

About 1910, my life and that of all the family was saddened by the death of my sister Tess whose goodness and kindness had so often kept the family afloat. She had married but found only sorrow and hardship. Her son was left in the care of my mother for a little while and her young daughters placed in a convent, where one of them soon died. Pat, my young nephew, looked upon me as a big brother and this affectionate relationship lasted all his life. He used to wait eagerly for my return from work so that we could set out for long walks in the country or along the banks of the Shannon – much as I had done with my own father. Presently, he had to go to England and he left us reluctantly and with tears.

During this time, in every spare moment, I was busy educating myself with constant reading. I joined the City Library which had been built and stocked by Andrew Carnegie – a splendid act of philanthropy, or a belated recognition of the shameful neglect of Irish education, whichever one chooses to think.

The first intimation of war that we had in Ireland, came about 1913. The tension of the growing rivalry over naval power and trade between Germany and Britain made itself felt even as far as my native south-west.

There was certainly no anti-German feeling in Ireland – indeed the struggle for Home Rule made the Irish rather indifferent to other problems. Later, when the struggle for independence

THE LIFE OF A LIMERICK DENTIST

BY MICHAEL GUERIN PART TWO

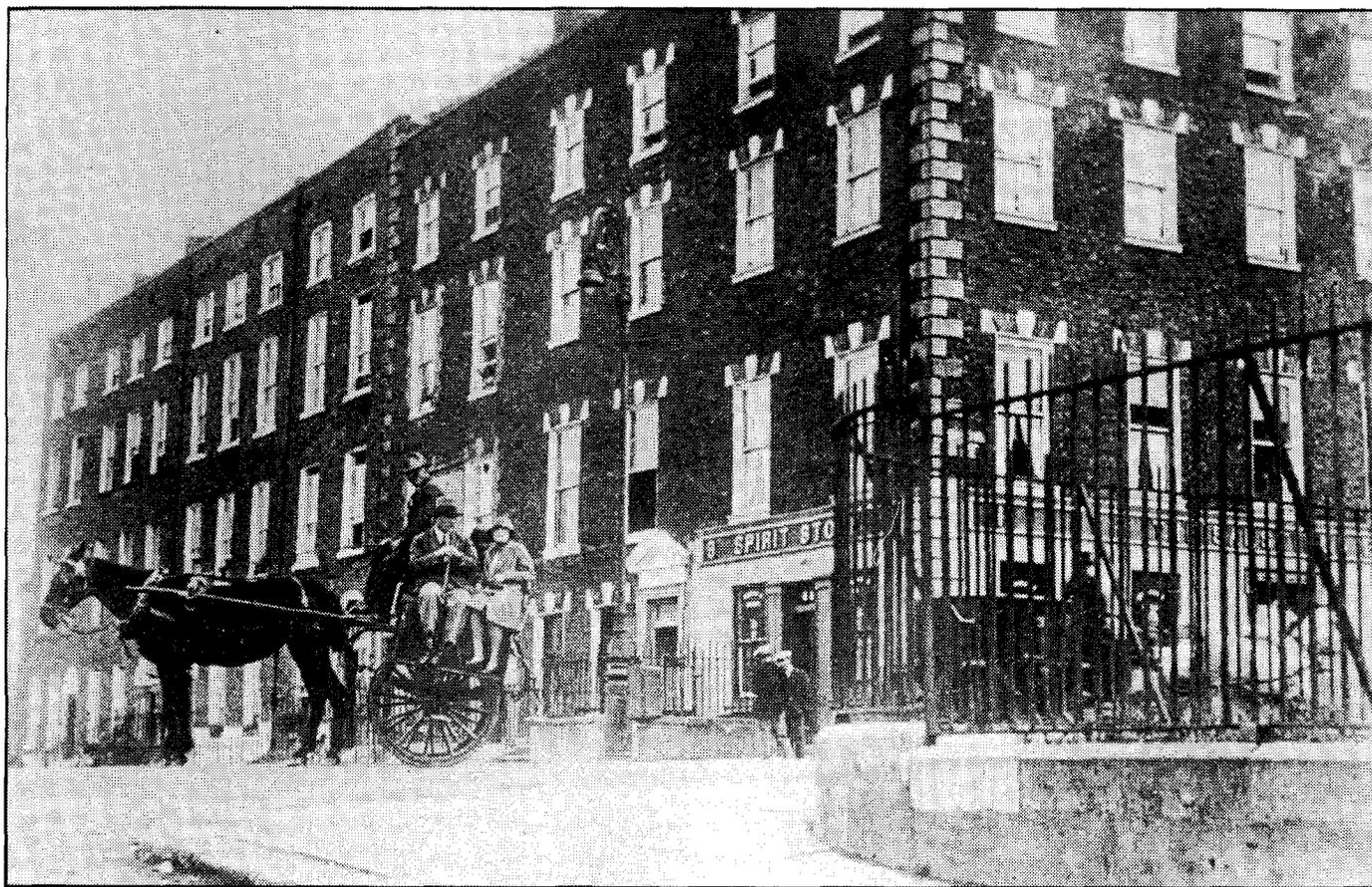
became more bitter and violent, then Germany might occasionally be seen in the light of an ally.

