

INTRODUCTION

A hundred years ago the world suffered a convulsion that not only took the lives of more than ten million men and brought down three empires but revised our idea of what kind of creatures human beings really are. A century later it is still hard to appreciate the scale of what happened or to make sense of it. This anthology cannot claim to offer any answers; what it hopes to show is how those who experienced such events responded to them. It was a world war, so we have included the witness of many nationalities. Women, as I hope these pages show, were much involved at home and at the front; children were also affected by the upheavals, and their perspective, also included here, is often poignant.

While a chronological order would have been natural for the testaments of soldiers only – recruitment, training, battle, leave and so on – the wider sample of writers here, including many who did not fight, persuaded us to organise the material in a different way – by place rather than by time. So the first section, ‘Distant Hammers’, includes reactions to the Armistice as well as to the start of the war; what links the pieces is that they are all written by people at some remove from the fighting. The second section, ‘Mind and Matter’, contains, by contrast, the responses and memories of those in the thick of it. The third part, ‘Between Borders’, records the effects

of displacement on combatants, families, friends and dissidents; here we find refugees and prisoners alongside people whose sense of dislocation is more internal – soldiers whom the war alienated from their homes, from their countries or from themselves. The final section, ‘White Spots’, deals with the absences, both physical and mental, left by such a holocaust. And the search for what was lost continues to this day.

While a good deal of the writing here deals with the side-effects of war rather than the firing of guns, no anthology would be complete without the voices of the young men themselves, telling how they lived and fought and killed. Some of these are appalling or revolting; some are heroic, some wistful; some even have a note of exhilaration as men record the friendships and the invigorating sense of identity and purpose that the war could bring.

Our inclination has been towards unknown writers rather than to famous names, on the grounds that most people with an interest in the war will be familiar with the classic memoirs of the period. However, we have not hesitated to include such writers as Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, Helen Thomas and D. H. Lawrence when their gifts seem to have enabled them to say something essential. In fact, I think E. M. Forster’s comment that ‘The supreme evil of war is surely not death, but despair – the feeling that the incursion of the soul into matter has been a mistake, that we may just as well sit brooding among the ashes of happiness and beauty, that it is useless to work, useless to give help and even to receive it’ is one of the most resonant in the book and could stand as its epigraph.

As for the unknowns and the unpublished, it has been a commonplace of commentary on the First World War to remark on the

reticence of those who fought in it. Some men's reaction at twilight on the first day of the Somme, as they picked their way back through a carpet of corpses and over the groaning earth, was that they had witnessed the end of the world and were now present at the Day of Judgment. Naturally, it was difficult for them to write home to their mother or wife the next day and give them the news. No man in the history of the world had seen such things; and they didn't want their families to worry about them. Better, therefore, not to go into it.

Those on leave, meanwhile, found it difficult to convey either the texture or the enormity of what they had witnessed. The female world of home was a blessed change, but to many it was not the real thing any more. Some family or friends did not want to know what the war was like; others were curious or concerned, but hit a jarring note in their questions. Some men were actually glad to return to the Front and to the company of their fellow-soldiers, resigned to face whatever awaited them.

Then, after 1918, in a world forever changed, life had to continue; so what was the point in dwelling on the nightmare that was gone? Whatever the long-term political effects of the war in eroding distinctions between officers and 'other ranks', there was still in the 1920s a presumption in book publishing that only officer memoirs would have a claim on the reading public: lousy Tommy Atkins was not pursued by the gentlemen of Bloomsbury. Then, twenty years on, when the time was ripe to rethink our memory of 1914–18, another calamity intervened; and the Second World War was to be remembered immediately and more vigorously – in colourful books and motion pictures and Holocaust memorials.

