



'Smile, Smile, Smile': Wilfred Owen and the Politicians

by Douglas Kerr

2018-10-15 09:05:38

Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag
And smile, smile, smile'.

One of the most famous songs of the Great War provides the title for what may be Wilfred Owen's very last poem. Written in France in September 1918, about the same time as the tremendous 'Spring Offensive?', 'Smile, Smile, Smile' is a satirical, angry poem in the manner of Owen's mentor Siegfried Sassoon. It targets the press and politicians at home, who, at a time when the German armies were in retreat and the war approaching its end, insisted that peace should not be made before the enemy was comprehensively defeated, and demanded guarantees that the winners would be indemnified ' that is, promised full financial compensation for their losses in the war. While this unbending spirit prevailed at home, soldiers on both sides continued to be killed in the last weeks of fighting. One of them would be Wilfred Owen.

We may be inclined to think of Owen as a poet who achieved a grand, comprehensive, tragic vision of the conflict. But it is good to remember that he was also politically aware, and like many of his fellow soldiers he knew the fighting was not only a tragic predicament: it was also the result of policies and decisions made by people far from the battlefield. News from home could reach the troops quickly. 'Smile, Smile, Smile' begins with a group of wounded soldiers in France, reading, as it happens, yesterday's *Daily Mail*, with 'the casualties (typed small) / And (large) Vast Booty from our latest Haul' (2013, 190). The newspaper is much more interested in the profits of victory than in its cost in human lives. The paper goes on to report a politician's speech rejecting any idea of making an early peace.

Peace would do wrong to our undying dead, --
The sons we offered might regret they died
If we got nothing lasting in their stead.
We must be solidly indemnified. (2013, 190-1).

We know, from a letter he wrote on 22nd September 1918, that Owen had been reading the *Daily Mail* at the front (1967, 578), and he mentions the report of a speech by the British Minister of Labour, George Henry Roberts, and one by the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, both of which make their way into his poem. Both politicians, speaking on behalf of their nation, contrive to praise the front-line soldiers in a way that betrays their patronizing ignorance. 'The sons we offered might regret they died' ' Owen's sarcastic phrasing

shows the people at home taking the credit for making sacrifices for victory ('the sons *we* offered?'), while getting ready to enjoy its profits. Unwittingly, the reported speeches open up a chasm between 'we?', the warmongers, and 'they?', the suffering troops.

Politicians, particularly in a democracy, are used to speaking on behalf of the nation: this is what they mean when they use the pronoun 'we'. Owen's poem is, among other things, a useful education in the politics of pronouns. It reminds us to ask 'Who do you mean by 'us?'' The speech goes on:

We rulers sitting in this ancient spot
Would wrong our very selves if we forgot
The greatest glory will be theirs who fought,
Who kept this nation in integrity. (2013, 191)

Nation' Whose nation exactly?
Nation' ' The half-limbed readers did not chafe
But smiled at one another curiously
Like secret men who know their secret safe. (2013, 191)

These damaged combat veterans do not feel that they belong to the nation that the politician is speaking about. They have been sent into a conflict they did not choose, against an enemy they do not hate (?I am the enemy you killed, my friend?', as Owen's 'Strange Meeting' has it), on behalf of a nation they do not recognise, represented by men they do not trust or respect. In these circumstances, who are 'we' and who are 'they'??

A few days before he died, Owen wrote in a letter: 'Did I tell you that five healthy girls died of fright in one night at the last village. The people in England and France who thwarted a peaceable retirement of the enemy from these areas are now sacrificing aged French peasants and charming French children to our guns. Shells made by women in Birmingham are at this moment burying little children alive not very far from here' (1967, 590).

There is more than one way of conscripting people into a conflict with others who are not their enemies. 'Smile, Smile, Smile' is a reminder that we do not have to accept the boundaries that other people set between 'us' and 'them'. In the poem the 'secret men' smile at what they have read in the newspaper, but their smile shouldn't be misinterpreted as assent and acceptance. The secret of their smile is opposition and solidarity. They have their own idea of what the nation means, and of who 'we' are.

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The smaller picture: 'In Retreat' - Herbert Read and the 2nd Green

Howards during the German March Offensive 1918

by Philip Dutton

2018-03-20 13:30:25

PRELUDE '*The enemy is rather threatening for the moment.*'?

Wednesday 20 March 1918 (BEF GHQ, France): much concerned for the welfare of his wife and recently-arrived third child ' a much longed for son (born 15 March), Sir Douglas Haig penned a solicitous letter to Lady Haig. Acknowledging the strong likelihood of an imminent German offensive on the southern sector of the British held front Sir Douglas regretfully explained that his planned visit to England would be better delayed until the following week - "*The enemy is rather threatening for the moment.*"[\[1\]](#) But keen to maintain his wife's health and morale, the fifty-seven year old Field Marshal arranged for his cook to make some soup for her and organised for it to be sent to her by King's Messenger. The next day, while this sustaining broth was in transit, the awaited German offensive was indeed launched following a terrific early morning bombardment of British positions; a bombardment which '*in grandeur of scale, of awe, and of destruction surpassed any other in the World War*'[\[2\]](#). The German March Offensive had begun.

