motto of long gone years.
But their comrades remember the stand
they made,
The gallant men of the Loyal Brigade,
When choice was death ere The Irish
Cavaliers.'*

SOURCES AND NOTES

1. Press release: *Nassauische Neue Presse, Nasseur Bote*, 29 May 1917.
2. *History of the Friedhof*, Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Wiesbaden.
3. Denis Gwynn, *The Life and Death of Roger Casement*, 1931.
4. Heinrich Langroch's eye-witness account in the *History of the Friedhof*.
5. Prisoners' accounts, *Limerick Leader* and *Limerick Chronicle*.
6. James W. Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1917
7. Herr Langroch's account, *op. cit.*
8. James W. Gerard, *op. cit.*
9. Herr Langriche's account, *op. cit.*
10. Capt. S. McCance, *History of the Royal Munster Fusiliers*, private circulation, 1927
11. Details of Fr. Crotty's career from Fr. Hugh Fenning O.P., Tallaght, Co. Dublin.
12. Denis Gwynn, *op. cit.*
13. Capt. Hasne, a Frenchman, lies under a horizontal tombstone and is the only non-Russian to remain buried in the Friedhof.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge, with gratitude, the great help of his dear German friends, Dieter and Maja Langendorf, without which this article could not have been completed. To Franz Prox, who generously supplied much valuable information and many historical photographs. To Bernard Byrne, a close friend, for his detailed and expert photographs taken at the Friedhof, and to Fr. Hugh Fenning O.P., Archivist, Dominican Order, for information on the life and service of Fr. Crotty O.P.