

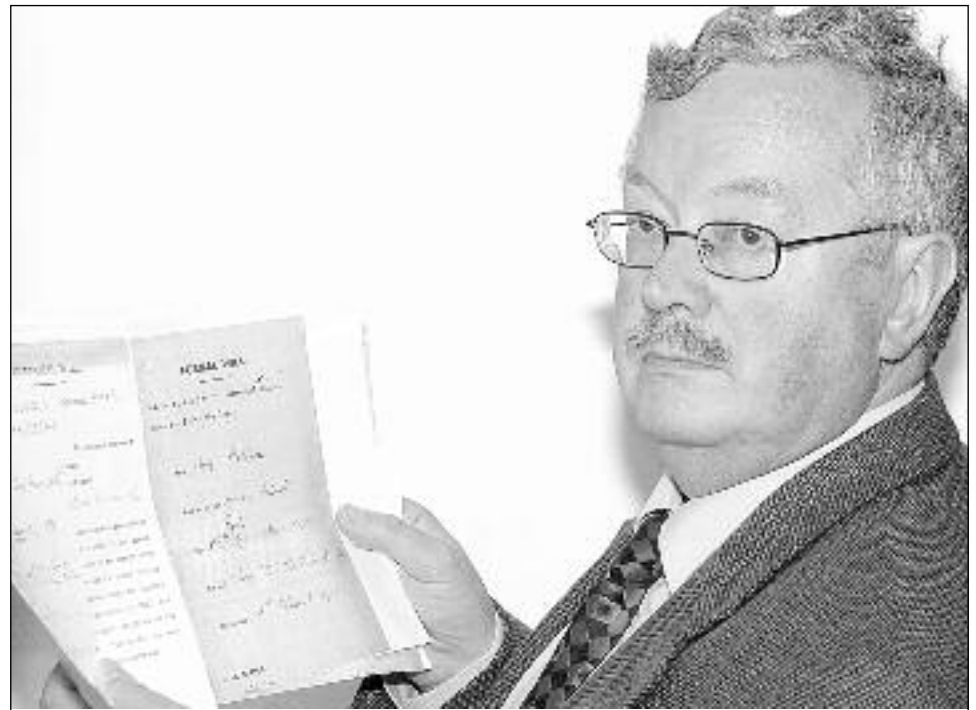
REMEMBERING THE SOMME

Final words of Ulster soldiers

Thousands of wills made by First World War soldiers from Northern Ireland before they went over the top are today stored in boxes in Dublin. **IAN STARRETT** reports on the efforts of a Portrush-based military historian to have them indexed for posterity

DEATH was very much on the minds of the men as they filled in their wills on the eve of battle. They were penned by courageous Ulstermen, mostly young, who knew that within hours they would be going "over the top" into the face of a man-made hell. Today many of those last wills and testaments survive largely undisturbed and unread in the National Archives of Ireland at Bishop Street in Dublin. Alistair MacKerracher, a retired civil servant, both of whose grandfathers fought in the 1914-18 conflict, has read through some of them. The stories they tell are poignant in the extreme, a lifetime's love and devotion is poured into a few words penned to the sound of battle. Mr MacKerracher has viewed the wills of men such as Private John McGraw, from 7 Andrews Street, Belfast; Rifleman Thomas Colgan from Galgorm Street, Ballymena; Private James Long from 45 William Street, Lurgan; Rifleman James Aiken, 9 Agnew Street, Larne; Private Hugh Forsythe of the Machine Gun Corps of 3 Bryson Street,

Belfast, and Lance Corporal David Campbell, from 40 Miller Street, Londonderry. He also came across the will of Private Felix Flynn, who served with the 2nd Highland Light Infantry and who left his "goods and chattels" to his sister who lived at 82 Mountpottinger Road, Belfast. He said: "In Scotland we found the wills of men who had won the VC as well as the wills of men who had been Shot at Dawn. There is nothing to say that that could not be the same with this untouched series that is lying down in Dublin." Mr MacKerracher, who has extensive knowledge of military history, used to work in the Scottish Records Office in Edinburgh which today forms part of the National Archives. "When I left there was a box of soldiers wills which I had only glanced at. Three years ago - it was always on my mind - I said I would go back over to Edinburgh, at my own expense, and index the box of wills for them. "We then discovered that there was something in the region of 130 boxes,



POIGNANT: Alistair MacKerracher with a formal and informal will that he found in Dublin
Picture: **Kevin McAuley**

which knocked that idea on the head." The wills in Scotland ran from 1857, the year after the Crimean War, up to 1965. "The vast majority of them were from the First World War. In all, there were about 30,000 Scottish wills which have now been indexed and are on the National Archives website." He began to wonder what was in the National Archives of Ireland and made contact with them to search for the wills of soldiers from Northern Ireland. Mr MacKerracher went to Dublin and began his search: "Lo and behold, yes, I found wills of men who were in fact

domiciled in Belfast, Londonderry, Lurgan and Lisburn. I was looking for Portrush but luck was that I didn't find any from there. "So what they have lying down there in Dublin is unindexed. They have 30 boxes and I reckon they contain about 10,000 wills." He has photocopied some of the wills but more details, he insists, need to be recorded. "Basically nobody knows that they are there," he said. Only when the last will in the unchronicled Dublin collection is indexed will it be known how many of them belong to servicemen from Northern Ireland.

Somme Collection

Commemorate the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme with the News Letter

The Irish on the Somme
- By Steven Moore



The Irish on the Somme puts the contribution of the men of Ireland, north and south, unionist and nationalist, into context. It takes the reader through the conflict, from the declaration of war in August, 1914, to the Second Battle of the Somme and the final push to victory, then on to the monuments and cemeteries, the tangible proof of Ireland's part in the "war to end all wars". It is an invaluable guide to both the armchair enthusiast and those visiting the battlefields for themselves.

The Somme: A New History
- By Gary Sheffield



On 1 July 1916, after a stupendous 7-day artillery preparation, the British Army finally launched its attack on the German line around the River Somme. Over the next four and half months they continued to attack, with little or no gain, and with horrendous losses to both sides. This book, written by the world's foremost expert in the subject, describes in chilling detail everything from the grand strategy to the experience of the men on the ground. Illustrated throughout, it is a stunning and absorbing depiction of the horror that was the Somme in 1916.

Somme 1916: A Battlefield Companion
- By Gerald Gliddon



Somme 1916, Gerald Gliddon's lavishly illustrated topographical survey of the Somme battlefield, first published in 1987 to critical acclaim, has become a classic reference for all those interested in this most horrific of First World War battles, which caused over a million casualties. This edition of Somme 1916 has been greatly expanded and updated to include a Somme diary, a new selection of contemporary illustrations, a complete order of battle for the British and German forces in the Somme for July to November 1916 and a listing of 'lost cemeteries'.

Somme - Ulster-Scots Folk Orchestra



This recording tries to address the enormity and the futility of the Battle of the Somme - Not just for Northern Ireland but for everyone, everywhere. Tracks include: Killaloe, The Bloody Road to the Somme, Stille Nacht, Jonny I hardly Knew Ye, The Flowers of the Forrest, plus many more ...

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