SUMMARY

Written in 1919 but not published until 1925, Herbert Read's short memoir 'In Retreat' tells the story of the 2nd Green Howards during the German 1918 Spring Offensive. Despite its brevity the account is rich in the type of detail missing from many of the official unit war diaries of the period. Though a small picture of a huge event it would be hard to find a better account of what the infantry of Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army went through during those last days in March 1918.

1918 - a year in the shadows?

In terms of public awareness the date '21 March 2018' may well trigger more ideas of the spring equinox than the centenary of the opening day of a cataclysmic battle on the Western Front. Fixated on the tragedies of the Somme in 1916, and, to a lesser degree, the dismal slog towards Passchendaele in 1917, the start of the 1918 German Spring Offensive gets short shrift, even though this monumental battle represented the greatest possible danger to the Allied cause in the west since the German invasion of Belgium and France in August 1914.[\[3\]](#)

The German March 1918 Offensive

The Kaiser's Battle (*?Kaiserschlacht?*) was planned as the decisive battle of the war and the scale and complexity its organization and execution, virtually defy description. The size of the battlefront, numbers of troops involved, and the tumultuous progress of the fighting impose the heaviest of burdens on the chronicler seeking to establish an accurate and coherent narrative. Seventeen years were to pass before the British Official account of the March fighting saw print.[\[4\]](#) Its arrival in 1935 was met with considerable interest.

Herbert Read's 'Time & Tide' Review of the Official History

In February 1935 the political journal *'Time and Tide'* included a review of the British official version of the German offensive. Entitled *'History and Reality'*, the article was written by the editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, a highly respected literary figure, poet, art theorist and pacifist, who was particularly qualified to comment as he had been a by no means disinterested bystander in the events depicted. **Herbert Edward Read** (1893-1968) served with distinction on the Western Front during the First World War. Commissioned into the Green Howards[5] in 1915, he was awarded the MC in 1917 and the DSO the following year. In March 1918, as acting Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion of the Green Howards (2/Green Howards), then occupying defensive positions opposite St Quentin, Read had the misfortune to be deeply implicated in the anxieties, chaos and destruction of the March Offensive, but the very good fortune to survive it. This was for him an unforgettable experience and one that compelled him to write an account of his ordeal, which, though completed by 1919 as *'In Retreat'*, was not published until 1925. Read's participation in the great battle inevitably informed his responses to Edmonds' narrative. Acknowledging both his personal and literary involvement in the battle, Read mused on the differing 'truths' offered by the 'scientific historian' (Edmonds) and the experience-based 'poetic truths', offered by the 'artist' (Read himself). Taking, by way of example, Edmonds', necessarily summary, treatment of the activities of the 2/Green Howards, and scrutinising the professional historian's use of the tasteful conventions of military historical phraseology, Read came down emphatically on the side of poetic truth: *'?History is ...an aggregation of facts which excludes feeling, excludes humanity, excludes truth. The only truth is in poetry?'*[6] So saying, Read's admiration for the Official History was high, and he commended Edmonds' *'scientific account of objective forces and events?'*[7], and his consummate skills of concision and clarity. Having vigorously flown the flag for the poetic sensibility Read, despite quibbles on Edmonds' treatment of artillery co-operation and the performance of the Royal Flying Corps, gave an emphatic 'thumbs up' for *'1918? Volume I.*[8]

In Retreat ' origins

If Edmonds' History of the March Offensive constituted an attempt to render a comprehensible version of the 'bigger picture', Herbert Read's treatment of those days is, understandably, more narrowly focused. The origins of his memoir may be traced to early April 1918, when Read, enjoying a temporary reprieve from the crisis wrote a letter to his fianc in Leeds: *'?I think the experiences of the last ten days have had a rather deep effect on me...I saw humanity very naked and life more precious and more pitiful?'*[9]. Earlier in the same letter he intimated that he was unwilling to let her hear the details of that *'raging hell... until I have written a book about it.'*[10] Read duly began, in the spring of 1919[11], a prose account of his part in the 'retirement', which was finished that same year. Publication proved something of a problem and the work did not see print until 1925, when Leonard and Virginia Woolf issued *'In Retreat'* under the imprint of the Hogarth Press. A self-consciously literary outlet for what was essentially a highly specific military reminiscence written by a poet and (at the time) museum curator[12], *'In Retreat'* was well received, and later merited positive comments (and indeed a single 'asterisk' emblematic of merit) in Cyril Falls' *'War Books'* (1930).[13]

?In Retreat? ' 'a transcript of experience?'[14]

Less than 50 pages in length[15], *In Retreat* is rich in intimate detail. Read combines a record of his personal sensations with a series of vivid, documentary-like, pictures of the actions involving the 2/Green Howards between 21 and 29 March 1918 The bare outline of his story is as follows: the battalion, in reserve on 20 March, was rushed up to the 'Battle Zone' on the morning 21 March, there to repel a series of mass German infantry assaults. Following an injury to Battalion's Commanding Officer in the early afternoon of the 22nd, Read assumed effective leadership (up until 26th March) of the battalion and, though repeatedly near-surrounded by the advancing enemy, co-ordinated with cool military professionalism a series of withdrawals. The much depleted and exhausted battalion, denied rest, is engaged in more defensive fighting before its eventual relief from the line.

