

## KILRUSH AND THE MUNSTER FUSILIERS:

# THE EXPERIENCE OF AN IRISH TOWN IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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**K**ilrush, a seaport town on the Shannon estuary with a pre-war population of over three and a half thousand, was one of two urban districts in Co. Clare and the source of over 400 participants in the Great War, especially for the Royal Munster Fusiliers, in whose recruiting district it lay.<sup>(1)</sup> As a port, it provided an above-average number of men to the Royal Navy and most of these sailors came through the First World War unscathed, in contrast to those who joined the army.<sup>(2)</sup> Nearly a fifth of the latter died, with far fewer still on active service by the end of the war, compared with those who fought at sea.<sup>(3)</sup>

Just over half of those who joined the army ended up in the local regiment, the Royal Munster Fusiliers.<sup>(4)</sup> These, as infantrymen, suffered an above-average number of deaths compared to those for the army in general, and only half were still serving by the war's end, the remainder having died or been invalided out.<sup>(5)</sup> Thirty-six soldiers with strong Kilrush connections died serving with the RMF<sup>(6)</sup> and they reflect the general pattern of deaths in the regiment, with 1915 being the worst year.<sup>(7)</sup> Most died serving with the 2nd RMF, with the 1st Battalion not far behind<sup>(8)</sup> and France was where the vast majority died, although half of the deaths for 1915 occurred at Gallipoli or in Macedonia.<sup>(9)</sup> The worst

single day of fatalities was on 9 May, 1915, which saw six Kilrush men killed in action in France, which together with the Gallipoli landings, resulted in that month being the worst overall.<sup>(10)</sup>

Those Kilrush fusiliers with known places of enlistment joined up at four different locations. Tralee was used only by those joining the regulars prewar. Ennis and Limerick had identical patterns, providing places of enlistment into the 5th (Special Reserve) RMF, both before and during the war and also for wartime volunteers into the service battalions. Kilrush itself was used as a place of enlistment prewar for both regulars and special reservists but was hardly used at all during the war. This



*'Come and Help Your Comrades ...'*



*The Munster Fusiliers on parade at Ennis.*

was probably due to lack of facilities there rather than a reluctance by wartime volunteers to enlist in their home town, as non-Kilrush men only appear to have enlisted there prewar also.<sup>(11)</sup>

A significant number of Kilrush men had connections with the RMF prewar regular soldiers, regular reservists and special reservists.<sup>(12)</sup> These were of course mobilised on 4 August, and while the 2nd Battalion's action at Etreux three weeks later saw no Kilrush men killed, 7 of the town's 9 RMF prisoners of war were captured at this time along with most of their battalion.<sup>(13)</sup> Wartime recruits joined either the new service battalions or a special reserve battalion, usually the 5th, from which they were sent to the front after training.

Particular streets of Kilrush contributed men to the services to varying degrees.<sup>(14)</sup> Commercial areas like Henry Street and Vandeleur Street were under-represented compared to poorer residential areas such as The Glen or Pound Street.<sup>(15)</sup> Those who did join up from the commercial streets were also more likely to end up in a specialist corps or more selective regiments rather than infantry of the line like the RMF. Kilrush fusiliers were thus better represented from those who joined up from some streets than others.<sup>(16)</sup>

Kilrush soldiers in the Munster Fusiliers all appear to have held non-commissioned rank and to have been Roman Catholic.<sup>(17)</sup> The dominant occupational category prior to enlistment was that of "general labourer" which applied to over four-fifths of Kilrush fusiliers, with the remainder having quite varied occupations.<sup>(18)</sup> The main

source of employment in Kilrush was provided by the flour and meal mill of Messrs. M. Glynn and Sons, a firm which also had shipping interests. Nearly a third of Kilrush fusiliers were former employees at the mill, which was an above average number for servicemen from the town in general.<sup>(19)</sup> None appear to have been Irish speakers and the vast majority could read and write in English.<sup>(20)</sup> Only a fifth were married men in 1911, although this proportion probably increased up to 1914 and during the war, while two-fifths resided in the lowest category of accommodation recorded in the census.<sup>(21)</sup> Families contributed men to the armed forces to varying degrees,<sup>(22)</sup> and while within households it was common for all eligible males to enlist, this was by no means always the case.<sup>(23)</sup>

