

Dulce et decorum est Wilfred Owen

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.*

*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...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.*

*In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

*If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

War is dirty, filthy, obscene business.

*“the white eyes writhing in his face ...
the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs”*

War is dirty, filthy, obscene.

The glory and the pomp, the dress uniforms, the stirring rhetoric of their finest hour and a thousand year Reich, the Latin mottoes, the parades and flags and bugles and medals, the tales of derring do and glory, of heroism and courage; without cynicism, without ever intending to deceive, all serve to distract us from that bitter reality; war is a mire where respect, civility, sympathy and humanity are smothered and killed. You cannot fight wars with kindness and gentleness; you cannot fight wars with consideration and mercy. War is dirty, filthy, obscene. We should not be surprised that so many of those who fought on the front line wanted to forget.

For a while some psychotherapists believed that people could undergo experiences so traumatic, so horrific that they would bury them so deep that they could no longer remember them. Only with therapy could they recall these hidden memories and deal with them. The idea is still found in fiction: the wound so terrible the mind cannot cope and so is wiped from the memory. A common idea, but not true. People who have undergone terrible experiences never need help recovering the memories of what has happened to them. Terrible events are always easy to recall. Experiences like that limpet to the memory. Remembering is automatic. What those who have experienced horror want more than anything else, is to forget.

Like many who went to war, my Great Uncle never spoke of his experiences. He left home to fight in the Burma campaign and came back a very different man: still loving, strong, devoted to his family, but changed, never the same again. His sleep was always broken by nightmares. He often appeared absent; during an innocuous conversation, at a family party his eyes would brim with tears, unprompted. Typical of the way we think of the departed, I remember his gentle kindness to us children. And I remember the constant tremor, the tea cup shaking in its saucer, the frozen movement, the unsteady gait; all signs of the Parkinsonism that blighted his later years, the disease a somatising of his nightmares—whatever they were—the psychological made physical in neurological disease. However much he loved children, however much our enthusiasm- innocent, tactless, boyish- pestered him for things military, he would never talk about his war experiences. Whatever he had

seen, heard, experienced we would never know. Talking is a way of making present again, remembering is a way of reliving: and my Great Uncle wanted to forget.

So many of those who went to war never spoke about their experiences, though like my relative, their changed personality bore testament without words, beyond words, to the effects their experiences had. Some returning combatants wanted to spare others vicarious knowledge of the dirt, the filth, the obscenity. And some simply wanted to forget.

When we are younger, we do not, can not know what our future will hold, but we know it will hold something. Though life is tumultuous and uncertain, we are instinctively certain that it is brimming with potential. We imagine careers and houses, lovers and families. If we are particularly serious minded we see on the far horizon a gentle gloaming and a departure borrowed from Hollywood's saccharine screenplays. We do not imagine that life will end, just as it's getting going. How can it? We do not imagine that we will stride the squalid battlefield, taste the depravity of total war. But twice in the last century that is what the world gave to its people, as we descended into the blasphemy of two world wars. That so many before us bore those experiences, that so many carried those unbearable burdens, that so many saw sights they should never see, did deeds that should never be done, lost what they should never lose; that so many lost their lives in squalid futility: these things we must remember.

September 2019 was the 80th anniversary of what we know as the start of WW2; September 1st 1939 was when the British Empire entered the war. For the Czechoslovakians the war had started the previous year; for the Chinese, earlier still, but for our nation as then was, 80 years ago September just gone, the world war restarted. This year the fanfare was absent, commemorations muted: we prefer to mark the end of wars rather than their beginning. More years ago than most lifetimes began the deadliest conflict in human history. Something like 85 million people died. The conflict saw massacres, genocide, the Holocaust, strategic bombing, premeditated death from starvation and disease, and the first and only use of nuclear weapons in war.

Perhaps as Churchill said, for the British Empire this was their finest hour; for the worldwide human family it was our worst.

These things we must remember.

And we betray the generations of the war if we do not learn to forget.

How can do both? How can we both remember and forget?

Start at the pivotal event of Christian history, the central event of human history, a Friday, in Jerusalem in 33 AD. The death of Jesus on the Cross was as bleak a moment of horror as any in human history. Crucifixion is dirty, filthy; an obscene way to take a person's life. Yet God took that event of unspeakable human barbarity and changed it into the greatest sign of his love. The violence of the Cross was answered not with anger or destruction, not with vengeance or gloating but by God's transforming that wrong. From that Cross sprang a movement to rebuild human lives; a movement that set at its heart the poor, the weak and the powerless; a movement to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the excluded and befriend the friendless; to welcome the stranger, to tend the sick; a movement that set at its heart, as its guiding principle and its crowning glory not power or wealth or pride or victory, but love. Gazing at the Cross we are looking past the depths of human depravity directly into Heaven. All Christian churches contain a Cross. We have not forgotten. We remember God's transforming act; the promise, the power of love.

War is dirty, filthy, obscene business.

If we are rattling our sabres ready for the next round but forget what steel blades do; if we remember coming together in adversity but forget countries torn apart; if we remember victory and forget cost; then we have remembered the distractions: the glory and the pomp, the uniforms, the rhetoric, the parades and flags and bugles and medals. And we have forgotten that soldier with

*the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;*

If we remember that soldier, we have come to the Cross. And the Cross is nothing if we do not move on.

We must remember and forget the wars of the last century in the same way as we have come to the Cross: determined to make this world a better place; resolved to avoid the acts of war and what causes them; not satisfied till we make our world—now— everything those two world wars were not.

September 1st 1939 *Wystan Auden*

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
'I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work,'
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the dead,
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die