His narrative includes many valuable historical insights into the nature of the battle. These include: descriptions of the local British defences and initial success in repelling the enemy onslaughts in the Ropy sector; the intensity and accuracy of German artillery bombardments; enemy infantry infiltration tactics; the shortcomings of British artillery (see **Appendix 1**) and the disorienting effects of fog, mist and smoke upon the defenders. Importantly, he highlighted the British failure to complete an effective third line of defensive trenches ' the Reserve or 'Green Line' - and the negative impact this had on British morale[16]. The memoir reads at times like a military report, with its spare clarity and precisely timed messages (carried by heroic 'runners?') punctuating the chaotic course of days and nights where sleep was not an option and food and water scarcely available.

The record of actuality is complemented by Read's scrupulous depiction of his own sensations during the battle. The accumulations of anxiety in the anticipation of the expected German attack; admissions of despair and exhaustion as disappointments mount and defeat and extinction loom. Also, contrastingly, moments of acute elation: following the repulse of an attack, or the discovery of French infantry reinforcements arriving in support. Discernible throughout is Read's competence as an officer and a very humane one at that. His concern for his men shines through[17]. If Read took pride in his military career in the post-war years it was surely as much due to his having earned the respect of the 'other ranks' in the battalion as to the official awards that formally marked his gallant service.

Conclusion

Although Edmond's '1918' Volume I and Read's *In Retreat?* could not be more different, - the authors, unlikely as it sounds, shared some things in common. Both experienced at first hand disastrous headlong military retreats ' Edmonds as a Divisional Staff Officer on the Western Front after the Battle of Mons in August 1914[18], and Read as a temporary infantry battalion commander in March 1918. Both were writers of the highest quality ' valuing detachment, analysis and clarity of expression. And both ' the much older and brilliantly academic Regular Edmonds, and youthful 'imagist' poet and literary-theorist, temporary officer Read - shared the highest sense of professionalism as soldiers.

Widely disparate as they are the two works offer complementary truths: the fact-based objectivity of the military historian and the experience-charged response of the artist/writer. Read's short account, though specifically recording the trials experienced by the 2/Green Howards includes observations of general conditions, tribulations and, on occasion, minor triumphs, that were almost certainly shared by other infantry units of Fifth Army. Read's 'small window' opens on to a narrow view of a tiny portion of the huge landscape of the March 1918 battle front. But the wealth of data it supplies and the humanity with which writer conveys his and his unit's ordeal helps make more intelligible, from the British perspective at least, the vastly complicated story of the German Spring Offensive - that hugely significant, yet relatively ignored, event in the history of the Great War, the centenary of which we commemorate this year.

APPENDIX 1

Read makes reference in *In Retreat* to five instances of, what we would now call 'friendly fire'. Undoubtedly there were cases of British 'shorts' causing havoc during the retreat ' but in the chaos of a rapidly moving series of actions such accidents, were inevitable. Read's eager attribution of blame to his own side may well be based on 'experience' but his ready identification of the origins of the incoming fire also perhaps reflects inherent prejudices of the infantryman towards the gunners. The difficulties for the latter were legion and the prevalence of thick fog and heavy smoke only added to the problems of registration and observation. There may well be some truth in A G MacDonell's wry definition of the function of the artillery subaltern in the latter part of the Great War: '*... a young artillery gentleman had to be attached to each battalion headquarters in the Line, whose duty it was to point out the fundamental difference between east-bound and west-bound projectiles and thus soothe the fighting troops into feeling a partial, at any rate, security.*'[19]

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----- NOTES -----

[1] *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig?*, edited by Robert Blake, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1952, p.294

[2] *History of the First World War*, Basil Liddell Hart, Cassell & Co Ltd, 1970, p.493

[3] '21 March 1918 was one of the great turning points of the First World War and, in the number of men involved, was probably the greatest battle of that war.' *The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1918: the First Day of the German Spring Offensive*, Martin Middlebrook, Penguin Books, 1983, p.9