Kilrush had typical experiences of a town in the RMF recruiting district during the war. Like the rest of Co. Clare, its corps of the Irish National Volunteers soon died away, only thirty-six of the seventy-two enrolled turning up for meetings by 4 November, 1914.<sup>(24)</sup> It also received visits by recruiting tours during 1915 such as that on 27 March by Daniel D. Sheehan M.P. for Mid-Cork. The latter was also an officer in suitability tests held for "a number of general labourers from the town and district who presented themselves for enlistment". On Monday (29th) over 200 recruits left the town by train and were seen off at the station by an enormous crowd.<sup>(25)</sup> Later, in August that year, the town was also visited by the lord lieutenant on the viceregal party's tour of the country.<sup>(26)</sup>

Differences in attitude to the war and

military service between the town and its rural hinterland were seen in mid-1915 with reports of emigration from West Clare by young men of the farming class, leaving the Kilrush terminus en route to the U.S.A.<sup>(27)</sup> More pertinent was the background to the case heard at the Kilrush Petty Sessions on 12 July, 1915, where James McDonnell, "a respectable farmer from the Kilmihih district" was charged with "drunkenness and riotous behaviour", after having assaulted Pte. Thomas O'Donnell RMF of Kilrush, then home on leave from the front. In an incident in Cussen's public house in Vandeleur Street, he had accused O'Donnell of being a "mean man to fight the Germans",<sup>(28)</sup> and that "it was all the scruff and corner boys that were in the army and that only for being rowdies, they would not be in it at all". The farmer, having decided that "O'Donnell did not get half enough from the Germans and he would give him more", had struck the wounded soldier on the head, for which he received a month's imprisonment.<sup>(29)</sup>

A few men from Kilrush who died on active service during the war were brought back for burial in the town.<sup>(30)</sup> One such was Pte. John McDonnell, who died in a Cardiff hospital of wounds received at Ginchy. A 26-year-old tailor from Moore Street before his enlistment into the 8th RMF,<sup>(31)</sup> his remains arrived in Kilrush on 19 October, 1916, and lay overnight in the church before a Requiem Mass and funeral the following day, which witnessed "a cortege of large proportions".<sup>(32)</sup>

The changing political scene in Ireland was reflected with the display of



*A drawing by Christopher Clark of Munster and Dublin fusiliers returning from the Somme, 1916.*

republican flags in Kilrush in May, 1917, following the Sinn Féin by-election in South Longford<sup>(33)</sup> while, on 30 March, Thomas Russell, an Irish teacher, had died of bayonet wounds received two days previously when his meeting at Kilrush was raided and broken up by Crown forces,<sup>(34)</sup> and July saw the initiation of a Sinn Féin Club at the Workingmen's Club in Frances Street.<sup>(35)</sup> At least seven Kilrush residents were jailed for arms possession and drilling offences, while three local soldiers, returning from leave in the winter of 1917-18, gave their rifles away to Sinn Feiners in Ennis, after having met Countess Markievicz on their train-journey from Kilrush. The trio, including two Munster Fusiliers, were subsequently apprehended after a chase through the county town, but all survived their courtmartial sentence which varied in extreme from a stern reprimand to a commuted death-sentence.<sup>(36)</sup> Despite this, in the immediate years that followed it was felt that Kilrush "was not a great Sinn Féin town" and "did not fall into line",<sup>(37)</sup> its strong military garrison also providing a restriction on I.R.A. activity in the period 1919-21.<sup>(38)</sup> In the spring of 1919, ex-servicemen were given precedence in an Irish Transport and General Workers' Union procession at Kilrush,<sup>(39)</sup> while in the January, 1920, municipal elections the town returned seven Home Rule and five Labour seats in contrast to the county town of Ennis where Sinn Féin were elected to half the seats.<sup>(40)</sup> This all emphasised the difference in attitude between town and country, with Sinn

Féin dominant in the latter and the old party of Redmond and newly-emerging Labour holding on in the towns and representing traditions with which ex-British servicemen, like former Royal Munster Fusiliers, were more likely to identify.<sup>(41)</sup>

#### REFERENCES

1. Its population in the 1911 census was 3,666. C.E. Glynn, *List Kilrush men engaged in the war from August 1914* (Waterford, 1919) is the main source for the basis of this research. The 414 men listed is a high figure because it includes many not present for the 1911 census such as regular servicemen, emigrants, etc. and so presents the best possible case. Any findings expressed in percentage terms are probably accurate, however. The Royal Munster Fusiliers (RMF) recruiting area was composed of counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Clare with the regimental depot situated at Tralee.
2. Glynn lists 414 individuals of whom 55 (13.3%) were in the Royal Navy. Of these 55, 7.2% were killed in action, 1.8% otherwise died on active service and the remaining 89% were still serving at the end of the war. Of those reservists and recruits joining the British forces from 4 Aug., 1914 to 15 March, 1916, in Munster (18,488), 755 or 4% joined the Royal Navy (compared with 13% from Kilrush from the war). (From statistics in Redmond papers, N.L.I., MS 15259).
3. Of the 359 who joined the army, 15.3% were killed in action/died of wounds, 2.8% otherwise died, another 20.3% discharged for all reasons, 21.7% were wounded in action and 4.7% prisoners of war. The 145 still serving at the commencement of demobilisation represented 40.4% and included the 17 former prisoners of war who had to return to their units.

