



This presentation deals with the poetry of World War I, also called the Great War or the “War to end all wars.” The war changed the world irrevocably: the Russian Revolution was triggered; the prewar class-structure in other European countries began to crumble; the Treaty of Versailles paved the way for fascism and World War II, and set up regimes in the Middle East that are the basis for that region’s present instability. The loss of life – 9 million combatants and 6 million civilians – was greater than had ever before been experienced in Europe. The war showed how little human life was valued – this was the “pity of war.” And poetry is in the pity – some of the greatest poetry of the English language was written by soldiers during this Great War.

This is not everyone’s opinion. Yeats wrote a poem entitled *On Being Asked for a War Poem*:

I think it better that in times like these  
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter’s night.

When Yeats edited the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, he did not include any poems from the war. His reasoning was that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry.” The war was pitiful but not tragic. The deaths occurred by accident - “some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road—that is all.” “If the war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell, or as we forget the worst moments of more painful disease.” Yeats was a great poet but he was often wrong. The 1936 *Faber Book of Modern Verse* edited by Michael Roberts included Owen and Rosenberg.

This famous photograph by Ernest Brooks shows soldiers of the East Yorkshire Regiment moving up to Broodseinde before the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. Brooks pioneered the use of silhouette-images. The soldiers depicted remained anonymous and thus more easily represented all the combatants: the unknown soldiers.

### The Shot Heard Round the World

On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a 19 year-old Serbian nationalist, shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife in Sarajevo. On July 28, Austria declared war on Serbia. Russia mobilized in support of Serbia. Germany declared war on Russia on August 1 and on France, Russia's ally, on August 3. Belgium refused to permit German troops to travel through its country. Germany invaded Belgium on August 4, and Britain declared war on Germany.



The war began as a relatively minor incident in Sarajevo quickly escalated. Assassination – the targeted murder of a prominent person – had been used throughout history to trigger rebellion, weaken an opposing nation or army, or to revenge injustice. Previous assassinations had occurred or been attempted in the Austrian empire: a Hungarian nationalist attempted to assassinate Emperor Franz Joseph in 1853; his wife Elizabeth was stabbed to death by an Italian anarchist in 1898. Only the assassination of the heir-apparent Franz Ferdinand resulted in such grave consequences.



The response to the declaration of war was greeted with great enthusiasm. Young men lined up to volunteer on both sides. Given the huge death toll that was to come, this eagerness for battle is hard to understand. The economy was stable and unemployment was low. Perhaps the idea of war was more glamorous than the boredom of industrial work. Youth needs a great cause to fight for. The young men has no way of understanding what was to happen.

MCMXIV



Those long uneven lines  
 Standing as patiently  
 As if they were stretched outside  
 The Oval or Villa Park,  
 The crowns of hats, the sun  
 On moustached archaic faces  
 Grinning as if it were all  
 An August Bank Holiday lark;  
 .....

Never before such innocence,  
 Never before or since,  
 As changed itself to past  
 Without a word – the men  
 Leaving the gardens tidy,  
 The thousands of marriages  
 Lasting a little while longer:  
 Never such innocence again.

This poem by Philip Larkin, whom we shall meet again in later presentations, considers the beginning of the war. The title gives “1914” in Roman numerals, the way dates are written on the war memorials. The crowds lined up as if for a sporting event – cricket at the Oval or soccer at Villa Park. The innocence of England went back to medieval times when the country was surveyed for the Domesday Book of 1086. It was a land of simple pleasures, of hot cocoa steaming in a mug and pipe-tobacco sold in a “twist.” It was a society, where everyone from lord to maid knew their place.

Over the next four years, everything changed. The pubs that had once been open all day became restricted in their hours so that workers did not become too inebriated to produce munitions. Servants fought alongside their betters and began to wonder about why they were different. In the years that followed the war, the British Empire began slowly to unravel.

