

THOMAS O'GRADY

The Things He Carried: An Irish Private in the King's (Liverpool) Regiment

Two days ago, I walked the streets of Armentières, a town in northern France that pushes up against the border with Belgium. I was searching for my grandfather, a Private in the British Expeditionary Force during the Great War of 1914-1918. His battalion encamped in or around Armentières in August of 1915.

My search actually began a year ago, 30 kilometers from Armentières, at Carrefour Rose, a crossroads in Boezinge (formerly Boesinghe), a farming community in Flanders on the outskirts of the small Belgian city of Ieper (formerly Ypres). Irish poet Francis Ledwidge, a Lance Corporal with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, was killed at that crossroads in a German shrapnel attack on July 31st, 1917. A memorial to Ledwidge stands at the very spot where he was killed. He is buried a half-kilometer away in Artillery Wood Cemetery. Visiting those sites last spring, I struggled to get my bearings in the disorienting landscape there—an unrelentingly flat expanse of grassland stretching out in all directions as far as the eye can see, punctuated only sporadically by small clusters of farm buildings and an occasional church steeple. Inevitably, I thought of the landscape of Ledwidge's native Boyne Valley in County Meath sketched by Alice Curtayne in her Foreword to *The Complete Poems*—"rich rolling land; woods and shrubberies ideal as 'trysting places'; observation posts for birds and flowers; winding roads and deep, untrammelled countryside" (8)—and of how the dominant theme of Ledwidge's poems written in Flanders and in northern France in the last half-year or so of his

life is encapsulated in the closing lines of “In France,” a little lyric he composed on February 3rd of 1917:

The hills of home are in my mind,
And there I wander as I will. (31)

But I thought of my grandfather too, even though at the time I did not know that on the very day that Ledwidge was killed at Carrefour Rose, he was only about 15 kilometers away in Proven, in training with his battalion for what would be known as the Battle of Langemarck in mid-August (see Wyrall III, 510-11).

What I did know as I stood there in Boezinge was that, like Ledwidge and the large majority of Irishmen of rural, village, or small-town stock who served in the British Army during the Great War, my grandfather would have felt indeed, in that relatively untextured and uncontroled landscape of Flanders and the regions of France near the Belgian border, “a long, long way from Tipperary” (as the popular marching song of the day had it)—a long, long way from the Irish countryside with its white-washed thatch-roofed cottages, undulant fields enclosed by tumble-down stone walls, twisty roads and lanes overarched by rich leafage, meandering rivers and brooks, perhaps furzy mountains rising in the distance. Actually born in County Tipperary in 1885, William O’Grady grew up in Clara, County Offaly. Sometime before the War he emigrated from Ireland to England, hoping to find work in the Irish-friendly city of Manchester. In September of 1914, responding to Lord Kitchener’s recruitment campaign, he enlisted in the King’s (Liverpool) Regiment and was assigned to the 12th (Service) Battalion. His medal index card indicates that his battalion entered its first “theatre of war,” in France, on July 24th of 1915. Over the next three years the 12th Battalion would be involved in many of the major engagements on the Western Front: both Battles of the Somme (1916 and 1918), the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) in 1917, and the Final Advance in Picardy in 1918. Standing at Carrefour Rose last year, I promised my grandfather—or promised myself—that I would honor his memory and honor his service by following his footsteps down the long, ribbon-thin roads and across the soggy battle-scarred fields of northern France and Belgium.

Which is what brought me to Armentières, the site of my grandfather’s first taste of the hard reality of war: on August 5th of 1915, two members of his battalion were “slightly wounded by shell-fire” there, according to King’s Regiment historian Everard Wyrall—“the first recorded casualties” (I, 193).

