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The Cruel Ways of War

Niamh Reilly

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This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the posthumous publication of Tom Kettle's collection of essays *The Ways of War* (1917). In the first decade of the twentieth century, Kettle (1880-1916) was viewed by many as a rising star of progressive, nationalist Ireland – a young Irish Party MP (1906-1910), a gifted orator, journalist, essayist, professor, and a vocal advocate on a range of social issues, including the rights of women and labour. As is well known, events surrounding the 1916 Rising radically altered the trajectory of Irish history. The story of how Tom Kettle became a target of vilification by “advanced nationalists” and spent the final weeks of his life in 1916 in France fighting in the Allied war effort, is laden with poignancy and paradoxes.

Today, public discourse is evolving regarding Irish participation in the Great War and how it is interpreted vis-à-vis Irish identity. Works by Frank Callanan, Margaret O'Callaghan and Senia Pašeta among others have fostered greater understanding of Kettle's legacy. Michael D Higgins's speech at Westminster in 2014 exemplifies the evolving rehabilitation of Kettle within a revised narrative of Ireland's founding story. Quoting from *The Ways of War*, Higgins praised Kettle as a “nationalist MP”, “Irish patriot”, “British soldier” and “true European”. Although Kettle never identified as a “British soldier” – as his wife stated, “it was as an Irish soldier in the army of Europe ... that he entered the war” – the current, more nuanced interest in him suggests a turning point in the recovery of Tom Kettle's place in Irish history.

One of Kettle's last acts in France was to amend his will to request that Mary Sheehy Kettle, his “dear wife and comrade”, should have sole “control of the publication or re-publication of any literary work” published after his death, “as a compliment to her intellect as well as her love”. In the same letter he outlines his wishes for the publication of a new collection of his writings to be entitled *Ways of War*. He hastily scribbled that the volume should contain “the essay on Nietzsche, the article on the Germans published in the *Daily News* in the first few days of the war; and my MSS article protesting against the transformation of a war for honour into a war for trade”.

The Ways of War contains twenty-one essays by Kettle, reflecting his hallmark fusion of political-historical analysis, scholarly but accessible discussions of political, social and economic ideas, witty observational accounts and activist commentary. Some essays were written “in the field” in 1916. Others had been previously published, including pieces Kettle wrote for the *Daily News* as a war correspondent in Belgium following that country's invasion by German forces in 1914. The Prefatory Note, signed simply “L.”, was most likely written by Robert Lynd, a leading essayist and literary critic who was well-regarded across the nationalist spectrum in pre-1916 Ireland and a long-time friend and literary colleague of Kettle's. The opening essays (“Why Ireland Fought”) recapitulate what for Kettle in September 1916 remained irrefutable, principled reasons for Ireland's, and his own, participation in the Great War. The essay “Prelude”, belying some characterisations of Kettle vis-à-vis the war as a naive idealist or out-of-touch Irish Party devotee, begins with his brutally honest description of the unfolding war situation, as a “sort of malign middle term between a lunatic asylum and a butcher's stall”, wherein:

Millions of men have been marched to the Assize of Blood to be torn with shells, bullets, gutted with bayonets, tortured with vermin, to dig themselves into holes and grovel there in mud and fragments of flesh of their comrades, to rot with disease, to go mad, and in the most merciful cases to die.

Yet for Kettle there was no choice but to support the war effort, “gripped in the ancient bloodiness of that paradox which bids us to kill life in order to save life”. He reasserts: “The Great War was in its origin a Great Crime” and lambasts “intellectuals” who failed to make “an honest study of documents within reach of all the world” while declaring they “didn't believe the Germans committed atrocities in Belgium”. He restates what he, a trained barrister, had documented in Belgium in August 1914: that “Germany ... was guilty of a systematic campaign of murder, pillage, outrage, and destruction, justified, planned and ordered by her military and intellectual leaders”. Equally, Kettle recognises that “the past of both Great Britain and France was deeply stained with domination”, but, he posits, both had begun to “cleanse themselves” by embarking on “the working out of the democratic formula”. He rejects the notion that by supporting Ireland's

participation in the war he was “dancing to the tune of Imperialism” and insists that he had “written no word and spoken none that was not the word of an Irish Nationalist, who had taken the trouble of thinking for himself”.

Kettle’s facility as a political thinker is evident in “Bismarck”, “Nietzsche” and “Treitschke and the Professors”. For him it was essential to recognise the tangible influence of Nietzsche’s ideas in the validation of “Prussianism” as an ideology and practice, as Kettle saw it, characterised by “violence, intellect and a certain malign splendour of domination”. A scholar of Nietzsche – he wrote the introduction to Daniel Halévy’s *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1914) – Kettle quotes extensively from the philosopher’s works to make his points. He warns against the misguided defence of Nietzsche’s writings as metaphorical “poetry”, stressing that Nietzsche unequivocally espoused the practical view that “war is necessary to the state, as the slave is to society”.

The Ways of War closes with “Trade or Honour?”, the last essay that Kettle had singled out for inclusion in the volume. In it he recognises the “whole pattern of retrogression imposed on us” by war, which entails “the supplanting of reason by violence” and the “dangerous paradox” of the suppression of free speech. He also warns of dangers from “the terrorists of ‘patriotism’” within and close to the Allied Governments who would “transform what began as a war for honour into a war of trade”. Kettle stresses that “no statesman has the right to change, behind the backs of fighting men, the aim and purpose of war”, at which point “protest has become an obligation”. Further, he argues, since the Great War “is a war for the ending of militarism it must include ... the liberation of all peoples who desire liberation, even the Germans” and cautions against assuming the complicity in “Prussian militarism” of the “whole body of the Germanic populations”.