- [4] *Military Operations. France and Belgium 1918: [Vol I]. The German March Offensive and its Preliminaries*, Brigadier-General Sir J E Edmonds, Macmillan, 1935.
- [5] The Green Howards (Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment)
- [6] *Time and Tide*, 9 February 1935 (Quoted in *Herbert Read. All That was Left of Them*, edited by Benedict Read, The Orange Press, 2014, p.209)
- [7] Ibid, p.210. The praise for Edmonds was in marked contrast to Read's reaction to Liddell Hart's *The Real War* (1930), which he condemned as a 'shoddy piece of rhetoric' in the July the 1930 issue of *Criterion*. See ' *The Real War?: Liddell Hart, Cruttwell and Falls?*', Hew Strachan in *The First World War and British Military History*, edited by Brian Bond, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1991, p.46
- [8] The military operations of 1918 ultimately required four additional volumes of official histories ' making a grand total of five. 'Put together these make a work substantially longer than the Bible?'; see *The Imperial War Museum Book of 1918: Year of Victory*, Malcolm Brown, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1998, p.xxix.
- [9] *Extracts from a War Diary*, Herbert Read, entry for 1 April 1918, quoted in *Herbert Read. All That was Left of Them*, edited by Benedict Read, The Orange Press, 2014, p.136.
- [10] Ibid, p.135
- [11] *In Retreat*, Herbert Read, The Hogarth Press, 1925, p.7
- [12] Since 1922 Read had been Assistant Curator in the Department of Ceramics and Glass in the Victoria and Albert Museum.
- [13] *War Books. An Annotated Bibliography of Books about the Great War*, Cyril Falls, (new edition introduced by R J Wyatt, Greenhill Books, 1989, p.226-27. (Originally published in 1930; the single asterisk denoted, in Fall's categorization, 'a good book').
- [14] *In Retreat*, Herbert Read, The Hogarth Press, 1925, p.8
- [15] In its original 1925 edition *In Retreat* comprises 44 numbered pages (including Introduction and Appendix; if the map of 'The Route of our Retreat' is included the total would be 46 pages.
- [16] 'We found an empty mockery and I was in despair??.', *In Retreat*, op.cit, p,23
- [17] One instance stands out: entrenched before the village of Esmerly-Hallon, on 23 March, he distributes sustenance (Army biscuits and red wine) in almost sacramental fashion to his famished men. *In Retreat*, op cit., p.29.
- [18] As a senior Staff Officer (GS01) of the 4th Division of the British Expeditionary Force.
- [19] *England Their England*, A G MacDonell, Folio Society edition, London, 1987, p.4. (Originally published by MacMillan & Company in 1933). My thanks to Chris McCarthy for pointing me towards this reference

[Original version](#)

The French infantryman's experience on the Western Front 1914-16: a soldier-novelist's reaction

by Philip Dutton

2017-11-07 09:03:56

2017 marks the centenary of the publication in English of a remarkable French wartime novel 'one which aimed to 'tell the truth about the war?'

The scale of losses experienced between 1914 and 1918 by the French Army was truly shocking. In late August 1914 alone, during the *Battle of the Frontiers*, French casualties totalled well over 200,000^[1]. But French forces rallied, and with Allied help, pushed the German invaders away from Paris during the crucial Battle of the Marne in early September. In the ensuing trench warfare on the Western Front French armies resisted further enemy incursions, and, as opportunity allowed, launched their own attacks designed to regain national territory. This was a process of unremitting toil, loss, and misery not helped by unfortunate tactical and strategic decisions that played into the hands of a well organised enemy. Dismayed by his own personal encounters with these failures a French soldier participant, already an established writer by 1914 and one with definite socialist sympathies, concluded that many of his civilian countrymen failed utterly to appreciate the savage intensity of the fighting and intolerable conditions of the 'front' - '*this catastrophe of flesh and filthiness?*'^[2] ' that their soldiers were condemned to inhabit. He aimed to make good this failure by writing a novel that would tell the truth about the war.

Henri Barbusse's powerfully anti-war novel '*Le Feu*' was imaginatively based on his over 16 months' active service on the Western Front in a French Infantry regiment. Written during a period of recovery after illness, his account was severely critical of the conduct of the war and uncompromising in its depiction of the gruesome realities of front line service. It first saw print in serialised form in the monthly literary journal '*L'Oeuvre*' during 1916 and it was published in book form in December of that year. The English translation of the novel, published as '*Under Fire?*', appeared in June 1917. The novel was warmly received in France and its English translation in Great Britain, received many approving notices.

Regarded as an honest '*piece of anti-war propaganda?*', by Cyril Falls, in his classic critical appraisal '*War Books*' (1930), '*Le Feu*' remains in print. A remarkable piece of wartime writing in its own right, literary scholars have identified the work as having exerted a powerful influence on a number of poets and writers during the conflict and, later, on that group of post-war authors, whose of 'trench memoirs' and war-based fictional works, published in the late 1920s, were largely fuelled by a spirit of anger about the appalling nature of the conflict, and disillusion with its consequences. A response typified in its most extreme form by Erich Maria Remarque's '*All Quiet on the Western Front*' (1929). Both *All Quiet* and *Le Feu* sold, and continue to sell, exceedingly well.

Understandably focus has remained on the continuing debate on the cultural impact of Barbusse's novel, notably as a forerunner and template of the anti-war, realistic school of 'disenchantment'. But in this concentration of purpose, the identity of the original translator ' William Fitzwater Wray - who first made the work accessible to English readers has been lost sight of. This is a pity as Fitzwater Wray was a fascinating character in his own right, and a good and prolific writer, particularly in his own specialist field ' cycling. And it was a cycling

experience in wartime France undertaken by Fitzwater Wray in September 1914 that unwittingly helped prepare him for the task of translating Barbusse's contentious novel.

