From Dark Rosaleen to Dark Cow – in Memory of Francis Ledwidge

(Text of speech at *Wreath laying and Poetry Reading in Memory of Francis Ledwidge, Poet and Soldier*, National war Memorial Gardens, Islandbridge, Dublin, August 4th, 2013)

August 4th, 2013, is 99 years to the day since Britain declared war on Germany in the conflict that became known as the First World War. It would devastate much of France and Belgium, northern Italy, the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as destroy the Ottoman Empire, give birth to the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement, and facilitate the rise of the United States to super power status.

An estimated ten million people died in Europe alone and it created the conditions that led to the Second World War and the deaths of 50 million more across Eurasia within a generation. Most of the crises and conflicts we face today can trace their roots to the 'guns of August'.

Francis Ledwidge was one of those millions of combatants who died in the Great War. He was 'Killed In Action' on 31 July, 1917, one of a group of Royal Inniskillings designated to work as pioneers on communications trenches and roads in preparation for the Third Battle of Ypres. 'Killed In Action' is of course a euphemism designed to obscure the obscenity of industrialised warfare and production line slaughter. He was reputedly drinking a cup of tea and smoking a cigarette when a German artillery shell sent him and four comrades into oblivion. It was probably as good a death as anyone could hope for on the Western Front in 1917, and my father used to say you weren't supposed to hear the one that got you.

He endured similar bombardments in Italy and described them as the most terrifying experiences of his life. The silence that followed the shells was quickly filled with the screams of the injured and the maimed. The generation that fought in British Army uniform between 1939 and 1945 had far fewer illusions about war and less appetite for it than their predecessors of 1914. Their main objective was to come out the other side in one piece.

Many of Ledwidge's generation still cherished notions of patriotism, gallantry and sacrifice as the noblest virtues. It was their misfortune that the ruling elites of Europe were too incompetent to resolve their differences peacefully yet sufficiently cunning to exploit those beliefs to meet their own self-serving interests.

What made Francis Ledwidge exceptional among the millions who died were his gifts as a poet and as an observer of nature. His patron Lord Dunsany said of Ledwidge that he was "*astonished by the brilliance of that eye … that had looked at the fields of Meath and seen there all the simple birds and flowers, with a vividness which made those pages like a magnifying glass, through which one looked at familiar things for the first time.*" Ledwidge was a poor man, the eighth of nine children, reared by a widowed mother, who had to leave school at 13 to earn a living by the sweat of his brow. But the support of Lord Dunsany provided an opportunity for him to achieve his potential as a poet and escape the daily grind of manual labour.

In 1914 a potentially bright future beckoned. His poetry was very much in rhyme with the spirit of the Irish literary revival, without the artificial mannerisms that sometimes marred the work of that school. When the war broke out Dunsany urged him not to enlist and, while there has been speculation that disappointment in love may have influenced the poet, what is on the record are his own words that "he would not have it said that England had fought to save civilisation while we sat at home passing resolutions".

It was a mentality forged in part by the dominant political consensus of the day, that of John Redmond's Irish Party and the constitutional nationalist press. But it also drew on the latent power of romantic nationalism that constitutional nationalists invoked as readily as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, or indeed the labour movement. The Wild Geese, the United Irishmen and the Fenians were part of a common legacy of resistance and a belief that political violence could lead to national rebirth. That a man of Ledwidge's sensitivity and intelligence, who had been a trade union activist since 1906 and had been elected secretary of the Slane branch of the Meath Labour Union in 1913 could succumb should not surprise us. After all fellow poets such as Thomas MacDonagh and Padraic Pearse, were responding to the same call when they opted for another militant brand of the same romantic

nationalism that cleaved to the separatist tradition. Even a figure usually portrayed as far more hard headed, James Connolly, could not resist the call to arms.

Although Dunsany had urged him not to join up and Ledwidge appears initially to have aligned with the minority, IRB inspired Irish Volunteers, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he felt an obligation of friendship as well as patronage to his noble sponsor. Once the primary decision was taken to act the man and serve the cause of Ireland as a soldier, the army joined or the particular course of action followed mattered less than the personal commitment made.

Ledwidge was stationed initially in the Richmond Barracks not far from the Memorial Park here in Islandbridge. He continued to write poetry and correspond with Ellie Vaughey, his sweetheart, before being shipped out to Gallipoli with the Tenth (Irish) Division. Only in 1916, when the Easter Rising erupted does he appear to have questioned his decision to join the colours. His patron Lord Dunsany was taken as a prisoner of war by the rebels in Dublin and many of the latter were of course detained in the Richmond Barracks before being sent for trial and execution or imprisonment. Ledwidge was court martialled and demoted that May for overstaying his home leave and for being drunk in uniform. He said to his brother that, "If someone were to tell me now that the Germans were coming over our back wall, I wouldn't lift a finger to stop them. They could come!"

But there was nothing he could do to reverse the fatal decision made in October 1914 to fight for King and Country. As a soldier caught in the military's maw he would not have to wait for the Germans to come to Ireland, he was despatched to France to fight them. As he put it in his *'Soliloquy'*

'And now I'm drinking wine in France,
The helpless child of circumstance
Tomorrow will be loud with war,
How will I be accounted for?'

The answer he gives in the same poem shows that the seduction of war and its comradeship remained as powerful for him as it would prove for many who joined the Irish Volunteers and fought for independence.

‘It is too late now to retrieve
A fallen dream, too late to grieve
A name unmade, but not too late
To thank the gods for what is great;
A keen edged sword, a soldier’s heart
Is greater than a poet’s art.
And greater than a poet’s fame
A little grave that had no name’

I honestly think we have to challenge the purpose of commemoration when it celebrates such values. The beauty of the surroundings here at Islandbridge, as with other war memorials, is designed to ensure we celebrate the repose of the valiant dead in ways that camouflage the realities of the wars that killed them and the barbarism this continent experienced for two generations after 1914 - and even longer in some parts of Europe.

Ironically, in his *Lament for Thomas MacDonagh*, a fellow poet whose similar motivation led to his execution as a rebel leader in 1916, Ledwidge dwells less ambiguously on the price paid by those ‘Killed In Action’ for their commitment to the paths of glory.

‘He shall not hear the bittern cry
In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds
Above the wailing of the rain’

We have been fortunate in Ireland that Independence was won fairly cheaply and yet we still managed to pay a fairly high price subsequently as a society in thrall to the heroic mythology of war. The romance of the flying columns, much of it as artificial as the tales of heroism told of the Western Front, served the purpose of relegating the less spectacular but often more effective collective action of women and trade unionists to the second division. It was a view of the past that cemented the alliance of Church, State, Patriarchy and Property that survived intact from Redmond’s day.

Today it has lost much of its relevance and is coming under increasing scrutiny; not before time. But we have yet to devise any effective alternative narrative that gives purpose to the Irish state and modern Irish society. Meanwhile the

current power elites of Europe seem intent on proving themselves as inept as their predecessors.

In 1914 there was a powerful labour movement across Europe, as there was a growing women's movement. Both were shattered by the impact of nationalism and war. Neither seems any more capable now than they did then of asserting the primacy of social solidarity values to human development on this continent.

Perhaps I should end, as Ledwidge did in his own lament for Thomas MacDonagh, on a note that is both a bit more mundane and optimistic about Ireland's prospects, and in which Dark Rosaleen becomes the Dark Cow.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor,
And pastures poor with greedy weeds,
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn,
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

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