

Military history from the street: new methods for researching First World War service in the British military

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Abstract

Local studies of military service in the First World War have traditionally focused on 'Pals' or other units known to be linked to a specific area. However, the availability of new records online has revolutionised the way in which local studies can be carried out. A 'military history from the street' approach can now document and analyse service by all those from a local area who served. The article explains how such socio-military methods, as used in the author's monograph on West Belfast (*Belfast Boys*, London, 2009), can be adapted to other areas, with a particular focus on employment data not include in that study.

Key words

First World War

Local

Sources

Methods

Employment

Introduction

A central element of British popular memory of the First World War is the idea of communities and interest groups enlisting *en masse* and going off to war together in infantry units with some specific characteristic. That idea can be found most clearly in the stories of the 'Pals' battalions which drew so heavily on close-knit areas that the devastation wreaked by losses on the Somme was immense. Equally, it can be found in the volunteers of the 17th Middlesex Regiment, the 'Footballers' Battalion',¹ or the Cambridge undergraduates embodied by the fictional Lieutenant The Honourable George Colthurst St Barleigh in *Blackadder Goes Forth*.² Remembering August 1914 he described:

Myself and the fellows leap-frogging down to the Cambridge recruiting office, then playing tiddly-winks in the queue. We'd hammered the hell out of Oxford's tiddly-winkers only the week beforehand and here we were off to hammer the Boche.³

Questioning from Captain Blackadder rapidly reveals that the Lieutenant is, by 1917, 'the only one of the Trinity Tiddlers still alive'. This narrative of slaughter, in which only the lucky few came home has been unpicked by countless revisionist writers, most notably in the context of popular culture and memory by Corrigan, Hanna, Sheffield and Todman.⁴ In so doing, academic opinion is even more than usually distant from popular memory.

¹ Andrew Riddoch and John Kemp, *When the Whistle Blows: The Story of the Footballers' Battalion in the Great War* (Yeovil: Haynes, 2008).

² Six episodes, BBC, 1989.

³ Richard Curtis et al., *Blackadder: The Whole Damn Dynasty, 1485-1917* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 439.

⁴ Gordon Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock*, (London: Cassell, 2003); Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: the First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001); Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005).

However, historians and the public seem to be more united on the issue of local communities' service in the military. At the core of writing about military service in Britain and Ireland during the First World War is an implicit assumption that the units in which men served generally had some link to their 'home' area, or at least the area in which they enlisted. This has led to several different historiographical genres which focus on the links between units (often infantry battalions or the infantry in specific divisions) and geographic areas.

In the first place there is a well-established tradition of writing about Pals' battalions.⁵ Such texts include significant material on the local character of each battalion, local efforts at recruitment and the ongoing relationship between local areas and 'their' battalions throughout the war. Second, where divisions had a specific geographic link, their histories often include reference to their recruitment areas and the circumstances in which they were raised.⁶ Third, highly localised publications which seldom reach beyond local history societies and a few bookshops and museums, tell stories in a variety of different ways. They might be rolls of honour which are primarily listings of those who died,⁷ or narrative accounts (but again focused on those who died), sometimes focused on a selection of units but more often on one or two battalions with local links.⁸ Some publications combine both approaches.⁹ Fourth, there are now academic analyses of the relationship between local areas and military service. Such publications which deal with the UK concentrate on battalions whose nomenclature links them to the relevant area,¹⁰ and can be placed in the context of some broader European studies.¹¹ In ways which no previous local study has been able to do, such academic work has now started to address issues such as the social

⁵ The 'Pals Series' published by Pen and Sword covers a wide range of units. Some include information on the home addresses of men in the units concerned. See, for example, John Sheen, *Tyneside Irish: 24th, 25th, 26th and 27th (Service) Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 1998), pp. 207-64

⁶ Examples include Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson and Orr, 1922), especially Chapter 1. Such references seldom include significant detail and most divisional histories are very limited as regards local connections. John Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division, 1914-1919* (London: John Murray, 1921), p. 5 contains no reference to the Scottish origins of relevant battalions. George Herbert Fosdike Nichols, *The 18th Division in the Great War* (London: Blackwood, 1922), pp. 2-4, is one of the more detailed at little more than two pages. None devote as much sustained attention to a division's domestic context as Terence Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992). Of a different type is Trevor Royle, *The Flowers of the Forest: Scotland and the First World War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007), which is broader in its scope than any divisional history but includes close attention to Scottish divisions.

⁷ Recent examples focus on small areas, usually a town or village. See for example, James S. Kane, *Portadown Heroes: A Tribute to the Men Commemorated on Portadown War Memorial* (Newtownabbey: Dargan Press, 2007). Examples for a city are rare, such as: Belfast Book of Honour Committee, *Journey of remembering: Belfast Book of Honour* (Belfast: Johnston Publishing, 2009). Contemporary attempts included the multi-volume *National Roll of the Great War* (London: National Publishing Company, 1920) which covered around 100,000 fatalities from selected parts of England, while Marquis de Ruvigny, *The Roll of Honour* (London: Standard Art Book Company, 1917-22) included around 25,000 biographies on a national basis.

⁸ Kenneth Wood, *Biggleswade and the Great War: Our Own Flesh and Blood* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), is a strong example of such an enterprise. See also, Joy Bratherton, *Where are the Lads of the Village Tonight? A Study of the Men of Minshull Vernon who gave their lives for us during the First World War* (Crewe: South Cheshire Family History Society, 1995) and Nick Thorncroft, *Cornwall's Fallen: The Road to the Somme* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008). Two excellent Home Front studies are Paul Rusiecki, *The Impact of Catastrophe: The People of Essex and the First World War* (Chelmsford: Essex Record Office, 2008) and Colin Cousins, *Armagh and the Great War* (Dublin: The History Press Ireland, 2011).

⁹ For example, the publications in the 'Men of Essex Memorial Project', the most recent of which is: Essex Branch of the Western Front Association, *Men of Essex: The 9th (Service) Battalion The Essex Regiment 1914-1919* (Billericay: Essex Branch of the Western Front Association, 2011).

¹⁰ A forerunner of this approach was a book by the journalist and author Geoffrey Moorhouse. His book *Hell's Foundations: A Town, its Myths and Gallipoli* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), skilfully placed a number of battalions and their war in the local context of Bury, Lancashire. See also, Mark Connelly, *Steady the Buffs! A Regiment, a Region and the Great War* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) focuses on four battalions of the East Kent Regiment (the Buffs), while Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War*, (Cambridge, CUP, 2005) examines two battalions. Moorhouse was not able to take advantage of any significant statistical data, but both Connelly and McCartney did do so.

¹¹ For example, Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 & 2007); Wencke Meteling, *Ehre, Einheit, Ordnung: Preußische und französische Städte und ihre Regimenter im Krieg, 1870/71 und 1914-1919* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2010).

composition of battalions and the extent to which battalions maintained their local connections as the war progressed. In time, they will allow more nuanced approaches to debates such as those about recruiting patterns.¹²

Much excellent work has been carried out in the categories above. However, the extent to which any of these studies can be precise about the local connections of any unit has been limited by the nature of the sources on which they are based. Consequently, unit histories, whether of Pals battalions or divisions, generally do nothing more than tell the story of the units concerned. Even where work tries to document the broadly accepted view that the 'local' content of most units diminished as the war dragged on, they cannot root this in information on precise place of residence.¹³ Localised works focus on the dead, often centred on those listed on one or more local memorials. Even if many battalions are covered by a local study, the stories are predominantly those of the dead.

Meanwhile, although there will be cases where Pals' battalions recruited most of the available manpower, plenty of other areas which were linked to such a unit would have sent men well beyond the Pals' formation. Yet assessing which units men served in, beyond 'local' units, has been challenging, again due to the limitations of sources. Academic studies have consciously focused on small selections of battalions. None of these works tells the story of military service in a specific area in its entirety (nor have they sought to). Consequently, what is missing from these local stories is much sense of service in either the Royal Navy or the Royal Flying Corps (and later the Royal Air Force). Men who served with the Royal Engineers, Army Service Corps, Royal Artillery or other divisional units are usually missing from such studies. That is even the case in divisional histories which tend to focus on infantry battalions, despite such formations comprising around one quarter of those in each division.

Such omissions limit our understanding of the impact of military service on specific areas. If we focus only on units known to be linked to areas we cannot make an accurate assessment of how far communities were affected by recruitment and casualties (especially spikes in casualty figures) beyond those linked to 'local' units. We also gain a distorted view of the war experiences of men who went away and returned having served in non-infantry units with lower fatality rates, in favour of those who served in infantry battalions.

Until recently, nothing could be done to tackle those limitations. In particular, any effort to analyse service from a geographic area was hindered by the lack of availability of soldiers' home addresses in army records in an easily accessible form. They remain hindered to some extent by problems in accessing naval and flying records. However, the availability of the National Archives' army service records online¹⁴ and searchable by place has revolutionised what is possible. These records can be combined with others to give a far more accurate picture of war service in specific areas. Such sources include newspapers, local memorials and listings and war graves records, which have been favoured by genealogists and amateur local historians but are seldom used by academics. Taken together, these sources mean that we can now use specific geographic areas as the starting point for research, rather than making assumptions about the units in which men served, and that can help us to answer questions about matters such as the social composition and local links of units in a far more sophisticated way than has ever been possible. In particular, the availability of service records online, in a form useable to those analysing local military service, allows such a step change in what can be researched that it should be seen as a 'new' methodology. As never before, we now have the opportunity to establish as comprehensive a picture as will ever be possible of how many people from a specific local area served and where they saw service.

¹² See, for example, Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 70-111.

¹³ However, it must be recognised that for many purposes, a precise address is not needed. Connelly, pp. 241-244, simply needs to show a Kent connection (or lack of one) in contrasting deaths in 1914-16 with those for 1918. For that, the information contained in *Soldiers Died in the Great War* is adequate.

