

Web supplement I to the 'Requiem: The Great War' double issue of *Agenda*



The editor's dear uncle to whom a poem is addressed in her recent collection:
Horses Between Our Legs

Two sequences by D.V Cooke and

D.V. Cooke

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In Memoriam – The Lost Country

(MCMXIV – MCMXVIII)

I – November waking

As stunned men gently go and wake
Memory of things past, of injustice done
And undone, I came again to the unleaving
Place where gigantic wars had cracked
And torn the erupting earth into hollow
Craters no-man-fathomed, where I met one
As between worlds, as if yet sheltering
From the guns' irate insistent fury.

You were the one who slew and in turn
Were slain. Your sleep – the somnolence
Of these swaying alders, these monuments
And shrines to remorse and abandoned time.
Will you wake now away from the guns'
Throb and deep insistent growling roar?
You sleep the sleep of a century –
Your bones being as if channelled
Into that lost past, they lie whitened
Like a broken birdcage in the deep
Trench of your thought – from
Which the spirit has long since flown.

A slight wind gathers this lost domain,
Stirs the slender metallic alder leaves
That drift around these deserted trenches.
Here a few stray strands of rusty barbed
Wire and drone of the wind among
Leaves simulates the howl and whoop
Of shells and ghosts of things past, over
Which the surface is stained green again.

II – On the Salient

Clapping you now the hands break bread,
Once steered the plough that cut the soil
That carved the land to harvest the dead.

These lands once were blood and earth that bore
And grew the wheaten field that nourished
The days and hands that went to war.

The war was trenches dug and attacked
At point of bayonet – and there
Like an angel lunged and fought and hacked,

And carved the war that made the lands
A barren waste. A blood-hewn contract
Has buried the day, yet once these hands

A rifle held and parried where men
Fired clip after clip into mounds
Of flesh till the breech grew hot and then.

The somnolent dead lay around.
Unbearable detonations – broken
Men in their own blood dying, drowned.

The soil remains – the soiled remains,
And over that torn yet fertile plain
The skull occasional the plough upturns.

III – In the dugout

Duskily as if out of dream
The long line of trenchcoats come
Out of their lair and burrow, out of their
Mud-prolonged darkness; from earth
And death unbound. Yet summoned
From this rut and domain we squat
Or kneel in the saurian dark –
Mere ghosts of the men we were.

Or scuttle like insects though
Insects are colossal here – until we are
Denatured or resort to orisons. Gradually
The gun-demented roaring lessens or by
Degree increases. Who now remembers
Us – remember us as strained faces
That blossom amid darkness,
That tunnel these damp hollows.

IV – Lullaby

Touched by the dawn's coruscating cry,
The ripening blossom trembled, fell,
And the guns, the wrangling guns they sigh
Over farm-house, orchard and dull canal.

Man here is but a turning weather-vane.
Yet who are these seen in silhouette –
These fading soldiery that trudge and sweat
Through vortices of an old campaign?

Under the flowering cherry – supine,
At ease they lie. Yet once inside a time
There we sang as light leapt to defend
And the guns gouged the honorific friend.

V – Requiescat

His voice was a pure baritone
And revered it was among the shires,
Along the banks of the green willow
That were hallowed with song, with choirs
Of voices that were gallant and holy.

Yet the war and the mud had done for him.
The rats chewed his cuticles. He was left there
To rot on the singing wire; and rot he did
In that no-man's place – and died of wounds
Gaping and most bloody. And millions
Like him, and a whole generation
Died it did – singing singing multitudes
In an agony of dying: in an agony he hung
There – till someone out of mercy
Put a bullet through his song.

VI – Lessons in obeisance

Earthward at dawn the deferential
Young and the honorific friend.
All the live-long to roam
As through river-fogs, through green
Verdure where the lush viridian grows.

And there to find the sunken barge
Or the estaminet hung precariously
Amid a tumulus of heaped brick –
To go through the ruined colonnade
Of forked trees; to find the tombstone
Kept below stairs. Or where the wounded
Were once by barge evacuated, where mind
Does ache, does ache amid wild rumours,
With air vanquished from lungs; to go
Into the long day's decaying; to follow
Those who had journeyed where death
Had double-dyed their lips to cherry;
To find the lush entombment of those
Green and early days. To kneel
Among the mind's frayed edges
Where death once held his dog days,
There among ruins to saunter; to find these
Relics around the flowering cherry tree
Where I slew you and you slew me.

