



Memoirs of the Great War

Graham Davis

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

(Laurence Binyon, *For the Fallen*, 1869-1943)

Yet how to remember them? We have the annual rituals: wearing the poppy with pride or guilt, the laying of wreaths, and the haunting trumpet sounding the Last Post. The Great War is also replayed to us through gaunt faces of men in the trenches captured on grainy, black and white film. The war poets are a constant memorial of the early euphoria and the sickening scale of slaughter on all sides of the conflict. At home, we are reminded of the heroic contribution of women in the munitions factories and elsewhere that culminated in the Parliamentary vote granted in 1918. There is no shortage of material to commemorate the military and domestic fronts of the First World War.

A hundred years after the war began historians offer conflicting accounts of the meaning of the war supposed to end all wars yet became the harbinger of the Second World War twenty years later.¹ An important source for historians in recovering ordinary experiences are the letters and memoirs written at the time or in retrospect surfacing decades later. The distinction is vital in understanding the mindset of those who endured the war years and chose to set down their experiences at different times. Contemporary and reconstructed memoirs offer different perspectives reflecting the changing climate of opinion over time. This was forcibly impressed on me during the 1970s when a group of army veterans were brought together with a number of History students to discuss the war. The surviving soldiers aged in their seventies were questioned by twenty year olds. A generally anti-war sentiment among the students, redolent of the time, was met with a stiff-backed pride and patriotism from the veterans. Their respective worlds were miles apart.

Memory theorists call 'constructive memory' that which integrates present and past events.² When constructive memories, derived from a printed text, are shared by a group of people, they create the impression of a unified collective history. Individual memoirs are shared by literate members of society as a whole and become seen as the same.

It is instructive how literary tropes associated with the Irish Famine can be paralleled with similar forms of description drawn from the First World War. Most representations of the Famine tend to be made up of static, iconic tableaux, each existing in a single timeless moment. John Mitchel, as narrator, saw the starving peasantry through the windows of a moving coach and employed the literary device of referring to the observed reality as far worse than mere words could describe.³ An often repeated form of words used by commentators to describe the spectre of the starving poor was 'the skeleton forms of the living'. A contemporary inquest held in 1848 created a haunting image of suffering that endured:

fig 1: **British Cemetery at Ypres.** *Photo taken by Jasper Davis*

A poor man whose name we could not learn...lay down on the roadside where shortly he was found dead, his face turned to the earth, and a portion of the grass and turf on which he lay masticated in his mouth.⁴

The skeleton and green-mouthed corpse were images subsequently appropriated in the propaganda war that accompanied the struggle for land ownership and the cause of Irish nationalism. By the end of the century such images were so well known that they constituted a form of collective memory.

Compare these images of suffering with those most associated with World War I: rat-infested trenches, the groans of wounded comrades left behind to die untended, the gruesome sight of dismembered limbs, bodies blown to bits by shell fire; stomach-churning descriptions of the devastating slaughter of industrial scale warfare. These descriptions, unlike those commenting on the Famine, were by participants, eye witnesses who experienced the horrors of war first hand. Nevertheless, the process of how iconic images become part of a shared experience and defining signifiers of the event, have similarities. Wilfred Owen's poem, *Dulce et Decorum est* must be a candidate for an enduring set of images taught in schools and universities that combine an individual voice with a shared experience, albeit second hand.

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.*⁵

Accounts from the War Front:

Over 1,800 men from the Bath area died in the Great War – more than 2 per cent of the population.⁶ Bath has the distinction of the grave in St. James' Cemetery of Private J. Viles, Somerset Light Infantry, aged 27, which records he died on 4th August 1914, the day war was declared. Bath was also the birthplace of Harry Patch, the 'last Tommy' to survive the trenches.⁷

Ralph Staight joined the 10th Royal Hussars as a cavalryman, transferred to the Somerset Light Infantry, was wounded at Ypres in 1915, and was killed in battle in 1917, having reached the rank of 2nd lieutenant. A small collection of letters written by him from France to his parents at 'Battlefields', Lansdown, Bath survive for the years 1914-15. These letters reflect the optimism of the early part of the war and also the nonchalance characteristic of the well-heeled Englishman.⁸

My dear Mother and Father,

So sorry not to have written before, but after a little jaunt up to ----- as reinforcement I was foolish enough to get a slight touch of influenza, nothing much, but just enough to make one feel very bad. I think you both know all about that complaint. Anyway I am in hospital, this is the third day, and now I am to be moved to one of the base hospitals I would far rather stay here, but the powers that be!!

