

## ***Check Against Delivery***

### **Lecture to mark the Christmas Truce of 1914**

*by*

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A Aire, a Ard Rúnaí, a dhaoine uaisle agus a chairde:

Tá an-athas orm a bheith i láthair anocht, i dTeach Uíbh Eachach, ar an ócáid speisialta seo.

Minister, Secretary General, distinguished guests and friends:

I am delighted to be here tonight, in Iveagh House, for this special event.

#### **1914 Christmas Truce**

On the Western Front on 24 December 1914, thousands of soldiers from the British Expeditionary Forces, which included men from all parts of the island of Ireland, huddled in miserable conditions in the trenches. Their spirits were low: thoughts of home, of firesides and families taunted and haunted them. All around them hung the menace of war with its torn bodies savagely reduced to raw meat and in every breath the imminence of death, their own deaths. The jingoism, the patriotic flag waving, the marching bands and rallying songs that puffed up the call to heroism, had all given way to a very personal and individual journey into the self, into fear, obedience, discipline, resentment, courage, homesickness, into this impossible reality all around them, this life over which they had so very little control and for which they could not possibly have had much love. An appeal earlier that month by Pope Benedict XV for an official truce had been officially rejected.

One young soldier, Rifleman Graham Williams, on sentry duty in Armentières on the French border picked his steps through the cold mud, and the freezing air, guided by the stars. The German lines were only a hundred yards away. Suddenly, he noticed little Christmas trees, lit by candles, shimmering and sparkling along the German trenches, a gift as it turned out from Kaiser Wilhelm II, to boost troop morale. It had caused a flurry of childlike excitement, all along the Front. And why not for all along the front on both sides were uniformed, armed youngsters many of them not even yet legally adults, their childhoods barely over. And on the German side, equally young men, stirred by those twinkling lights, had reached back to their childhoods and to that beautiful Christmas Carol, Stille Nacht. Rifleman Williams was shocked and thrilled to hear that tune for it was also very familiar to him. The favourite Christmas carol of his childhood Silent Night, broke the uneasy night silence. He excitedly told the other sentries and woke his comrades. They gathered and stood listening and looking in disbelief. There was no order, no command. Unprompted, they too began to sing Silent Night. How long had it been since they had learnt it and learnt to love it in their Catholic and Protestant Christian homes as children. Not long. Probably just as long as their

German counterparts had learnt to love it as children in their Catholic and Protestant Christian homes. Silent night, holy night- sleep in heavenly peace.... the infant born in Bethlehem with his promise of Peace on earth, good will to all mankind..... that is what they had been taught- almost all of them.

Further along the Western Front, Lieutenant Colonel George Laurie, a great grandson of Dr Charles Inglis, a Donegal man and the first bishop of Nova Scotia, was also thinking of home. Laurie, who was born in Canada, commanded a troop of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles, which included men from all parts of this island.

In a memorable letter to his wife he recounted the events of Christmas 1914; how, at 11 o'clock that night the German soldiers had called out across the parapets: 'Do not shoot after twelve o'clock, and we will not do so either.' Several German officers then formally requested a 48-hour ceasefire; in due course both sides agreed to put their arms aside for 24 hours.

On learning of the possibility of a truce, the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles had to be commanded to stay in their trenches, so eager were they to talk to the German soldiers. Eventually, Laurie and his fellow officers relented: the men from both sides scrambled out of their trenches and walked towards each other in no-man's land to exchange chocolate, cigarettes and stories about their loved ones at home. On St Stephen's Day, Laurie reported that the German soldiers refused to take up their arms again and, although they did not have the authority to extend the truce on their side, the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles decided to shoot over the Germans' heads to avoid casualties. A truce?- maybe or was it more than that- could it not also have been a simple but forceful admonition to earthly powers and posterity to remember the power of the transcendent, a desperate hope that somehow the commandment to love one another would, could, cut through the hopelessness of war, if not now then sometime.

An officer in the Scots Guard, stationed elsewhere along the line, later described to his family how, on Christmas Eve, his fellow soldiers had begun singing 'It's a long way to Tipperary', to which the Germans responded with 'es ist sehr weit zu Tipperary'. Before long, a chorus of Germans, Scots, English and Irish was merrily performing a rousing rendition of 'Auld Lang Syne'.

