

Remembrance

The onset of World War I brought into question the very idea of European civilization. Mankind's ongoing progress to a better world appeared no longer pre-ordained. Promises of future peace and plenty were forever broken. Henry James wrote in a letter to Howard Sturgis on August 5, the day after Britain declared war of Germany.

The plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton fiat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we had supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for my words. (James, 1920, p 398)

(The "autocrats" were Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Franz Josef I of Austria.) The complex sentence is typical of James, the master of convoluted qualification. Rudyard Kipling later said the same in fewer words in his *Common Form* for the *Epitaphs of the War*:

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

However, at the beginning of the war, the general population had no such reservations. People rallied to support their King and Empire. Young men thronged enthusiastically to the recruiting centres.



On looking at photographs of these happy volunteers, Philip Larkin wrote in 1960 a poem called *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;

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring:
The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;

The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never 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.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Larkin-MCMXIV.mp3>

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. The war etched itself into modern memory through poetry, photographs, painting and music (Silkin, 1972; Fusell, 1975; Malvern, 2004).

The bravado of the war’s first months 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.



Siegfried Sassoon described trench warfare in his 1917 poem *Attack*:

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Sassoon-Attack.mp3>



Broodseinde, 1917

Sassoon was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. He often went out on his own to engage the German lines, and was called “Mad Jack” for these near-suicidal exploits. Deeply disillusioned by the conduct of the war and the waste of life, in 1917 he wrote to his commanding officer a letter entitled *Finished with the War: A Soldier’s Declaration*, and forwarded a copy of this to the press. Rather than prosecuting him for treason, the military authorities sent him to Craiglockhart Hospital to be treated for neurasthenia or “shell shock.” At the hospital, Sassoon met and encouraged another soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen.

The Great War altered forever the way that we see the world. More than in any previous war, the public was able to see what actually happened from photographs of soldiers in action. These were strictly censored. Nevertheless, the published photographs showed clearly both the isolation of the soldiers and the desolation of the land.



Ypres, 1917

Paintings no longer portrayed romance and courage but horror and fear. Paul Nash was a war-artist who served with the British Army at Ypres in 1917. He wrote to his wife

Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all though the bitter black night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps, breaking the plank roads, striking down horses and mules, annihilating, maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast up on it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are

fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls. (quoted by Haycock, 2009, p. 278)

His impressions formed the basis for his painting *The Menin Road*:



After the Allies broke through their defences in 2018, 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.

Wilfred Owen was killed in action at the crossing of the Sambre-Oise canal on November 4, a brief week before the war ended. One of his last poems imagined what might happen when he died. The slant rhymes underline the uneasiness of his *Strange Meeting*.

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 groaned,
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.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.'

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . .’

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.”

Britten used as an epigraph to the score a quotation from the draft preface that Owen had written to a planned book of his poems on the war:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity ...
All a poet can do today is warn.

Owen’s words and Britten’s music provide context for today’s Remembrance. The following clip provides the ending to the *War Requiem*. The final lines of Owen’s poem, beginning with “I am the enemy you killed,” lead into the final section of the mass, initially sung by the two male soloists and a boys’ choir, before ending with the full chorus.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Britten-War-Requiem-VI-ending.mp3>

*In paradisum deducant te angeli
In tu adventu suscipiant te martyres
et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem.
Chorus angelorum te suscipiat et cum Lazaro
quondam pauper aeternam habeas requiem.
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:
et lux perpetua luceat eis.*

Requiescant in pace.

(May the angels lead you into paradise and at your arrival may the martyrs receive you and bring you into the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive you and may you have eternal rest together with Lazarus who once was poor. Lord, grant them eternal rest and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace.)

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