

A black and white close-up portrait of Francis Ledwidge. He has dark hair, a mustache, and is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on the right side of his face.

FRANCIS

LEDWIDGE

SOLDIER. POET.

Acknowledgements

This publication by the Inniskillings Museum provides an outline of the military service of Francis Ledwidge and a literary appreciation of his life and work, written by Alice Curtayne who wrote the definitive biography, *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet*, in 1972.



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Service History

16138 Lance Corporal F. E. Ledwidge

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers

Francis Ledwidge was born in Slane, County Meath on the 19th August 1887. His father, Patrick, was a labourer and died when Francis was 4 years old. He was brought up by his mother, Anne.

In October 1904, when Francis was 17 years old and working as a grocer's assistant for Mr WG Daly in Rathfarnham, Dublin, he enlisted in the 5th Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, a militia unit. He was living with a Mr Collins in Rathfarnham and was 5'3" tall and weighed 103lbs. In 1905 he was recorded as absent.



The cottage where Francis Ledwidge was born in Janeville, Slane, County Meath, now home to the Francis Ledwidge Museum.

On the outbreak of the Great War he enlisted at Richmond Barracks, Dublin, in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the same regiment as his patron, Lord Dunsany. He was attested on the 26th October 1914. He had two tours of operations duty.

After basic training, he was posted to the 5th Battalion, D Company. He was promoted to Lance Corporal in the summer of 1915 while he was training in Basingstoke, England. On the 7th of August 1915, he deployed with his Battalion to Suvla Bay, Gallipoli. He was promoted to Acting Corporal on the 30th August 1915 and confirmed the rank of Corporal on the 15th October 1915.

After he withdrew from Gallipoli with his Battalion, he deployed to the Balkans and Greece. He developed rheumatic backache and was treated at No. 30 Casualty Clearing Station before being transferred to No. 28 Gen Hospital on the 18th December 1915. He was evacuated by Hospital Ship from Salonika and spent five months in a military hospital in Cairo before returning to hospital in Manchester. After he was discharged from hospital, he joined the 3rd Battalion which was then in Ebrington Barracks, Londonderry.

Below: A cap badge of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers from the First World War.

Bottom: Congestion at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli in 1915.



Who was Lord Dunsany?

Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany (4th July 1878 – 25th October 1957) was an Anglo-Irish writer and dramatist; his work, mostly in the fantasy genre, was published under the name Lord Dunsany. During the 1910's he was considered one of the greatest living writers of the English-speaking world.

Dunsany was born and raised in London, but lived much of his life at Dunsany Castle (pictured below) in County Meath. He served as a Second Lieutenant in the Coldstream Guards during the Second Boer War and as a Captain in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (pictured below) in the First World War. In the latter stages of the war he wrote propaganda material for the War Office.



On his way to Ebrington Barracks in July 1916, he overstayed his leave and was insubordinate to an officer. He was subsequently court-martialled and reduced to ranks. In October 1916 he was posted to the 1st Battalion and on the 29th December 1916 he returned to active service on the Western Front. In early 1917, he was promoted to Lance Corporal.

He was killed at Passchendaele, Belgium on the 31st July 1917 while serving with the 1st Battalion. He is commemorated in Artillery Wood Cemetery, Boezinge, Leper, West Vlaanderen.

Mrs Anne Ledwidge, his mother, was paid £3-2s-4d in April 1918 in unpaid wages and received a War Gratuity of £13 in November 1919. In 1922, Lord Dunsany requested his medals on behalf of his mother.



Francis Ledwidge was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal during the First World War.

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 and W. A. Orren.

London Gazette—

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers—Capt. P. J. L. Davies
 is seconded for duty with a Labour Corps (21st June,
 1917).

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers—The undermentioned
 to be temporary captains:—2nd Lieutenant J. W.
 McMechan, Lieut. W. J. K. Moor, Lieut. W. H.
 Wagnersleben. 2nd Lieut. S. Fuchs to be acting
 captain while commanding a company, 14th May, 1917,
 to 17th June, 1917. To be temporary lieutenants:—
 S. M. H. Mark, T. W. Beezer, R. M. Boyle, E. M.
 Wilkinson, R. S. Deane, M.C.

Service Battalion—Royal Irish Fusiliers—Major S.
 J. Somerville (Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers) to com-
 mand a formation, and to be temporary lieutenant-colonel
 (18th April, 1917).

Local Reserve—Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers—Tem-
 porary Lieut. J. Douglas, from a Service Battalion, to be
 temporary lieutenant (21st February, 1917), with
 seniority 27th September, 1915.