So the idea of the silent Great War veteran, taking the unspeakable truth to his quiet grave, has some validity. And yet... I think the reticence may have been exaggerated. It's true that in the mid-twentieth century the arts of fiction, cinema and stage largely gave up on the First World War as workable subject matter, but when BBC Television undertook its twenty-six-part history of the war in 1963, it found no shortage of people willing to record their memories on camera. In March this year, BBC Two showed an hour-long edit of some of these previously unseen interviews under the title *I Was There: The Great War Interviews*. This was an extraordinary programme. Men spoke not only of the suffering but also of what fun it could be in France when there was not much going on. A German infantryman called Stefan Westmann (whose interview is quoted in part three of this book), recalled his horror at bayoneting a civilised man against whom he bore no grudge. One veteran spoke of the chivalry of aerial combat, where the machine not the pilot was the enemy; another of his lifelong regret at not having paused to give water to a dying man in his hurry to regain the safety of his trench. What they had in common was the modest courtesy of elderly men at that period and the haunted, exhausted look of those who had struggled for decades to reconcile what they had seen in those four years with what the rest of their lives had led them to expect.

The Imperial War Museum stored those tapes the BBC could not use. The documents collection at the museum, meanwhile, expanded in the 1970s and 1980s as the families of recently deceased veterans bequeathed their papers. These range from the sublime to the mundane, but while that great resource exists the texture of the war will never be lost. It was a privilege for this visiting reader

in 1992 to be able to examine long card indexes ('SMITH J. L/cpl. Letters, diaries, misc items, some rain-damaged, concerning service in Ypres salient 1915–1917, with 4th Fusiliers. Details of trench repair work'), fill out a request form and find a buff folder held with a pink ribbon delivered twenty minutes later. One never knew what bathos or gold or tedium or heartbreak would tumble out on to the desk; but to touch and hold them was in many cases to be the first to do so since the day they were written. And here was reality.

We owe a debt to the Imperial War Museum, its trustees and its scholars, men such as the late Roderick Suddaby, whose knowledge of its document holdings may never be equalled. Max Arthur is one of several authors who have produced impressively edited selections in book form from the museum's daunting volume of material. Other determined individuals helped keep the means of memory alive. Dr Peter Liddle established his own document archive while teaching in the 1960s and this is now housed at the University of Leeds; Lyn Macdonald did invaluable work in tape-recording the memories of veterans while there was still time and using them in her bottom-up histories of the conflict. While the war had its share of academic historians, it is to those who did the unsung work in the years when no one seemed to care that our particular thanks are due. These include John Terraine, who was not attached to a university, and Martin Middlebrook, a Lincolnshire poultry farmer who was astonished on visiting the Somme battlefields in 1967 to discover that no history of 1 July 1916 existed – so wrote one himself.

My co-editor, Dr Hope Wolf, is responsible for the wide reach of this anthology and was tireless in her search for oblique angles and the international perspective. She brought an academic eye to the

process and an enthusiasm for what had previously been overlooked. Any merit the anthology may have is the result of her labours. For her rapid response and helpful suggestions, I would also like to thank Emily Mayhew, author of *Wounded* (Bodley Head, 2014), which expertly uses documents to recreate the journey from battlefield to Blighty.

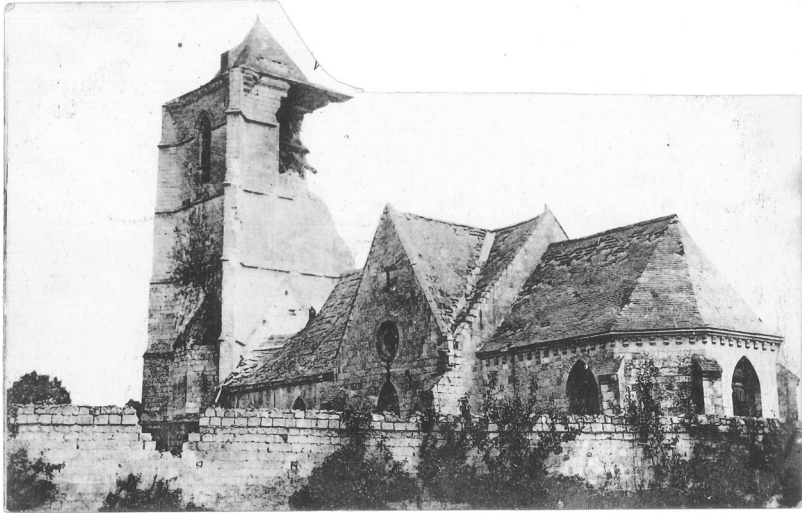
Now the centenary is finally upon us, there does seem to be a greater awareness and understanding of that conflict than there was thirty years ago. The books of Hew Strachan, Max Hastings, Christopher Clark and Margaret MacMillan, among others, have recently brought new light to bear on the period. Politicians and historians argue on television over whose fault it was; children in their thousands visit the battlefields of France and Flanders; the BBC is set to inform and entertain us for four long years. All this is encouraging in an educational sense, and this anthology hopes to add its tiny weight to the resources available to those curious for information.

