

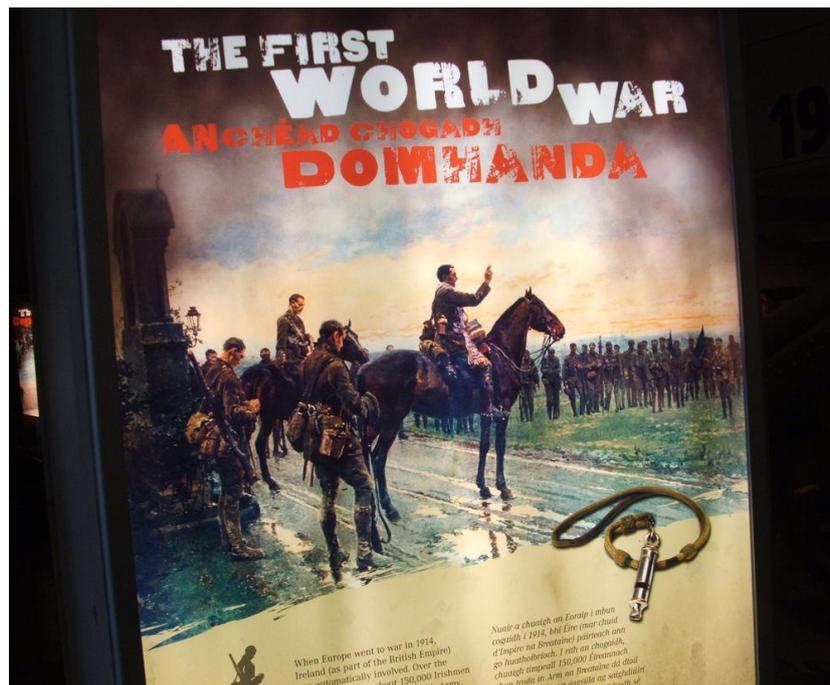


From Templemore to a place in World War 1 history.

Words – Gerry Molumby. Pictures – Cormac and Gerry Molumby

~ Iconic picture of World War 11 unites Tipperary and Dublin and forever keeps the name of Fr. Gleeson and those he blessed alive in our memory for evermore~

I would not be writing this article about fellow Tipperary man Fr. Gleeson had he not been immortalised by Italian artist Fortunino Matania in his picture 'The Last General Absolution of the Munsters at Rue du Bois. May 8th 1915.



Irish men in the First World War – exhibition at Collins Barracks Dublin 2009.

Picture by Gerry Molumby



This picture is of the poster for the 2009 Irish Museum display. Fortunino Matania at the age of 23 and in real time sketched and later painted this classic World War 1 picture. Some dispute this and claim he was commissioned the paint it by the wife of Colonel Victor Pickard (on horse behind Fr. Gleeson). The authenticity of the artist Fortunino is confirmed, look how he depicts the dreary drizzle of that day. Standing on the extreme right and facing Fr. Gleeson's blessing is John Ring from Bandon, Co. Cork. Father Francis Gleeson on the horse, dominates this picture and his raised hand in blessing offers general absolution of all their sins to these mainly Irish Catholic soldiers at the Rue du Bois on May 8th 1915, the evening before hundreds of many of them were killed or wounded. Records tell us that the Munsters lost their Colonel, Adjutant, 17 other officers and 374 rank and file Irish soldiers. The picture is a true depiction of 'extreme unction'! this absolution sacrament was and is very rarely granted and only used if people are entering pending doom. How must those hundreds of young virgin men have felt, they had hardly lived through adolescence and were about to die.

After the war the reproduced picture adored many an Irish home. A signed copy by Fr. Gleeson was found in a charity shop here in Leicestershire last year and is now up for auction!

Originally from Templemore, Co Tipperary volunteered in 1915 to be an Army Chaplain. He was posted to the Western Front as Chaplain to the Munster Fusiliers and his place in history is now secured by his domination in the painting

That evening Fr. Gleeson recorded the names of the 800 men he gave communion to. This information was later used in identifying the casualties and provides contact addresses for many of the families. At Passchendaele on November 10th 1917 Fr. Gleeson again recorded the names of the soldiers and was part of the effort of writing to grieving parents telling them their sons had died. Parents would have been comforted by the fact that Fr. Gleeson had offered confession and communion to the soldiers before the conflict.

Even when I wrote the article first in 2009 I did not know where Fr. Gleeson was buried and when I visited Glasnevin Museum last year; I was told by the research staff that I had passed his grave literally inside the gates as I walked to the museum. Fr. Gleeson finished his priestly life as PP in Dublin and is buried with other priests and bishops of the diocese on the left as you enter the cemetery, he is closer to the



front gates than Michael Collins (father of the nation) , Roger Casement , Pádraig Pearce , Eamon de Valera , Brendan Behan and the decent people of Dublin .!.



Glasnevin Cemetery Museum August 2014. Picture by Cormac Molumby





Father Gleeson's Diary 10th May, 1915

“Spent all night trying to comfort aid and remove the wounded. It was ghastly to see them lying there in the cold, cheerless outhouses, on bare stretches with no blankets to cover their freezing limbs. I shall never forget that young officer with the shattered left arm nor you Barrowdale, of the Welsh, who was a great organist and played for me at Epan. Heartbreaking to see him dying there - wasting away.”

Although originally from Tipperary Fr. Gleeson trained and served as a priest in the Archdiocese of Dublin. After the war Fr. Gleeson returned to ministry in Ireland, here it is reported that he was not always made welcome by some of his clerical leaders because of his association with the British Army. But ironically because of his army experience he was appointed on 12th February, 1923, Chaplain with the Dublin Army Command of the National Army in the new Irish Free State.



“
 The Kaiser knows the Munsters, by the Shamrock on their caps,
 And the famous Bengal Tiger, ever ready for a scrap,
 And all his big battalions, Prussian Guards and grenadiers,
 Fear to face the flashing bayonets of the Munster Fusiliers!”

Anonymous

But as time and memory moved on, so in old age and as a gesture of solidarity he donated the purple stole he wore at Rue du Bois to the Munster Fusiliers regiment.



Fr. Gleeson died as a Canon of the Archdiocese of Dublin in 1959.



Fortunino Matania



He was born in Naples in 1881. By the age of twenty he was working in Paris and soon afterwards moved to London where he was appointed as an illustrator with *The Graphic*. After three years in England he had to go back to Italy to do his national military service. After completing his military duties Matania returned to England where he was employed by *The Sphere*. King George V was impressed with Matania's work and invited him to cover his tour of India. During the First World War Matania was employed by the Ministry of Propaganda. He visited the Western Front several times and his drawings of the conflict appeared in *The Illustrated London News* and the French journal, *L'Illustration*. Fortunino Matania died in 1963.

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