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Title

**The flight from war; Belgian refugees in northeast Leinster (part of),
1914-1915**

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Declaration:.....

This is my own original work.

Abstract

Ireland played no part in the events which led to the outbreak of the First World War, or the subsequent outpouring of nearly one million Belgian refugees seeking refuge in Holland, France, Britain, and Ireland. Nevertheless, subsequent events in London demonstrate that people on this side of the Irish Sea were participating in one way or another in the provision of relief for Belgian refugees. In August 1914, John Redmond and T.P. O'Connor hosted a function in London attended by Cardinal Mercier, to highlight the close ties between Belgium and Ireland. From September, the personal linkages between Mrs Fowle in Dublin, and Madame Reyntiers in London, saw refugees receive aid parcels sent from Oldcastle, County Meath, courtesy of Fr Barry. Importantly too, when decisions were made as to how best to evacuate Belgians to Britain, it was plans drawn up by northern unionist James Craig which Lady Lugard, who had strong Irish connections, and her War Refugees Committee utilised to good effect. Although this country was last to receive refugees, nevertheless, when they did come, the Belgian Refugees Committee under Mrs Fowle received and distributed them to places of accommodation primarily in poor law union workhouses. Among those who benefited from private hospitality, their plight appeared to have crossed the religious divide with their benefactors coming from all parts of the spectrum of religious persuasions, at least within the study area. Notwithstanding the warm welcome given to the refugees, nevertheless, certain aspects caused tension such as employment; refugee accommodation; job security for Irish workers; and troublesome refugees. However, two generalisations might be made here, one was the relative absence of animosity towards Belgians as an ethnic group. Another was that until recently, the loss from the collective memory of when the Belgians were here, not only by historians but also by the population as a whole led to them being almost forgotten from the history of this area and perhaps even in Ireland generally. Furthermore, I might add, that if it were not for documented sources, then the story as it appears here, could not have been told.

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Abbreviations

WRC: War Refugees Committee (British).

BRC: Belgian Refugees Committee (Irish).

LGB: Local Government Board.

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Introduction

This thesis will examine the experiences of ‘some’ Belgian refugees who sought sanctuary in Ireland when their country was invaded by Germany at the outbreak of the First World War. The study area is the geographical region bounded to the east by the Irish Sea, to the west by Oldcastle, County Meath, to the north by Dundalk, County Louth, and to the south by Dublin City (see Map.1). The study is a local one, but because the refugee crisis was overshadowed by the war and now largely forgotten, therefore, a brief background of the early phase of the crisis will be given here. The collective amnesia in Britain was said to be because ‘they represented neither great threat nor great promise to the host community’ and were only temporary residents unlike past migrations of which the Irish were one.¹ An indication of their low profile is seen by the relative haste with which the subject is dealt with in a prominent work such as: *A new history of Ireland*.²

Britain, as a protector of Belgian neutrality, felt an onus of responsibility and in September 1914 bestowed the ‘hospitality of the nation’ on its refugees. Those who landed at English ports (Deal, Folkestone, and Dover) were received by the War Refugees Committee (WRC), a voluntary body established by Dame Flora Lugard; Mrs Alfred Lyttelton; Lord Hugh Cecil; and Viscount Gladstone, who met their needs. Herbert Asquith, P.M., and Bonar Law, praised the Belgians for resisting the Germans at Liege.³ Winston Churchill, while focusing on the military aspect, commented on the refugees, that ‘this is [was] no time for charity’.⁴ George Bernard

¹ Peter Cahalan, *Belgian refugee relief in England during the Great War* (New York; London), pp 1-2. (Hereafter cited as Cahalan, *refugees*).

² W. E. Vaughan, *A new history of Ireland: VI. Ireland under the union, ii, 1870-1921* (Oxford, 1996), p. 598.

³ *Reports from the commissioners, inspectors, and others: 1914-16* (Belgian Refugees Committee), [cd. 7750], HC 1917, vii., pp 480-81, 518-20. (Hereafter cited as, *reports from comm's: 1914-16* [cd. 7750], HC 1917, vii): E. Moberly Bell, *Flora Shaw* (London, 1947), p. 279. (Hereafter cited as, Bell, *Shaw*).

⁴ Cahalan, *refugees*, p. 69.

Shaw and James Connolly were outspoken critics, with the former believing that had power resided with the British people then the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) would have reached Liege first.⁵ Connolly blamed the ‘stupid Belgian governing class’ for misleading its people; the ‘jingo press’ for hyping up Britain’s military achievements; and the ‘British Government’ for making a ‘cats paw’ of the situation.⁶

In August 1914, unionist, James Craig, allowed Lugard to use plans drawn up for the evacuation of Ulster women and children to Britain (in the event of civil war in Ireland over home rule). These, she said, had ‘put me [her] in touch with people who had the necessary information’.⁷ A.T.Q. Stewart thought the Ulster scheme was comprehensive, but Dame Edith Lyttelton (WRC member), felt that ‘beyond the registration forms there was not much to count upon’.⁸ The Duchess of Somerset wrote to Sir Edward Carson offering to assist in the following way:

The day that the first shot is fired in Ireland, I shall have my complete ambulance started and ready. 2 medical men, 2 surgeons, 6 trained nurses and 32 orderlies. I have also undertaken to house 100 women and children from Ulster. The Duke and I will both come over to give all the help we can.⁹

There can be no denying the strong Irish input into the mechanisms put in place to deal with the refugee crisis as it unfolded in August 1914. As regards Lugard (nee Shaw), an English protestant, she had family connections to Clonmel, County Tipperary, and also Kimmage, Dublin.¹⁰ Her grandfather, Frederick Shaw [later Sir], represented Dublin in the Irish parliament in 1830-32, and Dublin University in 1832-48.¹¹ However, his entry into politics was said to have been at the expense of Daniel O’Connell. In 1846, Robert Peel [P.M.] offered him the secretaryship of Ireland, but

⁵ Letter from George B. Shaw, to Charles Sarola (ed.), in *Everyman*, special Belgian relief issue (Nov. 1914), p. 26.

⁶ *Irish Worker*, 17 Oct. 1914.

⁷ Cahalan, *refugees*, p. 27; Bell, *Shaw*, pp 278-79.

⁸ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster crisis* (London, 1967), pp 4-5, 231-32; Cahalan, *refugees*, pp 27-28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰ Bell, *Shaw*, pp 11, 275.

¹¹ B.M. Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978), pp 210-11, 433.

failing health prevented him from accepting the offer. Later, he became Recorder for Dublin. Lugard spent her formative years at Kimmage where she came under her grandfather's influence.¹² She was also involved with the 'Girls Friendly Society of Ireland'.¹³ In later years, she lived with her father [George], then an army general stationed at Woolwich, near London, but each May the family decamped to Kimmage, where they remained until October. Lugard paid a visit to Dublin in 1895, after an absence of twenty years. What she saw caused her to remark 'I cannot remember, to have seen in any country in the world, a people so dirty, ragged, and apparently degraded'.¹⁴ This is a strong statement by someone so well travelled, and raises the question as to what had caused the deterioration, which so upset her?

Meanwhile, the influx of refugees into Britain over-whelmed the WRC. In response, the Local Government Board (LGB) utilised former skating rinks, and facilities at Alexander Palace and Earls Court, London, to hold them.¹⁵ With regard to his exiled countrymen, Belgian socialist leader [Jules], Destree, wrote in *Petit Parisien*, in February 1915, 'that the Belgian refugees in London believed that the fate of those who stayed in Belgium, now [then] under German administration, is [were] better than their own'.¹⁶ This is an interesting point and is lent credence by an article in *Scissors & Paste*, January 1915, which relates that 'of the 90,000 Belgians who fled to Holland, no less than 50,000 have [had] since returned'.¹⁷

The LGB put radical proposals before government, which included the idea that large camps be established in southern Ireland for the refugees.¹⁸ Of the 1,000,000

¹² Bell, *Shaw*, pp 12-13.

¹³ Flora Lugard; Representative Church Body Library records 1871-1977 (MS578): <http://www.google.ie/search?hl=en&q=flora+shaw+and+dublin+girls+friendly+society+of+ireland&btnG=Search&meta=> (24 Mar. 2008).

¹⁴ Bell, *Shaw*, pp 14-16, 59-60.

¹⁵ *Reports from comm's*: 1914-16 [cd. 7750], HC 1917, vii., pp 480-87: Cahalan, *refugees*, pp 79-80.

¹⁶ *Scissors & Paste*, 20 Feb. 19145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 Jan. 1915.