Service Battalions—Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers—
 2nd Lieut. W. E. Tait (since seconded for service
 with Indian Army) relinquishes the temporary rank
 of lieutenant on ceasing to be employed with a bat-
 talion (1st June, 1917).



Major Lewis-Captain E. E. LEDWIDGE,
 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.
 Killed in action.

(Black usually sent by "The Sphinx.")

Repatriated Officer Prisoners.

ROYAL INNSKILLING FUSILIERS.

The following Officers interned in the Chirens
 (Dex) district, Switzerland, have passed the Swiss
 Medical Examination for repatriation to England,
 under the provisions of the recent Hague agreement:

- Captain E. D. HANCOCK.
 " F. PHILLIPS.
 " THORAL.
 Lieutenant J. SHANNON.

Left: The front cover of the regimental journal
 The Sprig of Shillelagh dated September 1917.

Below: The Medal Index Card for Francis Ledwidge.

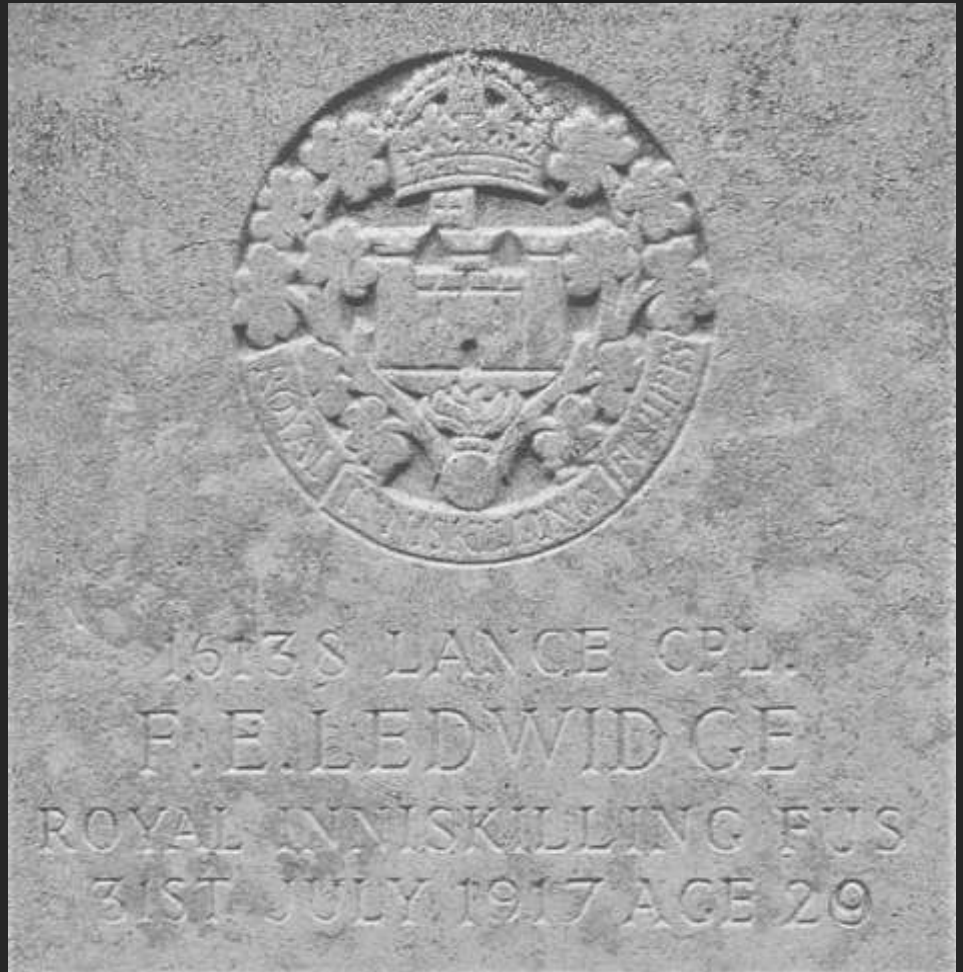
| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|----------|-----------------------|-----|----------------|--|----------------|--|
| Name | | Rank | | Date | | Regt. No. | |
| LEDWIDGE | | R. Innisk. Fus. 2/CAF | | 16/18 | | | |
| Surnames | | First Name | | Middle Name | | Initials | |
| Francis | | | | | | | |
| No. | Regiment | Rank | Age | Remarks | | | |
| 18 | R.I.F. | 2nd Lt. | 46 | K.O.C. 21.7.17 | | | |
| 18 | R.I.F. | 2nd Lt. | 46 | K.O.C. 21.7.17 | | | |
| Place of Birth | | Place of Birth | | Place of Birth | | Place of Birth | |
| 187/Blackburn | | 187/Blackburn | | 187/Blackburn | | 187/Blackburn | |
| Date of Issue | | Date of Issue | | Date of Issue | | Date of Issue | |
| 11.7.17 | | 11.7.17 | | 11.7.17 | | 11.7.17 | |