Never such innocence,  
 Never before or since,  
 As changed itself to past  
 Without a word

On the eve of Britain’s Declaration of War, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey said “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”



Ypres, 1914



*It's a Long Way to Tipperary*  
Judge and Williams, 1912, sung by Albert Farrington

The British Expeditionary Force quickly set out to defend Belgium against the German invasion. A common marching song was *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. This music-hall song has nothing to do with the war. It is sung by an Irishman who had come to seek his fortune in London but missed his girl Molly back in Tipperary. The lyrics were often changed to the bawdy “That’s the wrong way to tickle Mary.”

### Laurence Binyon (1869-1943)

Moved by the large number of casualties suffered by the British Expeditionary Force in Belgium, Binyon wrote *For the Fallen*. Verse 4 from the poem is frequently used in Remembrance Day services.



They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.



1898 etching  
David Strang

The British Expeditionary Force, outnumbered 3:1 by the German army suffered a severe defeat at Mons in Belgium on August 23. However, they did slow down the German advance. These men were all professional soldiers – the new recruits were not yet trained. They “saved the sum of things for pay” and were commemorated in the Housman poem *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*.

Binyon wrote his poem in response to the battles at Mons and Marne. It was published in the Times in September 1914. Verses 3-5, and particularly verse 4 are used in memorial services. It is therefore often referred to as the *Remembrance Ode*.

The poem uses the old distinction between shall and will: for the simple future “shall” in the first person and “will” in the second and third; for determination “will” in the first and “shall” in the second and third. It also uses the old euphemism “fallen” to describe the dead.

“Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn” alludes to Shakespeare’s description of Cleopatra “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale.”



Rupert Brooke wrote a sonnet sequence called *1914*, culminating with *The Soldier*.

 Simon Russell Beale

The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me,  
 That there's some corner of a foreign field  
 That is for ever England. There shall be  
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed,  
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
 A body of England's, breathing English air,  
 Washed by the rivers, that big-souled theme.

And think  
~~how~~ ~~not~~ their heart, all evil shed away,  
 A ~~man~~ pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given,  
 Their rights and wrongs; dreams happy as her day;  
 And laughter (laurel of friends) and gentleness,  
 In peace at peace, under an English heaven.

Rupert Brooke, the author of the 1912 poem *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*, wrote a series of sonnets about the beginning of the war. These described the fervent patriotism and sense of duty that were the emotions at the war’s beginning. *The Soldier* is the most famous of these sonnets. It is a fine lyric poem. However the emotions that it describes were soon to give way to disillusion.



Rupert Brooke died of septicemia in April 1915, while traveling with the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to Gallipoli. He was buried on the Greek Island of Skyros

And Rupert Brooke was soon to die. He developed septicemia from an infected mosquito bite on the way to Gallipoli. He was buried in an olive grove on Skyros – “some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England.” The photograph shows the original grave. The site was chosen by Brooke’s friend, William Denis Browne, a composer, who was to die in Gallipoli.

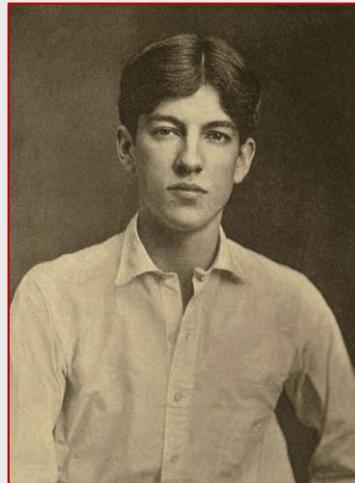
### Alan Seeger (1888-1916)

After graduating from Harvard, he lived the Bohemian life in Paris. When war broke out he joined the French Foreign Legion. He was killed in action in July 1916.

I have a rendezvous with Death  
 At some disputed barricade,  
 When Spring comes back with rustling  
                                           shade  
 And apple-blossoms fill the air—  
 I have a rendezvous with Death  
 When Spring brings back blue days and  
                                           fair.



