Irish Historical Studies (2015), 39 (155), 417–438.
doi:10.1017/ihs.2014.1

Irish identity and integration within the British armed forces, 1939–45

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ABSTRACT. *During the Second World War tens of thousands of volunteers from the island of Ireland served in the British armed forces. This article will examine the effect of an Irish background on the volunteers' experience of the British forces. It will explore the ways in which the military authorities facilitated and encouraged the development of a pluralist Irish identity. In doing so the article will demonstrate how the volunteers' ideas of Irishness were influenced by British perceptions and it will assess to what extent volunteers from North and South really shared a common Irish identity. The article will also place the Irish experience of the British forces in the context of a multinational army incorporating personnel from, among others, Scotland, Wales, the dominions and Poland.*

Tens of thousands of Irish men and women, from both North and South, served in the British armed forces during the Second World War. Unlike their predecessors in the First World War however, these volunteers from North and South would not serve in separate divisions borne out of political strife, but side by side in Irish regiments such as the Irish Guards and in larger formations such as the 38th (Irish) Brigade. In spite of the sectarian tensions created by partition in the previous twenty years, the most remarkable aspect of Irish wartime accounts is the absence of such tensions in relations between those from North and South. On the contrary, many Irish veterans remarked on the close friendship and solidarity that developed between Northern and Southern recruits, and the sense that once in British uniform their differences seemed irrelevant.

This raises important questions about the Irish experience of the British forces. Yet in spite of a growing amount of research on the volunteers, there has been little focus on how the British forces treated their Irish recruits or how Irish identity manifested itself in this environment. To begin with, the question of the identity of the volunteers has long been a contentious one. During the war many republicans, including some members of government, portrayed the volunteers as mercenaries or traitors. In 1942 Frank Aiken, the minister for the coordination of defensive measures, expressed his disappointment 'to see

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so many young people deserting their country in her hour of need', while Oscar Traynor asserted confidently that Irish recruitment to the British forces was 'almost wholly governed by economic considerations'.[1] Moreover, in 1939 *The Leader*, an ultra-nationalist newspaper, called Irish soldiers in the British army 'paid cut-throats'.[2] Indeed, the volunteers were frequently dismissed as 'West British', a derogatory term that referred to people living in Ireland who 'professed loyalty to the British crown and aped British manners'.[3]

It is only in the last twenty years that a more nuanced understanding of Irish recruitment to the British forces has emerged.[4] Keith Jeffery has demonstrated that partition and *de facto* independence did not stop Southern Irishmen from joining the British army; during the interwar period the proportion of the British army's soldiers and non-commissioned officers who were Irish-born remained steady at 5–6 per cent.[5] It is not known exactly how many Irish volunteers served in the British forces from 1939 to 1945 due to the unreliability of figures collated by the War Office, Admiralty and Air Ministry, which were not always based on place of birth but sometimes on address previous to enlistment.[6] However, rigorous statistical research by Yvonne McEwen has enabled her to provide reliable estimates for the number of Irish volunteers in the British army. Her research suggests that there were 49,302 army recruits from Northern Ireland and 50,644 from the South.[7] There are no similarly-researched figures for Irish volunteers in the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy, but based on British and Irish records Brian Girvin estimates that in total 60–70,000 Southern Irish people joined the wartime British forces.[8]

The collection of numerous oral history interviews with Irish veterans by researchers in University College Cork (U.C.C.) and the Imperial War Museum during the 1990s has spurred detailed research into the volunteers' experiences. By investigating their motives for enlisting, Richard Doherty, Aidan McElwaine and Jeremy Jenkins have demonstrated that the volunteers were not simply 'West British'. They have shown that there were many reasons for joining up but that the most common included: continuing in a family tradition, a thirst for adventure, the lack of any other employment and a patriotic duty among some Irish migrants to their host nation.[9] Based on these

[1] *Drogheda Independent*, supplement, 7 Nov. 1942; memo by Minister for Defence, 'Assistance being afforded to Irish citizens to enlist in the British Army', 5 Sept. 1941 (N.A.I., DT S6091A).

[2] *The Leader*, 15 Apr. 1939. See also accusation of treason in *The Leader*, 26 Jun. 1945.

[3] *Brewer's dictionary of Irish phrase & fable* (www.oxfordreference.com) (11 Oct. 2012).

[4] Pioneering work included Myles Dungan, *Distant drums: Irish soldiers in foreign armies* (Dublin, 1993) and Richard Doherty, *Clear the way! A history of the 38th (Irish) Infantry Brigade, 1941–1947* (Dublin, 1993).

[5] Keith Jeffery, 'The British army and Ireland since 1922' in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds), *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 437.

[6] Doubts were expressed in the Dominions' Office about the figure of 45,000 for Southern Irish volunteers: see Maffey note, 12 Mar. 1945 (T.N.A., DO 35/1230).

[7] Yvonne McEwen, 'Deaths in the Irish Regiments 1939–1945 and the extent of Irish volunteering for the British Army' in *Irish Sword*, xxiv (2004–5), pp 81–98.

[8] Brian Girvin, *The Emergency: neutral Ireland 1939–45* (London, 2006), pp 274–5.

[9] Richard Doherty, *Irish men and women in the Second World War* (Dublin, 1999), chapter two; Aidan McElwaine, 'The oral history of the Volunteers' in Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts (eds), *Ireland and the Second World War: politics, society and remembrance* (Dublin, 2000), pp 107–20; Jeremy Jenkins, '"This a private shindy or can

oral history interviews, Geoffrey Roberts has pointed out that far from being 'West British' many of the volunteers supported Irish neutrality and did not see any conflict between that position and their service in the British forces.[10] Similarly, Brian Girvin has assessed the Irish government's measures in relation to the volunteers, such as the censorship of obituaries, the punishment of Irish army deserters, the restrictions on the wearing of British uniforms and ceremonies of remembrance. He has concluded that these measures were part of a deliberate attempt to deny the extent of Irish volunteering for British forces, as they contradicted the neutral and 'isolationist' consensus that the government was attempting to build up.[11]

While this scholarship has provided new perspectives on the volunteers' motives and their relationship to the Irish government, there has been no in-depth analysis of the volunteers' relationship to the British armed forces. It has been estimated that over 100,000 men and women from the island of Ireland served in the British forces during the Second World War. Yet the most important questions such as how the British forces treated their Irish recruits and whether Northern and Southern volunteers forged a common Irish identity have remained unanswered. This is surprising considering the emergence of valuable sources, such as the War Office's postal censorship reports and various military chaplains' archives. Integration and identity are key aspects of the Irish volunteers' wartime experience, which can help explain why Irish men and women continued to join the British forces in large numbers during the war, in spite of the Irish government remaining neutral. Moreover, as Niall Barr has noted in his study of the three battles of El Alamein, *Pendulum of War*, the 'British' army was in fact a 'multinational and multi-ethnic force' composed of soldiers from Britain, its dominions and colonies, and from the exile armies of allied governments.[12] Therefore, an understanding of identity and integration within the army is essential to any assessment of its military effectiveness.

This article will use the example of the Irish volunteers to illustrate the British forces' flexibility in accommodating varying identities to form a cohesive fighting force. By comparing evidence from oral testimony and contemporary sources it will show that the Irish experience of the British forces was largely a positive one. The military authorities were keen to accommodate their Irish recruits in order to increase their *esprit de corps*. They not only facilitated but even encouraged Irish Catholic volunteers to carry out their

any bloke join in?": why neutral Irish volunteered for service in the British forces during the Second World War' in *Irish Sword*, xxviii, no.114 (Winter, 2012), pp 419–53. See also Steven O'Connor, *Irish officers in the British Forces, 1922–45* (Basingstoke, 2014), chapters 1–4.

[10] Geoffrey Roberts, 'Neutrality, identity and the challenge of the Irish volunteers' in Dermot Keogh and Mervyn O'Driscoll (eds), *Ireland in World War Two: neutrality and survival* (Cork, 2004), p. 276.

