

Whose war was it anyway? Irish journalism and the Great War after 1918

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Abstract

While the participation of Irishmen in the Great War has prompted much scholarship, the commemoration of their involvement – and in particular how Irish journalism reported and interpreted such commemorations – has been less examined. This article argues that the journalism surrounding the annual Armistice Day commemoration was a central factor in the battle for power in independent Ireland. It finds that the annual commemoration played a major part in the identity politics of the Irish Free State and that this was greatly intensified by journalistic argument about the motives of those who had fought in the Great War, what that war meant in relation to the freedom of small nations, and how best to commemorate those who had died. It also finds that while such journalistic argument helped engender an air of stigma about Irish involvement in the Great War, later journalistic arguments played a key role in removing that stigma.

Keywords

Journalism, Great War, Irish Free State, Commemoration, Armistice Day, Identity Politics

Introduction

If the involvement of Ireland in the Great War proved problematic in terms of recruitment and conscription it was nothing compared to the politics surrounding the commemoration of the conflict in a newly independent state. It is estimated that, over the course of the war (and excluding reserves and those already serving), approximately 140,460 Irishmen enlisted in the British Army (Callan 1987).¹ But those who served in the British Army returned to a very different Ireland in 1918 and although much research (Denman 1992; Dooley 1995; Myers 2014) has emphasised how their contribution to the war effort was quickly forgotten, such research does not explore the process by which this happened. In particular, it ignores several crucial aspects.

Firstly, the participation of Irishmen in the Great War was publicly commemorated throughout Ireland on an annual basis, with such ceremonies ceasing only on the eve of the Second World War in line with the state's neutrality. Secondly, these ceremonies were reported on extensively, including pictorial coverage, by all the national newspapers. Thirdly, such commemorations became a journalistic battleground regarding the motives of those who had fought in the Great War, what that war meant in relation to the freedom of small nations, especially Ireland, and how best to commemorate those who had died. Depending on the political orientation of the newspaper, such ceremonies were portrayed as either a reminder of Ireland's proud place within the British Empire or as a reminder that the Irish revolution was unfinished and that the memory of the dead was being used to bolster British imperialism. Fourthly, a significant number of ex-servicemen played a crucial role in securing victory for the pro-Treaty side of the Irish Civil War (1922–23) and so did not endear themselves to the anti-Treaty side that came to power in 1932. Indeed, there is a marked difference between the ceremonies and associated reportage that took place before and after 1932. Once the anti-Treaty side came to power the attendance at the annual commemoration declined dramatically and the narrative of Armistice Day as a day of celebrating imperialism took hold, a narrative that, until recently, dominated the relatively infrequent political and cultural reflections of the Great War that took place in Irish public life.

The Irish political and newspaper environment post-1918

The veterans that returned to Ireland from 1918 onwards returned to a very different country. The events that, in their absence, had transformed and radically politicised Ireland are well known and examined elsewhere (Augusteijn 2002; Hopkinson 2002; Townshend 2013). The debate about whether Irishmen should fight in the British Army or stay at home to ensure that home rule was implemented split the Irish Volunteers. While the majority of the Volunteers supported John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party in their assertion that Irishmen should join up and fight to secure the freedom of small nations, a sizeable rump of the Volunteers asserted that, in the phrase used at the time, they served neither King nor Kaiser but Ireland. In short order came the 1916 Rising, the execution of the signatories to the Proclamation of Independence, the election of the first Sinn Féin MPs in 1917, and the national general strike in April 1918 in response to the threat of conscription. The November 1918 general election – which saw Sinn Féin win 73 seats to the Irish Parliamentary Party’s 6 – was a defining moment. The establishment of a parliament in Dublin set the stage for a war of independence that saw demobbed British Army soldiers and officers (referred to as ‘Black and Tans’ and ‘Auxiliaries’ respectively) posted to Ireland to quell the independence movement.²

