The extraordinary tale of Ireland's 'Conscientious Objectors' in WWII New Zealand

By Peter Burke

At the launch in Moycullen, County Galway (l-r) Brad Burgess, New Zealand Ambassador to Ireland, Peter Burke, Minister for the Diaspora, Ciaran Cannon, and Peter Ryan, Irish Ambassador to New Zealand.

Not all of Ireland's patriots lived in Ireland or fought for their native land on Irish soil. This can be said of many nations including the United States, where support for the Irish cause has always been strong.

Probably not so well-known is the fact that there is a sizable Irish population in a country that is 12,000 miles from Ireland – namely New Zealand.

Many Irish men and women have made New Zealand their home since the early 19th century and right through to the present day. It is said that at least one in six New Zealanders are of Irish descent, including the country's present Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern.

My book, "True to Ireland," tells the story about a group of about 500 Irishmen living in New Zealand, who, when World War II broke out, refused to serve in the Crown Forces.

These men had come to New Zealand from all parts of Ireland in the 1920s and 30s to seek a better life.

When war out in 1939 a group of them formed and then funded an organization called the Eire National Association (ENA) that would take on the might of the New Zealand government to prevent Irish men from being conscripted into the army.

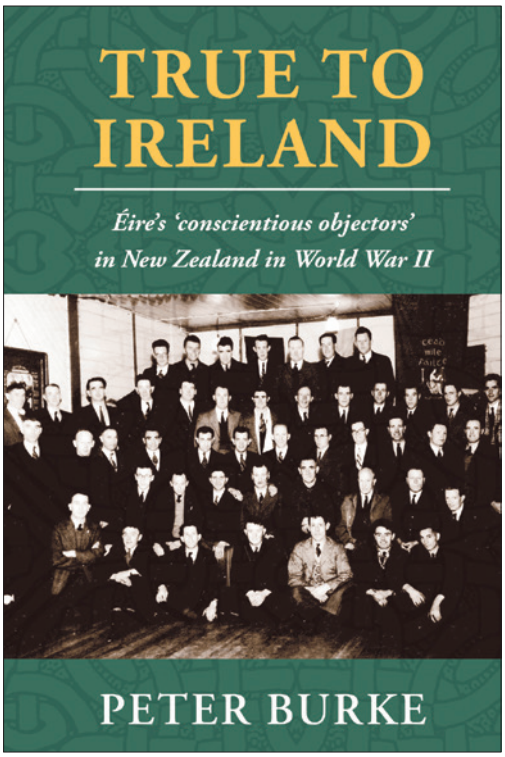
They were forced to appear before quasi courts called Armed Forces Appeal Boards to defend their stance. Their organization also lobbied the Labour government of the day headed by Prime Minister Peter Fraser.

My own father, Matthias (Matt) Burke from Moycullen, County Galway, was one of the leaders of the organization set up to oppose the conscription.

As it happened, and of course this is in part a story of Irish emigration, Matt's brother and sister and other relatives went to the United States and settled in Boston. Two of Matt's cousins fought in the U.S. armed forces during the war.

The reasons why the Irishmen in New Zealand refused to be conscripted was based on the atrocities they had personally witnessed. British armed forces, especially the dreaded Black and Tans, had committed such atrocities against their families, friends, and the general Irish population during the Easter Rising and the War of Independence.

They saw themselves as citizens of Eire, not Britain, and wanted to be treated as neutrals given that the Irish Free State was neutral in the war.



My book documents the Irishmen's struggles with officials and politicians to avoid conscription. At one stage, 155 men, including my father, faced deportation back to Ireland for refusing to join the armed services.

Their story was widely publicized in the New Zealand newspapers and the men became known as "the Sons of Eire." Eventually, the men persuaded the government of the day to allow them to stay and work in New Zealand without having to wear the British uniform which was completely anathema to them.

One of the most compelling passages in the book is the testament given to the Armed Forces Appeal Board in Wellington by my father.

The transcript of his evidence was preserved by my mother, Mary, and sets out the deep feelings of resentment and anger that Matt Burke and his fellow Irishmen felt towards the British Armed forces, and in particular the Black and Tans.

Matt's testament the board strikes at the core of what many young Irishmen saw during the "Troubles."

He stated: "I can even now see the mortal remains of John Geoghegan who had been tortured to death by Black and Tans after being dragged from his mother's arms to the front gate of their little garden where 25 bullets were discharged into his body by these same Black and Tan soldiers.

"I also saw eight Irishmen, three of whom were relations, stripped to the waist and publically flogged by these same Black and Tan soldiers who were working in conjunction with the British forces."

