

“Am I not of those who reared / The banner of old Ireland high?”

Triumphalism, nationalism and conflicted identities in
Francis Ledwidge’s war poetry.



Bachelor Thesis
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Abstract

This research will answer the question: in what ways does the poetry written by Francis Ledwidge in the wake of the Easter Rising reflect a changing stance on his role as an Irish soldier in the First World War? Guy Beiner's notion of triumphalist memory of trauma will be employed in order to analyse this. Ledwidge's status as a war poet will also be examined by applying Terry Phillips' definition of war poetry. By remembering the Irish soldiers who decided to fight in the First World War, new light will be shed on a period in Irish history that has hitherto been subjected to national amnesia. This will lead to more complete and inclusive Irish identities. This thesis will argue that Ledwidge's sentiments with regards to the war changed multiple times during the last year of his life. He is, arguably, an embodiment of the conflicting loyalties and tensions in Ireland at the time of the Easter Rising.

Key words: Francis Ledwidge, Easter Rising, First World War, Ireland, Triumphalism, war poetry, loss, homesickness

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Introduction

I tell you this in order that you may know what it is to me to be called a British soldier while my country has no place amongst the nations but the place of Cinderella.

-Francis Ledwidge (Curtayne 180)

There has been a vast amount of research done on the Easter Rising and the poetry that was inspired by the event, but comparatively little on Irish First World War poetry. The First World War and the Easter Rising were two major conflicts that caused uproar in Ireland, which was under English rule when the war broke out. The longing for Home Rule, which entailed self-government for the Irish, had been growing. The English rule in Ireland had led to tensions because it was beneficial for England but many Irish people were disappointed with the English. The colonisation of Ireland by the English in the seventeenth century had led to wars and conflicts in which many Irish people died. The Great Famine, or the Irish Potato Famine had cost the lives of a million Irishmen and had caused another million to emigrate in hopes of better lives between 1845 and 1852. Many Irishmen were disillusioned with the English and the demand for Home Rule was persistent.

One poet that was deeply connected to both the First World War and the Easter Rising was Francis Edward Ledwidge, who was born on 19 August 1887 in Janeville, Slane in Ireland. Although Francis was the eighth child of an underprivileged family, his father deemed education of immeasurable value for his children and provided them with this. The effect of this education is seen clearly, as Ledwidge was still reading poetry at the front, admitting that Keats was his favourite: his influence is seen in Ledwidge's own poetry (Curtayne 180). However, at the age of four, Francis' father died, which meant Anne Ledwidge, Francis' mother, had to provide for the large family. This led to Ledwidge working from a young age as a road worker and a miner among other occupations. Inspired by his education, he wrote poetry whenever he could and worked as a miner and a labourer until Lord Dunsany, a wealthy writer, gave him financial support and a workplace in his library in Dunsany Castle.

Ledwidge was a founding member, together with his brother, of the Slane branch of the Irish Volunteers in 1914. In 1913 the military organisation, run by Irish nationalists, who wanted Home Rule, was founded. The Irish Volunteers were set up as a response to the Ulster

Volunteers taking up arms and pledging to resist the introduction of Home Rule, because they wanted Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom. They intended to prevent Home Rule from being implemented, with force if needed.

On 18 September 1914 a Home Rule bill was passed in England, but Home Rule was postponed because the First World War had broken out on 28 July. The war caused a split in the Irish Volunteers. One group considered it 'England's War' and decided not to participate. The other group, led by John Redmond, wanted to join the British Army. Catriona Pennell describes how Germany was perceived in Ireland: "On the whole, the population in Ireland, just as in Britain, felt that Germany was the enemy and that the cause against it was just. People feared Germany's aggression, her tyrannical rule and, in Catholic Ireland, her Protestantism" (40). For many Irishmen, as well as the majority of the Slane branch of the Irish Volunteers, these sentiments were the reasons to enlist. Ledwidge was in the first group initially and opposed the Irish participation in the war, but he changed his mind and enlisted on 24 October 1916. He decided to join the British army after vigorously protesting against the cause initially.

Scholars have speculated over the reason behind his sudden shift in ideals. There are multiple factors that might have driven Ledwidge to enlisting. Ellie Vaughey, the girl he had fallen in love with, was now seeing someone else (Curtayne 83). Ledwidge also lost his job days before enlisting which begs the question if he made the decision for financial reasons (Kelly 61). He had also been called a coward and a pro-German by fellow Irish Volunteers for opposing the war (Curtayne 82-3). These factors combined might have instigated Ledwidge to enlist. He himself said about this matter in a letter in 1917: "I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions" (qtd. in McDonagh 9-10) It is clear that his attitude toward the English was reserved. He joined the army to defend Ireland and to ensure that England would not claim they were Ireland's defender after what Ledwidge considered to have been withholding independency from Ireland for centuries. It is, however, hard to say whether this was the only reason for Ledwidge to join the army, since he made these statements three years after enlisting. Since he opposed the enlisting of Irish Volunteers prior to joining the army, it is safe to assume at least a combination of factors influenced his decision.

The postponement of Home Rule and the many opposing paramilitary groups at the times caused tension within Ireland. These tensions and the demand for Home Rule eventually led to the insurrection that started on Easter Monday 1916. A group of Irish

nationalists considered that Home Rule had been delayed for too long enough and decided to act instead of wait. As an Irish nationalist in the British army Ledwidge was forced to take on an even more troublesome identity after the Easter Rising, which features in multiple letters and poems (Phillips 395).

Most scholars who have done research on Ledwidge have focused on his life and choices because he made conflicting decisions and statements. Most sources discuss his choice to join the army after speaking up against the cause initially. Alice Curtayne's biography is very extensive and deals with his decision as well. However, few scholars have analysed his actual poetry yet. Terry Phillips has analysed Ledwidge's war poetry and compared it to the work of Thomas Kettle, another Irish war poet. She concludes this comparative study of Kettle and Ledwidge by arguing that Kettle used rhetoric and logic in his poetry whereas Ledwidge used myth and legend. She also points out Ledwidge's conflicted feelings about serving in the army. Another scholar who examines Ledwidge's war poetry is John McDonagh. He argues that Ledwidge kept believing in the cause of the First World War until his death. He compares and contrasts Ledwidge to the much more canonical war poet Wilfred Owen. Ledwidge is also featured in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* by Fran Brearton and other anthologies, but often only his poem "Thomas McDonagh" is discussed, which was a lament for the executed Easter Rising leader, who was a friend of Ledwidge's.