The entity in which Irishmen had served with distinction in the Great War was now, for the majority of Irish people, the enemy, and the actions of this enemy – such as the burning of Cork City in December 1920 – only added to the sense of dislocation encountered by the returned veterans. Indeed, by the very nature of their past association with the British Army, ex-servicemen were viewed with suspicion by the separatist Irish Republican Army (IRA): out of approximately 200 civilians killed by the IRA as informers, 82 were ex-servicemen (Coleman 2003, 154). In contrast, after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 (which split Sinn Féin and established the Irish Free State as a dominion of the British Commonwealth) and the outbreak of the Irish Civil War over the terms of that treaty, a significant number of ex-servicemen joined the (pro-Treaty) Irish Free State Army. By May 1923 this army stood at 58,000 men, of which one fifth of its officers and half its other ranks were Irish ex-service men (Cottrell 2008, 51). Thus, ex-servicemen played a significant role in ensuring the victory of the pro-Treaty side: a fact not forgotten when the anti-Treaty side – in the guise of Eamon de Valera and his Fianna Fáil party – came to power in 1932.

In terms of the media environment, the post-war Irish daily national newspaper market consisted of five titles – the *Freeman’s Journal*, the (Dublin) *Daily Express*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Times*, and, from 1931 onwards, the *Irish Press*. Both the *Freeman’s Journal* and the *Daily Express* ceased publication in 1924 and 1921 respectively and for this reason are not considered here. The origins of the *Irish Independent* lie in the Parnell–O’Shea divorce scandal that engulfed the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1890. The following year Parnell established the *Irish Daily Independent* to bolster his position as party leader. The paper was not a success and was purchased in 1900 by William Martin Murphy, a prominent Dublin businessman and former Irish Party MP. Murphy re-launched the paper as the *Irish Independent* in 1905, having taken advice from another Irish-born businessman, Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe). The re-launched title emulated Harmsworth’s *Daily Mail* – it adopted display advertising, condensed reportage, illustrations, and serials, but studiously avoided any element – scandal, graphic crime reportage – that might attract criticism from the Catholic Church. The new *Irish Independent* was, effectively, the voice of conservative Catholic Ireland, and a huge commercial success. From an initial daily circulation of 22,608 copies in 1905 it sold 56,462 copies a day in 1913 (Kenny 2012, 59). Edited by Timothy R. Harrington between 1905 and 1931, it was moderately nationalist in tone and supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. It subsequently became associated with strong support for the pro-Treaty party (Cumman na nGaedheal) in its attempts to establish

and govern the Free State from 1922 to 1932. As a commercial rather than political entity, political and market stability and respect for law and order were crucially important to the *Independent* and, from the mid-1920s onwards, this concern framed its coverage of the annual Armistice Day commemorations.

The *Irish Times* represented the voice of southern unionism. Established in 1859, its first editorial declared that ‘as Irishmen we shall think and speak; but it shall be as Irishmen loyal to the British connection’ (29 March 1859). Acquired by Scottish businessman Sir John Arnott in 1873 it remained in the ever-diluting ownership of the Arnott family until 1974 when it was re-constituted as a trust. It consistently editorialised against home rule and, with the closure of the *Daily Express* in 1921, it fell to the *Irish Times* to be the sole daily newspaper of the Protestant minority within the Free State. With average daily sales of 25,500 during the 1920s the *Irish Times* sought, as best it could, to oppose legislation that it viewed as impinging on the civil rights of this minority. Among the many issues it editorialised against in the 1920s were compulsory Irish in national schools, the prohibition of divorce, and the Censorship of Publications Act 1929 (O’Brien 2008). Between 1907 and 1934 the *Times* was edited by John E. Healy, who had been one of a party of seven journalists that visited Irish troops on the Western Front in January 1916. As the organ of those who cherished the connection with Britain the *Irish Times* devoted extensive coverage to the annual Armistice Day commemorations and framed its reports in terms of the contribution made by Irishmen to the war effort and the British Empire.

For its part, the *Irish Press* was established to represent the worldview of the defeated anti-Treaty side of the civil war. Having languished in the political wilderness for several years, the leader of the anti-Treaty faction, Eamon de Valera, established a new party, Fianna Fáil, in 1926, entered parliament in 1927, and established the *Irish Press* in 1931. As its first editorial noted, it supported Fianna Fáil only because its philosophy and aspirations were the same as those espoused by the paper (*Irish Press*, 5 September 1931). Edited in its infancy by Frank Gallagher (who had helped produce the *Irish Bulletin* during the Anglo-Irish War) the *Press* was staffed by so many anti-Treaty personnel that it was nicknamed *Gunman’s Gazette* (Kelly 1995, 86). With a daily circulation of 86,825 in 1932, the *Press* articulated the anti-Treaty position of complete – political, economic, and cultural – separation from Britain. It strongly criticised the Cumman na nGaedheal government’s handling of issues such as unemployment and emigration, and promoted the policies of protectionism and self-sufficiency. Articulating a radical alternative to the status quo, it played a central role in bringing Fianna Fáil to power in 1932 and keeping it there: so much so that de Valera observed that ‘if the paper were to disappear, the government would disappear with it’ (O’Brien 2001, 49).