¹⁸ Cahalan, *refugees*, p. 60.

refugees displaced in the crisis, 500,000 went to the Netherlands, 250,000 to Britain, and the rest went to France.¹⁹ Clare O'Neill relates that Ireland's share was about 3,000 in total, with a peak of 2,300 near the end of 1914. However, at other times less than 1,000 was the norm.²⁰

An event of Irish interest occurred on 13 September 1914 at London, when Cardinal Mercier, en-route from Rome to Antwerp, attended a public meeting in his honour at Archbishop's House, Westminster, hosted by Irish parliamentarians John Redmond and T.P. O'Connor. Fifty thousand Irish people attended and the event was portrayed as being of international importance.²¹

The research findings will be spread over two chapters beginning with: The arrival and reception of Belgian refugees in northeast Leinster (part of), from late 1914 to early 1915. It will be seen that linkages between Mrs Helene Fowle, later head of the Belgian Refugees Committee (BRC), Dublin, Fr Barry, PP, Oldcastle, and Madame Reyntiers, London, helped refugees in London in September 1914.²² In Ireland, when LGB vice-president, Sir Henry Robinson, and Irish Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, attempted to utilise workhouses for refugees, they encountered resistance in some quarters.²³

¹⁹ *Reports from comm's: 1914-16* [cd. 7750], HC 1917, vii., p. 480: T.T.S. de Jastzebski, 'The register of belgian refugees' in *the Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. lxxix, part. ii, Mar. (London, 1916), p. 136:

<http://www.jstor.org.jproxy.nuim.ie/view/095285/di992780/99p0158y/o?frame=noframe&userid=959d01a8@may.ie/01cc993> (3 Feb. 2008). (Hereafter cited as, de Jastzebski, 'register')

²⁰ Clare O'Neill, 'The Irish home front 1914-18, with particular reference to the treatment of belgian refugees, prisoners of war, enemy aliens, and war casualties' (Unpublished PhD thesis, NUI, Maynooth, 2006), pp 63, 70-71. (Hereafter cited as, O'Neill, 'Home front').

²¹ *Drogheda Independent*, 3 Oct. 1914. (Hereafter cited as, *Drog Ind*).

²² *Ibid.*, 12 Sept. 1914.

²³ Board of Guardians [hereafter cited as BG], Ardee Union Minutes, 15 Oct. 1914 (Louth Archive, Dundalk: BG/ARD/BM/1/102 –June 1914- Jan. 1915), pp 296-97, 313: BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 15 Oct. 1914 (NAI: BG40/A131-A138-1914, pp 35-36).

Most refugees were welcomed on arrival in Ireland, some got breakfast at Dublin before moving on.²⁴ A few found themselves bereft of local assistance even to direct them to their destination.²⁵ Once ensconced in workhouses, some refugees were sought after as cheap labour, however, not all were suitably qualified due to poor skill sets.²⁶

Chapter two will examine the Irish-Belgian interface in northeast Leinster (part of) to determine whether it was a positive or negative experience for each side? It will be seen that much effort was expended on behalf of refugees such as caring for them and raising funds to support them. This demonstrates a broad balance of excitement and joy at their arrival within the area.²⁷ Drogheda in particular, took the task of supporting its refugees very seriously, ensuring that its efforts were similar to towns like Galway and Sligo.²⁸ There appeared to be a general feeling of euphoria surrounding the refugees with some poor law guardians seeing them through rose-tinted glasses. However, such views were short lived when trouble emerged later as at Balrothery and Ardee.²⁹ Fund raising for refugees created a negative spin-off when arguments developed over how scarce resources should be utilised.³⁰ The possible displacement of Irish workers by refugees caused some scare mongering by some prominent people such as James Connolly.³¹ Refugee accommodation was another potential tinderbox with suggestions that vacant mansions would have been

²⁴ *Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., p. 815. (Hereafter, *annual report LGB, 1915* [cd.8016], HC 1915, xxv).

²⁵ Letter from Percival Sorge, master of the SS Rathmore, to *the Irish Times*, 19 Oct. 1914.

²⁶ *Drog Ind*, 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1914.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24, 31 Oct. 1914.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1914.

²⁹ *Éire-Ireland*, 18 Nov. 1914: *Drog Ind*, 14 Nov. 1914: Belgian Refugees Committee, 'Belgian Refugees Committee minutes' (UCDA: P10b), p. 29. (Hereafter cited as, BRCM (UCDA: P10b).

³⁰ *Drog Ind*, 31 Oct. 1914.

³¹ *Irish Worker*, 17 Oct. 1914.

preferable over workhouses for ‘guests of the nation’ which had overtones of pauperism attached.³²

Primary sources for Britain were plentiful, an example being the register of Belgian refugees by T.T.S. de Jastrzebski, which provides much statistical data on the subject.³³ A secondary source, which proved useful was, Peter Cahalan, *Belgian refugee relief in England during the Great War*.³⁴ Despite its relative paucity of references to Ireland, nevertheless, its greatest value was as a comparator of events between Britain and Ireland.

Primary sources for Ireland are numerous, an example being a British parliamentary paper; *Report of the Belgian Refugees Committee* (BRC, Ireland), which provides a sound platform from which to begin research on the subject.³⁵ Also important was a minute book of BRC meetings for a twelve-month period to October 1915. The archives department of University College Dublin (UCDA) holds it.³⁶ The National Archive of Ireland (NAI) has some poor law guardians minute books, while others are available at Meath County Library, Navan; County Louth Archive, Dundalk; and Athy Heritage Centre, County Kildare.

Contemporary newspapers utilised were; *the Irish Times*, *the Meath Chronicle*, *the Irish Worker*, *Éire-Ireland*, *an Claidheamh Soluis*, *the Church of Ireland Gazette*, *Everyman*, *the Leinster Leader*, *Scissors & Paste*, and *the Drogheda Independent*, which invariably provided more coverage of guardian meetings than the minute books did. A source which disappointed was Richard J. Hayes, *Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilization* (Boston, 1965).

³² *Drog Ind*, 7, 21 Nov. 1914.

³³ De Jastrzebski, ‘register’, p. 134.

³⁴ Cahalan, *refugees*.

³⁵ *Annual report LGB*: 1915 [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., pp 815-23, 385-89.

³⁶ BRCM (UCDA: P10b).

Secondary sources for Ireland are few. An exception being the unpublished PhD work of Clare O'Neill, 'The Irish home front 1914-18, with particular reference to the treatment of Belgian refugees, prisoners of war, enemy aliens, and war casualties', which brings the subject from an Irish perspective out into the open for the first time. The work provides information on a whole plethora of different aspects which allows the subject to be seen in its broadest context and proved to be of immense benefit to this study, illuminating as it did, several dark corners in the quest for knowledge.³⁷

What will the study do which has not been done before? A research review shows that until recently, relatively little work had been done on the subject in Ireland. In 2001, Kevin Myers examined the question of the education of Belgian refugee children in Britain, but as few references pertain to Ireland, it will not feature here.³⁸ In 2006, Clare O'Neill brought forth the most significant work to date, but this was dealt with already. Notwithstanding the magnitude of work already done, a study such as this must search for a niche to exploit by utilising sources not fully exhausted or better still not used at all. It is my understanding that some of the sources shown earlier fall into the latter category and have the potential to provide new material not previously utilised in this context.

Examples of what the study hopes to demonstrate are that Fowle was engaged in refugee relief work before the BRC which was established in October 1914.³⁹ It is hoped to demonstrate that the date when the earliest refugees arrived here can now, in the light of new findings, be modified to an earlier date than heretofore thought.⁴⁰

³⁷ O'Neill ('Home front').

³⁸ Kevin Myers, 'the hidden history of refugees schooling in Britain: the case of the Belgians, 1914-18', in *History of education*, vol. xxx, no. 2 (Mar. 2001), pp 153-62: <http://www.informaworld.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/smapp/content~content=a713811900> (27 Feb. 2008).

³⁹ *Drog Ind*, 12 Sept. 1914: *Annual report LGB: 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., pp 814-15.

⁴⁰ *Annual report LGB: 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., p.815: *Drog Ind*, 17 Oct. 1914.

It will be seen that a distinction was made by aid givers between refugees from different social strata and then tailoring the quality of aid given accordingly, even to the extent of reserving better quality clothing for formerly well-to-do Belgians.⁴¹ Perhaps this is to be expected, as bonds between elites in these islands were strong at that time.⁴² The largesse shown towards the elite Belgians may simply be an extension of those close ties within a social hierarchy, which reached into Europe, and viewed from that perspective then they were only looking after their own kind.