A longer article about Barbusse and his translator is also available: See [*The French soldier novelist and the British cycling journalist: some notes on 'Le Feu' by Henri Barbusse, and its first English translator, William Fitzwater Wray.*](#)

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Online:

'Le Feu' is available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4380> This is the Fitzwater Wray translation

Teaching resource: <http://h-france.net/fffh/classics/teaching-le-feuunder-fire-by-henri-barbusse/>

----- NOTES -----

[1] 'No fewer than 80,000 French soldiers were killed?between 22 and 25 August, *The French Army Between Tradition and Modernity. Weaponry, Tactics and Soldiers, 1914-18*, by Professor Dr Francois Cochet, in *The World War I Companion*, edited by Matthias Strohn, Osprey Publishing, 2013, p.94. An aggregate figure for French war losses of '1,385,300' (killed and missing) for the period 1914-18 is offered by *The World War I Databook?*, John Ellis & Michael Cox, Aurum Press, 2001, p.269

[2] *Under Fire*, Henri Barbusse, translated by W Fitzwater Wray, introduction by Brian Rhys, Dent & Sons, 1965, p.269

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Tagore in the time of war 1913-1919

by Sneha Reddy

2017-02-08 12:10:21

Ideas and influence of poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore during the First World War

Marking 100 years of Tagore's lectures, delivered in Japan and USA, published in 1917 under the title 'Nationalism?'

'In wartime when the Czar of all Russia [has] lost his throne without a word and Kaiser's crown looks terribly insecure' that I should be drawn into politics does not in the least degree prove that politics of late has developed undreamt of poetical qualities? it only shows that at present in India things have come to such a tangle that even a poet had to be requisitioned for the purpose of a mock fight in a political playground'

-Rabindranath Tagore, 1917[1]

When Tagore won the Nobel prize in literature for *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* in 1913, the first non-European to do so, he was a rage in the West and, then, he was not. His friend Ernest Rhys, writing in 1915 said, 'India greatly appreciated the honour'. As for Tagore, himself overwhelmed by the publicity, he admitted to feeling like his 'shelter' had been taken away (Rhys 1915: xiv). Rabindranath was one of the thirteen children born to Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi, in Kolkata in 1861. He belonged to a prominent family of philosophers and religious reformers that occupied an influential position in Bengal. Although Tagore is best known for his poetry, he was also an accomplished novelist, artist, dramatist, essayist and made prolific music compositions. His work gained international prominence just as the winds of nationalism and mutual distrust swept across the European continent and morphed into a conflict in 1914. The poet saw the oncoming war as an assault on humanity and explored its political and cultural consequences through his writings. European intellectuals and literary figures who witnessed the war's brutality at their shores sought 'insights coming from elsewhere' and for many, Tagore's voice 'fit the need splendidly' (Sen 2011). India's own engagement with the war was complex. The country, then a part of the British Empire, supplied the Allies with thousands of troops and its main political organisation, the Indian National Congress, while being 'overtly supportive of the war?', was also 'willing to protest and exploit its consequences'. This article is a study of the complexity of those circumstances and Tagore's own experience of the war as he moved from being 'readily co-opted' for Anglo-imperial propaganda to becoming an independent force against the war and colonialism. The importance of Tagore lies in the capacity of his poetry and writings to 'anticipate and contribute' to the political changes they 'provoked' (Featherstone 2013: 182). As Nandy has argued, 'Tagore was an insider'. In rejecting Tagore, one risks rejecting an 'important part of the modern consciousness' in India (Nandy 1994: 4).

First World War poetry is said to have some 'classic features' such as: the 'lyric testimony of the broken body?mouth, eyes, the 'gashed' head'set against the abstract rhetoric of honour'. It can be argued that a lack of conformity to the 'British constructions of war memory of the dominant model of the trench lyric' has reduced the space for archipelagic and colonial poetry. There is also a 'neat' alignment of the words with moral agendas which are often bound up in the 'politics of cultural memory' (Das 2013b, 2013: 26). For instance, during the war years in Germany, Tagore's works were advertised with those of novelist Franz Werfel to project their

'humanity and pacifism?', and by 1915 Tagore came to be idolised as the 'poet of peace in the noblest sense of the word' (Kaempchen 2012). In another instance, Tagore's poetry, 'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word?', was found in the pocket book of Wilfred Owen, himself a famous Great War poet.^[2] In the context of the war, Tagore thought that India's own multicultural past could offer something valuable to both contemporary India and the world. He found many things to say, some very practical... Nevertheless, the 'listening in the West [was] firmly tuned to more other-worldly themes' and as soon as these ideas fell from favour, he found himself marginalised (Tagore et al. 1997: xviii). This explains a part of the puzzle in understanding his forgotten place in Great War memory.

*The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred
The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash
of steel and the howling verses of vengeance
The hungry self of Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its own shameless feeding
For it has made the world its food*

Above is an excerpt from a poem that Tagore wrote on the last day of the nineteenth century.^[3] Recalling Tagore's departure from England in 1913, Rhys narrated how 'amid the bustle of the railway platform at Euston station?he spoke with concern of the need for a better understanding between his people and ours' (Rhys 1915: 158). That same year in his book, *Sadhana*, Tagore pointed to the increasing aggression in the West: 'they are ever disciplining themselves to fight Nature and other races; their armaments are getting more and more stupendous every day; their machines, their appliances, their organisations are forever multiplying'. He cautioned about the winds of fury again in a 1914 meeting with Rhys where the major energies, he said, were not constructive as they did not make for the 'world's commonwealth?', and would therefore, by nature, 'come into conflict sooner or later' (Rhys 1915: ix, viii). The day after war broke out, Tagore who was at Shantiniketan in Kolkata at that time, gave a lecture titled 'Ma ma hingsi' that emphasised the necessity of abstaining from violence and the meaninglessness of war (Bhattacharya 2013: 72).