It is within this political and journalistic environment that the meanings of the Great War and the annual Armistice Day commemoration was debated, contested, and argued about on the pages of the national daily newspapers as all sides sought to confer preferred meanings on the motives of the ex-servicemen and the impact that commemoration of the Great War was having on Irish national identity – a process fuelled by the Anglo-Irish War, the reorganisation of the defeated anti-Treaty faction in the mid-1920s, the coming to power of the anti-Treaty side in 1932, and the immediate resumption of hostilities – in the guise of the Economic War (1932–38) – with Britain.

Armistice Day and journalism 1918–1925

Given the contested participation of Irishmen in the Great War, it was inevitable that commemoration of this participation would also be contested in a country that was pushing for independence from Britain. Even the ending of the war had resulted in pitched battles in Dublin. As the *Irish Times* reported, the city centre was bedecked with Union Jack bunting

and ‘batches of soldiers passed through the city singing popular songs’ (12 November 1918). However, nationalists also assembled and marched in the city centre singing the *Soldier’s Song* (adopted as the Irish national anthem in 1926). When both parties met rowdy scenes ensued. By the following year, the Anglo-Irish War was in full flight and from a journalistic point of view the commemorations were reported through the lens of the conflict engulfing the country. In a leading article, the *Irish Times* mournfully noted that ‘the Armistice did not put an end to our manifold troubles and anxieties’ (8 November 1919), and, as the organ of the unionist community, it devoted extensive coverage to Armistice Day ceremonies that occurred in Dublin and other cities. It reported that several thousand people gathered in Dublin’s College Green and that at 11.00pm all traffic ceased, the Union Jack was flown at half-mast and ‘not a sound was heard during the brief period for uniting in the simple service of silence and remembrance’ (12 November 1919).

For the *Irish Independent* the day was marked not by the ceremonies at College Green, but by the military raid on the Sinn Féin Headquarters in Dublin, which resulted in the arrest of three MPs – Sean O’Mahony, Sean Hayes, and Frank Lawless. It reported that ‘a large crowd groaned the operations and cheered the prisoners, to whom they threw cigarettes. Ironic remarks were good-humouredly shouted on the subject of peace celebrations’ (12 November 1919). In its leading article it declared the raid as ‘scarcely calculated to promote respect for the law in Ireland’ and ruefully noted that it was carried out ‘on Armistice Day and under circumstances which will be regarded by many persons as deliberately provocative of a breach of the peace’ (13 November 1919).

The fraught nature of the Anglo-Irish war ensured that the second anniversary of the Armistice was a low-key affair. In a leading article, the *Irish Times* bemoaned that there would ‘be no general celebration of Armistice Day in Ireland’ and predicted that eventually ‘our people will realise the folly of the present blind and blood-stained revolt against destiny [and] shall be content to take our true place in the Empire’ (11 November 1920). In contrast, the *Irish Independent* reported that ‘in several towns notices of a threatening character were posted up, ordering the people to close their establishments, and they were complied with’ (12 November 1920). It also reported the extraordinary scenes in Dungarvan, County Waterford, where Auxiliaries forced civilians – at the point of bayonets – to march on the main street with the Union Jack pinned to the back of one person (13 November 1920). Recalling that the Great War had been fought for the freedom of small nations, it called on British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, to implement that objective in Ireland:

If he is as anxious as he says for peace and good-will, why does he refuse to institute an impartial Commission of Inquiry into the justice of otherwise of the charges that are being made by responsible Englishmen and Irishmen against certain armed forces of the Crown at present in Ireland? If his statements during the progress of the war were not mere catchphrases designed to induce the youth of these islands to fight for the aggrandisement of the British Empire, why does he not give us self-determination or introduce an acceptable measure of autonomy for this country? (12 November 1920).

