# INTRODUCTION

This book offers a new military history of the city and county of Dublin in the era of the First World War and the Irish Revolution, setting the narratives of British soldiers and Irish republicans alongside each other. Much of the writing of Dublin's history between the start of the Home Rule crisis in 1912 and the end of the Irish Civil War in 1923 has been dominated by the Easter Rising of April 1916, along with its causes and consequences. There are certainly important studies of the city (less so the county) which recognise the interconnections between the two conflicts in terms of their impact on society, politics and the economy.[1] Meanwhile, excellent material on the Rising and the wider Irish Revolution has emphasised how the war created 'the long-awaited opportunity for rebellion' and made Irish republicans believe that an attempt at revolution was necessary to seize the political initiative.[2] Yet the war raging in Europe and elsewhere in 1914–18 is generally treated as a backdrop to this turning point in Irish history. From the end of mass commemorations of the war in the 1920s until the 1990s, much First World War service by men and women from what is now the Republic of Ireland was forgotten, their story overwhelmed by that of different heroes and heroines: the rebels of 1916.

Similarly, Dublin's First World War narrative tends to pay little attention to the Rising and the wider Irish Revolution. Indeed, it has long been dominated by the story of part of one battalion: D Company of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers, the 'Dublin Pals', at Gallipoli. Just as the Somme overshadows all in Belfast, the Pals and August 1915 loom largest in knowledge of Dublin's contribution to the war effort,[3] despite

work in recent decades to broaden the story.[4] Consequently, the full extent of Dublin's role in the British military during the war is narrowly told, and the crossovers between the military history of the Irish Revolution and the course of the First World War are rarely considered.[5] There is little sense in historical writing that telling the stories of the First World War and the Irish Revolution as one can shed light on how we understand Irish history at this time. Yet as Keith Jeffery argued, it is better to treat the Irish Revolution 'not as some completely separate narrative distinct from the world war' because in addressing Ireland's future political settlement 'paths diverged during the war, and *because* of the war'.[6]

This book offers a new narrative of this period, focused on people from the Irish capital and its surrounding county who were involved in military conflict, arguing that between 1912 and 1923, their history is best understood not as a series of separate events. Instead of one narrative leading from Home Rule to Civil War, and another dealing with the First World War, it argues that these events can best be understood as a series of interconnected 'Great Wars'. Irish nationalist support for *the* Great War can only be understood in the context of the political fight for Home Rule, while the Rising could not have happened without the outbreak of war in Europe.[7] Later, the War of Independence could not have occurred without the militarisation of Irish society which flowed from the 1914–18 war, while the Civil War would not have happened as it did without the earlier experiences of men in the British army. So this book does not intend to be a social or economic history of Dublin at this time, or an analysis of its 'home front'. It focuses on Dubliners serving in the British military and republican forces, and is fundamentally about the experiences of people in those roles and the conflicts in which they took part. Social, economic and political issues appear regularly when they relate to those subjects, but for such matters readers already have plenty of other books to which they can turn.[8]

Three themes run through the book. The first is about contexts: Dublin's Great Wars of 1912–23 should be placed within broad contexts of imperial and political conflict, and of Dublin's strong military and naval traditions. The former means that Ireland's fight for independence and its expressions of loyalty to the British Empire brought Dubliners of this era into violent conflict with each other far from Ireland and well before 1916, at least as far back as 1899 in the

South African War. Traditions of military service meant that Dublin was strongly embedded in the British military. Consequently, as soon as war broke out in 1914, Dubliners were thrown into action as members of the Royal Navy and of the regular army. Service was not simply about membership of volunteer units (whether Pals or political) recruited from the outbreak of war. The second theme is that the story of British volunteers goes far beyond the Pals of the 7th Dublins. That is seen vividly in other units of the 10th (Irish) Division at Gallipoli, in particular the 6th Dublins who recruited heavily in the city and county but received relatively little attention compared to the 7th Dublins. Service can also be seen in regular battalions and in Ireland's two politically aligned divisions. At least two thousand Dubliners joined the 16th (Irish) Division which attests to the strength of Dublin's willingness to follow John Redmond and parliamentary Irish nationalism prior to the Rising. Meanwhile, membership of the 36th (Ulster) Division points to a forgotten history of Dublin loyalism, as do public responses to pre-war royal visits. The third theme is that the events of the Irish Revolution must be set alongside the events and experiences of the First World War if we are to understand the causes and contexts of each. For the Easter Rising, that means understanding how, from the streets closest to where the Rising was fought, over a thousand men came to serve in the British military in the war. The vast majority were already serving by April 1916, while 121 had already been killed before the Rising.[9] That does much to explain how the Rising was received by Dubliners and as it took place, men of the 8th and 9th Royal Dublin Fusiliers were suffering heavy losses on the Western Front. Indeed, across the Monday to Saturday of the Rising, nearly three times as many Dubliners were killed serving in the British army in the First World War, as the total number of rebels killed in Dublin. Though news seeped through slowly, such levels of service and sacrifice explain much of the initial reception of the Rising among Dublin's people. Later, links between the events of the Revolution and service in the First World War can be seen in service by former British soldiers in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) fighting against the British, and in the use of British artillery during the Civil War. Such crossovers point to intimate links between the conflicts.

