



Francis Ledwidge – Soldier. Poet. 1887-1917

This special edition of Corncrake is part of the many celebrations around the centenary of Meath poet Francis Ledwidge. He was serving with the 1st Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers when he was killed at Passchendaele in 1917.

The poems in this issue were written as part of a concert organised by Dr John Graham of the Inniskillings Museum on 20th July, and some were read in St Michael's Church and in Blakes of the Hollow. The concert featured some of Ledwidge's own poems and letters, read by Frances Mulley, Seamus Mac Annaidh, Marcus Crawford and others; musical settings by Ivor Gurney and Michael Head, sung by soprano Lauren Coalter, accompanied by Matthew Murphy; and a reading by Adrian Dunbar of Seamus Heaney's poem *In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge*.

As a blend of the two most well-known portraits, our featured image aptly illustrates the complexity of the man: a sensitive and romantic poet, able to converse with the likes of A.E. and W.B. Yeats, yet also a more-than-competent soldier and leader, with a passion for justice – road mender, Union organiser, County Councillor, and founder member of the local Irish Volunteers. We hope that complexity is reflected in our poems.

Most of all in our researches, we were struck by the deep integrity and sheer humanity of his letters. Though unlucky in his love for Ellen Vaughey, Frank Ledwidge had a talent for friendship – whether with his literary patron Lord Dunsany, his fellow soldier and staunch Belfast Unionist Bob Christie, or the executed leader of the Easter Rising and fellow poet, Thomas MacDonagh.

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Jenny Brien Editor

The Inniskillings Museum has produced a booklet with details of Francis Ledwidge's military career and an appreciation of his life.

The cover image is courtesy of the Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, County Meath



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FRANCIS LEDWIDGE
— 1917 — 2017 —

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The Rock Remains

For Francis and Ellie

They came and went, this trysting couple
Seeking shelter from both wind and rain
And from the prying eyes of the prurient;
As they held hands with long lingering looks.
I did not feel put upon or burdened by them
They disturbed not my rest nor calm repose;
I was rather glad of their occasional company
For we all came from the same good earth.
I was saddened by their sudden leaving of me
Her to a new beau, him to fight far from here
Such is the inconstancy of love and life;
Whilst I stayed, same as ever, silent and true.
I grieved for their passing, one after the other
In time unseemly, for those long-lived as I;
If I had water in my veins, then I would've wept
Until my tears cleft my whole self in two pieces.
Still I remain, wearing their precious memories
On my hard skin, amongst the bloom of lichen;
He, of the earth, a poet of land, flora and fauna
She, of the night sky, shining as a brilliant star.

In the garden of Francis Ledwidge's family cottage, there lies a great stone brought down from the Hill of Slane; it was known to figure heavily as a backdrop to the wooing of his first love, Ellie Vaughey, by Francis.

John Llewellyn James

The Blackbird

i.m. Francis Ledwidge

Fair-haired Ellie shared
with me her sacred memory
of you, and your story

and the twinning
of you both
for only a short time

before she left you
for another; and you left –

heartbroken – for The Front.

You recorded your presence
there, in a palm-sized mud-
and-blood-stained notepad;

timeless words, in pencil,
recovered from a pocket.

I feel your essence
in the painful perfection
of her regret
as I am flooded
by a plaintive music.

I hope you too can hear
it; that you now can rest
lighter – as a feather –
within velvety dark wings
contingent to her being.

At the tip of my pen
let your beak break
the surface tension
of this awkward silence.

Let your voice
find a way to stage a bleed
and slowly seep
not far from my blunt nib.

Let a *nom de plume*
– without a name –
infuse into the fibre
of my blank page
and coagulate
as love-loud verse
in the guise of a dark
ink-blotted blackbird.

John D. Kelly

How Could You Leave Me?

In that instant it was over,
we were torn apart.
You were gone from my life,

a knife through my heart.

I could not believe it,
it was such a shock.
You were my world,
my love, my rock.

Though blackbirds still sing,
I do not hear their song.
No more your sweet voice,
as I trudge wearily along.

Stricken with grief,
tears spilt and cheeks dried.
Too tired to sleep now,
Oh how I cried.

How could you leave me?
I trusted you so,
with our future together,
now where shall I go?