The 1921 and 1922 ceremonies were similarly low-key affairs, but, two events – the establishment of the Irish Free State in December 1922 and the ending of the Civil War in May 1923 – meant that the 1923 ceremony was unique. The state, as a dominion of the British Commonwealth, now had its own government and that year’s ceremony was marked by increased coverage and, after all the hostilities that had ensued between 1916 and 1922, a degree of generosity towards those who had fought in the Great War. The *Irish Times* reported solemnly on the remembrance ceremony held at Trinity College’s chapel at which

the Provost read aloud the names of the 454 Trinity graduates ‘who died in the Great War for the cause of national honour and for the world’s freedom’ (12 November 1923). It also reported that ‘a good many members of the National Army wore the poppy in their caps, as did members of the Dublin Metropolitan Police who had served in the Great War’. In an optimistic leading article it commended this spirit of generosity:

We believe that the day is not far distant when all Irishmen will recognise that, without unfaith to any other cause for which any of them may have suffered, they can do honour to the Irish soldiers of the Great War. The Free State, standing on the threshold of an unknown future, cannot afford, and, as time passes, will not desire, to disown any part of her most precious legacy from the past (12 November 1923).

For its part, 1923 was the first year that the *Irish Independent* devoted substantial coverage to the ceremonies: it allocated two half-page columns to a ceremony in Dublin’s Killester village, which had been built specifically for ex-servicemen, and another one-and-a-half columns to international ceremonies (12 November 1923). The subsequent year followed suit. What the *Irish Times* referred to as ‘a temporary Cenotaph’ (a Celtic Cross) was erected in College Green and an estimated 50,000 people attended that year’s ceremony. The announcement that the Free State government would send a wreath to be laid at the cross (albeit without any minister present) was, as the *Irish Times* saw it, proof that the Irish revolution was over and that the Free State was happy to be a member of the Commonwealth:

Two years ago nobody could have hoped that our country might find a basis of union in the ex-soldiers of the Great War; but even two years have wrought swift changes. They have broadened the national perspective . . . Loyalty to the Empire is seen to be consistent with perfect loyalty to the Free State . . . To-day the cross in College Green – the very fact of its presence in College Green – is proof that within the Free State itself men of all parties are coming together in a new and broader creed of patriotism (11 November 1924).

In its leading article after the ceremony, the *Times* happily observed that the Free State was finding its ‘place in the Commonwealth of British Nations for which our fallen soldiers made their triumphant sacrifice’ (12 November 1924). The *Irish Independent*, however, viewed things rather differently. While commending the fact that ‘in the whole ceremony there was no thought of politics, no thought of party’ it viewed the ceremony not as a demonstration of Irish fidelity to the Empire, but as a commemoration of Irishmen who had fought for the freedom of small nations – including Ireland. It expressed the hope that the ceremony commemorated not just those who had died in the Great War but also those ‘who died for the cause of freedom in the Irish brigades of the 18th century, and of soldiers who died for the same cause of freedom in the Ireland of a few years ago’ (12 November 1924). Such differences in journalistic interpretations of the Great War, and what such commemorations meant, were to magnify in subsequent years.

Armistice Day and journalism 1925–1939

The large attendance at the 1924 Armistice Day ceremony and the suggestion that it had demonstrated that the Free State was now a committed member of the Commonwealth clearly disturbed anti-Treaty political sentiment. In 1922 the anti-Treaty side had adopted a policy of abstention from the Free State parliament and as Armistice Day 1925 approached the *Irish Independent* reported on a meeting organised by prominent anti-Treaty personalities to protest ‘against imperialistic displays’ on Armistice Day. Future Taoiseach (Prime Minister)

Seán Lemass was reported as describing Armistice Day events as ‘attempts to seduce the Irish people from their allegiance to the Irish nation, and win support for the British connection’. He took particular exception to the use of the Union Jack and noted that ‘though Irishmen might have differences, they stood when the Union Jack was waved in their faces as uncompromisingly against British rule as they ever did’. Careful not to breach the Irish custom of not speaking ill of the dead, Lemass observed that while the meeting meant ‘no disrespect to the Irish survivors of the Great War who wished to honour the memory of their dead comrades’, Armistice Day commemorations were ‘an endeavour to use Ireland in the interests of the Empire’. Another speaker, future minister Oscar Traynor, declared that they ‘did not desire any turmoil, but if the flag of serfdom is to be flaunted in the faces of the Irish people they told all and sundry that there will be turmoil’. While they respected those who sought to honour their dead ones ‘they protested against using the dead bodies to insinuate that the nation was going to be part of the British Empire’ (10 November 1925).

