

Robert Starr

**“Nailed to the rolls of honour, crucified”:
Irish Literary Responses to the Great War**

The War Writings of Patrick MacGill, James Hanley, and Liam O'Flaherty

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Cover picture: Two Irish Guardsmen on the outskirts of Houlthulst Wood, ca. 1918.

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Introduction

In the autumn of 2015 the National Library of Ireland in Dublin curated an exhibition entitled “Portraits of the Invisible: Faces of Irish Men and Women from WWI”, in which photographs of individuals connected to the conflict were put on display for the first time. There were portraits of nurses, sailors, airmen and officers—all of whom had had an involvement in the War—but there was one photograph in particular whose subject matter resonates with the concerns of this book: a group of soldiers, all serving in the ranks, all dressed untidily in items of army uniform, such as the rough woollen undershirts issued to privates (Figure One).

A number of the men give the appearance of being something other than soldiers. There is none of the parade ground polish often associated with troops, no bright buttons, no creased trousers, no standing to attention. In this photograph many of the men give the impression of being laborers rather than combatants: two individuals each hold a ramrod, an article used to clean the barrels of weapons; their faces lined with black dirt. The men seem to have been undertaking some form of hard manual work and as such there appears to be a blurring of two roles, both of which are central to this book: the laborer and the soldier.