¹⁴ <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1219> and <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1114> [accessed 22 November 2013].

Such sources and approaches have of course been used in other areas of history for decades. In the 1960s, 'hard' social history techniques emerged, based partly on new intellectual approaches which were suspicious of 'elite' histories and documentary sources, and sought to gain through statistics a knowledge of the experiences of the downtrodden and voiceless who had not left literary and/or artistic evidence of their lives. Emerging computer technologies helped to analyse the vast quantity of data used by the new social historians. In the UK, these developments manifested themselves in work by figures such as Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley through bodies such as the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.¹⁵ Yet such an approach has not been applied, beyond some analysis of enlistment and casualty figures, to the First World War, partly because sources were not available but also probably because issues around war did not match social historians' interests in class, the economy and everyday life. An exception, published in 1985, when more material had started to become available, was Jay Winter's *The Great War and the British People*. It became a classic and remains one of the key texts for study of the UK's war, but it was almost the first and last of its kind. Within a few years of its publication, the cultural turn became dominant in study of the war, which in some studies became disembodied from the experiences of those who did not leave extensive writings and/or works of art relating to the war.¹⁶ Indeed, some such approaches were vulnerable to the criticism levelled at 'elitist' history by the new social history.

However, new sources have changed what is possible, and we can now carry out the kind of analysis for the military which was performed for factory and farm workers from the 1960s onwards. Such an approach can be labelled 'military history from the street', emphasising its difference from histories which begin with the units in which men served rather than the areas from where they came. It has the potential to revolutionise the way in which we write the local history of service in the First World War, connecting military experiences with society to open up new areas for statistical analysis, such as the relationship between pre-enlistment occupation and the unit(s) in which men served. As such, the approach also offers a new socio-military history of the early twentieth century United Kingdom. In setting out that approach, this article draws on the methods used for the author's case study of West Belfast, *Belfast Boys*, which is to date the only comprehensive example.¹⁷ It goes beyond that study by offering new data for West Belfast which were not analysed in the book, and then discusses the validity of the approach for other areas. Although central aspects of the narrative of *Belfast Boys* are unique to Ireland, and some are specific to Belfast, it is argued that the methods used are adaptable to all parts of Britain and Ireland.

Military history from the street

'Military history from the street', a new socio-military history approach to the First World War, rests primarily on old sources available in a new way, and combining those with sources which have been underused (or not used at all) by academic historians. At the core of the methodology are the service records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks of the British army. These have been available for public use for many years on microfilm at the National Archives. They are collected in two microfilm series: WO 363, described as 'service', and WO 364, labelled 'pensions'. However, both collections are actually of service records with the latter being more correctly labelled, as William Spencer has pointed out, as 'service records derived from pensions claims'.¹⁸ The reason for them being in two categories was that after the First World War, any soldier who applied for a pension had his service record removed from others, and kept with those of other pension applicants. That was fortuitous because it meant that more have survived than would otherwise be the case. When the War Office's Arnside Street repository was bombed during the

¹⁵ www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/centres/campop/hpss/ [accessed 22 November 2013].

¹⁶ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London: Bantam Press, 1989); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990).

¹⁷ Richard S. Grayson, *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War* (London: Continuum, 2009 & 2010 revised edition).

¹⁸ William Spencer, *First World War Army Service Records: A Guide for Family Historians*, (Kew: The National Archives, 2008), p. 42.

London Blitz in September 1940, the service records were hit, but those which had been kept separately in relation to pensions (containing the same basic information as the 'service' records, plus further information on the pensions claim) were unharmed. Not all of the service records were destroyed, but many were, either through fire or the water used to fight the blaze.

Although the surviving records were later made available on microfilm, it was impossible to do anything other than search for soldiers by name because they are produced alphabetically. In theory, one could search through all the records for soldiers from a specific area, but a very approximate estimate by this author suggested that if one was able to work five days a week full-time on this task, then it would take twenty-seven years to do so, even before one had done anything to write-up and communicate findings. Clearly, no academic was going to build a career on such research. Meanwhile, official numerical recruitment returns would be too broad in the area they covered to be of any value for specific local areas.¹⁹

The situation changed with the publication of the records online. By the spring of 2010, all surviving pensions and service records for NCOs and other ranks were available online. When *Belfast Boys* was first published, it was still common to hear, among genealogists, references to up to three in four records having been destroyed, and that figure was used as the basis of a very rough estimate of an upper limit of how many West Belfast men might have served.²⁰ Even with the finalisation of the digitisation of records, official statements on how many records survived the Luftwaffe's endeavours are vague and varied. In the first place, it is believed that only 20 to 25 percent of the WO 363 collection has survived,²¹ but these records are of course supplemented by those from WO 364. One National Archive reference simply talks about 'more than half' being destroyed,²² while another says that 'About 2 million service records either survived the bombing ... or were reconstructed from pensions records' and says that this constitutes around 40 percent of the total.²³ Jay Winter's figures for overall service suggest that 5,215,162 men served in the British army in 1914-18, of whom 4,948,101 were NCOs and other ranks.²⁴ Figures obtained from the online provider tell us that there are over 2.9 million individual service records²⁵ which would suggest that around 59 percent of non-officer records survived (although the provider also says that around 60 percent of records were destroyed²⁶).

However, a sample for men from West Belfast suggests that there is some duplication in the two collections, with around 26.5 percent of the service records also appearing in the pensions collection.²⁷ Moreover, there is also duplication within collections. In the service collection, 3,014 (27.2 percent) of the 11,082 records searched were duplicates of others in the collection. In the pensions collection, the figure for duplication was 6.7 percent (344 of 5,129). This means that we can make some estimates about how many individuals there actually are with the online records. A search of the collection shows that there are 1,907,094 records in the service section and 987,589 in the pensions series.²⁸ The figures for duplication relating to West Belfast records would

¹⁹ For example, there are figures for Belfast, but not for 'West' Belfast.

²⁰ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2009 edn.), p. 191. This figure has been the subject of some useful discussion. See: David Fitzpatrick, 'West Belfast exceptionalism: Richard S. Grayson's *Belfast Boys*', *Irish Economic and Social History* XXXVIII (Nov. 2011), pp. 103-107.

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http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Research_Guide:_British_Army_Soldiers'_Papers:_First_World_War,_1914-1918 [accessed 28 August 2012].

²² http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/service_records/sr_soldiers.htm [accessed 20 April 2012].

²³

http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Research_Guide:_British_Army_Soldiers'_Papers:_First_World_War%2C_1914-1918 [accessed 20 April 2012].

²⁴ J.M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003), pp. 72 and 91.

²⁵

http://www.ancestry.co.uk/cs/Satellite?c=Learning_C&childpagename=UKLearningCenter%2FLearning_C%2FPageDefault&pagename=LearningWrapper&cid=1265124422680 [accessed 20 April 2012].

²⁶ <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1219> [accessed 22 November 2013].

²⁷ 1808 service records were identified for West Belfast soldiers, of which 480 also appeared in the pensions section.

²⁸ <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/CardCatalog.aspx> [accessed 20 April 2012].

suggest that this will equate to 1,804,405 individuals, or approximately 36 percent of non-officers, close to the online provider's statement that 60 percent of records were lost.²⁹

Despite the gaps in the collection, there is still a huge sample of records available to historians. The fact that they are now online revolutionises the way in which they can be used, allowing research that was never practically possible when they were only accessible alphabetically on microfilm. They can be searched in several different fields, for example by name, service number, regiment, place/year of birth and, crucially, residence. It is this latter point which offers such potential to academic historians seeking to analyse patterns of service by place. Instead of having no possibility of searching through millions of records on microfilm, a search in WO 363 for a place name such as Manchester, Liverpool or Hemel Hempstead in the 'Lived in' field yields records that are immediately more manageable: 26,830, 9,465 and 196 respectively. Some imagination needs to be used regarding search terms where boundaries have changed since 1914-18. For example, the town of Hemel Hempstead now includes the village of Boxmoor (sometimes in the past spelt Boxmore) and searches of such alternatives need to be made to gather in stragglers in the records, but that is easily done. Moreover, not all records have information in the 'lived in' search field (even though the data is usually in the record) and so searching in place of birth is also necessary. When this is all done, it is quite easy to examine and note around 150 of these records in one day's work and that makes such a project manageable not over decades but in no more than a couple of years for a larger city, or much less time for smaller areas.

In any such study, boundaries must be clearly drawn. The West Belfast study rests on electoral wards and that enables statistics from the 1911 Census for the total population of each ward to be used where necessary. A street directory available for the city lists each street and which ward it was in.³⁰ In possession of such knowledge it is possible to look at all online records which appear with a 'Belfast' search, and select only those relating to the west of the city. Meanwhile, other terms for key districts of the city were searched, such as 'Falls' and 'Shankill' (including its misspelling Shankhill which historically relates to a parish in County Armagh but was often written on Belfast records). There are problems with the transcribing of street names (such as one example of Crumlin Road in a soldier's record being rendered as Greenlees Road on the website) which mean that street names searches should be carried out with care. However, Belfast is hard to mis-read and for *Belfast Boys* searches for that word in the pensions records finds 2,968 individuals, and in the service records another 6,875. When other local terms (including Falls and Shankill plus less common nomenclature such as Ligoniel and Andersonstown) were also searched for the totals become 5,129 pensions records and 11,082 service records.³¹ Each of these was examined, with the result that 1,506 West Belfast individuals were found in the pensions records and 1,808 in the service records.³²

The service records provide the best sources for most statistical analysis of patterns of army service for reasons discussed in the next section. However, if one is seeking to build up as complete a picture of local service as possible, they can and should be supplemented by a range of other sources. Indeed without these, the majority of individuals will probably be missed: the West Belfast study suggests that over 70 percent³³ of individuals who were identified could only be

²⁹ Of the 1,907,094 service, 26.5 percent (505,380) would duplicate records in the pensions series, with 27.2 percent (518,730) duplicating those in the service collection. Within the pensions collection, 6.7 percent (66,168) would be duplicates of other pensions records.