Based heavily on the regimental War Diaries now held at the British National Archives in Kew, London, Wyrall's history—three volumes worth, published between 1928 and 1935—has been an indispensable source of factual information for my tracking the whereabouts and the movements of my grandfather's battalion from their arrival at Boulogne in late July of 1915 until their demobilization in April of 1919. It has allowed me literally to map my grandfather's footsteps across the Western Front, bringing me closer, kilometer by kilometer, to an intimate understanding of the general experience that he had in common with the several hundred thousand other Irish soldiers who served in the British Army during the Great War, yet whose collective story and individual stories continue to be muffled by the nationalist narrative—the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence (1919-21), and the Irish Civil War (1922-23)—that dominates both scholarly discourse and the popular imagination in Ireland. Walking those streets of Armentières two days ago and driving through the surrounding countryside, pausing frequently to orient myself in the lay of that mostly featureless foreign landscape, I wondered what my grandfather would have thought of the nicety noted by historian Keith Jeffery in his book *Ireland and the Great War*—that an Irish-born soldier in a non-Irish regiment is not even counted among the conventional estimate of 210,000 Irishmen who served in the British Expeditionary Force during the Great War (6).

In that regard, I expect that I will ultimately grapple with the questions posed by historian John Horne in "Our War, Our History," his contribution to a noteworthy collection of essays (originally radio lectures presented on RTÉ) premised on the recognition that "Our island's conflicting memories of the war still blur the retrospective view and prevent us from taking the war's full measure." Asserting that "History is not the same as memory, so changing the lens means recovering Irish experiences from the war," Horne asks:

But what does the new 'memory' consist of? Are we doing anything more than recognising for the sake of political correctness that soldiers from the whole island participated in the war? The soldiers' war is certainly important, and we still have much to discover about the ordinary men who fought in it. But how did the soldiers' experiences relate to the larger meaning of the conflict? In what way was the Great War 'our war'? (2)

To some extent, those questions lie behind several pioneering publications that implicitly—or intrinsically—engage with the very issues of "memory" identified by Horne. These include two books from the 1990s by journalist Myles Dungan—

Irish Voices from the Great War (1995) and *They Shall Not Grow Old: Irish Soldiers and the Great War* (1997). Quarrying diaries, letters, memoirs, interviews, and oral histories, Dungan lifts the mask of anonymity from the Irish experience in the War and of the War by assembling a mosaic of first-hand accounts set against the backdrop of condensed retellings of particular battles engaged in by particular regiments or battalions. In the Preface to *Irish Voices* Dungan describes his basic strategy: “I have approached this material as a journalist to tell a series of personal stories trying not to lose sight of those stories as they flit in and out of the small number of selected battles in the book” (10). Neil Richardson’s book *A Coward If I Return, A Hero If I Fall* (2010) follows a similar strategy, though with an interesting approach that actually implicated the general public: “I decided to submit articles to national newspapers, appealing for people whose ancestors had fought to contact me. Whoever contacted me, I would do my best to research and include the story of their ancestor” (9). For each author the result is a gathering of vignettes of Irish soldiers from wide-ranging social, political and economic backgrounds, military divisions, and ranks. Yet—perhaps inevitably—each author seems compelled to harness these vignettes to the drama and the trauma of specific large-scale engagements and battles—Gallipoli, The Somme, Passchendaele—with the result that the soldiers profiled exist mostly as emblematic cutouts standing against epic backgrounds rather than as multi-dimensional individuals brought back to life in more exact landscapes and circumstances.

My immediate interest thus lies somewhere short of casting my grandfather as a representative true-born Irishman in a decidedly British regiment. It lies, rather, in reconstructing what else, in conjunction with his Irish identity, defined his experience as a soldier; it lies, that is, with recovering what other “things he carried”—to rework a resonant phrase from American Vietnam-era fiction writer Tim O’Brien—as he took his place in the rank and file of his battalion and his regiment. In fact, “The Things They Carried,” the title story of O’Brien’s collection of short fiction centered on the experience of American soldiers in the Vietnam War—iconoclastic when published in 1990, iconic now—represents a model (thematically, at least) for my own narrative ambition. At its heart, O’Brien’s story is about the psychological burden borne, unreasonably but understandably, by his young protagonist Lieutenant Jimmy Cross after one of the men in his platoon is killed by a sniper. Both structurally and texturally, however, the story reads as a catalogue not only of the *materiel* of the soldiers’ place and time—the weaponry essential to combat and survival in the jungles of Vietnam—but also of “the

things they carried” in addition to M16s and grenade launchers and Claymore antipersonnel mines and flak jackets and helmets:

Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother’s distrust of the white man, his grandfather’s old hunting hatchet. (5)

Thus, even while the story is grounded in the unremittingly physical world of automatic rifles and ammunition and communication equipment and supplies, O’Brien leads the reader to contemplate the ineluctable symbiosis between the outer trappings of the soldier’s experience of war and the inner burdens that each and every soldier bears in his own way. Sometimes, those burdens are registered materially—through letters and photographs from home, through Lieutenant Cross’s good-luck pebble and Dave Jensen’s rabbit’s foot, through the way Henry Dobbins “carried his girlfriend’s pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter” (10). Indelibly, however, through richly cadenced prose, O’Brien imprints on the reader that the greatest weight a soldier carries is ultimately more metaphysical than physical:

They all carried ghosts. (10)

They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. (14-15)

They carried the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity. (15)

They carried their own lives. The pressures were enormous. (15)

Standing in Armentières two days ago, my search for my grandfather begun in earnest, I wondered if I could ever truly know “the things he carried” as a soldier settling into the rigors and the rhythms of life on the Western Front.

Right away, I wondered what he thought and what he felt—what he “carried”—as his battalion marched back and forth during August of 1915 between training exercises (classes in bombing and machine gunning) on a farm named La Becque and billets in the village of Laventie (with further training and nighttime work parties to shore up service and communication trenches). I wondered too what he thought and felt as his battalion suffered its first fatalities—Private George Cubitt on August 12th, Lance Sergeant George McDonald and Private Ernest Irvine on the 27th, Private Walter Adams on the 31st (Wyrall I, 234).¹ I wondered too if he had heard that his 19-year-old brother Patrick, a Private in the Leinster Regiment, had been killed in Gallipoli on August 11th.² I wondered if he wondered about the well-being of another younger brother, Peter, a career soldier in the Regular Army who had already done a tour of duty in India with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and was now also somewhere on the Western Front. I wondered what my grandfather thought and felt—what he “carried” with him—as his battalion experienced their first deployment in frontline trenches, near the village of Fleurbaix, from September 5th to the 12th: “Sniping, machine gunning and mining and instructive shell-fire,” regimental historian Wyrall reports, “were the principal features of the tour, though casualties were light” (Wyrall I, 194).

In his Introduction to *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in War and Revolution, 1912-1923*, historian Edward Madigan describes how “Memory, the most intimate and subjective of our windows into the past” involves “the way the public mingles with the private and the present with the past in the individual memories and family stories that, for all of us, have the potential to be more immediate than history and less choreographed than commemoration” (1). In the case of my grandfather, very few specifics of his experience in the War have been preserved and handed down in the family. His surviving children—my 89-year-old father and his 93-year-old sister—do recall their father exchanging “war stories” with his “cronies” in St. Gabriel’s Park across from their walk-up apartment on East 35th Street in Manhattan (where William O’Grady relocated to marry his Irish sweetheart Alice Dignam after he was demobbed). But more than four decades

¹ At the end of each of the three volumes of the regimental history, Wyrall lists both officers and soldiers of “Other Ranks” who died during the period covered by the volume; he includes the date of death.

² For details, see my essay “Memento Mori: A Tale of Two Photographs,” *The Recorder: The Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, Volume 25, No. 2 & Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2013), 55-66.

after their father's death in 1971, they remember mostly only fragmentary details of his storytelling: his pronunciation of Ypres as "Yeeps" (not the more commonly reported "Wipers");³ his recollection of the stenciled signage on railway cars used to transport troops—*Hommes 40 Chevaux 20*; his utmost admiration for the officers of his battalion. A particular story involves a regimental inspection by Edward, the Prince of Wales (later the short-lived King Edward VIII), a regular visitor to the front lines; apparently when asked by His Majesty to hand over his rifle—an unthinkable request in time of war—Private O'Grady responded with a curt "No, Sir." Certainly, nuggets like those add texture to my broad understanding of my grandfather's experience gleaned from the standard comprehensive political and military histories of the Great War—John Keegan's *The First World War*, S. L. A. Marshall's *World War I*, Peter Hart's *The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War*, for example—and more specialized focuses on specific battles. Yet as I set out from Armentières toward Laventie and Fleurbaix (and beyond) with Wyrall's three-volume history of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment as my trusty guide, I was grateful for another three-volume narrative, written by Irish-born soldier Patrick MacGill, that coincidentally dovetails with Wyrall's account of my grandfather's first major combat experience—the engagement known as the Battle of Loos—which was centered in the town of Loos, about 25 kilometers from Lille, in late September of 1915.

