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WHILE THE

MAD GUNS

IRISH WRITERS

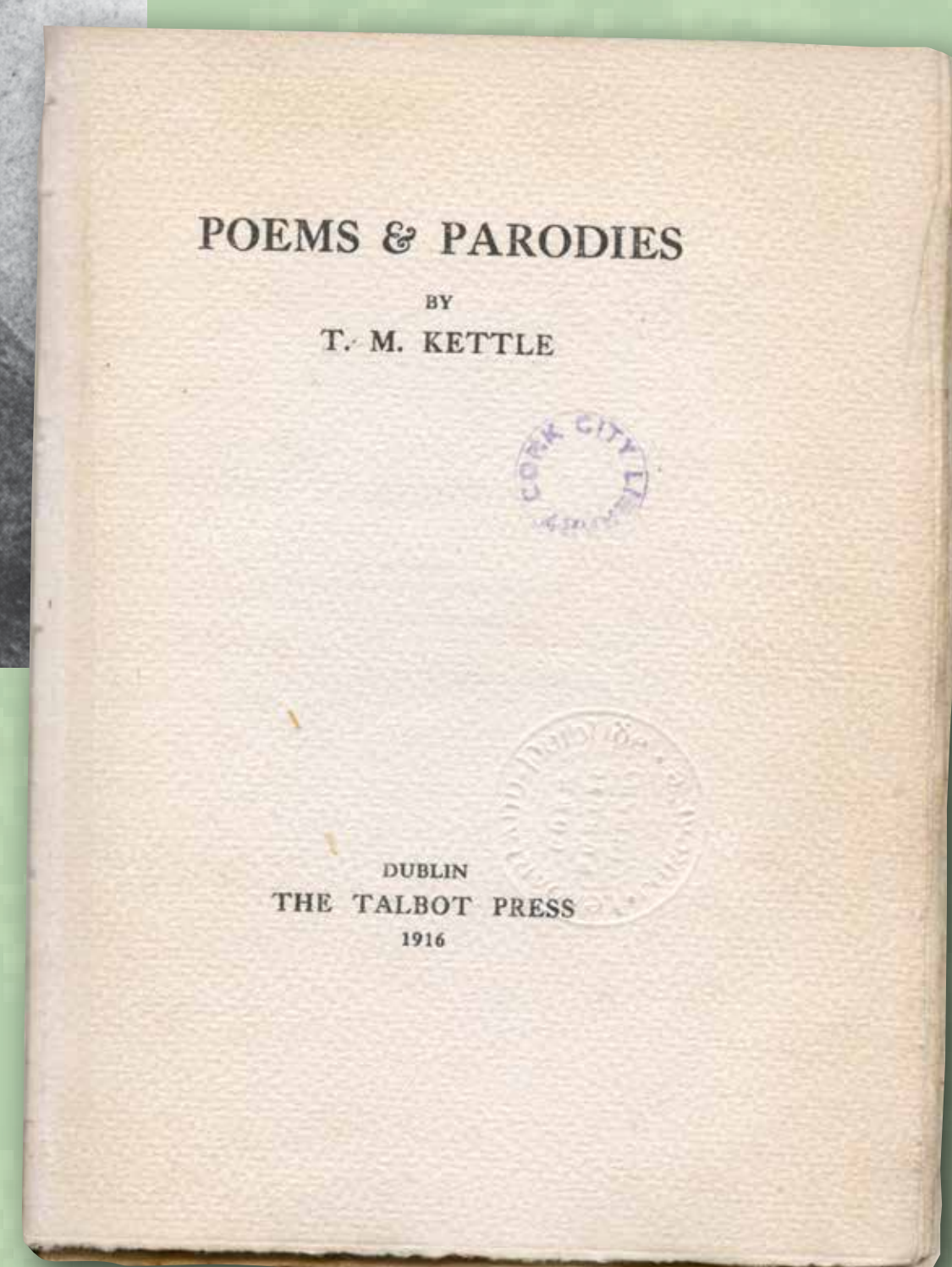
CURSE

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& THE SOMME

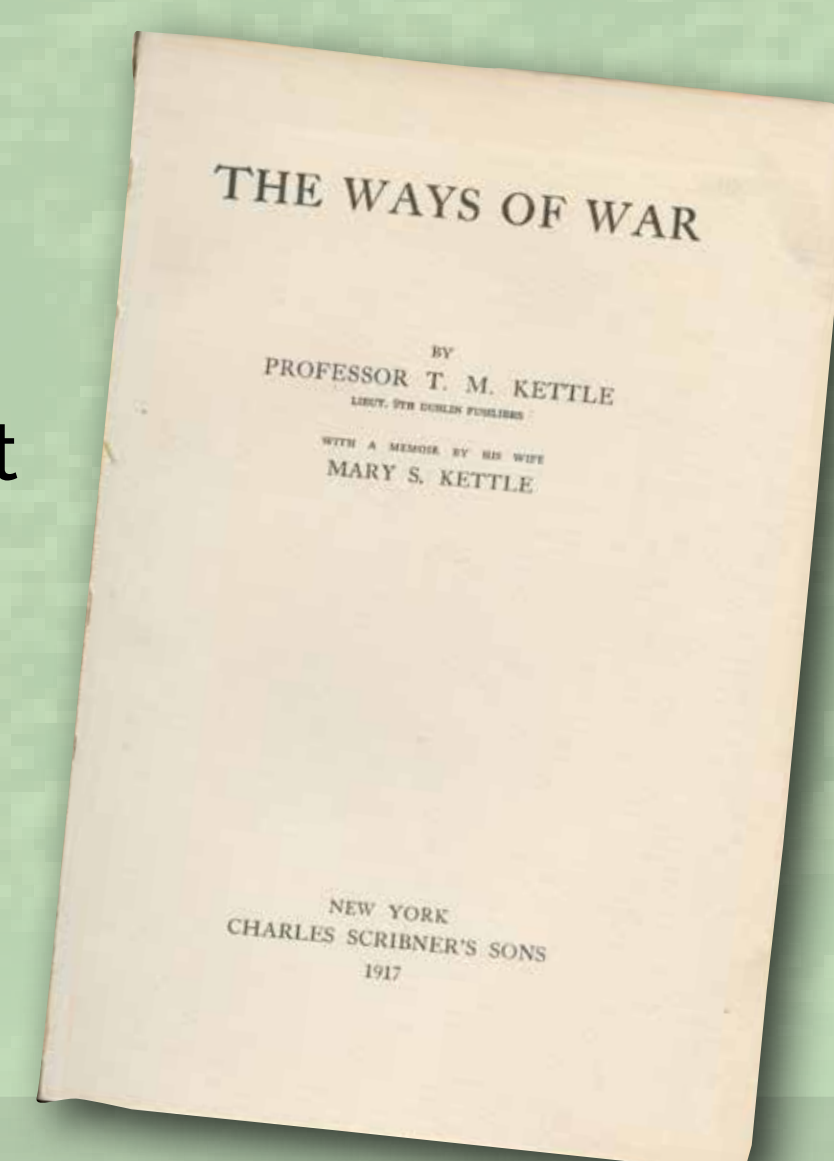


Tom Kettle
(1880 - 1916)



Poet, essayist, soldier, journalist, barrister, professor, politician (MP for East Tyrone 1906-1910), Tom Kettle was an ardent nationalist (joining the Irish Volunteers in 1913) who nevertheless, like many others at the time, joined the British Army to serve in World War I. He counted among his friends Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh and he was closely related to the Sheehy-Skeffingtons. He was co-secretary of the Peace Committee with Joseph Plunkett and Tom Dillon during the Dublin Lock-Out Strike of 1913. While in Belgium buying arms for the Volunteers in 1914 he witnessed the outbreak of WWI. Attracted to journalism and horrified by German atrocities in Belgium he reported on them during his time as war correspondent for the *Daily News*. As a result of what he witnessed in Belgium he backed John Redmond's support for the British war effort. He joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and applied to be sent to the Western Front. Because of ill-health he wasn't dispatched to the front line until 1916. Up to this time Kettle continued to publish newspaper articles, pamphlets, essays, poetry and essays. He served with Emmet Dalton in the same battalion – the 16th (Irish) Division of the 9th Battalion of the RDF. His health deteriorated in the trenches but he refused to take leave of absence and abandon his comrades.

Kettle wrote chiefly on the war in the last two years of his life much of which is contained in his collection of essays *In the ways of war*, published after his death and edited by his wife Mary. The critic Robert Lynd called it "the most attractive and eloquent book of prose... written by a soldier during the ...war" *Studies* Dec. 1931 pp 608. Four days before he was killed Kettle wrote a poem for his young daughter titled *To my daughter Betty, the gift of God*. One can already sense disillusionment and impending death in the poem.