³⁰ *Belfast and the province of Ulster Directory for 1914* (Belfast: Belfast News Letter, 1914).

³¹ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 232 n.5.

³² The reason for proportionally fewer individuals from West Belfast being found in the larger number of service records than in the smaller number of pensions records is partly that, as already stated, there is much duplication in the service records with many individuals having two files due to copies being kept.

³³ The precise figure is 71.3 percent (6276 of 8798). If the 36 percent survival rate for service/pensions records is correct, one would expect the figure for those which can only be found in other sources to be 64 percent. There are at least two possibilities for explaining why only less than 30 percent of the people found could be found in the online source. The first may be Belfast-specific: it is possible that among those records lost a disproportionate number were for surnames which are more common in Belfast than in other areas. Second, affecting all areas, it is possible that there are problems with the transcription of records which means that some do not show up when specific terms are searched for. In any event, unless one doubts the reliability of other sources such as local memorial rolls, a consequence of this is that

located in other sources (see Table 1). These other sources are principally local memorials, local newspapers and war graves records, plus a small number of sources which are peculiar to specific parts of Britain and Ireland, or to specific units. Local memorials have long been used by local historians as the basis of their publications. There are three broad types of these: memorials focused on an area, memorials associated with a specific church (usually Anglican), and printed listings. These are usually, though not always, listings of only the dead, but some aimed to include all those who served (such as the Irish Presbyterian roll of honour³⁴). Although these seldom contain a home address or unit details, they can be supplemented with other sources. To obtain unit information, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) database can be consulted.³⁵ Home addresses are more problematic in that they will not always appear in the CWGC database and are sometimes post-war, but they can often be found in newspapers (see below). The same information can be found in *Soldiers Died in the Great War* and *Officers Died in the Great War*.³⁶ Meanwhile, unless one is trying to link a fatality to a specific part of an area (as was the case in the West Belfast study), it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of those appearing on a local memorial will not only have some connection with the area but will also have lived there at the time they served. However, where local rolls are used it is crucial to maintain a sense of discipline about them so as not to over-inflate either enlistment rates or fatalities. As with any reports of a fatality, verification should be made through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.³⁷ Meanwhile, the appearance of a name (without an address) on a local memorial should not result in inclusion in overall statistics unless there is, from some other source, a verified home address or next of kin address in the area. That said, where a reliable source provides such an address, one should not feel the need to verify it elsewhere: in most cases, a soldier will only be found in one source, especially where they were not killed, wounded, or a medallist (which is why the service records are such a valuable starting-point because their making did not require anything to happen to a soldier other than the act of enlisting).

Newspapers have rarely been used seriously by military historians, perhaps due to suspicions that what is reported publicly must be treated with doubt. There is certainly room for caution. For example, the West Belfast study found 159 deaths reported which could not be verified through the existence of a war grave record (in addition to a total of 2,002 confirmed West Belfast fatalities). A small number of these 'deaths' were later found to be men who were missing. While the 'death' was reported in newspapers, the later news of survival was not, and it is possible that a significant number of the 159 unconfirmed fall into this category. There were also huge variations in the type of information which newspapers would report as we see from comparing Dublin and Belfast newspapers. The former included casualty listings but no significant information (such as a home address) on NCOs and other ranks. The latter gave much more detail on men of all ranks,³⁸ admittedly with more detail on officers, but almost always including a home address and the name of the soldier's next-of-kin and sometimes much more - such as workplace or membership of a local organisation. Fortunately, most local newspapers were more like Belfast's than Dublin's. Unlike most memorials, newspapers were not only focused on the dead but included much detail on the wounded, missing, prisoners and medallists, and sometimes those who just happened to write an interesting letter home. Up until the middle of 1916, the Belfast newspapers freely reported on the battalions in which men were serving, with that information only being absent for the second half of the war. However, where that information is missing it can often be supplemented through reference to war graves records or (for soldiers who survived) the National

when projecting forwards to assess how many people from an area are likely to have served, it is important to add an estimate for those who could not be found from another source other than the service records to the total already found, rather than simply taking the number found in service records and assuming that they are 36 percent of the total.

³⁴ Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: Roll of Honour, 1914-1919* (Belfast: W. and G. Baird, 1922).

³⁵ <http://www.cwgc.org> [accessed 20 April 2012].

³⁶ Published in paper form in 1921 but now available online at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1543> [accessed 20 April 2012] and on CD-Rom from the Naval and Military Press.

³⁷ See below, pp. XXXX, which shows that 2,002 West Belfast fatalities were verified in this way, with a further 159 not verified.

³⁸ Perhaps because they were read more widely across the social classes, and/or because they wanted to emphasise 'loyal' service on as wide a possible basis.

Archives' WO 372 series of Medal Rolls (which rarely include an address but often list a battalion).³⁹

The CWGC records have already been discussed as a useful source for verifying reports of deaths and also for filling gaps in detail. Each record also contains a field labelled 'Additional information' which from 2012 has been searchable online, where previously it was necessary to contact the CWGC to obtain a search of this field. Where the field has been completed, the data usually reveals the name and address of the next-of-kin, which is almost always a widow or parents.

In addition to the sources already mentioned, there are many other sources, some only relevant to certain parts of Britain and Ireland which can be used to supplement the larger sources. For parts of England, there is the *National Roll of the Great War* as mentioned above.⁴⁰ Ireland is well-served with several sources. *Ireland's Memorial Records* are now available on CD-Rom and online⁴¹ although they rarely include an address and are widely regarded as a problematic source.⁴² A further CD-Rom, compiled by Kiara Gregory, is an index of over 9000 wills of dead soldiers from across Ireland which are kept in the National Archive in Dublin.⁴³ The UK National Inventory of War Memorials⁴⁴ contains an increasingly useful amount of material for all four countries of the UK, while the Irish War Memorials site covers both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.⁴⁵ *Soldiers Died in the Great War* and *Officers Died in the Great War* never offer an address but do include a general indication (such as the name of a town or city) for place of birth and enlistment and, sometimes, residence.

Beyond these well-established sources there are other ways of pulling together information on local military service. If there are battalion nominal rolls in existence then those can be consulted, although there is a danger that this will distort data towards known 'local' battalions.⁴⁶ Local history societies and appeals through the media can also yield qualitative information on individuals. The extent to which such information will be useful will depend on what the researcher is seeking to establish and the standards they have set for information to be included. The West Belfast study set a very high standard for inclusion in the database of men from the area. It rested on two principles which aimed to ensure that neither enlistments nor fatalities are over-stated. First, any death, whether reported in a newspaper or on a memorial roll, must be verified by reference to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's records, sometimes aided by *Soldiers Died* to help resolve queries over, for example, the spelling of names. In *Belfast Boys*, 2,002 deaths were verified in this way, with another 159 which were reported in newspapers or found on rolls unverified and clearly stated as such. Second, to be linked to the area, there must be a record of an address⁴⁷ of either the serviceman or (so long as there is no evidence for the serviceman's home being outside the area) his next-of-kin, for the 1914-18 period, or for the immediate post-war records of the CWGC. It is not adequate, for example, to assume that all those listed on a local memorial roll were still living in that area when they enlisted. This meant that although a comprehensive search for local rolls was carried out for *Belfast Boys*, only one parish church roll

³⁹ These are available online at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/medals.asp> [accessed 20 April 2012] and at <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1262> [accessed 20 April 2012].

⁴⁰ Its volumes cover: Bedford, Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, London, Luton and District, Manchester, Northampton, Portsmouth, Salford and Southampton and most of it can be accessed at:

<http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1538> [20 April 2012].

⁴¹ www.eneclann.ie/acatalog/ENEC011.html and <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1633> [both accessed 23 November 2010].

⁴² The problems stem from its claim to contain the names of 49,000 'Irishmen' who died in the war. However, estimates of the 'Irish dead' now go as low as 25,000, with many agreed on around 35,000. The problem with this listing of 49,000 is that it includes all those who died in Irish regiments (many of whom would have been transferred from English, Scottish or Welsh regiments), and does not include the many Irishmen who died in non-Irish units. For a review of this debate see Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 33 & 35.

⁴³ [www.eneclann.ie/acatalog/ENEC016 - World War 1 Irish Soldiers.html](http://www.eneclann.ie/acatalog/ENEC016_-_World_War_1_Irish_Soldiers.html) [accessed 20 April 2012].

⁴⁴ <http://www.ukniwm.org.uk/server/show/nav.15> [accessed 20 April 2012].

⁴⁵ <http://www.irishwarmemorials.ie/> [accessed 20 April 2012].

⁴⁶ For Ireland, only one such roll has ever been located and that happens to be for a battalion which recruited well in Belfast, the 14th Royal Irish Rifles. It is important to exclude data for men who are only found in such a roll if one is counting the numbers of men in different battalions.

⁴⁷ Defined as a specific road in the area, though a house number was not required.

was of significant value, in addition to the all-Ireland Presbyterian roll. Moreover, it was not adequate to find addresses in the 1911 Census due to the very rapid turnover of residence among some sections of the population (see below for further discussion of the value of 1911 Census).

Consequently, simply being born in the Shankill or the Falls did not guarantee inclusion. That made the listings in *Soldiers Died* and *Officers Died* of no use other than for verifying death or membership of a unit. Similarly, if there had been a Belfast memorial which included names but not addresses of the dead, then that would also have been no use for research unless an address could be found elsewhere. Of course, where a memorial is in a village and the story of an entire village or town is being told, some assumptions can be made as stated above, but where an analysis of part of a city is being carried out, more specific address information is required. Despite all that, Table 1 shows that even for research on a city, a very wide range of sources not only can be used, but have to be used, if one is seeking as much data as possible.