Several essays also convey Kettle’s talents as a humorist and literary writer. Regarding the logistical feats involved in transporting armies to the front, in “The Way to the Trenches” he extols the “excellence of the travelling arrangements” where “Tickets are free”, “It is impossible to miss your train” and “Delays due to loss of luggage are unknown. You may indeed lose your luggage but you do not delay.” In “Rhapsody on Rats”, dubbing the rat-infested trenches Ratavia, Kettle describes how rats “are everywhere – large rats, small rats, bushy rats, shy rats and impudent ... slinking along on their pestiferous errands ... they scurry across your blankets and your very face”. In the rats’ defence he remarks: “it was not they who invaded our kingdom but we ... who dug ourselves down to their level”.

A lengthy “Memoir” by Mary Sheehy Kettle serves as a biographical essay outlining the highlights of Tom Kettle’s life and career. But it is also an attempt by her to assert her husband’s place as a nationalist and an Irishman – “irrevocably and immutably Irish” – in the transformed, post-1916 nationalist paradigm. In the memoir Mary Kettle wants, above all, to correct what she sees as the widespread misunderstanding of her husband’s motives for supporting the Allied war effort, noting that few had “gone to the trouble of understanding his wide outlook”. She writes that “Tom Kettle’s idea was an Ireland identified with the life of Europe” and that “England and English thought had nothing to do with his attitude to the war”. She commends Robert Lynd, who understood that “Kettle was not a Nationalist through love of a flag, but through love of freedom”, and Shane Leslie, who observed that Kettle “did not resent the littleness that had dogged him and left him lonely in the end ... but he hated the pettiness and meanness that had taken advantage of Ireland”. She berates Padraic Colum who, referring to Kettle’s time as a war correspondent in Belgium, had suggested that “had death found [Kettle] in those early days he would at least have died for a cause he believed in”. In reply, Mary Kettle asks: “Does Mr. Colum mean to suggest that my husband no longer believed in the maintenance of the rights of small nationalities? ... Is not Belgium still an invaded country?” Regarding the 1916 Rising, she recounts that “Easter week ... had been for [Kettle] a harrowing and terrible experience ... With the rebellion he had no sympathy ... But what really seared his heart was the fearful retribution that fell on the leaders of the rebellion”, several of whom were friends and colleagues of many years.

The Ways of War was first published in London by Constable & Co, with Talbot Press and Scribner’s handling distribution in Ireland and America. It appears to have done well, particularly outside Ireland. Available records indicate that 3,685 copies sold from September 1st to December 31st, 1917, including 2,886 copies in Britain, 500 in Ireland, and 300 in America. From September 1917 through 1919, dozens of appreciative reviews of *The Ways of War* and/or tributes to Tom Kettle appeared in British publications such as *Athenaeum*, *The Times*, *The Globe*, *The Sphere*, *The Graphic*, *The Nation* and *The Spectator*, as well as in major American outlets including *The New Republic*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*. Reviews

and notices also appeared in dozens of smaller city newspapers around Britain, the USA and beyond. By 1918 publishers in France were expressing interest in producing a translation of the book.

In Ireland, in March 1917, Talbot Press initially responded positively to a query from Constable regarding distribution of *The Ways of War*, replying that “we have little doubt but that it will be a very readable book, and it should do well in Ireland” and that sales “might ultimately run to at least 1,000”. By June, Talbot’s director, WG Lyons, was more cautious as he wrote to Constable regarding an order for 500 copies, noting that: “We should like to be associated with this book, more from sentimental than from business reasons”, and “We subscribed the book in Dublin yesterday but the subscription was not very satisfactory.” Indeed, the record of Talbot’s correspondence over 1917 and early 1918 offers a fascinating window on the wider context of popular publishing in Ireland and its part in the realignment of middle class Irish sensibilities, away from the old nationalism of the Irish Party, with which Kettle was deeply associated, towards the normalisation of the newly ascendant, separatist nationalism represented by Sinn Féin.

Lyons’s declining confidence in the viability of *The Ways of War* stands in contrast to his growing enthusiasm for two other books published by Talbot in 1917, which he expected to sell well: *With the Irish in Frongoch* by WJ Brennan Whitmore, which documents what Ruan O’Donnell describes as “the largely peaceable brief sojourn” in Welsh camps of hundreds of Irish internees accused of having links with the 1916 Rising; and *The Germans in Cork* by Mary Carberry, a whimsical satire making fun of the full range of Irish nationalist political life, but especially factions sympathetic to Germany. The gap between *The Ways of War* and the content and tone of the two latter books – one reflecting the mainstreaming of Sinn Féin and the other appealing to unionist sensibilities – could not have been greater.

A number of reviews of *The Ways of War* appeared in *The Freeman’s Journal*, *The Cork Examiner* and the *The Belfast News-Letter*. Overall, however, the reception of the book in Ireland in 1917 was muted in comparison to the many detailed appreciations published outside Ireland. Kettle’s “voice from the grave” (as *The Freeman’s Journal* coined it) was still immersed in the urgency, injustices and grimness of an unfolding international catastrophe, the resolution of which Kettle believed was inseparable from Ireland’s future as a united, independent nation. In 1917, most of Kettle’s countrymen and countrywomen believed the opposite. In this sense, at the time of its publication, *The Ways of War* appeared largely irrelevant in Ireland, published mainly for “sentimental” reasons. One hundred years on, it can be viewed differently as a valuable resource in our reconsideration of the place of the Great War in Irish history and as a collection of writings by an underrated twentieth century Irish thinker and writer.

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