

## A Lost Poem of A Lost Soul: May 1916 and Remembering Francis Ledwidge



One hundred and three years ago, Francis Ledwidge, who was seen in a rebellious mode and drunk in uniform in May 1916, was his country, Ireland. An as much as his country was, he was failed, betrayed, punished and left disoriented. Ledwidge is a poet who must be on the radar of those researching WWI and its contemporary reflections because of his "The Irish in Gallipoli".

Ledwidge has been unduly made the leading Irish poet of the Great War, although he was indeed a great poet but for a different cause. He was the poet of "A Lament for Thomas Macdonagh".

Following is the standard narrative on Ledwidge provided by the RTE:

*He was the 'Poet of the Blackbird', so-called for his sensibility to, and evocation of, the rhythms of nature and the rural landscapes of his native Co. Meath. But he was also a 'War Poet' and it was as an Irish nationalist in British uniform that he was killed at the Battle of Passchendaele on 31 July 1917. Here, on the centenary of his death, Prof. Mike Cronin, Academic Director of Boston College and a Director of Century Ireland, offers a biographical profile of a short and extraordinary Irish life.*

*Francis Ledwidge was born on 19 August 1887 at Janesville, Slane, Co. Meath. He was the eighth of nine children, and his father, Patrick, was a farm labourer. Ledwidge attended Slane national school but due to the family's straightened financial circumstances he had to leave school at 13 and take work as a farmer's boy. By 1907 he was working as a road mender, and three years later was appointed as supervisor of roads for the county. He was always interested in the conditions of the labouring classes, and in 1906 was a founder of the Slane branch of the Meath Labour Union. Just prior to the outbreak of World War One he was the temporary secretary of the union.*

*When not working, Ledwidge immersed himself in the history of the Boyne Valley, read widely and began writing poetry. Encouraged by a local curate, Fr Smith, Ledwidge began contributing his poetry to the Drogheda Independent. Ledwidge was later befriended by Lord Dunsany who would become an invaluable patron. Dunsany's lecture to the National Literary Society in October 1912, which foregrounded Ledwidge's pastoral and historical poetry, created interest in the young poet. He was admired by many of the leading figures of the literary revival of the period. Prior to the outbreak of war Ledwidge had established himself as an important Irish poet and writer.*



*The cottage in Slane, Co. Meath where Francis Ledwidge was born. (Image: Irish Life, 10 August 1917. Full collection available in the National Library of Ireland)*

*Ledwidge was a keen supporter of the Home Rule movement. In the autumn of 1913, when the prospects of a successful implementation of Home Rule was threatened by unionist opposition, Ledwidge took action. Along with his brother Joseph he was one of the founders of the Slane branch of the Irish Volunteers. He regularly took part in Volunteer meetings, and was also active in the drills and marches of his local branch.*

*Following the outbreak of war in August 1914 the Volunteers split. The majority would follow Redmond in his support of the war effort as the National Volunteers, while a minority would remain in the Irish Volunteers led by Eoin MacNeill. Ledwidge was initially sceptical of Redmond's support for the war, and he remained outside of the National Volunteers and away from the army recruiting offices.*

*By 1914 Ledwidge was the recipient of a weekly allowance from Dunsany, and could have remained at home to write during the war. However, Meath was a county that embraced the war, and it appears that Ledwidge was eventually swept along with the prevailing pro-war sentiment. On 24 October he joined Lord Dunsany's regiment, the 5th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 10th (Irish) Division at Navan, and was sent to Richmond Barracks in Dublin.*

*Ledwidge, despite his initial reticence to join the war effort, would later justify his decision: 'I joined the British army because England stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation, and I would not have had it said that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions.' Ledwidge took the rank of lance-corporal, and was sent to Basingstoke to complete his training. In early 1915 he was able to return to Slane for a brief visit before joining his battalion and sailing to Gallipoli.*

<https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/the-life-and-death-of-francis-ledwidge>

Ledwidge can not be considered or used as a war supporting Irish poet, in the sad and shattered mood of his poem for Thomas McDonagh, one of the 16 patriots of the Easter Rising in 1916. He is however, still being advertised on the contrary. His views might have intersected with London in the past, but he died as a different man, and this long and important final episode of his life is deliberately omitted.