4. The 'army' includes 7 in the Royal Flying Corps (part of the army and navy prior to April 1918), and 20 outside the British army (14 Australian forces, 4 Canadian, 1 South African and 1 in the U.S. army). Of 359 such men, 192 (53%) were stated to be RMF, although examination of those stated to have died shows that a few were actually in other Irish regiments. This is balanced by *Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919: part 72 The Royal Munster Fusiliers* (H.M.S.O., London, 1921) which has a few Kilrush men who do not appear at all on Glynn's war list.
5. The 192 RMF were found to include 5 cases of duplication reducing their number to 187 upon which the following findings were based. Died (all causes) 23.5%, wounded in action and invalided 10.1%, wounded in action and hospitalised 1.1%, otherwise discharged 11.2%, transferred to non-combat corps (Labour Corps, Royal Defence Corps) 1.6%, prisoners of war 4.8%, wounded in action and serving 15.5%, others still serving 32%. No mention was made of any transfers to other regiments which must have occurred.
6. *Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919*. This is less than the 44 claimed by Glynn, some of whom died with other regiments (e.g. Cooney, Patrick B, Kilrush, enlisted Kilrush, Pte. died 26/6/16 in India with 1st Garrison Battalion, Royal Irish Rgt. Of Kilrush and formerly 6007 RMF) and some of whom died after their discharge from the army and thus would not appear in *Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919*. The 36 in the latter source were made up of 28 born and lived there, 6 born there (lived elsewhere) and 2 who lived there (born elsewhere).
7. *Ibid*. The deaths for each year were, 1914 (2), 1915 (18), 1916 (7), 1917 (4), 1918 (4).
8. *Ibid*. Deaths by battalion were 2 RMF (17), 1 RMF (12), 8 RMF (3), 6 RMF (2), 7 RMF (1), 3 RMF (1).
9. *Ibid*. Deaths by location, France (25), Gallipoli (8), Macedonia (2), Home (1). The figure for France includes those who died of wounds at home from wounds received there.
10. *Ibid*. 10 Kilrush Royal Munster Fusiliers died in May, 1915.
11. *Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919*; Royal Munster Fusiliers Old Comrades Association records in the National Army Museum, Chelsea (hereinafter cited as OCA records in NAM 6907/29). From a sample of Kilrush RMF soldiers with known places of enlistment, the time of enlistment being estimated from serial number where not known, Kilrush was used by 2 regulars and 5 special reservists prewar and by only two in wartime. Ennis and Limerick were each 2 special reservists prewar and 4 during the war, with 4 service battalion enlistments for Limerick and 5 for Ennis. Tralee had only 2 regular enlistments before the war. 3 non-Kilrush men enlisting there all did so prewar.
12. *Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919*; RMF OCA Files in NAM 6907/29. Of a sample of 58 RMF soldiers, half had prewar connections with the regiment, 11 as regulars, 5 as reservists and 13 as special reservists (mostly in the 5th RMF).
13. Letter by Pte. Stafford RMF from Limburg P.O.W. Camp (*Cork Examiner*, 10 Mar., 1915). Stafford, John b. 1884, Pte. 2RME, wounded in action and taken prisoner 27 Aug., 1914, h/o Susan of 14 Crofton St., Kilrush. A general labourer and employee of J. Glynn and Son. A reservist, having