In his magisterial history *The First World War*, John Keegan presents that protracted battle, launched by a backfiring British chlorine gas attack on the morning of September 25th, as an utter debacle that, "in strategic terms, was pointless":

Of the 15,000 infantry of the 21st and 24th Divisions, over 8,000 had been killed or wounded. Their German enemies, nauseated by the spectacle of the "corpse field of Loos," held their fire as the British turned in retreat "so great was the feeling of compassion and mercy after such a victory." A German victory Loos was; though the British persisted with attacks for another three weeks, they gained nothing but a narrow salient two miles deep, in which 16,000 British soldiers had lost their lives and nearly

³ In a note to his modernist epic *In Parenthesis*, Welsh soldier-poet David Jones explains "that habit of calling Ypres 'Wipers,' the use of which might easily elicit: 'What do you know about Wipers—Eeps if you don't mind.' It was held by some that 'Wipers' was only proper in the mouth of a man out before the end of 1915, by others, that the user must have served at the first Battle of Ypres in 1914." See David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), Note 35, 198.

25,000 had been wounded. The battle had been a terrible and frustrating initiation to combat for the soldiers of the New Armies. (202)⁴

While Everard Wyrall makes clear that my grandfather's battalion had a marginal role in this battle (this distinction by Wyrall exposes the risk of over-generalization about large-scale engagements embedded in books like Dungan's and Richardson's), he describes their return to the frontline trenches near Fleurbaix as nonetheless harrowing:

The second tour, which included the operations of 25th September, was distinctly trying to a young battalion, for although the battalion made no assault on the enemy, the front line was (to use a phrase then common in France), very "unhealthy." With only a few weeks' experience, both officers and men were not quite practiced in moving about the trenches, with the result that the enemy's snipers, who were deadly marksmen, claimed many a victim. During the preliminary bombardment and throughout the course of the action of the 25th, with fighting going on all round them, the King's men were in an uncomfortable position. Their trenches were shelled heavily, and on Zero day fifty yards of their parapets were blown to pieces by hostile 8-in. shells. Lieut. D. K. Wolley-Dod was killed and Capt. Charlesey wounded, while sixteen N.C.O's and men were killed and twenty-seven wounded. Another officer lost his life on the 27th—Second-Lieut. A. L. Ford—killed on patrol in the early morning. The battalion was relieved on 30th "after" (as the Diary records) "eleven days in the trenches and four days' fighting." The King's men then billeted again in Laventie. (I, 194)

⁴ The term "New Armies" refers to the battalions, made of up volunteers, which were formed following the vigorous recruitment campaign conducted by Lord Kitchener, the newly appointed Secretary of State for War, who recognized with the onset of hostilities in Europe in August of 1914 that to conduct a war predicted to last three years Great Britain would require a much-expanded Army. By the middle of September, 500,000 new recruits had responded to his call to serve, enough to raise five hundred "New Army" battalions which together comprised what were known as the first three "Kitchener Armies"—K1 (9th-14th Divisions), K2 (15th-20th Divisions) and K3 (21st-26th Divisions). Unlike the battalions of the long-established Regular Army and the reserve Territorial Army founded in 1908, the "New Army" battalions—also referred to as "Service" battalions—would have a lifespan dictated by the duration of the War.