Much of Ledwidge's poetry features pastoral reflections on Irish nature and landscape. However, he also wrote more politically engaged poetry after the Easter Rising of 1916, in which he discusses both the failure of the Rising as well as his stance on the war and being a soldier. Whereas much war poetry, such as that of famous war poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, deals with the abhorrence of the battles and the abominable conditions during the First World War Ledwidge's is arguably different. It shows a more subtle suffering. As he confessed in a letter, he was always homesick (O'Grady 150). This yearning for Ireland also features in many of his poems. His poetry is, however, more multifaceted than just homesickness. In some of his poems, he addressed the leaders of the Easter Rising, whom he had admired, and he started examining his own identity as a soldier and an Irish nationalist. In this sense Ledwidge embodied the tensions and contradictory spirit of the time in Ireland (O'Grady 145), which is why he is an interesting poet to examine when trying to understand the internal divisions and struggle in Ireland at the time. These insights into Ledwidge's status led to the following research question: in what ways does the poetry that Francis Ledwidge

wrote in the wake of the Easter Rising reflect a changing stance on his role as an Irish soldier in the First World War?

Both the Irish involvement in the First World War and Irish war poets have often been forgotten or ignored. Irish World War One poetry has not only been overlooked by many scholars studying the broad genre of war poetry, but has been neglected by the Irish themselves too for a long time, most likely because of the controversy surrounding Irish soldiers who had fought in the British Army. Since little research has been done on this before, the findings in this thesis will provide new insight into the complex Irish identities of the soldiers who fought in the First World War. Moreover, the rehabilitation of Irish soldiers fighting in the First World War will help shape a more inclusive and complete Irish identity.

In order to answer the research question, Francis Ledwidge's poetry will be analysed using Guy Beiner's notion of the "triumphalist memory of trauma", which describes how the Easter Rising is remembered as a triumph even though the insurrection failed and cost many Irish lives. On top of that, Ledwidge's status as a war poet will be assessed. Phillips' definition of war poetry will be employed in comparing Ledwidge's war poetry to that of more traditional war poetry. Most First World War poetry are horrifying accounts of the gruesome experiences the soldiers endured in the trenches. However, Ledwidge did not apply these tropes in most of his poetry that relates to the war.

In addition to Ledwidge's poetry, other contemporary Irish poetry will be analysed as well in order to compare various political opinions. This will be a way to put Ledwidge's poetry into context. The poems discussed are by prominent Irish poets like W. B. Yeats and George Russell, but also other Irish soldier poets like Thomas Kettle and Patrick MacGill. All poems discussed feature reflections on the Easter Rising, on the First World War, or both.

This thesis will be structured chronologically. First the historical context, in which the events leading to the Easter Rising and the insurrection itself will be examined, and the framework will be explained, which will be Chapter 1. The first poems by Ledwidge, dealing with the immediate aftermath of the Easter Rising, will be discussed in Chapter 2. The third chapter will entail the shift in Ledwidge's mental state after he was ordered back to the front. In the last chapter the last two months of Ledwidge's life and poetry will be explored, in which he expresses different sentiments than expressed in Chapter 2 and 3. Ledwidge's poetry will be compared and contrasted with that of other Irish poets to put his poetry in context. In many ways Francis Ledwidge's poetry reflects the tensions that were current in Irish politics and society. On the one hand Ledwidge celebrates the fallen Rising leaders as heroes but also

acknowledges the controversial topic of Irish soldiers in the British army. In this sense, Ledwidge might be considered to be an embodiment of the conflicted identities in Ireland.

Chapter 1 History and Theory

In this chapter, the events leading up to the Easter Rising and the framework that will be employed to analyse Ledwidge's poetry will be explained. The events of the Easter Rising week of 1916 were the result of a build-up of years of unrest. Besides the long history of tension between England and Ireland, the direct causes of the insurrection can be traced to a few years prior to the Rising. Two major nationalist paramilitary groups that fought in the insurrection were the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers, both formed in 1913. Francis Ledwidge was a dedicated member of the latter group. In 1914 the women's paramilitary organisation Cumann na mBan was founded, which also joined in the Easter Rising.

On 18 September 1914 a Home Rule bill was passed through under the Parliament Act, with Royal Assent. However, on 28 June that year the Archduke of Austria Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, which incited the First World War. The United Kingdom joined the war on 4 August, which led to Home Rule being postponed. That same year in September, at a conference in Dublin, the plan of Irish nationalists inciting an insurrection while England was fighting the war was first discussed by militant nationalists, most of whom were part of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which was a secret nationalist organisation (Maume and Rooney 41). There was a split in the Irish Volunteers. Some members argued that Home Rule should be put on hold and that the war needed to be fought first. Others believed that they did not need to participate in the war because they did not regard England as their ally but rather as an oppressor. John Redmond, a leader of the Irish Volunteers, encouraged the men in his organisation to enlist for the war. The majority followed his example and went to war. Ledwidge was one of the very few in his area that opposed the Redmondites (Philips 192). He pointed out that sergeants were recruiting men in the north of Ireland by saying they should fight with anti-papal France and in the South by telling them that they should fight for Catholic Belgium (Curtayne 81). Ledwidge argued that The First World War was not a religious war. In fact, both Catholics and Protestants fought side by side. The idea of the First World War being a religious war thus was a hoax.

However, a few months later, in October, Ledwidge did decide to enlist for the war. Scholars have not come to a consensus as to why he joined after vigorously protesting joining the war initially. He had been called a pro-German (Kelly 61) and a coward (Curtayne 83) by contemporaries. Alice Curtayne argues that Ellie Vaughey, the girl he had been courting, rejecting his marriage proposal and starting a courtship with another man could be the reason

behind his enlisting (84). Al Kelly states that Ledwidge losing his job was the reason (61). Ledwidge himself claimed that he did not want England to win the war without Ireland because in that case England could argue that they had saved Ireland (Curtayne 83). He made this claim in a letter in 1917, so it is not certain if these were his sentiments three years prior. In reality, all these factors combined probably drove Ledwidge to war.

After John Redmond had left for the war, the minority of the Irish Volunteers who rejected the Redmondites and stayed in Ireland were led by Eoin MacNeill, Patrick Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett and Thomas MacDonagh. The latter three would play important roles in the Easter Rising. Sir Roger Casement, another member of the Irish Volunteers, travelled to Berlin to seek German help for the insurrection. This gives an indication of the perception that some Irishmen had of the war. They did not oppose the Germans and observed no need to participate, because the English were not their allies and the Germans were not their enemies. The fact that they requested German support signifies that these people rather perceived the English as their opponent than the Germans. During 1915, the unrest within the paramilitary nationalist organisations grew because the First World War had not come to an end yet and the prospect of Home Rule did not seem to get any closer. The members of the organisations started planning an insurrection. The leaders agreed on a rebellion during Easter 1916. Roger Casement received arms from the Germans but was arrested by the British upon his arrival back in Ireland, just days before the insurrection, which meant that the arms were never delivered to the rebels.