He then referred to one of the most appalling and horrific murders committed by British forces during the War of Independence – the murder in Galway of a Catholic priest, Fr. Michael Griffin.

"I viewed the bog hole where the Rev. Father Griffin's body was disposed of after he had been tortured and shot."

In his statement to the Appeal Board, Matt stated his own home had been broken into by the Black and Tans and that he had "witnessed the funerals of victims of the Black and Tan devilry in Eire."

But he added that he had no attachment to Germany or any country on the continent of Europe and was prepared to do any kind of work in New Zealand apart from combatant service

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His final words to the board were blunt and compelling: "Now could any sane man ask and expect me to put on a British uniform and go fight for that same country which has been quietly persecuting, shooting, publicly flogging and hanging without trial hundreds of our people down through the ages?

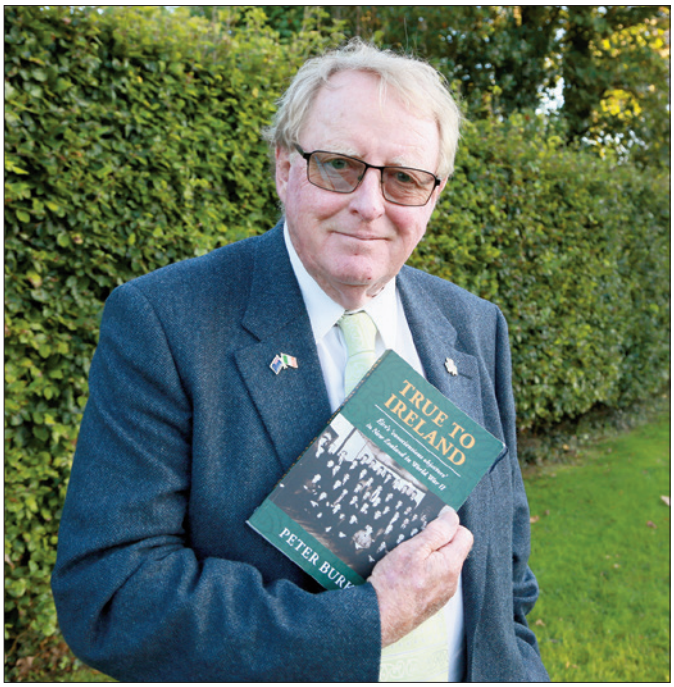
"And on top of that divided my country in two parts, while this present war rages. No your honour, I will not put on a British uniform, nor will I fight for Britain even to the point of the bayonet, the revolver or the machine gun and I am prepared to stand by those sentiments until death. And I can assure you that holds good for every Irishman in this appeal."

After two months deliberation, the Appeal Board rejected the arguments of the Irishmen and they were given the choice of fighting for New Zealand, going to prison for the duration of the war, or being deported back to Ireland.

But due to some smart lobbying by the men, with support from Prime Minister Fraser, the men were allowed to stay but were direct to work on farms and in "non-war industries" and were paid the same money that the average soldier in the army was paid.

The men were happy with this outcome.

One of the amazing facts revealed in the book is the discovery of the close relationship that developed between the Prime Minister Fraser and Eamon de Valera.



Author Peter Burke.

The pair first met in Dublin in 1935 and then in 1941 at the height the war when Fraser, who was in England for a meeting with Winston Churchill, made a special trip to Dublin to spend five days with de Valera.

They met again in May 1948 when de Valera visited New Zealand and in December that year when Fraser received an Honorary Doctorate in Laws from the National University of Ireland, of which de Valera was chancellor at the time.

The story told in "True to Ireland" is yet another example of showing how Irish men stood strong under pressure to serve a country which, for centuries, was the oppressor of the Irish people.

Peter Burke was born in New Zealand and educated at St. Patrick's College, Wellington. His father was from Moycullen, Co. Galway and his mother, Mary, was born in Denniston, on the west coast of the South Island of New Zealand.

He has worked for more than fifty years in the media as a journalist in television, radio, print, and public relations. Peter is a specialist agricultural journalist and has travelled widely overseas in the course of his work covering major political and trade talks in Europe, Asia, North America and the Pacific.

He regards Ireland as his second home and has made more than a dozen visits there which have led him to develop a love of Irish and family history – hence this book.

"True to Ireland is available in all leading bookshops in Ireland, including online from Kenny's in Galway. In New Zealand, it is available through The Cuba Press www.thecubapress.nz or Unity Books, www.unitybooksonline.co.nz

For information about the author and other information about the book contact peterj@true-to-ireland.com, or visit the website www.true-to-ireland.com.

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