The bigger questions, however, remain unanswered. To me the greatest of these is as follows. Did Europe's enthusiastic discovery of genocide in 1914–18 make a mockery of the preceding five hundred years, rendering such terms as 'the Renaissance' and 'the Enlightenment' simple self-delusion; and if this war showed the true nature of the human creature, its limitless capacity for killing once the means are in its hands, how are we to deal with our revised knowledge of what we are?

The last century has got us nowhere. The Great War seemed merely to license mass slaughter as a political process in Europe and Russia. We went collectively mad: it was as though the entire

continent were shell-shocked. If the commemoration process of the next four years provides not only greater knowledge of what took place at the start of that benighted century but also some small progress towards answering the larger questions, then those young men who died in their needless millions may perhaps begin to sleep at last.

Sebastian Faulks, 25 March 2014



This is a postcard sent by H.J. Ewels to his wife from the Western Front in 1917. A collection of his postcards is currently archived at the Imperial War Museum, London. In each case the card has been censored: place names have been cut out.

DISTANT HAMMERS

*Hearing and imagining
from afar*



D. H. LAWRENCE (1885–1930) was a writer and novelist. He was not in good enough health to enlist and was critical of the war. Along with his German wife Frieda, he was forced to leave his home in Cornwall in October 1917 as they were suspected of assisting the enemy. Lady Ottoline Morrell, to whom the following letter is addressed, was a literary patron, she and her husband Philip offered refuge to conscientious objectors during the war.

Greatham, Pulborough, Sussex.

March, 1915.

My Dear Lady Ottoline, –

I sent you the next batch of the MS. There will only be one more lot. I hope you will like it.

Monica has a motor-car every day to drive her out, so we go too. To-day we drove to Bognor. It was strange at Bognor – a white, vague, powerful sea, with long waves falling heavily, with a crash of frosty white out of the pearly whiteness of the day, of the wide sea. And the small boats that were out in the distance heaved, and seemed to glisten shadowily. Strange the sea was, so strong. I saw a soldier on the pier, with only one leg. He was young and handsome: and strangely self-conscious, and slightly ostentatious: but confused. As yet, he does not realise anything, he is still in the shock. And he is strangely roused by the women, who seem to have a craving for him. They look at him with eyes of longing, and they want to talk to him. So he is roused, like a roused male, yet there is more wistfulness and wonder than passion or desire. I could see him under chloroform having the leg amputated. It was still in his face. But he was brown and strong and handsome.

It seemed to me anything might come of that white, silent, opalescent sea; and the great icy shocks of foam were strange. I felt as if legions were marching in the mist. I cannot tell you why, but I am afraid. I am afraid of the ghosts of the dead. They seem to come marching home in legions over the white, silent sea, breaking in on us with a roar and a white iciness. Perhaps this is why I feel so afraid. I don't know. But the land beyond looked warm, with a warm, blue sky, very homely: and over the sea legions of white ghosts tramping. I was on the pier.

So they are making a Coalition government. I cannot tell you how icy cold my heart is with fear. It is as if we were all going to die. Did I not tell you my revolution would come? It will come, God help us. The ghosts will bring it. Why does one feel so coldly afraid? Why does even the coalition of the Government fill me with terror? Some say it is for peace negotiations. It may be, because we are all afraid. But it is most probably for conscription. The touch of death is very cold and horrible on us all.

D. H. LAWRENCE.

It is the whiteness of the ghost legions that is so awful.