The Easter Rising started on 24 April 1916. It was an insurrection not many civilians were prepared for. James Moran points out that some Dubliners confused the start of the rebellion for a play (15). This confusion underlines the fact that the Rising was not supported by a majority of the civilians, because many did not even know about the plans for the Rising. The insurrection was led by, among others, Thomas MacDonagh and Patrick Pearse, both of whom Ledwidge knew personally. The rebellion, which should have been a national uprising, remained for the largest part centred around Dublin, due to miscommunication. One day after the commencement of the insurrection, British reinforcements arrived in Dublin. The British troops had heavier arms, and often did not know rebel from citizen, which resulted in a massive number of civilian casualties. On 30 April, the last rebels surrendered, which ended the insurrection. Between 3 and 12 May 1916 fourteen of the Rising leaders were executed, including Pearse and MacDonagh. Public sympathy began to turn in favour of the Easter Rising quickly (Curtayne 158). The sixteen executed leaders were soon idolised as martyrs of

the Irish nationalist cause. Many Irish citizens were shocked and outraged by the force the British troops had used against this rebellion.

These sentiments are also present in Ledwidge's poetry. He heard the news while he was in a hospital in Manchester (Curtayne 149), after he had collapsed in Greece while serving the army (Curtayne 140). His poetry about the changing views on the First World War after the Easter Rising will be analysed by using the notion of the triumphalist memory of trauma by Guy Beiner, because that theory is closely connected to the Easter Rising. His status as war poet will also be assessed employing Terry Phillips' definition of war poetry.

Irish identities are troublesome because of the many conflicting ideals within the country, and the religious tensions between Protestants and Catholics. Even within one single organisation such as the Irish Volunteers there was disunion with regards to Irishmen enlisting for the First World War. James Dingley points out that the Irish struggle against English rule is not, as some Nationalists have claimed, a history of eight hundred years. He mentions the fact that not the English but the Normans invaded Ireland in the twelfth century and argues that fighting wars was common for the Gaelic tribes and was not only targeted at the crown but also at each other (151). This meant that the later 'struggle' against the English was not necessarily against the crown, but rather against other groups of power. However, the English did establish rule over the whole island of Ireland during the Tudor and the Stuart eras, but local resistance remained influential. The latter era also saw the implementation of the penal laws, a set of rules the Irish had to abide by. These laws underwrote the colonial identity for the Irish because they held a different status in society. Another element that strengthened the colonial elements in Irish nationalism was the Great Famine. After the potato harvests failed between 1845 and 1851, a million Irish people starved to death. Christophe Gillissen argues that this contributed massively to the rise of Irish nationalism because: "[t]heir impression was that the Union had failed them in their hour of need, at best because of a callous neglect of what the British government perceived as second-class subjects of the United Kingdom, at worst through a deliberate policy of genocide" (333).

One arguably key notion in Irish national memory is triumphalism. Guy Beiner argues that the Irish are preoccupied with the "triumphalist commemoration of traumatic experiences" (367). One example of this theory is the way the Easter Rising was commemorated, as Beiner argues. This is not a typical Irish trait according to Beiner, who uses Bernard Giesen's notion that all collective national identities are outlined by trauma and triumph (367). Beiner also argues that national memories of the Easter Rising start before the event itself. This sounds paradoxical. However, he states that memories are based on

“templates provided by recollections of earlier experiences” (370). These earlier memories influence the ways in which people experience events and subsequently the way in which historical events are remembered. This is why Beiner states that the study of the Easter Rising needs to go further back than 1916. He goes back to 1688, when the Williamite or Jacobite war waged. The Protestant Ascendancy generally supported King William III of Orange, while Catholics chose the side of the ousted King James II. Beiner argues that this war influenced how nationalists chose to commemorate the Easter Rising, because the Jacobite defeat was a catastrophic blow for the Irish Catholics, who were discriminated against under penal laws (373).

Beiner claims that despite this defeat, Irish Jacobitism developed a “triumphalist tone of wishful thinking” (374). He claims that this was not the only trauma that was reformed into a triumphalist memory. The 1798 Rebellion, during which the United Irishmen rose up against British rule in Ireland, was suppressed. However, the defeated United Irish leaders were elevated by popular press into heroic martyrs. A mere five years later another insurrection led by the United Irishmen failed, which Beiner argues helped formulate an even more clear “republican model of martyrdom”, in which rebels were celebrated as martyrs (375). Robert Emmet, who had been sentenced to death as one of the leaders of the failed rebellion, concluded his speech with a proclamation that would still inspire nationalists a hundred years later: “when my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written” (qtd. in Beiner 375). Beiner explains that presenting the memory of a defeated rebellion as a step toward triumph of the nation’s liberation and depicting rebels as martyrs of Ireland is at the heart of his notion of “triumph of defeat” (375). He argues that this pattern was repeated multiple times in the nineteenth century. Humiliating defeats were paradoxically remembered as exemplary events (375).

Beiner states that the Easter Rising of 1916 is the most important event in the tradition of the triumph of defeat. Patrick Pearse, one of its leaders, wanted to follow in the footsteps of Robert Emmet, who sacrificed his life for an independent Ireland (377). The Rising was built on a tradition of insurrections and Irish nationalism. The suppression of the Rising was traumatic, partly because of the high toll on the civilian population, but also helped to form the depiction of the leaders as political martyrs, as they were executed one by one. Even though the Rising had failed in military terms, Beiner argues that it was the start of a successful Irish revolution. This thesis will argue that the triumphalist memory of trauma is not only a national way to commemorate the Easter Rising, but that it is also visible in

personal accounts and poetic reflections on the insurrection. Ledwidge's poetry reflects this notion, which allows him cope with the grief he experienced after the insurrection.

Another important aspect of this thesis will be the conventions of First World War poetry. As argued by Terry Phillips, the best known variant of war poetry was written by "mainly public school-educated officers who saw active service during the Great War of 1914–18" (385). She adds that most recognised war poetry is about battlefields, personal suffering and protest against the war. This is seen in many poems by Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, two of the best known war poets. Their chilling recounts of the abhorrence and gruesomeness of the war are still widely taught in schools today. However, Phillips states that not only that perception of war in poetry should be recognised as war poetry, but also poetry that does not resist or protest war. She underlines that "ideas, feelings and situations generated or influenced by the existence of conflict" that one expressed in poetry should be considered war poetry and should be analysed as such as well (386). In this way Phillips tries to construct a less monolithic definition of war poetry. This thesis will argue that Ledwidge does not necessarily fit into the more traditional perception of war poetry, but should be regarded as such in the light of the more inclusive definition given by Phillips.

Chapter 2 Grief and Regret

The Easter Rising had a profound effect on Ledwidge and it changed him and his stance on the war. In Alice Curtayne's biography of Ledwidge, Henry Gallagher, who was in the same dormitory as Ledwidge from July until October 1916, is reported to have said that: "[h]e was addicted to drink and lost his corporal's stripe for this reason. He often talked about the Easter Week Rising and said since it happened he regretted having joined the Army. He was really a great Irishman and his heart was with the men of 1916" (166). The loss of his friends and the failed insurrection were the reason that Ledwidge turned to alcohol and came to regret his enlisting. His stance on the Germans was affected by the Easter Rising as well. This is reflected by his quote when he was home on leave: "If I heard the Germans were coming in over our back wall, I wouldn't go out now to stop them. They could come!" (qtd. in Curtayne 157). This quote exemplifies the extent of his grief and sorrow after the insurrection. He did not want to fight the Germans anymore because he did not want to fight with the English anymore. He was also court-martialled because he overstayed his leave and for insubordinate talk and behaviour, according to one of his comrades, Bob Christie (Curtayne 161). In a letter to this comrade Ledwidge wrote: "Poor MacDonagh and Pearse were two of my best friends, and now they are dead, shot by England" (qtd. in Curtayne 151). He goes on to praise MacDonagh's poetry and states that his memories of MacDonagh will now forever be filled with sorrow. The letter was written on 4 May 1916, just a day after the executions of Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh. Hearing that his friends were executed was a great blow for Ledwidge. Not only did he have to cope with this grief, but Irishmen received rather rough treatment in the British Army after the insurrection, according to Christie (Curtayne 161).