Given the large numbers that had attended the previous year’s ceremony, the 1925 event was held at the larger St Stephen’s Green. The run up to Armistice Day was marred by a number of incidents: two days before the ceremony, armed men entered two cinemas and seized copies of the film ‘Ypres’; armed men also raided the headquarters of the Legion of Ex-Servicemen (*Irish Times*, 10 November 1925). At the ceremony itself smoke bombs were detonated at either end of the assembled crowd, there were sustained disturbances during the day, and that evening shots were fired at the window of a city centre restaurant where a dinner for ex-servicemen was being held (*Irish Times*, 12 November 1925). In its leading article, the *Irish Times* criticised the actions of the protesters: it noted that ‘the persons responsible have the pleasure of knowing that they took away from the year, for a score or two of the people who were there in loving memory of dear ones, the two minutes that had been cherished as the special time of remembrance’ (12 November 1925). In contrast, mindful of its circulation and its role as the voice of conservative Ireland, the *Irish Independent* attributed blame to both sides:

On the one hand, a section of those who met to honour the dead did not keep clear of the pitfalls of politics and left themselves open to the charge of a show of flag-waving that might easily be mistaken for jingoism . . . On the other hand, yet another party, equally ill-advised, threw smoke-bombs which might have led to a panic amongst the dense crowd of women and children, were it not for the calm demeanour of the ex-servicemen.

Firmly occupying the middle ground it called, in future, for ‘a simple tribute to the dead without either provocative displays on the part of the comrades who honour them, or of interference by those who hold other views’ (12 November 1925). The following year, rather contentiously, the *Irish Times* declared that it was to ‘the sacrifice of her own sons of the old Irish regiments . . . that the Free State owes . . . her splendid place in the Commonwealth of British Nations’ (11 November 1926). Such a claim did not sit well with nationalists and as ex-servicemen marched from the city centre to the Phoenix Park on the outskirts of the city they were pelted with smoke bombs. Despite the serious disturbances, the *Irish Independent* did not comment editorially.

It was, however, in 1927 that Armistice Day became a central element in the identity politics that was at the core of the anti-Treaty side’s bid for power. That year, the anti-Treaty faction, in the guise of Eamon de Valera and Fianna Fáil had abandoned its policy of abstentionism and entered the Free State parliament. Three days before Armistice Day the party held an open-air meeting in College Green ‘to express the protest of the nationalist people of Dublin against the repetitions of displays of British imperialist sentiment that are

insulting to the Irish people'. As reported in the *Irish Times*, when addressing the meeting Seán Lemass had declared that:

. . . on previous occasions, when demonstrations were arranged in memory of men who had died in France, the demonstrations were utilised by a small section to display imperialistic sentiments that, in view of the history of this country, and in particular of Dublin, could not be peacefully tolerated by the Irish people. On those occasions the flag that had forever been the symbol of tyranny, rapine and loot in Ireland was flaunted.

Another speaker, future Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) of Dáil Éireann, Frank Fahy, declared that the party 'had no quarrel with those who would commemorate their dead, who honestly died believing they were right; but that the commemoration should not be used by pro-Britishers to spread the Union Jack over Dublin and say that the remnant of the ex-servicemen in Ireland were pro-British. They were not'. Another speaker, Tommy Mullins, future leader of Seanad Éireann (upper house of parliament), declared that it was time 'to put an end to the display of imperialistic emblems in this country, and the making a mockery of the solemn commemoration of the dead who died in Flanders and on the battlefields of Europe'. Significantly, Oscar Traynor, a prominent and respected ex-IRA commander, 'appealed to Nationalist ex-servicemen not to disgrace themselves by continuing to march under the Union Jack' (9 November 1927).