Tagore was aware of the war enthusiasm that pervaded all spheres in the early years. He referred to it in his poem, *The Trumpet*, 'Ah, the evil day! Come fighters, carrying your flags and singer with your songs?! In a 1915 letter to his friend, Robert Bridges, Tagore wrote, 'I know what this war is to you' Please let Mrs. Bridges accept my heartfelt sympathy and reverence [for one] whose son is fighting for the cause of liberty in one of the greatest wars in the history of mankind (Tagore et al. 1997: 172). Tagore's sense of a 'moral' standing was, at this point, clearly with the Allies. In fact, in 1915 Tagore's relationship with British officials in India was closer than with Indian nationalists like Gandhi and it was in June of the same year that he was honoured with knighthood. The reality in India, however, was that the coming of the First World War presented a political opportunity (rather than militarism) and, like most of the educated middle-class, Tagore found himself at a 'fragile point' between a 'residual loyalty to the empire' and a rising 'nationalist consciousness' (Das 2014).^[4] Take for instance his 1916 decision to decline an invitation to speak in Vancouver as he disagreed with Canada's immigration laws that discriminated against Indians. In another instance that same year, in a *Modern Review* essay, he wrote of his hope that Bengali youth be been taken as volunteers in the British Expeditionary Force. His belief was that 'if we could sacrifice our lives'so I thought?'in the same cause with the English soldiers, we should at once become real to them, and claim fairness at their hands ever after' (ScoTs; Featherstone 2013: 180).^[5]

Tagore's idea of nationalism was distinct in that he rarely separated it from internationalism. In a 1917 letter to Sir William Rothenstein, Tagore wrote, 'some critics have taxed me with having misunderstood the meaning of the word 'nation' 'Certainly it is based on the idea of competition, conflict and conquest and not that of cooperation. In human language, there are very few words that have an absolute meaning' (Tagore et al. 1997: 188). Even as his later poems of 1918 were 'relocated in broader currents of anti-imperialist activism' and his own criticism for British colonial rule in India grew more intense, he continued to dissociate his criticism of the

Raj from 'any denigration' of British or Western people and culture (Bhattacharya 2013: 71; Featherstone 2013: 181). Das argues that it is this mixing up of war, languages and other histories which are locally more charged than the war that stretch our understanding of the term 'First World War poetry' (Das 2013: 27)

In his book, *Nationalism*, which this article commemorates, Tagore bluntly said, 'Nationalism is a great menace'. He viewed the European war of nations as the 'war of retribution'. He felt that the 'time has come, for the sake of the whole outraged world, Europe should fully know in her own person the terrible absurdity of this thing called the Nation'. For him, 'nation' was just another name for an organisation of politics and commerce, and warned that when it 'becomes all powerful at the cost of harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity'. Ideas of nationalism were rife in India and he lamented that 'this abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India' (Tagore 1917: 133, 58, 22, 24). He further declared at the height of the First World War that 'there is only one history' the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one (Quayes 2011). Tagore's ideas on nationalism, however, were not well received in Japan or the USA, where crowds had gathered expecting to listen to a sage-like poet from a mystical land. In his 1916 address at Tokyo Imperial University, notwithstanding his great admiration for its culture and history, Tagore warned Japan to check its rising nationalist tendencies and stay true to its spiritual values. Sections of the Japanese elite, in reaction to his pacifist ideas, were quick to offer a scathing critique of Tagore. Meanwhile, the poet gradually began to see nationalism itself as illegitimate. Responses to Tagore from different quarters of the world in this period are noteworthy.^[6] In a 1917 letter, GRS Mead, a theosophist and close associate of Annie Besant, wrote to Tagore to say that he did not expect 'the poet of Gitanjali to turn political'. In his philosophy, Bhattacharya argues, 'Tagore was far ahead of his times and he ploughed a lonely furrow' (Tagore et al. 1997: 184; Bhattacharya 2013: 72).^[7]

In 1918, in the light of US involvement in the war, Tagore became keen to go to the US again but his implication in the San-Francisco Hindu-German conspiracy case restricted his entry. Infuriated, Tagore wrote to President Wilson and others but, as the case dragged on, he abandoned his plans and remained in India. In the years that followed, owing to the poor translations of his poetry, the unpopularity of his American lectures attacking nationalism and a changing literary taste during the war, Tagore continued to be marginalised on the world stage. The poet who was received with great adulation during his popular years received such denunciations with 'barely concealed pain' (Tagore et al. 1997: 198-9, 149, xviii). The final curtain, however, came down in 1919 with the *Jalianwalabagh massacre* when General Dyer ordered his soldiers to open fire, killing 379 and wounding 1200 unarmed civilians, and the British imposed martial law in Punjab.^[8] Tagore, shocked by such colonial excesses, decided to renounce his knighthood. In a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, he wrote, 'the time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings' (Tagore et al. 1997: 223). For the British, this renunciation was symbolic of his now firm anti-colonial stance. Yet, his enduring legacy is in that from his youth until even after the Amritsar tragedy Tagore never gave primacy to politics. Following the end of the war, Tagore would once again return to Europe. To his surprise, he was received with overwhelming warmth in war-torn Germany. He concluded that 'it must be that the nations of the West were looking for some new ideal from the East' (Guha 2012).

