

# Memory, Sacrifice and War

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## *Politics of the emotions*

There are many reasons why Remembrance Day has to be taken seriously, especially by those among us who are wholly opposed to war. If we feel that we cannot join in the play as it is staged, we need to appreciate why others do, and why departures from the script—white poppies, public figures wearing duffel-coats—may seem to them like a desecration.

One reason is that Remembrance Day is not simply an occasion for private grief. It is a ritual enactment of our national story about peace—how it was won at immense cost by a whole generation of young men in 1914–18; how it was snatched from the jaws of defeat in 1940 by the bravery of the few. It recalls the sacrifice of two generations of youth who gave their lives so that we could live in safety, especially the women and children. It is meant to recall the story of our salvation as a people, in the sense of our national liberation from tyranny and fear. It is meant to acknowledge the sacrifices that ensured it. It gives meaning to the bloodshed. Remembrance makes private grief tolerable by connecting it with national salvation.

If war itself usually creates strong feelings of solidarity, the aftermath of wars is always a time of doubt and division. The Remembrance ceremony has been part of the apparatus for coping with this. After the Great War the nation was seriously divided, especially as between those who had experienced life in the trenches and those who had not. There could have been a social revolution on the continental model. The government was lucky to get away with a failed General Strike in 1926. At the end of the Second World War, the General Election of 1945 told a similar story of demand for social change. The ending of war, even when it comes with victory, is a dangerous moment for the old ruling class. Whatever the humanitarian intentions of the British Legion in instituting it, Remembrance Day—especially the Cenotaph ceremony in London—became an important unifying ritual intended to counteract this danger<sup>1</sup>. A society tending to fly apart is drawn together with an orchestrated liturgy of national solidarity in remembrance of its dead. It stimulates and organises emotions connected with solidarity. And it works: in what other circumstances do Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock sink their differences and walk side by side? But at what cost to the truth?

Since the Second World War, Remembrance Day has carried a powerful political message relating to defence. Whereas after the Great War many people found in it an opportunity to express their anti-war feelings ('never again!'), this was not the case after the Second World War, which most people were ready to believe had been a necessary one. The Remembrance Day ceremony could then be used to underline the 'lesson' of that war—how Churchill rescued the nation from the false and fatal optimism of the appeasers and pacifists, those naive idealists who believed that security could be had without sacrifice, that peace could be sought without preparing for war or being willing to say no to the aggressor. As this is annually recalled, it reveals the basis for the present consensus about peace—that it is only to be had by strength and constant preparedness. By deterrence, in fact.

But this means that Remembrance Day now involves a certain deliberate forgetfulness about the Great War of 1914-18. The very fact of World War II embarrassingly undermines the basis of the justification for the 'sacrifice' of the youth in World War I. As Eric Bogle sings in *The Green Fields of France*,

Now Willie MacBride, I can't help wonder why,  
Do all those who lie here know why they died?  
And did they believe when they answered the call?  
Did they really believe that this war would end wars?  
Well the sorrow, the suffering, the sighing, the pain,  
The killing, the dying, it was all done in vain.  
For, young Willie MacBride, it all happened again,  
And again, and again, and again, and again.

#### *Remembrance and forgetting.*

Official Remembrance conceals the past as much as it remembers it. It is a story deeply biased by the need to make past actions seem necessary and to lend moral credibility to present policies such as deterrence. In order to do this it has to make sense of much that was entirely without sense. For instance, in the very act of remembering such appalling events as the Battle of the Somme, it obscures most that was true about it. The way it has gone down in history is in accordance with the mythology of 'great battles' which conceals most of the important things that happened on the ground. As Paul Fussell has pointed out in *The Great War in Modern Memory*,

A vast literature has been produced in the attempt to bring the Great War into line with other wars by highlighting its so-called battles by such impressive names as Loos, Verdun, The Somme, and Passchendaele ... This is to try to suggest that these events parallel Blenheim and Waterloo not only in glory but in structure and meaning.<sup>2</sup>