Last remaining copy of Roll of Call of 18th April 1917

187/Blackburn

Right: The gravestone of Francis
Ledwidge in Artillery Wood
Cemetery near Boezinge, Belgium
(grave reference Plot II, Row B, Grave 5)

Below: The Memorial to Francis
Ledwidge at the location where
he was killed near Boezinge.





Appreciation

Francis Ledwidge

Who fought in another man's war

By Alice Curtayne

On the 31st July, 1917, Francis Ledwidge was killed in action in the First World War. He would have been thirty years of age if he had lived another month. Born in Slane, County Meath, the son of a farm labourer, Ledwidge was fortunate in his birthplace, one of the loveliest villages in Ireland, overlooking the historic River Boyne, tree-begirt, surrounded by a great expanse of rolling pastures. Before he was fourteen, Ledwidge had to leave school to help support his widowed mother who had a large family to rear. Neighbouring farmers were glad to employ the strong willing youth. This boyhood work kept Ledwidge close to the land, moulding the future poet and colouring his poetry. He was a born poet if ever there was one. His first verses were traced with a piece of slate on boulders in fields, or incised on gateposts, or written with a charred stick on the wall of a byre. A verse so written still survives in Fitzsimon's farm.

The popular idea of a poet is that he is aloof and dreamy. Frank Ledwidge was not like that. He was good company and had many friends. He was a keen follower of the local football team, the Slane Blues, and he never missed the village sports: he was a champion at the high jump. Leadership

was in his nature. He founded the Slane Drama Group in which he was both chief actor and producer. While he was employed at the Beauparc Copper Mines, Frank organised a strike for tolerable working conditions, and he was always a supporter of the labour movement. He was elected to a seat on the Board of Guardians and also the Rural District Council. With Frank's help, the Ledwidge family reached a degree of prosperity; his mother was freed of field work and other heavy tasks. Frank fell in love and, for a time, he and Ellie Vaughey, a local girl, were blissfully happy. She inspired at least thirty of Ledwidge's poems.

In November 1913, the Irish Volunteers were formed "To secure and maintain the rights and liberties of the whole people of Ireland". Frank Ledwidge and his brother Joe were among the founders of the Slane Corps of the Irish Volunteers, and Frank devoted every evening he could to training. On August 4th, 1914, England declared war on Germany. All went on as before with the Irish Volunteers until John Redmond, leader of the Parliamentary Party, made his famous speech at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, on September 20th, 1914.

The interests of Ireland, of the whole of Ireland, are at stake in this war undertaken in defence of the highest interests of religion and morality and right. It would be a disgrace for ever in our country, a reproach to her manhood, and a denial of the lessons of history, if young Ireland confined their efforts to defend the shores of Ireland from an unlikely invasion, shrinking from their duty of providing on the field of battle that gallantry and courage which had distinguished their race all through its history. I say to

you, therefore, your duty is twofold. I am glad to see much magnificent material for soldiers around me, and I say to you, go on drilling and make yourselves efficient for the work, and then account yourselves as men not only in Ireland itself, but wherever the firing line extends, in defence of right, of freedom, and religion in this war.

Stripped of its verbiage, this was a recruiting speech and it was received as such. The original members of the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers immediately held a meeting. Five days later they issued a statement terminating their association with Redmond and with the nominees he had forced on them the previous June. Now there were two groups contending for control of the Irish Volunteers: Redmond and his supporters, who called their followers the “National Volunteers”, and Eoin MacNeill and the original twenty co-founders, who retained the name “Irish Volunteers”. At a meeting of the Slane corps of Volunteers, the whole hall declared for Redmond, except for six men, one of whom was Frank Ledwidge. After that meeting, the Volunteers to whom he had given his heart, his time and all his spare cash, ceased to exist for him.

At the next meeting of the Navan Rural Council session all except Ledwidge were united in their enthusiasm for Redmond: his fellow councillors sneered at him as a “pro-German”. Five days later, on October 24th, Ledwidge enlisted in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers at Richmond Barracks, in Dublin. Lord Dunsany, his friend and patron, had of course joined up the moment the war had been declared. At the time, Dunsany was out of touch with

Ledwidge and, despite popular belief, had nothing whatsoever to do with his decision to enlist. Francis Ledwidge wrote of his decision.

