

## **“Are we still in the age of Oliver Twist?**

### **With Defence Forces families eating porridge for dinner it certainly seems so”**

Dr Paul Huddie

“Those who, a few days since, beheld the Dublin district pay office thronged with deserted beings craving their miserable pittance to enable them reach their parishes cannot readily forget the scene. Many were in rags, emaciated and care-worn, presenting most deplorable aspects. There were other more respectable in appearance, striving to maintain a decent exterior in the presence of spectators. Nearly all were accompanied by one or two children. Anxiety and sorrow were stamped on the features of these supplicants for the public bounty; but the generality shrunk from the exposure to which their pressing necessities urged them”.

These lines are taken from a report from the Irish correspondent of *The Times* in April 1854, during the Crimean War. The image conjured by the author of those drastically poor, uneducated and largely unskilled women, who has made the choice to marry or at least bear the children of British soldiers (some 30-40% being Irish at the time), as were most of them, does not seem wholly startling to us now. For it was the era of the dreaded Work House and Oliver Twist. Nor does it seem overly amiss given the proximity of that war to the Famine. And you would be right to think and accept that. The life of the British soldier and his wife in the Victorian period, and right up to and during the First World War, was extremely tough. Extremely low pay, poor (although improving) living conditions, and the constant hazard of death through active service or disease, both at home or overseas. For the wives that added hazard of death but also the possibility that their husband might be sent away at any moment; perhaps for a decade or more, made their lives extremely unsecure and perilous.

We can easily accept, looking back now on the Victorian era from our modern vantage point, that the concept of those women, living in their dark and damp rented lodgings on Benburb Street in Dublin, or in any garrison town or port around Ireland or Britain, struggling to clothe and feed their children and generally to make ends meet or have a decent meal on a given day, is not a hard to accept. But what might be harder to accept, after reading ones newspaper or digital news feed, is that in 2017 the families of military personnel in Ireland sometimes have nothing other than porridge to eat for dinner, because they cannot afford anything else.

Our contemporary disbelief might be further compounded by the further comparison of the then and now.

Writing in his diary in May 1855, the Belfast clergyman and active philanthropist and care-giver within his community, the Rev Andrew McIntyre wrote: "He [the soldier] stops in the barracks, pays eight pence for mess, requires a penny for tobacco and the remainder, three pence, per day, is all that is to pay rent, purchase coal and support the wife and four children, not one of whom has any way of earning one penny". Earning only seven shillings and seven pence (7s. 7d.) a week at the lowest level, of which most was taken back by the Army to cover his 'necessaries': food and uniform etc., it is not hard to see why there was so little left for soldiers' families back then. But when one reads a testimonial of a soldier's wife (The Journal, 10/06/17), 162 years after the above excerpt was written, that claims that: "Once the rent, food, petrol, electricity and gas are paid there is absolutely nothing left", one might be forgiven to think that we were still in the nineteenth century.

As startling as that observation is, what is even more startling is the exasperation and indeed sheer hopelessness expressed by Irish service personnel's wives, during protests in April, June and now November 2017. To declare that: "'Sometimes, when I'm at home thinking about what I can cook for my family with about €6 in my purse I wonder if my family would be better off without me. I am tired. I cry so much because I feel I've let them all down", is a terrible thing. Again my mind at least is thrown back to the war with Russia when the sheer trauma associated with the poverty of the service life did cause some people, such as the sergeant in the Rifle Brigade who slit his own throat before sailing to war, because he was "unable to bear the knowledge of what his wife and child must endure without him".

The parallels and even stark inversions that can be made today between the age of Oliver Twist and the second decade of the twenty-first century are many. In the nineteenth century it was the women who had to try and bring in the additional income, through demeaning and laborious odd jobs: washing, cleaning, needlework and wet nursing. At the darkest times they had to resort to prostitution, as did soldiers' daughters. The fear of this very outcome haunted men when overseas on active service. Speaking in the House of Commons on 26 February 1855, the cousin of the Young Ireland leader William Smith-O'Brien, Limerick landowner and lover of Ireland, Augustus Stafford O'Brien, told the house and the country that, "He had seen letters [sent to soldiers] from female relatives stating that unless money was sent to them to purchase a mangle or set themselves up in some way of business, there was nothing left for them but the workhouse or prostitution". He said that "It gave him great pain to hear these brave men make such complaints day after day". Today, in Ireland, we are left with a situation whereby, according to the families of Defence Forces personnel, these men are being forced to become delivery drivers in order to make up the shortfall in their income (Irish Times, 20/04/17; The Journal, 30/11/17).