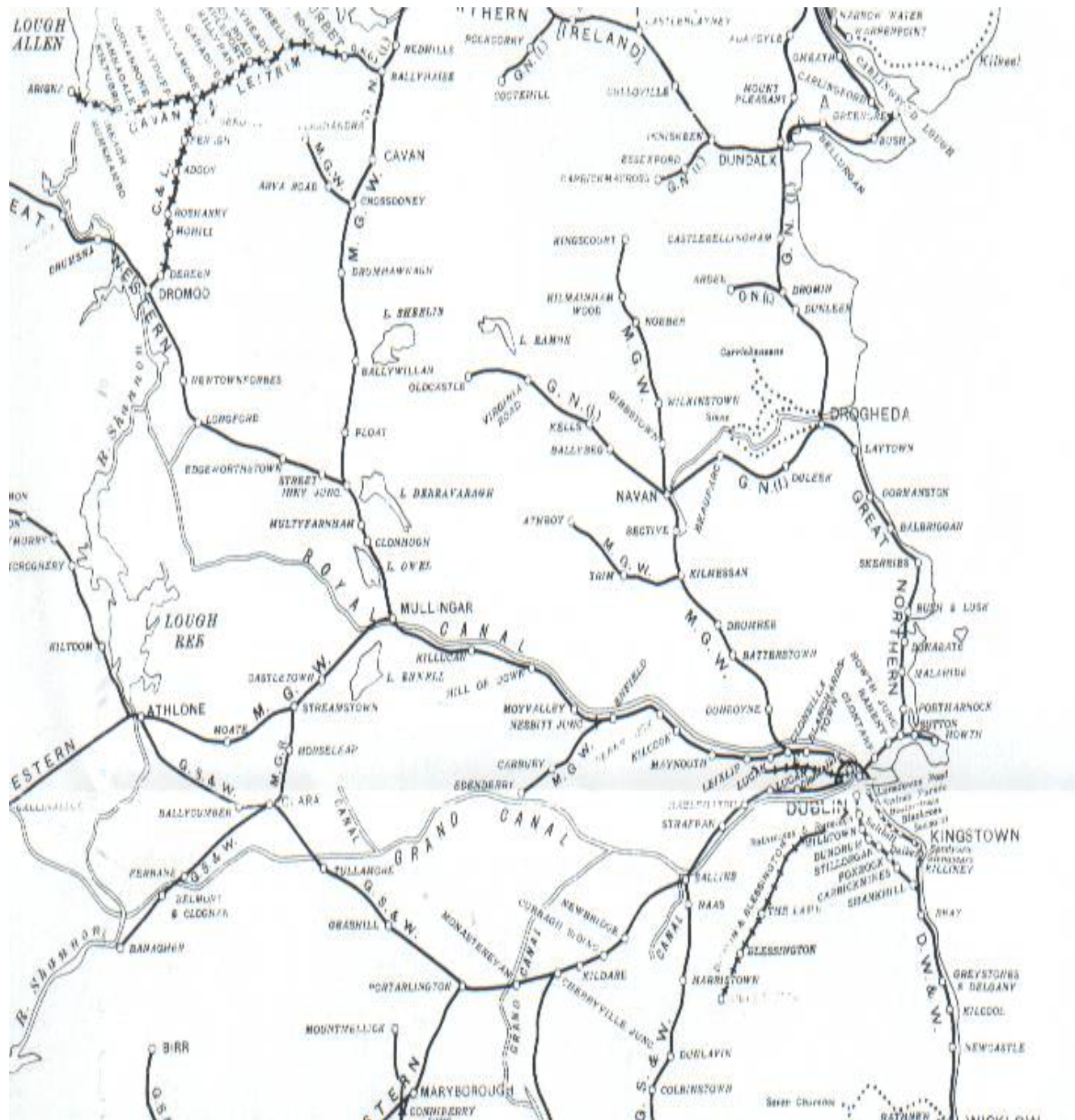
From examining the various accounts of aid givers, one could be forgiven for thinking that it was primarily females of a certain class who undertook such work and although males did offer assistance, nevertheless, they seemed to do so from the fringes.⁴³ This aspect will be highlighted by a series of charts in chapter two, which will demonstrate the preponderance of females engaged in refugee relief work in the Drogheda area.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12 Sept. 1914.

⁴² Alan Bairner, *Sport, nationalism, and globalization: European and North American perspectives* (New York, 2001), pp 26-27.

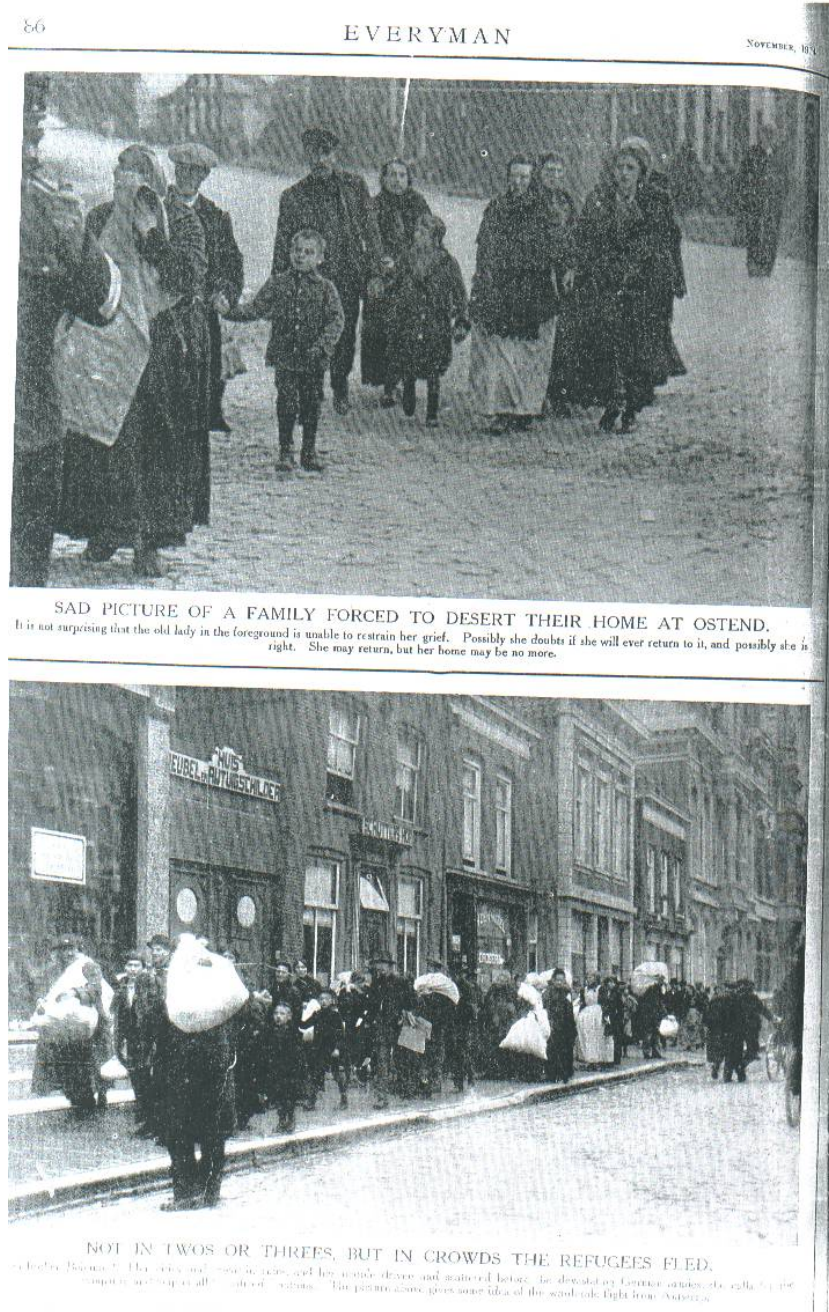
⁴³ *Drog Ind*, 24, 31 Oct. 1914.

Map.1. Railways of Ireland, c. 1906; showing northeast Leinster.⁴⁴



The rail systems of interest here are the Great Northern Railway (G.N.R.), between Dublin and Dundalk, the Midland Great Western (M.G.W), serving Navan, Kells, Trim, and Oldcastle, and associated spur lines.

⁴⁴ National Library of Ireland; map no. 15, 'Vice-Regal Commission on Irish railways, including light railways, 1906' in *Ireland from Maps* (Dublin, 1980).

Plates.1 and 2. Belgian refugees leaving Ostend and Antwerp in 1914.⁴⁵

The plates above show people demonstrating great fortitude in the face of extreme hardship, carrying their few meagre possessions, having left everything else behind. Meanwhile, although the events in Belgium were widely reported in the press, nevertheless, for those who wished to view the dramatic happenings from lantern slides, these could be purchased from T. Mason, Optician, 5 Dame Street, Dublin.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Charles Sarolea (ed.), 'Photographs' in *Everyman* (Nov. 1914), p. 86.

⁴⁶ *Claidheamh Soluis*, 12 Dec. 1914.

Chapter.1

**The arrival and reception of Belgian refugees in northeast Leinster (part of),
from late 1914 to early 1915.**

What constitutes a 'refugee'? Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rev P re Pire, O.P, while addressing the Irish United Nations Association at University College Dublin, in March 1960, gave an insight into the condition:

They are human beings, which are the essence of their plight, and one must see them as human beings who are uprooted, and not see these aspects in isolation; otherwise, you will be crushed by their misery and may miss the possibility of the resurrection, which exists in man. The problem of refugees goes back a long way to the 1914-18 war. Refugees lose everything and as yet have found nothing; their world and their background have gone, and if that happened to us we would not realise what we had until it was gone. In the way that a child does not know a parent until he or she has gone. It is the same for fatherland; climate; customs; religion; comrades, and all that make up mans life.¹

Plates.1 and 2 demonstrate what people look like as they begin the process of becoming refugees. However, what would one make of a report in *the New York American*, which stated that '500 Irish refugees had fled to America in 1914 on board the 'Cedric', to escape being conscripted into the British Army'? Many had sold farms before they left.² The two examples share only one commonality, the fear of war, yet each was described as refugees. The principal bodies providing aid to Belgian refugees in Ireland were the BRC and the LGB, with Mrs Helene Fowle, 26 Elgin Road, Dublin, heading the former while Sir Henry Robinson was vice-president of the LGB. These agencies received and distributed refugees coming through Dublin port to places of accommodation elsewhere in the country. The BRC consisted of; Sir Henry Robinson (LGB); Countess Fingall; Captain G. St Lawrence; Lady Moloney; Mrs Rushton; Miss Boland; Miss Fitzgerald-Kennedy; Sir Horace C. Plunkett; Rev T.