In 1913, I joined the Irish Volunteers: as they said at that time, "to further Irish freedom". It was also designed to counteract the movement that was afoot

in Ulster. We marched and we had parades but we had no arms. Several of us owned shotguns but we were not allowed to march with these. Of course, arms were unobtainable at that time – at least, in Limerick, which was fairly closely patrolled by the British Army. In



Clune's shop, William Street, circa 1910.



Bank Place, c. 1920.

the country places, of course, it was a different matter.

The first experience I remember of the landing of arms was early in 1914. At the time, I was in Dublin, staying with a cousin who was also in the Volunteers.

One morning he said to me: "There is a shipment of arms coming this afternoon. They were bringing it in at Howth".

We prepared to set out but, before we left, we heard that warning had reached the British who at once sent off a detachment of the King's Own Scottish Borderers to intercept the shipment.

Shortly after this, we heard that the ship had landed the arms at another place and had delivered the rifles: they were received with ecstatic joy.

In the meantime, the Borderers, returning from their fruitless sortie, were met by a very large crowd at Batchelor's Walk where the people obstructed the roadway. The officers warned them to clear the way but the crowd surged nearer. A volley was fired over their heads and the movement of the crowd ceased but the people did not disperse. Finally, the soldiers were ordered to fire into the crowd: one little boy was killed and a number wounded.

This incident created a great deal of hostility. War with Germany was declared soon afterwards and almost immediately the Borderers were sent to France. The people lined the streets and bade them a dreadful farewell with jeers and curses, spitting on them as they passed by and pelting them with

rubbish. Even though I shared these feelings and remember now the hopeless bitterness of the Irish people at that time, yet it is a terrible thing to consider that many of these men were going to their deaths with these images in their minds.

The British Government had promised John Redmond that if he could persuade the Irish people to support the war, Home Rule would be guaranteed when peace was declared. It must be considered as a tribute to Redmond's immense popularity and the trust he inspired, that he was able (even temporarily) to turn the anti-British tide into such reversing channels that Irishmen actually agreed to wear a British uniform and fight in the British Army.

Early in 1915, he came to the Markets Field and I, with many others, listened, enraptured, as he called to us: "If any young man here wants to serve the cause of Ireland, let him fight for the cause of Belgium and the rights of small countries".

Fired by his enthusiasm and his promises, I joined up immediately with thousands of others from every corner of the country. This reaction was not universal and many saw the war as an opportunity for a renewal of the struggle for complete independence from a war-preoccupied England.

The men of the Sixteenth Irish Division had been brought together from every part of the south and we came to Dublin in the summer of 1915. I remember the day we marched to the transport ships; the streets were crowded

with people laughing, crying and cheering. The war was accepted with mixed feelings by the Irish people; many pinned their hopes upon it as the means of bringing Ireland into the bright hope of independence. All this was to change later, but we went away on a great wave of acclamation. We were the young heroes who would finally break the chains binding Caitheleen ni Houlihan.

I was sent to Aldershot for my training, only to find that neither uniform nor arms were available for us. The powers-that-be gave me a khaki jacket which I wore with my own trousers and overcoat. Eventually, I was issued with a pair of trousers but I wore my own overcoat for several months. When I was issued with a coat, I sold my old one for a pound.