The first poem that Ledwidge wrote after learning of the insurrection was a tribute to MacDonagh, which was named after him. His death and the failure of the Easter Rising impacted Ledwidge deeply on a personal and political level. However, the poem is not necessarily politically engaged but rather an emotional farewell to a friend. Another, more political poem, in which the horrific event features, is titled "The Blackbirds", and was written in July (Ledwidge 292). The poem opens with:

I heard the Poor Old Woman say:
 "At break of day the fowler came,
 And took my blackbirds from their songs (Ledwidge 192)

The old woman symbolises Ireland, an image that many Irishmen would immediately recognise as a common trope for Ireland. The “Poor Old Woman” is Sean Bhean Bhocht, “who memorializes the violent sacrifice of the dead generations in order to give hope to the nationalism of the living” (Pittock 47). This was a recognisable identification of Ireland, which had been invented more than a century prior to the insurrection, but proved to still be relevant and popular, as Yeats and Lady Gregory had based their “Cathleen ni Houlihan” on it. This play, written in 1902, encourages young men to sacrifice their lives for Cathleen ni Houlihan, the identification of an independent Ireland, which might have inspired the Easter Rising rebels. It is arguable that by using this trope Ledwidge was somewhat optimistic, because he wanted to stimulate the nationalism in Irishmen. However, this poem mostly expresses grief for those who died. The fowler symbolises England, while the blackbirds stand for the rebels who lost their lives, amongst whom were Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh. England is represented as a strong oppressive force, whereas Ireland is portrayed by a more fragile image. The fowler, or bird catcher, is stronger than the birds, so in these opening lines a strong postcolonial narrative becomes visible. In this poem a triumphalist tone can be seen carefully shining through in the fourth stanza in lines such as: “Shall there come blackbirds loud with love / Sweet echoes of the singers gone” (Ledwidge 192). There is a slight tone of optimism in these lines. However, Ledwidge immediately followed these lines with:

But in the lovely hush of eve
Weeping I grieve the silent bills”
I heard the poor old woman say
In Derry of the little hills. (Ledwidge 192)

In these lines it becomes clear that Ledwidge was mostly grieving the loss of his friends and the failure of the insurrection. He was not yet ready to turn the rebellion into a triumphalist memory of trauma, even though there is a glimmer of triumphalism in the lines that speak of the birds that will echo the dead birds. Ledwidge’s love for Irish nature, which features heavily in the majority of his poetry, also shines through in these lines. This adoration of Irish nature was even more emphasised after he went back to the front.

This grief and loss are featured throughout Ledwidge’s poetry until his death a year later, but other sentiments started becoming present in his poetry during this last year. His identity and poetry were shaped by the Rising. Over the following months he started

exploring his own identity as a nationalist and as a soldier. This awareness of his own identity and the exploration of his identity, which would be present in the rest of his life, started within a few months after the executions of the Easter Rising rebels. These poems arguably reveal a certain duality embodied in Ledwidge because he was an avid nationalist who fought in the British army.

A poem in which this internal controversy starts to take shape is “Ireland”, written in the summer of 1916. In this poem Ledwidge starts by expressing his unhappiness because he considered himself not taken seriously by the Irish Volunteers before he left for the war due to his young age. The next lines give an indication of Ledwidge’s reasoning behind enlisting:

And then I left you, wandering the war
 Armed with will, from distant goal to goal,
 To find you at the last free as of yore,
 Or die to save your soul. (Ledwidge 197)

Feeling that he could not attribute anything to the nationalist cause in Ireland, he enlisted for the war. He seems to be certain of his case and he explains his intentions with these lines. A free Ireland is what he was striving for and he would come home to an independent Ireland or die trying to free it. It might also be argued that Ledwidge had faith in Home Rule being implemented during his absence.

While these lines are upbeat and positive, at least about the intentions Ledwidge had, the last stanza eradicates the positivity that shone through those lines:

And then you called to us from far and near
 To bring your crown from out the deeps of time,
 It is my grief your voice I couldn't hear
 In such a distant clime. (Ledwidge 197)

In these lines Ledwidge voices his regret that he was not present at the Easter Rising. Being a member of the Irish Volunteers from the start, Ledwidge undoubtedly thought that he should have been fighting side by side with his comrades, which is indicated in the last two lines of the poem. The guilt of not being in Ireland at the time of such an important nationalist event haunts this poem. There is not yet a triumphalist tone in this poem. The sentiments dominating these lines are guilt and regret.

The shock of the Easter Rising was not the end of Ledwidge's army life, however. In mid-December, Ledwidge was ordered back to the war (Curtayne 167). Herbert Jenkins observed that: "Ledwidge insisted on going to his third front. There was no necessity for him to be sent to France, but he was eager to get in the firing line again" (qtd. in Philips 394). She does point out that this is a second-hand opinion. Many Irishmen were dismayed because of the actions of the English during the Easter Rising and became even more critical of the English, and subsequently the war, which they perceived as an English war. This led to a less negative perception of the Germans, which is evident when looking at Sir Roger Casement. Terence MacSwiney, an Irish Nationalist, wrote a poem titled "Casement", which was published in a volume of poetry in 1918. His sentiments regarding Casement, who was executed due to negotiations he had had with the Germans in order to receive their aid in the Easter Rising, are strong:

And oh, we burn with pride
Because of you, our peerless one, who died
In the old proud, unbending, Irish way. (MacSwiney 53)

Casement is presented as a hero in the poem, which might be unexpected as he had gone to Germany in order to receive help and arms. Casement had written in a letter that Britain was Ireland's real enemy, not Germany (Laffan 63). However, Irish soldiers were fighting a war against Germany in the British army at the time, so these lines in MacSwiney's poem arguably reveal the controversial thoughts on the First World War within Ireland. It shows that some Irishmen did not oppose the Germans after the Easter Rising because they condoned Casement's 'treason' and even perceived him as a hero, on par with Pearse, MacDonagh and the other executed leaders. There is also a distinct triumphalist tone, because although Casement died he did so in an "Irish" way, so, arguably, this poem refers to the many Irish rebels before him, who were executed because they did not obey the English. There is pride in being executed and it is celebrated. This trauma is, indeed, presented as a triumph.