Table 1: Source origin of individuals in West Belfast study

Source	Number	Percentage of total
Presbyterian roll only	1763	20.0
Newspapers only	1645	18.7
Service records only	1328	15.1
Pensions records only	1194	13.6
St Michael's Roll only ^a	573	6.5
CWGC database only	273	3.1
14 th RIRifles Roll only ^b	175	2.0
Wills index only	132	1.5
Troubles-related only ^c	21	0.2
Private sources only ^d	19	0.2
United Reformed Roll only	10	0.1
<i>Total from one source only</i>	<i>7133</i>	<i>81.1</i>
<i>More than one source</i> ^e	<i>1665</i>	<i>18.9</i>
Total	8798 ^f	100

^a Church of Ireland Parish covering part of Shankill area.

^b A book, held at the Royal Ulster Rifles Museum, which includes the name, home address, and denomination of those who served in the 14th Royal Irish Rifles. It is believed to be the only nominal roll in existence for any Irish battalion, and means that we have information which is close to being complete for just one battalion.

^c Newspaper reports of deaths during Belfast Troubles of 1920-2, mentioning former military service.

^d Material provided by individuals, mainly in response to appeals in local media.

^e Over half of these are newspapers combined with either the Presbyterian or CWGC records.

^f 8798 is an upper limit due to possible duplication of a very small number of records. If all possible duplicates are duplicates, then the number would be 8473 but no lower, although it is unlikely that all would be duplicates.

As Table 1 makes clear, over 80 percent of records can only be found in one source and so, if one wishes to gather the maximum amount of information possible for a local area, then as many sources as possible must be used. However, because some of the sources involve selectivity in their creation, they must be used with care in statistical analysis as discussed below.

It is worth noting where the 1911 Census can and cannot be used. The recent completion of its publication online for the whole of Ireland⁴⁸ has excited historians because it does offer huge potential for research, and of course it is also available for the rest of the UK. Parts of the census for Belfast were online well before the all-Ireland collection as part of the Belfam project,⁴⁹ and from an early stage of work for *Belfast Boys* the author found the source invaluable for material on individuals. However, the value of the 1911 Census for research on 1914-18 is not as great as one might at first imagine. Aside from providing biographical back-stories for select individuals, its main use for *Belfast Boys* was to supplement information on religious denomination where this was missing from service records. Denomination was missing in 31 percent of cases. It might be

⁴⁸ www.census.nationalarchives.ie/ [accessed 20 April 2012].

⁴⁹ www.belfastfamilyhistory.com/ [accessed 20 April 2012].

thought that a majority of the gaps could be filled using the Census, and every individual with a service record whose denomination was missing was searched for, but it was only possible to find material for a further 5.2 percent of those searched for (that is, just one-sixth of those who were researched on the Census website). That is likely to be because of the relative (compared to now) lack of diversity in names, falsification of age at enlistment on service records, and because many people moved on a frequent basis. These factors make it difficult to verify individuals with reasonable certainty.

The question then arises as to whether the Census could be used to find other information. Occupation is the most obvious. On the one hand, the Census can be used to assess social origins, for example, by recording father's occupation in general terms. However, for individuals, a great deal can change in at least three years and the author does not feel that it is sufficiently rigorous to assume that an occupation in 1911 should be used as the basis of analysis of links between occupation and recruitment in 1914-18. A more reliable method is to use the information we have in service records. Moreover, once one has a record of someone serving in 1914-18 from a relatively reliable source such as WO 363 or 364, the value of looking for that individual in the 1911 Census is unclear. One would verify their existence, but unless one feels that there are service records for non-existent soldiers,⁵⁰ and nobody has ever seriously suggested this, then doing so would have no point. So, while matching to Census data might be interesting for, say, the descendants of soldiers, the academic value of gathering such data is limited, though that should not detract from the value of using the Census to assess social origins.

Analysis of local patterns

Once a database or spreadsheet has been created using as wide a range of sources as possible, the data can be analysed. However, for much statistical analysis, only the service records should be used because they are free from the biases affecting other sources. This is especially the case where politics might affect the recording of information as it did in Ireland. In the case of newspapers, Protestant and unionist titles tended to focus stories on battalions which were political in their character. Meanwhile, using a Presbyterian roll, when there are only partial rolls for Anglicans and none for Catholics, is problematic. In contrast, one part of the service records is unsifted other than by the random fact of having survived the Blitz, and the pensions part of the collection contains all applicants for pensions.

Yet there are still limits to what these records can reveal and before establishing what value the sources discussed can have to academics it is important to recognise those. In the first place, very few members of the Royal Navy, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force are to be found in the service records. No information on naval service would be included, unless a man had transferred into the army from the navy. As regards flyers, only those members of the RFC who died or were discharged before the RAF was formed would have had their records kept with those of soldiers.⁵¹ These are large gaps because 640,237 men served in the navy, and 291,175 in the RFC/RAF.⁵² As regards the army, the files of all the 247,061 men who served as officers are not part of the service records. Even if they enlisted as private soldiers before obtaining their commission, their records were moved to the officer records section. Although correspondence for approximately 217,000 individuals remains intact,⁵³ that exists only in paper format and cannot be searched by place. Even if they could, the basic biographical information contained in Army Forms B196 and B199 was destroyed in the Blitz.⁵⁴ Of course, there will be a significant number of references to army officers, sailors and flyers in many of the other sources such as newspapers

⁵⁰ Of course, soldiers did enlist using false names, but simply not finding those names at a particular address in 1911 would prove nothing.

⁵¹ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/royalflyingcorpsairmen.htm?WT.lp=rg-3148> [accessed 23 November 2010].

⁵² Winter, *Great War*, p. 91. Of the RFC/RAF, a relatively small number, 6,166, were killed.

⁵³ The National Archives says that there are 'over 217,000' records in its collection. See <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/officerbritisharmyafter1913.htm> [accessed 20 April 2012].

⁵⁴ Spencer, pp. 19-20.

and memorials. However, as discussed below, these have their own problems and it cannot be assumed that they will offer the same kind of coverage of geographic areas as the service records.

In using the sources there are two broad types of analysis which can be carried out. First, statistical analysis of the service records only, with this selection made on the basis that they offer not only the most complete information on individuals, but also because they cover the dead and survivors and there was no selection (for example by religious denomination) in the way that they were made. Second, all the sources can be combined to offer as complete a picture as possible of service from a specific area, and to allow the production of wide-ranging narratives. Each approach will yield different types of results, and each carries its own health warnings.

The service records contain as much consistent information on soldiers as can be found anywhere. Of course, some of it might be inaccurate (notoriously age) because the form partly relies on information provided on enlistment by the soldier concerned. However, much of the rest of the information was added after enlistment and does not suffer from the same dangers of deception. Initial information provided by the soldier includes name, age, place of birth, occupation, any former military service, marriage and children. Age is problematic because of men enlisting when they were too young or too old. Details of former military service might also be incorrect because a man might not want to mention that he had, for example, been discharged as unfit for military service on one or more occasions.⁵⁵ From the point of view of consistency, it is unfortunate that some forms used by the army did not have pre-prepared spaces for the insertion of home address and religious denomination.⁵⁶ The latter was often added at the top of the second page of the form above next-of-kin details, while the former was compensated for by the inclusion of the name and address of a next-of-kin, and their relationship to the soldier. Where that person is a wife, we can relatively safely assume that the soldier was living with them, and where that person is a parent or parents, we can see at least some connection with a particular area.

Other information about the soldier's appearance and physique would be added by the attesting officer at enlistment: height, weight, chest measurements, complexion, eye colour, hair colour and the presence of any distinguishing marks (which often included a description of tattoos). Subsequent information added to the form over the period of a man's service would be about battalions or other units served in, and any time spent abroad, partly in relation to eligibility for medals. Time in each battalion and time served overseas is recorded to the precise day. Where a man took any classes of instruction while in the army that would be listed, and there would also be a record of any wounds sustained (again, with the precise date stated). If a man was wounded there might be several additional pages inserted to the record detailing the nature of the wound and treatment received which would, of course, be particularly pertinent for any pension application. Where a man was discharged due to a wound, such information would be extensive.

Beyond such core information there is sometimes much more. The West Belfast study found cases of extensive correspondence with parents where soldiers enlisted under-age and were claimed back.⁵⁷ There are examples of the problems the War Office faced in tracking down the relatives of a dead soldier in order to give them a Death Penny.⁵⁸ There are also many details of mental health problems. Frank Malone was depressed because he believed he had heart disease and doctors also noted that 'he is alone and wants to get married to save his soul, as if he died as he is, he fears he would never see the face of God'. He was discharged with melancholia. Meanwhile, Alexander McCartney believed himself to be a wealthy man who was to buy a butcher's shop on discharge, and regularly said that pigs were outside his hospital waiting to be slaughtered. He was discharged for 'insanity' and being 'delusional'.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Hamilton Quee of Conlon Street in Belfast made four attempts to enlist in 1914–17, never staying in more than three months, until his final enlistment when he managed to serve just over a year in the Inland Waterways section of the Royal Engineers. Earlier, he had been discharged due to hammer toes, varicose veins and middle-ear disease.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of this see, Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 193.

⁵⁷ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 20.

⁵⁸ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 188.

⁵⁹ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 21.

Such information provides unmatched qualitative material for understanding the lives of ordinary soldiers, but there is also much information which can be used quantitatively in many different ways. In the first place, a particularly important part of studying service from a geographic area is to assess in which battalion or other units men served. That helps us to understand how far men were serving in the units believed to be linked to that area, or whether their service was cast further afield. In so doing, we can move beyond infantry-dominated accounts of the war towards an understanding of how many men from an area were serving in, for example, the Royal Engineers or the Army Service Corps.