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 at home but pass resolutions.

There was another strong reason, however, why Ledwidge left Slane at this time: Ellie Vaughey had jilted him. She and her handsome new escort, John O'Neill, were often seen together. The sight turned the knife in the poet's wound.

As Ledwidge wrote, even before the war had started.

*I'm wild for wandering far-off places
Since one forsook me whom I held most dear.*

The six months following his enlistment, Ledwidge spent in Dublin and in only a few months he won a lance corporal's stripe. Then he had the good fortune of forming an enduring friendship with a fellow soldier, Robert Christie, a Protestant from Belfast. Both were interested in literature in general and in poetry in particular. There was much optimism about the war. Even the Irish volunteers believed the British Empire was invincible and that the struggle would be over in a matter of months. On the other hand, Ledwidge was stricken by the news that his beloved Ellie had married John O'Neill. When Christmas leave came around everyone in Slane noticed the change that had

come over their Frank. He had become quiet and the fund of good stories had come to an end. Yet at this time Ledwidge wrote *A Little Boy in the Morning*, one of his best poems. It was inspired by the sudden death of little Jack Tiernan, a neighbour's son, whom Frank used to meet driving in the cows in the morning;

*The moon leans on a silver horn
Above the silhouettes of the morn,
And from their nest-sills finches whistle
Or stooping pluck the downy thistle.
How is the morn so gay and fair
Without his whistling in the air?*

*The world is calling, I must go.
How shall I know he did not pass
Barefooted in the shining grass?*

At the end of April, 1915, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers left Dublin for England, receiving a terrific send-off from the cheering crowds. The Tenth Division was taken from Liverpool to Hampshire, where camp was set up on a farm near Basingstoke. Ledwidge and Robert Christie were almost inseparable companions there, and they enjoyed this phase of Army life marred only by the tedium of long route marches and mock battles. Both made friends with a lovely, hospitable family named Carter. During this pastoral interlude Ledwidge wrote three poems: *The Place*, *May Morning*, and *Evening England*. But a great sorrow struck: Ellie died in childbirth.

The night before the news came, Ledwidge had been disturbed by a vivid dream of white birds flying over the Atlantic Ocean: it seemed a presage of disaster. He wrote a poem *Caoin*, got six days' leave and went to Manchester where Ellie and John O'Neill had been living. Ellie had not been happy in the city: her health deteriorated; her pretty looks had faded. Her pregnancy had been difficult and she had to have a Caesarean section at seven months. The baby daughter was saved. These details only served to heighten Ledwidge's grief. He never ceased to mourn for Ellie; she was with him in thought until the end of his life. On his return to Basingstoke, Ledwidge wrote one of the many elegies for Ellie Vaughey, *To One Dead*;

*A blackbird singing
On a moss-upholstered stone
Bluebells swinging,
Shadows wildly blown,*

*A song in the wood,
A ship on the sea,
The song was for you
And the ship was for me.*

Ledwidge's company left Basingstoke in July 1915 for Devonport and from there they sailed in a converted coal boat for Gallipoli, in the Dardanelles. On the voyage Ledwidge felt extremely homesick; his worst pang of memory was his mother's face. In an effort to sublimate his feelings he wrote *On the heights of Crocknanarna*;

*...I heard a woman weeping
In the brown rocks and grey.
Oh, the pearl of Crocknanarna
(Crocknanarna, Crocknaharna),
Black with grief is Crocknanarna
Twenty hundred miles away*

The Gallipoli military adventure was costly. Robert Christie was wounded at the Battle of Kidney Hill and by strange coincidence Ledwidge was one of those who helped carry him to safety. There had been so many casualties that the Medical Corps could not cope and Ledwidge volunteered to help. Christie was invalided out of the Army. For the two close friends, Gallipoli was the end of their soldiering together. After the disastrous Battle of Gallipoli, with its 5,300 dead, there came a stalemate in September. During the eight weeks Ledwidge spent in this campaign, he wrote no poetry at all. Soon he was involved in one of the most successful retreats in military history. At night 118,000 men were taken off the peninsula with no casualties. Ledwidge was one of the lucky ones: on that same peninsula, 1,900 of his comrades in the shattered Tenth Division met their death.