- previously served from 1902-10, he was discharged as unfit on 13 July, 1918, having received an early release (1911 census returns; Glynn; letter by Stafford to the OCA in 1929 in RMF OCA Files, NAM 6907/29).
14. The different layout of the two main sources, Glynn and the 1911 census returns for Kilrush urban district (P.R.O.I., 1911 census 104/DED 1-42) causes difficulties. Glynn lists 13 areas mostly streets, compared to the 42 sub divisions in the census returns.
  15. Henry St., with 112 males in 1911 contributed 11 to the forces (9.8%) from a street with 41 shops, 23 pubs, 5 dwellings and a bakery. Vandeleur St., with 107 males, contributed 8 to the forces (7.6%) in a street with 22 shops, 13 dwellings, 8 pubs, a school and a "manufactory". The Glen, with 121 males, contributed 70 (57.8%) from an area (including Ball Alley Lane) of 55 dwellings only, while the adjacent streets of Pound St., Hector St. and Crofton St., with 237 males, contributed 89 (37.6%) from an area with 104 dwellings and 4 shops (Glynn; 1911 census returns, Kilrush urban district).
  16. Using Glynn, the percentage of servicemen from each street in the RMF was as follows: 'Pound St./Hector St. etc'. (48), Burton St. (85), Vandeleur St. (50), Malt House Lane (41), Ball Alley Lane (69), The Glen (62), Stewart St. (60), "Grace St. etc". (76), Chapel St. (77), Moore St. (29), John St. (50), "Miscellaneous" (4), Henry St. included no RMF at all among its 11 servicemen, these being in the Irish Gds. (4) and one each in the Army Service Corps, Royal Garrison Artillery, Canadians and Australians.
  17. Glynn states each rank and 1911 census returns provide religious affiliation. Four sons of Kilrush's Church of Ireland rector, Canon Simon Carter Armstrong, were commissioned, two in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, one in the Royal Garrison Artillery and one in the Army Veterinary Corps and one killed in action. Glynn, Henry Hanna, *The Pals at Sulva Bay*, p. 156, gives a biography of Charles M. Armstrong, who served with 7RDF at Gallipoli prior to his commissioning in the 6RDF. He was later killed in action with 10RDF in France (10 Feb., 1917), and is commemorated by a plaque in the Church of Ireland at Kilrush.
  18. 1911 census returns were used for 65 individuals who could be traced. The 14 who were still scholars in 1911 were sons of general labourers in 9 cases (64%), the remainder being sons of a shoemaker, a publican, a railway porter and 2 sons of (different) carpenters. The remainder included 42 general labourers (82% of 51), 2 bakers, 2 shop porters, a tailor, a butcher, a blacksmith, a shoemaker and a sweet-maker.
  19. Glynn. 58 of 187 was 31% RMF compared with 26% for the town overall.
  20. 1911 census returns for 64 individuals from 44 families. 9 from 6 families were illiterate. Many parents of those who joined up were still Irish speakers in 1911.
  21. 1911 census returns show 19 families contributing recruits to the RMF lived in category 3 accommodation, 28 in category 2 and none in category 1.
  22. Of those examined, 28 families gave one recruit, 11 gave 2, 7 gave 3, 3 gave 4 and one family gave 5 recruits. These being families which gave at least one recruit to the RMF (1911 census returns).
  23. Of those families which contributed RMF recruits, 7 had one more eligible male who did not join, 6 had 2 and one family had 4 more. This takes no account of medical fitness etc. (1911 census returns).
  24. M. McNamara, Kilrush secretary I.N.Vs, to Col. Maurice Moore, Nov. 1914 (N.L.I., MS 10547[5]).
  25. *Limerick Leader*, 31 Mar., 1915. The figure of 200 seems a bit high representing half of Glynn's war list enlisting in March, 1915 alone, although possibly many were rejected at a more thorough medical examination subsequently.
  26. *Cork Examiner*, 28 Aug., 1915.
  27. *Limerick Leader*, 16 June, 1915.
  28. *Ibid.*, 14 July, 1915. This street was named after the local gentry, the Vandeleurs, whose departure from the area just before the war caused Arthur Lynch M.P. (W. Clare) to comment that it symbolised the wiping out of "the last traces of foreign domination in the Kilrush district" (David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life 1913-21* [London, 1977], p. 49). A descendant of this Vandeleur family led the Irish Guards battle group (2nd Armoured and 3rd Infantry battalions) of the Guards Armoured Division in operation "Market Garden" in September, 1944. His part was played by the actor Michael Caine in the film *A Bridge Too Far*.
  29. *Limerick Leader*, 16 July, 1915.
  30. The Church of Ireland cemetery, used by all denominations, contains 7 graves (Royal Navy 3, RMF 2, Royal Irish Rgt. 1, Royal Field Artillery 1), Shanakyle cemetery contains one (Royal Army Service Corps), as does Scatterry Island (Royal Navy). Not all of these were from Kilrush and other local servicemen who died after the Armistice are also buried there.
