

At the time of the main Somme centenary commemoration at Thiepval in July, I discovered that the Somme Association, based in Northern Ireland, was responsible for planning the official Northern Irish ceremony to mark the centenary of the battles of Guillemont and Ginchy, in which many Irish lives were lost. The village of Guillemont, the flattened remains of which were recaptured on 3 September 1916, hosted the ceremony on 3 September 2016, joined by the village of Ginchy, liberated on 9 September 1916.

Over the years the Somme Association had held a number of ceremonies at the Ginchy Cross (in Guillemont), with a gradually increasing participation by Irish citizens in the commemoration, as the Northern Ireland peace process helped to reconcile Irish feelings about the service of those from the South in the British Army. As historian Eamon Phoenix told the BBC ‘*the nationalist soldiers who came back in 1919 had been cheered on as they left, but in post-1916 Ireland they were marginalised, ignored, spat-upon, airbrushed out of history.*’ (Mervyn Jess, BBC NI TV, 3. 9. 16).

Ann and I, Paul with Jessica, Helen and Richard with Jack and Tom, were able as a family to get tickets for the commemoration ceremony, (tickets which also acted as security passes in the current State of Emergency in France – access to the village was strictly controlled on all roads). The ten of us lodged in Amiens, and drove out to Guillemont to be there about 9.30 for the ceremony starting at 11am. Two war memorials stand in front of the Church at Guillemont, rebuilt in the 1920s, one the War Memorial to the French soldiers and civilians from the village, and one to the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division, the Ginchy Cross. This is a stone replica of a wooden cross made after the battle from the timbers of a ruined farmhouse, created as a memorial to their fallen comrades by the soldiers of the 16<sup>th</sup> Division and originally erected in a field between Ginchy and Guillemont. It was brought to Ireland after the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 and is now located in the Irish National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge near Dublin. Other replicas are at Messines-Wytschaete in Belgium and at Thessaloniki in Greece).

The main streets of the village were all closed to vehicles, the entrances guarded by the gendarmerie, and parking was directed to a farm away from the centre of the village. As we walked up to the church on a



lovely sunny day, the village was bright with flags, French, Irish and British, and there were banners of ‘Vive l’Irlande’. A green was spread with a thousand or so wooden crosses laid out in the form of a shamrock, where schoolchildren had read out the names of the 1200 killed in the battles, – the 16<sup>th</sup> Division lost some 4300 killed or wounded in those six days.

There was already a crowd of a few hundred people in place opposite the church and the two memorials. Plenty of Irish accents could be heard; there were numbers of

substantial men in black suits, some wearing orange sashes or collars. (They were following perhaps in the footsteps of Dr Ian Paisley who is known to have broken the habit of a lifetime by entering this Catholic Church back in 2007 on a visit to the Memorial.) Gradually several large black cars drove up containing the principal guests, a few labelled prominently in the windscreen 'VIP', no doubt those containing the British, Irish and French government ministers in attendance ( - and the last car rather blatantly 'VVIP'!). Soldiers in the uniforms of the Royal Irish Regiment and the Irish Defence Forces, some giving out the programmes and order of service, and a few French uniforms were around. There were also some soldiers from the Jersey Field Squadron (for a later ceremony) and a few in 1914-18 British Army uniform – it was unclear whether these were soldiers or re-enactors.

Led by a band from another Somme village, the colours of the



2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Royal Irish

Regiment and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the Irish Defence Forces were paraded on. (The British and Irish soldiers had apparently needed an earlier joint rehearsal because the two armies march to a different beat!) The ceremony was then opened by the chairman of the Somme Association and there was a welcome from the Mayors of Guillemont and Ginchy. The Mayor of Guillemont gave a very moving speech of welcome, part of it recounting the state of the village at the end of the war, almost totally destroyed by the bombardments and the fighting, and completely uninhabitable. (The population had been 333 in 1911; by 1921 only 69 had returned and were living there.) His voice broke as he spoke of the young couple, René Ledez and Publicia Rondot, who had the courage to be married on the flattened site of the church on



1 March 1920 and brought life back to the village – ‘premiers mariés et rentrés à Guillemont...pour y redonner vie’ as the street name on the church wall declares, naming it the Place Ledez-Rondot.