When I first saw his Irish in Gallipoli, I was bringing together the Irishmen who were pro or against the war - without judging anyone - But, placing someone under a group is already a judgmental act and I did not want to go wrong. I kept reading about him, and this resulted in considering him among those who were against the war.

Why do the people need to know this is related to "building and destroying of an emotional perception of the Great War" if I may put it that way.

It has been to much surprise of careful researchers that he had authored such a poem particularly after the execution of Thomas Macdonagh, his statement on his unwillingness to fight against Germans, and his punishment by the court martial for disciplinary reasons in May 1916. Besides, he was under the influence of entirely different convictions and emotions and had little time left before his death in July 1917.

The Irish in Gallipoli was said to be written on 24 February 1917. This is repeatedly stated as such in Internet portals.

It may still make some sense that he had decided to write the poem in retrospect - after almost two years!-. Having spent the remainder of 1916 in Ebrington Barracks, Derry, not before January 1917, he was in the Western Front. And in that atmosphere, still very embittered he writes a poem of an entirely different character!

The real question is, where this poem is. Lord Dunsay who was also Irish but who was famous, was looking for a poet "amongst the Irish peasants" as he put it in his intro of Songs of the Fields (1915). Songs of the Peace again with Dunsay followed this in 1916. And all other poems of Ledwidge was published post humously, to pose another permanent problem. Dunsay was a member of the establishment and indeed had some further poetic toys to play with once Ledwidge was no more.

Dunsay wrote another intro for Last Songs which was published in 1918 (the book is in archive org and undated, but wikipedia says it so). Very same collection then appeared under the title of The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge (dated, 1919). I went through all these books. The Irish in Gallipoli was not printed in these books and it is a big question mark where was this poem published first in a decade that it would make sense the most.

Seamus Heaney was among the last cannons to back Ledwidge. He is still in Taoiseach's website, - without a date -. But, apparently, one can indeed talk about a slightly lost poem. This sounds like a case for literary historians. I wonder if anyone saw this poem printed in somewhere from 1920s or earlier.

As mentioned below, his Irish in Gallipoli is still a lost poem. How this poem was found and brought to the forefront is a big question mark.

Having sustained the execution of Macdonagh on May 3, 1916 and written his poem on him, Ledwidge could be the last person to write "The Irish in Gallipoli". To what extent this poem has the structure of ancient Celtic tones that he loved to use, must be answered too and experts and ethnusiasts might have an idea on that.

The poem is not printed in anywhere pre-1919 to include his own books and where was this published first is unknown.

Songs of the Fields (1915). Songs of the Peace (1916), and Last Songs (1918) (the book is in archive org and undated, but wikipedia says it so) do not include this poem. These can be downloaded from the archive org for further examination. If this most important poem is not in any of these, so where was it? Probably because it did not exist.

*A Lament for Thomas Macdonagh's* analysis is also required. As of May 1916, Ledwidge was an Irish nationalist. He did not see the Germans as enemies from then on either.

*He shall not hear the bittern cry  
In the wild sky, where he is lain,  
Nor voices of the sweeter birds  
Above the wailing of the rain*

*Nor shall he know when the loud March blows  
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,  
Blowing to flame the golden cup  
Of many an upset daffodil.*

*But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor  
And pastures poor with greedy weeds  
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn  
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.*

Note – the Dark Cow is an allegorical name for Ireland. The “pleasant meads” represent still to be won National independence. MY NOTE: HE NO LONGER FOUGHT FOR BRITAIN NOR WAS IN THE MOOD TO WRITE A POEM TO THAT END. He was aspiring for the pleasant meads - a free Ireland. He was no longer the man of his idea that “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.”

<https://englishhistoryauthors.blogspot.com/2013/11/francis-ledwidge-poet-of-blackbird.html>

Another analysis:

<https://poemanalysis.com/lament-for-thomas-macdonagh%E2%80%A8-by-francis-ledwidge-poem-analysis/>