Music even inspired French and German soldiers, between whom there was a particularly bitter enmity. At one location along the Front, a French captain, who happened to be a musician, organised an orchestra of fellow soldiers who had brought musical instruments to the trenches. An invitation, announcing a musical performance for 5 p.m., was tied to a rock and hurled into the German trenches. On the appointed hour, armed with only a baton, the French captain mounted the parapet, and from there conducted a concert in the most unusual of settings. On its conclusion his counterpart stepped forward from the German trenches and gave a salute, to the cheers of soldiers from both sides.

It is a telling fact that many of these spontaneous acts of truce were accompanied or even precipitated by music and song. Just as patriotic music was used to divide and develop blindness to the humanity of the other, here was music transcending all that divided them,

and introducing them to the common humanity of the other. Those songs opened up a heartbreaking reality that whatever the high-level politics of that war, on both sides these extraordinary ordinary young men had lived similar lives, in similar homes, been raised with similar values, had sung the same songs, had hoped for long and happy lives, for Christmases shared with their children and grandchildren, singing Christmas carols in places infinitely more humanly decent than the terrible trenches.

The shared memories the tentative goodwill, evoked on both sides of the trenches that Christmas 1914 were not enough to counteract the imperial political imperatives and warmongering realpolitik of the day. Within days many of those same young men had killed one another, willingly or otherwise. Yet somehow that strange musical interlude that gave each of them the very same holy night, calm and bright, has become a stellar memory, perhaps the stellar memory among so many of the triumph of simple humanity. It seems very fitting that this evening's commemoration of the Christmas Truce will also be accompanied in music and song by the Island of Ireland Peace Choir.

Other eye-witness accounts corroborate the well-known stories of football matches taking place, one of which notoriously resulted in a win for Germany (that the Germans won a football match is not something that would surprise anyone today!).

Letters described how conversations took place between the soldiers in stilted English and broken German, and how even officers on the two sides exchanged scarves, gloves and any other of the scarce and valued personal items that could be offered as gifts. These were gifts that it really cost to give, and the cost was in mercy not money. Poignantly, in many places along the front the temporary cessation in fire was used as an opportunity to retrieve the broken, dead bodies of soldiers that lay strewn across No-Man's Land. In some places the truce lasted for a day, in others, several days.

While casual fraternisation was not uncommon, if discouraged, in those early months of the war in quiet areas of the front. we'll never know everything that happened in no-man's land in France and Belgium at Christmas 1914 – which stories were true, which were embellished, which were no more than myths. But we do know that a truce happened in several places along the Western Front And we know that men from all over the island of Ireland, took part, including the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers; the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Leinster Regiment.

Not everyone was happy with what had happened in Flanders that Christmas. On learning of the ceasefire, many senior officers condemned what they saw as a breach of discipline, and made sure that another extensive Christmas truce would never happen at any other point during the war. But the truce and the events that characterised it was of course much more dangerous than a mere breach of discipline for it broke through the carefully constructed clinical and cold hermetic seal of uniform and side, identity and stereotype which rendered the otherness of the other despicable, contemptible, worth hating, worth killing. No army at war could afford that kind of raw compassion for the other. Yet that is probably precisely what makes the story of the Christmas truce of 1914 so famous and so poignant, that compassion for one another bubbled to reinforced surface through crevices in unsealed human hearts.

In its very spur of the moment simplicity the truce opened up the sluice gates of spontaneous, natural compassion and celebration, two of the great pillars of the Christmas feast. In every home it is a time of gathering, of gift giving and receiving, of putting aside the bones of contention and worries, a time of innocent play and fun, of hope in the power of love with precious time for one another. That is what those thousands of young boys, mostly barely entitled to be called men, did that Christmas. They did what they had done every Christmas, celebrated, shared, played, laughed, hoped, hugged, shook hands, made time for each other and then turned back to their lives again, their ugly unimaginably horrific lives again, even more painfully aware of their powerlessness to change their immediate fate, unaware that this war to end all wars would last four more outrageous years and wipe out an entire generation of Europe's young men. There would be many Rachels left to weep for her lost children. Worse still the little children of the next generation in Ireland, Britain and in the rest of Europe who would learn that beautiful carol, -silent night, holy night- in Christian homes, would fight each other to the death in wars of independence, civil wars, sectarian wars and another so-called World War. No wonder that once off truce has become iconic. It is today a fearsome challenge and admonition, a powerful reminder of man-made political and spiritual failure on an epic scale.