Clearly, Wyrall's account brings me much closer to my grandfather's personal experience than does Keegan's. (Two days ago I was brought even closer when, in the Rue Pétillon Military Cemetery, located down a narrow road and then down a narrower lane on the outskirts of Fleurbaix, I happened upon the side-by-side graves of those 12th Battalion officers named by Wyrall. Trailing my grandfather through Belgium and France—from Flanders to The Somme—I stopped and visited more than a dozen of the nearly 1000 cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the final places of rest for more than 750,000 British Expeditionary Force fatalities. Keeping an eye out for gravestones designating casualties from my grandfather's regiment, I found literally hundreds of them, each one marked uniformly with the regimental badge featuring the White Horse of Hanover. The cemetery on Rue Pétillon holds the remains of more than 1500 soldiers from numerous regiments. Many of the stones are marked with just the chilling inscription A SOLDIER OF THE GREAT WAR / KNOWN UNTO GOD. Familiar to me by way of Wyrall's history, the names of Wolley-Dod and Ford stopped me in my tracks as I walked row by row among the stones.)

But the version of the Battle of Loos that I find most valuable as I search for my grandfather and "the things he carried" is that registered in *The Great Push* (1916), the third volume of Patrick MacGill's autobiographical trilogy describing his experience as a Rifleman (that is, a Private) in the regiment known as the London Irish Rifles. In the first two volumes—*The Amateur Army* (1915) and *The Red Horizon* (1916)—MacGill, a native of County Donegal best-known as a novelist and a poet of the underclasses, details first his basic training in England and then his early months as an infantryman in northern France. (By the time represented in *The Great Push* he had become a stretcher-bearer.) In a "Postscript" to his acclaimed Great War memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929; revised 1957), celebrated British man-of-letters Robert Graves, who had served as a commissioned officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, both asks and answers a fundamental question regarding the reliability of that sort of narrative:

But what is meant by the *truthfulness* of war-books? . . . It was practically impossible (as well as forbidden) to keep a diary in any trench-sector, or to send letters home which would be of any great post-War documentary value; and the more efficient the soldier the less time, of course, he took from his job to write about it. Great latitude should therefore be allowed to a soldier who has since got his facts or dates mixed. I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of

the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. High-explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary of anyone; the old trench-mind is at work in all over-estimation of casualties, ‘unnecessary’ dwelling on horrors, mixing of dates and confusion between trench rumours and scenes actually witnessed. (41-42)

That caveat notwithstanding, I find MacGill’s narratives essential reading for my purposes on two grounds. One, noted by historian David Taylor in *Memory, Narrative and the Great War* (2013), a long-overdue and altogether persuasive analysis of the importance of Rifleman MacGill’s writing on the War, is that “a working-class perspective is worthy of study as a counterweight to the middle-class accounts [like Graves’s] that allegedly constitute ‘our [that is, British] collective memory’” (2): the eldest son of a harness-maker, my grandfather had, by 1913, relocated from Ireland to Manchester, where he found employment as a railway laborer—like MacGill (a *spailpín* and a navy before he launched his writing career);⁵ William O’Grady was a decidedly working-class Irish émigré. The other involves the immediacy with which MacGill records his experiences, beginning with *The Amateur Army* which, he explains in the Preface, grew into an extended narrative during his basic training in England when “In my spare time I wrote several articles dealing with the life of the soldier from the stage of raw ‘rooky’ to that of finished fighter” (7). The undiluted strength of *The Great Push* likewise derives from the absence of distillation-over-time—that processing and purifying of the past—associated with conventional memoir: “Practically the whole book was written in the scene of action, and the chapter dealing with our night at Les Brebis [a village near Loos], prior to the Big Push, was written in the trench between midnight and dawn on September the 25th; the concluding chapter in the hospital at Versailles two days after I had been wounded at Loos” (vii-viii).

The Amateur Army is an enlightening account of what a typical new volunteer recruit—my grandfather included—would have experienced in the months leading up to shipping out to France in 1915. Its sequel, *The Red Horizon*, recognizes immediately the raised stakes, as the opening chapter ends with MacGill contemplating his fellow soldiers in the London Irish Rifles—contemplating, in effect, “the things they carried”—as they sleep on their ship sailing away from Southampton: “What did they dream of lying there? I wondered. Of their journey

⁵ *Spailpín* is the Irish word for a seasonal itinerant farm laborer. Navy is a term used broadly for a manual laborer, especially one working on civil engineering projects like digging canals.