So episodes of the most appalling chaos, stupidity and destruction were elevated into glorious moments in 'Our Island Story'. We could add to

this such historical absurdities as ‘The Battle of Hamburg’ in World War II in which 44,600 civilians burned and suffocated to death in one night by the actions of Bomber Command<sup>3</sup>. ‘Battle’ gives the impression of a fight where there was in fact merely a massacre, at a distance, of an undefended population. It is part of the sanitization process which all modern warfare undergoes at the hands of the media and government propaganda. For reasons which will emerge presently, we can call it ‘the old lie’. In the bad old days of civil defence propaganda similar things were said about nuclear ‘battles’ to come. If you have a real ‘battle’, of course, you can also have heroism, inspired leadership, steadfast resistance, a beginning and a middle and an end, meaningful death, and a proper memorial for the ‘fallen’. And if you project these things into the future you can stiffen people’s resolve to put up a proper ‘defence’, without asking too many questions about what such a defence would comprise. But the indescribable chaos and stupidity of the fighting in the Great War, and its equivalent in the civilian bombing of the Second World War, had to be sanitized or else soldiers and airmen would refuse to fight and people at home refuse to support the war. In the Great War, letters home were scrupulously censored to omit all reference to the reality. After July 1916, standard forms were issued for letters home, which only allowed things to be crossed out which did not apply<sup>4</sup>. There was no space for bad news. Lloyd George was convinced that if the Great War could once be described in accurate language, people would insist that it be stopped. ‘But of course, he said, they don’t—and can’t know. The correspondents don’t write and the censorship wouldn’t pass the truth’<sup>5</sup>. One of the reasons for the routine neglect of war-wounded and war-widows is probably that they provoke the wrong kind of memory.

So much is omitted in official and ritual memory: not only the blood and the bits of body flying through the air and the stinking corpses lying unburied for months, but the universal shit and stench and the real obscenity of it all. In 1989—fifty years after the outbreak of World War II—we had another flood of glossy books sanitizing that War. Very few of them really tried to get at the truth. Paul Fussell’s other book, *Wartime*, was a luminous exception<sup>6</sup>. As in personal life, the story that we tell ourselves represses things that cannot be dealt with.

Besides repressing the way people died, remembrance ceremonies are designed to conceal the fact that it was only our ‘warriors’ who died. Understandably, they ignore the enemy dead—but, more surprisingly, they ignore the civilian dead of our own side. The truth of the matter is that remembrance is not easily adaptable to modern mass warfare against civilians, the scientific extermination of whole populations. It is a form of sacrifice which we now sum up with the word *holocaust*. It makes nonsense of remembrance. It is as far as you could get from the ideal of the noble warrior laying down his life for his country, which is the way sacrifice was understood in the Great War. Nevertheless holocaust really began in the trenches of the Great War.

*Why we need to remember.*

Remembrance of the twentieth century wars is essential to our mental health—even our spiritual life. The past needs to be remembered because responsibility for the present needs to be taken. Without remembrance we are all potential victims. Worse than that, we are all complicit in the next holocaust. We will repeat the cycle of folly and destruction again and again. As I write, in the late August of 1990, forgetfulness of the reality of war is once again almost total as a vicarious belligerence takes over the popular press, and people cannot wait to see a real shooting war break out in the Gulf, at a safe distance from home.

The kind of remembrance we need is the kind that Jewish writers have insisted on, rightly forcing their Holocaust under our noses, lest we forget. It has taken us almost fifty years to face the reality of it. Accounts of it were written within a decade and a half of it happening—e.g. Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* and Eli Weisel's *Night*—but it took thirty more years to get people to read them<sup>7</sup>. Far from rejecting remembrance, we need to find a new standpoint for it, in order to see through the old lie.

Unfortunately, peace people have their own kind of ignorance. They tend to think that, because they have a clear moral stance, it is not necessary to know very much about history. We know all that killing was wrong. It is not necessary to dwell on exactly how it happened. But this is a profound mistake. It would mean that we would make ourselves ignorant of what most deeply affects the minds and actions of our neighbours. It can only alienate the sympathy of those the Peace Movement most want to influence: ordinary voters. Peace people should stop talking vacuously about peace and talk more about war. Only then will they be able to speak to those who want to remember because they have lost sons, fathers, mothers, in war. Only then will they be able to offer them something better than the old lie. It should be enough to tell the truth about war. Moralizing about the necessity of peace is otiose.

We specially need to remember the Great War of 1914-18. Why should we keep returning to it in view of the fact that we have had many wars since then, in which many more millions of people have been killed by devices which make the trench warfare of 1914-18 look as primitive as knights in armour? There are very solid reasons why memorializing the Great War is of extreme importance to all of us. It was, as we have said, the first of the mass slaughters of the twentieth century. The millions who died in World War II, the Holocaust of the Jews, and the millions who will die in a nuclear/chemical war if there is one—all that was made thinkable by the cheapening of life in the war of 1914-18. Secondly, all national rituals and war monuments are built around lists of names of the young men who went to their deaths then. It was the first time that British society memorialized the ordinary dead, rather than victory and the generals who gained it. Thirdly, the whole literature—the good and the bad—of war memoirs, poetry, novels, revelations about the horrors of war, has derived from the descriptions of the Great War by those who

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took part in it. Most of the best writing and thinking about the significance of modern war happened in relation to that war. It has even affected our everyday language—we talk about ‘going over the top’, ‘putting our heads above the parapet’, occupying ‘entrenched positions’.