In offering a new narrative of Dublin's Great Wars of 1912–23, this book utilises the 'military history from the street' methods developed for my 2009 book *Belfast Boys*. In simple terms, the method

involves trying to use every source possible to draw in the military service of everyone from a given area. The gold standard used to establish that someone is 'from' an area (in this case the city or county of Dublin) is that an address for them can be verified during the relevant years, or in the absence of an address for the individual themselves, that a next-of-kin in the area can be identified. Simply having been born in a location is not enough to place them there during the relevant period, so my numbers will always tend to err on the side of caution.[10] Despite that, my estimate is that at least 35,000 Dubliners served in the British military during the First World War.[11]

The methods are described in some detail in an appendix to *Belfast Boys* and in a journal article.[12] Newspapers and service records have been particularly rich sources of information.[13] But there are some differences between the approach used in that book and the approach used for Dublin, in five key areas. First, many new sources for the British military have appeared in a searchable form since 2009 and that has allowed the inclusion of, for example, more sailors and airmen. More specific data on which infantry battalion men served with has come from newly digitised regimental medal rolls.[14] Second, some use of the 1911 Census has been made in ways not done in *Belfast Boys* but it is worth noting that, if rigorous standards are applied to its use, this source is not quite the key to all mythologies which it might at first appear to be.[15] Third, through the British Red Cross Society, there is now publicly available data on the Voluntary Aid Detachment which enables the scope of volunteering, especially by women, to be assessed. Fourth, since this book addresses involvement in republican units of various types, full use has been made of the Irish government's IRA pensions and medal records, along with witness statements from the Bureau of Military History, and other material on republicans such as arrest records.[16] Finally, since I was not only interested in a specific part of one city as I was for *Belfast Boys*, I have been able to make use of records (in particular casualty lists printed in newspapers) where simply a general reference is made to 'Dublin' as being the residence of the next-of-kin. For the same reason, I have drawn in war memorials from across the city and county.[17] I remain of the view that the gold standard for viewing someone as being from Dublin during its 'Great Wars' of 1914–19, 1919–21 and 1922–3 should be an address, but I have presented my overall figures by including all possible information.[18]

Central to the book is the question of how Dubliners fared on the battlefield during the First World War. In its approach it is broadly 'revisionist' in the sense of being influenced by the approach of writers over a period of decades but most prominently those such as Gary Sheffield and William Philpott.[19] It is tempered by 'post-revisionist' analyses which accept the broad thrust of revisionism but point to 'patchiness' and 'inconsistencies' in the British army's performance rather than a steady learning curve,[20] and also consider the complexities of the processes by which the army learned.[21] Revisionism has offered significant challenges to widely and deeply held popular perceptions of the war by making a number of arguments: once the war broke out, the stakes were so high that the UK was right to be involved; the vast majority who fought returned; even infantry soldiers spent most of their time out of trenches and fought rarely; the generals learned as the war went on and became highly effective at what they did; on the Western Front the war was, eventually, won on the battlefield with German soldiers driven back to whence they came. These views are consensus ones among most academic historians and I count myself a revisionist.