¹ P re Pire, *The problem of the refugee* (Dublin, 1960), p. 1.

² * ire-Ireland*, 12 Nov. 1914.

V. Nolan; E. Bourke; John Murphy (Belgian consul); M. J. Murphy; and E. White (LGB).³

The first indication of Irish involvement in Belgium's plight seen within this area was at Oldcastle, where in September 1914, a committee of females worked under the auspices of Fr Barry, PP, and Mrs Naper, and collected clothes destined for the Belgian Relief Fund, London.⁴ At Kells, Lady Rose Headfort and thirty-six females made clothes for the Red Cross Association, the Leinster Regiment, St John's Ambulance Service, and 110 female refugees.⁵ Fr Barry was in close contact with Mrs Fowle, and she, after receiving a letter and further gifts from him, replied from the Rubens hotel, London, where she was aiding distressed relatives and friends. By her direction ordinary clothes were to go to Mr Warean, 8 Christchurch Street, while quality garments should go to Madame Reyntiers, 63 Cadogan Square, London, 'who takes care of them and knows how to distribute them to what used to be well-to-do people'. Her letter ended with these poignant words about Belgium; 'all this is so sudden! All their homes burnt! Their people killed! Their country ruined in a matter of a month'.⁶ From reading between the lines it appears that her distressed relatives were in all probability newly arrived refugees. She was making decisions based on social class, and one wonders apart from clothing what other concessions were made to those of the higher social order. Her actions in that regard were nothing out of the ordinary as exemplified by the Lady Lugard Hospitality Committee for better class Belgian refugees in Britain.⁷

An early indication that refugees were coming here was seen in early October 1914, when the North Dublin Union discussed an LGB request to take fifty refugee

³ *Irish Times*, 19 Oct. 1914: *Annual report LGB: 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., p. 814.

⁴ *Drog Ind*, 12 Sept. 1914.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 Oct. 1914.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 Sept. 1914.

⁷ Cahalan, *refugees*, pp 197, 312-14, 316, 319-26, 473-77.

children in a possible emergency. When a guardian related to the board that the nuns at Cabra, County Dublin, were willing to take them if necessary, the chairman Alderman Keogh, grasped the opportunity to relieve the workhouse of fifty Irish children instead. He sent them ‘to breathe the pure air of Cabra’, thereby, at a stroke, transferring their responsibility onto the nuns. No record has been found of any refugee children arriving at the workhouse subsequently.⁸ Keogh’s action may be seen as a masterstroke of cunning, a sign of decisiveness, or an example of sharp practice at the nuns expense, depending on ones interpretation of it. John Keogh sat on the Municipal Council of the city of Dublin, however, the minutes for October, November, and December 1914, show no mention of Belgian refugees by the board.⁹

When Mrs Fowle went to London to drum up a few refugees, imagine her amazement when she was offered 200 per week, an amount that far out-stripped the supply of private hospitality.¹⁰ The LGB reacted by despatching communications on 15 October 1914, to selected poor law unions seeking urgent offers of accommodation. The following day (Friday), Sir Henry Robinson (LGB vice-president) and Augustine Birrell (Irish chief secretary) visited workhouses at Ardee and Balrothery, and met the chairmen and staff. However, the guardians were not included in the talks and this exclusion annoyed them. LGB inspectors on Saturday; instructed that isolation wards proposed for refugee use, should be separate from the rest of the workhouse.¹¹

Refugees arrived at the North Wall Dublin on Sunday 18 October 1914, from Holyhead, aboard the SS Rathmore. However, the ships master Percival Sorge, wrote

⁸ *Irish Times*, 1 Oct. 1914.

⁹ *Minutes of the Municipal Council of the city of Dublin 1914* (Dublin, 1914).

¹⁰ O’Neill, ‘Home Front’, p. 62.

¹¹ BG, Ardee Union Minutes, 17 Oct. 1914 (Louth Archive, Dundalk: BG/ARD/MB/1/102- June 1914-Jan. 1915, pp 296-97): BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 21 Oct. 1914 (NAI: BG40/A132-A138-1914, pp 35-36): *Drog Ind*, 24, 31 Oct. 1914.

to *the Irish Times* complaining of distressful scenes on the quayside where language difficulties made it impossible for refugees to get directions, even to their place of hospitality.¹² Perhaps in response to the letter, which was published on Monday 19 October 1914, a meeting took place at the Mansion House Dublin, on that same day. The meeting was attended by Dublin's Lord Mayor [Lorcan J. Sherlock]¹³ along with members of the recently formed BRC, and presided over by Mrs Fowle. Two clear objectives were to be addressed; the urgent need for interpreters, and the inadequate offers of private hospitality. The first objective was quickly disposed of when females from the gathering proffered their services as interpreters. The second objective proved problematic, nevertheless, action was needed urgently as batches of refugees were to arrive on the following morning and continue over the coming weeks until an anticipated number exceeding 600 had arrived. The meeting discussed the issue and although offers to take one or two refugees were plentiful, what was needed was a solution on a much bigger scale.¹⁴ A magnificent offer from Bray Relief Committee, to give hospitality to the first 100 refugees, was heartily welcomed. However, the problem of what to do with the rest remained. In the end, a decision was arrived at whereby those without offers of hospitality would receive temporary accommodation at Gorey workhouse, County Wexford.¹⁵

The question of when the earliest refugees came to the area is clouded by conflicting accounts. A parliamentary paper relates that the first refugees landed at Dublin port on Saturday 17 October 1914.¹⁶ However, a short piece in *the Drogheda Independent*, a weekly newspaper, dated 17 October, is informative. Under the

¹² *Irish Times*, 19 Oct. 1914.

¹³ *Thom's official directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland for the year 1914* (Dublin, 1914), p. 1817.

¹⁴ *Irish Times*, 20 Oct. 1914.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 Oct. 1914.

¹⁶ *Annual report LGB: 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., p. 815.

heading 'local happenings' it relates not only that a refugee colony was to be established at Laytown, but more importantly, that the 'defenders of Antwerp have arrived in Drogheda'. It was followed by the words 'this has not been submitted to the censor'.¹⁷ In an effort to corroborate the story the poor law guardian minute books for Drogheda were searched but nothing on the matter of refugees was found.¹⁸ The significance of the sentence relating to the censor is obscure; perhaps it meant that there was insufficient time to inform him of the decision before going to print? In any event the report, in order to appear in a weekly edition, which usually goes on sale from midweek, would have gone to press before then. Which means in essence that the refugees must have been in Drogheda from early in the week ending Saturday 17 October 1914. How they got there so early and with only a single record of their coming is problematic. For the sake of argument, I offer the suggestion that they paid their own passage and therefore did not come to the BRC's attention and also that they may have arrived through the port of Drogheda. The fact that they did not appear to seek the sanctuary of the poorhouse lends credence to the hypothesis that they were self reliant Belgians.

On 20 October 1914, thirty-five refugees, mainly women and children arrived at Laytown, with an interpreter and an official of the Belgian Embassy. They got a warm reception at the rail station, bedecked with flags, and greeted by cheering crowds. Most were from Antwerp, with others from Alost, Brussels, and Tournai. They were accommodated in cottages owned by Mrs Creaser, while Mrs Cullinan, Mrs Jameson, Colonel Pepper, and A.W. Archer gave support. A press reporter interviewed the refugees on the evening of their arrival and their accounts make interesting reading, particularly that of the Le Cheminant family who previously

¹⁷ *Drog Ind*, 17 Oct. 1914.