What Stafford's testimony also showed is that soldiers did not want to receive "charity ... [or] ... subscriptions from private benevolence", but rather wished to be able to support their families on their own wages. The seeking of assistance from private charities and philanthropic organisations, in lieu of entering the state's dreaded Work Houses, was the only other option left open to many women back then. Today women are doing the modern equivalent, by claiming social welfare payments – Family Income Supplements – in order to make ends meet (Irish Times, 20/04/17; The Journal, 20/04/17).

Yet Irish families are not alone in their penury. Similar protests have also been seen in France this year. Back in August a protest took place in Paris, which comprised some 700 soldiers' wives, over what are seen as the "deplorable working conditions" in that force. Similar to the Irish situation, where families are concerned about the traumas being endured by personnel while overseas; even on refugee missions in the Mediterranean, as well as the health impacts of anti-malaria drugs (Irish Times, 20/04/17; The Journal, 10/06/17), the wives in France called for better support of soldiers with PTSD (BBC, 26/08/17). What this shows, especially when one realises that in the United Kingdom there are presently 2,000 registered charities dedicated either wholly or partly to providing some form of welfare and care to current or former members of the British Armed Forces and their families and other dependents, is that the soldier (as well as sailors and air(wo)man, continues to be a disposal entity.

While those people volunteer to serve and defend their countries successive governments and civil services maintain a parsimony relative to their pay and conditions. Of course part of the problem might also be, it could be argued, the ethos of the military itself. Men and women are trained to follow all lawful orders; not to question their superiors or to upset the apple cart with high-minded notions. That is not to say that they cannot voice opinions or take the initiative, but there is an inherent code of silence within all militaries due to the nature of the same. This has been acknowledged by the wives, partners and families of the Irish Defence Forces. They have stated: our men cannot speak, so we will do it for them. That silence is also demonstrated by the DF as a whole and is even a charge made against the Defence Force's representative association, PDFORRA (Irish Times, 20/04/17).

As the only portion of the civil service (alongside An Garda Síochána) that cannot join unions or strike, any silence by the Defence Forces as an organisation or PDFORRA has to be detrimental to the welfare of personnel. However, being 163 years since the 'emaciated' and largely uneducated soldiers' wives and children were seen on Dublin's Fleet Street seeking their 'miserable pittance' from the British Army, today's service wives etc. are in a far stronger position. They are educated, skilled, have the power of modern technology at their disposal and, thanks to the efforts of women in the past and the impacts of

the First World War, they have the power of their votes. This is especially poignant, as we move into the centenary of women getting the vote next year. It is those attributes that have led to the formation in November 2016 of the representative and lobby group 'Wives and Partners of the Defence Forces', and their organisation and undertaking of a protest (April 2017), a march (June 2017) and now vigil and march (November 2017) in an effort to improve their situations, and those of the service partners. While their historical predecessors, in this unique, largely closed and dynastic sorority, were relatively (although not totally) powerless in the face of their drastic poverty and dependent upon charitable persons of influence to champion their cause, and that of their husbands, the future may be brighter for today's wives, partners and families. I certainly hope so.

It is always the endeavour of the historian to make their research into the past current and relevant. To tag it onto something in the here and now and peek peoples' curiosity and interest. Yet for researchers of war and of welfare, or in this case both, such as myself, one might always, naively, hope to use ones findings and examples from the past to draw contrasts with the present, and not parallels. One would hope that we have progressed in some way, have learnt from the past and improved our collective lot, with the use of hindsight and technology, but alas that is too often not the case. Thus, all that can be hope for by a historian such as I, in relation to this matter if not others, is that the hardships endured by people in the past, but also the efforts that were made others and the improvements that were made, can provide useful aids to us today to improve our society and lead to a brighter future for those of whom it really matters.

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