Pulpit

Never To Be The War To End All Wars

I recently made a visit to Ieper (formerly known as Ypres) in Belgium. I have been there several times before and each time it has been a personal pilgrimage, rather than a visit to a place of religious significance. The beautiful town of Ieper and its environs creates in me today, albeit 90 years after the events, a sense of anger and frustration at the conflict which caused such a casual waste of human life in order to gain nothing. At the time, this conflict was billed as "the war to end all wars" and what a misnomer that turned out to be!

Belgium is a very peaceful, happy place. Ieper is only 30 or so miles from Calais and easy to find. As I arrive I am aware of feelings of profound emotion. My grandfather, Corporal George Kaye (1881-1948), came here with the Manchester Regiment to fight in the battles of Ieper in the Great War of 1914-1918. I can feel his presence as I walk around the town. I can feel the strength of the camaraderie transferred from the dirty slums and back streets of Manchester to this place of callous carnage and unremitting catastrophe. I can hear the witty remarks shouted from one soldier to another, roughhouse humour masking a deep anxiety and a fear of terrible and imminent death.

Everywhere you look there are green signs pointing to cemeteries; countless small burial grounds suddenly come into view as one travels round the countryside and towns. (Amazingly, even today, the remains of soldiers are still being ploughed up in the fields and, despite the many years since their deaths, they are given a proper military funeral.) It would be impossible to visit each and every one of these sad memorials to the war but there are several places which are of "must visit" quality. First, The Cloth Hall which stands in Ieper's main square; an enormous medieval building of outstanding beauty and grace. Formerly a place where wool and cloth were stored before being sold at market, this fine edifice was completed in 1304 then almost completely destroyed over 600 hundred years later by an incendiary device which fell in 1914.

Meticulously reconstructed between 1934-1958, it now houses a museum of the Great War. Full of artefacts and information, it is one of the most moving museums I have ever seen. You can take an overwhelming, evocative audio and visual virtual tour at www.inflandersfields.be. The interactive Great War exhibition is called "In Flanders' Fields" and I have to admit I was unable to control my tears. On a screen one sees two hand written poems, one the eponymous "In Flanders' Fields" by Canadian Lt. Colonel John McCrae and the staggering "Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen, who was in fact a Second Lieutenant in the same Regiment as my grandfather. Owen's evocation of the horrors of war clashes stridently with the still optimistic note set by McCrae's poem which invites new soldiers to come and fight on to replace the fallen. They did, in their many thousands, and Owen's poem tells us what happened to them and what a wastage of life it represented.

Wilfred Owen, 1893-1918

Dulce et Decorum Est

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 disappointed shells 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 floundering 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.

The last two lines translate as "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country". Owen, still in the act of preparing for the publication of his poems, was killed during the Second Battle of the Sambre just one week before the end of the 'great' war.

One of the works of art in the museum is entitled "Christmas Truce" and it shows men from both sides in uniform greeting each other. They are dressed as soldiers but, at this moment, they only human beings in No Man's Land greeting each other on Christmas Day, 1914.

Their hands are depicted coming through a glass wall. They are able to see and touch each other, but the barriers imposed by the war, although temporarily suspended, will quickly become insuperable again and for a long time to come – way beyond the Second World War.

Of the vast amount of information displayed in the museum, one stands out as an indictment of the whole affair; "*The 3rd battle of Ieper aka the Battle of Passchendale. 700,000 killed, wounded, drowned or disappeared. It had taken 100 days to fight their way to Passendale. It took 3 days to give up everything they had gained.*"

After the experience of the museum, one feels the need for fresh air and 'freedom' so I walked down to the Menin Gate, itself a magnificent edifice, and climbed the town ramparts to the Ramparts Cemetery.

This photograph was taken from the position of the German army as it tried to capture the town of Ieper which you see in the background, now of course re-built. It shows the position of the allied forces and the headstones that now mark where men fell.