¹⁸ BG, Drogheda Union Minutes, 1914-1915 (Louth Archive: BG/DRO/MB/001/050: BG/DRO/MB/001/051-1914-1915).

owned a saloon bar on Antwerp's South Quay. Mr Le Cheminant had managed to get onto the last ship to leave that city and for which he said, strategy was the key to getting a place on board, and not 'gold'. Later, his family had to flee on foot to Holland for safety and meeting up with him afterwards at London, before coming here.¹⁹

When the chairmen of Ardee and Balrothery workhouses responded to the LGB's request for accommodation, they submitted remarkably similar estimates that about sixty refugees could be taken. As already stated, the guardians were not consulted; perhaps it was assumed they would rubber stamp the decisions made without their input. This proved not to be the case and when the Balrothery guardians met on 21 October 1914, they struggled to contain their anger towards the chairman and the LGB. When it transpired that the workhouse clerk had failed to read out details from a letter, which told of the imminent arrival of refugees about whom they had no prior knowledge. The chairman was accused of going behind their backs and then rubbing salt in the wound by calling a meeting when everything 'was already cut and dried'. With the meeting on the verge of chaos, one guardian raised his voice above the din and reminded them of the debt owed to Belgium, which could be repaid in a small way, if only they put their rancour aside. The good name of Balrothery guardians was at stake he said, unless refugees were accepted into the workhouse 'for the greater good'. When urged by the chairman to show solidarity on the issue by returning a unanimous verdict, his wish was granted.²⁰ The subject of how best to accommodate the refugees has inadvertently given an insight into how they perceived both refugees who had yet to arrive as well as the Irish poor already in their charge. 'Clear out all able-bodied adults and children and put 200 refugees in their place' said one guardian.

¹⁹ *Drog Ind*, 24, 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1914.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 Oct. 1914.

They would be more productive than the present incumbents, some of whom it would 'take a German shell to hunt [out]'. Notwithstanding the drastic nature of his proposal, nevertheless, it found acceptance among the board, including the chairman, who lamented that the proposal was impracticable to implement.²¹ In any event the nature of the discussion makes it clear that while taking a dim view of their own charges, the guardians seemed willing to elevate Belgians whom they had yet to meet, onto a higher plane. Was this a classic case of 'rose tinted glasses'? It certainly appears to be so. In the weeks and months ahead these same guardians would reflect on their preconceived notions of Belgian refugees and rue their misplaced confidence or naivety in regard to strangers no matter what nationality they were.

Relations between the LGB and Dunshaughlin guardians were also fraught with difficulty as is shown by a press report of 16 January 1915. The trouble appears to centre on the displacement of workhouse inmates to Navan in the previous year and which caused the house to be closed for a time in preparation for the accommodation of refugees in the New Year. The closure was used as an excuse by foodstuff suppliers to deem their contracts broken and therefore they sought higher prices for the goods elsewhere. The housemaster told of having difficulty in procuring a bag of sugar and that only the milk supplier was still holding to his contract.²² It may have been the case that the suppliers were using the fact that refugees were coming, in order to gain increased contract prices. However, it appears that the guardians were not at all happy with what the LGB were attempting to do with their workhouse. One guardian said that 'when we were elected members of the board of guardians, we never undertook all these duties that are being fitted onto us now'. The chairman added that if the LGB imposed them [refugees] on the house 'then let them send

²¹ Ibid., 24, 31 Oct. 1914.

²² Ibid., 16 Jan. 1915.

money from the Belgian Refugee Fund' to pay for them. The feeling of the board was that their primary duty was to the local ratepayers. 'We are not going to be treated like a lot of old women' said the chairman. When it transpired that £1,000 worth of goods (furniture, etc) had been ordered, and it seemed unclear who was to pay the bill, the chairman, by then quite vexed, said, 'no matter what, I will not pay it and would go to jail first'. Another related that the guardians at Tullamore, County Offaly, had refused to allow refugees into their workhouse.²³ The situation at Dunshaughlin was discussed further later in the month where it was agreed that refugees would enter the house on condition that accounts for their maintenance would be kept on a separate register for payment by the LGB, thereby absolving the local ratepayers of the expense.²⁴

Regarding the situation at Tullamore, to say that they would not accommodate refugees was not quite correct. The main issue there, centred around the perceived unsuitability of workhouse accommodation while mansions lay vacant all around. It was felt too that the British government thought it had absolved itself of responsibility towards refugees once it had ensconced them in Irish workhouses. It was pointed out that the old military barracks at Philipstown or Lord Digby's Castle at Geashill, would be more fitting accommodation. In any event after making their point, the guardians there relented and refugees entered the workhouse.²⁵ This demonstrates that poor relations between the LGB and guardians were not restricted to the study area.

At the end of October 1914, twenty-seven adult males, eight adult females, and one child arrived at Balrothery workhouse. An additional seven adult males had gone to the home of Mrs Jameson at Sutton, County Dublin.²⁶ She also had a refugee

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 23 Jan. 1915.

²⁵ *Éire-Ireland*, 3 Nov. 1914.

²⁶ BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 28 Oct. 1914 (NAI: BG40/A132-A138-1914, p. 51).

family staying with her, but one of these, Madame Jeanne Bresselers, was returned to the workhouse at Balrothery suffering from Tuberculosis and died there on 22 November 1914.²⁷ A second refugee, Emile Fykleur, died in the workhouse in early December that year. The circumstances surrounding their burials are not clear; however, an effort by me to find out more about them as produced the following information. Bresseler's removal was handled by James McNally, Undertakers, Balbriggan, at a cost of £3. 5s. 0p. Interestingly, there is a discrepancy of five shillings between the record in McNally's book and the figure on his receipt as found in the BRC minute book. Fykleur's burial was handled by an unspecified undertaker, but McNally's records show that it was not his firm this time. The BRC sanctioned an estimate of £4. 0s. 0p., on that occasion.²⁸ This raises the question as to why McNally was not approached to handle the funeral; after all, his cost was substantially less than the later undertaker. None of the sources indicate where the two refugees are buried. In an effort to find out more, I visited the Balrothery Union graveyard and found only a single Celtic cross, erected in 1918 by the guardians to commemorate those interred there. However, no names are inscribed on the cross and no headstones are found in the cemetery. The works of Dr Michael Egan were consulted for the aforesaid graveyard, along with the old and new cemeteries at nearby Lusk. However, no mention of them is found in those cemeteries.²⁹ Apart from hoping that another source will sometime in the future help to allow a definitive answer to be given, all that can be done now is supposition. Having given the question some thought, I have come to the conclusion that the guardians, having spent a considerable sum on funeral

²⁷*Drog Ind*, 28, 14 Nov. 1914:

BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 25 Nov. 1914 (NAI: BG40/A132-A138-1914, pp 115-17).

²⁸ BRCM (UCDA: P10b), pp 25, 100: James McNally, undertaker, Balbriggan, 'funeral record book 1914' now in possession of his son Sean, Balbriggan. Seen by me in conjunction with Sean, on 15 May 2008.

²⁹ Michael, J.S. Egan (ed. & transcr.), *Memorials of the dead: Dublin city and county graveyards* (10 vols, Dublin, 1988- 97), xl, 117-18; x, 83-206; x111, 134-86.

expenses, would then bury the pair in unmarked graves amongst the workhouse paupers. The fact that Egan denotes many unmarked graves in St MaCullin's cemetery, Lusk, which may previously have had markings which time has erased, I feel that it is here that the refugees found their eternal rest.

To return to how the guardians at Ardee felt when they met at the end of October 1914. While they also felt aggrieved by their exclusion from the talks, nevertheless, their anger was less vehement than that of the Balrothery guardians. The main issue at Ardee was the proposed utilisation of the isolation ward for refugees and the subsequent displacement of infectious patients to facilities elsewhere. However, an agreement between the LGB and Drogheda and Dundalk Unions that such cases would be cared for there, resolved the matter. On the subject of food preparation, it was pointed out that the cooking range was obsolete and needed replacing. The chairman however, thought it was adequate, after all, he said 'Belgians use a lot of soup and coffee and very little butter'.³⁰ Why he refused to replace a worn out cooker when the board believed that all expenses connected with the preparations for refugees would be refunded by the LGB is curious.³¹ Similarly, Balrothery guardians argued over whether to order a clothes-drying press for the refugees even though all saw the need for it.³²

At the end of October 1914 at Ardee, in anticipation of the arrival of female refugees, the workhouse inmates were confined to their dormitories, thereby leaving the day room free for the newcomers. Subsequently, twenty-one males, rather than females, arrived on the four o'clock train to Ardee. Their arrival aroused much passion from those who came to greet them, and in addition, as a special treat, the Ardee Corps of Volunteers, who bore their rifles in public for the first time, provided

³⁰ *Drog Ind*, 31 Oct. 1914.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5 Dec. 1914.

³² *Ibid.*, 13 Feb. 1915.

them with a guard of honour.³³ The refugees, afterwards, feasted on meat, soup, and bread provided for their delectation in the workhouse dining room. The group were of a respectable class and ranged in age between nineteen and forty years. Most were Flemish and included painters, masons, sculptors, clerks, and tramway men who came to Ireland by way of Holland and England.³⁴ The arrival of males rather than the anticipated females demonstrates the somewhat chaotic nature of refugee movements.

