

KEYWORTH & DISTRICT U3A

WORLD WAR I HISTORY GROUP



An Anthology

The Memorial Gates, Keyworth

4th August 2014

Foreword

On the 4th August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany and the World was plunged into World War I, which was to last until November 1918. To mark the centenary of this event the World War I History Group gathered at the Memorial Gates to the Rectory Field on the 4th August this year and members recited poems or contributed readings, some of which were dedicated to relatives or local residents who gave their lives in this “War to end all wars”.

An anthology is presented below.



Introduction

The great catastrophe has come upon Europe. Germany has declared war upon Russia. The declaration was handed to the Foreign Minister at St Petersburg at 7.30 am on Saturday night by the German Ambassador, who thereupon left St Petersburg with his staff.

The Times, August 3, 1914

Subsequently

The Foreign Office issued a statement: "Owing to the summary rejection by the German Government of the request made by his Majesty's Government for assurances that the neutrality of Belgium will be respected, his Majesty's Ambassador to Berlin has received his passports, and his Majesty's Government declared to the German Government that a state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany as from 11pm on August 4, 1914."

Six weeks earlier on 28th June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, [heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne] & his wife [Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg] were assassinated in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian-Serb radical.

One month later Austria declared war on Serbia and, in response, Russia mobilised for war and then Germany declared war on Russia. Successive mobilisations and declarations followed to recruit all major European powers to the cataclysm of World War One.

There was a certain inevitability in that sequence of events, even more chilling when examined in the light of the horrors and sacrifices of the years to 1918 and beyond.

And yet five days earlier on 25th July there was no general European awareness of that inevitability, but more general uncertainty as to the immediate future. Czar Nicholas hesitated to mobilise, Wilhelm II was on holiday on his yacht, Poincare of France was also at sea, returning from St Petersburg. Asquith was pre-occupied with private affairs, leaving British reaction to Sir Edward Grey. Britain had no treaty with France and British participation in a continental war was far from inevitable.

On 25th July the Russian Ambassador called on Foreign Secretary Grey to discuss British reaction to Russian mobilisation should Austria mobilise against Serbia. Grey's bland diplomatic reply that it would be a "perfectly natural response" unsurprisingly encouraged Russia. Grey had overlooked that stopping mobilisation stopped war. Mobilisation was no longer a national decision and a penultimate step towards war, it was the start of the sequential mobilisation of armies as the driving and irreversible force towards war, overriding political judgement and Imperial diktat alike, robbing politicians of the time to reflect, to confer and to decide.

Five days later Russia mobilised, successive mobilisations and declarations of war followed so that on 3rd August 1914 Grey could observe "The lamps are going out all over Europe" the day before Great Britain and the British Empire entered what had begun as a Balkan squabble before pan-European treaties, military plans and railway timetables created a pandemic, and ultimately a half century of war.

Chris Close, August 2014 with acknowledgement to ***The Times***

Doug Brown

I now know that I had two great-uncles, killed in action in World War I and it seems fitting on this occasion to remember one of them — Private Robert Eadie, thought to have enlisted in August 1914 into the 9th Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), 9th Division. This was one of six new divisions of K1 – volunteers known as Kitchener's Army.

Robert was killed in action at the Battle of Loos on the 25th of September 1915, age 17.



I would now like to read a few verses and the chorus from an Eric Bogle song written in 1976 and I quote the writer:

"I wrote this song after a short and sobering tour round one of the vast military cemeteries in northern France. There were a lot of Willie McBrides buried there." It is known as either no man's land, Willie McBride or perhaps most commonly as the *Green Fields of France*.

Whilst generally thought of as an anti-war song, I heard it on the radio the other day described as “thought provoking” and have included verses and chorus from a reply written to Eric’s song by Stephen L. Suffet in 1997.

Green Fields of France

*Well, how do you do, Private William McBride,
Do you mind if I sit down here by your graveside?
And rest for awhile in the warm summer sun,
I've been walking all day, and I'm nearly done.
And I see by your gravestone you were only 19
When you joined the glorious fallen in 1916,
Well, I hope you died quick and I hope you died clean
Or, Willie McBride, was it slow and obscene?*

*Did they Beat the drum slowly, did they play the pipes lowly?
Did the rifles fire o'er you as they lowered you down?
Did the bugles sound The Last Post in chorus?
Did the pipes play the Flowers of the Forest?*

Eric Bogle, 1976

Reply from the grave

*My dear friend Eric, this is Willie McBride,
Today I speak to you across the divide,
Of years and of distance of life and of death,
Please let me speak freely with my silent breath.*

*It wasn't for King or for England I died.
It wasn't for glory or the Empire's pride.
The reason I went was both simple and clear:
To stand up for freedom did I volunteer.*