In September, 1915, we were already formed into Irish divisions. Redmond had wanted Irish brigades but was told that this was not possible. The men from Southern Ireland were in the Sixteenth and those from Ulster in the Twenty-Ninth. There was also the prestigious South-Irish Fourth Division - for, of course, horses were still being used for war. The belief that horses must always eventually take over from the infantry, died very hard indeed. The idea of a triumphant cavalry still reigned and the stark reality of the trenches and their unimaginable horrors was not yet suspected. Generals French and Haig



O'Connell Street at the turn of the century.

were after all old cavalry men and still lived in the past before the coming of the machine-gun and its raking devastation.

None of us thought that the war would last very long. After all, were not men coming from all over the world to fight for the Allies? How could Germany resist such pressure? Finally, it was widely held that as the Germans were all conscripts and the English soldiers volunteers, the latter were inevitably superior. Was not one volunteer worth ten pressed men? Of course, this was all ignorant enthusiasm based on total ignorance of what lay before us: the world we knew was to be utterly destroyed.

On Christmas Eve, I found myself in France and more exactly in Boulogne. From the moment of landing, we were drenched through by relentless rain which set our tents and gear awash with mud. Later, we moved to the outskirts of Abbeville where we were lodged in barns, where though still cold and fairly miserable, we settled down, and managed to keep as dry as possible.

In fact, I took very little notice of conditions but relied on my youth and fitness to carry me through. I never had as much as a cold all the time I was in the army, but that winter an abscess developed on a molar tooth which nearly drove me mad with pain. I reported to the doctor, but he said that he had no means of extracting the tooth and advised me to go to the casualty clearing-station. Wasting no time, I hastened

down there. A sergeant in the R.A.M.C. came out and listened to my tale of woe but shook his head.

"Sorry, lad, but you have missed the dentist, I'm afraid. He won't be around again for about six weeks".

He was starting to walk away as I groaned and nursed my jaw then turned back, hesitating.

"I'll tell you what, - I'll take it out for you. There are two or three forceps around and I've often watched extractions. Of course, I've no chloroform to give you. Do you think you could stand it?"

I had no idea whether I could bear the pain of getting rid of the tooth, but I did know I could not bear the agony of keeping it. The sergeant took my dismal nod as agreement and motioned me to sit down on a wooden crate at the same time yelling for two or three soldiers to come and hold me down. In the next few minutes, I was convinced he would end by breaking my jaw, but he succeeded in pulling out the tooth, roots and all. I thanked him and went back to my billets where a couple of days later I felt none the worse.

Meantime, army life absorbed me into itself. I was given a job in the company office where I sorted out and delivered mail. I must say I enjoyed those early days delivering the letters up and down the lines, for I often met old friends and there was always news or rumours of what was happening in various parts of the front.

Generally speaking, we were all in fair heart when we went up the line but it was harder to maintain a brave spirit and a steady head at the front. It was the dreadful noise of the bombardments, day and night, that ate away at the nerves.

The nights were worse than the days. I think it was perhaps because one still somehow expected the nights to bring a little peace: man's ancient memories die hard. The eerie illumination of the Verey lights was followed by the whistling and the whining of the shells and the fearful crash of the explosions. The most robust and youthful health was hardly proof against these continued shocks. We were all afraid - and if any man, then or since, said he was not afraid, then I would not believe him. Neither do I believe that it was courage that kept the majority of us there: the simple truth was that we had no choice.

At this particular time, in my sector, the casualties were not great. Men were killed, of course, every day and night and not only by shell and bullets. Deep craters were formed which filled with rainwater and mud: a death-trap for a man weighed down by his gear. I knew several who died that way and I thought that it was a long, long journey to travel only to drown in a muddy hole.

At one place, Givenchy, we counter-attacked and won quite a victory, gaining all of three hundred yards of shell-holed ground! Of course, these little skirmishes and hundreds of others, were simply the army's way of marking time. A great

attack was being planned with a massive gathering of men and arms which was to take place around the Somme.

Soon after the battle began, the Ulster Division went in and was promptly and almost completely wiped out. My own division arrived there in August and I remember the weather was very hot and humid. The slaughter was well under way although we had no idea of the monstrous size of the casualty lists: knowing those of our own section was devastating enough.