[11] Girvin, *The Emergency*, chapter eight. For an alternative analysis of the reasoning behind government policy see Bernard Kelly, *Returning home: Irish ex-servicemen after the Second World War* (Dublin, 2012).

[12] Niall Barr, *Pendulum of war: the three battles of El Alamein* (London, 2005), p. 46. At the final battle of El Alamein roughly fifty per cent of Montgomery's forces were not British but Indian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Free French, Polish and Greek.

religious duties. Moreover, the authorities recognised the nationalist identity of the volunteers from Southern Ireland with the setting up of the Irish Brigade in 1942, in which the soldiers' official songbook included the Irish national anthem as well as other rebel ballads. Indeed, the Irish Brigade and other Irish units encouraged the development of a pluralist Irish identity in which the traditions of both North and South were equally respected. This article will examine these efforts and assess their impact on the national identity of volunteers from independent Ireland.

It is recognised that Irish volunteers were a diverse group of individuals with a wide range of experiences, but it is believed that by comparing a large number of primary sources it will be possible to show the uniquely Irish aspects of their service with the British forces. Some of the primary sources used in this article present a particular challenge to the researcher. The oral history interviews provide a wealth of information about Irish experiences in the British forces. However it is important to acknowledge the limitations of these retrospective sources. In most cases the interviews took place forty or fifty years after the war. Therefore, there is a danger that the passage of time has distorted the interviewees' recollections and that the experiences and knowledge that they accumulated in the decades since the war may have inadvertently influenced how they remember their time in the British forces. Another problem is that participants are self-selecting, so that those with positive memories of their military service were more likely to come forward for interview than those who had negative experiences. Finally, perceptions of identity are influenced by changing personal and external circumstances. The fact that the participants in the Volunteers Project were veterans who returned to Ireland after the war and the fact that the interviews took place around the time of the Northern Ireland peace process in the 1990s could have influenced their answers. Had Irish veterans living in Britain been interviewed during the Troubles their answers regarding identity might have been different. These considerations limit the value of oral testimony and consequently the approach of this article has been to provide a balance between retrospective and contemporary sources. Thus, the oral testimony and written memoirs used in this article will be corroborated with evidence from contemporary sources such as letters, diaries, regimental journals and government documents.

I

To start with a brief review of oral testimony, in describing their war service many Southern Irish veterans insisted that they did not experience any problems on account of their Irish background, rather the reverse, that they sometimes received special treatment. To appreciate the significance of their largely positive experiences it should be remembered that Southern Irish people joining the British forces in the 1940s had grown up in a state that was constantly endeavouring to assert its political, economic and cultural equality with Britain. In addition, many of the war recruits had never been outside of Ireland before and many of them had been reared on stories of Saxon treachery. Therefore first encounters with British life could induce a culture shock. As Shane Leslie, an Anglo-Irish writer and founding member of the London Shamrock Club for Irish service personnel, wrote in 1946, 'The Irish volunteers found an England they had not expected. They were honoured,

respected and assisted. They met the English and the English met the Irish often for the first time.'[13] Personifying this disorientation was Sean Deegan from Dublin, who was born in 1925 and joined the R.A.F. in 1943:

> I was educated by the Christian Brothers and their education was totally Ireland, patriotic, that English had fought us and starved us, the famine, we'd all this history of anti-Brits because that was the nature of our education … but there was nothing here, we were impoverished and it [the war] was an adventure. And then you found to your surprise, the English – and I'm saying it in all sincerity – were lovely people and they weren't the people we thought they were … they were kind and they were helpful and you made some tremendous friends.[14]

Another R.A.F. recruit from Dublin, Mark Downey (born 1921), had a similar perspective:

> I was always amazed at the British approach to foreigners, they were so easy and really, they would lean over backwards to make you feel at home, I mean for instance, as anybody who knows anything about an army or air force, there's a tremendous importance attached to Sunday morning church parade but Catholics didn't have to do it … they gave us a special transport to the nearest church where there would be Mass on Sundays.[15]

On the question of whether Irish Catholics in the predominantly Protestant British forces experienced any sectarianism, the answer would seem to be very little. Thus Cornelius Glanton could say of his time in the Royal Navy:

> No, I can honestly say that the fact that I was Southern Irish and a Catholic didn't make one ha' penny of a difference to my career, as I said earlier I retired as a lieutenant commander and I'm not the only one, other people did it as well and, providing you had the ability, there was never a word said in that way at all … the Southern Irish were always welcome and got on well with their fellow Englishmen and Scotsmen and Welshmen etc., and we never had any problems at all like that.[16]

Similarly, Eamonn O'Toole, a Northern Irish Catholic in the R.A.F., replied:

> On the contrary, for example, until – was it Pope Pius XII – abolished abstinence on Friday … the Service always had fish on Friday – always – and everybody had to have it whether they were R.C. [Roman Catholic]

[13] Shane Leslie, 'The Shamrock Club' in D. D. Sheehan (ed.), *British Legion victory souvenir: being the special victory number of the British Legion annual* (Dublin, 1946), p. 39.

[14] Interview with Columbanus Deegan, O.F.M. (Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (henceforth I.W.M.S.A.), 25513).

[15] Interview with Mark Downey (U.C.C., Volunteers Project Sound Archive (henceforth V.P.S.A.)).

[16] Interview with Lt. Cdr. C. Glanton (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

> or not and I remember a lot of friends said: 'Pity the Chiefs of the Air Staff are Papists, we always have this bloody fish.'[17]

The Irish Jesuits sent twenty chaplains to the British forces during the war and their surviving letters support the above oral testimonies – none recorded sectarian problems Fr. Fergus Cronin, serving with the British army, found that due to wartime conscription British regiments were generally 'composed of a cross section of the whole country … Among them were many good Catholics, solid Confraternity men, pillars of St. Vincent de Paul, etc.' and in his varied experience he 'rarely met anti-Catholic bigotry'.[18]

In fact, among the sources on the Irish in the British forces there were relatively few examples of Irish volunteers being the targets of hostility or condescension. Occasional spats in Anglo–Irish diplomatic relations and criticisms of Irish neutrality in the British press seemed to have had little impact on Irish volunteers' day-to-day relations with their comrades. Brian Inglis described bantering mess arguments in which he and others defended the 'right of the Irish to go their own way; for as time went on, however little we might care for the ideals and policies of Ireland's rulers, we adopted a kind of protective chauvinism, half-serious, half-exasperated, in their defence' and on the Treaty ports 'we realised that there could be no question of de Valera returning them. To do so would have been to abandon neutrality: a principle we had come grudgingly to respect.'[19] At the command level one instance of anti-Irish prejudice has emerged. When a soldier in the British army committed a minor offence the standard punishment was to be 'confined to barracks' (or C.B.), but Paddy Devlin from Galway related a different approach that was applied to Irish soldiers:

> General Montgomery, being Irish himself, ordered that all Irishmen in his command were to lose pay instead of being confined to barracks as this was the only way they could be punished. C.B. to them was only a way of getting fatigues in the cook-house where they gorged on food and spent their time drinking tea, especially when they had no drink money left. So by taking some of this drink money off them it was a better form of punishment.[20]

These largely positive views of the British forces can be corroborated by reference to contemporary reports from the British military censors and the War Office's committee on morale. Throughout the war the armed forces employed censors to ensure that personal letters from military personnel did not reveal sensitive information regarding deployments and weaponry. Yet they had another role, which was to provide an assessment of morale based on what soldiers wrote in their letters. The reports of the chief base censor for the Tunisian and Italian campaigns have been preserved at the British National Archives and they paint a vivid picture of the life of British and Commonwealth soldiers overseas. These reports are considered reliable as although they only quoted selected extracts from letters, they were not meant

[17] Interview with Wg. Cdr. E. O'Toole (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).
[18] Fergus Cronin, 'A bed of roses' in *Interfuse*, xli (1986), p. 54 (Irish Jesuit Archive).
[19] Brian Inglis, *West Briton* (London, 1962), pp 60–1.
[20] Devlin quoted in Doherty, *Irish men and women in the Second World War*, p. 49.

for public consumption but for internal use as 'confidential' assessments of the real state of morale.

