

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION  
LEAVING CERTIFICATE, ORDINARY AND HIGHER LEVEL HISTORY

## Lamp from River Clyde, 1915



This lamp is from a converted collier, the River Clyde. On 25 April 1915 it lit the way to hell for 2000 soldiers, mostly members of the Munster and Dublin Fusiliers. They had been chosen as the shock troops of an Allied landing near Sedd-el-Bahr at Cape Helles, on the southern tip of the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey. The Gallipoli operation was intended to break the military stalemate on the western front that had developed since the outbreak of the First World War—the monumental clash of great European empires that began in August 1914 and quickly earned its name as the Great War.

The River Clyde was deliberately run aground beneath an old fortress, while most of the Dubliners tried to get ashore in open boats. Both regiments made perfect targets for the Turkish gunners in the fort. One officer recalled that the men on the open boats were ‘literally slaughtered like rats in a trap’. Another recalled that the landing as he experienced it:

*was pure butchery and we were at the receiving end. They called it a ‘landing’ but it was hardly even that at the beginning. The dear men were just mown down in scores into a bloody silence as they showed themselves at the Clyde’s open hatches.*

The Dublins had 25 officers and 987 other ranks but only one officer and 374 others made it ashore, many of them wounded. Among the Munsters, about 600 were killed or wounded. The scale of the casualties was such that the battalions were temporarily amalgamated into a single unit, known as the Dubsters.

It would have been hard to remember, at that point, that the outbreak of the war was greeted by many in Ireland with some relief. Ireland had been on the brink of civil war over Home Rule, but the infinitely larger conflict superseded this insular row. Although Home Rule was finally passed in September 1914, its implementation was immediately postponed for the duration of the war. The Nationalist leader John Redmond supported the war effort. Over 200,000 Irishmen fought in the war. Optimists dared to hope that the experience of fighting side-by-side in a relatively short and triumphant campaign would create a new sympathy between Ulster Protestants and southern Catholics.

Optimism, not just for Ireland but for humanity, was bled dry on the beaches of Gallipoli and in the mud of France and Belgium. On 1 July 1916, the 36th (Ulster) Division was in the forefront of the offensive on the Somme, suffering 5500 casualties, including 2000

dead—a catastrophe seared into the collective consciousness of Protestant Ulster. The 16th (Irish) Division lost 4330 men (1200 dead) in the same battle in September. At Messines Ridge in June 1917 the two divisions went into battle together—among the dead was Redmond’s brother Willie. In all, at least 35,000 Irishmen died. The war did form a common experience for Irishmen of different traditions, but it was the experience of a scarcely imaginable cataclysm.