

## Tom Kettle (1880-1916)

Post by Olive Morrin, Special Collections and Archives



Photo from *The Ways of War* by  
T. Kettle

Tom Kettle whose 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary is on September 9<sup>th</sup> died during the [Battle of the Somme](#) along with over 3,500 other Irishmen. Tom Kettle was for some a compromised nationalist. While on an arms buying assignment to Belgium in 1914 he witnessed first-hand German atrocities against the civilian populations in Belgium and France. His experience led him to join the *Daily News*, become a war correspondent and he subsequently assisted in humanitarian work. When he returned to Ireland he answered Redmond's call to fight for England with the promise of gaining [Home Rule](#). His experience resulted in him breaking out of the insular approach of Irish nationalism and adopting a more European approach of which Ireland was a

part – “My only counsel to Ireland is, that to become deeply Irish, she must become European”.

Special Collections & Archives holds a copy of Tom Kettle's collected war journalism which was posthumously published in 1917 with the title *The Ways of War*. He requested that his wife Mary (nee Sheehy) should write his memoir as a preface to his war book. Mary Kettle was a sister of [Hanna Sheehy Skeffington](#) and sister-in-law of [Francis Skeffington](#). She considered herself unworthy of the task and that others would have done it more justice. But the resulting memoir justified her husband's faith in her literary abilities. The Library holds other books by and about Tom Kettle and also the Russell Library holds a copy of a pamphlet he wrote with his brother-in-law R.J. Sheehy titled *The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908*.

Tom Kettle was a gifted and talented man who in his short life directed his abilities with integrity into many different areas. Unfortunately, he developed a heavy drinking habit which became progressive. After he joined the British army he was not immediately sent to the front but after assurances that the problem was under control he was assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the [Royal Dublin Fusiliers](#). He left for France on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1916 with the knowledge that the men involved in the [Easter Rising](#) would be remembered as heroes and those who fought in the Great War would be viewed as traitors.

Apart from being a soldier and nationalist, Tom Kettle was also a barrister, economist, journalist, writer, linguist, poet and politician. He was born in Artane, Dublin, attended the Christian Brothers' O'Connell School at Richmond Street, Dublin and later studied at [Clongowes Wood College](#) in Kildare. He entered University College Dublin in 1897 and became involved in student politics and became auditor of the Literary and Historical Society. He was a brilliant scholar and became one of the emerging literary and political leaders of his time which included [James Joyce](#) and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington. After his degree he studied law qualifying as a barrister in 1905. He practiced only irregularly and devoted much of his time to political journalism and edited *The Nationist*. He became of vocal supporter of Home Rule and initially declined [Redmond's](#) offer to stand

for a parliamentary seat. He eventually did stand for East Tyrone and was successful. In 1906 he went to America and participated in propaganda and fund-raising meetings. In Westminster he made a name for himself as an orator and became a strong supporter of the [Irish Party](#) and Home Rule. In 1908 he became the first professor of National Economics at University College Dublin and combined his academic work with his work as an MP. In 1909 he married Mary Sheehy sister of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington.

During the 1913 Dublin strike and [Lockout](#) he supported the workers and wrote about the terrible living conditions of the poor in Dublin. Around this time, he also joined the Irish Volunteers and was sent to Belgium to buy arms where he witnessed German atrocities and on his return became an Irish nationalist in a British uniform. He saw himself as a European Irishman whose nationalism probably did not go beyond Home Rule.

A few days before his death he wrote a touching poem to his baby daughter Betty. In it he outlines his reasons for leaving her and going to war.

### **Extract from**

#### **To my Daughter Betty, the Gift of God**

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,  
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,-  
But for a dream, born in a herdsman shed,  
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.

He died while taking Ginchy at the Battle of the Somme. His body was never recovered. It was not until 1937 that a commemorative bust of Kettle was erected in [St. Stephen's Green](#) without an official unveiling because of the ambiguity surrounding him and other Irishmen who fought in the First World War.

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### **References**

*The Ways of War* by Professor T.M. Kettle and a memoir by his wife Mary S. Kettle, published in 1917

*Remembering Tom Kettle 1880-1916* by Conor Cruise O'Brien, Frank Callanan, Margaret O'Callaghan, Brendan Walsh and Patrick Maume, 2009.

Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom\\_Kettle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Kettle)