

For an allegedly undemonstrative nation, the British have one overt symbol that binds them together - the annual display of an artificial representation of a flower that came to symbolise the loss of a generation, the Flanders poppy emerging from blood soaked and torn asunder fields on the front line of a European civil war which lasted a century and a half. On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, Britain remembers.

Not just the dead of the Great War, the war to end all wars, the victims of the killing fields of industrial warfare on a previously unimaginable scale, the crucible for weapons deployed even more fearfully a scant twenty one year later, that spawned the scarred political leaders and commanders who would once again lead their men to the slaughter and thrust their civilian populations into the gun and bomb sights too, but also the dead of later wars which came round with further butcher's bills to pay too. Despite peace in Europe, in only one year of the last half century has no British soldier fallen.

As our act of remembrance, (Elayne Jude writing as) Paula Jaegar has gone back to read what some of the war poets, all numbered amongst the dead, wrote to describe what they felt about the carnage around them.

R W Sterling (Killed 23 April 1916) To J.H.S.M., killed in action, March 13, 1915

LAST LINES

I
Ah ! Hate like this would freeze our human tears,
And stab the morning star:
Not it, not it commands and mourns and bears
The storm and bitter glory of red war.

II
O brother, I have sung no dirge for thee:
Nor for all time to come
Can song reveal my grief's infinity:
The menace of thy silence made me dumb.

Edward Thomas (Killed at the Battle of Arras 9 April 1917)

In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men,
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should
Have gathered them and will do never again.

Rupert Brooke (died of infection 23 April 1916)

IV. 1914 5. V. 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, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

W N Hodgson, J W Streets, Alexander Robertson (all died 1 July 1916, 1st day of Somme, the most savage day in the history of the British Army. 60,000 casualties, one third dead. Gains : minimal)

Edward Thomas (Killed at the Battle of Arras 9 April 1917)

GONE, GONE AGAIN

Gone, gone again
May, June, July,
And August gone,
Again gone by,

Not memorable
Save that I saw them go
As past the empty quays
The rivers flow.

And now again,
In the harvest rain,
The Blenheim oranges
Fall grubby from the trees

As when I was young -
And when the lost one was here -
And when the war began
To turn young men to dung

Look at the old house,
Outmoded, dignified,
Dark and untenanted,
With grass growing instead

Of the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age, and pain;

I am something like that;
Only I am not dead.
Still breathing and interested
In the house that is not dark:

I am something like that:
Not one pane to reflect the sun,
For the schoolboys to throw at -
They have broken every one.

Wilfred Owen - (Killed at the Battle of Sambre 4 November 1918, one week before the Armistice)

Anthem for doomed youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Other fallen poets who bled for us and for whom our hearts bleed even now down the years:

Harold Beckh (1894-1916)
Horace Bray (1896-1918)

Leslie Coulson (1889-1916)
Richard Dennys (1884-1916)
Julian Grenfell (1888-1915)
Cyril Horne (1887-1916)
TM Kettle (1880-1916)
Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918)
J M Langstaff (1883-1917)
Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917)
W S S Lyon (1886-1915)
John McCrae (1872-1918)
Hamish Mann (1896-1917)
Harold Parry (1896-1917)
Colwyn Philipps (1888-1915)
Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918)
Alan Seeger (1888-1916)
Henry Lamont Simpson (1897-1918)
Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895-1915)
E Wyndham Tennant (1897-1916)
Bernard Freeman Trotter (1890-1917)
Robert Ernest Vernede (1875-1917)
Arthur Graeme West (1891-1917)

Listing taken from 'In Flanders Field And other poems of the First World War' - ed Brian Busby.
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