

Mark G. McGowan. *The Imperial Irish: Canada's Irish Catholics Fight the Great War, 1914-1918*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Pp 424.

Canadian Irish Catholics who supported the British Empire in the Great War seemed to be on the wrong side of history, especially as many in Ireland were fighting back at the British occupiers, most famously with the Irish Easter Rising of 1916. And yet Mark McGowan's deep research into personal stories, newspapers, and multiple archives draws out the complex interplay of identity and loyalty during the war, observing how Irish Catholics justified service to the Crown. One of the book's many strengths is this exploration of overlapping identities, with religious and racial characteristics mapped on to regions and peoples.

McGowan, a professor of history at the University of Toronto, spent thirty years researching this book. There were other projects in between, and most of them related to Irish-Canadian history, but this is the culmination of a career. It is a fine book that tells us much about how this group of Canadians struggled to find their place within the Canadian and Imperial war effort.

Irish Catholics were never fully trusted in large parts of Canada, with religion a strikingly discordant subject in early twentieth century. To this division over faith was added the fear of the Fenian raids after the American Civil War that lingered in social memory, Protestant prejudices, and the many Irish who spoke out against British Imperialism. Catholics were seen as having divided loyalties between the Pope and the King. And yet when Canada found itself at war in August 1914, Irish Catholics enlisted in large numbers. They did so despite the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, an unstable bigot, who hated Catholics (among many others), and was the commanding figure of the country's war effort for the first two years.

Like other Canadians who enlisted, there were many motivations expressed by Irish Canadians in why they enlisted to serve King and country, with much public discourse highlighting the need to free Belgium from German occupation and oppression. This would later become an important message surrounding the debate over Britain's "occupation" of Ireland. Others expressed the need to serve as part of the duties that came with imperial citizenship, while others talked of defending Canada from the impending German threat. One

circulating letter to Irish Catholics claimed, “You do not need to be reminded of the duty of patriotism. You are as ready as any to defend your country and share in the burdens of Empire” (75). The Irish-Canadian bishops strongly supported the war, preaching “piety and patriotism” (77). Not surprisingly, there were Irish Catholics who came out publicly against the war, but they seemed to be a minority—or at least unwilling to speak up in the hyper-patriotic environment. As McGowan writes, “There was no definitive Irish-Catholic response to the war” (8). Contradictions abound, although McGowan embraces these to tease out the fascinating story.

There is a fine section on ethnic recruitment, and the specific Irish-Catholic battalions like the 121st from the West coast, the 199th out of Montreal, the 208th that was formed from men from Toronto, and the 218th raised in Edmonton. Detailed breakdowns of religion, class, and ethnicity offer new insight into the demographics of the enlisted men. McGowan also explores individual stories of men and women who enlisted. There is Frank McGee, the one-eyed hockey star, and Ned Murray, from one of Ottawa Valley’s most prominent Irish Catholic families; both were killed overseas, with their loss felt keenly across the country. There is also a section on Irish-Catholic nurses, but it adds little to our understanding of the nursing experience. In the end, Catholics accounted for about 14 per cent of the total CEF enlistment, with 51,426 in service, although this did not just include Irish Catholics, even if they formed a large percentage of that number.

McGowan explores the key role of Irish Catholic chaplains in the overseas units, and his work complements and offers nuances to Duff Crerar’s fine book on the subject of overseas padres and chaplains. It was not easy for the chaplains to meet the needs of the massive force in England and Western Europe, but the chaplain’s performed important duties for the dead. For the living, prayer sustained many men against the terrible strain, and one father heard 204 confessions in a single day. Letters home to the grieving next of kin were among the most difficult of tasks for the chaplains.

With many studies of French Catholics in the war, McGowan rounds out the story of the Irish Catholics who are often missing from the record. In fact, as pressure mounted for conscription in 1917, there was a break between the Irish and the French Catholics over the need for conscription. McGowan’s work provides new insight into the crisis around forcing young men to fight against their will, and Irish Catholics distanced themselves from those in French-speaking

Canada. The strain of the war caused tremendous friction between the two groups, and Irish Catholics had little sympathy for the 1918 Easter riots in Quebec City that led to several deaths.

There was more empathy for the Irish 1916 Easter Rising, even though many of the Irish-Catholic papers surprisingly condemned the revolution, describing it as unlawful. That Germany supplied some of the rebels' arms seemed to suggest it was more closely linked to the war than centuries-long oppression. But the brutal response of the British soldiers was even more damning, especially the public executions, which led to much consternation over what Irish Canadians should do in support of those Irish across the Atlantic. It was increasingly difficult to justify fighting for the Empire, when it was executing Irish people. "The executions are worse than a crime," said the editors of one paper (216). The Irish-Canadian leaders used the considerable support of the war effort to pressure Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden to use his influence with his British counterpart, David Lloyd George, to install free rule for the Irish. It brought little success but, increasingly, Irish Canadians displayed double duty: to Canada and Ireland.

McGowan ends his fine study with an exploration of the return of the soldiers, the veterans' experience, and aspects of memorialization. Church memorials were erected to mark the names of many of the fallen, providing stark insight into the cost of service. This is a fine book that sharpens our understanding of the complex interplay of fluid wartime identities and offers new ways to think about how the Great War shaped Canadians.

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