However, there is a danger that revisionism is misunderstood as meaning that those who hold such views are somehow dismissive of the effects of the war. One case I uncovered in writing this book made me realise the necessity of explaining that this is not the case. In May 2016 I visited the archives at the Royal College of Surgeons in London to use the plastic surgery records of a First World War officer from Dublin. What I saw there had a profound effect on me. The photos in the file of Captain Robert Callaghan of the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers were stark (see p.342). The first showed a man without any eyes. One eyelid was almost completely closed. It looked as if it had been damaged then healed as if closed. The other eyelid was partially sewn up, possibly some eyelashes remaining – or perhaps sutures – creating a sense of prickliness in a wound still open and sore and hinting at the empty eye-socket. I saw a general sense of bewilderment in the photos of Callaghan, of him not knowing where he was or what was happening, and a sense of hoping for help. Everyone has their own private fear and mine has long been to lose my eyesight. So I was immediately struck by the life that Callaghan was now facing when these photos were taken and found it hard to begin my research. Of course, I did carry on – telling myself that I had no troubles compared to Callaghan – but I shed tears when I got home.

A month later I followed up Callaghan's story in the National Archives at Kew. His file is an unusually weighty one because his correspondence with the War Office about his pension took twists and turns.[22] In 1921 it was found that he had been overpaid his pension by £305 (around £14,000 now). This was because at the time of his injury, Callaghan had only been a captain for ten days rather than the required fifteen for a captain's pension, but he had still been paid a captain's dues. He was in no position to repay the amount overpaid to him and he was later let off some of it, but not all. Poignantly, the file began with his last letter to the War Office, written in 1938. It said that although he was blind, he was now a medical masseur and a medical electrician. He wrote to offer his services to the army in the event of another war.

Historians are not often emotional in the archives. We use small individual cases to build up a big picture and the individual can be lost. But that does not mean that we are oblivious to individual suffering, nor that we overlook how mistakes were made in diplomacy prior to the war. Yes, 'only' 12 per cent of those who served in the British forces were killed, but that 12 per cent amounted to three-quarters of a million. Of the 88 per cent who returned, millions bore mental and physical scars. It is correct that the majority of time at war was spent behind the lines,[23] but even one day in the firing line was not something anybody in their right mind would wish on themselves or others. Certainly, I believe that the UK was right to fight the war once it broke out as it did, and that the primary fault for that outbreak lies with the Central Powers – Germany and Austria-Hungary. But if the Union of Democratic Control were correct in their critique of 'secret diplomacy'[24] – and I am inclined to think that they were – then this was a war which could and should have been avoided. Then there would not have been the lives cut short, the children who never knew their fathers, and the parents who spent the best part of their remaining lives mourning the loss of a son or daughter – perhaps more than one, and sometimes an only child.

The photographs of Captain Callaghan were a stark reminder to me that the effects of the war were, literally, bloody terrible. It brought home to me what had long been a nagging doubt about the dangers of the public perceiving revisionist history and its proponents in a certain way. Simply because revisionist historians seldom talk about the horrors of war, it does not mean that we are not horrified by them. So it needs to be said: the achievement of the victory came with a human cost which

impacted millions just in the UK, and many millions elsewhere. Nobody should ever forget that, whatever they have to say about the broad sweep of history, though it should be no surprise that so many veterans wanted to do precisely that – forget – when they came home. For those from Dublin, this book attempts to tell the story of the Great Wars of the revolutionary period in as complete a manner as possible, recognising the full scope of their service – in the British army and as Irish republicans – and the horrors they endured.

# 1 PRELUDE: DUBLIN AND CONFLICT, 1899–1914

*. . . we were at war with England, and . . . all our political and social ills were due to her occupation of our country.*

Helena Molony, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, on anti-recruiting campaigns of the early 1900s[1]

## Southern Africa, 1899

Ireland's conflict of 1912–23 grew from such deep roots that those involved in it were fighting long before then and far from Ireland. Recognising that broad context is essential for understanding the motives which made Dubliners fight on different sides in 1912–23. Of course, one can trace the origins of the problems back to Norman times, the Reformation, 1798, or the Act of Union, to name just a few. But for some of those who were the active participants of 1912–23, the first chance to show what they would do in the name of 'freedom', or to become part of a British military tradition, came in southern Africa over a decade before.