Though no refugee could be taken from the workhouse without sanction from the authorities, nevertheless, enquiries were plentiful, particularly for those with a little understanding of the English language.³⁵ Mrs Jameson, Sutton, and Mrs Plunkett, Portmarnock, appeared to have no difficulty getting refugees. Others, such as Mrs Wilson (no address), had her request for a servant girl turned down.³⁶ Although Mrs Jameson was Protestant, and her nine servants similarly so, nevertheless, it did not make her less desirous to take on Catholic refugees. Meanwhile, Mrs Plunkett, a Catholic, as were her five servants, experienced no difficulties either.³⁷ Therefore, it is suggested that the refugees plight allowed them cross the religious divide in this part of Ireland. On the other hand, at Portadown, County Armagh, several Catholic families had been encouraged to convert to Protestantism, an act that caused the BRC to put an embargo on other refugees from going there.³⁸

The aspect of refugee suitability for employment was an interesting one and an end of October 1914, report by nurse Hegarty, at Balrothery workhouse, is insightful. She related that of the thirty-nine refugees in her charge, very few were workers. Of five

³³ Ibid., 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1914.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Irish Times*, 20 Oct. 1914: BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 27 Oct. 1914 (NAI: BG40/A132-A138-1914, p. 55); *Drog Ind*, 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1914.

³⁶ Ibid., 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1914.

³⁷ Census of Ireland 1911: NAI: Microfilm, 000023428, and 000010638: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000023428/> : <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000010638/> (7 Feb. 2008)

³⁸ BRCM (UCDA: P10b), pp 113-29.

women, only one could work, but had appendicitis, while the others were of the poorer class and were impracticable. While most of the thirty-three men were energetic and willing to work, their basic hygiene standards held them back. They were mainly fishermen or peasants and not at all suitable for the work available, which was housework.³⁹ De Jastzebski, in his register of Belgian refugees points to the fact that though many Flemish refugees were urban dwellers with skills in law, medicine, education, and metalwork, nevertheless, fishermen were over represented among those who came to Britain, while, agricultural workers were under represented.⁴⁰ The situation at Balrothery may have represented in microcosm what de Jastzebski found in his research in regard to fishermen. At Ardee workhouse, a refugee with metalworking skills proved useful to a blacksmith named McArdle, at Tullakeel, County Louth, that is, until he was recalled for military service. While discussing the case, the chairman, Sir Vere Foster, tendered his resignation on the grounds that he was going to the 'front' to fight for Ireland.⁴¹ This is perhaps a timely reminder that human traffic was two-way at that time. The war which drove Belgians here was simultaneously attracting Irishmen in their thousands to the fight, but, unlike the refugees, many Irish soldiers never made it home at war's end.

³⁹ *Drog Ind*, 31 Oct. 1914.

⁴⁰ De Jastzebski, 'register', pp 145-47.

⁴¹ *Drog Ind*, 7, 14, Nov. 1914.

Chapter.2

The Irish-Belgian interface in northeast Leinster (part of); was it a positive or negative experience for each side?

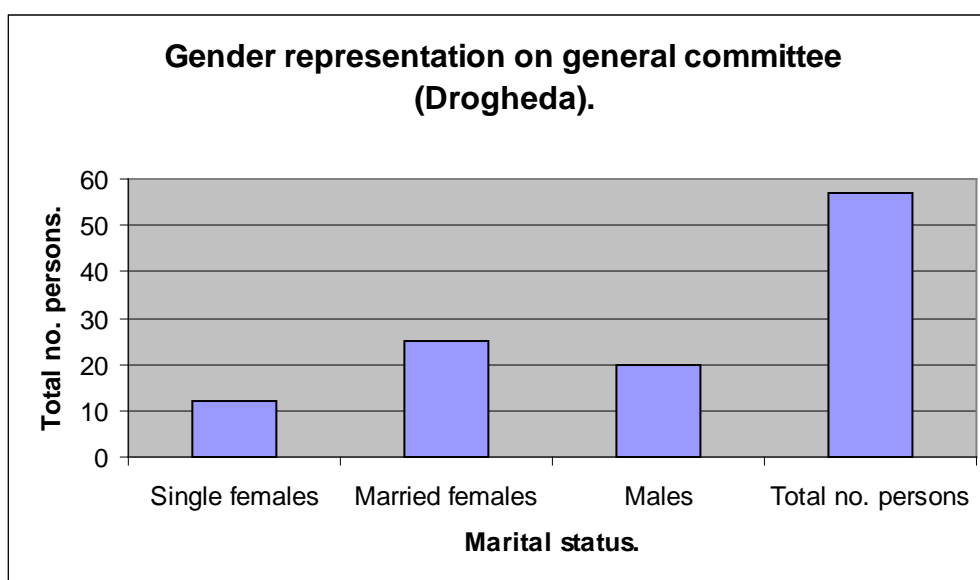
From October 1914, there was tremendous fund raising activity in the area with church-gate collections fulfilling a promise made by Irish bishops to Cardinal Mercier to assist his relief efforts in Belgium. Funds collected in County Meath enabled a draft for £620 to be sent to Monsignor M. E. Carton de Wiart.¹ Meanwhile, a fundraising lecture at Drogheda saw Fr O'Neill, SJ; speak of his time at Louvain before its destruction. At talks end, plans were made for a concert at Whitworth Hall, Drogheda, on 30 November to raise money for refugee maintenance at Laytown, then costing £15 a week. Monsignor Seagrave pointed to the need for a general committee to keep the fund-raising effort going. He stressed the importance of Drogheda's role in maintaining its complement of refugees at a level commensurate with its size and importance in Irish life and particularly should be comparable with effort by Galway and Sligo towards their refugees.² The composition of the committee was made up of the following fifty-eight people; Miss Arnold; Lady Bellew; Mrs Boylan; Mrs Brunskill; Miss Brodagan; Mrs P. Cairne; Mrs A. Cairne; Mrs Callaghan (Lady Mayoress); Mrs Coddington; Mrs Creaser; Mrs Cullinan; Miss Curtin; Mrs J. Davis; Mr Davis; Mrs Elcock; Mrs Farrell; Miss Finnegan; Lady and Lord Gormanston; Lady Henrietta Gradwell; Mrs Hall; Mrs W. Jameson; Mrs May; Mrs Montgomery; Miss Montgomery; Miss McDonnell; Mr and Mrs F. McKeever; Miss McKeever; Mrs Turnstall Moore; Mrs C. Macartney-Filgate; Mrs Osborne; Miss Osborne; Miss Smyth (Greenhills); Miss Smith (Kilineer); Miss Smyth (Newtown); Mrs Smyth; Mrs Preston; Miss Shuttleworth; Miss Whitty; Mrs A. Farrell; Mrs Matthews; Dr

¹ *Drog Ind*, 5 Dec. 1914.

² *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1914.

Bradley; Mr G. Daly; Luke Elcock; Rev Fr Flynn; Mr G. Gradwell; Rev A. Hall; Rev Chancellor Ladoux; Col Pepper; C. Macartney-Filgate; J. McIliderry; Dr Moore; Archdeacon Seagrave; R. Smyth; Mr Symes; J. Walker; and Lord Mayor Mr J. Callaghan.³ The charts shown below might help to elucidate some aspects pertaining to the committee.

Chart.1 gender representation.



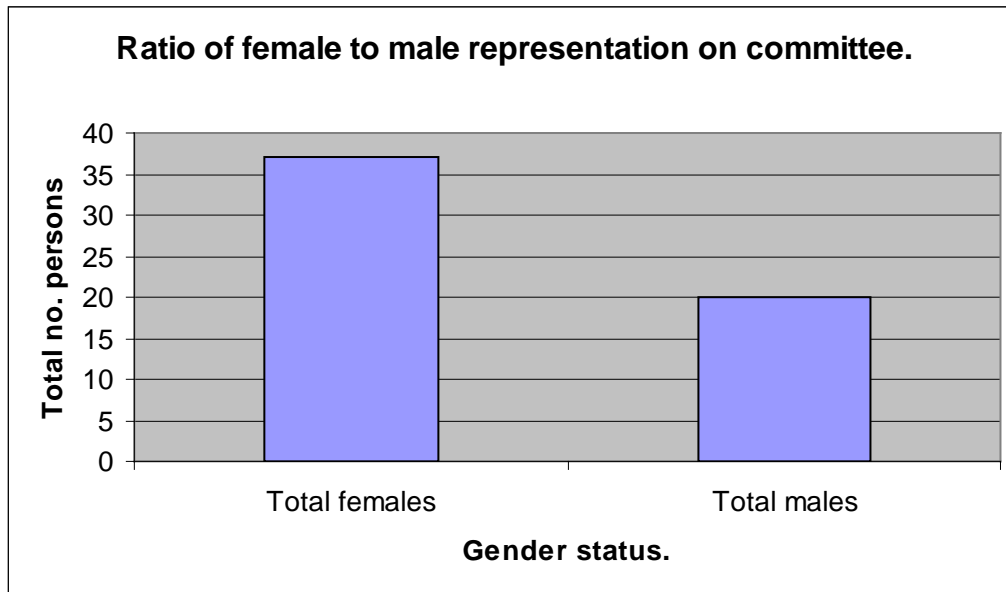
This chart gives a gender breakdown and demonstrates that the largest section of the group was married females, at forty-four percent. Males comprised thirty-five percent; while single females, were twenty-one percent. The next chart shows the female categories combined and which thereby, out-number the males by almost two to one.

