

One-hundred members of the extended Persse family from around the world served in the Great War. Author Gerry Kearney tells **THOMAS HACKETT** how their story inspired his new book



The impact of the First World War on one of Galway's most famous families is brought to life in a new book, *In Days that Were: The Great War and Beyond*. The book by Gerry Kearney chronicles the harrowing Great War experiences of the prominent Anglo-Irish Persse family from South Galway and their descendants.

The Persses suffered tremendous loss during the war, as their sons served in some of the bloodiest battlefields of the conflict. Of those who fought, 18 men of Persse heritage would never return.



Gerry's book starts in Galway and its reach is broad as it records the lives of more than 100 people from around the world who had Persse blood in their veins and fought in WWI.

The book features names from Ireland, England, South Africa and Australia - what they all have in common is that they're descendants of Dean Dudley Persse (1625-

1699), a Church of Ireland clergyman who established Roxborough estate near Kilchreest, Loughrea, in 1685.

"He was the first of the Persses to ever come to County Galway", notes Gerry.

The Persse family went on to play a pivotal role in the history of Galway City and County - and probably became best-known for establishing Persse's Distillery in Nuns' Island in the 1840s. One Ireland's most successful distilleries at the time, its label proudly displayed 'as supplied to the House of Commons'. It closed in the early 1900s, but the ruins of the distillery can still be seen today.

The most renowned family members included celebrated playwright Lady Augusta Gregory of Coole Park, near Gort, who was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival, and Sir Hugh Lane, who opened the world's first modern art gallery in Dublin.

Lane was tragically killed when Germans torpedoed the *Lusitania* in May 1915, mere weeks after another Persse descendant, William Hugh Cornwallis Trousdell, was lost at sea following the sinking of another passenger ship, the *SS Falaba*.

"That was a real case of absolute murder, it was nasty stuff," says Gerry of the *Falaba* incident.

His fascination with the Persse family history began while he was researching a previous book.

"I was doing a piece on my wife's family called *The Taylor Family of Ardrahan Post Office* and, while in the graveyard of Kilchreest, I noticed many graves with the name Persse," he explains.

He was hooked.

In Days that Were captures the history of the Persse family from the Tudor period of the 16th Century through to the Crimean War, the Great War and the Irish revolutionary period.

Researching a project of this nature was a gargantuan task and Gerry jokes that, "there was a time

ONCE-GREAT FAMILY LAID LOW BY WAR



▲ Pictured from left: Major William Robert Gregory, only son of Lady Gregory, who was killed in Italy in 1918.

Lt Col William Horsley Persse.

Hugh Lane, Lady Gregory's nephew, who died in the *Lusitania*.

Major General Gerald F Boyd who served in the Boer War and World War I.

L/Cpl Richard Theophilus St George, 2nd South African Infantry Regiment, who subsequently died of pneumonia.

where I was sorry I had even started it".

He consulted the *London Gazette* and other contemporary archival sources in his research and received much help from Michael Dudley de Burgh Collins Persse, a member of the Persses' extensive Australian line.

Michael sadly passed away earlier this year, but provided a touching foreword to the book before his death. *In Days that Were* is dedicated to his memory.

"He was very helpful and was very proud of his history," observes Gerry.

Members of the Persse clan fought in nearly every theatre of World War I, from the barren slopes of Gallipoli to the icy waters of Jutland, truly highlighting the global struggle that was the Great War.

Notable examples of the Persses' service and sacrifice in the war include the story of Major William Robert Gregory, son of Lady Gregory, who was killed when the aircraft he was flying crashed near Padua, Italy, in 1918. Major Gregory was later immortalised in W.B Yeats' poem, *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*.

Gerry's book features many more examples of the horrific loss and pain suffered by the Persses during the conflict, such as the story of Frank Presse of Ashfield, Gort, who lost both his sons.

Lt Dudley Francis Persse died of wounds sustained in naval combat in the Adriatic Sea, while Frank's

other son, Cpl John Geoffrey Persse lost his life in one of the fiercest engagements of the Gallipoli Campaign, the Battle of Chunuk Bair.

"It was a savage affair; in the end they ran out of ammunition and had to fight with their bare hands," says Gerry.

More than 800 ANZAC soldiers - from Australia and New Zealand - lost their lives during the two days on Chunuk Bair, demonstrating the futility of the Gallipoli Campaign.

According to *In Days that Were*, "Frank Persse took to whiskey in rage and despair" following the death of his sons, a reflection of the tragic and forever-fractured existence of loved ones left behind by the war.

Gerry Kearney's book also details the poignant tale of two South African brothers, John Christopher and Richard Theophilus St George. John was severely wounded while operating as a stretcher-bearer during the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and subsequently died. Richard, who wanted to follow his brother's example, also volunteered as a stretcher-bearer and was wounded twice in the conflict. He later died of pneumonia in 1923.

Gerry stresses the bravery of these two particular Persse descendants.

"Both those lads fought really hard as stretcher-bearers and they both won the Military Medal."