

Thoughts on Galipoli

Fergus Cronin, April 2015

Read by the author during the morning service, Dublin Unitarian Church, 26th April 2015

It is a warm afternoon, the 24th of April 2012, and I make my way through the village of Sedd-el-Bahr onto its narrow strip of beach, empty except for a few upturned fishing boats and a tangle of seaweed and plastic flotsam along the high-water line. As I walk towards the water's edge my legs give way, I fall to my knees and giant sobs shake my body. The tragedy that befell my countrymen in this place overwhelms me completely and I kneel in the sand, sobbing and somehow sharing the pain and loss of those young men and of their loved ones, who would receive the news via Post Office Telegraphs in the coming weeks.

At first light on the 25th of April 1915, two famous Irish battalions of the British Army's 29th division, the 1st Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers were to land on this beach, code named V-Beach, as part of Churchill's now infamous Gallipoli campaign of World War 1. They landed "like lambs to the slaughter" from rowboats and down the gangways of a beached coal ship, *The River Clyde*, into this sloping arena designed by nature and arranged by the Turks for butchery.

"Johnny Turk, he was ready, he primed himself well, he rained us with bullets and he showered us with shells". This line from the ballad, 'The Band Played

Waltzing Matilda' by Eric Bogle, about the landing by Australian and New Zealand troops on that same morning applies tragically well to what the Dublin and Munster Fusiliers encountered here. Out of the first 200 men down the gangways 149 were killed outright and 30 were wounded.

Another line from this song: "our blood stained the sand and the water" is no exaggeration in the case of the Irish landings. Lieutenant-Commandant Sampson, a Royal Naval Flyer, observed from the air that the sea at V-Beach was an unusual colour, on closer inspection he realized that it was red with blood to a distance of about 50 yards from the shore.

Back on that afternoon in 2012, the wave of grief that has brought me to my knees subsides. The sand feels soft and warm beneath my hands and knees. Rising, I walk to the edge of the tranquil turquoise sea. Dipping my fingers in the warm Aegean water I bless myself; in commemoration of those lads who fought and died so far from home and maybe in gratitude for belonging to a generation neither pushed nor pulled into war.

I walk further down the beach and come upon the V-Beach graveyard, filled with headstones carved with familiar names: Patrick Byrnes, Daniel O'Brien, Joseph Kiernan. I could have spent all day here. I felt at home, among my own – my presence in this lonesome foreign place somehow mattering.

I scramble up a goat track from the Cemetery to the heights overlooking the beach. From here I can see how terribly exposed and vulnerable were our

men to the onslaught of the Turkish defensives. Again the emotional impact of this hits me and tears stream down my face. I keep looking out to sea so as not to be noticed by a group of Turkish school kids milling around the reconstructed Turkish positions.

The Irish experiences at Gallipoli could have had a significant place in the story of our emerging nation, but history closer to home, starting with the Easter Rising of 1916, was to overshadow these experiences of horror and heroism by Irishmen in Gallipoli. In recent years I am grateful to experience our growing openness as a people to a more inclusive and richly complex history of ourselves, which has done much to remember all the Irish affected by Wars.

I puzzle as to why this particular distant campaign has obsessed and moved me so powerfully. Even before learning of Irish involvement in Gallipoli I was moved to tears every time I heard the song, "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda". When, living briefly in Devon, I chanced upon an ANZAC remembrance service in a local church and was further captivated. I have asked around in my family and by all accounts no members fought in World War 1 and yet some mysterious providence drew me 4000 kilometres to this stretch of sand in Gallipoli and into connection with the terrible losses here 100 years ago.

I have heard it said that what one generation represses the following generation may strongly express. Maybe it is part of our national amnesia

and hidden grief finding expression that brought me to V-Beach in 2012, to the Dawn Service at Grangegorman yesterday morning and that motivates me to share with you this morning.

Lest we forget.

782 words