The Pearses and the Brennocks- Two families of Row Boys.

To any past pupil of Westland Row the names Patrick and Willie immediately bring to mind the Brothers Pearse whose stories have been told and retold to generations over the almost 100 years since their deaths.

To mark the old school’s sesquicentenial the PPU have managed to gain access to the early school roll books. Their acquisition, in digital format, will be marked by a visit to the school by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, on November 20th 2014.

Looking back, it is slightly surprising to see how limited the references to the Pearse brothers are. William’s entry is clear and unambiguous. It shows the family address in the then Brunswick Street and confirms the occupation of his father as a sculptor.

Ironically, the more famous Patrick, almost slips through the net. He is referred to only in an abbreviated class listing on page 303 of the records for 1888-97- almost certainly 1890. He appears there as Patk. Pierse(sic). We do also, of course, have some photographic evidence of Patrick with his classmates.

We know also of other past pupils who played a prominent role in the Rising- Michael Malone who led the IRA unit at the Battle of Mount Street Bridge and The Pedreschi brothers who were active in Ogliaigh Na hEireann in those years.

Less well known however are the past pupils who died in the Great War of 1914-1918. Given what we know about the numbers of Irishmen who died in that awful conflict, it would be surprising if Row boys escaped the carnage. One of the projects being undertaken by the PPU this year is an attempt to remember these brave men. The project is only in its very early stages but already we have discovered one story which we feel deserves to be told.

The Brennocks were a large family who, at the time of the 1901 Census, were living in 2 Island Villas, just off Pearse Street- behind the old National School there. The father, Michael was then a 42 year old Miller from Tipperary, who had married a Dublin girl (Mary Bolger, also 42.) Given his occupation and address I think it is fair to guess that Michael worked at Boland’s Mills which itself played an important role in those tumultuous times.

Despite their youth, the Brennocks had eight sons and two daughters. We have established definitively so far that at least five of the sons were Row Boys.

Patrick, their eldest boy, who was born a year after Willie Pearse, was 18 at the time of the Census and working as a machinist. He had left home by the time of the next Census in 1911. We suspect he joined the Royal Navy. The next record we have of him was his death on board HMS Europa. He is remembered at the Portsmouth Navy Memorial.

De Rouvigny’s Roll of Honour (vol. 4 page 18) tells us Patrick was appointed to HMS Syrius, one of Admiral Hood’s Squadron, which took part in the bombardment of the Belgian coast. He later served on HMS Europa engaged in the landing of troops at Gallipoli, where he contracted dysentery and died at sea on 26th August 1915.

Interestingly De Rouvigny’s Roll specifically mentions that Patrick was educated at the Christian Brother’s School, Westland Row, Dublin.
Extraordinarily he was not the first of the family to die in the conflict- nor was he the last.

Willie, a couple of years younger- had also obviously joined the British Forces before the outbreak of war. He was a member of the crack Irish Guards who suffered dreadful casualties in the first battle of Ypres- 700 killed in the first three months of the conflict. Willie Brennock died at Klein Zillebeke on 6/11/1914. He is remembered on The Menin Gate at Ypres.

Two sets of brothers, sharing the same first names, Patrick and Willie, each born two years apart, living a few hundred yards apart and all attending Westland Row within a total time span of eight years and illustrating the multiple and complex strands of Irish identity.

Mary Brennock’s suffering was not yet complete however.

On 28/2/1917, a third son Thomas’ by then aged 28 died at Saily- Saillisel where he was buried. He was serving with The Royal Dublin Fusiliers and he is remembered at The Thiepval Memorial. As he has no marked grave at this time it seems likely that the graveyard fell victim to later bombing- one of the reasons that so many victims now have no known resting place.

Thomas originally enlisted in The Royal Army Medical Corps on the 10th January 1915. He was later transferred to The King’s Shropshire Light Infantry and finally to The Royal Dublin Fusiliers. He was obviously a very highly regarded soldier, having been promoted to the rank of Sergeant in the two years since enlistment. Even more remarkable, De Rouvigny’s Roll mentions that he was under orders to return to England on 3rd March to obtain a commission. Unfortunately he had been killed for days earlier.

An” In Memory” piece on Michael appeared on page one of The Freeman’s Journal on 28th February 1917 a year after his death. He is mentioned in The Irish Times of the same date.

His memorial reads- “Son of Michael and Mary Brennock of Dublin. His brothers William and Patrick also fell”. One can sense the anguish of the parents in that line.

The 1911 Census makes clear that the family had moved home to 18 Shelbourne Road by then. De Rouvigny’s Roll makes it clear that the family subsequently moved to Galway- a fact confirmed by Thomas’ will, which can be viewed on our National Archives website.

One suspects that the reason for the move to Galway was linked to Michael’s occupation as a miller. Their final known address was 4 Mill Street Galway.

In passing, De Rouvigny’s Roll also mentions that both Willie and Thomas were educated by The Christian Brothers in Dublin, without specifically mentioning Westland Row.

Entries in De Rouvigny’s Roll were paid for. As a result only a tiny fraction of victims of The Great War appear there. The fact that there are entries for all three Brennock brothers is an indicator of how anxious their parents were that their sons should not be forgotten.

None of the bodies of the three brothers have any known resting place. It seems fitting that we should remember them at this time.

The newspaper cutting overleaf comes from the front page of the Saturday Evening Herald of April 28th 1917- sourced from The National Library. Thomas Brennock is highlighted in the middle row.
Note how many of the other victims lived in close proximity to the school- Townsend Street, Mark’s Lane and Stella Gardens Ringsend.

Note also that only three of the twelve victims were attached to The Dublin Fusiliers at the time of their deaths. This highlights the problem of accurately assessing the numbers of Irish people who died in this terrible conflict. More than 4,500 Royal Dublin Fusiliers died in the Great War excluding Officers. 1,328 of them are recorded as having been born in Dublin. A further 2,200 Dublin born victims were attached to other Regiments. (Source- Soldiers Died in The Great War)

All of the past pupils mentioned in this piece appear in the Second Set Admission Registers for Westland Row CBS:

- Patrick Pearse  Book 2 Page 303
- William Pearse  Book 1 Page 16
- Patrick Brennock  Book 1 Page 20
- Willie Brennock  Book 1 Page 98
- Thomas Brennock  Book 1 Page 101

Des Byrne would like to acknowledge the help of Conor Dodd of The Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association in fleshing out the detail of this piece.