Serbia was the next scene of warfare, and Ledwidge's regiment landed on Salonika in preparation for the fray. In October, and at first sight, the countryside seemed a dream setting of almost unreal beauty, but, with winter, the soldiers got orders to move about five miles up the mountains. The weather turned very cold; food supplies soon became scarce. Yet, in this unlikely setting, Ledwidge experienced the greatest event of his literary life – the arrival of an advance copy of his first book *Songs of the Fields*. He was so delighted with the little volume that it was better to him than food and warmth. Shortly afterwards, he had the added pleasure of receiving press cuttings mostly praising his poetry with much better reviews than he had anticipated. About all this he wrote happily to Dunsany, and then followed with a description of his surroundings;

The weather is getting bad, the nights in particular. Being in a mountainy country, we suffer much from rain and cold. A goodly few of us have rheumatism badly, but the work is still here and the doctor is inexorable.

In an earlier letter to Dunsany, Ledwidge had said;

I wish the damn war would end; we are all so sick for the old countries. Still, our hearts are great and we are always ready for anything which may be required of us.

Shortly afterwards, Ledwidge wrote again to Dunsany;

I am too short of paper to send you copies of some poems I have written, but I will be careful of them until an issue [of paper] takes place, if one ever does in this awful place. I wish I could get home for a rest and go to France in the spring. I will never hold out all the winter here as I suffer terribly from rheumatism... of course you understand that we are quite different from what we have been in your day. We are all weak and sick.

At the end of November, a sudden blizzard swept down on Serbia, covering the mountains with snow. Huddled in his tent, Ledwidge wrote two poems which he sent to Dunsany a few days later, saying;

Remember in reading the enclosed the circumstances under which they are written. When Love and Beauty Wander Away was written by Lake Dorrian one awful night of thunder and rain. I was thinking of the end of the world as the Bible predicts it and tried to imagine Love and Beauty leaving the world hand in hand, and we could not yet die. Standing on the edge of a great precipice with no song, no love, no memory. At the same place, thinking of another thing, I wrote the Nocturne.

The other thing Ledwidge thought of was his former love, Ellie;

*Grey days come soon
And I am alone
Can you hear the moan,
Where you rest, Aroon?"*

Shortly after the storm Ledwidge had complained about, the Bulgarians came out in strength against the British and the French. The Allies had to retreat back to Salonika. Of this retreat, Francis wrote to a friend that;

It poured with rain on us all the long ninety miles we had to march, and what with sleeping in wet clothes, sweating and cooling down, I got an attack of Barney Fitzsimon's back... We should have left the previous evening but just as we had mustered to go we received word that a French Brigade was almost surrounded higher up and we were called on to do a flank attack. We did, and extricated the French, but got in a similar condition ourselves by morning. The Bulgars came on like flies and though we mowed down line after line, they persisted with awful doggedness and finally gave us a bayonet charge which secured their victory. We only just had about 200 yards to escape by and we had to hold this until next evening and then dribble out as best we could.

They stayed for two days on their retreat at a Greek village, called Sara-Jul, and out of this came his escapist poem *The Cobbler of Sara Jul*, in an unusual style difficult to classify.

Serbians suffered also in the Allies' defeat. In a humanitarian gesture of compassion, Ledwidge gave his greatcoat to a shivering Serbian girl whom the soldiers encountered at the roadside. Not only had she run away from home in light clothes, she also had been separated from her family and friends in the general panic. Ledwidge's act of kindness resulted in the loss of his glasses, which he had left in his coat pocket. It was months before he was able to replace these. It was also the end of the Serbian campaign as far as Ledwidge was concerned. Before the retreating soldiers reached camp, he collapsed – his back so badly inflamed that he could not stand up. There followed months in hospital, five of them in the East. Eventually Ledwidge reached the Western General Hospital in Manchester, and there received news of the 1916 Rising in Dublin.



Always an Irish Volunteer in his heart, Ledwidge was deeply shocked by the Rising and by the consequent executions. The Rising changed everything. He felt that he would have to get out of the British Army as soon as possible. MacDonagh and Pearse had been two of Frank's best friends. He particularly admired MacDonagh's poetry and said of him that "he had a beautiful mind". Ledwidge's lament "Thomas MacDonagh" is widely recognised as one of his finest poems, worth quoting whole;

*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 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.*

On his first evening home in Slane – early in May, about a week after MacDonagh's execution – Ledwidge read out "Thomas MacDonagh" to his family. He was in a hurry to send a copy to Dunsany to discover whether his

trusted critic considered the poem worthy of publication. On his visit home, both family and friends found Frank a different man. He had become morose, and it was hard to get him to talk on any topic, least of all his Army experiences. He was completely disillusioned. On one occasion, Frank answered his brother's persistent questioning by saying,

If someone were to tell me now that the Germans were coming in over our back wall, I wouldn't lift a finger to stop them. They could come!

