

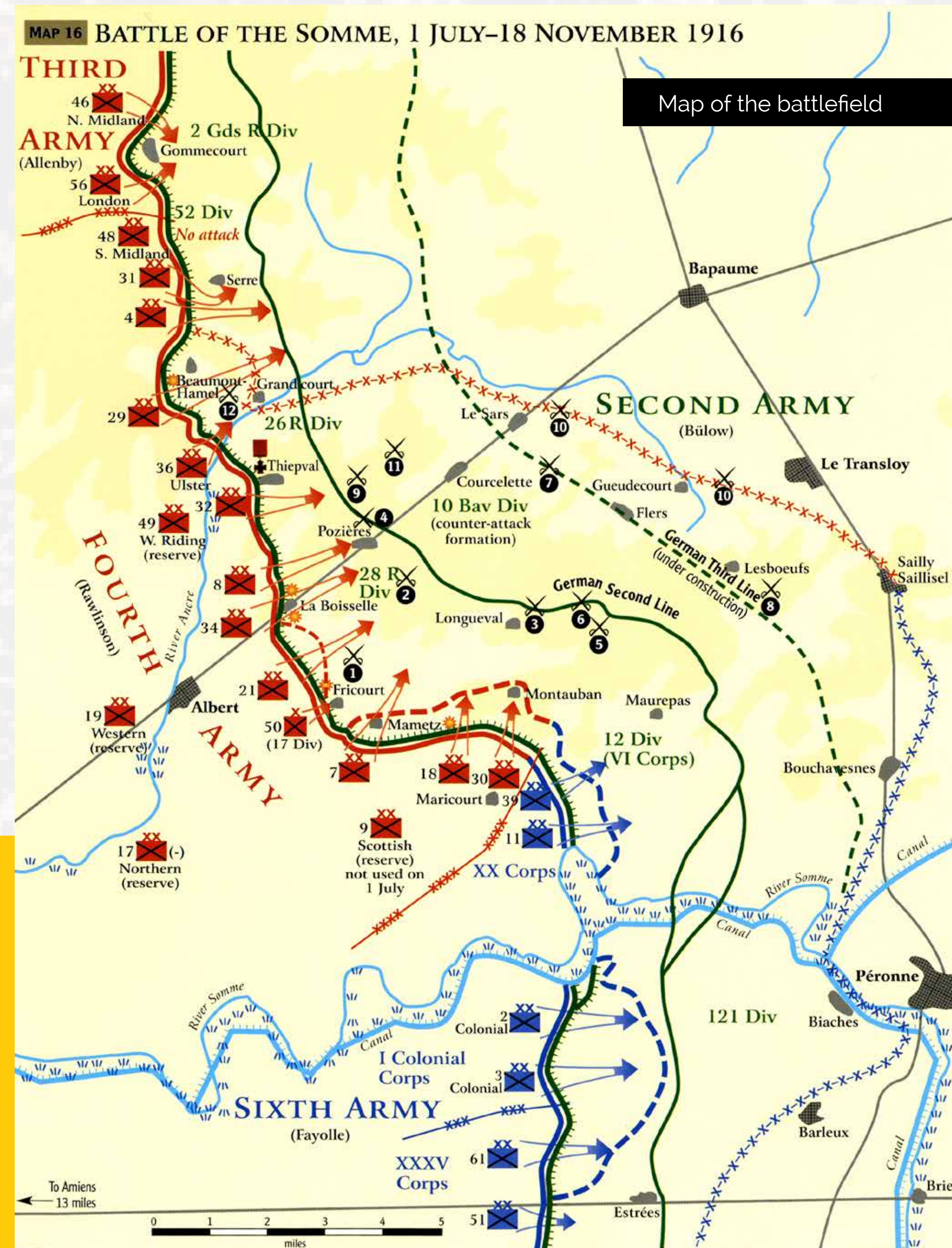
# WRITERS & THE SOMME

## CURSE

## 11

World War I – the War to end all Wars as it was initially touted – saw many dreadful battles with unimaginable loss of life and injury: Ypres, Gallipoli, the Tannenberg marshes, Verdun. The Battle of the Somme, which began on 1 July 1916 and carried on until 18 November of that year, was one of the worst.

The Somme offensive was fought on both sides of the upper reaches of the River Somme, on French territory near the Belgian border. It was intended to hasten a victory for the French and British armies, and was the largest battle of the First World War on the Western Front. It was at the Somme that military aircraft and tanks first demonstrated their potential. It was, however, primarily a battle fought in and from the trenches. More than one million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the bloodiest battles in human history. The British Army suffered 481,842 casualties at the Somme. Included in that number were thousands of Irishmen, many of whom were from Cork.