Extracts from the letters of members of the Irish regiments suggest that the Irish soldier's experience of the war was much like that of any soldier. Complaints were frequent about the long delays in receiving mail. There was the occasional grumbling about the quality or quantity of food, and general descriptions of camaraderie and the determination to stay cheerful. There was also a clear pride in upholding Ireland's military reputation, as one Inniskilling Fusilier wrote: 'We have been in close grips with the Bosche quite a few times and in every case I can safely say we have given more than we got.'[21] The sentiment was magnified by another soldier in the North Irish Horse: 'You leave it to the Irish old girl – they'll fix the Jerry over here. We are not going to leave one alive in this corner of the Globe.'[22]

Significantly, the War Office's morale committee proved willing to address the occasional grievance found in Irish mail. This committee was set up to review morale in army units based in the United Kingdom and one of the sources of information was postal censorship reports.[23] In early 1942 an officer in the North Irish Horse remarked: 'We have very good stuff and equipment, our only trouble is the lack of Irish officers, there are only about five of us here now; I am sure it is wrong – when there are so many Irishmen in the Regiment. The English officers we get these days are terrible idiots.'[24] This complaint along with similar ones from Scottish regiments influenced the authorities to take measures to reduce the cross-posting of officers and men between regiments.[25] A year later there was a great contrast in letters from the same regiment, one soldier asserted 'Our officers are a grand lot, there was no distinction in any shape, they were just members of tank crews, and each did his job whatever it was including cooking'.[26] Another issue identified by the morale committee was the grievance caused by 'the restriction preventing men from adding the 2 days' short leave on to their week's privilege leave if their leave involves a sea passage. Irish personnel profess to see in this an example of discrimination against them.'[27] A thorough investigation 'did not reveal any reason why men travelling on leave to or from Ireland should be treated any differently from others' and it was agreed to amend the rules accordingly.[28]

In early 1944 the British government imposed a ban on travel and communications with Ireland due to a security concern that German espionage was active in Dublin through its legation and that continued

[21] British North African Force (henceforth B.N.A.F.), appreciation and censorship report no. 12 covering period 19–25 Mar. 1943, p. 2 (T.N.A., WO 204/10381).

[22] Ibid.

[23] See Jeremy Crang, 'The British soldier on the home front: army morale reports, 1940–45' in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds), *Time to kill: the soldier's experience of war in the west, 1939–1945* (London, 1997), pp 60–76.

[24] Morale report, Feb.–May 1942, AC/G(42)20, 12 Jun. 1942, p. 14 (T.N.A., WO 163/51).

[25] Morale report, May–July 1942, MC/P(42)1, 11 Sept. 1942, p. 6 (T.N.A., WO 163/161).

[26] B.N.A.F., appreciation and censorship report no. 21 covering period 23–29 May 1943, p. 4 (T.N.A., WO 204/10381).

[27] Morale report, Feb–May 1942, p. 7 (T.N.A., WO 163/51).

[28] Minutes of the 18th meeting of the Morale committee, MC/M(43)8, 31 Aug. 1943, pp. 1–2 (T.N.A., WO 163/161).

contact would risk leakage of information about the planned invasion of Normandy. In April the military censors were ordered to read over 2,500 letters to Éire from Irishmen and women serving in all branches of the British forces in the Mediterranean theatre, in order to gauge reaction to the ban and Irish morale in general. On this score they stated that 'Uniformly high morale was noted and no special tendencies due to racial feeling were observed'.[29]

On the ban, the majority of letter writers accepted it as prudent and necessary, one soldier wrote:

> It's too bad about the transport ban between England and Ireland but I have expected it for a long time. If it means the safety of only a few of our lads in the coming invasion, it will have been worthwhile. I know it will mean a further tightening up for you but you can always console yourself with the thought that you are still much better off than these Italian people and of course a lot of the people on the continent.[30]

While Irish volunteers could be defensive about Irish neutrality when discussing it with their British comrades, in their letters home the censors noted that by this stage in the war there was some criticism of de Valera's policy: 'What odds does it make if she [Ireland] does come into the war? She needn't send any troops or indeed commit herself in any way – she's not likely to be bombed as a reprisal nowadays. All she need do is stop Jerry using wireless sets and diplomatic channels to give away secrets.'[31] Reactions like these were not just the result of a natural bias from people who were risking their lives for the Allied cause, but were based on a real concern that neutral Ireland would be economically isolated after the war, leading to long-term stagnation and emigration. Significantly, the final report on Irish service mail concluded: 'The general tone is excellent. Most writers are proud of being Irish and of serving in the British Army. Reference is often made to the large number of Southern Irish in H.M. Forces. Grousing about conditions or about officers and the Army generally are entirely absent.'.[32]

II

The British army not only monitored the morale of its troops, it also sought to actively cultivate good discipline and morale by influencing their sense of identity. The Irish were no exception to this. The principal vehicle for achieving this was the setting up of the 38th (Irish) Infantry Brigade in 1942. Until that date British policy had been to refrain from drawing attention to its Irish troops for fear of putting the Irish government in an awkward position and endangering a useful source of manpower. However in 1941 reports on mail from Southern Ireland indicated that those from Anglo-Irish backgrounds were increasingly incensed by criticisms in the British press of Irish neutrality combined with a lack of recognition of the number of Southern Irish

[29] Report on Irish Troops mail covering period 31 Mar.–13 Apr. 1944, p. 1 (T.N.A., WO 204/714).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid, pp 1–2.
[32] Report on mail to Éire examined by No. 6 Base Censor Group, 15–30 Apr. 1944, p. 1 (T.N.A., WO 204/714). Emphasis in original.

people joining up, which they scathingly contrasted with Northern Ireland's apparently weak contribution.[33] In September 1941 a letter to *The Times* by retired general Sir Hubert Gough of Curragh Mutiny fame spurred the government into action. He highlighted the fact that 'very large numbers of Irishmen have joined H.M. Forces since the outbreak of war', in spite of there being 'no agencies' and 'no recruiting campaigns' in Southern Ireland due to its neutrality. 'It is a pity', he continued, 'that this fact – well known as it appears to be in Ireland – is not more widely realised here, as it is valuable evidence that Irish neutrality is not a mask for a hostile spirit towards Britain and the Commonwealth.'[34] He went on to suggest that 'existing Irish units should be regrouped as an Irish brigade or division'. This deserved recognition, he asserted, would further boost Irish recruitment and morale. Churchill seized on the idea, writing to the Secretary for War, 'We have Free French and Vichy French, so why not Loyal Irish and Dublin Irish?'[35]

The Secretaries for War and the Dominions were sceptical about the idea of creating an Irish division and they identified a number of concerns. Firstly, the propagandising of the exploits of such a large Irish formation might provoke the Irish government into stopping the flow of volunteers to Britain. Secondly, it would entail the formation of new Irish battalions and 'in active operations with heavy casualties, it would be impossible to guarantee that all reinforcements were Irishmen'. Thirdly, the ministers believed that those Irish who had already joined might 'prefer not to be associated with specifically Southern Irish units, for fear of being penalised in their homes. Further, there is the possibility that completely Irish units … might become a fertile breeding ground for subversive agitation by the I.R.A. and other disloyal elements … This could not apply in the same way in mixed Irish and British units.'[36] Conversely, they concluded that these dangers could be minimised by taking the alternative route of organising three pre-existing Irish infantry battalions, such as the 6th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers and 2nd London Irish Rifles, into an Irish Brigade: this could be presented as a military rather than political decision, the smaller size of the formation would make it easier to sustain the Irish element, while at the same time 'It would not be open to the danger of I.R.A. agitation … since these battalions are not, in fact exclusively Irish, the proportion of Irishmen in them (including men from Ulster) being approximately 30%, 70% and 45% respectively.'[37]