Dr Bradley raised the social aspect of the committee and felt it was a poor representation of the towns-people as a whole. He also wished to see encouragement given to those of lesser means to enable them to contribute, as he believed many wished to do so. Subsequently, the committee undertook a weekly collection from within Drogheda and its hinterland. It was stipulated that collectors should primarily

³ Ibid.

be females known within their allocated areas and should endeavour to call at a regular time each week in order to build up a rapport with them.⁴

Chart.2 ratio of female to male representation.



Church gate collections in October and November 1914 raised £47 at Navan, and another £60 at Balbriggan, which subsequently went to the Duchess de Vendome.⁵

Demonstrations of benevolence towards Belgians were in some cases criticised for taking scarce resources away from Irish poor. Examples of this attitude appeared to be widespread. A press report in the *New York American* describes complaints that funds sent to aid Belgians, should have been utilised to relieve poor American children, some of whom were sleeping rough in the streets.⁶ In Ireland, an example was seen in October 1914, when Fr Michael Woods PP., Trim, at Sunday mass, urged his parishioners to give generously to a collection for Belgian refugee relief. Subsequent reports in *Éire-Ireland*, lambasted him for seeking money for refugees while saying nothing of the native poor, literally outside the church walls. It was also

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 17 Oct., 21 Nov. 1914: *Leinster Leader*, 31 Oct. 1914.

⁶ *Éire-Ireland*, 2 Dec. 1914.

pointed out that a recent concert had raised £60 and plans for a ‘ball’ in the weeks ahead were all destined for the benefit of refugees. The organisers were lampooned as the ‘new charity mongers’ and the ‘shoneens of Trim’, who ignored the ‘cry of Trim’s hungry poor, lost in the sounds of revelry organised to aid imported foreigners’. Meanwhile, Trim’s unemployed fathers looked over their hungry children while government departments were seeking employment for Belgians ‘already being supported by the misdirected charity of Irish people’. The hard-hitting report puts forth the motto ‘bread for the Belgians, a tomb-stone for the Irish’. It relates that when measles swept through Trim the previous year, none of the ladies and gentlemen now so interested in the welfare of Belgians showed any interest in the predicament of sick Irish children.⁷ Striking a somewhat political chord, the reports suggest that ‘all the sympathy is for the foreigners, which were dumped on the town by the English Government in an effort to aid the recruiting campaign by creating a terror of the Germans’.⁸ What can one make of the above? It certainly demonstrates the vehemence felt by a section of the community towards the elites whose efforts to relieve refugee distress while at the same time seemingly oblivious to the needs of the native poor within their own area. Notwithstanding, the intensity of the feelings expressed in the reports, it is remarkable that the strongest language found by this study, used against the Belgians was to call them ‘foreigners’. Regarding the term ‘shoneens’, what did this mean? Terence P. Dolan gives several explanations such as ‘a person who is more interested in the English language and customs than Irish ones. A ‘west Britain’, a ‘pretentious person affecting airs and graces’, an ‘upstart’, and a ‘hanger on’ are others definitions for the term.⁹

⁷ Ibid., 2 Dec., 20 Nov. 1914:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Terence Patrick Dolan (comp. & ed.), *A dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish use of English* (Dublin, 1999), p. 239.

Meanwhile, workhouse guardians at Navan seem to demonstrate by their behaviour that some sort of bias was working in favour of Belgians while at the same time having the opposite effect towards Irish poor. The incident relates to the refusal of the guardians to assist a mother and her seven children whose husband had died from tuberculosis thereby leaving his family destitute. It took one of the guardians to highlight the fact that the board appeared willing to help foreigners of whom they knew nothing, while at the same time refused a desperate case on its own doorstep. His intervention forced a change of heart and thereafter the family received help.¹⁰ However, what does the above tell us about the attitudes prevailing against Irish poor at that time? It is perhaps somewhat telling that only one guardian on the board could see the unfairness of the situation and had the backbone to stand up against the others when it would have been easier to do or say nothing at all.

On the matter of those who gave hospitality to the refugees, it might prove informative to examine one of them briefly as a case study. Who better to choose than Mrs Creaser, who was singled out by the Drogheda general committee for fulsome praise and lavished on her by Lady Gormanston.¹¹ Margaret Anne Eagar was from a landowning family at Drogheda. She married Thomas Creaser of The Mall, Drogheda in 1879. He was an English Methodist whose uncle left him a building and contracting business in the town. In 1905, the couple moved to Townrath House, Townrath, north of Drogheda, where they raised a family. They owned property at Laytown, which included Netterville Terrace and Victoria Terrace among other seaside dwellings. These were let out to summer visitors, but accommodated refugees at other times. Mrs Creaser was described as a capable businesswoman who owned and drove one of the first motorcars in the Drogheda area. She collected eggs and

¹⁰ *Drog Ind*, 31 Oct. 1914.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1914.

took donations on behalf of a wounded soldiers and sailors fund in the Great War.¹² Her commitment to the refugee cause appears to have been on-going as Lady Moloney of the BRC contacted her in September 1915 in regard to accommodating more refugees.¹³ Whether she did so is not known but in any event some refugees stayed at St Joseph's, Laytown, in February 1915.¹⁴ However, little is known about that place and it may have been a private dwelling.

What motivated Mrs Creaser and others like her to expend their time, energy, and money in caring for refugees? Cahalan suggests that in England, women of a certain social class, helped refugees for 'quite spontaneous and unpolitical reasons'. They had little outlet for expressing their patriotism and perhaps such work allowed them to feel that they were doing something useful. Interestingly, he points to a disproportionate number of females on local committees, who, he says, 'did the real work'. Nevertheless, males were useful as figureheads and were to be found in greater numbers on executive committees. Lloyd George made the comment that the relief effort towards Belgian refugees had been 'a great act of humanity'. However, for many of those who undertook the task of caring for them, for whatever reason, the reality often proved to be unexciting, thankless, and in many cases, carers suffered the deprivation of their personal privacy, having taken refugees into their homes. Gladstone described those who took on such responsibilities, as 'willing horses', part of a still thriving philanthropic community.¹⁵ It seems reasonable to suggest that much of that described above can be superimposed onto the situation within the study area and thereby may help explain what drove people to act towards Belgians in the way that they did. It can certainly be seen that more females than males participated

¹² James F. Todd, 'The Creaser family of Townrath' in *the Journal of the Old Drogheda Society*, no. xiii (2001), pp 123, 126-27.

¹³ BRCM (UCDA: P10b), p. 126.

¹⁴ *Drog Ind*, 6 Feb. 1915.

¹⁵ Cahalan, *refugees*, pp 507, 511, 176-77.

at the coalface of the relief effort in this area. They appeared to have been driven with something akin to a religious zeal such was their enthusiasm for the task no matter how onerous it proved to be.

When it came to finding jobs for the refugees the amount of government rules and regulations ought to have allayed any fears that they would displace Irish workers.¹⁶ However, there were numerous examples of people who believed otherwise. One of these was James Connolly who wrote in *the Irish Worker* in October 1914 of his concern that the ‘large number of refugees in Ireland’, might displace Irish workers from their jobs. He believed that some young men were being sacked so as to make them more amenable to join the army and encouraged anyone with provable cases to bring it to his attention.¹⁷ Another body, the Dublin Fair Trades Council, who met in mid November, discussed the possible repercussions of refugee employment on fair labour in the city. One member, before speaking further, said that under the present circumstances to say anything against the Belgians is ‘tantamount to being martyred’; nevertheless, his belief was ‘that charity began at home’. Furthermore, though wishing them no harm, nevertheless, he felt that they should be fighting for their country rather than expecting charity here while at the same time supplanting Irish tradesmen and servant girls from their jobs. It was suggested by another member that if refugees got jobs that at least proper wages and conditions should apply.¹⁸ This aspect was important, as the LGB had received requests for refugee workers on conditions described as ‘*domestique* without pay’.¹⁹ The practice of seeking refugees as employees on minimum wages occurred in Britain too. Numerous letters were

¹⁶ *Annual report LGB: 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., p. 818.

¹⁷ James Connolly; Jim Larkin (ed.), ‘Belgium and the refugees in Ireland’ in *the Irish Worker*, 31 Oct. 1914.

¹⁸ *Éire-Ireland*, 19 Nov. 1914.

¹⁹ *Annual report LGB: 1915* [cd. 8016], HC 1915, xxv., p. 384.

written to *the Times*, by people who thought that the arrival of refugees was the answer to the ‘servant problem’ there.²⁰

Notwithstanding the concerns over refugees putting Irish workers out of jobs, there was another aspect to be considered and that was the effect on refugee moral of having no work at all. *The Church of Ireland Gazette* suggests that such a situation allowed them too much time to brood on the circumstances which brought them to Ireland, and led to some refugees getting into trouble.²¹ While work was scarce for refugees, nevertheless, it was seen earlier that their skill-sets made them hard to place in jobs.