NORMAN DEMUTH was a rifleman in the London Rifle Brigade. He was interviewed for the 1964 BBC *Great War* series. The following is taken from the Sound Archive of the Imperial War Museum, which was set up in 1972. It was edited by Max Arthur in association with the Imperial War Museum, and was published in *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (2002).

As well as being given white feathers, there was another method of approach. You would see a girl come towards you with a delightful smile all over her face and you would think to yourself, 'My word this is somebody who knows me.' When she got to about five or six paces from you she would suddenly freeze up and walk past you with a look of utter contempt and scorn as if she could have spat. That was far more hurtful than a white feather – it made you curl up completely and there was no replying because she had walked on.

However, I was given a white feather when I was sixteen, just after I had left school. I was looking in a shop window and I suddenly felt somebody press something into my hand and I found it was a woman giving me a white feather. I was so astonished I did not know what to do about it. But I had been trying to persuade the doctors and recruiting officers that I was nineteen and I thought, well, this must give me some added bounce because I must look the part, and so I went round to the recruiting offices with renewed zeal.



SYLVIA PANKHURST (1882–1960) was a writer, artist and political activist, born in Manchester. She was the daughter of Emmeline Pankhurst and sister of Christabel. In 1903 Emmeline and Christabel set up the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union), which campaigned for women's suffrage. Sylvia took a pacifist stance towards the war. The excerpt below, about a visit to Scarborough in 1914, is from her memoir, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the World War* (1932).

In the brief Christmas days, when the slackening of propaganda gave me respite, I went with Smyth to see the havoc wrought by the Scarborough bombardment. Travelling by night we arrived in a cheerless dawn. The sky and sea were a leaden grey. The big amusement 'palaces' on the front were scarred and battered by shell-fire, iron columns twisted and broken, brickwork crumbling, windows gone. Yawning breaches disclosed the pictures and furnishings, riddled and rent by the firing, dimmed and discoloured by blustering winds and spray. The little steep streets, leading up from the foreshore, were barred by wire entanglements – the first I had ever seen – great stakes driven into the ground, with a mass of stout barbed wire threaded around and around them, and tangled about between. At many points were high barricades of sand-filled sacks, with a row of loopholes for the rifles.

We knocked at one of the sea-front boarding houses. The woman who opened to us was weary and dishevelled as though she had spent the night out in the storm. She gazed at us, startled and hostile, when we asked for a lodging. When we urged that we had come from London and understood she was accustomed to let, she hesitated suspiciously, then reluctantly explained that she had promised to hold herself in readiness to receive any shipwrecked seamen who might be saved from drowning. 'I've been up with them all night – some of 'em's gone, some of 'em's still here. We have to put 'em in hot blankets as soon as they're carried in.'

'But there won't be another wreck to-night!' we essayed, rather feebly, to rally her.

'There were three lots brought in here yesterday, and two the day before,' she answered mournfully, and pointed to the many craft

out in the bay, telling us they were all minesweepers engaged in the perilous work of clearing away explosive mines laid by the German warships and daily causing the loss of many vessels.

This was an aspect of the German visit not recorded in the Press. In our ignorance of war, we heard her with shocked surprise.

She agreed at last that we should stay with her, on condition that we would leave at once if another party of shipwrecked mariners were brought in. Barely an hour had passed when her daughter flung open our door:

‘Another boat’s blown up! You’ll have to go!’

Out we went to the blast. Groups of shawl-wrapped women were gazing seaward. ‘They’ve landed some of them at that slip,’ a woman told us, and pointed to a small dingy brown steamer with a cluster of people looking down at her from the quay. ‘A motor-car’s gone off with one of them – he was covered with a white sheet!’ a shrill voice cried; and even as the words were uttered another car dashed away. A bent old crone ran by us wailing: ‘He was a young man with black hair; with thick black hair; his head was all smashed in!’

Groups of people moved about us, awestruck, with a hand shading the eyes, gazing out to sea, or across to the little steamer at the end of the slip.

