

Education

THERE is often a jocular debate about the number of people credited with being in the GPO for the Easter Rising, taking a stand for Irish independence.

We'll never know the figure for sure, but as bloodlines travel through the generations, the reality is that whatever the number was back then, there are multiple descendants who can truthfully claim an ancestor who participated in revolutionary activities of 1916.

The 1916 Ancestry Project, one of the Department of Education initiatives for the 2016 Centenary Programme in schools, has tapped into those family stories and it is bringing history alive in classrooms around the country.

Some 800,000 primary and post primary pupils were encouraged to carry out their own research to discover more about what people were doing and where they were living in 1916, using resources such as the 1911 census, the military archives, church records and speaking to relatives and others.

For many students it has turned into a fascinating journey of discovery about their own families or communities.

Schools were invited to share their stories on the Scoilnet.ie website, the Department of Education official portal for Irish education, and the first of the projects have started to appear online.

Take De Lacy College, Ashbourne, Co Meath a newly opened second-level school, but already with a rich sense of history. The school, which now has 107 first and second-year students, puts a lot of effort into nurturing a love of history among its pupils.

They participate in the Young Historian programme organised by their patron body, the Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB), and have also enthusiastically embraced the Francis Ledwidge Poetry competition, another LMETB initiative, which celebrates the famous Co Meath poet, who died in World War I.

So, when the Department of Education launched its commemorative programme, there were plenty of willing hands in De Lacy College, ready to get going on various projects, a typical response in schools all over the country.

De Lacy College acting deputy principal Angela Guinan said a number of students jumped at the opportunity to look back through their family tree and it transpired that "they had very different stories to tell".

Katie Colbert says she knew "a small bit" about her great-great uncle Con, before embarking on the ancestry project "but I learned a lot more since".

Con Colbert was one of the leaders of the 1916 rising, who was subsequently executed in Kilmainham Gaol.

While she did some research online, Katie (13) only had to pick up the phone to get some first-hand information. "I called by granddad, Stephen Colbert and he put me on the phone



Above: De Lacy College, Ashbourne, Co Meath 1st year students Eoin Lawless, 13, with a photo of his great-great grandfather Edward Lawless, a 1916 Volunteer who fought in the 1916 Battle of Ashbourne, and Katie Colbert, 13, with a photo of her great-granduncle Irish Volunteer and IRB member who fought in Dublin in 1916; Con Colbert. Right: Charlie McCormack, 12, Jia Wen McCabe, 15, Victoria McElearnay, 14, and Ben Heagney, 13 with their 1916 poems. PHOTOS: CAROLINE QUINN

to my great nan, May, who was married to Con Colbert's nephew. She is 91 now.

"It was all really interesting and I enjoyed learning about it and it makes you want to learn a bit more. My mam had already told me that Con Colbert has a railway station and a road named after him."

A house in Hollybank Road, Drumcondra is the setting for Sadhbh Mooney's action-packed family story about 1916. Number 10, where her great-great grandparents lived and the house into which her great grandmother was born in 1916, was the scene for some interesting activities that year.

According to Sadhbh's research, the basement was a hide out for volunteers and guns, while the roof was used as a lookout.

"One famous person who used to hide out in the house was Maud Gonne. This was a very important time in Ireland's history and I love learning about my ancestors," says Sadhbh.

Eoin Lawless' family name is familiar locally, arising from his ancestors' revolutionary credentials.

Among them was Frank Lawless, who was second in command in the Battle of Ashbourne in 1916.

He was subsequently sentenced to death, but was spared execution and was sent to a UK Prison camp. His brother Edward was one of the 20 men selected from the volunteers' camp in Finglas to go in to help out in the GPO. Eoin's great-great aunt was Evelyn Lawless, was secretary to Michael Collins between 1918 and 1920 and later became a nun.

The ancestry project has become more than a national snapshot of roots to 1916 Ireland. Many students grabbed the opportunity to tell a family history, unrelated to 1916, including those with origins from well beyond these shores, weaving rich threads into the multi-cultural tapestry that is modern Ireland.



Rachel O'Brien had a slightly different story to tell about her ancestors, who included English-born Alfred Hendrick, who fought in the Boer War and who was disinherited when he married servant girl, Mary Corcoran, from Naas, Co Kildare. On the other side of the family was her great-grandad Matthew Kelehan, who fought with Michael Collins in 1922.

Sophie Giovale is half Irish, half Italian, and she has shared the Italian side of her family tree, which included pasta-makers.

"My dad is from Italy. He came to Ireland for a holiday and met my mom. I called my nanny who lives in Salerno and to get the information," says Sophie, who includes images of census documents and ID cards

in her submitted work.

The bards of De Lacy College, already well practiced thanks to the Francis Ledwidge poetry competition, have also played to their strengths putting their reflections on events 100 years ago into verse.

Next Tuesday is Proclamation Day, when some 4,000 schools will showcase all the work they have done on the 1916 theme.

Writing their own history lessons

When pupils traced their family trees, interesting stories emerged, writes Katherine Donnelly