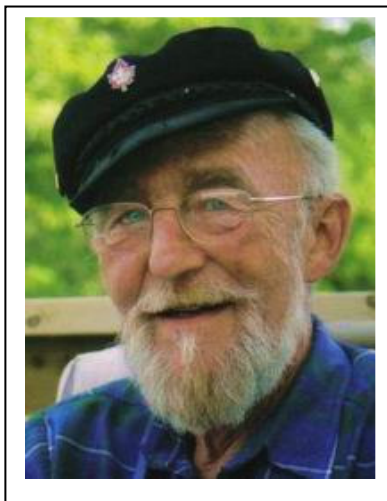


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Column #85

The Search for Robert Cronin



It was a portrait of a vacant looking young man in uniform. "That's my grandfather's brother, Robert. He died in the First World War." That was all that was known of him and, from time to time, over several years I tried to get a handle on him without much success.

Finally, I bit the bullet and made him a focus of research. This was doubly significant to us because we had very little information about the grandfather's family and we hoped that the search for Robert might lead to filling in some of those gaps.

We devised a series of research questions and set out to find out more about him. The only additional information we had to work with was that his father's name was John and his mother's Christian name was Bridget.

British Censuses gave us a basic family context for him and a place of abode as well as a variety of possible birth dates. His parents were a bit of a problem because John Cronin and Bridget are hardly rare names. Subsequent research showed some of the census data was, not

only wrong but, misleading. I suspect that they lied to the census taker, for their own reasons.

The age of the oldest child (from the census) gave us a ball park for their possible marriage date and the BMD's came up with two John Cronins who married Bridgets in that time frame. We sent for the birth certificate of the grandfather and it provided his mother's maiden name. We followed that up with obtaining John and Bridget's marriage record, which included their father's names. We were now into a more solid family context.

Robert Cronin's service history was another matter. Archival records for enlisted men in WW I can be difficult to find because most were destroyed in bombing raids during WW II and through water damage, poor storage conditions and general carelessness. Only the Guards have good records of their men.

We checked what databases there were. There are records of three Robert Cronins, who were Privates, and received medals. There were also three Robert Cronins, who were Privates and who were killed. In both cases, the Regiment and the Regimental number were provided. In the latter case, the place of burial is also included.

Since we knew he had died, we went with the three who had died. They were from the Royal Engineers, the Royal Munster Fusiliers (The Dirty Shirts) and the Irish Guards (The Micks). Which one was our Robert?

I checked the websites for the three regiments to see what resources they might have to help and there was not much. The Irish Guards had an archives and museum but the fee for documentation was 25 pounds. That is a fair amount of money to invest on speculation. Then it struck me that the hat badges of the three units were distinctively different; a circle, an oval, and a sunburst. This led to the breakthrough.

I went over the photograph of Robert with a magnifying lens and, unquestionably, his hat badge was a sunburst. He was a member of the Irish Guards, who kept such good records! My e-mail request for a copy of his service record along with the 25 pounds was off like a shot. About ten days later, his record was in my hands.

I now knew when and where he was born, his physical characteristics, his trade (Motor tyre examiner), and a chronology of his military service. Even the three occasions on which he was charged with minor infractions were there to help us fill out a better living picture of the shadow that had been Robert.

Family lore claims that they came from county Cork, but Cork is the biggest county in Ireland and without more precise directions it is not very practical to do a search there. We now know what parish in Cork they came from and a whole new set of research questions are forming to push the family history farther back than we had thought was possible. We are excited!!