That a portion of refugees became troublesome is without doubt. At the beginning of November 1914, the refugee colony at Balrothery workhouse was described as ‘a peaceful little colony’. However, this soon changed and refugees from the workhouse were cajoling money and drink out of naive residents of Lusk and Rush. When alcohol fuelled disturbances became a regular occurrence, the BRC and Mrs Fowle became embroiled in trying to sort the problem out. One refugee in particular, Joseph de Groof, proved such a nuisance that he was sent to Rathdrum workhouse but he refused to stay there. The housemaster at Balrothery was advised to treat him ‘not as a Belgian’ but to send for the police instead.²² One guardian at Balrothery said that ‘people would get enough of the Belgians yet’. However, the chairman had some sympathy, saying that if people gave them ‘stimulants’, they, having gone through extreme hardship, ‘could not cope with it’. In the meantime, he said, that they would have to put up with the refugees but that the BRC and the LGB would be informed of the type of undisciplined refugees that have to be dealt with here.²³ Refugees at

²⁰ Cahalan, *refugees*, p. 511.

²¹ *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 8 Jan. 1915.

²² *Drog Ind*, 14 Nov. 1914.

²³ *Ibid.*

Ardee appeared to know of alcohol too, and while discussing how the refugees were grasping the rudiments of the English language, Mr McNello, related in a light-hearted way that they had no trouble saying ‘the same again in the public house’.²⁴ Trouble carried over into the New Year and in February 1915, ‘twenty Belgians were reported on in one month’.²⁵ Père Ottevaere, a Belgian, attended a BRC meeting on 27 January 1915, to speak about the unacceptable behaviour of a substantial number of refugees at Balrothery. It was felt by all, that the work of the BRC was being undermined by such conduct and along with informing the WRC at London; it was decided to send the miscreants back there.²⁶

However, not all refugees behaved badly. Some at Drogheda, after performing at a concert at St Mary’s parochial school hall on 14 February 1915 were lauded for their efforts. The show opened with the Belgian national anthem, and followed with singing by Madame Cotur, master Lucian Van Gobbleschroy, master Robert Cotur, M’selle Julienne Van Gobbleschroy, and accompanied by Mons Gobbleschroy on the piano. The highlight of the evening was when the children sang ‘Tipperary’ which brought the house down.²⁷

On the aspect of refugee accommodation, much energy was expended on the whys and wherefores of workhouse versus private housing and especially regarding the notion of tainting refugees with pauperism. However, Irish poor needed housing too, and some even felt that they were competing for it with refugees. An example of this was seen at Swords Petty Sessions Court in October 1914, when John Wilson, appeared before the magistrate on a charge of non-payment of rent on a house. He described his position as desperate, and related to the court that if he should lose his

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 Dec. 1914.

²⁵ BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 23 Feb. 1915 (NAI: BG40/A132-A138/1915, p. 336).

²⁶ BRCM (UCDA: P10b), p. 40.

²⁷ *Drog Ind*, 20 Feb. 1915.

home, then he would be destitute, and unlikely to find sanctuary at Balrothery workhouse due to it being full of refugees. 'I am as bad as they are now' he said.²⁸

The above only goes to show the inherent difficulty in answering broad open-ended questions such as that posed by the heading of this chapter. When all is said and done, apart from generalisations, it is only on the individual level that anything approaching an answer can be attained, which in Wilson's case, was firmly in the negative.

Preparations for Christmas day at Balrothery workhouse show only the 'usual fare' was on offer, no turkey and plum pudding for either the refugees or the ordinary inmates. The only exception was made for New Year's Day when twelve sweet cakes would have to suffice among all the workhouse occupants, hardly a feast most would agree. However, records show that the guardians stocked up generously on yuletide drink, with one gallon of whiskey, ten dozen of porter, and a similar amount of Sherries purchased for their enjoyment.²⁹ However, while the likelihood of any drink passing the lips of the refugees there was slim. This was not necessarily the case elsewhere. Refugees fortunate enough to have enjoyed the hospitality of Madame Van Bever's home at Montpelier Parade, Dublin, would have got stout served regularly as a treat. The bill of £1.1s. 6p., was paid by the BRC.³⁰ However, the practice of serving porter to refugees seems somewhat ironic in view of the trouble alcohol caused elsewhere at that time, and for the BRC to pick up the tab is even more intriguing as it was one of the parties trying to stamp out alcohol related trouble amongst refugees in the workhouses.

²⁸ Ibid., 31 Oct. 1914.

²⁹ BG, Balrothery Union Minutes, 23 Feb. 1915 (NAI: BG40/A132-A138/1915, pp 163, 178).

³⁰ BRCM (UCDA: P10b), p. 87.

Conclusion

Ireland's share of Belgian refugees undoubtedly received a warm reception overall, nevertheless, some of the earliest to come were beset with language difficulties in making themselves understood on landing at Dublin's North Wall. More than a month before any refugees reached Irish shores, some were already benefiting from the activities of Mrs Fowle and Fr Barry's committee through their personal linkages with Madame Reyntiers at London. Other important Irish links with that city were between northern unionist James Craig and Englishwoman Lady Lugard over her plans for the evacuation of Belgians. Contacts were also seen between John Redmond, T.P. O'Connor and Cardinal Mercier showing the solidarity between Ireland and Belgium. Moves by Catholic bishops at Maynooth, saw funds collected within the study area make their way to Belgium and Cardinal Mercier for the relief of distress there. Therefore Belgian refugees were benefiting from Irish endeavours both in Britain and Belgium, even before any came here.

When refugees did arrive in this part of Ireland, most of them found systems already put into place by the BRC and the LGB to receive them. However, due to the somewhat chaotic nature of the time, along with insufficient offers of private hospitality, many refugees were accommodated in poor law union workhouses such as at Gorey, Balrothery, Ardee, and Dunshaughlin. There appears to have been some difficulty in keeping track of the movements of the earliest refugee arrivals with a parliamentary paper source saying one thing and the BRC saying another. Current knowledge ascribes the 17 October 1914, as the date when the first refugees arrived into this part of Ireland. However, a report in *the Drogheda Independent*, dated 17 October 1914, relates that the 'defender's of Antwerp have [had] arrived in Drogheda', a statement which thereby allows a modification to be made on the matter

of the 'first' refugee arrivals here, by at least several days. Such was the enthusiasm for refugee relief in the Drogheda area that a refugee colony planned to open after that date received its first occupants only a few days later on 20 October. A general committee established at Drogheda to relieve distressed Belgians accommodated them in seaside properties owned by Mrs Creaser. The study has looked at the makeup of the Drogheda committee and its membership seemed to consist primarily of the town's social elite, a fact alluded to by one of its members, Dr Bradley, who made the point that it was a poor representation of the townspeople as a whole. The benevolence shown to the refugees in this area was mainly from people of similar social backgrounds to those on the aforesaid committee, and examples were seen in the study whereby such people were ridiculed over their perceived favouritism towards Belgians and ignorance towards Irish poor. A graphic example of this was seen at Trim, where those acting to help Belgians were described as 'shoneens' for ignoring the plight of the poor outside their own door.

Other aspects examined in the study concerned worries over employment prospects for Irish workers once Belgians became available to Irish employers. James Connolly and the Dublin Fair Trade Council suggested that female servants, tradesmen, and young men might be sacked in favour of refugees. However, it was seen that the skill-sets of some refugees would hardly enamour them to perspective employers especially if housework was involved. The lack of work or their unsuitability for it raised the prospect of refugees having too much time to ponder on their misfortune and in turn drew some into troublesome ways. Drink related incidents were seen at Balrothery workhouse where it was suggested that Belgians took advantage of naïve residents of Rush and Lusk, whereby they received the wherewithal to purchase alcohol.

Another aspect, which caused much debate in some quarters, was the type of accommodation supplied to refugees without offers of private hospitality. Some people, such as Fr Carolan, PP, of Tullyallen, suggested that not only was the utilisation of poorhouses a bad choice by virtue of their association with pauperism, but also was made worse by the availability of vacant mansions, which he thought preferable. When he said that future Irish historians would denigrate Ireland's efforts towards the Belgians in their time of need, one wonders what he would think were he alive today to realise that until recently, the subject had been largely forgotten not only by historians but by the Irish population as a whole.

With regard to the interface between the Irish and Belgian refugees and whether these were positive or negative as the case may be, is somewhat difficult to determine beyond generalisations and individual case studies. However, that aspect apart, and having completed the research for this work, I am struck by the lack of any discernible animosity shown towards the Belgians in this area at that time and where those openly opposed to their presence here, nevertheless, appeared to qualify their comments with the preface that the Belgian people were a noble and hard-working nation. Perhaps their very ordinariness combined with the historic past shared by two small Catholic nations may have bestowed on them the affection normally reserved for friends, maybe the term 'guest of the nation' was an apt one after all.

Before drawing this study to an end, it is worth remembering that the human traffic between Ireland and the European continent was two-way in the period 1914-15. Nevertheless, while the majority of Belgian refugees successfully made their way home after war's end, many Irishmen did not, their broken bodies left to lie where they fell along with those of other nations, as a legacy to a war which many believed was fought for the freedom of small nations such as Belgium and Ireland.

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