The thousands of young men who were on the Western front this week one hundred years ago, who lived and died through the worst and the best of it delivered a strong message to those of us who lived after them. They delivered that message in and through that unlikely and never repeated phenomenon of respite we call the truce. It was a call to do our utmost before it is too late to make peace with our enemies and to build peace with tools that do not require the scandalously wicked waste of human life. Their willing heroism should not blind us to how resentful a sacrifice many of them made of their lives. Can we really believe that they and those who loved them, preferred death or damage in the trenches to singing Silent night with their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren in Belfast, Berlin, Birmingham, Brussels, Bologna, Bordeaux. The truce tells us that what their hearts longed for was peace on earth, goodwill to all.

### **Commemorating the First World War**

Peace of a sort would come in 1918 but only after millions lay dead and millions more were wounded physically and psychologically. An old order was over – what the late historian Eric Hobsbawm called the Age of Extremes had been born.

Answering – even asking – questions of how should we remember, honour and commemorate the men and women whose lives were lost in the First World War was made more complex in Ireland, as conflict continued here, through the war of independence, the civil war, and the division of the island. How do we reconcile the commemoration of those dead Irishmen who wore British uniforms fighting for freedom in Europe while others sacrificed their lives for our freedom from that same British colonial power with its grim history of oppression in Ireland.

Séamus Heaney addressed some of these challenges in his famous poem 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', the Irish poet who died in the trenches in British uniform. Ledwidge like

many of his fellow soldiers was an Irish Catholic nationalist, who supported the 1916 Rising. He once lamented being 'called a British soldier while my own country has no place among nations'. Heaney explores Ledwidge's complex identity not just to try to understand Ledwidge, but to understand something more about himself- ourselves. Heaney wrote:

I think of you in your Tommy's uniform,  
A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave,  
Ghosting the trenches with a bloom of hawthorn  
Or silence cored from a Boyne passage-grave.

As Heaney phrased it so succinctly in the concluding words of the poem, too many soldiers, whether British or Irish, all 'consort now underground'. The same can be said for all the nationalities who fought and died on all sides. The grief of their families, the same grief, the loss of their individual and collective genius, incalculable.

Somewhere in the region of 35,000, some say as high as 50,000 men (mostly) and women from all over the island of Ireland died in the First World War. Almost a quarter of a million volunteered and fought. If they came home safe they did not return unscathed. Ours was a small population. Every street, almost every clan, had a returning soldier or a shoe box of medals and memories to mark a tragic death, a devastating loss so great so unbearably deep that no computer could ever hope to compute its size or shape, its bottomless well of might-have-beens. And to return to what? An Ireland radically, irrevocably altered by the Rising, a Free State uncomfortable with this narrative of British heroic suffering for freedom when a new chapter in the long narrative of Irish heroic suffering for freedom was in the ascendent. And so commemoration became a divisive issue. Compassion became impossible. Mercy atrophied and men hid their stories away. A new generation of neighbours grew up separately, learning very different versions of history and when they met as they occasionally did, it was only to shake their heads in despair that the other could be so ignorant, so misinformed.

### **McAleese Presidency**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By a kind of strange coincidence I was inaugurated President of Ireland on 11 November 1997 which is, of course, Armistice Day. The theme of my Presidency was building bridges, a straightforward metaphor for a difficult but essential undertaking, the embrace of the otherness of the other, the attempt to redeem a divisive past by creating a shared future, the making of good neighbours of people who lived cheek by jowl but in awesome mutual ignorance.

