

Countering Amnesia – Revealing Ireland’s Home Front during the Great War – DR.
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In 1914 as German forces swept into Belgium and civilians and military fled before them, committees were formed throughout Ireland in anticipation of an influx of refugees. Meanwhile, almost as soon as the first groups of Irish volunteers enlisted and left for the front, war wounded began to arrive in Ireland. Many of those who remained at home joined together to form committees to transport the wounded from hospital ships to hospitals. Others joined together to set up and organise local hospitals and nursing homes to care for the wounded. At the same time Quakers organised themselves into groups to support German, Austrian and Hungarian detainees. Irishmen and women of all classes, creeds, and political persuasions, in towns and counties throughout Ireland formed groups and organisations to support the victims of war.

In 1966 F.X. Martin drew attention to a gap in the historiography of early twentieth century Ireland and referred to this gap as ‘national amnesia’. The gap he referred to was the lack of accounts of Irish participation in the Great War. Since Martin’s first articulation of this omission several writers have addressed the ‘amnesia’. Many of these accounts focus on military aspects of Ireland’s involvement in the Great War with many detailed accounts of Irish participation at the Front. In Britain, Fussell’s seminal work provided an approach to understanding the Great War based on an examination of war literature.¹ He showed that understanding and memory of the First World War in England is dictated by those who took part in it.² By contrast, in Ireland there are few accounts by those who took part in the war.

In this paper I will examine the wide range of war time activities that took place in Ireland involving large numbers of Irish people but which have never been represented in literature or in historical accounts. I will contend that the absence of accounts of

¹ Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish poetry* (Oxford, 2003).

² Paul Fussell, *The Great War and modern memory* (Oxford, 1977).

wartime civilian activities provides an opportunity to examine the role of memory in serving the need for a cohesive national identity. Amnesia provides a significant insight into the way Irish national identity has been formed. I will argue that on the outbreak of war many Irish people's nationalism was located on a continuum between Britishness and Irishness and was, therefore, 'a category of constantly changing content'.³ The influence of this continuum ensured Irish involvement in a wide range of war related activities. In the years since independence an Irish memory of the war was constructed that could be seen as serving the purposes of the advanced nationalists rather than others along the continuum. With time, memory of participation in war work became an uncomfortable link to the British side of the continuum and eventually the memory was exorcised. This paper will reveal Irish civilian mobilisation, highlight the continuum and in this way confront amnesia.

³ R.V. Comerford, *Ireland: Inventing the nation* (London, 2003), p. 1.