It's too painful to see you,
I cannot stay here.
You have betrayed me,
that much is now clear.

So I'm leaving for Dublin,
and there I'll enlist.
For when I'm gone,
I won't be missed.

Francis Ledwidge fell in love with Ellie Vaughey who later jilted him for John O'Neill. The sight of the two together out and about his beloved Slane, hurt Frank deeply and was a constant reminder of his grief. The chance to escape this torment may have cemented his decision to enlist, with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in Dublin, on 24th Oct 1914.

Brendan Kelly

Bob Christie Shares a Glass with Francis

The sweetest sound that I ever did hear
Was that of your voice calling to me
Through the unholy fug of war memory.
So let us raise our cups to Gallipoli;
I never had a truer friend before that day
When you appeared there at my side.
Let us remember too our fallen friends
Alive only now in precious memories;
And with the Good Lord in the Hereafter.
I have lost a leg but gained much more
In a friend across harsh political divide;
I pray more such friendships may abound.

Bob Christie, a Protestant from Belfast, met Francis during the War. He was seriously injured in Gallipoli and Francis stayed with him, until he was evacuated back to Ireland. Francis visited him when he was on leave, on his way to Ebrington Barracks, Derry; he ended staying longer with his friend and was subsequently court-martialled and he lost a stripe.

John Llewellyn James

Molly Christie

“Frank saved my life” my son says,
“there in Suvla Bay.”
Just so. It blew his leg away.
His father and his brother still remain
but now at least the War has let Bob go.

And you are here. Brown eyes like them
and still in uniform, although
you’re broken too – stiff back, stiff mind,
great heart too proud to turn aside.
“Stay with us for the night,” I said
“You’ll sleep in Alexander’s bed.”

You told us stories of the Boyne –
The little places that you knew
so well, and I recalled the Antrim glen
where William and I met
before he worked the Yard.

"William and Mary," Bob said then,
"How Protestant is that?"

"But call me Molly," I replied
"Your homeplace seems so rich
compared to ours.
English, almost, as ours was Scots."
"Yet both are Irish too," you said
and then I smiled, "How true!"

Friends came, and day turned into day
And all the time we talked
of paintings, pints and poetry
with music through the nights.
We laughed and put the world to rights
Between New Lodge and Tiger Bay.

Until you had to leave.

"Write soon, for it will surely be
'Good news for Molly' when
the Army lets you go."

You looked so sad, so close to tears.
"Someone," I asked, "for whom
that never can be so?"

You nodded, sighed,
"MacDonagh."
Bob said "Hush!"

"MacDonagh –
that's a fine Scots name.
Was he a poet too?"

"He was. A friend like Bob, and brave as him.
They shot him, you must know,
last month in Dublin."

Then we hugged,
but I was thinking of

Someone
in uniform,
brown eyes like yours,
who was in Dublin too.

Jennifer Brien

The Greatcoat – Katja’s Story

Did I ever tell you, my dear grandchildren
About the Irish soldier who came upon me
Shaking with brimming fear and icy cold
In the harsh rain on a road in war-torn Serbia?
I was separated from my parents, but huddled
Amongst a rag-taggle band of lowly refugees
Fleeing from fierce fighting and starvation.
His cohort thundered along that rutted road
In boots that surely had stormclouds in them
With the noise that rattled the forest trees.
Our group hurried to the side of the track
And cowered in fear and blank submission.
One of the men broke away from his ranks
And cast a fitful eye upon my presence;
I shrunk further into the group in apt terror.
But he smiled as he took off his greatcoat
Wrapped it around my bone-thin shoulders;
I had not even the breath then to thank him.
It wasn’t until many days later, as we rested
That I found his wire-framed spectacles
In a soft leather pouch in a coat pocket
That my short arms could barely reach into.
There was also a notebook full of writing
That I couldn’t read as it was a foreign script
But still proved magnetic to my curious eyes.
I would wear the spectacles, though too large;
They slid down my nose and fell off my ears
Until a woman tore a rag and tied them on me.
The coat was huge and it dragged along the road
But at night it cocooned my whole frail body.
After the war and re-uniting with my parents
I went back to school and learnt English tongue
So that I may read the words of my saviour.
I discovered he was a poet of the blessed soil
Who often wrote of his home in faraway Ireland.
I dreamt of visiting, but it proved too far for me,
To say thank-you to the man who gave me my life.
My end now nigh, wrap the greatcoat around me
Let me lie in the soil, shallow, with the Sun’s rays
And caress of rain to be felt on my reposed face;
My Irish soldier’s greatcoat, keeping me warm.