It is clear that Ledwidge's poetry just after the insurrection is filled with grief and regret. He has not yet started to commemorate the Easter Rising in a triumphalist manner. Ledwidge struggled with conflicted sentiments, but he had to return to the front again. However, his later poetry reveals a shift in his attitude towards the war and his own identity as a soldier. Ledwidge struggled to come to terms with finding a balance between serving in the

British Army and being an Irish nationalist after he was ordered back to the front. This struggle will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Rhyme and Reason

In this chapter, Ledwidge's conflicting ideas on the war and the Easter Rising in the months after he was ordered back to the war will be further examined. In December 1916, a shift can be observed in Ledwidge's poetry. He still wrote about the Easter Rising but he was no longer just grieving it and feeling guilty for not participating. These poems reflect the start of an exploration of his own identity and role in the Irish nationalist cause. In his poem "At Currabwee" Ledwidge told a fairy tale. In every stanza he told a part of a story about shoemakers, who repair fairy boots at night, while they sing of a free Ireland. The stanzas end with the person who told that part of the story. The first stanza ends with: "So my mother told to me / And she is wise you will agree" (220). Ledwidge valued his mother, who had taken care of him and his siblings on her own after his father died, and he missed her whenever he was at the front, which will become apparent in the last chapter. The second stanza ends with: "So I heard Joseph Plunkett say / You know he heard them but last May" (220). Joseph Plunkett was one of the executive leaders of the Easter Rising. Plunkett married his fiancée Grace Gifford just a few hours before his execution (White 266). Ledwidge wrote "To Mrs. Joseph Plunkett", a poem in which he describes Gifford's plight, around the same time. The last-minute marriage was one of the elements which turned public opinion toward sympathy for the Rising rebels (White 266). Ledwidge argued that, even though they suffer losses, her loss is greater than theirs, because her love was killed. The understanding of her suffering might be influenced by Ellie Vaughey, a girl Ledwidge had been in love with, who died in childbirth in 1915, which inspired many of his poems (Curtayne 116). The third stanza of "At Currabwee" ends with: "So Pearse said, and he knew the truth / Among the stars he spent his youth" (Ledwidge 220). He built the fairy tale around three individuals he admired deeply. The first three stanzas of the poem allude to another tribute to the leaders he so admired for their sacrifices for a free Ireland. However, the last stanza takes a different approach than most of Ledwidge's earlier poetry:

And I, myself, have often heard
 Their singing as the stars went by,
 For am I not of those who reared
 The banner of old Ireland high,
 From Dublin town to Turkey's shores,

And where the Vardar loudly roars? (Ledwidge 220)

In this last stanza he carefully placed himself within the ranks of the nationalist heroes. These lines demonstrate how Ledwidge might slowly be accepting his fate in the army and the fact that he did not participate in the Easter Rising. He stated that he has been fighting for Ireland, not only in Dublin, which was the backdrop of the insurrection, but also in the places where he had served in the army before he was hospitalised. He defended his own nationalist identity by pointing out that fighting in the Great War is, in a way, fighting for Ireland.

This move away from guilt intensified over the months that followed. In his poem “Una Bawn”, written on 13 December 1916, he wrote: “Una Bawn, the days are long / And the seas I cross are wide / I must go when Ireland needs” (Ledwidge 222). He did not want to leave Ireland, because he would be homesick, yet he described going back to the war as going when Ireland needed him to, so it is his duty. He did not display resentment towards the British for sending him back. He grieved because he loved Ireland but also expressed a sense of duty to fight again in the war. Ledwidge was transferred to France in late December. When Ledwidge was back at the front, he became homesick. In February 1917 he wrote the poem “In France” (Ledwidge 296). In it he confesses that he dreams of being at home with the concluding lines: “The hills of home are in my mind / And there I wander as I will” (Ledwidge 232). His love for Irish landscape in combination with his homesickness featured in multiple poems.

Unlike many other homesick war poets, Ledwidge did not often employ conventional tropes about the gruesomeness and brutality of the First World War. His war poetry was more gentle by often just alluding to the war by emphasising his more subtle suffering through his poems about home. This does not mean that Ledwidge was not afraid or did not have a realistic perception of the war, in ways similar to the canonical War poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon perceived it. In a letter to a friend, he wrote about being attacked at the front: “We can do nothing but fling ourselves into the first shell-hole and wonder as we wait where we will be hit” (qtd. in Curtayne 177). It is clear that Ledwidge was not blind to the dangers of the war. One of the few poems by Ledwidge that is exclusively about the war, and its toll, is “A Soldier’s Grave”:

Then in the lull of midnight, gentle arms
Lifted him slowly down the slopes of death,
Lest he should hear again the mad alarms

Of battle, dying moans, and painful breath.

And where the earth was soft for flowers we made
 A grave for him that he might better rest,
 So, Spring shall come and leave it sweet arrayed,
 And there the lark shall turn her dewy nest. (Ledwidge 236)

The last two lines of the first stanza allude to an awareness of the gruesomeness of this war. However, unlike most war poetry, most of the poem seems peaceful and gentle. It is, however, not possible to ascribe this style of war poetry to his Irish perspective on the war. Patrick MacGill was another Irish soldier and poet, but his poetry is similar to that of the gruesome, chilling accounts of the war written by the more canonical war poets. A prime example of this more classic war poetry is MacGill's poem "Letters", written in August 1915. In the poem, a group of soldiers in the trenches receive letters from home, but one letter remains unopened. The man to whom the letter was addressed had been killed. The poem continues with an account of the man's final hours and how they will reshape this story for his girlfriend:

We'll write to her to-morrow and this is what we'll say,
 He breathed her name in dying; in peace he passed away –
 No words about his moaning, his anguish and his pain,
 When slowly, slowly dying. God! Fifteen hours in dying!
 He lay a maimed thing dying, alone upon the plain. (MacGill 57-8)

MacGill's tone is realistic and he paints a frightful picture of the process of dying, but the men will not write this story to his girlfriend. This is arguably one of the reasons why people at home did not know the true horrors of the war. Ledwidge's tone is much more gentle and his depiction of dying is idyllic. This stark contrast is rather a product of Ledwidge's style than his native country. Ledwidge grew up reading Keats (Curtayne 22), and wrote in a letter to a friend that he loved Keats and his poetry best of all (Curtayne 145). The influence of Keats is visible in many of Ledwidge's poems. The escapism into nature, which is a considerable element in Romantic poetry, like Keats', features heavily in "A Soldier's Grave" and many of Ledwidge's other poetry, which explains the rather different tone in his war poetry.

Around the time Ledwidge wrote “A Soldier’s Grave” he also wrote one of his most famous poems. “Soliloquy” is in a way an examination of the poet’s identity and is featured on multiple memorials for the poet. In the poem he writes: “To-morrow will be loud with war / How will I be accounted for?” (Ledwidge 238). He expresses a sense of doubt as to how he will be seen by others. It is interesting to explore these emotions further before examining the rest of this poem.