Observe the sons of Ulster

Frank McGuinness' play *Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme* was first performed in February 1985 in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin. It quickly caught the imagination of audiences in Ireland, Britain, the USA, and other parts of the world, and has been performed countless times since. Frank McGuinness is a native of Buncrana, just a few miles from the border between Donegal and Derry.

Nowhere in Ireland was more affected by the tragedy of the Somme than the towns and rural areas of Protestant Ulster. "This powerful and subtle play" (*Times Literary Supplement*) centres on the experience of eight men who, like so many of their workmates, had volunteered to serve in the 36th (Ulster) Division when World War I broke out. While the Battle of the Boyne is nowadays commemorated on the 12th July, the actual battle took place on the 1st July 1690 in the old, Julian, calendar. The climax of the play sees the men in the trenches don their Orange sashes as they prepare to go over the top at the Somme on 1 July 1916.

The claustrophobia and group-think of the trenches echoes the narrow ground of the northern part of the island of Ireland in 1916, riven by sectarian bitterness.

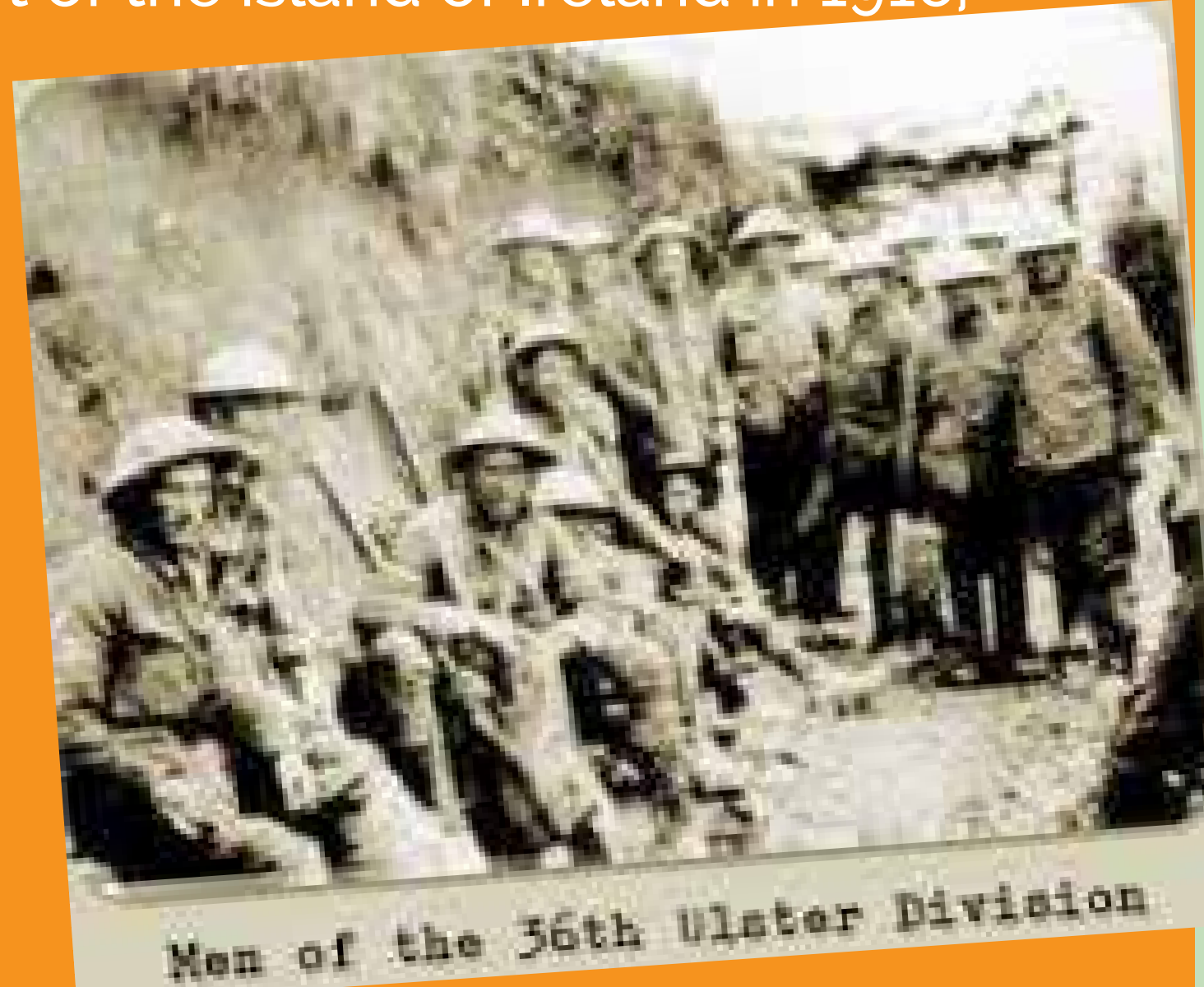
"ANDERSON: We've noticed something missing from your uniform. Something important. We think you should do something about it. It might get you into trouble.