Therefore, the unit set up to recognise the contribution of tens of thousands of Southern Irish people to the British forces was, in fact more Irish in symbolism and propaganda than in substance. This is surprising as Yvonne McEwen's research on Irish volunteer deaths suggests that 51,000 Southern Irish people joined the British army.[38] It is apparent that many of these recruits were not serving in Irish regiments, but why? The British government's concern about I.R.A. agitation might explain why Irishmen were to be found

[33] 'Extract from Postal Censorship Report', 1 Oct. 1941 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).
[34] Newspaper cutting, 26 Sept. 1941 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).
[35] Minute by Winston Churchill, 6 Oct. 1941 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).
[36] Memo, 'Proposed Formation of an Irish Brigade', 25 Oct. 1941 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).
[37] Ibid.
[38] Yvonne McEwen Doherty, 'Irish volunteers and volunteer deaths in Irish regiments, 1939–1945' (M.Sc. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2003), pp 49, 59.

in a wide array of infantry regiments, rather than concentrated in distinctly Irish regiments. More important, however, was the Army Council's policy as set out in November 1941 that in allocating recruits 'operational requirements' such as 'immediate reinforcement demands' by frontline units would take priority over the previously accepted principle of posting Scottish, Welsh and Irish soldiers 'to units having appropriate territorial connections'.[39] It should also be remembered that during the Second World War the bulk of recruits to the British army, regardless of their nationality, did not actually serve in the infantry but in other corps where national identity was not usually represented, such as the Royal Artillery, Royal Army Service Corps and Royal Army Ordnance Corps. A likely explanation for the significant British proportions in the Irish regiments would seem to be the difficulty of sustaining the regiments' Irish composition when the demands of the war required that each regiment provided a regular flow of recruits to its multiple battalions in order to replace losses from action.[40] If the supply of Irish volunteers to the infantry was insufficient, it is likely that shortages were made good from any available source, namely drafts of conscripts from British regiments.[41] Moreover, a significant proportion of the recruits from Ireland were serving in the R.A.F. rather than the army, and the Air Ministry advised against Churchill's suggestion of forming a 'Shamrock Squadron'. It believed that such a unit would present formidable organisational challenges in that Irishmen were dispersed among various branches with different training and could not easily be formed into a single operational unit, and that it would 'militate against their chances of promotion'. Lastly, they asserted that 'There has been no demand from within the Service for such a unit by Irishmen, who would resent being moved from their existing units'.[42]

Sensitive to its position in the United Kingdom, the Northern Ireland government strongly objected to the formation of an 'Irish Brigade'. John Andrews, the prime minister, was concerned that 'Ulster regiments' were to be put into a formation that 'would inevitably be associated with the Irish who fought against England in the days of Marlborough, the Irish Brigade which fought against Britain in the Boer War [and] Sir Roger Casement's effort in the last war'.[43] In a second letter to London he explained that 'any policy calculated to obliterate or blur the distinction between the belligerency of Northern Ireland and the neutrality of Éire would confuse and mislead public opinion' and 'arouse resentment' in Northern Ireland.[44] Andrews was on weak

[39] Army Council instructions for 1 Nov. 1941 (T.N.A., W.O. 293/26).

[40] By 1944 three Irish battalions ceased to exist due to their inability to replace gruelling losses in the Mediterranean theatre: Jeffery, 'The British army and Ireland', pp 442–3.

[41] John Horsfall, an officer in the Royal Irish Fusiliers, wrote that his company received a draft of soldiers mainly from Warwickshire and Stafford in 1943: John Horsfall, *The Wild Geese are flighting* (Kineton, 1976), pp 96–7. Similarly, in 1942 Sydney Swift, a conscript in the Royal Sussex Regiment, was assigned to a draft for the London Irish Regiment. He had no Irish connections: I.W.M., S. F. Swift, MSS 19814, p. 21.

[42] Memo, 'Proposed Formation of an Irish Brigade', 25 Oct. 1941 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).

[43] John Andrews to Winston Churchill, 18 Dec. 1941 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).

[44] Andrews to Clement Attlee, Lord Privy Seal, 23 Jan. 1942 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5).

ground as the War Office had carried out a survey of 'nationality' in the 6th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, and while historically they may have been 'Ulster regiments', their actual composition in 1941 suggested otherwise – respectively 13 per cent and 38.5 per cent of all ranks in the battalions were from 'Ulster'.[45] The reality was that over half of the troops in the Brigade came from Britain and that Andrews was in no position to raise objections based on the 'Ulster' identity of these regiments considering what John Blake has termed the 'relatively low' recruitment from Northern Ireland.[46]

In spite of the Irish Brigade's diluted composition, it is worth examining the unit as not only does it give an insight into the British army's definition of 'Irishness' and how it constructed that identity, but it also highlighted some trends that were occurring in any branch of the wartime British forces where there was a concentration of Irish people from North and South. Thus, the 38th (Irish) Infantry Brigade was duly formed in early 1942 and it quickly proved itself to be more than a propaganda showpiece: before the end of the year it was committed to Operation Torch, the outflanking of Field Marshal Rommel's 'Afrika Korps' via French North Africa, and the unit's performance earned praise from senior officers.[47]

Significantly, as Andrews had pointed out, the use of the title 'Irish Brigade' evoked memories of the Irish Catholic exiles who had fought in French service during the eighteenth century. According to the British government this was unintentional but according to other accounts the Brigade's first commander, The O'Donovan, endorsed this connection recalling that he 'felt the mantle of Sarsfield had fallen on his shoulders'.[48] Indeed, there was some historical continuity with that 'Irish Brigade', as many of its officers had transferred into British service after Louis XVI was executed during the French revolution.[49] And neither was it the first time that the title had been used to cultivate an Irish *esprit de corps* in the British army. In December 1916 the 16th (Irish) Division under General William Hickie adopted the old Franco-Irish Brigade's motto *Ubique et Semper Fidelis* (Everywhere and Always Faithful) and began styling itself the 'Irish Brigade' (the motto was later adopted by the 38th (Irish) Brigade). Divisional Christmas cards, which included the new motto and a shamrock badge printed on a green background, were distributed.[50] Another innovation that was employed to aid morale was 'Hickie's medal': when no official recognition of a soldier's gallantry was forthcoming, Hickie would

[45] Memo, '"Nationality" Classification of Personnel Serving in Proposed "Irish" Bde', 1 Jan. 1942 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5). The Southern Irish proportion in these regiments was even smaller: 4 per cent and 19.2 per cent respectively.

[46] John Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (Belfast, 1956), p. 200.

[47] Doherty, *Clear the way*, p. 57. See also remarks of men from the Special Raiding Squadron serving alongside the Irish Brigade at Termoli, October 1944 in Gavin Mortimer, *Stirling's men* (London, 2005), p. 155.

[48] Attlee to Andrews, 2 Jan. 1942 (T.N.A., PREM 3/129/5); Doherty, *Clear the way*, p. 7.

[49] Thomas Bartlett, '"A weapon of war yet untried": Irish Catholics and the armed forces of the Crown, 1760–1830' in T. G. Fraser and Keith Jeffery (eds), *Men, women and war* (Dublin, 1993), p. 77.

[50] Terence Denman, *Ireland's unknown soldiers: the 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Dublin, 1992), p. 105; Doherty, *Clear the way*, p. 2.

award a parchment certificate headed 'The Irish Brigade' in Celtic script, which expressed the unit's gratitude for 'gallant conduct and devotion to duty in the field … and have ordered your name and deed to be entered in the record of the Irish Division'.[51]

During the Second World War there was insufficient Irish manpower to establish 'Irish' and 'Ulster' divisions; instead men from all over the island would serve side by side in the Irish Brigade and other units. This was probably fortunate since the above 'political' divisions of the Great War seemed to reinforce party strife rather than reconcile: many of the officers and men recruited to the 36th (Ulster) Division were members of the Ulster Volunteer Force and similarly a significant proportion of the recruits to the 16th (Irish) Division came from the pro-Home Rule Irish National Volunteers.[52] In contrast, during the 1939–45 war, the ability of the army's regimental system to create an imagined community with a strong *esprit de corps* was poignantly demonstrated by the various Irish regiments' successful integration of both Northern and Southern elements into a pluralist, all-Ireland identity.