  31. McDonnell, John b, Kilrush, enlisted Ennis, 4337 Pte., 8RME. Died of wounds 14/10/16 aged 26, a master-tailor s/o John and Catherine of 25 Moore St., Kilrush (*Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919*; 1911 census returns).
  32. *Limerick Leader*, 27 Oct., 1916. In the early twenties, the Kilrush Ex-Servicemen's Association erected a wooden cross in old Shanakyle cemetery to commemorate those who had lost their lives in the Great War (James McGuane, *Kilrush from olden times* [privately published, 1984], p. 92).
  33. *Limerick Leader*, 11 May, 1917.
  34. Padraic O'Farrell, *Who's who in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-21* (Cork, 1980), p. 141.
  35. *Limerick Leader*, 23 July, 1917.
  36. *Clare Champion*, 1 Aug., 1986; letter to author dated 20 Aug., 1986 from Aidan Cahill, Kilrush correspondent for that paper. The third soldier, John Bolger, was in the Australian forces and suffered little due to the A.I.F.'s great disciplinary tolerance. The two RMF men were: Keane, Michael, b. 1891, Pte., IRMF, a baker at Glynn's Mill, s/o Pat and Mary of 9 Burton St., Kilrush. One of a family of 13 which included his brother John, 4612 Pte., IRMF, KIA 9/9/16 at Ginchy, Michael Keane was tried by his battalion commander, Lt.-Col. Robert Kane, who, perhaps fortunately, was also a Clare man. Pte. Keane survived his sentence of six months of continuous front-line duty, but Lt.-Col. ("The Admiral") Kane was killed leading his battalion in October, 1918. The other (unrelated) was Keane, Patrick, b. 1894, 5426 Pte., 2RME, a general labourer, s/o Patrick of 9 The Glen, Kilrush. One of a family of 8 which included a brother, Michael, 5835 Pte., IRMF, KIA 26/4/15 at Gallipoli, Patrick Keane's death sentence was commuted to continuous front line service in view of the large number of his family serving. His subsequent rescue of a wounded officer in no-man's land later won him a total reprieve.
  37. Although its recalcitrant inhabitants could at least be pressed and bullied for their money (Fitzpatrick, p. 153).
  38. *Ibid.*, p. 221. Fitzpatrick went on to quote a local I.R.A. veteran: "Although we were few, we were very active and very effective in many ways. Actually we had no military activity. There was military in the workhouse. There were the British marines over in Cappaged. The Black and Tans were down here in Toler St. We were helpless if you like, as a military organisation. "This garrison was ultimately composed of 100 soldiers and up to 50 Royal Marines (Michael Brennan, *The war in Clare 1911-21* [Dublin, 1980], pp. 86-92). Kilrush was not, however, left untouched by the events of 1919-21. Michael Brennan tells of a raid by the East Clare Flying Column of the I.R.A. which resulted in the death of an R.I.C. sergeant. This was probably Sgt. McFadden who died on 23 Apr., 1920. Constable O'Hanlon was killed in the town on 21 Aug., 1920 (O'Farrell, p. 184). Captain Lendrum, resident magistrate for the Kilrush area was kidnapped on 22 Sep., 1920, and his body found near Doonbeg on 1 October. On 7 Feb., 1921, Patrick Falvey of Kilmacane, Kilrush, was shot while filling in a trench which had been dug across the road near his home and he died two days later. Thomas Shannon, a farmer from near Kilrush, was shot dead on 4 Apr., 1921. A former Sinn Fein magistrate, he had subsequently tried to leave the movement and was shot 10 days after having refused to pay rates to a local Sinn Fein councillor (Irish Times, 10 Feb., 7 Apr., 1921); Sinn Fein Publicity Department, *The good old I.R.A./Tan War operations* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 21, 29, 43'. The latter useful publication is a compilation of contemporary newspaper reports. It includes over 40 cases of ex-servicemen who were killed mainly in 1921, mostly by the I.R.A. as alleged informers. Kilrush does not appear to have witnessed any such killings and only one such case could be found for all of Clare. The only I.R.A. death in the area as listed in O'Farrell on p. 164, appears to have been that of Volunteer T. Curtin on 6 Dec., 1920.
  39. Fitzpatrick, p. 252.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 121. The other 6 (Home Rule) seats in Ennis included a "Comrade of the Great War".
  41. It should also be noted that the June, 1920, mutiny of the 1st Connaught Rangers in India had as one of its ringleaders a Kilrush man, Pte. Joseph Hawes (Sam Pollock, *Mutiny for the cause* [London, 1969], acknowledgements page [un-numbered]). Kilrush continued to provide recruits to the RMF as late as January, 1921, when Pte. Michael Cahill enlisted (letter by Cahill to the OCA in 1961 from his Crawford St., Kilrush, address in RMF OCA Files in NAM 6907/29). Cahill, Michael, enlisted 3 Jan., 1921, 7212910 Pte., RMF, of Kilrush, discharged 20 July, 1922, due to disbandment of the regiment. The only person with his name and approximate age in Kilrush for the 1911 census was aged 12, s/o James and Anne of 8 Russell's Lane.

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