

History lecture focused on the devastating flu pandemic of 1918

By Michael Tracey

THE devastation caused by the Spanish flu 100 years ago in Carlow and beyond was the subject of a fascinating talk in Tullow recently.

Carlow College lecturer Dr Ida Milne gave the talk in Teach Bhríde, Tullow, which was hosted by the Carlow Historical Archaeological Society.

Dr Milne, a social historian of disease, looked at the pandemic which struck around 800,000 people in Ireland in 1918-19 from a number of facets, including its international origins.

Spanish flu killed around 50 million people worldwide – far more than the number of casualties in World War I.

Indeed, research suggests that influenza may have affected the war's outcome, with up to 400,000 German soldiers contracting the disease.

It's believed that at around 23,000 Irish people died from the influenza, but there is little awareness of the devastation today.

Dr Milne believes that the flu got buried in the conflicts of revolution and war at the time.

"There was so much death in those days. If you had a child born in those times, you would not be reasonably confident that he or she would live beyond their fifth birthday, where they would have a much better chance of survival.

"A lot of families lost well more than one child. Twenty percent of all deaths on the island in the 1910s were children under the age of five."

The flu dominated headlines at the time in Ireland and *The Nationalist* and *Leinster Times* had some vivid accounts of the devastation it wrought.

In Bagenalstown, the local GP Dr Farrell was one of the first to contract Spanish flu and died.

Bagenalstown had a population of 2,000 people at the time and only 100 escaped infection.

A Miss Brien filled the gap vacated by Dr Farrell, visiting and caring for the sick at all hours. It was reported that few deaths had occurred in Bagenalstown due to her efforts and those who had helped set up a milk depot for the poor.



President of Carlow Historical & Archaeological Society Pat O'Neill with Dr Ida Milne, who gave a talk entitled *Stacking the coffins: the 1918-1919 influenza in Teach Bhríde, Tullow*

Photos: michaelourkephotography.ie

In Leighlinbridge, Fr James Coyle, PP, attended to sick families, bringing them food and medication after the local doctor was unable to do so because of illness.

In Rathvilly, Nellie O'Toole would recall how 13 houses on Phelan Row were hit by the flu.

The only respite came from the Rathdonnells of Lisnavanagh who, on a daily basis, would send down a pony and trap filled with soup to those who were ill.

"The flu produced a lot of local heroes," commented Dr Milne.

The influenza had a lasting impact on families. The virus struck a lot of young adults in the 25 to 35 age bracket, who were parents and workers.

Frequently, a job meant a house for a family. In Kilkenny, a significant number of prison warders who lived in prison accommodation died, which meant their children not only lost a parent but also a home.

The same fate befell children of tenant farmers who were struck down.

Dr Milne's relatives in Clohamon outside Bunclody never spent another night in their home after their tenant farming parents died.

It was commonplace that more than one person in a family would die from influenza.

On the night of the talk, Dr Milne produced a death notice of siblings John (22) and Katie (28) Brennan of Rossmore, Tullow, who died of influenza within a week of each other in 1918.

It was later pointed out by a local who attended that the Brennans' home was only a few hundred yards away from the venue of the talk.

A further half-dozen people in the audience also spoke of their own families' experiences of Spanish flu.

The influenza struck all classes, with people who were frequently around others particularly susceptible. Shopkeepers, policemen and prison officers were among the most vulnerable.

Those who died tended to be poor, as they often had no option but to return to work before they had fully recuperated.

The virus could be fast moving, causing death in a few hours or days in those pre-antibiotic times.

Dr Milne was first attracted to the history of disease while researching the sinking of *RMS Leinster* in 1918 in her former role as a librarian in the *Irish Independent*.

"I noticed that while 500 people died in the *Leinster* sinking, another 500 people a week were dying of the flu in October 2018. There was nothing in our knowledge of it, despite it being in the pages of the newspaper."

Dr Milne, a lecturer in European history at Carlow College, published a book about the subject last year entitled *Stacking the coffins: influenza, war and revolution in Ireland*.

A part of the watershed generation who were first given vaccinations, Dr Milne believes the importance of vaccines in combating life-threatening diseases should never be forgotten.

"I try to capture these stories of the damage these diseases once did, to remind people and to tell stories so they know how dangerous it is."

She is always on the lookout for material about diseases in Ireland, whether it is stories or records.

Dr Milne can be contacted at imilne@carlowcollege.ie or 059 9153265.



COMMUNITY INFORMATION MEETING

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BURREN RIVER CATCHMENT?

VENUE	DATE	TIME
Seven Oaks Hotel, Carlow	2 April 2019	19.30 - 20.30

Refreshments afterwards.

The Burren River catchment is part of 190 areas nationally which have been prioritised for action to protect and restore water quality. You are invited to a public meeting about these two water bodies and to hear what it means to be part of an area for action. This is a new way of working to protect and improve water quality and everyone can play their part! The meeting will include an overview of why the area was selected and will include staff from the Local Authority Waters Programme. This meeting is open to all and will include a Questions & Answers session and an opportunity for informal discussion during tea and coffee after the meeting.

For more information contact:

Ruth Hennessy, Catchment Manager (085 803 0164, rhennessy@lawaters.ie) or Ann Phelan, Community Water Officer (085 808 4067, aphelan@lawaters.ie)

Or visit www.watersandcommunities.ie



féile Naomh Pádraig

Live Music

Food Stalls

Bouncy Castles

Kids Fun Area

Facebook icon @stpatriksdayparadecarlow

March 16th & 17th Haymarket, Carlow Town

SEACHTAIN NA GAELIGE CEATHARLACH
Seachtain na Gaeilge 1ú - 17ú Márta



John Kelly and Lynne Whelan at the lecture



Pictured at Carlow Historical & Archaeological Society's lecture, Lily and Jim Mulhall