

# ON THE BRINK

## The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

### ACTIVE SERVICE

#### JOHN MEEKE

Private John Meeke had lain in an unmarked grave in Derrykeighan Old Churchyard for 80 years, when in 2005 Robert Thompson and Keith Beattie recovered his story. John rescued Major William Redmond under heavy fire during the Battle of Messines, being wounded twice. In 1917 in Ireland this was a celebrated act of heroism, but since then has been all but forgotten.

Meeke was a stretcher-bearer for the 36th (Ulster) Division. He was born on 13th April 1894, the third of a family of 10. He lived with his parents on the Montgomery estate, Benvarden, in County Antrim. Major William Redmond was a Nationalist MP and an officer of the 16th (Irish) Division. His brother John was leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party.



Headstone to Pte John Meeke 'Hero of Messines', Derrykeighan Old Church Graveyard

On 7th June 1917 both the 36th and 16th Divisions advanced together into the battle on Messines Ridge. John Meeke was searching the battlefield for wounded men when he saw Major Redmond fall. He faced heavy machine-gun fire and other artillery to get to him. As he bandaged Redmond's wounds, Meeke was hit on his left side. Redmond ordered him to retreat. Meeke refused and moments later he was hit again. Once more he disobeyed Redmond's order to save himself. Under a constant barrage of bullets, both men were rescued eventually by a patrol from the 36th (Ulster) Division who were escorting German prisoners back to British lines.

Unfortunately Redmond died from his injuries several hours later. Meeke insisted on returning to the battlefield to search for more casualties, until he too was taken to the field dressing station for treatment. He was awarded the Military Medal for bravery. Near the end of the war Meeke was once again wounded, when an explosive bullet hit his leg. The damage was extensive, and he subsequently went through eight operations to mend it.

John came back to Benvarden after the war, and took work as a gardener on the estate. Sadly, he developed tuberculosis shortly after marrying in 1922 and died on 7th December 1923. No headstone was erected for John; he was remembered by a simple epitaph on his brother's headstone, reading: "Also in memory of Pte. John Meeke M.M. R. Innis Fus. Who died Dec 1923 aged 25 and is buried nearby". (In fact, John was 29. A local paper reporting his death included errors in his biographical information).