PYPER: What's missing?

ANDERSON: Your badge of honour. (Anderson hands out an Orange sash to Pyper). Well?

PYPER: It's not mine.

ANDERSON: It is now. It's a gift. From us."

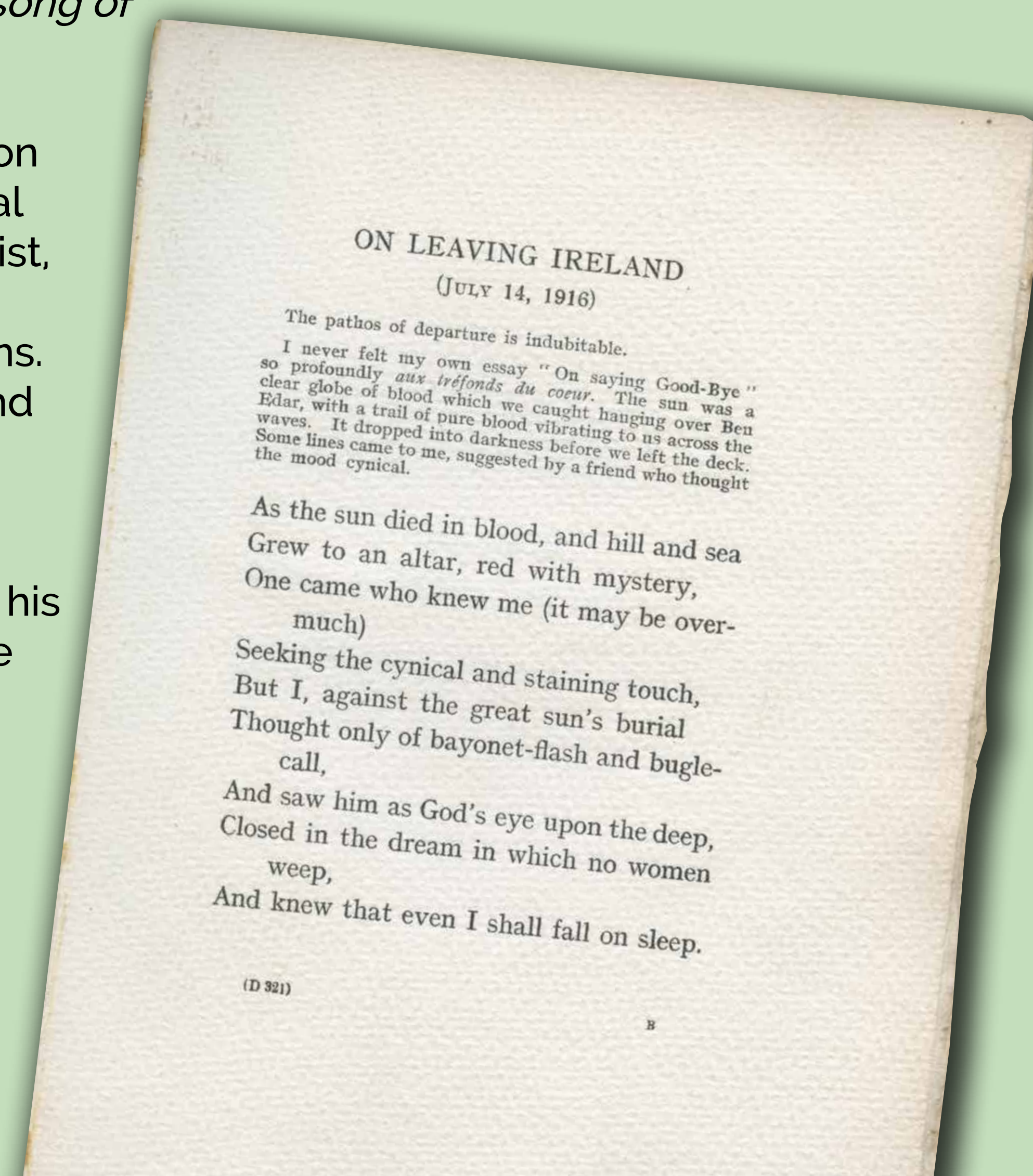
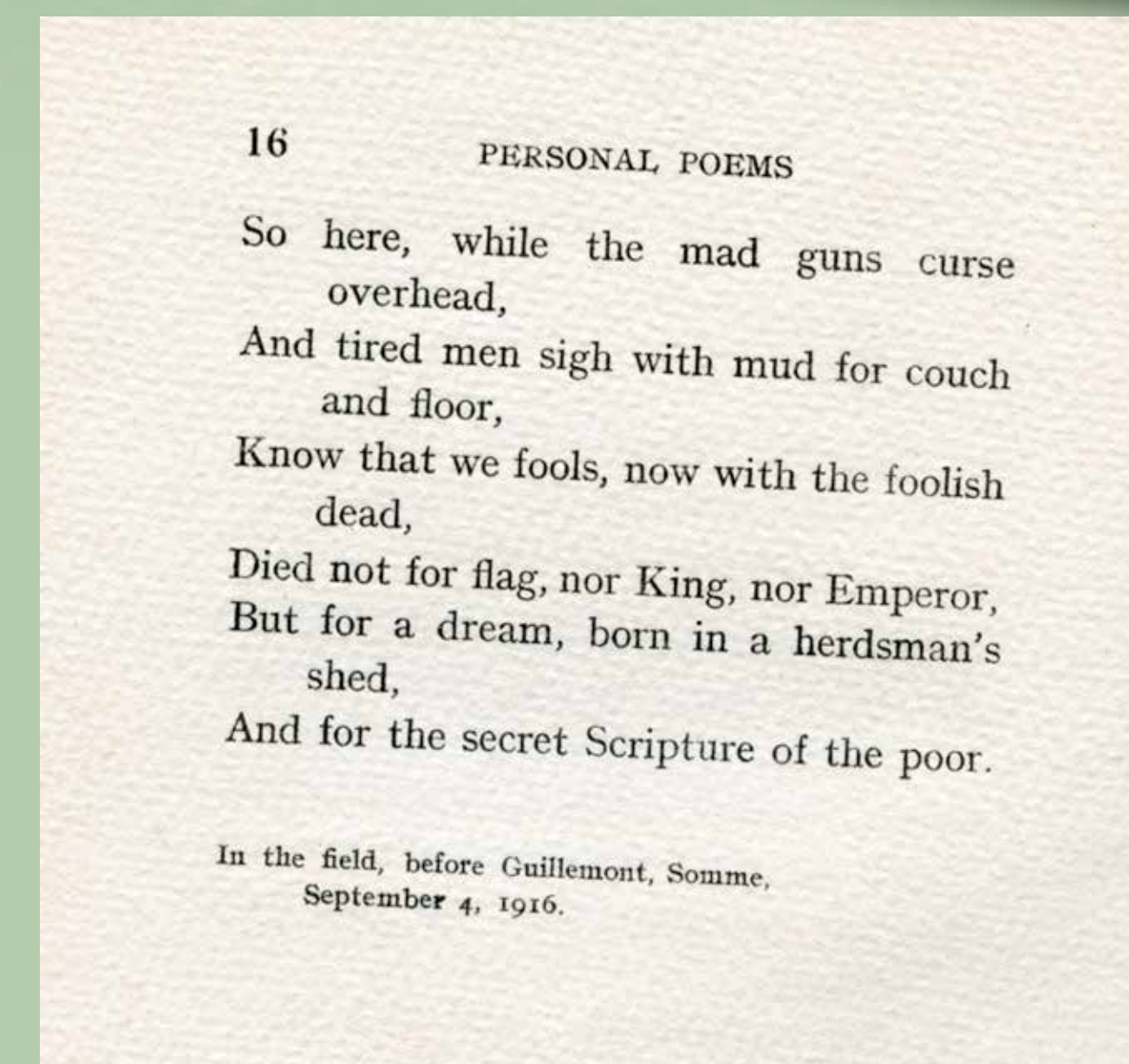
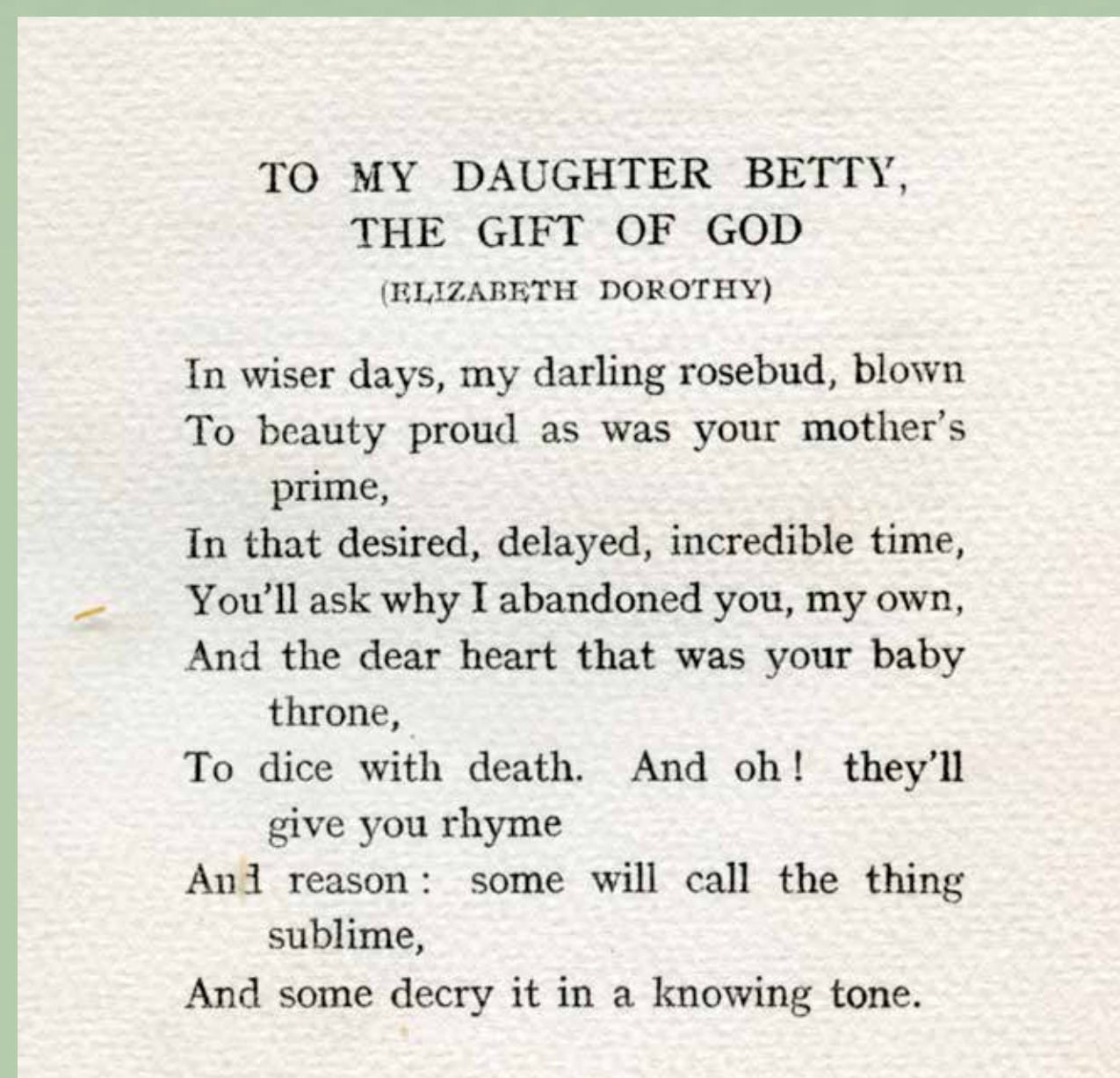


His collection of poetry *Poems and parodies* published shortly after his death in 1916 includes *On leaving Ireland*: July 14 1916 which evokes a sense of pathos and poignancy –

In this collection are four war poems – *Paddy*, *Sergeant Mike O'Leary*, *A nation's freedom* and *A song of the Irish armies*.

In his introduction to the collection William Dawson describes Kettle "A genial cynic, a pleasant pessimist, an earnest trifler, he was made up of contradictions. A fellow of infinite jest and infinite sadness".

He was killed on 9th September 1916 leading his men at Ginchy during the Battle of the Somme.



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