It is true that we cannot change the past but we can change how we tell the past. A number of individuals and organisations had already long since set about restoring to respected memory those of our people who fought in that awful war. The restoration of those memories was not done to widen the divide but to show us that in fact these men could be an important bridge to each other in this generation. The strength of that bridge, its resilient capacity to hold men and women of all politics, faiths and perspectives on this island, was

showcased memorably at Messines on the 11 November 1998 when with King Albert of Belgium and our good neighbour Queen Elizabeth II, I was privileged to open the island of Ireland Peace Park with its magnificent round tower and poignant inscriptions marking the place where the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster and 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division had fought together comrades and friends on Belgian soil, but bitter opponents at home. The span of the bridge was evident again in May 2011 when Queen Elizabeth and I stood together in the War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge in the company of an audience made up of all of strands of society from Ireland north and south including former paramilitaries from both sides. We stood together, united in what Wilfred Owen called 'the eternal reciprocity of tears', but crucially we were not just there to commemorate the past but to commit to a new and peaceful shared future. Just the day before we had watched as Queen Elizabeth bowed her head in the Garden of Remembrance – a respectful salute to the memory of those who fought the British crown in pursuit of Irish independence. Later when she said that the United Kingdom and Ireland were today more than uneasy neighbours, but rather 'firm friends and equal partners' we knew that to be true miraculously true, a miracle hewn out of grief and horror by peace-makers, men and women who believe us capable of better, who will not settle for the crass failure of imagination that instigates and prolongs conflict.

Your presence, Minister Flanagan, at the Remembrance Sunday event in Belfast last month, and the Taoiseach's attendance at the Remembrance Sunday event in Enniskillen are part of that relentless engagement, establishing trust, developing friendships, as John Hewitt put it- "we build to fill the centuries arrears". Indeed it is likely that the work of peace building on this island will take centuries.

That is why memory is important- especially the memory of the appalling human cost of peace. That is why the memory of that Christmas Truce is so important on this island at this time and in Europe at this time, when dull factionalism and dense cynicism threaten to hollow out the achievements of the heroic builders of Ireland's peace Process and of the great European Project the European Union, the quiet good neighbours who fraternised across divides and when they got their chance in referenda gave partnership and sharing a thunderous endorsement. Those builders are the true inheritors of the spirit of the 1914 Truce. They are the people who set out to prove that the way of truce need not be a nostalgic temporary interlude, an aberration in between spells of slaughter, but a way of life, an embedded culture of childish delight in one another, of celebration, friendship and of egalitarian, just sharing across the divides of history and identity. The road map to that culture is chiselled on stone by the hard grinding daily work of sustaining solidarity not simply with ones friends but with one's enemies especially those who are our neighbours.

We are building a peace not a truce. Yes we had to leave our trenches, meet one another, talk, compromise, collaborate and befriend. But most importantly we had and have a choice to stay out of those trenches. We have a power over events that was not available at Christmas 1914. We have a hard won peace Agreement with its intricate infrastructure designed to support us all the way to a permanent peace on this island and between these islands. We gave it overwhelming endorsement and the integrity of that endorsement is entitled to be respected and followed through comprehensively.

I venture to suggest that those who sang that night in Armentieres one hundred years ago whether it was Silent Night or Stille Nacht, held in their aching hearts the memory of that moment of "love's pure light". They must surely have hoped that peace on earth was not a mere Christmas fairytale but an ambition that could be and would be achieved. They are sleeping together long since in their own heavenly peace. Let us hope that the memory of that precious holy night Christmas 1914, fills us their squabbling children, with the courage to keep on building the peace which they never knew. Let us hope that the memory of those precious gifts they traded so generously with one another, stirs us on all sides of our own conflict to be unstinting in our magnanimity to one another. There is no other way to give our children something much more than the heart-breakingly beautiful but ultimately unsatisfactory story of a temporary truce. They deserve what Rifleman Graham Williams and his comrades and opponents longed for, the sure and settled joy of peace on earth and goodwill to all. A nineteen year old private Henry Williamson wrote home to his mother on St Stephens day . "Yesterday the British and Germans met and shook hands in the Ground between the trenches, and exchanged souvenirs. Yes, all day Xmas day and as I write. Marvellous, isn't it?" And it was, for a glorious moment it was. Go ndeana dia agus muidine trocaire ar a n-anamacha uaisle.

A chairde, nollaig shona dhaoibh go leir. A peaceful and happy Christmas to you all.