Ledwidge's furlough lasted only a couple of weeks. Every day he feared a dread summons, and at last it came: he was told to report to Ebrington Barracks in Derry. On his way, he was to go to Richmond Barracks, in Dublin, for a new uniform, weapons and a travel pass. Before complying with this part of his orders, however, Ledwidge took a look at the city: he was appalled. O'Connell Street, then known as Sackville Street, had been reduced to a mass of rubble. The fire that had forced the insurgents to evacuate the GPO was still smouldering in the summer sunshine. When he finally walked into Richmond barracks, Ledwidge was speechless with emotion. Unfortunately, the officer to whom he had to show his credentials was the most aggressive type of army brass-hat who made some sneering remark about the Rising. Ledwidge replied that, when he fought on two battlefields for England, he had, like a fool, believed he was fighting for Ireland too. "You'll be court-martial for that!", barked the officer. Ledwidge shrugged and walked out.

On his way to Derry, Ledwidge had to change trains at Belfast and wait a few hours for his connection. He called on his old friend Bob Christie, with whom he had resumed correspondence on his return to Manchester, and the two friends had much to talk about. Christie had resumed his dentistry studies after having been dismissed from the Army on crutches. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life. Christie's mother put on a magnificent meal. Then, as Ledwidge was preparing to leave, another friend of Christie's walked in – Stanley Prosser, a music teacher, well-read and versatile, one of the Belfast literary and artistic circle. "It's time you two met," said Christie. Ledwidge protested, "I'll miss the Derry train and I'm already overdue." Mrs Christie added, "I took it for granted that you would stay a few nights so I had a bed in the spare room made up for you this morning." Christie said, in his blunt way, "You're in trouble anyway, Frank, and you might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb". The three men talked far into the night, luxuriating in good conversation.

At this time Dunsany was still training, an occupation he loathed, in Derry. Dunsany had rented a large house in the city so that his wife could be with him and so that he could escape from the barracks atmosphere when he was off duty. Dunsany could not save Ledwidge from court-martial, though he did his best by making it his business to find out who was presiding over the court. This was a Major Willcock, a small man, who could not bear to be chivvied by Dunsany, who had followed him around saying: "Remember you will go down in history as an afflicter of poets." This made Willcock leap out of his chair and pace the room. Willcock had had his orders from much higher up in the ranks, and he was too timid a personality to do anything but

obey. The outcome of the farce was that Ledwidge lost his lance corporal's stripe, a punishment that did not cost him a thought. He wrote *After court martial* on the event;

*My mind is not my mind
I take no heed of what men say
I lived ten thousand years before,
God cursed the town of Nineveh.*

The Dunsanys let Ledwidge use a room in their Derry house where he could work at his poetry when he was free. He revised poems he had written before and after the publication of *Songs of the Fields* and then he selected 39 for a second collection to be called *Songs of Peace*. Dunsany helped in the selection and revision, and then Ledwidge sent off the verses to the publishers in London.

Meanwhile, Ledwidge had been drafted into B Company, 1st Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (29th Division), who had been on active service in France and had suffered heavy losses. Ledwidge and his companions joined the Fusiliers in December in Picquigny, a village northwest of Amiens. Here he was consoled by a letter from Katherine Tynan enclosing a good review she had written of *Songs of the Fields*. To Katherine Tynan Ledwidge replied;

If I survive the war, I have the greatest hopes of writing something that will live. If not, I trust to be remembered in my own land for one or two things which its long sorrow inspired... You ask me what I am doing. I am a unit in the Great War, doing and suffering, admiring great endeavour and condemning great dishonour. I may be dead before this reaches you, but I will have done my part. Death is as interesting to me as life. I have seen so much of it from Suvla to Serbia and now in France. I am always homesick. I hear the roads calling, and the hills, and the rivers wondering where I am. It is terrible to be always homesick.

The same day Ledwidge wrote that letter he also finished *The Rushes*, about the River Boyne, which begins;

*The rushes nod by the river
As the winds in the loud waves go,
And the things they nod of are many
For it's many the secret they know.*

And his thoughts were always on Easter Week too, for the very next day Ledwidge finished another lament, *The Dead Kings*. Indeed, thoughts of the Rising never seem to have been far from his mind, for in June, 1917, a month before his death, Ledwidge wrote *O'Connell Street*;

*A noble failure is not in vain,
But hath a victory its own.
A bright delectance from the slain
Is down the generations thrown.*

*And, more than Beauty understands,
Has made her lovelier here, it seems,
I see white ships that crown her strands.
For mine are all the dead men's dreams.*

