

Alliance Française de Dhaka
presents

WAR
AND COLONIES
1914-1918

CONFERENCE PAPER • PHILIP ORR



PHILIP ORR

Ireland and the First World War – the Search for a Modern Identity Narrative

Abstract

For those Irish men and women who wished to free Ireland from the British Empire, the Great War was a time of opportunity. During Easter Week in 1916, a rebellion was launched on the streets of the Irish capital. It would lead, within the next six years, to the creation of an Irish Free State. This Irish revolution would offer a vivid template for all those who wished to chart a successful route towards a post-colonial future.

However, the reality is that 200,000 Irishmen served in the Great War with the British Army, each one of them a volunteer. This number greatly exceeds the roll-call of those who joined the Irish Republican Army to fight for Irish independence. In the new, independent Irish polity that emerged in the 1920s, the lives and deaths of these Irish/British soldiers, who had fought in the army of the imperial power, were soon consigned to an incomprehensible oblivion. It is only within recent years that there has been a concerted attempt to understand the motives and affirm the worth of those Irishmen who chose to fight – and ultimately to die – at places such as the Somme and Gallipoli.

However, amongst most Irish Protestants, the Irish independence movement has been resolutely opposed and the memory of the link with the British Empire has been deeply cherished. The on-going existence of Northern Ireland – a British territory in the north-east of the island – is lasting proof of the enduring nature of such loyalties. For the pro-British community who constitute an ever more beleaguered majority in Northern Ireland, the memory of military sacrifice in the Great War is something that possesses enduring significance. Today, amongst Northern Ireland's pro-British working-class communities, the Battle of the Somme has become a bittersweet folk-emblem of costly loyalty to a British Empire that once gave them their sense of dignity and prowess, but has long since lost interest in their actual welfare.

My talk will attempt to explain why the Great War continues to have such deep significance as an identity narrative in Ireland – an island which was, after all, a laboratory for empire, during the dawn of British imperialism in the early modern period.

Profile

Philip Orr is a Belfast-based writer and community worker who has studied the Irish experience of the First World War. In the 1980s he interviewed many of the remaining Irish veterans. His published works include *The Road to the Somme* (Belfast, 1987) and *Field of Bones* (Dublin, 2006). These books focus on the experience of the ordinary soldier on the Western Front and at Gallipoli. They also explore the mythological uses of that war in post-imperial Ireland.