

British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 3, November 2020

Review of *Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History* by Niamh Gallagher

Richard S. Grayson

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 25 November 2020

Citation: Richard S. Grayson, 'Review of *Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History* by Niamh Gallagher', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.3 (2020), pp. 186-187.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Niamh Gallagher, *Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Xvii + 258pp. ISBN: 978-1788314626 (hardback). Price £72.00.

The cover of Niamh Gallagher's *Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History* features an image which at first glance appears like black and white photos which many will have seen before: a large and obviously interwar crowd gathered around a war memorial. However, picked out in colour is a union flag draped across the top of the memorial as if over a coffin, with the green, white and orange of the Irish tricolour in the foreground on a flagpole (with another union flag apparently peeping out from behind it). The juxtaposition of the two flags is uncommon enough in such photos of interwar Ireland. It becomes even more surprising when one learns that this photo was taken in 'rebel Cork' in 1925. It points to the core argument of the book which is that support for the war effort was strong in Ireland not only throughout the war, but also beyond the Armistice.

A study of society and politics across Ireland in relation to the First World War is long overdue. Plenty of works concerned with the war have addressed aspects of the subject, but they have generally done it as an aside to essentially military studies. A different set of studies have examined Irish society and politics more comprehensively but with the principal viewpoint being that of the Irish Revolution. Niamh Gallagher is the first writer to produce an island-wide study which considers Irish politics and society through the prism of the British (and wider Empire) war effort. The book she has produced is an outstanding analysis, based on extensive research and written in a lively and accessible style. I believe it will come to be seen as a classic in the field and a standard reference point for all scholars working on Irish history in this period – whether they start from interests in the war or the Irish Revolution.

Divided into eight chapters, the first two contextualise the main subject matter with close attention to past historiography, especially how it relates to apparent changes in opinion after the Easter Rising. Gallagher's central argument in these chapters is that the attitudes of Irish Catholics towards the war have been conflated with those of nationalist leaders, with the Irish Parliamentary Party's 'perceived lack of action on the Allies' behalf' after the Rising 'and growing support for Sinn Féin' becoming 'a crucible through which the attitude of the wider Catholic population has been considered.' Consequently 'people were thought to have exhibited the "mental neutrality" towards the war that was displayed by their elected representatives.' Gallagher then uses four thematic chapters to challenge 'The view that Irish Catholic support for the war effort was limited from the outset and that it was tied to the changes within nationalism after Easter 1916'. These examine: women's relief work on the home front; the horrors of the war at sea which brought the war close to home and accentuated Germany's

BOOK REVIEWS

status as the 'enemy' (as Gallagher points out, this aspects of the war is 'excluded from virtually every scholarly account of the period'); the role of the international Irish diaspora (many of them politically nationalists) in supporting the war effort; and the ways in which support for the wider Allied war effort was expressed throughout the war. On the latter point, Gallagher makes a persuasive case for distinguishing between hostility towards conscription in 1918 and continued support at the same time for voluntary enlistment to support the war effort – indeed, there was a growth in the latter during the summer of 1918. Two short reflective concluding chapters draw together key themes from the four substantive chapters and then move on to consider commemoration in interwar Ireland (and to the present day) pointing to the breadth and depth of public engagement, and challenging historians who have seen hostility/amenia towards veterans and the cause of the war.

This is a compelling and persuasive study, whose arguments will be central to future scholarship. My plea to the publisher is that they produce a reasonably-priced paperback soon so that it can reach the wider public audience which it deserves.

RICHARD S. GRAYSON

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i3.1438

Don Farr, *A Battle Too Far; Arras 1917*. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2018., 28 photographs. 36 maps. 368pp. ISBN 978-1912174928 (hardback). Price £25.95.

The Battle of Arras has always sat awkwardly in the historiography of the Great War, chronologically (as well as geographically) between the 1916 Battle of the Somme and the Flanders campaigns of 1917. With a total number of casualties lower than the Somme and Third Ypres campaigns, fewer images of lunar mudscapes and having opened with a day of great success, historians and the wider public have broadly limited their enthusiasm towards the BEF's Spring Offensive to nodding approvingly at the Canadian Corps' achievements on Vimy Ridge. The one book which dealt with the Arras campaign in depth, apart from Cyril Falls' volume of the Official History covering the period, has been Jonathan Nicholls's *Cheerful Sacrifice*. Since the hundredth anniversary of the battle, further works by Jim Smithson and Andrew Rawson join the body of literature which includes considerable interest in the Canadian and Australian actions at Vimy Ridge and Bullecourt respectively. As the Battle of Arras holds the