*Yes, they beat the drum slowly, they played the pipes lowly,
And the rifles fired o'er me as they lowered me down,
The band played "The Last Post" in chorus,
And the pipes played "The Flowers of the Forest."*

Stephen L. Suffet, 1997

As the team's head-brass

*As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewn the angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.*

*The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began -
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out?' No.' And don't want to, perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm, I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more...Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes. 'Many lost?' Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time*

*I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.*

Edward Thomas 1878-1917

Ken Doyle

My readings are dedicated to the memory of my mother's older brother L Cpl James Green of the 2nd Battalion Scots Guards who was killed on the Somme on the 25th Sept 1916 aged 21.

The two poems appear on The Polar Bear Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas. The Bear was the first memorial in the Arboretum and is dedicated to the 49th Infantry West Riding Division (2nd World War)

Who are these men?

*Who are these men who march so proud,
Who quietly weep, eyes closed, head bowed?
These are the men who once were boys,
Who missed out on youth and all its joys.*

*Who are these men with aged faces,
Who silently count the empty spaces?
These are the men who gave their all,
Who fought for their country for freedom for all.*

*Who are these men with sorrowful look
Who can still remember the lives that were took?
These are the men who saw young men die,
The price of peace is always high.*

*Who are these men who in the midst of pain,
Whispered comfort to those they would not see again?
These are the men whose hands held tomorrow,
Who brought back our future with blood tears and sorrow.*

*Who are these men who promise to keep
Alive in their hearts the ones God holds asleep?*

*These are the men to whom I promise again:
'Veterans', my friends – I will remember them!*

Jodie Johnson 1996 (aged 11)

Fifty Years Late

*I am only a child
And it's hard to explain
The feelings I have
As I sit in the rain
And think of the men
Who went off to war
Knowing they would not
Come home any more
I cannot say thank you
To the men left in France
Who laid down their lives
To give me a chance
I cannot say thank you
To the ones who returned
For thank you is not
What those brave men earned
I owe them my life
As I live it today
A life lived in freedom
Because of that day
I owe them much more
Than I can ever repay
I owe them the lives
That they gave up that day
They will live in my heart
For as long as I live
And my children will learn
Of the gift that they give*

Jodie Johnson 1994 (aged 9)

David Highley

Earlier this year I visited the Commonwealth War Commission's Essex Farm Military Cemetery, near Ypres where there is a memorial to Major John McCrae. He was a Canadian artillery commander and military doctor. His friend, Lt Alexis Helmer, a young Canadian artillery officer, was killed by shell fire during the 2nd Battle of Ypres on the 2nd May 1915. John McCrae was asked to conduct the burial service and it is believed that later that evening he began to draft his now famous poem '*In Flanders Fields*'.

John McCrae, then a Lt Colonel, died on 28th January 1918 of pneumonia and was buried with full military honours at Wimereux cemetery near Boulogne.

In Flanders fields

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

John McCrae May 1915

Lesley Coote

Among all the Keyworth participants, including many Disney's killed or survived, only one woman is known to have served overseas: Ellen Disney.

“The only woman known to have served in the war with Keyworth connections is Ellen Disney who served in the Queen Alexandra’s Nursing Corps as a staff nurse in Baghdad & at Parkhurst.” Keyworth & WW1, Howard Fisher 2011

One of the better known WW I poems written by a woman is Eva Dobell’s ‘*Pluck*’ (1916), is based on her experience as a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment.

The poem mentions a boy of 17 and it appears that is the age of the youngest Keyworth soldier who died in WW1 – Samuel Burton died on 6th March 1915.

Pluck

*Crippled for life at seventeen,
His great eyes seems to question why:
with both legs smashed it might have been
Better in that grim trench to die
Than drag maimed years out helplessly.*

*A child – so wasted and so white,
He told a lie to get his way,
To march, a man with men, and fight
While other boys are still at play.
A gallant lie your heart will say.*

*So broke with pain, he shrinks in dread
To see the ‘dresser’ drawing near;
and winds the clothes about his head
That none may see his heart-sick fear.
His shaking, strangled sobs you hear.*

*But when the dreaded moment’s there
He’ll face us all, a soldier yet,
Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air,
(Though tell-tale lashes still are wet),
And smoke his Woodbine cigarette.*

Eva Dobell (1876–1963)

Brian Fernley

My reading is dedicated to the memory of my Grandfather, James Garfield Fernley of the Lancashire Fusiliers who died of his wounds on 30th October 1918.

The General

*'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.
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.*

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But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Siegfried Sassoon April 1917

Ivor Perry

Who made the law? An angry poem!