and the perils that lay before them? Of the glory or the horror of the war? Of their friends whom, perhaps, they would never see again? It was impossible to tell” (18). Set “Somewhere in France” (the telling title of another early chapter), *The Red Horizon* at times anticipates Tim O’Brien in literally cataloguing what the soldiers carried physically as they prepared for combat in a disorienting and hostile landscape:

The company came to a halt in the village; we marched for three miles, and the morning being a hot one we were glad to fall out and lie down on the pavement, packs well up under our shoulders and our legs stretched out at full length over the kerbstone into the gutter. The sweat stood out in beads on the men’s foreheads and trickled down their cheeks on to their tunics. The white dust of the roadway settled on boots, trousers, and putties, and rested in fine layers on haversack folds and cartridge pouches. Rifles and bayonets, spotless in the morning’s inspection, had lost all their polished lustre and were gritty to the touch. We carried a heavy load, two hundred rounds of ball cartridge, a loaded rifle with five rounds in magazine, a pack stocked with overcoat, spare underclothing, and other field necessaries, a haversack containing twenty-four hours rations, and sword and entrenching tool per man. We were equipped for battle and were on our way towards the firing line. (49-50)

Reading that scene inscribed by MacGill in a chapter titled “First Blood,” how easily I could picture my grandfather on march just a few months later with the 12th Battalion of the King’s (Liverpool) Regiment from Armentières to Laventie and then on to the frontline trenches at Fleurbaix.

But what brings me closest to my goal at this point in my search for my grandfather is Patrick MacGill’s inscription not even of the Battle of Loos *per se* but of “the things *he* carried” in *The Great Push*. In perhaps the most disquieting moment in his short story “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien—himself a Vietnam infantry veteran—acknowledges the ultimate “thing” that soldiers bear and yet try desperately to conceal:

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely

restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. (20-21)

MacGill had admitted to similar worries himself in that opening chapter of *The Red Horizon* set on the ship crossing the English channel: "What will it be like, but above all, how shall I conduct myself in the trenches? Maybe I shall be afraid—cowardly. But no!" (17). But as a passage in the final chapter of *The Great Push* makes apparent, there might be even more at stake for a soldier than masking cowardice. Earlier, MacGill had expressed his grave misgivings on the eve of September 25th about engaging in combat with "the enemy": "At dawn I might deprive him of life and he might deprive me of mine" (51). A day or so later, reflecting on the War just moments after suffering the wound that would end his service on the Western Front and just hours before another futile and fateful morning attack by the British on the German defenses at Loos, MacGill put himself into the place of his German counterparts:

No doubt they had little bundles of firewood with them to cook their breakfasts at dawn. They were now thanking God that the night was quiet, that they could get into the comparative shelter of the trenches in safety. Long lines of men in grey, keeping close to the shelter of spinneys sunk in shadow; transport wagons rumbling and jolting, drivers unloading at the "dumps," ration parties crossing the open with burdens of eatables; men thinking of home and those they loved as they sat in their leaky dug-outs, scrawling letters by the light of their guttering candles. This was the life that went on in and behind the German lines in the darkness and rain. (248)

Clearly, this passage crystallizes how the emergent trajectory of MacGill's trilogy is not just the arc of "disillusionment" with war that David Taylor rightly recognizes (7) but an arc of empathy as well.

Arriving at that point in *The Great Push*, I remembered a story my father told me—about once, as a young boy, asking his father if he had ever shot a German. My father admits that at the time he was disappointed by his father's intentionally ambiguous answer, his resistance to glamorizing his wartime experience for

his wide-eyed son: “Well, I aimed my rifle at one—yes, I had him in my sights . . . and when I looked again he wasn’t there. . . .” I thought of the complexity and the subtlety of that answer—“the things he carried,” indeed—as I moved on from Armentières and Laventie, following Private William O’Grady’s footsteps toward the frontline at Fleurbaix. I thought also of the way that Patrick MacGill introduced his empathetic reflection on those German soldiers: “I had a vivid impression. In my mind I saw the Germans coming up to their trench through the darkness, the rain splashing on their rifles and equipment, their forms bent under the weight which they carried” (247-48).

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