

Hey, look at this!

Neil Richardson writes 12 articles about his own poetic work and what people, ideas and influences led him to write some of his poems. The series will last for the twelve months of 2010.

In Flanders Fields - 2 Sonnets written on a journey to Flanders, 1988

Wipers Wags

Perhaps your roughhouse joke and jaunty song
Encouraged you, at first, to "smile, smile, smile"?
Still buoyed with hope and ignorance, along
The road to Ypres you came, with "style, boys, style"?
"Where are we now?" - "In France, you stupid prat!"
"I saw the sign, but couldn't speak the French."
"It must be Wipers, mate. We'll call it that."
They did, in each uneducated trench.
The joke, of course, before too long wore thin
As men wiped from their eyes blood, sweat and bile;
Got shock, went dumb, lost sight and friends and limb.
The war, from Wipers Wags, wiped off the smile
And left them only with a hideous grin.
In death, they sing "It never was worthwhile."



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.



These two photographs of graves are taken in Tyne Cot Cemetery, a short distance from Ieper, the most visited British war cemetery in the world.

The first time I saw the cemetery it hit me how the graves stand like soldiers on parade, awaiting the shouted commands of the parade master.

Everyone in Britain of my age has heard of Ypres. It is etched on the collective memory, a scar, a blemish. It is a fearful symbol of pointless death and cold-blooded military madness. It is also a symbol of human courage and optimism in the face of total disaster and the wholesale carnage, the savage butchery of human beings, from both sides of the war.

I first personally encountered Ypres by mistake. The year was 1988 and I was in Belgium on holiday at a holiday village, living in what was described as a Polder House. Toby was coming up to 17, Ben to 15 and Hannah was 7 years old. We were enjoying the facilities of the site, the swimming pool, the tennis, the indoor activities, and then we went for a drive in the countryside to see what it was like.

We paused at a cross-road and as I perused a sign post, I noticed an old one, mixed up with the bright and shiny EU-approved road signs. It was a simple wooden arrow pointing down a road and simply said **Ypres**. The bells started to clang in my head. I then twigged that the newer sign pointing to a place called **leper** was in fact pointing to the same place. The Belgians know the town as leper. When it was under French influence, they called it Ypres.

Without consultation with my fellow holiday-makers, I knew I had to go there immediately. We arrived and from the first moment I saw leper, I knew I loved the place. Here I felt something very special, deeply embedded as a place of terrifying warfare, deeply embedded as the place to which my grandfather came with the Manchester Regiment to face months of misery and the high expectation of painful injury and death.



These two pictures of the same building, the Grote Markt, epitomise the destructiveness of war on the town of leper. The beauty and tranquillity of this lovely town was destroyed for several years and my grandfather, Corporal George Kaye was part of it. The reconstruction of this fine building was a major act of faith and today it is a stunning site for local residents and visitors alike. I have been to leper several times since 1988, and the Grote Markt never fails to stun and surprise me by its enchanting beauty set as it is in the lovely square at the heart of leper, surrounded by hotels, restaurants and pavement cafes.

On that first unscheduled visit to leper, I was deeply impressed and the next day, as I sat on the patio of our little Polder House, I found words coming into my head, words of an emotional intensity, words of passion and disbelief, words of pity and regret, in fact the words you see on the previous page, two sonnets written with my grandfather and his generation very much in my mind and my heart. I tried to put myself into their shoes, to imagine the horror of that war and the battles of Passendale in particular, and I have to say that my mind resisted this on the grounds of protecting my sanity.

I have often found that the deeper emotions I feel may be expressed more powerfully through the structured form of a sonnet, with its demands for a regular meter and a planned rhyming scheme. Strangely, the wilder feelings are somehow conveyed better through the constraints rather than allowed to flow freely.

I imagine leper filled with combatants, some on their way to the front line in trepidation and some on their way back for refreshing time off duty, walking with relief or even disbelief that they were still alive. 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 and the home-sick and the war-sick. When they came off duty for a short time of respite, many of them went to Poperinge, just a few miles away but still within ear-shot of the continuing battles. So what was there to do in Pop? Well, the 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 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.

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 the original features, including odd and witty notices, reflecting the optimism and clear mind of the founder.



For visitors to leper, there is a chance before dinner to attend the Menin Gate at 8pm to hear the Last Post. The Menin Gate is a huge War Memorial, covered with the names of casualties and spreading over the very road along which the soldiers would march off to the front-line trenches. The leper 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 with me my grandfather's medals and clutched them in my hand as the Last Post was sounded out. 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.

I have read many of the poems written by soldiers of the great war and others, reflecting on the cataclysmic events of 1914-1918. My little sonnets may not have the ring of the soldier in them, but I wrote them out of a deep sense of commitment to honour and cherish my grandfather and the soldiers of that terrible war.

I visited Tyne Cot cemetery again in the winter of 2009. They have added a new interpretation centre just east of the cemetery and one of the aspects of this is a continuous reading out of the names of those who died in the Great War, along with their age. As each name is read out, an image of the individual appears on a screen. It creates an eerie feeling. In the centre, I found a leaflet asking visitors to respond to the question:

“Did your grandfather fight in Passchendale 1917? Did he give his life?”

I felt angry, and wrote the following poem in response.

Another Old Lie!

*“Did your grandfather fight in Passchendale 1917?
Did he give his life?”*

A loaded question, that.
My grandfather survived
but shell-shocked,
his life spiralled downwards
into an early grave.

Did any Tommy give his life?
Give it?
Willingly?

By no means!

Life was taken, not given away,
either by the enemy with well-aimed
shells, gas and bullets;
or by the cruel indifference
to humanity
shown by the ruling class in charge.

Death in the trenches was death,
from wherever it came,
and life was cheap and wasted
for no real gain.

The immorality of this war
increasingly defies description.

However, for Tommy and for Fritz,
life was taken,
not given,
and who by, after ninety years
is plain to see.



The reference to an old Lie, is of course, a reference to Wilfred Owen's magnificent poem, **Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori**, which the poet describes as "the old Lie." I think I spotted another one, embedded in the question posed to those visiting Tyne Cot in 2009.