In its leading article, the *Irish Times* acknowledged that de Valera was now the de facto leader of the opposition. It noted that while Fianna Fáil 'were good enough to take no objection to the ceremony of Armistice Day as a commemoration of the dead . . . they must refuse to make terms with any aspect of British imperialism, and, in particular, they must banish the Empire's flag from the Free State'. It accused de Valera of issuing an ultimatum for having stated that 'any exhibition of the Union Jack on Armistice Day could be interpreted only as a deliberate insult to national feeling' and noted that the party had not concealed 'the hope that it would be made impossible by mob law' (9 November 1927).

The day before Armistice Day, the *Irish Independent* reported on a meeting of the 'Anti-Imperialistic Association' in College Green at which a resolution was adopted 'voicing the determination of the citizens of Ireland to oppose all imperialistic propaganda and displays that were made on the occasion of what was called Remembrance Day, which was in reality a glorification of imperialism and a recruiting parade for the Empire'. Addressing the meeting, Oscar Traynor repeated his appeal to ex-servicemen not to march under the Union Jack because 'they did not fight that it might endure' (*Irish Independent*, 11 November 1927). On that day an ex-serviceman's club hall was burned down in Dublin (*Irish Times*, 11 November 1927). Again, seeking to reflect the middle ground, in a leading article, the *Irish Independent* called for moderation on both sides:

. . . on the one side is a section, for the most part outside the ranks of the ex-servicemen, which avails itself of the occasion to make party demonstrations, and to indulge in a display of flag-waving that is repugnant to a portion of the populace of Dublin. On the other side is a small section so intolerant that it resents the tribute that the living soldiers pay to the memory of their dead . . . We recognise that the overwhelming majority of the citizens, whatever their political creeds, have no sympathy with the activities of those contending factions. The ex-servicemen as a whole do not, we think, countenance the provocative demonstrations and the flag-waving of those who pretend to be sympathisers with them. All decent citizens, even those who held extreme views during the years of the war, respect the feelings of

those who fought or suffered, and concede their right to observe the anniversary as one of proud, if sorrowful, remembrance (11 November 1927).

Despite the tensions, the 1927 commemoration was the quietest in many years and was marked only by minor skirmishes. Subsequent years followed a similar path: in 1928 the *Irish Independent* reported ‘a certain amount of liveliness in the streets of Dublin’ (12 November 1928); the following year it reported that ‘no untoward incidents of a serious character were reported’ (12 November 1929); in 1930 it reported that there were ‘some minor incidents arising out of attempts to snatch poppies from the wearer but no trouble of a serious nature occurred’ (12 November 1930).

But, by Armistice Day 1931, Fianna Fáil had the support of the newly-launched *Irish Press* in its campaign for power. A central plank of that campaign was the identity politics surrounding the relationship between Britain and Ireland. The *Press*, through its reportage, framed the annual commemoration as a bastion of imperialism, sought to appropriate the ex-servicemen for the cause of Irish independence, and framed the legacy of the conflict in terms of the ordinary soldier being forgotten while the British Legion spent money on elaborate memorials. In a leading article it claimed that Irishmen had served not for the benefit of the British Empire but ‘in the hope that their deaths would bring to Ireland the freedom so long denied her’. It also had harsh words about how Armistice Day was conducted:

In Ireland, Armistice Day has been celebrated in a manner not known in other nations. Here, instead of being a Day of Remembrance, it has become a day of acute partisanship. The very ideals for which the dead were asked to fight are those least present to the minds of the organisers of the Commemoration. It has in fact become an Imperialist Day. It is that which has provoked the resentment felt throughout the country on these occasions . . . But while some people are allowed to turn it into an anti-national demonstration it cannot fail to be an occasion of anger and bitterness – a yearly reminder that despite all the sacrifices of our people we have not been given the freedom that has been purchased. But however individuals may abuse their memory for partisan ends, the fact that they gave their lives for an ideal will not be forgotten (11 November 1931).

In a lengthy article – ‘Ireland and the Great War’ – it criticised Britain’s acknowledgement of the Irish contribution to the war effort, and reminded readers that during the Great War many recruiting posters had indicated that the war was being fought for the freedom of small nations and that it was ‘in the interest of Ireland to test the public declaration of the Allies and aid them in the fight’. When the war was won, it declared, Ireland had not been given its freedom:

The war was not six months over when the National Assembly set up by an overwhelming vote of the Irish electorate was proclaimed an illegal organisation. Within twelve months of the Versailles peace the Black and Tans were loosed on the Irish people and the nights were red with the fires of Irish towns and the British gibbets creaked to the corpses of Irish Republican soldiers. Having dedicated 400,000 men to cause of little Belgium, we were made to feel in every Irish village something of what the people in Little Belgium must have endured.