Etienne Rynne notes that, following the lecture at Slane, much discussion as to Ledwidge's nationalistic leanings ensued. One questioner ventured to remark that, if these had been as sincere as the lecture had led us to believe, then Ledwidge would not have returned to barracks after the 1916 Rising, but would surely have deserted and thrown his lot in with the insurrectionists. Professor Rynne replied that Francis Ledwidge was, clearly, an honourable man in what we would call an old-fashioned sense: he was a man of his word and, having given his word when he enlisted to fight in the World War, he felt morally obliged to do so, even if he no longer had the will to continue. It seems quite clear from his comment to the commanding officer in Richmond Barracks, from his subsequent lack of anxiety to get to

Derry (for which he was later court-martialled), and from his poetry that Ledwidge was, after Easter 1916, only a reluctant participant in the war. Joseph, Ledwidge's brother, and other relatives and friends who attended the lecture supported this interpretation.

In January, 1917, Ledwidge was on the front line in the Somme with his company. That winter was exceptionally severe and conditions more horrible in that sea of frozen mud. "Our men lived there," wrote a war correspondent, "crouched below the sandbags and burrowed in the sides of the craters. Lice crawled over them in legions. Human flesh, rotting and stinking, mere pulp, was pasted onto the mudbanks".

Yet, Ledwidge was able to take consolation from his letters from home and from fellow writers. He wrote to Katherine Tynan about how he used to feed the birds in bad winters in Slane, and he talked of his poems:

If I do not give them to someone, they become part of the dust of the earth and little things stuck on the ends of the hedges when the wind has done with them... I try to keep my poems now by sending them to Lord Dunsany, or home, but out here one had not always the time or the convenience.

There were a few people at the front, however, with whom Frank could discuss poetry, including the Jesuit chaplain Father Devas, whom Ledwidge had met in Suvla Bay. When the United States entered the war on Germany on April 3rd, 1917, the Allies were given new hope of a speedy end of the war. Ledwidge's unit was involved in the Battle of Arras with thousands of

infantry assembled in cellars, passages, and vaults under the city while it was being shelled continuously by the Germans. They suffered the unceasing, ear-splitting roar of the massive artillery bombardment. On April 13th, his unit was summoned out of cellars in Arras to support the lines east of Monchy-le-Preux. Back in the reserve again, Ledwidge wrote to Katherine Tynan on May 31st that;

Entering and leaving the line is most exciting, as we are usually but thirty yards from the enemy, and you can scarcely understand how bright the nights are made by rockets. They are in continual ascent and descent from dusk to dawn, making a beautiful crescent from Switzerland to the sea. There are white lights, green, and red, and whiter bursting into red again and changing again, and blue bursting into purple drops and reds fading into green. It is all like the end of a beautiful world. It is only horrible when you remember that every colour is a signal to waiting reinforcements of artillery and God help us if we are caught in the open...



The battlefield of Arras near Monchy-le-Preux.

All the following week, whenever he got away from the firing line, Ledwidge was working on a long, mystical poem – *The Lawneen Shee* whose last verses speak, again of Ellie;

*From hill to hill, from land to land,
Her lovely hand is beckoning for me.
I follow on through dangerous zones,
Cross dead men's bones and oceans stormy.*

*Some day I know she'll wait at last
And lock me fast in white embraces,
And down mysterious ways of love
We two shall move to fairy places.*

Ledwidge, had a vivid dream of Ellie, and he told Dunsany he believed that was a portent of his own death. He had always believed in telepathy.

On June 26th, the first of the American contingents arrived at the Western Front, well equipped, looking bronzed and fit. They seemed to promise unlimited fresh reserves that would surely turn the tide of the war. Ledwidge's unit was ordered north at the beginning of July. They marched over the Franco-Belgian border into what was known as the "Ypres Salient", incorrectly pronouncing Ypres as "Wipers". Leave was overdue for men spending their seventh month on active service, but, though leave was out of the question for the moment, Ledwidge must have been hopeful of escaping the next battle, for he wrote home to Slane that:

It must be quite beautiful in the bog now. How happy you are to be living in peace and quietude where birds still sing and the country wears her confirmation dress. Out here the land is broken up by shells and the woods are like skeletons and when you come to a little town it is only to find poor homeless people lamenting over what was once a cheery home. As I write this a big battle is raging on my left hand and if it extends to this part of the line I will be pulling triggers like a man gone mad. I may be home again soon. In fact, I am only waiting to be called home. God send it soon.