Jasper Britton



Most of English poems of World War I were written by the British soldiers. However, one very famous poem was written by the American Alan Seeger who was to die fighting with the French. The US did not declare war on Germany until 1917 and most of the American troops did not arrive in Europe until 1918.

Seeger’s poem describes how young men sometimes court death. In his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discussed the death instinct – Thanatos – that sometimes subverts the life instinct – Eros. Alan Seeger is the uncle of folk-singer Pete Seeger.

**Vera Brittain (1893-1970)**



During the war, Brittain served in the Voluntary Aid Detachment as a nurse. Her fiancé, Roland Leighton, was killed in action in 1915. Her brother, Edward, was killed in 1918. After the war, she wrote the memoir *Testament of Youth*, and became an active pacifist.



Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,  
 And I shall see that still the skies are blue,  
 And feel once more I do not live in vain,  
 Although bereft of you.

  
 Judi Dench

Some of the war poems were written by grieving women rather than the fighting men. Though they showed the effects of war on the bereaved rather than on the dying, these were generally not as memorable as those written by the soldiers. Vera Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth*, was made into a fine movie in 2015. It stars Alicia Vikander as Vera.



**Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918)**

An artist and poet, he enlisted in the British army in 1915. He was killed in action in 1918.



1915
1917

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
 Your cosmopolitan sympathies.

The early bravado of the war soon ceded to harsh reality. Young men in their thousands marched to their deaths; trenches were dug like graves in the once-fertile land; the instruments and engines of war grew more efficient and terrible; form and sound became incomprehensible in the exploding shells; death came even in the air that soldiers breathed. Isaac Rosenberg was one of the poets who began not to follow the patriotic fervor.



The photograph shows a German trench that had been taken by the British and changed to fight toward the East (right side) rather than toward the West. One sentry watches while the other soldiers sleep. The trench is in the middle of the Somme region and is much drier than the trenches further to the North.

Rosenberg's poem considers the remnants of nature in the devastated landscape: the poppy that he puts behind his ear and the cosmopolitan rat that moves back and forth between the opposing lines. The latter is perhaps a subtle reference to the Jews who once moved easily back and forth between the warring countries.



The documentary film *The Battle of the Somme* was made in 1916. It was made by the cinematographers Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell. Much of the film depicted events as they occurred. This particular scene showing a platoon going over the top was staged. It is

nevertheless impressive. Various versions of the film as well as excerpts are available on YouTube, e.g.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhHdZLioRZg>



1915 photograph, G. C. Beresford

### Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

His poems sought to convey the horrible reality of trench warfare and to counter the romantic view of war provided by propaganda. He was called 'Mad Jack' by his friends because of his night raids across no man's land. He received the Military Cross in 1916. However he published a pacifist letter entitled *Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration* and threw his medal away. Interventions by Robert Graves and other friends prevented a court-martial, and he was sent to Craiklockart Hospital.

Siegfried Sassoon's father was a member of the Sassoon merchant family. This Sephardic family originated in Persia and operated largely in India and the Far East. Sassoon's father married an Anglican. Siegfried grew up in affluence. Before the war, he was interested in foxhunting and cricket.



"Good-morning, good-morning!" the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,  
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.

Michael  
Sheen



The clip from *The Battle of the Somme* shows a general exhorting his troops just before they move up to battle. This does seem strange and one is tempted to believe that the soldiers died and the generals survived. This is the main idea of the Sassoon's poem. However the mortality rate for British generals (18%) was actually higher than that for the ordinary soldiers (13%). The generals died from sniper fire when they visited the lines (they were conspicuous because of the "red tabs" on their collars), and from shelling behind the lines. The highest mortality rate (20%) was for the junior officers (lieutenants and captains) who had to lead their men into battle.



The photograph shows a dead soldier at the doorway of a dugout. Sassoon's poem looks at his sleeping colleague and is reminded of the dead.



This 1918 photograph (US Signal Corps) shows a church converted into a first aid station. Sassoon's poem describes the experience. Medicine was rudimentary. There were no antibiotics and no blood transfusions.





Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...

Brian Blessed



The German army was the first to use poison gas on the battle field. Chlorine gas was the first agent. Chlorine damages the eyes and lungs. Mustard gas caused blistering of the skin, conjunctivitis, choking in the lungs and internal bleeding. The chemist Fritz Haber directed the German poison gas production. He had previously developed a process for making ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen. Ammonia was used for fertilizers. Thus Haber invented both the process of gaining bread from the air (*Brot aus Luft*) and the way of administering death from the air (*Tod aus Luft*). The former was the reason for his Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1918.

This poem describes a gas attack. The experience was far from the gentle death promised by the Roman poet Horace *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (It is sweet and proper to die for one's country).



This photograph shows Australian gunners on a duckboard track near Hooges during the Third Battle of Ypres, 1917. The photographer was Frank Hurley.

<b>Rhyme</b>	Cvc	alliteration	bad boy
	cVc	assonance	back rat
	cvC	consonance	back neck
	CVc	reverse rhyme	back bat
	CvC	pararhyme	back buck
	cVC	strict rhyme	back rack
	CVC	rhyme riche	bat bat
	<b>Strange Meeting</b>	It seemed that out of battle I escaped Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped Through granites which titanic wars had groined. Yet also there encumbered sleepers groined, Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred. Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared With piteous recognition in fixed eyes, Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.	
 S. R. Beale			
 B. Britten			

Before we listen to the next poem, we might diverge a little to consider rhyme. Rhyme is very common in English poetry. Blank verse was used for drama, for epics and for other long poems, but shorter poems typically rhymed. In the 1900 version of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, only 16 of 883 (less than 2%) poems did not rhyme. Rhyme was seldom used in Classic Greek and Roman poetry. How rhyme developed in European poetry is not fully understood. Two possible sources may have contributed. Rhyme is the essence of Persian and Arabic poetry and it is possible that the medieval troubadours in Southern France learned the techniques of rhyme from the Moors in Spain. Another possible source is the Gaelic poetry of Ireland. The Irish began to spread Christianity back to Britain and the continent and the Irish rhyming techniques seem to have affected the Latin poetry of the Dark Ages.

Almost all of English rhyming involves “strict rhyme” (or canonical rhyme) at the end of a line of verse. However, internal rhyme – two words in the same line – was occasionally also used. Alliteration was common but did not follow the strict rules of Old English. Occasionally, simple consonance or pararhyme (slant rhyme, near rhyme, half rhyme) was used to vary the ongoing strict rhyme, e.g. in Shelley’s *Ozymandias*:

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of **stone**  
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose **frown**,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words **appear**:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and **despair**!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* has more examples of pararhyme. Owen's poem *Strange Meeting* is written in pararhyming couplets. He used this device in many of his other poems as well. He perhaps learned the technique from Shelley or perhaps also from a French poet Jules Romains (Owen was living in Bordeaux at the beginning of the war). The very slantness of the rhyme adds to the uneasiness of his dream of death. The poem is unprecedented in its subject matter, striking in its verbal form, and tremendously moving. Sassoon called it Owen's "passport to immortality."

The dead soldier's description of the life that might have been, the laughter and the tears cut short, portrays "the pity war distilled." *Strange Meeting* was one of several poems by Owen that were set to music by Benjamin Britten in the *War Requiem*, composed for the 1962 consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. The old cathedral had been destroyed by bombing in World War II, which began only twenty-one years after the end of the "war to end all wars." The brief excerpt is from the poem's middle. The singers are Philip Langridge (tenor) and John Shirley-Quirk (bass-baritone).



The photograph shows Owen's gravestone in the cemetery at Ors. The cemetery is maintained by the villagers under the sponsorship of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Such cemeteries are scattered over northeastern France and Belgium. Many of the graves are of soldiers who could not be identified – they are designated using the form "British Soldier Known Only to God." For Owen's gravestone, his religious mother chose a quotation from A. C. Swinburne for the epitaph:

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
All death will he annul.