Rumour ran wild, however, and by this means we pieced together some vague notion of what was happening. I was talking one day to the driver of the brigade-major and he told me that the army command simply did not know what to do with the unending masses of the dead – not to speak of the wounded. I have often wondered about the fearful paralysis that seemed to take hold of the minds of these commanders. Why and how could they continue to send ever more and more men across land where they might fall at every step and under the direct sights of countless machine-guns. No Man's Land, indeed!

I cannot pretend to recall with any clarity what were my own feelings as I went over the top. They served out a good ration of dark, strong rum to every man. This, taken after nights of broken sleep and stressful days was generally sufficient to dampen fear and deaden immediate sensations. Some men refused it – for all kinds of reasons – and when this happened, there was always another man eager to drink a double share. In addition, of course, we were urged forward by mounting tension and excitement, the proximity of many close comrades, the exhortations of the officers who led us and finally by the sheer fatal inevitability of the action.

The noise of the guns remains as the over-riding memory. It was necessary to lip-read, for you could not hear the voice of the next man in line. This unceasing pandemonium continued, on one occasion, for six weeks. Many men lost their hearing, many had impaired ear-drums and many others suffered irreparable damage to their nerves which made them unfit to live a normal life after the war.

Many of my friends from home had been killed, wounded or separated from me in one way or another. Regimental identities disappeared as the casualties mounted and when men returned after convalescence or leave, they were sent to whatever part of the line needed reinforcement. In the midst of this constant movement, the importance of comradeship still remained. Friendships were quickly made in those conditions of unbelievable pressure and strain. One achieved a closeness and harmony of mind with those brief friendships of the trenches that a life-time of civilian acquaintance could never give.

There was, of course, a particular sharpness in the pain of losing a childhood friend. I remember one of my

boyhood pals, a young fellow from my own parish in Limerick, called Cull Carroll. One day, he came back from a sortie in a strangely triumphant and confident mood.

"I'll never be killed now, I'm convinced of that, Michael", he said. "After what we've been through today, I'd not be afraid of hell itself".

The very next morning, he was shot dead as he stood on guard at the parapet. He was a great footballer and very popular at home: his death was a great sorrow to me.

Presently, the preparations began for Passchaendael. There were all kinds of stories going up and down the lines. The French had suffered frightful losses and we heard that in certain sectors they had mutinied and refused to fight. We even heard that some British soldiers had put down their arms but we did not place much credence in this. Since then, we know that this sad and baffling episode did take place: one more melancholy piece in the great desperate jigsaw.

As for myself, I was merely, there, becoming ever more bewildered by the ghastliness of everything. The beautiful simplicity of John Redmond's rallying cry and our glad response, seemed to belong to another century, another life. Further off still, like an infinitely distant dream, was the column of children marching proudly with their wooden rifles to the gentle command of the teacher, as she played the stirring strains of "O'Donnell Abu".

Looking back, I feel only the deepest compassion for the French and all others who revolted in despair against the bloodbath. At the time, however, despite my misery and bafflement, mutiny remained for me the unthinkable act. Nevertheless, I would always be chary of passing judgement on the acts of soldiers at the height of war. Societies have to choose: they must make war no longer or they must forbear to pass judgement on the men they have bludgeoned into military machines and thrown into unspeakable situations.

I had no personal experience of gas but we were sent up the line to replace the Dublin Fusiliers who had been through an attack. They were all lying out on blankets, spread along the footpath, coughing, retching and spitting blood. In the distance, we saw the drifting clouds of gas which those boys had been breathing and we knew how useless were the masks which had been issued to us. I believe they copied the German masks later, but in any case, I never had to wear one in action since gas soon showed itself to be a dangerous and perfidious weapon.

That day, was Easter Sunday, 1916. Little did any of us realise what was happening in Dublin on that fateful day. Later, the Germans began putting up great placards: "Your women and

children are being murdered in Dublin!" Indeed, at this time, the Germans were trying to form an Irish brigade from among the prisoners they had taken, but with little success.

Save for exceptional periods of bombardments, we were fairly reasonably fed; the diet was monotonous but we were not greatly troubled by the quality of rations, so long as they were in sufficient quantity. Hot sweet tea could always be brewed up and with our cigarettes, made up for most deficiencies. When, later, I read Remarquès, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, I was appalled at his account of the miserable diet of the German soldiers, in comparison with our own. He relates that they were always glad to raid an enemy trench on the chance of finding food.