There were a number of ways in which this was achieved. In the official Irish Brigade songbook under the heading 'Patriotic' (and subtitled 'If you belong to one side of the fence disregard the other!'), among the recommended marching songs were nationalist ballads like 'Kevin Barry', 'The Soldier's Song' and 'The Boys who beat the Black and Tans', and alongside these were loyalist songs such as 'The Sash' and 'The Ulster Volunteers'.[53] In the Royal Irish Fusiliers and the Irish Guards, St Patrick's Day was celebrated by the entire regiment attending Mass, including those who weren't Catholic, while the Twelfth of July was also celebrated.[54] Irish dancing, hurling and Gaelic football were also familiar activities.[55] And in the officers' mess the cardinal rule was 'no discussion of religion or politics'.[56] In relation to other British regiments, the most prized distinctions of the Irish regiments were their pipers, the wearing of saffron kilts and their unique head-dress, known as the caubeen, which the regiments believed was the 'traditional headgear of Irish soldiers' dating back to the time of Owen Roe O'Neill.[57]

Several Irish soldiers testified to the success of these regimental traditions in promoting unity and neutralising prejudice. Major General David O'Morchoe who was commissioned into the Royal Irish Fusiliers or 'Faughs' in the late 1940s recalled: 'it was one of the great delights of my life, quite honestly, seeing how Irishmen from all four corners of the island could work together'.[58] In the

[51] Tom Johnstone, *Orange, green and khaki: the story of the Irish regiments in the Great War, 1914–18* (Dublin, 1992), p. 214; Denman, *Ireland's unknown soldiers*, p. 94.
[52] Timothy Bowman, *The Irish regiments in the Great War: discipline and morale* (Manchester, 2003), pp 61–75.
[53] Regimental booklet, 'Songs of the Irish Brigade' (Royal Irish Fusiliers' Museum, Armagh).
[54] Interview with Maj. Gen. D. O'Morchoe, 9 Nov. 2009; Dom Rudesind Brookes, *Father Dolly: the Guardsman monk* (London, 1983), p. 126.
[55] Mary Whittle, *He walked tall: the biography of Canon Michael Casey* (Wigan, 2002), p. 66; interviews with Maj. Gen. O'Morchoe, 9 Nov. 2009 and Maj. W. H. Roche, 17 Nov. 2009.
[56] Interview with Maj. Desmond Fay (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).
[57] Doherty, *Clear the way*, p. 297.
[58] Interview with Maj. Gen. O'Morchoe, 9 Nov. 2009.

same vain Jack Harte, a Dublin soldier who joined the Faughs in 1937, explained that most of his friends in the army were Protestants based on their common working class background and interest in sports.[59] Major General H. E. N. Bredin who served with the Irish Brigade in Italy remembered the officers and N.C.O.s being 'much addicted to singing songs from the little booklet *Songs of the Irish Brigade*', and Major Desmond Fay recalled that 'Kevin Barry' and 'The Sash' were frequent favourites.[60]

Few reported having witnessed sectarian friction. One officer asserted that the soldiers were more likely to fight over football results or women then politics, while Harte admitted that after a 'few jars' on St Patrick's Day some Catholic soldiers used to sing: 'St. Patrick's Day is a very good day for kicking the Prods out of the way', but that it was meant in bantering humour as they joined their Protestant comrades in singing 'The Sash' on the Twelfth of July.[61] The level of mutual respect and pluralism achieved in the Irish Brigade could be seen when the journal of the Inniskilling Fusiliers proudly reported that a group of Irish soldiers, both Catholics and Protestants, had made a memorable visit to Pope Pius XII in June 1944. These representatives from the Irish Brigade paraded behind their pipe band into St Peter's basilica where Mass was celebrated by their chaplain, Fr Dan Kelleher.[62] The Pope made a 'tremendous impression' on the soldiers, addressing them as 'My Beloved Sons' and in a personal audience each received a rosary and autographed photograph. According to Fr Michael Pelly, when the audience ended the brigade 'lifted off the roof with three rousing cheers, and a fourth for good measure'.[63]

III

Yet these regimental traditions were not essential to harmonious relations, as in spite of lacking specifically Irish units the R.A.F. also seemed to have a strong camaraderie between North and South. Michael Quayle, an officer from County Down, noticed that 'there was a lot of mutual affection and respect' and that recruits from Northern Ireland tended to 'drift' towards the Southern Irish rather than the English or Scottish.[64] Wing Commander Jack Simpson from Belfast remembered warm relations: 'in Italy we ran a Twelfth

[59] Interview with Jack Harte (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[60] Maj. Gen. H. E. N. Bredin, 'Foreword' in Doherty, *Clear the way*, p. viii; interview with Maj. Fay (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[61] Interviews with Maj. W. H. Roche, 17 Nov. 2009 and Jack Harte (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.). Two British soldiers serving in Irish regiments, Ronald Hooper and Sean Crampton, also reported banter between Northern and Southern Irish but no real animosity (I.W.M.S.A., 27349 and 17352 respectively). On the other hand, a Dublin soldier who served in the same battalion as Hooper (1st Royal Ulster Rifles) recalled that on St Patrick's Day the men would 'all join together and have a hooley and it'd end up in a row and as well on 12th July'. He claimed that the unit was '80% Orangemen' and that some Southern Irish soldiers 'never returned after their first leave': interview with Thomas Meehan (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[62] Anon., 'The Irish Brigade visits the Pope' in *The Sprig of Shillelagh*, xxvii (1943–5), p. 24 (Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers' Museum, Enniskillen).

[63] Fr M. Pelly to Fr Provincial, 30 June 1944 (Irish Jesuit Archive, Dublin, CHP2/33 (19)).

[64] Interview with Fl. Lt. M. Quayle, (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

of July parade, North and South taking part, for a bit of crack.'[65] However, other accounts suggest that this rapport may have been as much a cause of British preconceptions of Irish people, as of actual cultural similarities between people from north and south of the border. Thus, on arrival in England another R.A.F. recruit recollected how the Northerners 'were all absolutely horrified to be described as Paddys, it didn't matter whether they came from Derry or Belfast or Dublin or Cork, we were all Paddys'.[66] Several volunteers mentioned this practice and that it was not used as a term of condescension, but rather as an easy tag, in the same way that all Scots were called 'Jock' and Welsh 'Taffy'.[67] Even the fighter ace, Brendan Finucane, who was hero-worshipped by much of the British public, was nicknamed 'Paddy' and as Michael Brennan points out, press reports always made it clear that this was a nickname by using inverted commas and including his real name. In Brennan's view this demonstrated that it 'was not used in the traditional derogatory sense which English publications, notably *Punch* magazines had once employed so liberally'.[68]

Yet for some Irish volunteers in the British forces the 'Paddy' tag betrayed English expectations of the 'stage Irishman', characterised by a quick wit and rebellious streak, and this influenced their behaviour accordingly. While attending an English public school Captain Peter Ross had already detected this tendency and he initially complied with 'the wild Irishman image I was supposed to live up to'.[69] Mary Morris, an Irish nurse serving in Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, described her encounter with one such compatriot who encapsulated this stereotype. On the 23 August 1944 she wrote in her diary:

> Met a crazy Irishman from Roscommon, a bomber pilot from the R.A.F. Paddy is a most unconventional character, a wild man of the bogs. He has all the traditional dislike of the Irish for the British yet like thousands of other Irishmen he has joined them in this fight against Hitler. He is the only man I've ever met in the British Forces who is drawing an extra shilling a day because he speaks Gaelic – but can one believe Paddy![70]

The fact that British service personnel used the term 'Paddy' to describe anyone with an Irish accent, regardless of their political or religious background, provided a strong impetus for volunteers from Northern Ireland to identify with their Southern counterparts. Exposed to this unfamiliar environment, some even began to assume a stereotypical 'Irishness'. For example, R.A.F. navigator Sam McAughtry, a Belfast Protestant, put sprigs of shamrock in his cap on St Patrick's Day and went into the English town where he was stationed. The shamrock

> was spotted right away by the locals and the people we were serving with. They treated us differently. A light came into their eyes when they saw

[65] Interview with Wg Cdr J. H. Simpson, 11 Dec. 2009.
[66] Interview with Wt. Officer D. Murnane (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).
[67] Interviews with Maj. Gen. O'Morchoe, 9 Nov. 2009, Maj. Roche, 17 Nov. 2009 and Wg. Cdr. Simpson, 11 Dec. 2009.
[68] Michael Brennan, 'This is it chaps: the story of Brendan Finucane' (B.A. in Journalism thesis, Dublin City University, 2002), p. 30.
[69] Peter Ross, *All valiant dust: an Irishman abroad* (Dublin, 1992), p. 10.
[70] Sister Mary Morris, 'The diary of a wartime nurse', p. 127 (I.W.M., MSS 80/38/1).