It is a misquotation. The second sentence is also a question and the answer is no.

A more fitting epitaph would be Owen's poem about the futility of war. This poem uses both slant and strict rhymes. And he uses assonance between them: sun, once (assonance to sun), unsown (slant to sun), France (slant to once), snow (assonance to once), now (slant to snow), know (strict to snow).



The 1997 movie *Behind the Lines* was based on Pat Barker's *Regeneration*. This clip shows the death of Wilfred Owen (Stuart Bunce) and the response of Dr. Rivers (played by Jonathan Pryce) to the letter from Sassoon (James Wilby) informing him of the death. The poem *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young* is one of the last poems that Owen wrote before going back to France. The poem recalls Genesis 22:

<sup>1</sup> And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

<sup>2</sup> And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

<sup>3</sup> And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

<sup>4</sup> Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

<sup>5</sup> And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

<sup>6</sup> And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

<sup>7</sup> And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

<sup>8</sup> And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

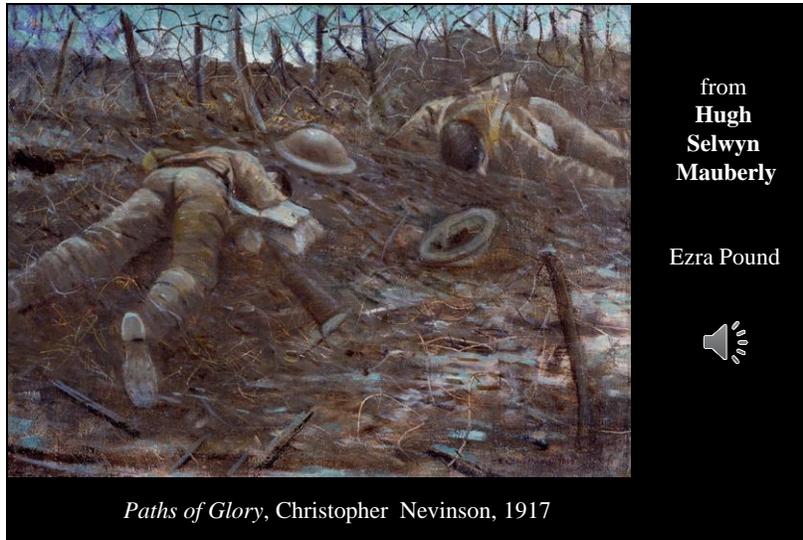
<sup>9</sup> And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

<sup>10</sup> And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

<sup>11</sup> And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

<sup>12</sup> And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

<sup>13</sup> And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.



This painting by Christopher Nevinson was censored by the government as not conducive to the war effort. Nevinson displayed the painting at a gallery but brown paper was placed over the bodies. The title comes from Thomas Gray's 1750 poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*: The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Ezra Pound's poem remembers the many friends and colleagues who died in the war. Most notable of these was Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915), a brilliant young sculptor, who had carved an iconic portrait of Pound just before the war began. Pound remarks about the war's futility – so many died

For two gross of broken statues,  
For a few thousand battered books.



### The Silent Slain

Archibald MacLeish



The Emperor Charlemagne laments the death of his nephew Roland who died during the retreat from the Battle of Roncevaux (778). Roland had blown his horn to call for reinforcements, but these arrived too late.

After the Allies broke through their defences in 1918, Germany sued for peace. Negotiations began in October and the war was finally ended by an armistice between the Allies and Germany signed on November 11 at 5 am in a railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne. Hostilities were to cease at 11 am that day “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.” At that time each year since then, we have paused to remember those who died in battle.

The war was painful to remember and the dead soldiers difficult to commemorate. This poem by Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) was dedicated to his brother Kenneth, a flyer in the US Navy, who was shot down over Belgium in 1918. MacLeish uses *La Chanson de Roland*, a medieval French epic that describes the Battle of Roncevaux. Roncevaux is a small village on the France-Spain border. Here the French army under Charlemagne was defeated by the Moors. Prince Roland died during the retreat when he was attacked by Basques. Roland blew on his horn to summon reinforcements (“his horn had a lasting note”), but they arrived too late. Perhaps as the US soldiers had arrived too late to have prevented such loss of life.