A far greater problem than food was the unceasing struggle with lice. These creatures made a complete conquest of every soldier, invading every part of his body, hair and clothing. Once a month, we went down to the bath-house and were given a change of linen, but it was quite useless: we bathed in old wooden tubs and the lice were waiting for us in all the cracks and crannies above the water line.

Winter was the dreadful time. We lived, drenched through, standing in icy water; foot rot, trench foot, gangrene, whatever the name you give, was the penalty for neglect. Some men, allowed their toes to rot, in hope of discharge. This ploy worked at the beginning but soon became an offence punishable by court martial.

We had entered the world of underground animals, and since we could not displace them, we had to live with them. They, in turn, lived around and upon us. We were there living in conditions that were probably a great deal worse than those of our primitive ancestors, while at the same time, into our hands were placed the most sophisticated weapons of that day for the destruction of other men. Perhaps the conscientious objectors, who refused to play this obscene and paradoxical game, were in the end proved to be the only sane men.

I feel certain that this degrading existence, continued for so long, was as responsible for the breakdown of nerve and spirit as were the bullets and shells. The very young and the very healthy were perhaps better able to shake off this experience, but for the older and the weaker, it was devastating. We know that many became unemployable after the war and some were quite unfit for the ordinary routine of domestic life. Many took to the wandering life of the misfit and the tramp and these also should be added to the casualty lists.

No home leave was granted to any man from Southern Ireland during the years I spent in France. I heard of men who had previously been granted home leave and had never returned.

One day, in October, 1917, somewhere



A drawing by Brenda Andrews of St. Mary's Cathedral, with St. John's spire in the background.

beyond Abbeville, I was standing talking with a chap called Lemmon, from Northern Ireland, when out of nothing and out of nowhere, a shell came and blew us up. I remember no more of Lemmon but I heard later that three weeks from that day the Germans swept over the British lines and all the men I had known were either killed or taken prisoners.

The interval between my being wounded and my arrival at St. Thomas' Hospital in London is filled with vague impressions of ship and trains. I had been fairly severely wounded but my youth and health and my fundamental optimism helped my recovery.

While I was in the hospital, a young man, a little over eighteen, was brought into the bed next to mine. He had been at the front for only a few days when he collapsed with complete nervous paralysis. Today, of course, there would be many methods of treating such a condition but over seventy years ago there was nothing to offer him. The doctors told his parents that he was unlikely ever to walk again.

His mother was distraught. She talked often with me and one day asked how old I was, for she thought I was about his age and indeed I was only a few years older. She seemed to question

why he had been unable to endure when someone of a similar age had survived. Of course, there are as many answers to that question as men, their genes and their varied backgrounds can furnish. Equally, the answers, I believe, have little or nothing to do with that mysterious commodity we call courage.

After a considerable time in hospital and convalescent homes, I was finally discharged in 1919. The returning home of the discharged Irish soldier was in strange contrast to his departure. We came back to a country riven through and through by strife and bitterness and, moreover, beginning to be divided against itself.

The events of Easter 1916 had accomplished what seven hundred years of repression had failed to do. The Irish were at last united in their determination to achieve independence. They were not, of course, united in the exact form of that independence nor of the nature of future government. Those were to be the themes for further bloody chapters in the ancient story.

We, the young patriots who had eagerly responded to Redmond's call were now treated with hostility or derision. Those who marched away as flower bedecked heroes were received back with coldness and contempt. At

best, we had allowed ourselves to be led on a fool's errand and at worst we were traitors to the country. How well we understood, now, why we had never been allowed home leave as long as the war lasted! We were soon given to understand that there was but one way we could redeem ourselves: to place our training and experience at the service of one or other of the armed camps.

As I was out walking one day, I met my old childhood companion, Micky Danford. He greeted me in a friendly enough fashion but there was a look in his eyes that was new to me and put me on my guard. We chatted a little and as we were parting he said: "How about coming down tonight to meet a few of the boys?" I said I'd think about it but when I told my brother of the encounter he advised me to get out of Limerick as quickly as I could, unless I intended to throw in my hand with the gunmen.

Well, I had had more than enough of guns and killing and I wanted no more. I had done what I could for Ireland and I certainly intended never to take up arms again.

I left Limerick that very night full of sorrow and homesickness but youth was over and now I had to make my way penniless and homeless among the harsh realities of the post-war world.