Levels and nature of service

One of the reasons for analysing West Belfast was the dominance of a particular kind of popular narrative about the Protestant Shankill area. That is paralleled by an almost total lack of knowledge of levels of service from the Catholic Falls other than awareness of men joining the 16th (Irish) Division for which the nationalist leader, John Redmond was an active recruiter, out of the belief that such enlistment would help the Irish secure Home Rule. Thus there was a public awareness of two rival volunteer divisions, and little beyond that, and scant detail on either. The dominant Shankill narrative is a loyalist story which has been included on websites and leaflets aimed at tourists, and is also used in a tourist information board provided by Belfast City Council outside the Shankill Memorial Garden. It talks of 760 men who fought in the war, with only 76 coming back. With its focus on men being killed after going over the top on the first day of the battle of the Somme, that account is by implication an infantry-dominated one.⁶⁰ Yet a street-by-street analysis gives a very different picture. In the first place, ironically for a community which proudly celebrates its role in the British army, this story severely understates both the number of men who served, and the number who were killed. However, it overstates the percentage of those who were killed as a proportion of those who served, and inaccurately concentrates on the 36th Division. In fact, not 760 but over 6,431 Shankill men were found to have served. Many more than around 700 were killed: nearly twice that number, 1,358. Moreover, there is a sizeable story to be told about service from the (much smaller, around one-third of 'West Belfast') Falls area, from which 2,341 men were found to have served with 644 being killed.⁶¹ Combined with another 26 men whose addresses crossed boundaries between the Falls and the Shankill,⁶² that makes a total of up to 8,798 identified, though due to possible duplication in records, the figure might be as low as 8,473 (see Table 1, note f).

Such figures show that very much larger numbers of men served than are allowed for in a narrative which focuses on the Ulster Division. Yet they do not amount to the final total of those who served due to the loss of service records. However, we can make estimates, starting from the knowledge that around 64 percent of the records were lost, and that 36 percent of records can be found only in service records. We know that in the surviving service/pensions records there were 2,522 men whose existence was not documented in any other source. If this represents 36 percent of the records which can only be found in this way, then one might expect to find as many as another 4,115 in the lost records. That would make an upper limit of 13,280 who served.⁶³ That would constitute around up to 66 percent of the male population of service age.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ www.shankilltourism.com/page/default.asp?cmsid=3_62_72&cms=history_Shankill+History_World+War+One [accessed 13 July 2008].

⁶¹ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 195.

⁶² In these cases, the road but no house number was found, and as the road was in both the Falls and the Shankill, they cannot be placed in either area.

⁶³ In *Belfast Boys* it was suggested that the figure 'could be over 12,000.' That estimate was based on the fact that there are WO 363 service records for 1,328 men from West Belfast who cannot be found elsewhere. If these 1,328 were 25 percent of the total records which were made, then it was calculated that there would be 3,984 others which were destroyed and should be added to the other records identified. Of course, some of the service records survived as part of the WO 364 pensions collection, and as already stated, this means that probably 36 percent of the records can be found. However, that 36 percent is not the 1,328 found only in the service records, but the 2,522 found in the WO 363 and WO 364 combined. As stated, that leads to a total possible figure even higher than 12,000. Fitzpatrick, 'West Belfast exceptionalism', p. 105, suggests that the figure should be nearer 10,000, but that total seems to have been reached by applying a 'two-fifths' survived assumption to only the 'service' records (WO 363), when the figure of two-fifths (or the more accurate 36 percent) should be applied to WO 363 and 364 combined. If 1,328 represents two-fifths of the

For any part of Ireland at this time, the denomination of recruits is a central question, not least because the levels of service according to denomination were much debated at the time and previous efforts at assessing recruitment according to denomination are problematic.⁶⁵ It might be hoped that some estimates would be possible using only the service and pensions records because they do not have the same bias as other sources. However, information on religious denomination is not contained in all of these records. A particular problem is that denomination is lacking for some battalions more than others. For example, it is included for 88.2 percent of the 9th Royal Irish Rifles, compared to only 38.3 percent of the 6th Connaughts and just 17.9 percent of the 7th Leinsters.⁶⁶ However, the disparity between information recorded in different battalions is highly problematic when it is suspected that some battalions began with different religious compositions. There could be many reasons for this. It might be that the staff compiling records for the Leinsters and Connaughts were simply not very diligent. However, it might also be that most or all of those in the Leinsters were Catholics and it was simply not considered necessary to write that down. In contrast, those making records for the Royal Irish Rifles might have felt that, while most/all volunteers at their recruiting offices would be Protestant, it was important to know what type of Protestant they were. Despite that, the 1911 Census can be used, subject to the caveats discussed above,⁶⁷ yet the figures are far from conclusive. They lead to results which put the Catholic proportion of volunteers at anything between 34.5 percent and 37 percent in an area where they comprised 35.9 percent of the population.⁶⁸

We can be more clear about the types of units in which men served, beginning with very broad categories using data from the service records about the first destination of recruits. This does not help with many of the problems around the narrative for the Shankill, but it does point out the limitation of infantry-dominated accounts which are so central to much writing about the British army in 1914-18.

records, then there would indeed only be slightly short of 2,000 more records which were lost, and the total would be somewhere between 10,000 and 11,000. However, if 2,522 represents broadly two-fifths of the records (which is the case), then there would be nearly 4,000 more records, justifying the earlier claim of 'over 12,000' rather than 10,000. When the more accurate 36 percent is applied, the figure is considerably more than 12,000. So whether or not one applies 25 percent to WO 363 or two-fifths/36 percent to WO 363 & 364 combined, the result is broadly similar and well above 10,000 in total, supporting the earlier (actually rather cautious) claim of 'over 12,000'.

⁶⁴ Based on the population figures in the 1911 Census. There is a debate to be had about this figure. Fitzpatrick, 'West Belfast exceptionalism', p. 104-105, believes that 51 percent would be more accurate. That is partly based on Fitzpatrick's view that the figure of around 10,000 is more likely than 12,000 to represent the total figure of West Belfast service. As stated above (n. 63), that is problematic. Fitzpatrick also argues that while official statistics suggest a military participation ratio for Belfast as a whole of 60 percent, that is likely to include men who enlisted in Belfast but lived outside it. That is certainly the case but implies that all Belfast men enlisted in Belfast and none enlisted outside the city. In reality, at least some Belfast men would have enlisted outside the city, for example, those temporarily working elsewhere, or those who travelled somewhere in Great Britain to enlist in a specific regiment, and they might even match the number of incomers. For West Belfast, the place of attestation was found for 2,813 individuals, of whom 271 (9.6 percent) enlisted outside the city.

⁶⁵ Eric Mercer, 'For King, Country and a Shilling a Day: Belfast Recruiting Patterns in the Great War', *History Ireland* 11, 4 (2003), pp. 29-33 and 'For King, Country and a Shilling a Day: Recruitment in Belfast during the Great War, 1914-18' (MA Dissertation, The Queen's University Belfast. 1998), p. 9. This is a strong dissertation but is problematic as regards the use of surnames to identify denomination.

⁶⁶ In many cases, denomination is not recorded simply because among the various enlistment forms used in different offices and at different times, one type did not include space for denomination, although a section was sometimes added by hand. In other cases the relevant pages are missing from the service records which survived the Blitz.

⁶⁷ See above, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁸ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 232 n. 7.

Table 2: First destination of West Belfast men

Source: WO 363 and WO 364.

Type	Number	%
Artillery	186	6.1
Army Service Corps	364	11.8
Cavalry	26	0.8
Infantry ^a	1978	64.0
Other	53	1.7
Royal Army Medical Corps	77	2.5
Royal Engineers	406	13.1
Total	3090	100

^a Includes reservists and a small number of men in Guards regiments, mainly the 1st and 2nd Irish Guards: 18 (0.6%) in total.

As Table 2 shows, around one-third of men were not initially sent to any infantry battalion (regular, service or reserve). The rest were mainly in units such as the Royal Engineers and the Army Service Corps. Consequently, accounts focused on the infantry overlook a significant part of service. Moreover, accounts which focus on one or a few infantry units known to be associated with an area distort the picture of service even further, as Table 3 suggests.

By counting the number of different instances of service in different units, it is possible to see the range of different units in which men served. Table 3 does not include all 8,798 men in the database because not all of those have unit-level data attached to them. For example, Church memorial rolls commonly stated a regiment but not a battalion. It contains two sets of figures, one from service records only, and one from all sources. The reason for that has already been stated: if one is trying to compare 36th and 16th Division service, the service records are 'blind' according to religion or politics. However, the 'all sources' data include material from unionist newspapers (while nationalist ones did not report the war in the same level of detail) and from Protestant rolls of honours (while Catholic churches did not produce any in Belfast). Thus, in very simple terms, 'all sources' should in theory inflate the relative numbers of unionists and Protestants. That at least is what one would expect to happen and indeed service in the 16th Division does fall significantly as a percentage when 'all sources' are added in. However, the 'all sources' column also reduces the overall percentage of men who served in the 36th Division, the biggest increases being in the naval service and the two regular battalions of the Royal Irish Rifles. It is difficult to explain why this would be the case and the main conclusion to draw from it is that looking at percentages of those who served should always be described as being in a broad range. Thus, we might most safely talk of around ten percent of service taking place in the 16th Division, and around one-third being in the 36th Division.