Someone advised us to enquire for lodgings at a near-by cottage, the front door of which opened directly on to the foreshore. A fisherman in his blue jersey was seated by the fire; his wife was too much troubled by the peril of the men out there in the bay, to consider whether or not she would give us a bed. She talked to us a long time before she could bring her mind to it. She spoke of the bombardment; it was terrible, the noise so loud, so fearfully

loud, she thought she must go mad. Little children were killed; many people were injured. 'A lady who not five days before was singing in this Bethel' was helping a poor old woman down into her cellar, when she was struck dead by a piece of shell. No one knew when it might happen again; people could not settle down to ordinary life; all sense of security was destroyed. Her husband and the other fishermen were prohibited from following their calling because of the mines. Their means of support was stopped; yet he was best at home; yes, even if they should have to starve! She had a son in the Navy and a son-in-law on a mine-sweeper; that was enough!

[...]

On Christmas morning, climbing by winding ways above the town we saw the trenches recently dug by British soldiers along the cliffs; and higher still, great heaps of stone which fell from the old castle when its walls were shelled by the German ships.

Lodging among the cottages of the fisherfolk in these terraced streets of the old town seven years before, I had wandered often beneath those ancient walls, regarding them curiously as a relic of an age of barbarism long dead, confident in my faith in the sure advance of progress. To-day in face of the evidence of present barbarism, my thoughts were sad.

Vainly seeking my old landlady, for she had left the town, I was accosted by some neighbours of hers who remembered me. It was the anniversary of their wedding, and hospitably they would have us enter to celebrate it with tea and plum cake, in their warm kitchen. It was a Yorkshire custom, they said, to exchange visits of Christmas morning. The wife was a very pretty woman, turned

forty, with the bluest of blue eyes, a little shy and diffident and pleased to let the rest of us talk. The husband was black-eyed and swarthy as a Spaniard, with great gold rings in his ears. He told us, as others in the town had done, that the German battleships came so close to the shore that the people (believing them British) feared they would run aground. He was at the window when the firing began, and he called to his wife: 'It's no good, lass, the Germans have come!'

Then he told her to go next door and help their neighbour to pacify her children. She was running to the back door, but he locked it and said: 'I'm an Englishman and a Yorkshireman, and they'll not make us go the back way!' He walked to the end of the terrace and stood facing the battleships. He was not hit, but he showed us a big bit of shell which had fallen beside him. Believing, like everyone else, that the Germans intended landing, he looked around for our soldiers. They were nowhere to be seen. After the bombardment ceased they got into their trenches and sang a hymn. 'They were no better than wooden soldiers!' he cried, indignant. His wife reproved him, with a timid glance at us: 'What use would it have been for our British soldiers to come out to be killed?'

[...]

Returning to our lodging we learnt that yet another boat had been blown up. It was bitterly cold; the wind howled fiercely. We huddled by the fire, saddened and chilled. A girl ran past the window sobbing and wailing. A few minutes later she passed again. As I heard her coming a third time I went out to her, and saw that she was about sixteen years of age, hatless and poorly dressed.

In abandonment of grief, she flung herself now against the wall, now leaned her head for a moment upon a window-sill, crying: 'Dad! Dad! Oh, Dad!' As I came up with her two women met her. They knew her and understood what she muttered between her sobs better than I. They told me that her father was on one of the mine-sweepers out in the bay. She shrank into trembling reserve and, faltering nervously that she must go to her mother, fled from us in the dusk.

Next morning we called on our first landlady to learn the news of the night. As we came in sixteen lately shipwrecked mariners, who had recovered in her house, were leaving the door. She told us six others had been drowned, and a third vessel since our arrival blown up. Another, another, and yet another vessel was sacrificed during the morning. Again we had notice to quit our lodging to make way for the sea-drenched men. Scarborough was too sad for me. 'Let us get away to-night,' I said to Smyth.

As we stood on the breakwater before leaving we saw the lifeboat set forth again to the rescue, over the cold grey waves in the gathering dusk.



W. F. TAPP was a child at the time of the First World War. This letter was an answer to a call for contributions by Professor Stanley Weintraub in 1979. Eyewitness accounts of the Armistice would be used to compile his book, *A Stillness Heard Round the World: The End of the Great War, November 1918* (1985). Here W. F. Tapp details the moment when the Armistice was announced in Devonport, Plymouth.