Who made the Law that men should die in meadows?

*Who spake the word that blood should splash in lanes?
Who gave it forth that gardens should be bone-yards?
Who spread the hills with flesh, and blood, and brains?
Who made the Law?*

*Who made the Law that Death should stalk the village?
Who spake the word to kill among the sheaves,
Who gave it forth that death should lurk in hedgerows,
Who flung the dead among the fallen leaves?
Who made the Law?*

*Those who return shall find that peace endures,
Find old things old, and know the things they knew,
Walk in the garden, slumber by the fireside,
Share the peace of dawn, and dream amid the dew
Those who return.*

*Those who return shall till the ancient pastures,
Clean-hearted men shall guide the plough-horse reins,
Some shall grow apples and flowers in the valleys,
Some shall go courting in summer down the lanes -
THOSE WHO RETURN.*

*But who made the Law? The Trees shall whisper to him:
"See, see the blood – the splashes on our bark!"
Walking the meadows, he shall hear bones crackle,
And fleshless mouths shall gibber in silent lanes at dark.
Who made the Law?*

*Who made the Law? At noon upon the hillside
His ears shall hear a moan, his cheeks shall feel a breath,
And all along the valleys, past gardens, crofts, and homesteads,
He who made the Law,
He who made the Law,
He who made the Law shall walk along with Death*

Leslie Coulson 1916

Leslie Coulson was fatally wounded at the Battle of Le Transloy and died in October 1916. Buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Grove Town cemetery at Meaulte with Wymeswold men: Alfred Savage and Bramford Sparrow.

Paul Harris

Last Post

A modern 'slant' on the tragic waste & pity of it all, look for the echoes of a WW I contemporary.

*"In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If poetry could tell it backwards, truth begin.
That moment shrapnel scythed you to the stinking mud.
But you get up, amazed,
Watch bled, bad blood,
Run upwards from the slime into its wound.*

*See lines and lines of British boys
Rewind back to their trenches,
Kiss the photographs from home.
Mothers, sweethearts, sisters,
Younger brothers - not entering the story now,
To die, and die, and die.*

*Dolce - no! Decorum - no!
Pro patria mori.*

*You walk away,
You walk away,
Drop your gun, fixed bayonet,
Like all your mates do too.
Harry, Tommy, Wilfred, Edward, Bert
And light a cigarette.*

*There's coffee in the square,
Warm, French bread
And all those thousands dead
Are shaking dried mud from their hair
And queuing up for home, freshly alive.*

*A lad played Tipperary to the crowd.
Released from history
The glistening, healthy horses fit for heroes, kings.*

*You lean against a wall, your several million lives still possible
And crammed with love, work, children,
Talent, English beer, good food.
You see the poet tuck away his pocket book and smile.
If poetry could truly tell it backwards ...
Then it would."*

Carol Ann Duffy 2009

An extract from **"The Other Side"** by Captain Gilbert Frankau, Royal Field Artillery, who tries to explain **"why?"**

From 'The Other Side'

*" ... And if posterity should ask of me
What high, what base emotions keyed weak flesh
To face such torments, I would answer: "You!
Not for themselves, O daughter, grandsons, sons,
Your tortured forbears wrought this miracle;
Not for themselves, accomplished utterly
This loathliest task of murderous servitude;
But just because they realised that thus,
And only thus, by sacrifice, might they
Secure a world worth living in - for you."*

Captain Gilbert Frankau, 1918

A Japanese haiku (poem) by the Emperor Hirohito from a period which stands between ourselves and World War 1; written during the build up to the attack on Pearl Harbour when apparently he wished for peace but was carried along by his hawkish advisors. It has a resonance with our world today ...

***"If all men are brothers,
Then why are the winds and waves so restless?"***

All past lessons forgotten - when will they ever learn? ...

Chris Close

Back

*They ask me where I've been,
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But someone just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands...*

*Though I must bear the blame,
Because he bore my name.*

Wilfred Gibson (1878 – 1962)

Sylvia Doyle

‘For the Fallen’ was written by Robert Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) in mid September 1914 a few weeks after the outbreak of the World War I. During these weeks the BEF suffered their worst defeat of the war at the Battle of Mons on 23rd August.

Laurence said in 1939 that the fourth stanza came to him first. These words have become especially familiar and famous, having been adopted by the Royal British Legion as an Exhortation for ceremonies of remembrance.

For the Fallen

*With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her children across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.*

*Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears*

*They went with songs to battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their face to the foe.*

***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***

*They mingle not their laughing comrades again;
They sit no longer at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England 's foam.*

*But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night;*

*As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end they remain.*

Published in The Times 21st September 1914

Laurence Binyon (1869-1943)