



LAUNCHING IN IRELAND AND NEW ZEALAND IN 2019

## True to Ireland

Peter Burke



*The story of Ireland's 'conscientious objectors' in New Zealand in WWII*

On January 16th 1942, the National Service Department drew up a list of 155 Irishmen living in New Zealand with the intention of deporting them back to Ireland. Their crime – honesty – refusing to fight for Winston Churchill's New Zealand army. These men had vowed and declared that to fight a war for New Zealand, and by default England was something their conscience would not allow.

They were, by New Zealand, law defined as conscientious objectors, but this was not quite true. What's more they were not just being sent back home, but the documents setting out their deportation quite specifically states that *'these citizens of Eire who have refused military service are being allowed to return home but are not to be allowed to return to New Zealand during the war or thereafter'*. For me this untold and extraordinary story is deeply personal. If that deportation had gone ahead I would not be here today to tell you about it because my father Matthias Burke was one of the 155.



Dad was born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1909 in the small townland of Ballydotia in the parish of Moycullen, Co Galway He was a twin – the second of the two to be born according to parish records. Dad had a twin brother Malachy and two other brothers and two sisters.

Like many young men in Ireland he was to become part of that country's export trade of people. I am told that dad wanted to go to the USA, but he had a congenital heart problem and the Americans rejected him, but not the kiwis. Dad left Ireland just before Christmas 1929, catching a ferry across the Irish Sea and then to Southampton where he boarded the Rangitane on its maiden voyage to New Zealand, arriving in Wellington on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1930.

In NZ he worked on the roads and in factories and as a school caretaker and a lorry driver. He joined the Irish Club in Wellington and that's where he reconnected with some of his Moycullen mates and made new friends.



As the war clouds darkened over Europe and the world, my father and his fellow Irishmen could see the inevitability of war and with it the likelihood of conscription being introduced. In 1940 they formed in Wellington an organisation called the Eire National Association and its specific purpose was to support Irishmen living in NZ at the time and who did not want to be conscripted in the armed forces from having to wear 'a British uniform'.

ENA president was Paddy Feeney who fought with Liam Mellows in East Galway during the 1916 Rising and later with the IRA. My father was a member of the executive of the ENA. Another member of the executive was Maurice Leo Aylward from Kilkenny who was the secretary and emissary and the person who effectively led the organisation. The ENA then hired a very smart, pro-Irish and anti-establishment lawyer, Fred Ongley to represent them. He was well known to many Irishmen in Wellington and was famous for saying *"No Irishman could be conscripted to fight an Englishman's war"*. Ongley's role was to prepare to act when the marbles for the ballot were drawn out.



*Peter Burke*

*Journalist, writer, broadcaster.*

*Claddagh Farm, P.O Box 15086, Otaki Railway, Otaki.*

+64 63 626319 or +64 21 2242183

[peterb@actrix.co.nz](mailto:peterb@actrix.co.nz) or [peterb@ruralnews.co.nz](mailto:peterb@ruralnews.co.nz)





The Appeal Board hearings were often openly hostile to appellants and in this cauldron of antipathy my father Matthias Burke began his statement thus.

*"I do not base my claim of conscious on anything that has arisen since war broke out in September 1939, but on what I saw, felt and experienced in Eire between 1919 and 1921. It is only those who have been through that experience can realise how the memories of those frightful days have left something in one's mind that can never be blotted out"*

He then went on to recount the two major atrocities that he witnessed in Moycullen during The Troubles – the murder by the Tans of Fr. Michael Griffin whose bullet riddled body was dumped in a bog hole on the road that links Moycullen with the small settlement of Barna and Galway Bay. The other major killing my father speaks of is that of John Geoghegan (who lived just a few hundred yards from where my cousins now live). John Geoghegan was a commandant of the IRA and his killing is commemorated by a memorial on the roadside where he was murdered.

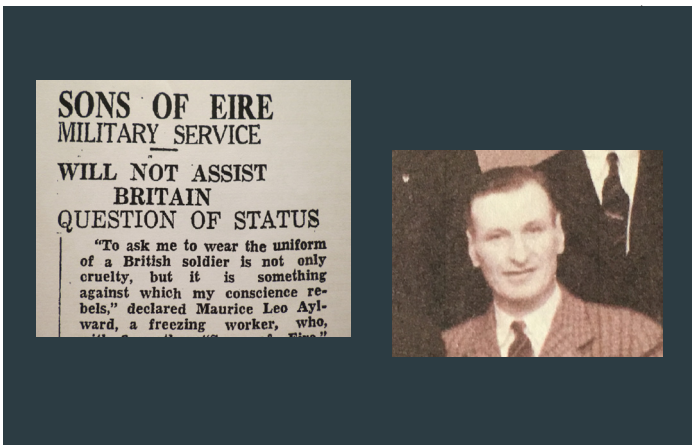
*I can even see the mortal remains of John Geoghegan who had been tortured and shot by the Black and Tans. I also viewed the bog hole where the Reverend Father Griffin's body was disposed of after he was tortured and shot.*

And he went on to say:

*I saw eight Irishmen, including three of my relations stripped to the waist and publicly flogged by Black and Tan Soldiers.*

*My home was actually broken up by the Black and Tan soldiers in the name of British law and order.*

*Now could any sane man ask me to put on the 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 the ages. I will not put on a British uniform, nor will I fight for Britain, even to the point of revolver or the machine gun and I am prepared to stand by those sentiments until death."*



Earlier at the same hearing Maurice Leo Aylward from Kilkenny had this to say:

*"To ask me to wear the uniform of a British soldier is not only cruelty, but it is something against which my conscience rebels.... I saw young men taken to their graves in the prime of their lives. I saw my home broken up, my mother suffering and my eldest brother hunted in the hills of Ireland".*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> October 1941, the No 4 Armed Forces Appeal Board sent lawyer Fred Ongley a copy of their reserved decision. It rejected the claim of status as 'Citizens of neutral Eire' and reaffirmed that they were 'British Subjects' and therefore required them to serve in the Armed Forces. It also rejected their claims that they were not conscientious objectors as defined by New Zealand law.

New battle lines and actions were now the order of the day. The ENA, through Fred Ongley, protested to the Government at the decision of the Appeal Board. They reiterated their offer to support New Zealand in any ways other than overseas military service. At the same time officials issued the Irishmen in New Zealand with an ultimatum to either serve in the Armed Forces or be deported back to Ireland.



Aylward played a pivotal role in this case. He was a smart negotiator who got the ear of PM Peter Fraser and knew Eamon de Valera personally through his Fianna Fail connections. Finally, as if almost worn down by the protests of the ENA and whole process, on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 1942, Prime Minister Peter Fraser sent a cable to London, to the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Clement Attlee asking that the Sons of Eire be allowed to stay in New Zealand. Three weeks later Attlee came back and said yes. This was effectively victory for the Eire National Association. They were happy to work for soldiers' rates of pay which was lower than normal pay rates in the country and they felt that Fraser and his government had treated them fairly. Their victory can also be attributed to the strong personal relationship between de Valera and the NZ Prime Minister at the time, Peter Fraser. Over many years Fraser and de Valera developed a special personal friendship. They met during WWII and in May 1948 de Valera visited NZ while Fraser was Prime Minister. In December 1948 Fraser received an honorary doctor in laws from NUI where de Valera was Chancellor at the time.



*Peter Burke*  
 Journalist, writer, broadcaster.  
 Claddagh Farm, P.O Box 15086, Otaki Railway, Otaki.  
 +64 63 626319 or +64 21 2242183  
 peterb@actrix.co.nz or peterb@ruralnews.co.nz