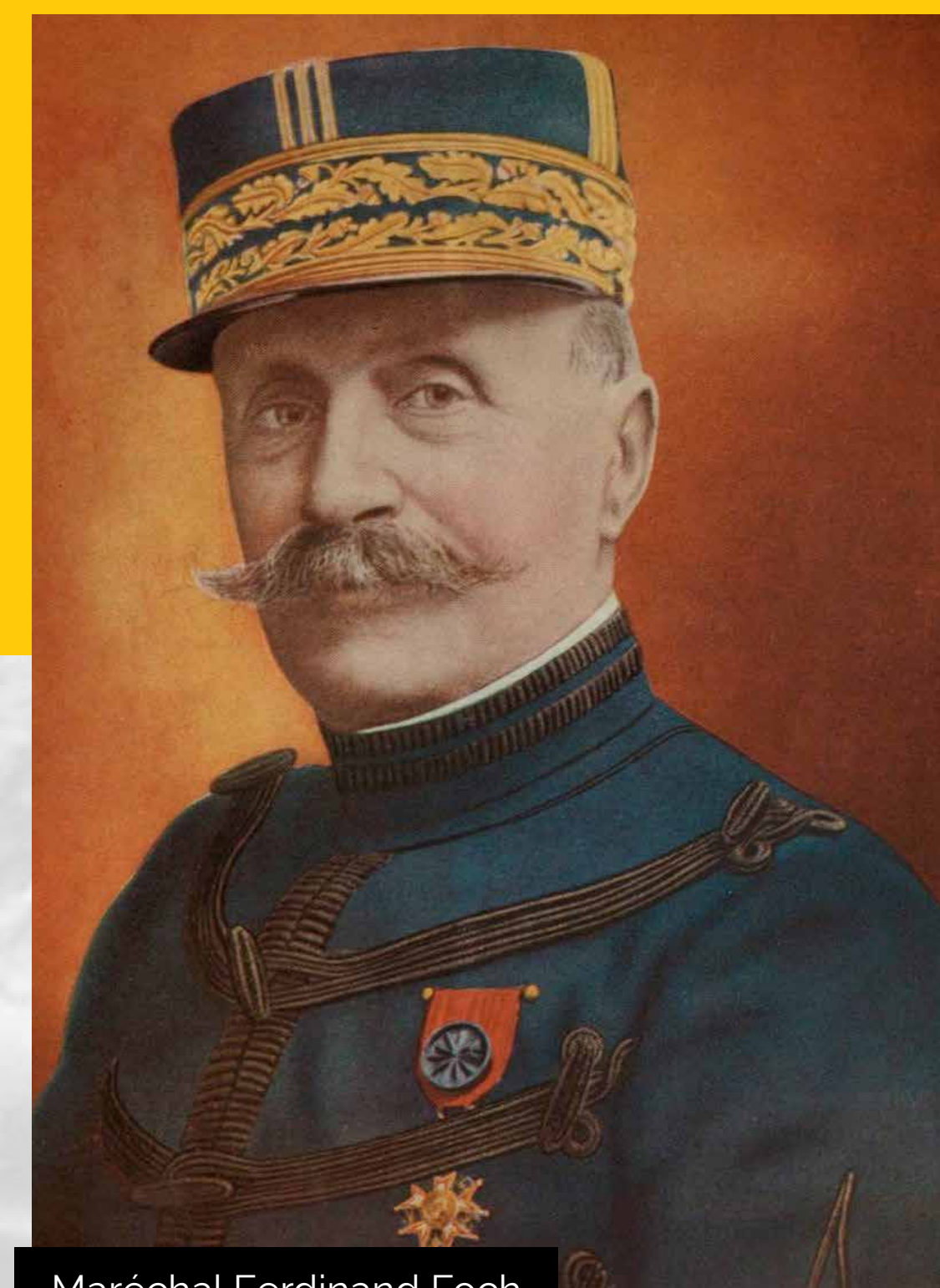
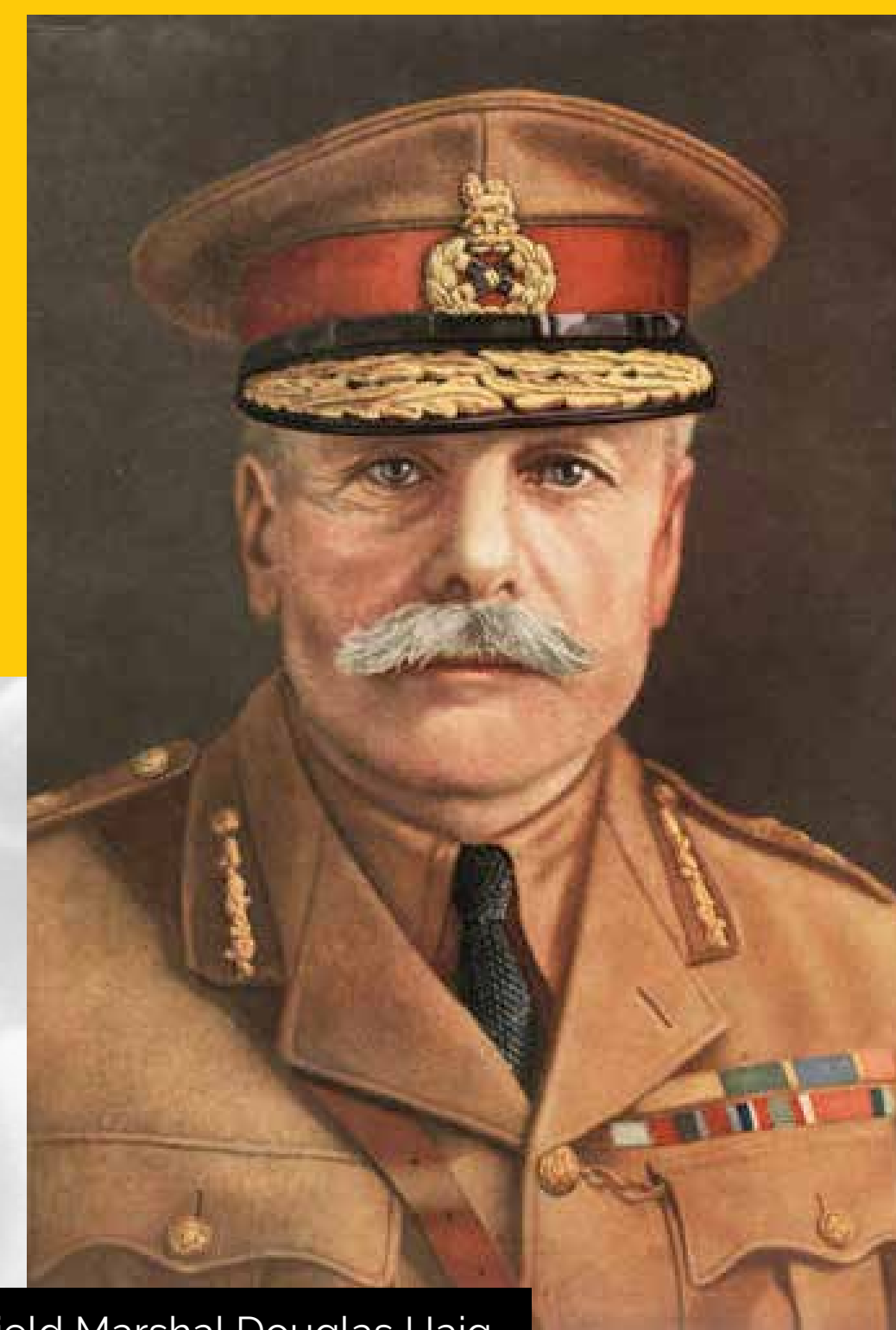
The Somme also stands out for its literary significance: more writers and poets fought in it than in any other battle in history.

While the offensive began on 1 July, September 1916 has great resonance for Irish involvement in the Somme: it

was in this month that Tom Kettle died, it was in this month that the 16 (Irish) Division, including two Battalions of the Royal Munster Fusiliers, was moved to the Somme theatre.

After five months of fighting, after all the lives lost, British and French forces had penetrated just 10 km into German-occupied territory. For most of the century since, no battle has better exemplified the view that in World War I it was a case of

'lions led by donkeys', brave and resilient soldiers led by incompetent and uncaring generals. In recent years, however, historians have taken a somewhat different view: the Somme was a new form of industrialised warfare, a forewarning of what was to come in the 1939-1945 conflict, and in such fighting mass slaughter is unavoidable.



For Irish people, North and South, and for the British, the Somme continues to evoke the agonies of war at its most merciless. It is the writers – Owen, Sassoon, Kettle, Tolkien – who first gave these agonies a voice, and it is through the prism of these writers that we view the Somme today.