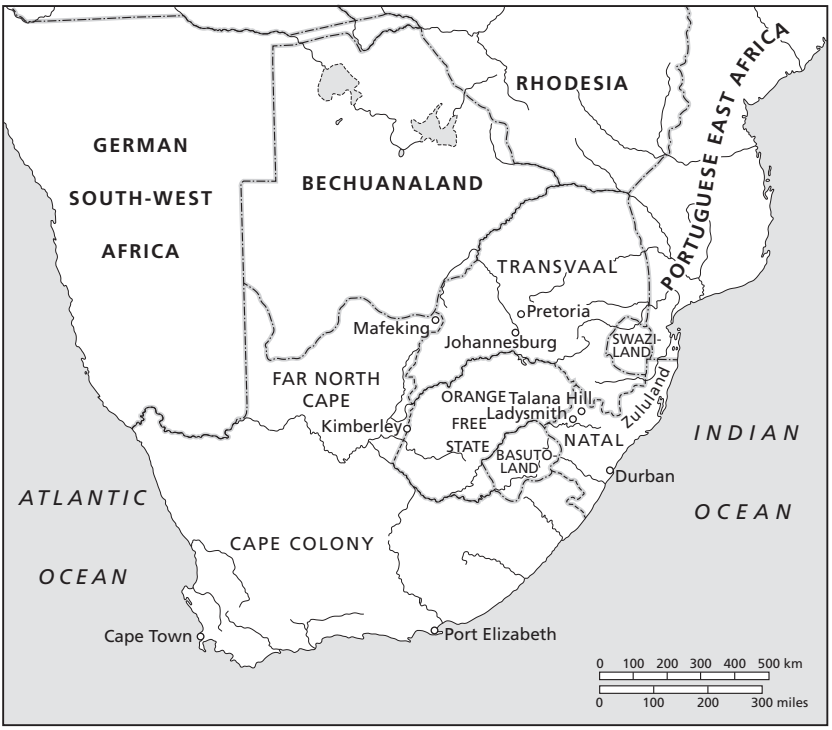
In late October 1899, Tom Byrne, a Commando in the Irish Transvaal Brigade, set up camp just outside Ladysmith, in the British southern African colony of Natal. He had been on horseback for much of the past three weeks (since the beginning of the South African War, then commonly known as the Boer War) along with around 300 other men of the Brigade allied to the Boer forces. They had seen action in the

earliest days of the war, crossing into Natal as war broke out on 11 October. Among the British prisoners they captured in the war's first days were Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

Born in Carrickmacross in County Monaghan in 1877, Thomas Francis Byrne had moved to Dublin with his family five years later, spending his formative years in the city until departing for South Africa in 1896. The 19-year-old émigré found mining work in Johannesburg. Over the summer of 1899 it became clear that there was a strong risk of war between Britain and the two 'Boer' (Afrikaans-speaking) states, the South African Republic (known as the Transvaal) and the Orange Free State. Ostensibly the conflict was about voting rights for British settlers in these areas. However, underpinning the dispute were concerns that British settlement had grown so much that if such settlers were given the vote the two states would be likely to opt to join the British Empire. Only war could save the Boer states from losing their independence.

On a broader canvas, this quarrel was a struggle between a small nation and the might of the British Empire – a struggle which foreshadowed later events in Ireland. So radical Irish nationalists saw common cause with the Boers and over the summer of 1899 Byrne organised 'an Irish contingent with the Boer army' along with Richard McDonagh from Listowel, County Kerry. Closely involved from the start was County Mayo-born Irish Republican Brotherhood member John MacBride, described by Byrne as 'the only outstanding Irishman in the Transvaal at this time'. In late September 1899, Byrne's organising was complete and the Irish Transvaal Brigade mobilised. Former US Cavalry officer John Blake was elected as colonel, with MacBride as major. With war imminent, the Brigade was given horses and rifles and entrained at Johannesburg for the Transvaal–Natal border. On arrival, around two weeks were spent learning to ride.[2]

Crossing into Natal on 12 October as the Boer states launched pre-emptive attacks on British positions, the Brigade 'rode on without opposition'[3] and entered Newcastle with other Boer forces on 15 October. MacBride would later criticise cautious Boer tactics, which meant that the advance only covered sixty to seventy miles in its first week.[4] It was not until 20 October, in an advance on Dundee that they saw any fighting. Byrne described how in their 'first brush with the enemy' they captured horses and




**Map 1.1:** Key locations of the South African War. Drawn by David Cox.

a heliograph and, he said, two hundred British prisoners. Among them were members of the Dublin Fusiliers. MacBride wrote, 'A number of the prisoners had been at school in Ireland with members of the Brigade.' These were men from the 2nd Dublins and 'Talana Hill' was not only the first major encounter of the Boer War but also the first ever hostile action for the 2nd Dublins since the formation of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in 1881.