In 1921, eight years after he had been awarded the Nobel prize, Tagore gave the customary acceptance speech at the Swedish academy where he laid stress on global cooperation and harmony. In the aftermath of the war, as former dominions and colonies became nation states, their war contribution was either marginalised or reconfigured while Tagore himself suffered from 'his being made a parochial possession of Bengal' (Das 2013: 26, Guha 2012). In the study of global experiences of the Great War, Tagore's work is valuable not only for his political and social ideas but also as a link between the criticism of war poetry and the broader field of postcolonial studies (Featherstone 2013: 174). In comparing Tagore's popularity within the language group of Bengalis, Jack argues that there is no equivalent, barring perhaps the popularity of Robert Burns in Scotland, a

hundred years before. While Tagore may still be seen as a 'purely local phenomenon?', Jack argues that Tagore's message was international (Jack 2011). Although the poet was famous in the West as a spiritualist, the essence of his writings lay in his critical reasoning and in his ideas of the universal man who was free (Sen 2011). In contrast to the western memory of Tagore, he was an artist, philosopher and writer, a well-travelled thinker with progressive ideas, an educationalist, ecologist and critical nationalist. His core ideas- of the need for self-determination and to strengthen the nation from below; the universal man and his commitment to education, first through Shantiniketan and then Viswa-Bharati University- transcended borders. During the war years, Tagore continued to accept invitations to give lectures at universities and public gatherings across the world. While he used these platforms to propagate internationalism and humanism, he directed his earnings towards educational reform initiatives. With Tagore's contributions running into thousands, his political critique during the war was far-reaching. Tagore, like most of his contemporaries of the early twentieth century, witnessed the rise of nationalism in both East and West. He lived through the First World War but he also went on to be a part of the popular struggle for Indian freedom, and he was unique in the ideas he stood for and extraordinary in his abilities to express them. Here, it is valuable to remember that Tagore described his own cultural background as 'a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British?': a complete contrast to those who viewed the world then and the world today as a 'clash of civilisations' (Sen 2011).

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NOTES:

[1] In a letter to W. W. Pearson, 25 October 1917 (Tagore et al. 1997: 185-6).

[2] Owen's admiration for Tagore, however, never translated into 'an engagement with his Indian comrades-in-arms' (Das 2013: 25).

[3] The poem '*The Sunset of the Century*' forms the last chapter of his 1917 book, '*Nationalism*' (Tagore 1917: 157).

[4] India's contributions to the war would later contribute to Montagu's 1917 declaration that promised a 'progressive realisation of responsible self-government' as the future aim

[5] In 1915, special legislation in India for Defense of India against sedition in the context of World War 1

[6] Even Gandhi famously commented of Tagore that 'the poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation ' his world of ideas' (Ghosal 2016)

[7]

Tagore was ahead of his times even in his understanding of women, their discontents and dilemmas, in patriarchal societies (Jack 2011).

[8] The Rowlatt Bill, passed despite opposition from the Indian members of Imperial Agitation from 30 March 1919, led to the declaration of martial law in Punjab on 10 April 1919.

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Poppies, Paris and the power of objects

by Matt Leonard

2015-11-18 13:45:09

Only a week ago the remembrance poppy was still in full bloom as millions remembered the lives of millions, and a time when the world was at war. The human experience of the Western Front is now confined to that conflict's material culture, yet its horrors remain ingrained in our minds. The continuing oral testimonies of those who experienced the Second War allow us to 'imagine' that conflict too, although it won't be long until those voices are laid to rest in artefacts and the memories of the memories of others. Despite the remembrance poppy being inextricably linked to those lost in the two World Wars, it stands for all who have died in conflict across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both military and civilian. Yet as those great conflagrations fall further into depths of the past, the poppy becomes harder for younger generations to identify with, in turn making it increasingly difficult for them to 'remember' and identify with the realities of war.

Perhaps this is why, according to recent research conducted by the Royal British Legion, 67% of 18-25 year olds questioned did not know when Armistice Day was, and many who did said they would be surfing the net or using social media during the traditional two minutes silence. To combat this, the Legion enlisted the help of celebrities to remind us of why poppies are worn, and when they should be pinned to lapels. The media, and increasingly social media, was then used to promote this endorsement in the hope that 18-25 year olds would follow their idols in sporting the little red flower, the donations for which are put to such good use by the Legion. But are those in their late teens and early twenties that easily influenced by pop groups, reality television stars and athletes? There was a time when this was the case, but social media has changed the dynamics of fame, as well as how we remember. It has also changed the context in which modern warfare is understood ' something brought into sharp focus last Friday on the streets of Paris.

The events of 1914 irreversibly changed the concept of a battlefield. The industrialisation of war meant that it was no longer possible to adequately define these places ' aeroplanes, submarines, long range artillery and the mass produced machine gun created battle zones, as warfare became a more dynamic entity, as ambiguous as the landscapes on which it was fought. Today the battle zones of modern war are still global, yet the world has seemingly become smaller, constricted by the communications revolution, as the conflicts simultaneously seem further away. Newsreels and newspaper headlines no longer communicate events to us first. Today that is the job of Twitter and Facebook, and although 67% of 18-25 year olds may not know when Armistice Day is, they almost certainly know what occurred in Paris last week.