The stones read like a Cook's Tour of the world! Mingling with Regiments from Middlesex, Kent, Manchester, Yorkshire and Dorsetshire are those from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Leinster, and the Royal Scots. As you walk around, you find names like R. Taupaki and HT Haenga of the NZ Maori Battalion, mingling with men from the Royal Irish Rifles.

It is very hard to credit what this battleground was like except that it must have been absolute hell to every one of the poor souls involved. I am always moved when I visit the Ramparts Cemetery because it is small, of human proportions and it has a tranquil feeling so unlike the reason for it being there.

Then ones needs to get in the car, drive through the Menin Gate, round what the soldiers called "hell-fire corner" and

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travel a mile or so to Sanctuary Wood to visit the trench museum where as well as photographs and memorabilia, there is the only original section of trenches left for visitors to see. Sanctuary Wood is close by Hill 62, an important monument to Canadian forces and surrounded by yet more cemeteries.

Here we find some of the few remaining Great War original trenches although some have been re-worked to accommodate tourists and students. It is difficult to imagine what it must have been like to live and die in these trenches. However, I am glad to say that the owners of the museum have made no attempt to sanitise or glamorise the exhibits and they retain the earthy, muddy, cold, discomforting feeling which made that generation of soldiers such an easy target for shells, bullets and gas attacks. This museum preserves what was part of the British front line from 1914-1918. I wonder if my grandfather walked in these very trenches?

The next stop on my journey is Tyne Cot Cemetery, not very far away and the largest military cemetery in the world. As I approach the shock of seeing so many graves is still immense, despite having seen it many times before. How beautifully the graves are kept by the staff of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Throughout the world, wherever British and Commonwealth soldiers lie buried, the staff do such a good job and this cemetery is always in tip-top condition.

The headstones stand so neatly, so well-dressed and have an eerie sense of organisation and orderliness – quite unlike the confused and chaotic minds of the senior officers responsible for the battles of Ieper, and so unlike the mud-bath and blood-bath which created the need for a cemetery in the first place. I feel relieved that my grandfather didn't end up buried here. I always think of the rows and rows of headstones as the men themselves, on parade, stood to attention, strictly in line, waiting for the barking voice of the Parade Master to issue orders. I wrote this after a previous visit in 1988;

Tyne Cot Cemetery

I think you never stood so still and square
When raucous life and love flowed in your veins.
When massed in ranks, called by the bugler's blare,
I'll bet a jest or jibe relieved your pains.
But now, obedient to the sharp command
Of Death, you lie beneath the ground and wait
The tramp of feet. Your comrades' marching band
And Regimental pride go past, with hate
Of enemy still burning in each heart.
Then wives and mothers cling and add their tears
To those you shed, frustrated in your trench.
And now we come, bewildered from the start,
Your grandchildren. We reach across the years
Then turn away. Death still retains its stench.

Unusually, Tyne Cot also has a handful of German officers buried around the blockhouse, which was the object of that particular campaign. The German authorities brought their war dead together for a common burial place. They feel odd, but with the passage of time, no one objects. The death of a man is the death of a man, a human tragedy, a widow, orphaned children, a life lost rather than given.

As you see in the photograph above left one visitor has added a little Royal British Legion poppy mounted on a cross among the plants on the grave. Perhaps this is a gesture of reconciliation? Or just a human touch? As in the Ramparts Cemetery, soldiers from all faiths and nations lie buried. The headstone, above right and marked with a Star of David, is

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that of a Jewish soldier of the London Rifle Brigade. But the vast majority of bodies were unidentified and their headstones are simply marked "*A Soldier of the Great War. Known unto God*". The names of those without known graves are inscribed on the walls of the cemetery cloisters.

The savagery of the battles of Passendale are hard to imagine as one walks around this lovely hillside with views of the spires of Ieper in the distance. (Well, visible in decent weather conditions!)

Following the visit to Tyne Cot, I travelled a few miles to Langemarck, a town which was held by German forces following the first gas attack in April 1915 until it was recaptured by the British on 16 August 1917. It is the site of the only German military cemetery in the area and contains the graves or memorials of 44, 292 men.