One day, during a lull in the bombardment which opened the third Battle of Ypres, Ledwidge heard a robin singing, and this inspired *Home*, which ends;

*This is a song a robin sang
This morning on a broken tree,
It was about the little fields
That call across the world to me.*

And later, on July 20th, he wrote to Katherine Tynan;

We have just returned from the line after an unusually long time. It was very exciting this time, as we had to content with gas, lachrymatory shells and other devices new and horrible. It will be worse soon. The camp we are in at present might be in Tir-na-nOg, it is pitched amidst such splendours. There is barley and rye just entering harvest days of gold and meadow-sweet rippling... There is a wood hard by where hips glisten like little sparks and just at the edge of it many leaves sway like green fire... I would give £100

for two days in Ireland with nothing to do but ramble on from one delight to another. I am entitled to a leave now, but I'm afraid there are many before my name in the list. Special leaves are granted, and I have to finish a book for the autumn. But, more particularly, I want to see again my wonderful mother, and to walk by the Boyne to Crewbawn and up through the brown and grey rocks of Crocknaharna. You have no idea of how I suffer with this longing for the swish of reeds at Slane and the voices I used to hear coming over the low hills of Currabwee. Say a prayer that I may get this leave, and give us a condition my punctual return and sojourn until war is over. It is midnight now and that the glow-worms are out. It is quiet in camp, but the fair night is loud with our guns bombarding the positions we must soon fight for.

This was an unanswered prayer. All furlough had now been cancelled until after the battle. Thinking affectionately of his old friend Matty McGoona, Ledwidge wrote *To One Who Comes Now and Then*, recalling McGoona's fiddle playing in the twilight;

*And when the shadows muster, and each tree
A moment flutters, full of shooting wings,
You take the fiddle and mysteriously
Wake wonder on the strings*

During the third Battle of Ypres, Ledwidge and his comrades were in reserve working at roadmaking while an endless tide of wounded flowed back from the frontline. The Army's first need was men; their second, guns; their third, roads. B company was at work one mile north-east of "Hell-Fire Corner,"

so-called because it was exposed to German shelling. The enemy's long-range guns continued to fire shells far behind the enemy lines, but the roadwork was so important that it could not stop. Tea was issued to the men and, drenched to the skin, they stopped to take it. A shell exploded beside Ledwidge and he was blown to pieces not while in the firing line, but on a tea break.

Among the first to arrive, Father Devas wrote in his diary that night, and later to Ledwidge's mother that the poet had been to confession previously and to Communion on the day of his death. As Ledwidge had not been killed in battle, he was buried at once, in Number 5, Row B, of the second plot of the Artillery Wood Cemetery three quarters of a mile east of the village of Boezinge, in Belgium, about three miles north of Ypres. It was July 31st, 1917. Ledwidge would have been thirty that August.

This article was written as a lecture to be given during the ceremonies organised by the Slane Community Council to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Francis Ledwidge's death.

*The author has quoted from her edition of *The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge* (London: Martin Brian and O'Keefe, 1974) and has drawn much material from her publication *Francis Ledwidge: A Life of the Poet (1887-1917)* (London, Martin Brian and O'Keefe, 1972). The author thanks her husband, Stephen Rynne, and her daughter, Catherine Rynne, for much help in preparing the text, which her nephew, Professor Etienne Rynne of University College, Galway, read on her behalf at Slane, County Meath, on the 12th July 1977.*

Acknowledgement

With sincerity and in fond remembrance we acknowledge the generosity of the late Alice Curtayne and her late husband Stephen Rynne in donating the copyright of this lecture paper to the Ledwidge Cottage Committee and sub-committee of Slane Muintir Council to be used to raise funds for the restoration and maintenance of the poet's birthplace.

Alice Curtayne-Rynne wrote a book on *The Life of Francis Ledwidge, Poet* and also edited in 1974 the *Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge*; both works of great merit. She was born in County Kerry, lived in England, America and Italy; the last she considered her adopted country.

For many years, she resided with her husband in their farmhouse in Downings, Prosperous, County Kildare. She and her husband Stephen died within a year of each other in Hazel Hall Nursing Home; Stephen in 1980 and Alice in 1981. They were both ardent admirers of Francis Ledwidge and a short time before his death, Stephen declared that the older he grew, the more he appreciated the genius of the poet and the beauty of his verse.

Stephen Rynne was a writer and journalist of high repute, among his works was a biography – *The Life of John M Canon Hayes*, founder of Muintir Na Tire. He was also well known as a broadcaster and his voice with its attractive lisp was frequently heard on Radio Éireann programmes.

Pearl Baxter

PRO, Ledwidge Cottage Committee
Hill of Slane

Francis Ledwidge

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