

Review of "Dublin's Great Wars: The First World War, the Easter Rising, and the Irish Revolution" by Richard S. Grayson

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Recommended Citation

Maxwell, Jeremy P. "Review of "Dublin's Great Wars: The First World War, the Easter Rising, and the Irish Revolution" by Richard S. Grayson." *Canadian Military History* 32, 1 ()

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Richard S. Grayson. *Dublin's Great Wars: The First World War, the Easter Rising, and the Irish Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 280.

In the field of Irish history, the First World War, Easter Rising and the Irish Revolution each have their own respective scholarship. The motivations for the Easter Rising and its relationship to the First World War have long been contemplated, and the simultaneous operations of nationalists fighting against the British Crown and those fighting with the British in France are well documented, more recently in Emmanuel Destenay's *Shadows from the Trenches Veterans of the Great War and the Irish Revolution (1918–1923)*.¹ The fact that nationalists learned from their martial experience in the First World War and how that manifested in the Irish Revolution is also fairly common knowledge at this point. Most of the scholarship on these events, however, lies with the respective event. In *Dublin's Great Wars: The First World War, the Easter Rising, and the Irish Revolution*, Richard Grayson offers a tale of war and revolution through the experience of Dubliners, tracing the stories of Dublin men from enlistment to the trenches to their grim and often violent afterlives in post-war Ireland. He posits that the First World War and the Irish Revolution are overlapping, intimately connected conflicts that are best understood in relation to one another. Moreover, in a brilliant local history of Dublin units, he explores the nuances that affected service in these three wars.

Richard Grayson is a professor of twentieth century history at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has written numerous books and articles, and has a well-established career of analysing the First World War, British foreign policy and the relationship between both European and home (Irish) fights.² The most similar work would be Keith Jeffery's *1916: A Global History*, which analyses twelve events

¹ Emmanuel Destenay, *Shadows from the Trenches. Veterans of the Great War and the Irish Revolution (1918–1923)* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2021).

² Grayson's relevant titles include *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy, 1924–29* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); *At War with the 16th Irish Division 1914–1918: The Letters of J H M Staniforth* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012); *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War* (London: Continuum, 2010); and Richard Grayson and Fearghal McGarry, eds., *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Politics of Memory in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

from 1916 that reverberated around the globe, but there are indeed, numerous works on the First World War, the Easter Rising and the Civil Wars respectively.³ None of those, however, offer as much detailed empirical evidence as Grayson does in *Dublin's Great Wars*.

Grayson claws through a rich supply of archival material, including letters home from the front, regimental diaries and medical records. While his level of detail can, at times, be moderately distracting, he brings to light stories that are heretofore untold. The story of Michael McCabe, who fought as a teenage rebel in the Rising, a British infantryman in France, an anti-Treaty IRA guerrilla in the Irish Civil War and again as a British soldier in the Second World War is but one of the many examples Grayson uses to weave his narrative. Others include the experience of Arthur and Gerald Neilan, brothers who fought on opposite sides of the Rising, and the Geraghty family of Middle Gardiner Street, which lost three of their six sons to the war. Dubbed “Military History of the Street” by Eve Morrison, an Irish Research Council postdoctoral fellow in the University College Dublin School of History and Archives, Grayson’s book does in fact, provide a compendium of facts to portray how the people of Dublin navigated issues of identity and loyalty during this period.⁴

Grayson’s work reminds scholars and lay readers alike, that during the Easter Rising more Irish men were killed while serving overseas with the British army than the total number of rebels who were killed in Dublin. The starkest example is perhaps, the story of the tragic death of Irish rugby international Jasper Brett, who after fighting at Gallipoli and in the Balkans, was hospitalised and diagnosed with a wide range of psychological problems arising from his war experience. Upon being discharged from hospital, he committed suicide in January 1917 near Dalkey by lying down in the path of a train. Readers get stories of famous units like the Royal Dublin Fusiliers at the Somme, the experiences of working for Michael Collins in the National Army in 1922 and imported tactics employed by the IRA on what was often an Army of men who were once brothers in the same case for Irish freedom.

³ Keith Jeffery, *1916: A Global History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁴ Eve Morrison, “Military History from the Street,” review of *Dublin's Great Wars: The First World War, the Easter Rising and the Irish Revolution*, by Richard S. Grayson, *History Workshop Journal* 90 (2020): 311–19.

Nor does Grayson leave out the storied history of politics in Dublin during this period. Dublin was a garrison town, quite literally the seat of English power in Ireland. Grayson discusses the often mythical way in which the men who participated in the Easter Rising are celebrated for their nationalist fervor, while highlighting the higher representation of Unionists who made up the population of Dublin than other places in Ireland. This is yet another valuable insight to the interesting dynamic of how nationalists and unionists fought together and fought each other.

To the scholars of early twentieth century Irish history, *Dublin's Great Wars* is a fantastic resource, rich with research from copious amounts of both archival research and oral histories. Given the sheer amount of data, however, the lay reader might find this rather daunting. This story is brilliantly told through the lives of historical figures, but the insight of the overall work might be lost on someone who has only a cursory understanding of these events in the context of Irish history. As is often the case, while simultaneously demonstrating himself to be the foremost expert on the interrelated nature of these three wars, Grayson's inclusion of so much detail outside of the footnotes might make it difficult for some to stay on track with his arguments. That being said, it is a must read with respect to all three wars, life in Dublin during the period and the nature of the relationship between war and politics from multiple perspectives.

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