The article also played-up the contribution of the ex-servicemen in the Anglo-Irish War, while conveniently omitting that many ex-servicemen had joined the Free State Army to defeat the anti-Treaty side in the Irish civil war:

The sympathies of the majority of them must have been on the side of the nation in its struggle for independence. In parts of the country there was not an IRA column without its ex-serviceman. To-day there are several Republican TDs who served through the Great War. Yet by propaganda and by playing upon the discipline and personal loyalty of the ex-servicemen they are being used to give body to an anti-national movement and to provide the Irish people with imperialist displays as foreign to the national feelings of the ex-soldiers themselves as to those of any other section of their fellow-countrymen. And it is these men who on one day of the year are remembered and whose devotion to their brave and fallen comrades is used to re-establish the principle the war was supposed to have dethroned – that Empires may dominate and destroy the weak and little nations (11 November 1931).

The *Press* also devoted substantial coverage to the dissatisfaction felt by many ex-servicemen in relation to the provision made for them in the aftermath of the war. In an article entitled ‘Sorry Plight of British Ex-Soldiers: Legacy of Unfulfilled Promises’ the paper published an interview with ‘a prominent Dublin man’ interested in the conditions of ex-servicemen who outlined ex-servicemen’s grievances. These included dissatisfaction at the quantity of housing provided and the conditions of occupancy associated with same. It was noted that Dublin Corporation had built more houses (547) for ex-servicemen than the Ex-Serviceman’s Trust (262) and that, unlike properties built by the Corporation, houses built by the Trust came with higher rent costs, no fixity of tenure and no opportunity to purchase the property. There were also grievances about pensions: according to the interviewee ‘claimants for pensions usually received ungenerous treatment and were frequently called before examining Boards with the object of reducing their allowances’. The interviewee also criticised plans for a war memorial: many ex-servicemen, he declared, ‘objected to spending the £50,000 that had been collected for the purpose of an elaborate memorial, which would be used to make an Imperial holiday for a clique who would ignore the soldiers’ demands for work and for food and houses for their children’ (11 November 1931).

By the subsequent Armistice Day (1932) Fianna Fáil was in government and an economic war had broken out between the Free State and Britain over the non-payment of ‘land annuities’ to the British Exchequer.⁴ As both states imposed tariffs on each other’s exports the slogans ‘Buy-Irish’ and ‘Burn Everything British Except Their Coal’ became commonplace in Dublin. There existed a heightened sense of anti-imperialism: on the evening before Armistice Day, 15,000 people attended an Anti-Imperialist League meeting in College Green. Amongst many incendiary speeches, Frank Ryan, editor of the IRA newspaper *An Phoblacht*, observed that ‘the Germans would not allow the French to parade to Berlin carrying the French flag [and] no matter what anyone said to the contrary, while they had fists, hands, and boots to use, and guns if necessary, they would not allow free speech to traitors’. Ryan concluded his speech by appealing to the crowd to ‘gather together and wherever a British flag was flown to tear it down and give the imperialists what they deserved’ (*Irish Press*, 11 November 1932). Amid the tensions of the Economic War, that year’s Armistice Day was, what the *Irish Independent* referred to as, ‘one of the most riotous in the history of the Armistice celebrations in Dublin’:

From 9 o’clock streets in the centre of the city were in a state of turmoil, and many people were injured in scuffles, stampeded, and baton charges. A procession of youths several thousand strong and accompanied by a mob paraded the streets, interfering with everyone whom they saw wearing poppies. The procession was ultimately put to flight by Guards, who charged with drawn batons (12 November 1932).