Ledwidge was not alone in this sentiment. Thomas Kettle was an Irish nationalist and poet who fought, like Ledwidge, in the British Army, and was also concerned about how he might be remembered. In his haunting poem “To My Daughter Betty, The Gift of God”, which was written just days before he was killed in action, Kettle writes to his young daughter that he is aware that she will wonder why he chose to go to war, instead of staying in Ireland with her. The poem almost begs the question whether the poet knew his fate. It seems like he knew his days were numbered so he would not be able to explain it to her himself as he writes the following:

And oh! They’ll give you rhyme
 And reason: some will call the thing sublime
 And some decry it in a knowing tone.
 So here, while the mad guns curse overhead,
 And tired men sigh with mud for cough and floor,
 Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,
 Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor, -
 But for a dream, born in a herdsman’s shed,
 And for the secret Scripture of the poor. (Kettle 65)

Kettle feels the need to explain his choice to enlist so that others would not have wrong interpretations about this decision. Like Ledwidge in “At Currabwee”, Kettle compared himself to the Easter Rising leaders. Phillips states that he “[e]xpressed regret that while the Easter rebels would go down in history as heroes, he would go down as ‘A bloody British officer’” (Phillips 391). Kettle defended his choices by explicating that he did not enlist in order to fight for the English, but for a more noble cause. The last two lines indicate that his choice was, arguably, based on religion, as Phillips argues that the dream that is born is a marginalised Christ figure (392). Ledwidge also uses religious imagery in “The Irish in

Gallipoli” to justify fighting in the First World War, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Ledwidge felt the need to defend his choices too. When he was asked why he had joined the British Army, by Professor Lewis Chase, who was interested in Ledwidge’s life and poetry, Ledwidge reflected on his choice by explaining that he would not allow England save Ireland from a common enemy and take the pride for it:

Some of the people who know me least imagine that I joined the Army because I knew men were struggling for higher ideals and great emprises, and I could not sit idle to watch them make for me a more beautiful world. They are mistaken. I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions. (qtd. in Curtayne 83)

Both poets emphasised that others might misrepresent them and their choice to join the war before stating their actual reasons. This focus on their reason for joining the war is understandable, because the war became even more controversial after the Easter Rising. Many people who were not in favour of the idea of the Rising initially, admired the persecuted leaders afterwards; they were perceived to have given their lives for a free Ireland.

One of these people was George Russell. He was a pacifist, but in his poem “To Some I Knew Who Loved Ireland”, or “Salutation”, he eulogised the men who fell during the Rising. He addresses Pearse, MacDonagh and Connolly, the three poets who were executed. Russell acknowledges that he did not support the Rising, by writing: “Here’s to you, Pearse, your dream not mine” (Russell 455). It is clear that Russell distances himself from the Rising by saying it was not his dream, yet he did acknowledge the sacrifices that these men made during the insurrection. As the poem develops, he praises the leaders for sacrificing their lives for a free Ireland:

I listened to high talk from you,
 Thomas MacDonagh, and it seemed
 The words grew idle, but they grew
 To nobleness by death redeemed. (Russell 455)

Beiner's theory of triumphalist memory of trauma is applicable to this poem. The death of the leaders is seen as a triumph, regardless of the failure of the insurrection. However, Russell added three stanzas after completing the initial poem. These stanzas do not praise the Easter Rising rebels but rather the Irish soldiers fighting in the First World War. In every stanza Russell emphasises that the soldiers had Ireland's best interest at heart, just like the leaders of the insurrection:

You who have fought on fields afar,
 That other Ireland did you wrong
 Who said you shadowed Ireland's star,
 Nor gave you laurel wreath nor song.
 You proved by death as true as they,
 In mightier conflicts played your part,
 Equal your sacrifice may weigh,
 Dear Kettle, of the generous heart. (Russell 456)

Russell explicitly placed Kettle among Easter Rising leaders, such as MacDonagh and Pearse, in the fifth sentence in this stanza by addressing him and writing that he perceived Kettle in the same way as the insurrection leaders, and that they all gave their lives for Ireland. In the beginning of the stanza he also acknowledges that the soldiers who fought in the war do not receive recognition in Ireland. This poem tries to raise awareness to the sacrifices made by Irish soldiers in the First World War by comparing them to the celebrated and revered Easter Rising heroes. Russell uses the idea of parity of sacrifice in his poem in order to make a political synthesis for Ireland. He argues that the sacrifices made by the soldiers in the First World War are worth as much as those made by the Easter Rising rebels. There is no need to choose between the two groups as they had the same ideals and the same willingness to give their lives for the cause.

This functioned in the poem, but his ingenious idea had no observable political impact in Ireland at the time (Flanagan 132). Russell's unity between the insurrection leaders and the Irish soldiers in the war is remarkable because this view was not shared by many. The equivalence in the poem was opposed by some Irishmen and when the poem was republished in an anniversary collection of poetry that addressed the Rising twenty years later, the editor chose to use the first edition of the poem, which did not include the three stanzas on the soldiers who fought in the war (Wills 129). Therefore, Ledwidge's and Kettle's urge to

explain their reasons for joining the war and wondering how they are perceived by the people at home seems justified by the Irish mentality at the time.

However, questioning his status as an Irish soldier is not the only thing Ledwidge did in “Soliloquy”. In the last stanza of the poem, Ledwidge’s changing, and more positive stance on the war and being a soldier is evident:

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 has no name.
 Whence honour turns away in shame. (Ledwidge 238)

It is noticeable that Ledwidge adopted a more romantic perception of the war. Phillips argues that the emotion expressed in the last few lines was probably a fleeting one, and states that: “[i]t is certainly not one with which the reader of Ledwidge’s poetry concurs” (399). This is, however, debatable. While Phillips may be correct in claiming that it is not a thought Ledwidge has expressed this unambiguously before, dismissing it as a fleeting emotion is to dismiss the struggle and evolved identity of the poet. This sentiment is not a fleeting thought that happened to be caught in rhyme but arguably represents the journey of a poet, nationalist and soldier towards an identity that encapsulated all three of these different and somewhat contradictory aspects of this young man’s life. The first few lines in this poem also seem to suggest that Ledwidge had found a way of coping with the events of the Easter Rising. Instead of grieving the past, Ledwidge regarded the war as his duty. He started to adopt a more positive look on the war, and subsequently, he started voicing this opinion more clearly.

In “The Irish in Gallipoli”, written in February as well, Ledwidge writes about the reason why the Irish serve in the British army. Ledwidge himself had been at Gallipoli and in the poem, he explains the Irish war effort in a way that mirrors Thomas Kettle in his “To My Daughter Betty”. He writes that it is “Neither for lust of glory nor new throne” (Ledwidge 240) that the Irish fight under English command:

...when war

Serves Liberty and Justice, Love and Peace

Who said that such an emprise could be vain? (Ledwidge 240)

These lines alone indicate a proclamation of why the Irish fought this war. It seems as if he is defending his position as an Irish soldier under British command by questioning who could disagree with the cause of the war. The last stanza of the poem underlines this feeling:

Were they not one with Christ Who strove and died?