I have to confess my dislike of this cemetery. During a previous visit I'd felt a sense of threat, an atmosphere which suggested that failure was being mourned rather than the death of men. I can't explain why I felt this, but look at the sculpture which greets the visitor on arrival. From a distance the figures, viewed through the portal above, appear to be holding weapons, but on closer inspection they are, of course, not doing so. They are simply holding their helmets.

The cemetery is heavy and scary and quite unlike the British cemeteries. It feels to me like an incubus (demon in male form) has taken possession of the whole area and I know that many other English visitors have had a similar reaction to mine.

This feeling was not diminished by a visit to a new interpretation centre which sits on the perimeter of the cemetery and built only recently. The exhibition has several visual displays and an audio track with the sounds of battle. One of the displays shows how the armies launched their attacks with gas. The graphic shows what happened and how the gas went from one front line to the next. All very well, but I got the feeling that the message was "Aren't we clever to think of that!" rather than "Aren't we sorry we used gas in the trenches". Mind you, I say this without the benefit of understanding the German language commentary and I could be completely wrong.

With all these soldiers about, the need was for finely tuned organisation. There were the front line trenches, the holding areas of trench, the first aid and hospital sections and the pathways to the front line: all milling with men and the injured and the shell-shocked, the home-sick and the war-sick. When they came off duty for a short time of respite, they went to Poperinge, a few miles away from Langemarck but still within earshot of the continuing battles. So what was there to do in Pop? Well, 'Tommy' could take his choice; there was drinking and there were prostitutes.

Shocked by this total lack of recreation, an Army Chaplain, the Revd. Philip "Tubby" Clayton (1885-1972) managed to wangle some money to rent a house. The person offering the money did so on condition that it was named after his fallen son, so Talbot House, pictured above today, was born.

It became a god-send to many men. A place where there was neither booze nor prostitution, a place of safe and intelligent discussion, somewhere to read a book, a garden in which to loiter, even the possibility of clean sheets on a bed and there, right at the top of the house, a chapel.

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In this chapel, many men sat and pondered what was increasingly likely to be their inevitable death. It is unimaginable what terrors they went through, just waiting for the next tour of duty in the front line trenches. At Talbot House, they had the time and opportunity to worship God and pray in hope. Admittedly, in those days faith was more common, but even the totally unchurched would have welcomed the respite which Talbot House offered.

Tubby Clayton became an important figure in the minds of so many men of the Great War and he went on to establish the world-wide charity Toc H from these war-time experiences and efforts. It is remarkable how well Talbot House has lasted with many of its original features, including odd and witty notices, reflecting the optimism and clear mind of the founder. Today it offers ‘minimalist’ accommodation for battlefield visitors. All beds are single beds, no rooms are en-suite and it is totally self-catering, including breakfast. It has a well equipped kitchen and you are expected to do your own washing up!

With these visits over there is time before dinner for me to attend the Menin Gate at 8pm to hear the Last Post, pictured above right. The Ieper Fire Brigade provide the bugles every night without fail. Sometimes there is a handful of people there. At other times, there are hundreds, and of all ages.

In what is for me an uncharacteristic bit of sentimentality, the last time I went I took my grandfather’s medals and clutched them in my hand as the Last Post was sounded. I felt his presence and imagined him walking in fear and trembling up the Menin Road, round “hell-fire corner” and to his life under fire in the trenches.

Corporal George Kaye survived the Great War but had to deal with the mental illness that resulted from shell-shock. His family suffered as his behaviour became unpredictable and, at times, unpleasant. He had Electro-Convulsive Therapy treatment and died when I was only two. An early grave but one that, at least, he had eluded in the trenches. I have no recollection of him, but my mother and my grandmother told me that I used to play on his knee and that we got on very well together. They spoke about him so much as I grew up that I feel that I did know him, at least in spirit.

George Kaye, 1881-1948

The war to end all wars was the start of a bloody 20th century of world conflict which continues into the 21st.

Will we ever learn? Expect more war cemeteries.

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