That year was the last time a large scale march of ex-servicemen assembled in the city to mark Armistice Day. As the Economic War dragged on, throughout the 1930s attendance at the annual commemoration declined. The 1933 Armistice Day commemoration was, as the *Irish Press* described it, ‘the most peaceful Armistice Day celebrated in Dublin since 1918’ (*Irish Press*, 13 November 1933). This, most likely, had much to do with the decision by the British Legion to ban Union Jack flags from the much reduced ex-servicemen’s march from the city centre to the Phoenix Park. From then on the annual march and wreath-laying ceremony declined in terms of numbers attending and in terms of press coverage, before ceasing altogether in 1939 amid the state’s neutrality and press censorship during the Second World War.³

Discussion and Conclusion

The familiar refrain that the Irishmen who fought and gave their lives in the Great War were quickly and quietly airbrushed from public life ignores the complexity of the identity politics that developed in the Irish Free State. That game of identity politics was played out not only in the political sphere but also in the journalistic sphere as, principally, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Press* put forward different interpretations on the motives of those who had died in the Great War, what that war meant in relation to the freedom of small nations, and how best to commemorate those who had died. Once the anti-Treaty faction came to power in 1932 and hostilities with Britain (in the form of the Economic War) were renewed, the *Irish Press*’ interpretation – that Irishmen had fought not so much for empire but more so that Ireland might be free – gained greater credence and the numbers attending the annual remembrance ceremony declined until it ceased in 1939. In later decades significant Great War anniversaries went unreported – even by the *Irish Times*: the thirtieth (1948), fortieth (1958), and fiftieth (1968), anniversaries passed by without any editorial comment or feature.

But just as journalism had fanned the flames of identity politics in the 1920s and 1930s, in later decades it rehabilitated the reputation of those who had fought in the Great War. In a leading article on the sixtieth (1978) anniversary of Armistice Day the *Irish Times* observed that the contentiousness that surrounded Armistice Day had arisen ‘from pride in the new state, growing up in the shadow of a powerful former master, when any memory of Imperial days seemed to be a slight on the new order’. The country had, it continued, moved on and people now knew ‘that our history has a complexity which no political propaganda should be allowed to simplify’. To that end, the *Times* acknowledged that defence of the empire was not the only or primary reason Irishmen joined up: instead they went ‘in a spirit of adventure or just because they had nothing else to do . . . They did not have to go because of Britain’ (13 November 1978).

In the 1980s, one *Irish Times* journalist, Kevin Myers, played a key role in highlighting the part played by Irishmen in the Great War and reversing what he has referred to as the ‘informal community of silence’ about Irish participation in the conflict (Myers 1998, 103). Myers began his one-man campaign in July 1983 with a one-page commemoration of the sixty-seventh anniversary of the Battle of the Somme (*Irish Times*, 16 July 1983). He followed this up with an article that detailed the contribution of Irishmen to the war effort (*Irish Times*, 9 November 1985). As the writer of the popular ‘An Irishman’s Diary’ column, Myers used the diary to highlight ongoing research into Ireland’s involvement in the Great War, to publicise talks and lectures on the topic, to notify readers of key anniversaries and remembrance ceremonies, and to update them on the renovation of the Irish War memorial Gardens.⁵ In recent years, post-the Northern Ireland peace process, the participation of Irishmen in the Great War has again been publicly commemorated and reported on extensively. The Irish National War Memorial Gardens were officially opened by then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern in 1994 while, in 2006, the state officially

marked the ninetieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. There has also been a marked increase in scholarly interest in Ireland's role in the war and its commemoration (Jeffery 2000; Horne 2008; Horne and Madigan 2013) and, in recent years, as Ireland has become more diverse, journalism has opened up the debate on what it means (and what it meant) to be Irish. As the Irish republic prepares to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising there is greater acknowledgement that history is not one dimensional – and the contribution to the state's development from all parties deserves to be remembered and commemorated.

NOTES

¹ Patrick Callan puts the number of reserves who went to their depot at the outbreak of the war at 30,266.

² The term 'Black and Tan' arose from the improvised uniform (khaki and dark green) worn by the soldiers; the term 'Auxiliaries' arose from the fact that the officers were neither police nor army personnel – they were a paramilitary or auxiliary force.

³ During the war years members of the diplomatic corps continued to observe the annual ceremony at the War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge, Dublin.

⁴ The 'land annuities' derived from loans granted by Britain to Irish tenant farmers for land purchases, repayment of which was agreed on as part of the Anglo-Irish Treaty 1921.

⁵ The gardens had been completed in the late 1930s but the advent of the Second World War had prevented them being officially opened.

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