Another poem *Memorial Rain* recalls the opening of a cemetery for the American dead in Belgium. As the ambassador drones on about the soldiers’ heroism and sacrifice, MacLeish describes the countryside, the wind and ultimately the rain. The war is over and Nature reclaims the land. Despite the ambassador’s comments, the dead are not happy.

The poem with its “happy, happy dead” has some satirical similarities to e. e. cummings “heroic happy dead” in:

next to of course god america i  
 love you land of the pilgrims’ and so forth oh  
 say can you see by the dawn’s early my  
 country ’tis of centuries come and go  
 and are no more what of it we should worry  
 in every language even deafanddumb  
 thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry  
 by jingo by gee by gosh by gum

why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful  
than these heroic happy dead  
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter  
they did not stop to think they died instead  
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?  
He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

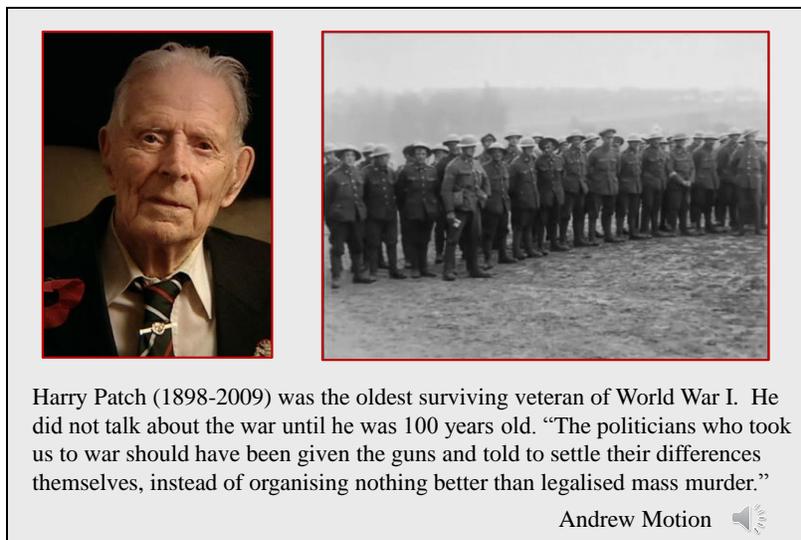
Both poems were written in 1926.



After the war, the governments of France, Britain and Canada erected monuments to the dead. The main Canadian War Memorial is at Vimy Ridge. The Menin Gate in Ypres was finished in 1927. Each night at 8 pm the Last Post is sounded to commemorate the British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in the war. Many of the surviving soldiers, such as Sassoon, derided this glorification of the war as inappropriate.



The water-color painting is by Paul Nash – *Shellburst, Zillebeke, 1917*. Zillebeke is near Ypres. Sassoon’s poem describes how old soldiers remember the exploits of their youth. The horror and the fear have been attenuated. Some of the strange beauty of the wartime landscape remains. They remember lost friends and colleagues – they play the “game of ghosts.” Joe Simpson used this quotation as an epigraph for his 1993 book *Game of Ghosts* about the friends he lost in climbing accidents.



The poet Andrew Motion became acquainted with Harry Patch toward the end of his life and wrote a commemorative poem after Harry died. The video clip – from *The Battle of the Somme* shows a church parade for the troops before battle. In the poem, the dead soldiers are called to a final communion, with Harry Patch the last to arrive.



This photograph, showing a Canadian stretcher party bringing in a wounded soldier at the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917, brings us to the end of the presentation. It shows the devastated land and the few survivors of the War to End All Wars.

Never before such innocence,  
Never before or since,  
As changed itself to past  
Without a word