*Two kinds of sacrifice.*

Carved high up on a stone cross in the churchyard of the village of Henbury on the outskirts of Bristol are the words, ‘*They died that we might live*’. Round the base of the cross are lists of names of young men in the local villages who died in the Great War, sometimes three from one family. It is difficult not to be moved by this simple testimony to the dead. But it is also difficult to accept it without a great deal of reflective qualification.

What we need is a better kind of remembrance than the one we are offered in November. One which exposes the old lie. Perhaps it is worth asking what would have been the attitude of the early Christians if they had been confronted with a Roman Remembrance Day? In all likelihood they would have held themselves rigidly aloof as from the ceremonies of an alien religion, which of course it would have been. Their intellectuals would have pointed out that the Church already has its remembrance ceremony in the Eucharist, which commemorates the events of Easter, in which Christ’s passage through torture and death is recalled, and his victory over Satan and the powers of evil. Jesus, after all, told his disciples, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’. They would have said that the Church does not need any other kind of remembrance ceremony to guarantee its freedom and peace. Those early Christians did very accurately identify the reason why they could not take part in Roman state events—it involved sacrifices to other gods, and the Cross of Christ had brought all blood sacrifice to an end.

The situation for us now, of course, is immensely complicated by the fact that the modern remembrance ceremonies—unlike the ancient Roman ones—have always used Christian symbols and have been set in the context of Christian worship. It is much more difficult for us to identify what is wrong. Also, it is doubtful whether many Christians would want to set themselves apart to such an extent that national life and national history means nothing to them. Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Strict Brethren might opt out, but Anglicans and Roman Catholics and Methodists? We have all been involved with national life for generations. Our grandfathers and great-uncles suffered and died in the Great War like anyone else. Our priests and ministers entered the battle to comfort the dying. In many cases it was the prayers and rites of their church that enabled people left behind to bear the tragedy, the pain and the grief, if only because the only cultural resources most people had available to deal with such a breakdown in the structure of existence were Christian ones. It would be foolish for Christians with a pretence to some theology to think they can dismiss it. Nevertheless we should recognise

that the entire phenomenon of Remembrance, as it is conceived in the November ceremonies, is stuck in an emotional shell-hole. The emotions of the day remain uneducated, in a time-capsule of their own, switched on by the traditional words and rituals and military panoply—easily manipulated for purposes of State. In any case, all of us with any kind of ministry are faced with a pastoral problem: our congregations will for the most part see nothing problematic about Remembrance Day. If we want to make any serious gospel reflection on the event, what do we say? A critical Christian response is a necessity.

We might consider what truth there is in the comforting belief that 'They died that we might live'. Although it does not have an exact equivalent in scripture, substitute 'he' for 'they' and it would be an accurate statement of St Paul's and St John's theology of the Cross. But this identification acts as a repression of the truth because it is based upon a failure to understand the Cross of Christ itself. Deeply influenced by theories of Atonement, we think to ourselves, 'it had to happen', even, 'God wanted it'. And we lose the sense of outrage at such a destructive act as crucifixion—which, after all, was what the Romans did regularly to slaves and subject people. It is only a short step then to the comforting but untrue thought that the deaths of the soldiers in the war 'had to happen'. In that way the subversive questions which arise from grief and loss are suppressed in all but the persistent few.

The Christ parallel was used very deliberately when the soldiers were being sent to the front in the Great War. Here is an excerpt from a sermon preached at a Methodist memorial service in June 1916:

We need to tread a path that we might have never trodden before ... the way of the Cross, but by another route to that by which our fathers came ... in this service we see death robbed of all shame and defeat.... They died, thank God! not because their bodies were wasted with sin, nor enfeebled with self-indulgence; they did not even pay the inevitable price of mortality. They died under oath, willing captives of a great ideal ... Sacrifice! Sacrament! Cross! I think of a home in Warrington—six sons, four killed, the fifth wounded... These boys of ours shall not die in vain... We keep them on our rolls of honour. Never let them get dusty or be forgotten!... Those who have died have consecrated the Army in our thinking. Let us go with them the way of the Cross!<sup>8</sup>