Let Ireland weep but not for sorrow. Weep

That by her sons a land is sanctified

For Christ Arisen, and angels once again

Come back like exile birds to guard their sleep. (Ledwidge 240)

This comparison between the soldiers who fought in Gallipoli and Christ indicates that Ledwidge saw the war as a noble cause. He mentioned the English at the beginning of the poem, in which it becomes clear that he reasons that there was a good reason for the Irish to fight together with the English, although he morally objected to English rule over Ireland. This indicates that Ledwidge started to separate the war and his attitude toward the English. He may have not wanted to fight under the English, a sentiment that he would feel the rest of his life, but he perceived the war as a righteous cause, and that it was his duty to fight in the First World War, which has been expressed in his earlier poetry such as “Una Bawn”. There is a clear triumphalist tone in this poem because the British suffered immense losses at Gallipoli, a battle eventually won by the Ottomans. However, Ledwidge placed the soldiers within the ranks of the Easter Rising leaders, because he compares the soldiers to angels. There is a sense of martyrdom that he ascribes to the fallen soldiers, which is in line with the triumphalist memory of the Easter Rising that he has expressed in poems before. Beiner’s notion of triumphalist memory of trauma is applicable for the First World War in this poem. According to John McDonagh, “The Irish in Gallipoli” “[e]ncapsulates his belief that the war, despite all of its horrors, was for the greater good of not just Ireland but her allies as well” (10). He also argues that Ledwidge held the belief that the war was a noble cause until his death, but the final chapter of this thesis will argue against this notion, as this was not the end of the conflicting loyalties and tensions for Ledwidge.

Chapter 4 Brotherhood and Homesickness

As the previous chapter established, it might be argued that Ledwidge had adopted a ‘triumphalist memory of trauma’ with regards to the Easter Rising by June 1917. In this chapter, the final phase in the development of Ledwidge’s poetry will be discussed. In the light of Guy Beiner’s theory, it is noticeable how Ledwidge’s perception of himself changes as he adopted a more triumphalist attitude towards the insurrection as opposed to a pessimistic, grieving attitude he expressed shortly after the rebellion. The change in Ledwidge reaches a climax in the last few months of his life. In his poem “O’Connell Street”, written on 10 June 1917, his opening lines read: “A noble failure is not vain / But hath a victory of its own” (Ledwidge 249). O’Connell Street was the location of the General Post Office, which was the headquarters of the rebels during the Easter Rising (Wills 2). Even long before the Rising, O’Connell Street had been a place for nationalist protest (Wills 8). The opening lines indicate a distinct triumphalist attitude to the trauma of the Rising. Ledwidge acknowledges the defeat of the rebels but he follows this by the statement that this still is a triumph. This sentiment is in line with a letter he sent to a professor, who was interested in his poetry, on 6 June 1917, just four days before he wrote his poem “O’Connell Street”:

I am sorry that party politics should ever divide our own tents but I am not without hope that a new Ireland will arise from her ashes in the ruins of Dublin, like the Phoenix, with one purpose, one aim, and one ambition. I tell you this in order that you may know what it is to me to be called a British soldier while my country has no place amongst the nations but the place of Cinderella (qtd. in Curtayne 180).

Ledwidge expresses the idea that Ireland would be more determent because of the Rising, regardless of its failure. However, this letter also shows Ledwidge’s stance on serving in the British Army. He echoes the famous Irish nationalist, Robert Emmett, who was sentenced to death after leading a failed insurrection against British rule. His request was clear: “when my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written” (qtd. in Beiner 375) , and it resonated with many Irish nationalists and he had been an inspiration for Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the failed Easter Rising. By echoing Emmett, Ledwidge indicates that he experienced tension when called a British soldier, and that his sympathies were still with Irish nationalists who rebelled against the English rule.

A poem Ledwidge wrote in July 1917 reveals his changed perception of the war in more detail with regards to the Germans. It is titled “To a German Officer” and the subtitle reads: “who died a true gentleman” (Ledwidge 255). Ledwidge wrote the poem when he came across the grave of a German officer in the Ypres Salient (Phillips 398). He wrote it on a wooden cross that the men had erected over the grave (Ledwidge 298). It opens with a stanza that puts the ‘enemy’ in another perspective:

I cannot think that God could take
 A man who fought on Mammon’s side,
 Nor yet in brimstone caverns break
 A noble soul’s ancestral pride. (Ledwidge 255)

Ledwidge would be buried near Ypres that same month. In the poem Ledwidge does not express hatred against the German officer. Phillips explains that: “his reference to the ‘ancestral pride’ of the ‘noble soul’ who fought ‘on Mammon’s side’ demonstrates an awareness of the common brotherhood of the battlefield which became part of the experience of trench warfare” (398). This is not the same, almost lethargic, sentiment Ledwidge expressed just after the Rising when he said that he would not fight the Germans if they came to Ireland. For Ledwidge the war had lost its meaning, at least temporarily, after the failure of the Easter Rising and the loss of his nationalist friends, whom he had admired. However, as the initial grief wore off and Ledwidge started to process the trauma his own identity began to take shape and his idea of the war started to change.

As mentioned earlier, the awareness of common brotherhood in the war was not limited to Ledwidge’s stance. In a poem by W. B. Yeats a similar view is expressed. Yeats wrote four elegies for Major Robert Gregory, the son of one of his friends, who was killed during the First World War (Pickering 81). One of these four poems, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”, starts with:

I know that I shall meet my fate
 Somewhere among the clouds above;
 Those that I fight I do not hate
 Those that I guard I do not love; (Yeats 145)

It is clear that the Airman does not perceive the Germans as an opponent that are to be hated, and that he does not really belong in the British army, much like Ledwidge did. This is arguably, to some extent, the result of their Irish identity, because many Irish soldiers suffered from tension, because they were fighting with the English.

Ledwidge was also still homesick, arguably more than ever. His poem “Home” was one of the last he wrote. In it he wrote about his homesickness after he came across a robin singing near the battlefield in Belgium, which inspired him to reflect on his home in County Meath. In the final stanza of the poem Ledwidge depicts the bird in the broken landscape of Belgium:

This is a song a robin sang
 This morning on a broken tree,
 It was about the little fields
 That call across the world to me. (Ledwidge 257)

The little fields represent his beloved county Meath, which he missed (Phillips 398). This reference is an echo of his poem “The Blackbirds”, which he concludes with “In Derry of the little hills” (Ledwidge 192). This poem was written while he was staying in Slane. No matter where he is on duty, his homesickness haunts him, which is evident in this poem, because he invests a robin’s song with a very specific, personal meaning. This is underlined by a letter he wrote to a friend on 20 July 1917:

I want to see again my wonderful mother, and to walk by the Boyne to Crewbawn and up through the brown and grey rocks of Crocknaharna. You have no idea of how I suffer with this longing for the swish of the reeds at Slane and the voices I used to hear coming over the low hills of Currabwee. (qtd. in Curtayne 186)

In this segment, Ledwidge acknowledged that he missed the nature and landscape of his home as well as the people he had to leave behind. He also wrote that he was entitled to a leave but that there were many men that would still come first. He asks: “Say a prayer that I may get this leave” (186). However, he was not granted a leave and just eleven days later the Battle of Passchendaele started. Ledwidge died, among 135,000 other men, on the first day of the battle. Ledwidge was working behind the trenches, making roads that day. He was killed during a break when a shell exploded beside him (Curtayne 187-8).