Table 3: Instances of service by West Belfast men

Unit summary	From service records		From all sources	
	Number	%	Number	%
<i>36th (Ulster) Division^a</i>	975	36.3	2,113	33.8
9 th Royal Irish Rifles	237	8.8	537	8.6
Other Belfast infantry	224	8.3	843	13.5
Non-Belfast Infantry	127	4.7	308	4.9
Non-infantry ^b	387	14.4	425	6.8
<i>16th (Irish) Division</i>	350	13.0	528	8.5
6 th Connaught Rangers	117	4.4	141	2.3
7 th Leinsters	96	3.6	130	2.1
Other Infantry	136	5.1	255	4.1
Non-infantry ^b	1	0.0	2	0.0
<i>Other Irish units</i>	512	19.1	1,654	26.5
Other regular/service Irish bns	174	6.5	582	9.3
10th Div Infantry	160	6.0	361	5.8
Royal Irish Rifles 1 st & 2 nd (Regular) ^a	156	5.8	587	9.4
Irish Guards	15	0.6	73	1.2
North Irish Horse	7	0.3	48	0.8
10 th Div non-infantry	-	-	3	0.0
<i>Other infantry</i>	227	8.5	571	9.1
English regiments	125	4.7	326	5.2
Scottish regiments	98	3.6	237	3.8
Welsh regiments	4	0.1	8	0.1
<i>Other</i>	621	23.1	1,380	22.1
Royal Engineers (non-10 th , 16 th or 36 th Div)	195	7.3	226	3.6
Army Service Corps (non-10 th , 16 th or 36 th Div)	150	5.6	197	3.2
Artillery (non-10 th , 16 th or 36 th Div)	136	5.1	218	3.5
Miscellaneous ^c	117	4.4	394	6.3
Royal Army Medical Corps (non-10 th , 16 th or 36 th Div)	15	0.6	29	0.5
Royal Flying Corps & Royal Air Force	7	0.3	53	0.8
Royal Navy and Mercantile Marine	1	0.0	263	4.2
<i>Total</i>	2,685 ^d	100.0	6,246 ^e	100.0

a. Both the 1st and 2nd Royal Irish Rifles became part of the 36th Division in the later stages of the war, the 1st from February 1918 and the 2nd from November 1917. However, the division had lost its political character by that point, partly due to post-Somme transfers from other units, and partly because of the transfer of units such as the 1st and 2nd RI Rifles. So it would not be accurate to consider service in these two battalions in terms of the popularly held conception of the 36th Division.

b. 36th Div and 16th Div ‘non-infantry’ covers units of the Army Service Corps, Army Veterinary Corps, Machine Gun Corps, Royal Engineers, Royal Field Artillery, Royal Army Medical Corps and Trench Mortar Battery.

c. ‘Other’ covers a wide range of units such as the Army Veterinary Corps and the Labour Corps, not associated with the 10th, 16th or 36th divisions.

d. Represents 2,377 individuals. An instance of service has only been recorded where it is possible to be sure precisely which unit the man served in. For example, ‘RE (non-10th, 16th or 36th Div)’ includes only those men whose unit was proven to be not in the 36th Division.

e. Represents 5,901 individuals and the same method for attributing service was used as described in d above.

Table 3 suggests a number of points about service in the British military. As regards the 36th Division, one would expect most men from the West Belfast area to be in the 9th Royal Irish Rifles, formed from the West Belfast Ulster Volunteer Force. However, almost as many men served at some point in another Belfast battalion, mostly the 15th Royal Irish Rifles which was formed from the North Belfast UVF. That is partly due to ‘North’ Belfast covering a part of the Shankill, and also due to men transferring into the 15th later in the war when the 9th was disbanded. Even more notable, however, is that men were more likely to serve in a non-infantry unit of the division than is suggested by accounts which focus on the infantry. According to service records, nearly 40 percent of those who served in the division spent some time in a non-infantry unit, principally the

Royal Engineers or Army Service Corps. Using all records that figure is much lower (around 20 percent) but that is probably artificially low because church rolls tended not to report units of, for example, the Royal Engineers, in the same way that they mentioned specific battalions of regiments. Moreover, because casualties would be lower in non-infantry units, men would be less likely to be mentioned in newspapers.

Examining the 16th (Irish) Division, mainly formed from the nationalist community, we can see that, although sizeable numbers served at some point in the 6th Connaughts or 7th Leinsters which were associated with Belfast, there were also sizeable levels of service in other battalions of that division – nearly 40 percent of service in that division was outside those two battalions. More widely, there was significant service outside the 16th and 36th divisions: one in five to one in four served in other Irish units, around one in ten in English, Scottish or (in a small number of cases) Welsh units, and around one in five in other units not associated with either division. Overall, around half of the instances of service (50 to 55 percent) were outside the two political divisions.

We can gain an even more in-depth understanding of how far men were grouped into specific infantry units by looking at battalion level data more closely. Table 4 includes data for men drawn from service records only (so as not to increase disproportionately percentages for predominantly Protestant units covered in other sources). The percentage given is a proportion of the 2,377 individuals for whom unit level data exists, and the table includes figures only for those battalions in which more than 30 men served at some point in the war. This method emphasises army service at the expense of sailors and flyers and does not therefore indicate service in a battalion as a percentage of overall service. However, it does illustrate patterns of service within the army. On that point, it should be noted that 387 men served at some point in non-infantry formations of the 36th Division, which equates to 16.3 percent of those men who served in the army. We can conclude from Table 4 that although more men served in the 9th Royal Irish Rifles than in any other infantry battalion, this still accounts for only 10 percent of those who served. More widely, no other individual battalion accounted for more than 5 percent of those who served, which illustrates just how broadly service in the infantry was distributed across different battalions.

Table 4: Instances of service in infantry battalions (excluding reserve battalions) by West Belfast men

Unit ^a	Number	Percentage ^b
9 th Royal Irish Rifles	237	10.0
6 th Connaught Rangers	117	4.9
15 th Royal Irish Rifles	109	4.6
7 th Leinsters	96	4.0
2 nd Royal Irish Rifles	85	3.6
1 st Royal Irish Rifles	76	3.2
6 th Royal Irish Rifles	61	2.6
16 th Royal Irish Rifles	59	2.5
2 nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers	56	2.4
14 th Royal Irish Rifles	53	2.2
10 th Royal Irish Rifles	51	2.1
8 th Royal Irish Rifles	31	1.3

Source: WO 363 and WO 364.

a. Includes only battalions where number served is 30 or more.

b. Percentage is of 2377 individuals for whom specific unit/battalion level data exists, including non-infantry

One explanation for this spread of service is of course that, although men were likely to be sent to a 'local' unit in the early months of the war, later on there were pressures simply to use men wherever they were needed. This can be seen in the extent to which the dominance of recruitment into the 36th and 16th Divisions had disappeared by the middle of 1915 as Table 5 shows. It should be noted that because these figures are drawn only from the service records which are incomplete, actual numbers would be three to four times higher,⁶⁹ and it is the relative proportions which are the most important indicators.

⁶⁹ See n. 63 above..

Table 5. Recruitment destination per month for West Belfast men

Source: WO 363 and WO 364.

Unit	Aug & Sep 1914		Oct-Dec 1914		Jan-Mar 1915		Apr-June 1915		Jul-Sep 1915		Oct-Dec 1915		Jan-Mar 1916		Apr-June 1916		Jul-Sep 1916		Oct-Dec 1916		Jan-Mar 1917		Apr-June 1917		Jul-Sep 1917		Oct-Dec 1917		Jan-Mar 1918	
	n	% ^b	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
10 th Division	110	16.8	11	2.3	3	0.9	1	0.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
16 th Division	25	3.8	143	30.3	58	18.1	42	12.3	17	12.5	3	1.9	1	1.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	6.7
36 th Division	286	43.7	229	48.5	190	59.4	105	30.8	10	7.4	12	7.7	3	3.2	1	2.0	7	8.0	2	3.6	1	1.4	-	-	-	-	1	4.8	-	-
Other Artillery ^a	20	3.1	31	6.6	7	2.2	2	0.6	5	3.7	9	5.8	3	3.2	1	2.0	1	1.1	3	5.5	2	2.8	4	7.3	3	7.1	1	4.8	-	-
Other ASC ^a	2	0.3	-	-	2	0.6	8	2.3	5	3.7	15	9.7	6	6.3	3	6.0	9	10.2	8	14.5	27	37.5	20	36.4	8	19.0	6	28.6	5	33.3
Other RE ^a English, Scottish & Welsh Infantry	5	0.8	3	0.6	10	3.1	6	1.8	5	3.7	6	3.9	6	6.3	10	20.0	37	42.0	19	34.5	28	38.9	15	27.3	16	38.1	4	19.0	6	40.0
Other Irish Units (Infantry, NIH & Guards)	16	2.4	13	2.8	7	2.2	56	16.4	14	10.3	18	11.6	24	25.3	3	6.0	1	1.1	4	7.3	1	1.4	2	3.6	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	4	0.6	9	1.9	3	0.9	5	1.5	7	5.1	10	6.5	3	3.2	4	8.0	1	1.1	1	1.8	2	2.8	1	1.8	4	9.5	1	4.8	1	6.7
Reserves	137	20.9	25	5.3	36	11.3	111	32.6	69	50.7	77	49.7	44	46.3	27	54.0	29	33.0	18	32.7	8	11.1	13	23.6	10	23.8	7	33.3	2	13.3
Total	655		472		320		341		136		155		95		50		88		55		72		55		42		21		15	-

a. 'Other' for Artillery, ASC and RE means a unit other than one attached to the 10th, 16th or 36th divisions.

b. Some percentage columns might not add up to 100 percent exactly due to rounding up/down to one decimal point.

Until June 1915, the end of the quarter in which the Ulster Division was filled the dominance of the 36th Division in early recruitment is evident, especially to the end of March 1915. These figures were followed by those of the 16th Division which in the October to December 1914 quarter took nearly one third of recruits. In addition, figures for reservists should be considered alongside those for the 16th and 36th Divisions because the reserve battalions in question were primarily focused on supporting these volunteer divisions.