This was followed by an anodyne speech by James Brokenshire, the British Minister for Northern Ireland, and a more interesting one by the Irish Minister for the Arts, Heritage, Regional and Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys, which hinted at the difficulties the Irish had experienced over the years in coming to terms with their mixed feelings about the soldiers killed in the British Army. *“The 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division of the British Army, which entered the Battle of the Somme in September 1916, comprised of men from all over Ireland. In the battles of Guillemont and Ginchy, the 16th suffered 4,330 casualties, of whom 1,200 were killed. Given that the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish included men from every province, these deaths would have impacted on communities the length and breadth of Ireland. Despite the sacrifices made and the casualties*

*suffered, the story of these men was frequently overlooked over many decades. It has been incredibly important to me, during this centenary year, that we reflect on a complete view of Irish history. The 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division entered the Battle of the Somme, fighting for the British Army, little over four months after the Easter Rising had unfolded at home. In 2016, this complex historical narrative is being fully explored."*

The Director of the Somme Association gave a brief historical account of the battles; the citations of the three VCs won in these battles were read by a British, an Irish and a Jersey soldier. The padre of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion RIR conducted the service and the Act of Remembrance. The service included the reading by an RIR officer of a poem by Lt Tom Kettle of the 9<sup>th</sup> RDF, - poet, journalist, writer, barrister, Professor of Economics, and Irish Nationalist MP at Westminster, a charismatic leader of the Home Rule movement - who died leading his company into battle at Ginchy on 9 September 1916. The sonnet was written to his three-year-old daughter just four days before his death. The last few lines are perhaps another hint of the feelings already being voiced at home against those from the South serving in the Army.

**To My Daughter Betty, The Gift of God,**

*IN wiser days, my darling rosebud, blown  
To beauty proud as was your mother's prime,  
In that desired, delayed, incredible time,  
You'll ask why I abandoned you, my own,  
And the dear heart that was your baby throne,  
To dice with death. And oh! they'll give you rhyme  
And reason: some will call the thing sublime,  
And some decry it in a knowing tone.  
So here, while the mad guns curse overhead,  
And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor,  
Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,  
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,  
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.*



After the Exhortation in English and Irish, the Last Post was sounded, a minute's silence held, and the Irish Piper sounded a Lament. Then wreaths were laid at the memorial to the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division, first of all by the ministers and then by Associations and relatives two by two.

I was able to lay one of the last wreaths, to Jack, "To Pte John White, 8<sup>th</sup> RDF, laid on behalf of your brother Fred by his son John and family".





After these final wreaths were laid, the three Ministers each laid one at the French War Memorial, the National Anthems of the three countries were sung, and the Colours paraded off. While some repaired to a tent where the village was providing refreshments, we walked with most down to another part of the village where a just-erected memorial stone 'The Guillemont Stone' was unveiled, commemorating the 'Jersey Contingent'. The island of Jersey having been exempt from



conscription during the First World War, the 'Jersey Contingent' was a battalion of volunteers who had been attached to the Royal Irish Rifles and fought at Guillemont. A symbolic section of the stone, the 'heart', was removed to be carried back to Jersey. As Richard was Jersey-born this seemed a very appropriate coincidence of ceremonies for us.



Leaving Guillemont we went for a late lunch together in Albert. We moved on to the Lochnagar Crater at La Boisselle, where Helen had subscribed a couple of years ago to a plaque in Jack's name on the boardwalk of the crater. (As an aside, at the crater we noticed a number of visitors scouring the surrounding

fields in the hope of finding objects of interest. One picked up a grimy soldier's uniform button from the First World War which he kindly gave to Jessica.)



Finally, we drove to the cemetery, Serre Road N°2, where we laid another wreath at Jack's grave. The following day, after Paul and Jessica had to return home, the rest of us visited the excellent War Museum in Albert and then returned to Guillemont and Ginchy to the spot where Jack was killed, to leave a couple of small wooden crosses in the field at the roadside where the bodies of Jack and his comrades were found in 1929.

I am very happy that we have had this opportunity, as a family, to do this. As far as I know, no other

descendants of the White family of Morton have ever been able to visit the Somme and pay their tribute to Jack, and I think my father, who tolerated rather than appreciated religious ceremonies, would nevertheless have been pleased that his brother had been remembered in this way.



### **Two further small post-scripts.**

1 'Our Jack' page 21: I speculated that the spelling Guinchy for Ginchy was a confusion with the name of a village in the Loos sector where the 8<sup>th</sup> RDF had travelled from. I was wrong. In Amiens Cathedral I spotted on one pillar a memorial to Prime Minister Asquith's son Raymond, referring to his being killed at Guinchy. I was puzzled again by this, since while spellings sometimes change, this one implies a change in pronunciation from a hard G to a soft G. As we drove through Ginchy a couple of days later, deserted like all French villages seem in the afternoons, I spotted a couple of people washing the village bus stop (in preparation for the local fête as it turned out!). I stopped and enquired about the spelling and learned that

it had been Guinchy until World War I, but afterwards whether by error or design, the 'u' had been dropped and gradually the pronunciation changed; so Ginchy with a hard G was certainly what the soldiers heard, picked up and used. It was noticeable during the ceremonies that the British and Irish used this pronunciation, despite hearing the name consistently the other way from the French speakers.

2 'Our Jack' page 20: I referred to the song of which my father had a recording 'On the Ginchy road'. Thanks to a friend I have now managed to hear that song again. It was sung by Peter Dawson, one of my father's favourite singers, and can be heard on YouTube at <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ1X86PNu8o>. You will note that I misquoted the number of soldiers slightly, and had totally forgotten the upbeat last verse. The second verse is as lugubrious as ever!

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