Over the course of Ledwidge's career as a poet he expressed the love for his country, and his nationalist feelings in many poems and letters. The Easter Rising numbed him and disconcerted him, turning him to drink. Apart from experiencing grief over the death of his friends, whom he admired greatly, died, Ledwidge experienced immense guilt for not participating in the most important nationalist event of his life. One of the groups that were fighting in the Rising was the Irish Volunteers, of which Ledwidge had been an avid member since the first hour. As time progressed, however, Ledwidge started to cope with the feelings of grief and guilt by adopting a more positive, triumphalist perception on the insurrection and he started to explore his own identity and the ideals he had as a soldier. He started to place himself among the executed leaders of the Rising, wondering if his ideals were any different or merely the way in which he wanted to reach the same goals. He started to write more positive poetry about the war, at times even romanticising it. But during the last months of his life, the horrors of the war had beaten Ledwidge down and his homesickness started to increase. During the last period of his life, the clear aim of the war had blurred and Ledwidge did not see the Germans as evil anymore. All these developments contributed to Ledwidge's conflicted identity. The longing for his beloved Meath was overwhelming him.

Conclusion

Francis Ledwidge expressed a wide range of different sentiments regarding the First World War and fighting in the British Army, in his poetry. He was torn between his nationalist feelings and his duty as a soldier in the British Army and tried to find his own identity during the last years of his life. This struggle is evident in the poetry Ledwidge wrote after the Easter Rising up until his death. During the months that followed the failure of the Easter Rising and the executions of its leaders, Ledwidge expressed mostly grief for the friends he lost and guilt for not participating in such an important nationalist event. However, as the months progressed, Ledwidge started to slowly examine his own identity and ideals and started to compare himself to his fallen friends.

When he was ordered back to the front, there is a clear shift in the sentiments expressed in Ledwidge's poetry in regard to the war and being a soldier. He started to romanticise the war in his poetry either because he had grown to cope with the Easter Rising in a triumphalist way, expressing certainty of a greater good behind the failure of the insurrection, and in this way finding his sense of duty to fight again, or because romanticising the First World War was a way for Ledwidge to justify his service in the British Army. Ledwidge was not alone in turning the Easter Rising memory into a triumphalist one, as many other poets wrote about the greater good of the insurrection and the leaders, who came to be perceived as martyrs, which is, as Beiner stated, not a new phenomenon in Irish culture. However, this romantic perception of the war diminished in the last months of his short life as his homesickness was still haunting him and the clear distinction of right versus wrong started to blur. In one of his last poems, for example, he addressed a German officer "who died a true gentleman" (Ledwidge 255). This shows that the Germans perceived as evil was no longer a solid concept for him. This last shift that Ledwidge started to exhibit in his final months was a common sentiment expressed by many soldiers of the First World War (Phillips 398).

It is hard to categorise Ledwidge as either a war poet or a nationalist poet because he was conflicted between serving his country by staying in Ireland and by going to the front and serve in the British army. In this sense, Ledwidge reflects the conflicted views of Irish nationalists on the First World War after the Rising. He presents the executed insurrection leaders as martyrs, which can be seen in works by canonical Irish poets like W. B. Yeats and George Russell as well. On the other side, he also writes the many Irishmen that decided to take part in the war. Ledwidge embodies both the people who sided with the Easter Rising

rebels and the people who sided with the soldiers. One of the few poets who also reflected both sides in his poetry was George Russell. However, unlike Ledwidge, Russell was morally opposed to both the Easter Rising and the First World War because of his pacifism. He was not personally attached to either the war or the insurrection, but he honoured the men that he considered to have sacrificed their lives for a free Ireland, because he espoused nationalist sentiments as well. Ledwidge had a very different point of view, because he was personally attached to both the Rising and the war. However, both men argue that the soldiers, who were fighting on the continent, were not distinctly different in their ideals and reasons for fighting.

Since not much research has been done on Irish war poetry yet, there are many subjects that still need further investigation. Thomas Kettle, Patrick MacGill, and Francis Ledwidge have been receiving some scholarly attention, but there are most likely other Irish war poets, who have not. However, war poetry by Kettle, MacGill and Ledwidge still has not been researched to its full extent. MacGill could shed new light on Irish war poetry compared to Ledwidge or Kettle because the latter two both grew up in the East of Ireland and were both members of the Irish Volunteers, whereas MacGill grew up in Donegal, which could lead to differences in style as well as perceptions of the war. It could also be interesting to compare Irish and English war poetry to see how the Irish background of the poets altered the style, form and content of their poetry. There are many influences of mythology and legends to be found in Ledwidge's poetry, as well as MacGill's, and the Gaelic Revival was popular among young poets, which may have influenced their style and form, which can be compared to the canonical war poetry. Ledwidge's war poetry does not employ the tropes of war poetry, but it can still be considered war poetry in Phillips' broader definition, because many of his poems were inspired by the war. However, his war poetry is more gentle and focuses less on the actual battles and more on the emotions the war evoked in him.

Irish war poetry should be regarded as academically interesting because it does not only reflect the same issues as the more canonical war poetry, but does so against a backdrop of an increasingly politically unstable native country. This duality encapsulated in the poetry of the Irish soldiers is a key to understanding the conflicted Irish mentality and identities at the time of the war. It is important to understand the entirety of Irish history, which includes the political tensions and the divided loyalties of the time, in order to understand Irish identities.

In recent years, interest in Irish soldiers in the First World War by Irish society has finally been increasing. As an attempt to pay a late tribute to the First World War soldiers, centenary events have been planned since 2014. This is remarkable since the war was a

controversial topic in Ireland for a long time. Tom Burke notes that friends of Tom Kettle raised money and commissioned a bust of him in 1919, which they were not allowed to place, due to the contentious position of the First World War in Irish history. When it was finally allowed to be placed in 1927, more than ten years after his death, the Commissioners of Public Works objected to the words “Killed in France”, which they changed into “Killed in Guinchy, 9th September 1916”, without any reference as to what Guinchy is or that he fought in the First World War (Burke 171). In regards to Ledwidge, Slane, his home village, will see the erection of the first statue of the poet in June 2017. Around a hundred people, fifty of which from the Slane area, will visit his grave at Artillery Wood Cemetery in Ypres on 31 July 2017, a hundred years after his death (McGreevy). By remembering the Irish soldiers who decided to fight, for many reasons, in the First World War, new light will be shed on a period in Irish history that has hitherto been subjected to national amnesia. By retrieving the memories of those soldiers, which can be done through extensive studies of their war poetry, a more complete and inclusive Irish history and identities will be shaped.

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