

Families rewrite the history of war with mementos

Hundreds bring special keepsakes to roadshow

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By Louise Hogan
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IT was a small tin box designed to bring cheer to soldiers fighting in the damp trenches as [World War One](#) approached its first Christmas.

Inside, the card from 1914, addressed to Jack Bates, from Drogheda, Co Louth, a member of the [Leinster](#) Regiment, who was serving with the British Army, had been carefully ripped open.

But the wrapped squares of tobacco it contained are still intact, almost 100 years after [Britain's](#) Princess Mary raised funds to send it and other small gifts to tens of thousands of serving soldiers.

"I received the box when I was very young from my mother. I always knew there was something very special about it. It is priceless to me and I intend to pass it on," said Lillian Devitt Brayshaw of the treasured heirloom from her grandfather who survived to return to [Ireland](#).

"He was my hero. Even though he didn't speak about the war I was so proud of him."

Many of the boxes of tobacco were never smoked as they didn't reach the soldiers in time for [Christmas](#) 1914, explained Darren McMahon, a history buff from the Irish Great War Society.

The queue of hundreds of people waiting to display and record their memorabilia at the 'World War One Family History Roadshow' snaked across the ornate round hall of the [National Library of Ireland](#) in Dublin.

The material from members of the public was being recorded by Europe's digital museum and library, Europeana, which is building an online archive of private stories and documents from World War One in time for the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the war in 1914.

Military historian from [Oxford University](#), Everett Sharp, said the items mirrored those found at similar events in the UK. However, he felt for many Irish relatives it was a chance for them to tell stories about World War One that many had kept hidden due to political sensitivities surrounding the civil war period.

"It has been said to me about four times today, 'Thank God you are doing this, at last we can tell our story,'" he said.

Katherine McSharry, head of services at the library, explained their call for people to bring their World War One heirlooms had far surpassed all expectations with hundreds of people turning up.

Mr Sharp said an intact Princess Mary box, complete with tobacco and the Christmas card, was "very rare". He pointed out many of the items were priceless to their owners due to their personal value, while collectors could spend a couple of hundred euro for the various items.

Unusual

Some of the more unusual items picked out by Mr Sharp were 1914 'star' medals which were given to soldiers who joined the armed services from the start of war until mid-November 1914.

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Lillian Devitt Brayshaw with the Princess Mary tin in the National Library in Dublin yesterday

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"Youngsters 19 years of age going out there, they didn't understand even what they were doing going out there.

"What kind of a world would we have today if they didn't go out?" questioned Gerard Gleeson, from Clonlara, Co Clare, who had prisoner of war photographs and a star medal belonging to his father Michael Gleeson, who spent four years in [a camp](#) after being captured by German forces while serving in France with the Royal [Munster](#) Fusiliers.

It was by telegram that the five orphaned children of Thomas Francis Barrett from the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers were informed of his death by gas on August 8, 1916 at Ypres.

"He died at the age of 41, he had given his age as 34 to rejoin after his wife died in 1915, so he could feed his children," his granddaughter, Helen Lawlor, said.

Simon Artherton carefully carried the 'swagger stick', or cane, and a notebook with a hole in it where the bullet had fatally wounded his great-uncle Corporal [Patrick Kane](#), from Downpatrick, on the fields of Flanders.

"Two days before the end of World War One he was fired at by mistake by his own people," he explained.

The material was scanned during yesterday's event and will be uploaded to the website, yet anyone unable to attend can upload their materials on the site www.europeana1914-1918.eu

- *Louise Hogan*