However, after the two divisions were filled there was a somewhat different pattern with the steady reduction in the proportion of recruits being sent to a 'local' battalion is apparent. While in the first two quarters a clear majority went either to one of the three volunteer divisions or to an associated reserve unit, that began to change in early 1916 with a steady increase in the proportion of men being sent to a unit of the Royal Engineers or Army Service Corps outside the three divisions. These patterns reflect the steady reduction of local links across the British army as a whole. Just as, for example, the 9th Royal Irish Rifles was bolstered by drafts from Norfolk, Hertfordshire and London after the Somme,⁷⁰ Belfast men might be sent to any part of the army.

Pre- enlistment employment and wartime service

The data on the types of units can be examined in further depth so that we not only understand which units men went into and when, but also which types of men went into which types of unit. Information on the pre-war occupations on recruits allows such analysis. Previous studies, because of the nature of sources used, have not been able to make much comment on the relationship between pre-enlistment occupation and the unit(s) in which men served. Indeed, there has been very little attention to how far recruiting offices might have paid any attention to occupation when deciding which unit a recruit should enter. Peter Simkins has pointed out the theoretical impact of the individual enlistee's choice. Timothy Bowman has referred to the attractions of the higher pay in units such as the Army Service Corps.⁷¹ Meanwhile, there has been some discussion of the relative value of skills to munitions producers or the army, in the context of wider debates on manpower.⁷² We also have considerable knowledge of relative enlistment rates across different occupations, which is part of a wider debate about how far factors such as age and occupation affected enlistment, and some of this is now focused on specific local studies.⁷³ In an Irish context, David Fitzpatrick has considered the issue partly within the context of the impact of pre-war militarism in Ireland. He has examined the impact of occupation on propensity to enlist, perhaps most importantly finding that 'the relationship between enlistment and insecurity of employment was inverse rather than direct', with those who had the strongest economic interests for not enlisting instead doing the reverse.⁷⁴ However, beyond brief discussion of the fact that, from late 1914, pioneer battalions sought men who had experience of digging or tunneling,⁷⁵ there has been very little consideration of how far men with specific skills might be used in specific ways by the army and whether the skills-needs of the British army were met through the distribution of skilled men into suitable units. Typical accounts of the formation of the new armies either pay little attention to the backgrounds of recruits,⁷⁶ or put forward the popular view that infantry battalions

⁷⁰ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 197.

⁷¹ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916* (Manchester: MUP, 1988), p. 176; Timothy Bowman, *Carson's Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-22* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), p. 173. Indeed, in 1914, there was higher pay for the ordinary soldier in all non-infantry units as www.1914-1918.net/pay_1914.html [accessed 22 November 2013] helpfully sets out from War Office Instruction 166.

⁷² Simkins, p. 311; Keith Grieves, *The Politics of Manpower, 1914-18* (Manchester: MUP, 1988), pp. 57-8.

⁷³ J.M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003), pp. 33-39; P.E. Dewey, 'Military recruiting and the British labour force during the First World War', *The Historical Journal*, 27, 1 (1984), pp. 199-223; Bonnie J. White, 'Volunteerism and early recruitment efforts in Devonshire, August 1914 – December 1915', *The Historical Journal*, 52, 3 (2009), pp. 641-666.

⁷⁴ David Fitzpatrick, 'The logic of collective sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army, 1914-1918', *The Historical Journal*, 38, 4 (1995), pp. 1017-1030.

⁷⁵ Simkins, p. 309.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Charles Messenger, *Call-to-Arms: The British Army, 1914-18* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 94-129.

contained men from a very wide variety of backgrounds, even in some Pals' battalions,⁷⁷ although there is obviously much work showing how Pals' battalions and some other units were more narrowly focused in social terms.⁷⁸

The impact of occupation on the type of unit a man joined can be looked at in different ways. In the first instance, patterns for an area across the entire war can be analysed. In the case of West Belfast, the hypothesis investigated (by this author and a colleague⁷⁹) was whether assignment to specific types of military units was systematically influenced by the pre-war occupation of the recruit. To test this out the data from 2,675 recruits were categorised by unit and occupation. Unit categories were: artillery,⁸⁰ Royal Engineers, infantry,⁸¹ Army Service Corps and other.⁸² Occupation categories were: animal-related,⁸³ commerce,⁸⁴ other skill,⁸⁵ skilled construction,⁸⁶ skilled engineering,⁸⁷ skilled manufacturing,⁸⁸ skilled trades,⁸⁹ unskilled⁹⁰ and white collar.⁹¹

The statistical analysis conducted was a multinomial logistic regression.⁹² The dependent variable was the assigned unit and the predictor variable was the category of pre-war occupation. Logistic regression computes a series of odds ratios (ORs). ORs compare the odds of being assigned to one unit relative to a reference unit ('infantry' in this case), for each pre-war occupation relative to a reference occupation (in this case, 'unskilled'). The overall logistic regression shows that the unit to which a recruit was assigned in general was strongly and reliably influenced by occupation prior to recruitment into military service (Likelihood ratio test statistic = 308.2, df = 32, p<0.0001). Of more interest, however is the specific pattern of ORs as set out in Table 6.

⁷⁷ Simkins, pp. 72 & 92.

⁷⁸ A key issue in McCartney, pp. 27-36, is the middle-class nature of the battalions in the study. McCartney uses the 1921 Registrar General classification of occupations to analyse the composition of two units. That is a useful approach when the composition of units in total is looked at. It was not attempted for the West Belfast study because the area is an overwhelmingly working-class area and such analysis would not tell us anything other than that most people from it who enlisted were working-class. Moreover, there is no baseline for comparisons of enlistment rates according to occupation because the figures for numbers in each occupation are only recorded in the 1911 Census for Belfast as a whole, rather than being presented by ward. Consequently, although it is widely accepted that West Belfast was a predominantly working-class area, we do not have any statistics which might help us place where employment classes I and II are, for example, 10 percent or 20 percent of those in the specific area, thus preventing any analysis of enlistment by occupation using those categories. A Belfast-wide study would be necessary to allow this.

⁷⁹ I am grateful to Professor Alan Pickering of Goldsmiths for constructing a program which converted my data into a format which could be used by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 18, and then for providing the statistical analysis with follows in relation to Table 6.

⁸⁰ Royal Field Artillery, Royal Garrison Artillery and Royal Horse Artillery.

⁸¹ Including Guards regiments and infantry reserves.

⁸² A range of units, principally including cavalry regiments and the Royal Army Medical Corps, but also covering, for example, the Army Cycle Corps.

⁸³ Principally carters and coach men, along with anyone in the broad 'farrier' category, covering for example shoeing smiths, plus those involved in farming (mainly dairy). It only includes those working with live animals and so does not include butchers (see note 79 below).

⁸⁴ Mainly shop workers but also merchants.

⁸⁵ Mainly bakers, butchers, communications workers, sailors and painters.

⁸⁶ Building.

⁸⁷ Almost entirely those involved in the shipping industry.

⁸⁸ Mainly those associated with the textile industry.

⁸⁹ Those specifically describing themselves as, for example, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, stone workers, blacksmiths, glaziers or polishers.

⁹⁰ Mostly described simply as 'labourer'.

⁹¹ Largely clerical.

⁹² Conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 18.

Table 6: Destinations of recruits by unit and occupation, relative to the infantry and unskilled workers from West Belfast

Unit type ^a	B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval for Exp(B)	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Artillery	Intercept	-2.773	.127	477.514	1	.000		
	Animal-related	1.460	.327	19.978	1	.000	4.308	2.271 8.173
	Commerce	.644	.490	1.731	1	.188	1.905	.729 4.975
	Other skill	.758	.360	4.435	1	.035	2.133	1.054 4.318
	Skilled - construction	-.318	1.030	.096	1	.757	.727	.097 5.479
	Skilled - engineering	.557	.329	2.859	1	.091	1.745	.915 3.329
	Skilled - manufacturing	-.066	.323	.041	1	.839	.937	.497 1.764
	Skilled - trades	.146	.441	.109	1	.742	1.157	.487 2.747
	White collar	.495	.540	.841	1	.359	1.641	.569 4.730
	Army Service Corps	Intercept	-2.118	.094	508.578	1	.000	
Animal-related		1.856	.230	64.910	1	.000	6.396	4.072 10.046
Commerce		1.019	.323	9.987	1	.002	2.772	1.473 5.216
Other skill		1.202	.236	26.028	1	.000	3.326	2.096 5.277
Skilled - construction		.636	.504	1.593	1	.207	1.890	.703 5.077
Skilled - engineering		1.388	.192	52.370	1	.000	4.006	2.751 5.834
Skilled - manufacturing		.666	.186	12.854	1	.000	1.947	1.353 2.802
Skilled - trades		.407	.296	1.895	1	.169	1.503	.841 2.684
White collar		1.345	.300	20.092	1	.000	3.838	2.131 6.910
Other		Intercept	-2.835	.131	470.710	1	.000	
	Animal-related	1.186	.369	10.327	1	.001	3.275	1.589 6.754
	Commerce	.484	.539	.804	1	.370	1.622	.564 4.668
	Other skill	.127	.480	.070	1	.791	1.135	.443 2.909
	Skilled - construction	-.256	1.031	.062	1	.804	.774	.103 5.838
	Skilled - engineering	.774	.312	6.133	1	.013	2.168	1.175 3.999
	Skilled - manufacturing	.077	.314	.060	1	.806	1.080	.583 2.000
	Skilled - trades	.613	.374	2.684	1	.101	1.847	.886 3.848
	White collar	1.117	.431	6.729	1	.009	3.057	1.314 7.112
	Royal Engineers	Intercept	-2.253	.100	509.716	1	.000	
Animal-related		1.192	.291	16.762	1	.000	3.293	1.861 5.826
Commerce		.124	.483	.066	1	.797	1.133	.439 2.922
Other skill		1.026	.262	15.321	1	.000	2.791	1.669 4.665
Skilled - construction		2.253	.318	50.312	1	.000	9.514	5.105 17.729
Skilled - engineering		1.711	.186	84.446	1	.000	5.535	3.843 7.973
Skilled - manufacturing		1.041	.177	34.675	1	.000	2.831	2.002 4.003
Skilled - trades		2.068	.191	117.175	1	.000	7.909	5.439 11.501
White collar		1.228	.327	14.095	1	.000	3.415	1.799 6.484

Table displays the parameter estimates from a multinomial logistic regression. Exp(B) are the odds ratios referred to in the text.