Francis Ledwidge, on a road in war-torn Serbia, generously gave his greatcoat to an unknown girl, amongst a group of refugees on the roadside as they were passing. The poem takes that story and speculates what may have happened to that girl, whom I have called ‘Katja’.

John Llewellyn James

Digging for Fools' Gold

There is no sweet lark song
here, to temper dying moans
and the mad alarms of battle
as we dig into sticky wet mud
to only lose more ground
around already rotting feet.

And, after it all,
we're still only the silly sum
of what we can see
from where we're at;

and as we sink deeper
into the hell of its absence,
the earth is showing us
just how tall we are –
what big fools we are –
without its presence;

and when we no longer
have the bold brass necks
to see beyond the surface
of all that glitters (or doesn't)
above the worms
and decaying leaf mould,
we know that one day soon
we will be face to face with
the shells of our own brothers

and we know that even Mother
Nature can't turn them into gold
within the dark lonely graves
we have all dug for ourselves.

John D. Kelly

The Door-Bell

All was quiet and peaceful
in the cottage
and then
the doorbell sounded – boom!

In an instant, all hell
broke loose
as its deafening sound
echoed through every room

but even so, no one came.

It was one of those confounded
wireless electronic imitators;
not of a typical chime at all
but oddly of a wartime bomb –
an exploding shell.

He had it wired to remind him
of the trenches, the mud,
the blood, of them –
his best mates Frank and Jim
who it couldn't be at his door.

Everyone thought him crazy
to fix such a sounder on his wall.

He had ignored the installer
who tried for at least an hour
to talk him out
of that particular setting

but there was no getting
through, or past, his life-
long feeling of guilt –
his need to suffer
further – to atone
for being a lone survivor.

A week later
the Guards broke down
his front door to find him
lying on the floor, frozen;

his wrinkled left hand
on a tin-hatted head;
his right arm and eye missing;
the other closed; lips smiling.

The Return

I met him early in the morn
Before the dawn, in grey light walking
He seemed as from another time
We fell in rhyme; we started talking.
Listen (he said) the blackbird's song –
For which I long – from Slane is ringing
My home, my love, my native land
Now I shall end at my beginning.

Have you been far away? I asked
For what is past has moved you greatly
Oh, I have been where few may go
Both joy and woe I know innately.
I served my time through sleet and cold
Mending this road in every weather
But I have walked on dead men's bones
When all the stones called out together.

I fought for those who killed my friends
And sought amends for that injustice
Till I was making roads once more
Through mud and gore for King Augustus.
But then I heard one sing of grief
And found relief in sweet compassion
My Ellie of the golden hair
Had never loved in such a fashion.

For she had lived a thousand years
Where no one fears the end of summer
The falling leaf, the fading light
The silent beat of a distant drummer.

Yet she had loved a human heart
Fairer to start than all about her
Who loved her well a hundred years
But then chose age and death without her.

And as I heard her tale of woe
Her quest to know some other lover
I dreamed that love had just begun
My joy was done, my gladness over.

I knew she would return at last

In one fierce blast she drew me to her
In her long-dreamed-of summer land
Till in the end I also flew her.

For at the sighing of the leaves
When all life grieves for light departed
An ancient and a sad desire
Steals in to tire the human-hearted.

I know, I said. You wrote that too.
It came from true and deep devotion
The hundred years that missed your heart
Began to start their wheels in motion
Too late – the friends you long for still
Like Ellie on the Hill are sleeping
And Matty's fiddle no more plays
His tunes from days before the weeping.

But you are now where Age and Death
Can send no breath of change to find you
For, Friend, a hundred years have passed
Since she first cast her spell to bind you.

And you are still remembered well
For your own spell less misbegotten
Fear not. Your words have worked their art.
Your human heart is not forgotten.

Jennifer Brien