VII – Song of the bones

It is summer in the sultry southern downs,
In this green and calcified country –
This rolling chalk country composed of bones.

In a rollicking the larks are going
Upward through the sprung and tufted field.
Their song is in praise of their own one calling.

Along the narrow path silence engages,
And is the silence of those who endure
The long-day's war and all its ages.

What think you now whose bones were erased?
*I think I come to a country in decay –
Where the population has been replaced;*

*Where the laws and customs are not mine;
Were traded for those of a barbarous tongue
Whose cause and outcome led to decline.*

A century has clawed away the debris.
Yet what brings your bones back to this time
That will not now lie still nor silent be?

*It is the speech of bones about to be said,
Where another's plangent eloquence guards
The day and time does tread, does tread, does tread.*

Martin Caseley

Martin Caseley is an English teacher, essayist and poet, living in Stamford, Lincolnshire. He regularly contributes reviews to the Stride magazine website (www.stridemagazine.co.uk) and his most recent poetry collection, *A Sunday Map of The World*, appeared in 2000. He is working on new poems and essays.

Disinterring a Story

(Ernest Harold Marles

b. 1887, Somerset,

d. 1917 nr. Bethune, Arras.)

(i)

So at last, the story's disinterred,
the mud dried up, the iron harvest hurled,

scrap, rusting high beside the fields and roads,
and silence settles.

Coaches bounce their loads

past Hyde Park Corner, round the Menin Gate;
we file off quickly: we cannot be late.

At eight 'o'clock each evening sounds their fate.

(ii) *His Story*

His story
passed down through the family
like a saint's relic,
a knuckle or a finger-bone,
fragile pages turned over in the hand.

His story
becomes ancient history,
takes on the quality of myth,
lacquered, impermeable,
impossible to reach the truth
over there...

too distant now to celebrate.

(v) *The war, the war*

The war in the published memoir,
the war up on the screen,
the war that sleeps forever
in the fitful, waking dream.

The war of the stirring poster
and the white feather; grainy
Craiglockhart film of the limb,
fluttering forever.

The war of the trench exploding
into particles of earth;
the shrapnel of the modern world
slouching into birth.

The war in 1000 days,
the war of 'never again',
the war of the Pals' Battalions,
the war of the foxhunting men.

The war of the iron harvest
that still seems to be ours;
the war that will not let us rest
in the small, muttering hours.

The trench war, the war in the air,
the war to end all wars;
the 'over by Christmas' confidence,
the war of the good, brave cause.

That war they would not speak about;
the war we cannot stop thinking about.

(vi) : *What did we expect?*

So the coaches inch along the lanes,
past the farms, following the brown, mud-coloured signs

to the rows of bleached standing stones, regular with age,
a petrified scream, even teeth of graves
outraging the wide, wide skies. The regulars have plans,
have brought their own beer (none of that Belgian stuff!) and
discuss regiments knowingly, loudly, for hours.
Then it becomes a subdued tourism
revolving, as it does, around the silence standing around the graves,
before they troop back on the coach, ticking
in the sun.

Ernest's, when we find it, is a humble affair: a quiet corner
of a village cemetery and a small quadrant
assigned to commonwealth soldiers.
Not far off, beyond the railings,
is a scrubby side-street with a garage
and a laundry in the cool shadows
and someone is driving off. Nothing much is happening
in the middle of the day; cats laze
on bonnets in pools of lassitude.
We take it all in; there is a hundred years
of silence to break.

What
did we expect? Having pieced together the story
of emigration and letters, only to find we know less
than we assumed,
more than we suspected. Photographs present
a military mask, correctly. Standing there,
taking pictures, we speak the usual platitudes,
read the rain-smearred messages left on surrounding stones;
the coach grumbles into life
and as we leave, at slower than marching pace,
the traffic is free and light all down the Arras road.

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