> the shamrock … I wasn't long in picking all this up. I loved it. It's no wonder the Irish won so many Victoria Crosses because the English expected you to be like that. I was inclined to play up to the Irishness a lot and do daring things and be cheeky with sergeants. Now your typical North of Ireland man, from Ballymena or wherever, was not naturally this way. Yet I saw them come out of their shells whenever they were referred to as 'Paddy'. I used to sit on the bed in the barrack room and watch some guy who was Scotch-Irish by nature, reserved and cautious, and I used to watch them to some degree come out of their shell and become 'Irish'.[71]

In this way British preconceptions of Irishness played a role in helping the Northern and Southern Irish to relate to one another in a way that was free from political and religious connotations. To the extent that they shared a common identity, it was based on the fact that they were both serving in the armed forces during wartime and shared a common cause. When asked about sectarianism, Wing Commander O'Toole from Antrim replied: 'Never ever did we have the slightest problem; you remove the Paddys from their home environment and the air that they breathe here and put them together, especially if they have a common cause and it was great.'[72] Thus, the powerful bonds of comradeship created by shared danger often obscured the political and religious differences that separated the Irish volunteers. Captain Don Mooney from Dublin articulated this view most succinctly: 'I never came across any antagonism between fellas from the North in the army and fellas from the South, we were all in the army … That is the thing about the services, you don't give a damn of what a fella's religion is or whatever he's done, you rely on … your neighbour.'[73]

In reality, therefore, Northern and Southern volunteers forged close bonds but they did not share a common Irish identity. In spite of the good relations, both groups were aware of the significant differences and a degree of self-restraint was always present. As McAughtry asserted, he never clashed with an Irish comrade over politics: 'With aircrew it was an unwritten law that the Irish problem should stay in Ireland, and this was scrupulously and especially observed by the Irish when they met.'[74] Similarly, Denis Murnane recalled that he had had many friends from the North during his time in the R.A.F. in spite of the fact that they had 'a completely different outlook on life'.[75] In the Irish regiments too self-restraint was evident. In the officers' mess religion and politics were usually taboo subjects and while the enlisted ranks happily sang each others' songs, one non-commissioned officer noted that some soldiers had a less conciliatory tone after a few drinks.[76] Therefore, it seems that the spirit of unity achieved in the regiments may not have stayed with the volunteers once they left their units and returned home after the war. Major D. M. Kennedy in the Irish Guards hinted at the temporary nature of this pluralism

[71] McAughtry quoted in Doherty, *Irish men and women in the Second World War*, pp 50–1.
[72] Interview with Wg. Cdr. O'Toole (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).
[73] Interview with Capt. Don Mooney, 22 Jan. 2010.
[74] *Irish Times*, 13 May 1985.
[75] Interview with Wt. Officer Murnane (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).
[76] S. F. Swift papers, p. 21 (I.W.M., MSS 19814).

when he remarked: 'I don't know why more Northerners don't join, because for the time they are here they forget all about their "wee orange drums" which is a very good thing for all. The result is that in the end they won't hear anything said against the South.'[77]

IV

Conversely, it seems that rather than identifying more closely with their Northern comrades, service in the British forces made the Southern Irish volunteers more aware of their own national identity. In May 1945 Churchill's victory broadcast expressed thanks to Northern Ireland and 'the thousands of Southern Irishmen, who hastened to the battlefront to prove their ancient valour', while castigating de Valera for denying Britain use of the Treaty ports.[78] Not only in Ireland were his comments widely regarded as unfair, but even many of the volunteers serving with the British forces were infuriated. As John Maffey, the British representative in Dublin pointed out, 'the majority of these gallant warriors are supporters of Mr de Valera and his policy of neutrality'.[79] Thus, Quayle recalled listening to the speech in a hotel with other Irish volunteers 'and when they heard Churchill's remarks quite a few stood up and left, including myself'.[80] This anger is borne out in the oral history interviews and memoirs; two-thirds of the volunteers who expressed an opinion on Irish neutrality supported it. Their reasons ranged from political to practical: it was a logical expression of independence,[81] it was the least divisive policy de Valera could pursue given recent Irish history,[82] it was militarily wise as Ireland's unpreparedness meant that to enter the war would invite a catastrophe[83] and finally, as David Baynham asserted, 'it kept all my friends and relations reasonably safe I thought'.[84]

Indeed, the war service of the volunteers revealed that they possessed a robust Irish identity that did not slavishly conform to the views of Churchill's government nor that of de Valera's. In joining the British forces the volunteers represented the interconnected history of the two islands. Though the Irish state declared neutrality, the physical legacy of a shared military past in the form of monuments to Irish soldiers killed in the Crimea, South Africa and Flanders, combined with the extensive remembrance parades organised by the British Legion in many Irish towns, ensured that the republican view of the British forces as not only 'foreign', but also a 'machine of tyranny and subjection',[85]

[77] Robert Jocelyn, *Major D. M. (John) Kennedy, M.C.: A tribute* (Galway, n.d.), p. 44. An officer who served in four Irish battalions during the war also acknowledged that among the soldiers religion simply did not matter but that this may have changed when they returned to their homes in Ireland: interview with Maj. Gen. H. E. N. Bredin (I.W.M.S.A., 12139).

[78] Churchill quoted in *Irish Press*, 14 May 1945.

[79] Memo by Sir John Maffey, 21 May 1945 (T.N.A., DO 35/1229).

[80] Interview with Fl. Lt. Quayle (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[81] Interviews with Capt. J. Jermyn and Cpl. J. Neylon (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[82] Interview with Lt. J. Jacob (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[83] Interviews with Lt. B. Bolingbroke, Sub Lt. M. M. A. D'Alton and Wt. Off. Drumm (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[84] Interview with Capt. D. Baynham (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[85] *Irish Press*, 29 Nov. 1934; *The Leader*, 15 Apr. 1939.

was contested in almost every part of the country.[86] Thus for many Irish people, both Catholic and Protestant, there was nothing contradictory between Irish nationality and British military service. Many of the Irish volunteers, like John Joseph Drumm, came from a family tradition of service. Drumm was the son of an I.R.A. veteran from the War of Independence and the nephew of Great War veterans. Significantly, he recalled from his youth in Tullamore, a former garrison town, the extensive Armistice Day commemorations and that:

> even the Old-IRA men joined them in the British Legion club afterwards for a drink because after all they were their brothers, their cousins and their neighbours. So we didn't have any feelings of hostility or animosity that prevails in recent times in certain circles and we would've been quite upset at the idea; if the British authorities refused to allow us to join the forces and make a career in the British civil service or the British navy or army or air force.[87]

Drumm joined the Irish Army Air Corps but deserted in 1943 to fight with the R.A.F. He explained that there was a 'mass exodus' from the Air Corps because 'by 1943 there was no risk of invasion of Ireland and … our time in the Army seemed to be a waste of time because there was nothing we could do'.[88] He also believed that many in the Air Corps were sympathetic to the British cause due to close contact with the R.A.F. through training and liaison activities.