The hashtag #parisattacks was used in 1.2 million tweets during just 15 minutes on Friday night. The news networks were openly using Twitter for their information and it was impossible to scroll through the messages quick enough as thousands of people relayed the unfolding events in real time. Social media is overwhelmingly the preserve of the younger generation, and although many of these individuals may not have been interested in November 11th or the poppy, it did not take long for new symbols of remembrance to appear on the airwaves

last week. Within hours Jean Jullien's 'Peace for Paris' symbol was being retweeted by thousands, striking a chord with many. Facebook soon followed suit, allowing users to superimpose a Tricolore over their avatar image, enabling a show of solidarity with those in France's capital.

Symbols of memory are contested objects, and just as many discuss the rights and wrongs of wearing a poppy, the appropriate angle of a reverential bow in front of the Cenotaph, and whether or not the little red paper flower still has a place in modern society, so too have these new symbols of remembrance become contested, not over the course of a century, but over the course of a day. On Saturday morning social media was alive with people claiming that the display of an Eiffel Tower peace sign, or a superimposed Tricolore was inappropriate, as it memorialised violent events in Paris at the expense of those in Lebanon and Garissa, Mosul and Aleppo, Homs and Ukraine, The point was valid and echoed the sentiments of Sassoon, McCrae and others, as well as today's incarnation of the Western Front, all of which surround the remembrance poppy in controversy. The desire for lives of the lost in other parts of the world to be heard above the cacophony of gunfire on the boulevards of Paris is understandable, so it is perhaps surprising that the remembrance poppy, or *le Beluet*, has not yet appeared in connection with the Paris attacks. That new symbols are required reflects the way modern warfare has become distanced from those in the West, even as it is increasingly played out closer to home.

That the terrible events in Paris were prioritised over similar attacks elsewhere in the world is a symptom of the Western gaze, aided by the proliferation of social media in the developed world where seemingly everyone has a mobile phone and access to Twitter and Facebook. Should one want to, it is easy to find out about events in Africa or the Middle east, but in an age when the horrors of war are communicated via the fast moving platform of social media, events so far away are quickly forgotten, lost in their seeming ubiquity. So too is the reality that despite the President of France saying his country is now at war, France, and much of the world is already at war, and has been for some time.

1914 and 1915 saw the Battles of the Marne and Mons, poisonous gas unleashed around Ypres, the Battle of Loos, the Battles of the Artois and the disaster at Gallipoli as the world plunged headlong into the Great War. A century later, in 2014 and 2015, the world is still on fire, yet it took a catastrophe in Paris for many to realise. The past two years have seen intense fighting in Ukraine, waged by soldiers wearing no insignia on their uniforms, two passenger planes blown out of the sky, the destruction of large swathes of Syria, gas attacks on civilians, devastating bombings in Africa and the Middle East, the offices of Charlie Hebdo attacked, aid workers beheaded on YouTube, drone attacks, remote assassinations, relentless bombing campaigns on IS strongholds, at least six terror plots foiled in the UK this year alone, and almost as many in France. Arguments have erupted in the last few days as to whether more violence should be applied to those who do not share the West's values, whether suicide bombers should be shot on sight by security forces, and if mass immigration, in large part caused by the continuing world at war, is endangering the lives of those who only experience this ongoing global conflict through social media and nightly news broadcasts.

Warfare since 1914 has created a sensorial No Man's Land, a place where events are distanced from reality by the lack of visceral contact with it. The never-ending casualty lists in the Great War's newspapers, the legion of walking wounded in society, and the dogfights above British streets brought home the horrors of the two World Wars, directly imprinting the sounds and sights on those that witnessed them. Today the delivery methods have changed, desensitising us to the realities of industrial conflict. Another bombing in the Middle East fades into the clutter of online noise and opinions on foreign policy in a manner that the same violence in a European capital cannot. Paris could be London or Madrid or Berlin, whereas many Europeans would not even know where Garissa is, or how to find Beirut on a map. Events like those of Friday night take place with increasing regularity in far off places, but in the twentieth-first century, unlike in the one that preceded it, the sound of this gunfire is not heard in Western Europe and the blood of the innocent does not stain our streets. Until it is, and it does.

In January of this year 'Je Suis Charlie' became a symbol of remembrance in Europe. Ten months later the Eiffel Tower and the Facebook Tricolore took its place. The next attack, and their will be a next, and a next, and a next, will undoubtedly produce similarly powerful symbols, all of which will be contested. Amongst these new artefacts of remembrance the red paper poppy, along with the blue cornflower, will continue to bloom around November each year as we remember the two major, and countless minor, wars of the last century that dominate our understanding of modern conflict. Yet in reality the type of warfare born on the killing fields of France and Belgium in 1914 has never ended, never left us, and perhaps never will. Over the coming days and weeks many will continue to sport the Tricolore on their Facebook page, or change their Twitter image to Jullien's Eiffel Tower, and as a consequence perhaps next November the 18-25 year olds will stop surfing the net for two minutes, pause and think. They may even pin a poppy to their lapels and remember all who have had their lives destroyed by the continuing existence of industrialised conflict, not just over the last century, but today, yesterday and last week, in a world that is still very much at war.

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