Plain enough! The most popular hymns at home were *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *Fight the Good Fight*. A Congregationalist soldier writes back to his parents in 1917: 'I am setting out on a crusade ... We've been carried up to the Calvary of the world, when it is expedient that a few men should suffer that all the generations to come should be better'.<sup>9</sup> Among Catholics as among Nonconformists, the atoning power of the death assimilated to the Cross of Christ was the dominating image. It is the purifying power of blood sacrifice. One of the texts frequently used

at that period was Hebrews 9.22, 'without shedding of blood is no remission', usually understood as 'no Redemption'.<sup>10</sup> Closely connected with the spirit of national freedom, it was a common way of thinking in those years, not only in Britain and not only among Protestants. It was the theology of Patrick Pearse when he held the Dublin Post Office against the British Army at Easter 1916<sup>11</sup>. An Irish Jesuit uses it while fighting *for* the British in the trenches at roughly the same time<sup>12</sup>. The Great War wasn't just reluctantly faced by Christians with what theological resources they had—it was positively embraced, even by former pacifists, as a way of saving the world from the modern tide of secularism. A Christian world softened by years of peace and liberal theologies and corrupted by materialism and venality could be rescued by the moral effort and selfless devotion required in warfare. The world would be cleansed by the blood of the soldier-martyrs, and a new, better and more Christian society would arise.

Soldiers who enlisted for the front were following the footsteps of Christ. I suspect this was something new—the idea that soldiers are not merely doing a Christian duty, but actually representing Christ in a more exact way than anyone else. It made radical Christian reflection almost impossible. Radical reflection when it came, came not from the theologians—who, for the most part had completely crippled themselves with their enthusiasm for the theology of sacrifice—but from some of the soldier-poets who distanced themselves carefully from official Christianity. On the whole, the best guides to the realities of war have been poets who happened to have been caught up as victims or survivors: poets like Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg in the case of the Great War.

In the War of 1914-1918 there were two realities which subverted the claim favoured by home-based clergy and Press that the soldier was a Christ-like hero: the fact that they had to kill as many Germans as possible on the narrow path of the disciple, and the fact that, by the time of the Somme in July 1916, it became obvious that the young men being sent to the front were not willingly laying down their lives at all, but were semi-trained civilians herded into the firing line—pure victims, who were shot for cowardice if they showed reluctance to be killed. Far from seeing themselves as redeeming the world, their understanding of their predicament was, in the words of one of their songs: 'We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here'. In another song popular with the common soldier, the Colonel is pinning another medal on his chest, the captain is home again on seven days' leave, the quartermaster is drinking up the company's rum (any number of other verses could be added to the same effect), while the end is always the same:

If you want to find the privates I know where they are,  
I know where they are, I know where they are,  
If you want to find the privates I know where they are,

They're hanging on the old barbed wire.  
Nothing redeeming about that.

There was none of the expected national moral and religious revival following the Great War. On the contrary, it seriously accelerated the decline of the Nonconformist Churches, and to a lesser extent that of the Church of England, a decline which continues to this day<sup>13</sup>. This is partly to be explained by the overwhelming rejection of the sacrificial way of thinking by the men who returned from the trenches. There was respect for the few padres who risked their lives at the front but none for those who preached sacrifice from the safety of home pulpits. The best of the soldier poets avoided the imagery of sacrifice, or, as we shall see in the case of Wilfred Owen, subverted it. Judging by the record then, it does not look as if Christian forms of remembrance are up to it. They have failed time and again by obscuring the truth of war by pious assimilation to the sacrifice of Christ. There may be a sense in which the soldier hanging on the old barbed wire in no-man's land *was* like Christ on the cross—but not in the way it was promoted by bishops and popular preachers who were trying to boost the national war effort.

Wilfred Owen was much occupied with this question as a result of his experience in the trenches. He saw the Christ parallel as subverting patriotism, not supporting it. In a letter to his mother from a field hospital in France on 16 May 1917, he wrote:

Christ is literally in no man's land (i.e. rather than in the English and French lines, as the 'pulpit professionals' made out). There men often hear his voice: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life—for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism... The practice of *selective ignorance* is, as I have pointed out, one cause of the war. Christians have deliberately *cut* some of the main teachings of their code.<sup>14</sup>

The Greater Love text was common currency among those Christians at home who were doing their bit to send more men to the front. Owen is intent on subverting the common interpretation. So the 'friends' for whom the soldier lays down his life in imitation of Christ is very far from being the folks at home for whom he is supposed to be fighting. It is the soldiers he is fighting with: reflecting a common experience at the front of loyalty transferred from abstract King and Country to real comrades. It is even—by horrible irony—the soldier he is fighting against, as in Owen's most famous poem, 'Strange Meeting' ('I am the enemy you killed, my friend'), written between November 1917 and February 1918. In a letter of 13 August 1917, again to his mother, he had shown himself doubtful about the Christ parallel because of what the soldiers like himself have to do in order to earn it:

While I wear my star and eat my rations, I continue to take care of my Other Cheek; and, thinking of the eyes I have seen



made sightless, and the bleeding lads' cheeks I have wiped, I say: Vengeance is mine, I, Owen, will repay.... There is a mote in many eyes, often no other than a tear. It is this: That men are laying down their lives for a friend. I say it is a mote; a distorted view to hold in a general way.<sup>15</sup>

Owen is developing his own Christ parallel. Almost a year later, in a letter to Osbert Sitwell, it gets its full expression in a beautiful, carefully constructed passage, clearly meant for posterity:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands to attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.<sup>16</sup>

The situation had changed. These soldiers were not those who, earlier in the war, had eagerly enlisted to do their bit against the Hun. They were unwilling teenage conscripts herded in from the fields to fill the spaces left by former slaughters. The Christ parallel becomes applicable in a new and more exact way. It is not a way that lends itself to the rhetoric of militarism, nor to the pieties of Remembrance.

We may say that this is poetry, not theology, and so it is. But it is poetry which, more faithful to the gospel story than contemporary preaching, gives the lie to it and all the third-rate theology of the time. The 'Old Lie' according to Owen, was the Roman patriotic tag, '*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*', made nonsense of by the sight of soldiers dying of a gas attack. The poem of that title, written at some time between October 1917 and February 1918, may be the true poetic epiphany of the Great War, when under pressure of physical reality, the conventional pieties fell away and gave way to a new way of seeing things. The reality of the sacrifice—the sin involved in it—then became clear. Though, as with the crucifixion, not everyone has had the eyes to see.

### *Conclusions.*

A close look at remembrance has presented us with a dilemma. On the one hand we have had to admit the emotional truth of many people's attachment to Remembrance Day, summed up by 'They died that we might live'. It would be wrong in several ways to act as if we know better. The truth enlarges it rather than denies it. And if we do have a deeper understanding of the sacrifices made in modern war, it would be a mistake to reject as worthless the common understanding by which many people manage to express their private grief and gratitude in terms of Christian symbols. Crude subversion of Remembrance Day ceremony only hurts without enlightening. We should demonstrate solidarity rather

than disdain or indifference. On the other hand, Remembrance Day itself is a crude simplification of the complex process of remembrance. It systematically omits most of what is really important to remember about past wars. It perpetuates a misleading view of sacrifice. It cannot cope with the holocaust. And it is and always has been easy for the State to manipulate remembrance for its own ends, to create a spurious consensus about past wars and the preparations for future ones. Above all, the Whitehall Cenotaph ceremony hijacks remembrance for State purposes. These thoughts make it difficult either to subvert the occasion (with say, pacifist symbols) or to take part in it, with all its military hocus pocus. For the present, at least, we will have to live with the dilemma. After all, those who accept it wholeheartedly and those who are critical share a common belief in the importance of the past which distinguishes them from the majority of their countrymen and women, in whom the process of forgetfulness is complete. Among those who keep alive the duty of remembrance, there is at least a chance of sharing deeper insight.

- 1 Even so, not all ex-soldiers found the annual ceremonies acceptable, and on Armistice Day 1921, thousands of unemployed marched towards the Cenotaph with pawn tickets instead of medals. Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, SPCK 1978, p 305.
- 2 Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory*, OUP 1975, p. 9.
- 3 Martin Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg*, Penguin 1980, p. 328.
- 4 See Fussell on the 'Whizzbang', *Great War*, p. 184.
- 5 Fussell, *Great War*, p. 174.
- 6 Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War*, OUP 1989.
- 7 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, Abacus 1986, first published in Italy in 1958. For his final reflections on the Holocaust, see *The Drowned and the Saved*, Abacus 1988.
- 8 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Fontana 1972, first published in France in 1958.
- 8 Alan Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform? War, Peace and the English Churches 1900—1945*, SCM 1986, p. 33.
- 9 Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, p. 43.
- 10 Wilkinson *The Church of England and the First World War*, p. 188.
- 11 Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse, The Triumph of Failure*, Faber and Faber 1977, p. 217.
- 12 Alan Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, p. 43.
- 13 Cf Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, pp. 55—58.
- 14 Harold Owen and John Bell (Eds.), *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, OUP 1967, p. 461 (Owen's italics).
- 15 *Letters*, p. 483.
- 16 *Letters*, p. 562.

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