However, there were other Irish recruits to the British forces with memories of the Curragh Mutiny in 1914, the 1916 Rising and the 'Tan War', who did regard the British military as an institution that was historically hostile to Ireland and in joining up placed the economic imperative ahead of politics: the pay and separation allowance (for married men) were much higher in the British forces than in the Irish army.[89] Yet if some Irish volunteers regarded themselves as 'mercenaries', even they had more complex motives than the purely monetary. Among the oral history sources two Catholics from Northern Ireland and another from the South who joined the R.A.F. asserted that they had considered the Irish Army Air Corps but as O'Toole says: 'I found they had three airplanes and that they were confined to Baldonnell so I didn't see an awful lot of excitement in that prospect.'[90] Moreover, as another R.A.F. recruit frankly admitted: 'it wasn't our war … generally speaking we were still neutral, we were mercenary, we were just in it for the adventure, in it for the training, it was a wonderful opportunity to get away from Ireland at that time because it was so restrictive then and money was scarce.'[91]

This range of push and pull factors was echoed by another self-proclaimed 'mercenary'. John Jacob, whose father was a Quaker and mother a

[86] See O'Connor, *Irish officers*, chapter six; Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000), chapter four.

[87] Interview with Wt. Officer Drumm (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

[88] Ibid.

[89] Memo, 'Assistance being afforded to Irish citizens to enlist in the British Army' by Minister for Defence, 5 Sept. 1941 (N.A.I., DT, S6091A).

[90] Interview with Wg. Cdr. O'Toole (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.). See also interviews with Fl. Lt. M. Quayle (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.); Air Marshal William MacDonald (I.W.M.S.A., 4610) and Sqn. Ldr. Tim Vigors, *Life's too short to cry: the compelling memoir of a battle of Britain ace* (London, 2008), pp 78, 203.

[91] Interview with Columbanus Deegan, O.F.M. (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).

Presbyterian, believed that there were very few Irish people joining up out of a sense of loyalty to Britain. He outlined his personal experience:

> being a young state on the periphery recent history probably dictated neutrality to Eire as the only feasible national option, but amongst her people there was room for different shades of the interpretation of neutrality. For me, 23 years old, a qualified accountant, working in an import business being slowly strangled by hostilities abroad, involvement was an option. Being footloose and fancy free and above all a competent seaman and lover of the sea, the option became compelling and politically too, like many others, I was certain that if the Germans did conquer Britain they would not stop at Holyhead and Fishguard.[92]

Jacob went on to emphasise the pragmatism with which Irish recruits approached British military service: if they had to take an oath to the king, in his opinion, 'their tongue would be way up their cheeks, nobody worried about those kind of things; if you want to get on you wear the right hat, don't you.'[93]

V

At the outset of this article the British army was described as multinational and multi-ethnic. The Irish in the British army were not the only group whose national characteristics were recognised in their regimental traditions and a comparison with the experiences of soldiers from Scotland, Wales, the dominions and Poland will help shed further light on the approach to identity and integration within the army. Firstly, it should be said that all regiments in the army tried to imbue their men with a regimental *esprit de corps* by harnessing customs, dress, ceremonies and histories. The military authorities believed it was necessary to convince the men that their regiment was special and unique in order to maintain discipline and morale, for a soldier who loves his regiment and cares for its reputation has a strong incentive to conduct himself well – both on and off the battlefield. One of the principal methods of promoting a regiment's individuality was the use of physical symbols.[94] In English regiments, for example, this was mainly expressed through the use of different badges and buttons, but in regiments that recruited from national minorities such distinctions could extend much further.

Scottish regiments attached great importance to the wearing of the kilt, pipe bands and traditional dancing. In 1939 the commanding officer of the 1st Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, Douglas Wimberley, attached such importance to the kilt for regimental *esprit de corps* that he refused to follow an order from the War Office that his men should hand in their kilts, which were thought to be impractical for modern warfare.[95] Wimberley went on to command the 51st (Highland) Division from 1941 to 1943 and he was

[92] Interview with Lt. J. Jacob (U.C.C., V.P.S.A.).
[93] Ibid.
[94] See David French, *Military identities: the regimental system, the British army, and the British people, c.1870–2000* (Oxford, 2005), chapter 4.
[95] Craig F. French, 'The fashioning of esprit de corps in the 51st Highland Division from St Valery to El Alamein' in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, lxxvii, no. 312 (Winter, 1999), p. 280.

determined to use these distinctions to build up a strong sense of Scottish national identity. Lieutenant John McGregor recalled: 'All officers below field rank assembled five minutes after Reveille for Scottish dancing'.[96] The pipe bands were the pride of the division and often gave public demonstrations, as Craig French has noted: 'Whether the Division was in Aldershot, Cape Town or Durban, units carried out the beating of retreat in front of many spectators'.[97] Wimberley encouraged the kilt to be worn whenever possible and became known as 'Tartan Tam' among the men. His attachment to such traditions and his dogged determination to accept only Scottish recruits to the division often brought him into conflict with 'the War office theorists' as he called them, 'who didn't know that for infantry success we depended on regimental spirit, discipline and esprit de corps, more than any other factor'.[98]

Welsh regiments also possessed traditions that suggested a distinct cultural identity, such as the celebration of St David's Day. As was the case with the Irish regiments, the army made no special effort to send Welsh recruits to Welsh regiments and as the war went on these regiments were progressively diluted.[99] Yet, as Martin Johnes has pointed out, in the eyes of the regiments this did not weaken their Welsh identity. A sergeant in the Welsh Guards remembered that non-Welsh recruits had no difficulties integrating: 'They are Welsh Guardsmen and once they joined us they were treated equally, the same as if they had been born and bred in Wales.'[100] The fact that non-Welsh recruits could be incorporated into this fraternity confirms that national distinctions were simply used as devices by regiments to create a strong sense of *esprit de corps* among the men. The primary purpose of such distinctions was not to express belonging to a particular nation but to engender loyalty to the regiment and their comrades.[101] Even though the majority of Welsh servicemen did not serve in Welsh units the experience of serving alongside people from all parts of the U.K. could make them more aware of their Welshness and

[96] Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders: 51st Highland Division in the Second World War* (Barnsley, 2007), p. 25. See also Jeremy A. Crang, 'The Second World War' in Edward M. Spiers, Jeremy A. Crang and Matthew Strickland (eds), *A military history of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2012), pp 572–84.

[97] French, 'The fashioning of esprit de corps', p. 290.

[98] French, 'The fashioning of esprit de corps', pp 281–2.

[99] Army Council instructions for 1 November 1941 stated that, 'The principle has always been accepted that as far as possible, officers and other ranks of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish nationality shall be posted to units having appropriate territorial connections, but operational requirements and other overriding commitments, such as immediate reinforcement demands, requirement of specialists and tradesmen prevent the full application of this principle' (T.N.A., W.O. 293/26).

[100] Martin Johnes, 'Welshness, Welsh soldiers and the Second World War', conference paper presented at 'Fighting for Britain? Negotiating identities in Britain during the Second World War', University of Edinburgh, 29 June 2012. Available from http://martinjohnes.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/welshness-welsh-soldiers-and-the-second-world-war/; accessed 20 Sept. 2013.

[101] Major General Macmillan of the 15th (Scottish) Division took a similar view, asserting that: 'I do not think that it is essential to prove that there are more than 50% Scots in the units concerned, as the basis of my argument is that the wearing of the Balmoral will promote divisional *esprit de corps* and is not a sign that the wearer is a Scotsman, but only that he belongs to a Scottish Division': French, 'The fashioning of esprit de corps', p. 284.

the diversity of Britain. Like the Irish being called 'Paddy', many Welsh recruits were called 'Taffy', and as Johnes concludes, this made 'their nationality central to who they were'.[102]

Beyond accommodating national diversity in the U.K. the British forces also included a number of personnel from the dominions. The postal censorship reports from the Italian campaign suggest that soldiers from the dominions were well treated. Unlike the Irish volunteers, most Commonwealth personnel served in national units that had been recruited at home and they therefore viewed the British army from a distance. Yet some had direct experience of serving in a British unit due to being sent on attachment and their letters indicated an excellent relationship. One Canadian officer attached to a British armoured division wrote: 'The set-up is perfect and they have an ideal organisation. I hope they don't call us back to CBRD [Canadian Base Reinforcement Depot], too soon. The English troops are treating us swell and are going out of their way to help us.'[103] British organisation was singled out by another Canadian: 'Just leave it to the English they're marvellous organisers. Incidentally this is one thing that has impressed one more than anything – the ability of the British. Talk about German thoroughness or American organisation – they can't touch the Limeys.'[104] Such letters were part of a consistent thread running through the postal censorship reports in which Commonwealth soldiers discussed their warm relationship with their British comrades.