Despite these early Boer successes, the Battle of Talana Hill eventually saw the British forces successfully drive the Boers from a defensive position on high ground, though the British suffered heavy casualties. In a reference to an earlier British defeat in the first Boer War two decades before, the 2nd Dublins' official history described Talana Hill as 'Majuba reversed'. It showed it was possible to take high ground in the face of modern rifle fire, even though that would not be a regular occurrence for the British in the Boer War. MacBride had a different view, writing several years later that 'the British showed themselves

absolutely incapable' and lamented the failure of Boer generals to engage more directly with the enemy.[5]

Proceeding on to Ladysmith, the Irish Transvaal Brigade took part in the battle there on 30 October as the British attacked growing Boer positions. Three of them were killed while Blake was among ten wounded, so MacBride took command. Ladysmith was besieged by the Boers until the end of February 1900 when the British managed to break through. By then, the Irish Transvaal Brigade had taken part in several operations, including the Battle of Colenso on 15 December.[6] Through 1900 the Brigade fought in several more encounters with the British and during a retreat in the Orange Free State blew up bridges, stations and anything else they thought might help their enemy. Byrne recalled, 'We always left a notice "With the compliments of the Irish Brigade", which was read by the British fifteen minutes afterwards.' At Machadodorp station Byrne encountered prisoners of the Irish Imperial Yeomanry and 'recognised a few of them, but I did not go near them.' In late September, Byrne and MacBride were among retreating Boer troops who crossed the border into Mozambique and surrendered to the Portuguese. They were soon shipped to Europe or the USA with Byrne winding up in New York with fifty to sixty others. MacBride went to Paris. Byrne stayed in America until returning to Dublin in 1913.[7] Three years later, he – and MacBride – would play their part in the most momentous events in the city's history.

While Byrne was preparing to cross the border into Natal, Michael Tracey of the 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers was with his battalion at the Curragh in County Kildare. Born in Rathmines in 1877, Tracey was working as a labourer when he enlisted in the regiment in the summer of 1895, three weeks after his eighteenth birthday. Mobilised on 7 October 1899 to form part of the 5th (Irish) Brigade in South Africa, the battalion left Ireland a month later. Reaching Cape Town on 28 November after nearly three weeks at sea, they acclimatised before being thrown into the war at Colenso on 15 December, some companies attached to the 2nd Dublins. They had little sight of the Boers but heard 'one ceaseless rattle of Mausers, and a constant hum of bullets only drowned by the screams of the shells'.[8] Losses were heavy, though Tracey escaped injury. He served through the South African War with the 1st Dublins, seeing action at places like Alleman's Nek and Volksrust. The Peace of Vereeniging brought the war to an end

in May 1902, and the 1st Dublins departed for Malta in November. Tracey's time in the army effectively ended in April 1903 when he was transferred to the army reserve, in which he remained until September 1911, having married in Dublin in 1906. The army had done little for his education as he was unable to read and write when he signed the 1911 Census with his mark. By that point, he was working as a builder's labourer, had one daughter, and was living in Francis Street in Dublin's Wood Quay area. Yet there must have been something about army life which appealed to him for in January 1912, he again enlisted in the Dublin Fusiliers, this time as a reservist in the 4th battalion.[9] That decision took him on a journey which meant that in April 1916, he, like Thomas Byrne, was in a fight, though many miles away and for a different cause.[10]

In 1907 a triumphal arch was erected at St Stephen's Green commemorating 250 Dublin Fusiliers killed during the South African War. Though such commemoration of British imperialism was controversial, opposition represented minority opinion in the city, only that of 'advanced nationalists'.[11] Dublin's connection to the British army was strong and popular, and many of those who fought in the Boer War would play their part in Britain's next war. It is hard to identify exactly how many South African War veterans from Dublin joined the British army in the First World War, but it is likely to number in the hundreds.[12] Among the most notable to serve in both wars was Thomas Crean, who was born in Dublin's Northbrook Road in 1873 and won nine Ireland rugby caps. Serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps as a Surgeon Captain, he won the Victoria Cross at Tygerkloof on 18 December 1901. He had tended the wounded under heavy fire, despite already being wounded himself. Only a second wound, initially thought to be mortal, stopped his work. He would serve in France in the First World War, winning the Distinguished Service Order.[13] Crean's story, like that of Tracey and Byrne hints at the deep-running Dublin traditions of support for, and resistance to, British rule which would again come to the fore in its Great Wars of 1914–19, 1919–21 and 1922–23.

## Dublin and the Military

That a Dubliner like Thomas Byrne was fighting in South Africa during the Boer War was not unusual. Yet the army in which he fought