Source: WO 363 and WO 364.

a. The reference category is: infantry.

Key points which emerge from the data are that the odds of being posted to the Royal Engineers relative to the infantry were more than three times greater for those who had worked in animal-related professions than for unskilled workers (OR=3.29, 95% CIs=1.861, 5.826) and this effect was highly significant statistically ($p<0.0001$). The impact of having worked in an animal-related occupation can be seen even more strikingly elsewhere. Such men were more than four times more likely to go into the artillery relative to the infantry than were unskilled workers (OR=4.31, 95% CIs=2.271, 8.173), and more than six times more likely to go into the Army Service Corps (OR=6.39, 95% CIs=4.072, 10.046). In both cases, this effect was again highly significant statistically ($p<0.0001$).

Meanwhile, the Royal Engineers were more than nine times more likely relative to the infantry to recruit skilled construction workers (OR=9.51, 95% CIs=5.105, 17.729), more than seven times more likely to recruit skilled tradesmen (OR=7.91, 95% CIs=5.439, 11.501), and more than five times more likely to recruit skilled engineers (OR=5.54, 95% CIs=3.843, 7.973). In both cases, this effect was again highly significant statistically ($p<0.0001$). By contrast, the odds of being posted to the Royal Engineers relative to the infantry was not significantly higher for those who had worked in commercial professions compared with unskilled workers (OR=1.13, 95% CIs=0.439, 2.922).

In sum, the results show that those who worked in animal-related occupations and other skills tended to go into the artillery. Meanwhile, every occupation other than construction and trades were most likely to go into the Army Service Corps, every skilled occupation (not 'commerce') went into the engineers, and the other units received relatively more postings from animal-related, engineering, and white collar backgrounds. This seems to reflect a very rational pattern of postings, utilising pre-war work skills as one basis for the recruits' destination units. Whether or not this was unique to West Belfast, Belfast, Ireland or the UK more widely would of course require further local study. Moreover, we cannot be clear exactly *why* this was the case. It is possible that a decisive factor was that an enlistee with a particular skill could earn more in units which could utilise that skill than they could in the infantry.⁹³ However, the surviving records rarely indicate any preference on the part of enlistees, even though some forms contained a space for that to be indicated. But the data which does survive does open up significant new territory for academic analysis.

Local narratives

Beyond statistical analysis, the sources discussed above can also be used to inform narratives of local areas. The statistics will be crucial for determining which units are most important to include, and the individual records will also reveal detailed personal stories as already discussed. However, it is only in conjunction with other sources that they can be used to construct a narrative which reveals the full richness of a local area's service in the First World War. In the first place, battalion war diaries are an essential way of matching a soldier's dates of service with specific locations at the front. With such war diaries containing day-by-day (often hour-by-hour and sometimes minute-by-minute) accounts of where a battalion was and what it was doing, it becomes possible to flesh out what a group of men, who might have arrived in France in October 1915 and stayed there for much of the war, would actually have been doing. There are even cases where the death or wounding of a soldier can be linked to a specific incident recorded in the war diary, even if the man is not named in the latter. For example, in the West Belfast study, it was possible to match the death of a man (Private Robert Fitzgerald, 6th Royal Irish Rifles) in Salonika to an isolated training accident recorded in the war diary, even though no report of the nature of the death was found elsewhere.⁹⁴ On only a slightly larger scale, the names and addresses of seven men killed on the night of 5/6 June 1916

⁹³ See above, p. xx. n. 71.

⁹⁴ Grayson, *Belfast Boys* (2010 edn.), p. 59.

could be matched by combining newspaper reports and the war diary. This showed that six of the men killed in this one incident of enemy shell fire all lived very close to each other in the Shankill area of Belfast. The incident contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Shankill fatalities than has previously been the case due to an excessive focus on 1 and 2 July 1916.

Such cases point to the value of newspapers as a source. In the first place they carry very detailed information of casualties and medallists. Military historians can be rightly sceptical of material in newspapers because they were so often used as propaganda, but in so doing they contained information that can help to challenge some of the narratives of the war which have a popular hold today. In the case of West Belfast for example, there are strong narratives around the battalions of the 36th (Ulster) Division, in particular the 9th Royal Irish Rifles formed from the West Belfast Ulster Volunteer Force. In recent years, during the Northern Ireland peace process, a new narrative has emerged around the Irish nationalists who joined the 16th (Irish) Division at the behest of the nationalist leader, John Redmond. Many of those from West Belfast went into the 6th Connaught Rangers. However, both narratives share a core strand which sees volunteers joining for political reasons, both serving on the Somme (thought at different stages in the battle), and then serving side-by-side at Messines in June 1917. Beyond this, little else about the war is remembered. Newspapers offer a contrast. For all that newspaper editorials might focus on the political divisions, the individual stories contained in casualty lists offer an alternative, implicit and subversive narrative. Even where stories were being produced for propaganda reasons, they illustrate the diversity of West Belfast men's military experiences, from the outbreak of the war to its very end, and in every theatre in which the war was fought. Thus the war goes beyond the Western Front to draw in Gallipoli, plus isolated but prominent examples of service in Africa, the Eastern Front, and, with the Royal Navy, as far away as the Falkland Islands.⁹⁵ The war is also extended chronologically as well as geographically, with the initial retreat at Mons and every battle through to the eventual victory. Consequently, for any part of Britain and Ireland where stories of one or more local units dominate the narrative, the scope of the war can be reconceived as contemporaries saw it. Newspapers can inject into a simplistic narrative a view of the war that would have been held by local people at the time but has long been forgotten in the popularising and ritualising which have accompanied remembrance.

Conclusions

One case study can only scratch the surface of the academic value of the service/pensions records, supplemented with other sources. Some of the value of that study relates to the very specific issues involved in the service of men from the island of Ireland in the British army, particularly denominational segregation in battalions. However, it also points to possibilities which go beyond the traditional outputs of military historians, towards histories which root men in the streets in which they lived, and in their places of work. In other words, newly available sources combined with old sources used in new ways offer the prospect of putting the social into military history to create a new sub-discipline: socio-military history, or 'military history from the street'.

There is scope for the further development of such an approach. In particular, data could be used to explore differences between volunteers and conscripts. This was not possible for West Belfast because there was no conscription in Ireland. However, in Great Britain, such data could help remedy the problem that existing literature is focused on volunteers. This would allow quantitative evidence to be brought to bear on debates such as the propensity of different occupations to enlist, setting that information against a range of other factors such as age, marital status and whether or not a man had served in the military before.

⁹⁵ Hugh Roy was a trooper in Colonel Enslin's Horse which was engaged in suppressing the Boer revolt (*Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 23 January 1915, p. 6). John McFarland was killed at Brzezany fighting the Austrians on 1 July 1917 as part of the Royal Naval Armoured Cars Division (*Belfast News Letter*, 10 August 1917, p. 8; *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 23 August 1917, p. 6 and 30 July 1917, p. 5). W.H. Wright witnessed the sinking of the *Leipzig* off the Falkland Islands while serving on HMS Cornwall in January 1915 (*Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 4 February 1915, p. 3).

Before we can analyse service in local areas in as ‘complete’ a manner as possible, further records will need to be digitised and made searchable by place: naval and RFC/RAF records and those of army officers. But even without that, there is much that can be known about the ordinary soldier. For this to happen, we need of course to have more local studies carried out to offer comparative perspectives and perhaps, in time, to build up a national database. If that is to be done effectively then there needs to be a dialogue between academic historians, amateur local historians⁹⁶ and genealogists. All three will have different reasons for gathering information but they will largely be compiling the same type of data. While some academics can take a rather elitist view of the work done by so called ‘amateurs’, anybody who has engaged with local groups and individual projects will be well aware of not only the energy which they apply to tasks, but also the very high standards on which much ‘amateur’ work rests. However, if data is to be compared across projects, it is important that it has been recorded on the basis of the same categories and terminology (especially when it comes to abbreviations). For that reason, the academic advice being given to the Imperial War Museum’s crowd-sourcing project, *Lives of the First World War*,⁹⁷ will be crucial in setting standards which researchers can follow. With such standards established and applied, we will be in a position to take our understanding of the place of the First World War in British and Irish society down to a street level.

Perhaps surprisingly, such a ‘low’ approach might also speak to debates in ‘high’ politics and military strategy which have traditionally been focused on questions about the learning and competence (or otherwise) of the upper echelons of officers, and the agendas of government ministers. Yet wars are fought by the men on the ground, and the success or otherwise of battle plans must be influenced in some way by the nature of the troops available to the generals. How far the infantry would be capable of achieving the goals set for it might be affected significantly by the skills of its men. Only by understanding the nature of those men, in different units and at different stages of the war, can we really understand how far they could be expected to be effective soldiers. The next dimension of debates on learning curves and the competences of generals might well be found among the ranks.

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⁹⁶ Much excellent work is already going on. See, for example, the Flamstead War memorial project (<http://www.flamsteadpc.btik.com/Documents/FlamsteadWarMemorial> [accessed 1 December 2010]), along with material for Ballymena (<http://www.freewebs.com/snake43/> [accessed 1 December 2010]) and Boxmoor (<http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Hertfordshire/Boxmoor.html> [accessed 1 December 2010]), along with a school-based project in which this author has been involved (www.hemelatwar.org [accessed 1 December 2010]).

⁹⁷ www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org/ [accessed 24 May 2013].