However, some personnel from the dominions who served in the British forces recalled initial difficulties due to differences of behaviour and upbringing. When Alan Deere and eleven other cadets from New Zealand arrived in an R.A.F. pilots' mess for the first time they received a cold reception and strange looks from their fellow cadets. Deere wondered if the English had expected them to be black since the national rugby team was called the All Blacks: 'Whatever the cause, there was not the enthusiastic reception which we had expected, as would have been the case in our own country under similar circumstances … It was some weeks before what I now know to be the natural reserve of all Englishmen gave way to a more friendly approach.'[105] Some Commonwealth servicemen encountered a condescending English attitude towards the 'colonials', which upset their self-identification as proud and equal members of the British Empire. Errol Crapp, an Australian based at an R.A.F. airfield in Wales during the war, wrote in his diary: 'For being late on parade owing to very late serving of breakfast at the mess, we N.Z., Canadian and Australian pilot-officers were severely reprimanded by an R.A.F. "wingless wonder" Flight Lieut who said that so far he has had decent officers under him. I mention this here as this R.A.F. attitude of being a step above the "Colonials" is apparent wherever you go.'[106] Similar to this

[102] Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939* (Manchester, 2012), p. 10.
[103] C.M.F.-B.N.A.F., appreciation and censorship report no. 34 covering period 16 Nov.–15 Dec. 1943, Part B – Canadian Expeditionary Force, p. 4 (T.N.A., W.O. 204/10381).
[104] C.M.F.-B.N.A.F., appreciation and censorship report no. 38 covering period 1–15 Feb.1944, Part B – Canadian Expeditionary Force, p. 4 (T.N.A., W.O. 204/10381).
[105] Alan Deere, *Nine lives* (Canterbury, 1991), p. 25.
[106] Hank Nelson, *Chased by the sun: the Australians in Bomber Command in World War II* (Crow's Nest, 2006), p. 57. Emphasis in original.

'colonial' complaint, Irish volunteers, as we have seen, were accustomed to being called Paddy and that this sometimes implied an expectation of the stage Irishman. Commonwealth servicemen's experience of British condescension is likely to have strengthened their national identity as Australians or New Zealanders or South Africans while weakening their attachment to the 'mother country'.

Finally, Britain's reception of the Polish exile forces offers an interesting comparison based on their high rates of conformity to Catholicism. After their defeat in 1939 many of the Poles who wanted to continue the fight had first gone to France and most were scathing about their supposed ally: 'one got the impression that they did not really know what to do with us … We felt like intruders.'[107] The Poles were provided with bare accommodation lacking furniture or a stove for warmth, they even had to pay for using the showers at the French base. In this atmosphere it was not surprising that the Polish commander, General Sikorski, preferred transferring his forces to Britain where he believed things would be 'carried out in a more businesslike way than France, where the bureaucracy is terrifying'.[108]

To the delight of the Polish pilots who transferred to the R.A.F., this assumption turned out to be correct: with a quiet efficiency accommodation, training and equipment were quickly organised for Britain's new ally.[109] The flyers were soon followed by soldiers. Many of the Polish army units under British command had their own military chaplains but for those that did not their men were entitled to transport to the nearest church to hear Mass. Moreover, in relations with civilians the Poles, like the Irish, found British people extremely open and hospitable: when people spotted the 'Poland' flashes on their uniforms they were 'embarrassingly friendly', as Adam Zamoyski relates, 'Bus conductors refused their fares, waiters settled their restaurant bills for them, and they only had to walk into a pub to be offered free drinks.'[110] Although, as Wawer and Suchcitz have shown, there was some initial prejudice and scepticism about the Poles among the military authorities, the imminent threat of invasion ensured that doubts were dispelled and the exiles fully integrated into the British war effort with the signing of the Anglo–Polish military agreement on 5 August 1940:

> The agreement stipulated that the Polish Land Army would form a single operational formation, operating in a single operational theatre, under the command of its own commanders, under Polish colours and external badges and insignia … The Polish Forces were to be kitted out and supplied by Britain and Polish troops were to be answerable to the Polish judiciary and in exceptional circumstances to British criminal law.[111]

[107] Polish airman quoted in Adam Zamoyski, *The forgotten few: the Polish Air Force in the Second World War* (London, 1995), p. 44.
[108] General Sikorski quoted in ibid, p. 46.
[109] Robert Gretzyngier, *Poles in defence of Britain* (London, 2001), pp 3–7.
[110] Zamoyski, *The forgotten few*, p. 60.
[111] Zbigniew Wawer and Andrzej Suchcitz, 'The Polish army as part of the defence forces of Scotland 1940–1945' in Eugenia Maresch (ed.), *Polish Forces in defence of the British Isles 1939–1945*, (London, 2006), p. 94.

VI

In examining Irish identity and integration in the British forces, this article has highlighted the importance of corroborating evidence from retrospective sources with that from contemporary sources, for as good as oral history sources may be they cannot replace conventional written records but only supplement them. Thus, the experiences of the Irish volunteers revealed that far from being a hostile alien environment as some had expected, the British army, navy and air force were places where an Irish person could 'get on' without reference to their religion or nationality.[112] This positive view articulated in the oral testimony of many Irish volunteers is confirmed by the War Office's morale reports and censorship reports. These reports demonstrate that the Irish volunteers generally possessed good morale, that their daily preoccupations differed little from that of their British comrades and that it was only on very rare occasions that they encountered any difficulty due to their Irish background. Moreover, the non-sectarian, multinational atmosphere of the British forces provided an ideal basis on which Northern and Southern Irish volunteers could find common ground and develop friendships. However, the self-restraint evident on both sides suggests that rather than developing a shared identity, Northern and Southern volunteers remained divided by a different understanding of what it meant to be Irish. Nonetheless, their service in the British forces exposed them to an atmosphere of pluralism and it remains an important question for future research to investigate what effect this had on the volunteers after demobilisation.

Significantly, the Irish experience of the British forces demonstrated the military authorities' recognition and accommodation of the distinct identity of volunteers from independent Ireland. Catholics were facilitated in attending Mass. In the Irish Brigade St Patrick's Day was celebrated, nationalist marching songs were adopted and the soldiers took pride in uniquely Irish cultural activities like Irish dancing. These customs were blended with Northern traditions to inculcate a broader Irish identity. By all accounts, this approach succeeded in cementing a robust *esprit de corps* among volunteers from North and South in the Irish regiments. This unity and sense of purpose was essential in battle and in the case of the Irish Brigade it was tested almost immediately after its first deployment, during the grueling mountain battles west of Tunis where the Brigade earned its reputation as a crack unit. The comparison with the experiences of recruits from Scotland, Wales and other contingents demonstrates that the Irish experience of the British army was not exceptional. The army accommodated other forms of diversity from within the U.K. and beyond. Underpinning this approach was the belief that discipline and morale, and ultimately combat effectiveness, would be enhanced if British units possessed an *esprit de corps* that was built on the feeling of belonging to a special community. This willingness to accommodate widely diverse groups enabled the British to turn a patchwork coalition into a cohesive fighting force.

[112] Interview with Columbanus Deegan (I.W.M.S.A., 25513). I would like to thank Prof. Brian Girvin, Dr Robert Armstrong and the external readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and the Irish Research Council for funding the Ph.D. research on which this article is based.