The building is really [sic] a training college for priests, but it makes a ripping hospital. This ward is really [sic] the dining hall and is a huge great room.

Well to begin as near as I can to where I left off in my last letter ----The rumour about being moved in to winter quarters was only a rumour after all. We all had to parade at about 6.30 am (you can guess the scramble to get the horses properly saddled in the dark ---- we were minus lights of any sort bar matches). When we did get fixed up no one knew in the least where we were going, all we had heard was "Winter Quarters".

It was a fine sight to see the whole crowd on the move. A long snake winding along the roads ---- I was in the middle and hardly ever saw the leaders and never the last part so you can guess what it was like. We halted at midday near the big Aerodrome where we had splendid views of some of the flying. It was very windy and the machines were bumping frightfully. Later on we were moved up to a place about half a mile to the right of one of our heavy guns ---- most horrible noise ----

Thank you so much for the parcels and the papers which I received just before I got the beastly flu. I don't know what I should have done without the books they help to while away the time.

A German aeroplane has just been over the town. Everyone was very excited, as the Sunday before last they amused themselves by dropping bombs.

Just think, next Friday will be Christmas day. I have not been ill at Xmas time since I went to Hamilton House ages and ages ago. I must not grumble, things might easily have been much worse, and I am well looked after so there is no need to worry. (20th December 1914)

Letter from Caroley Barn, Rouen, France, (22nd Decemeber 1915)

My dear Father,

I was so sorry to hear that you had been ill. I suppose it is that beastly flu, that is worrying everyone out here as well as at home. But still "It's an ill wind etc." and this wind seems to have taken you both to Bournemouth, I for one am not sorry to hear it, for then perhaps Mother will do what Dr. Frost tells her.

Thank you most awfully for the watch which arrived quite safely yesterday morning. It is splendid to have a watch again; you have no idea what it is never to know the time except by the position of the sun (I am getting quite smart at that now) which does not often favour us these days, unfortunately.

We are expecting to hear of things happening very soon, as there are fairly big moves on here. The rumour is that the war starts at the end of next month. Starts from our point of view, I mean, starts on and in Germany, and finish at the end of July. I don't think anyone wants another winter out here. One of the greatest jokes among the Tommies is about the advertisements which describe the beauties of "Sunny France". They have other names for France, many of them would not bear repeating, in fact most of them would not be found in a dictionary.

Letter from Ralph to his father (9th May 1915) – now back with his regiment

We are back in the billets where the Regiment has spent the greater part of the time since Xmas. I don't know how long we are going to remain here but I have heard that we move again tomorrow night. It is a splendid way of seeing the country, the only trouble is that many of the places one would like to see are passed at night. I hope some day to have a proper look at Ypres, so far I have only been fairly close to it and then it was too dark to see anything much. The only thing of excitement and that wasn't much, was a church which got set alight by a German shell.

Stefan Westmann was a German medical student when called up for national service in April 1914. He served as a Corporal with the 29th later as a Medical Officer. When the Nazis came to power, he emigrated to Britain and ran a successful gynaecological practice on Harley Street, London. He was interviewed for a BBC programme on First World War veterans in the 1960s.⁹ This is a remarkably graphic yet humane account of life in the German trenches. It is quite hostile to the French enemy at the same time admiring of the British 'Tommies'.

The German Army of the Kaiser consisted of 800,000 conscripts. There were hardly any professional soldiers. Amongst these 800,000 men they had ten thousand who were called One Year's Volunteers. That means mostly students and men with higher certification of education.

The medical students had to serve only for half a year with the Infantry. And then, after they were qualified the next half year as Medical Officers.

In February 1914, I, as a medical student received my call up papers ordering me to report for military duty in a clean state and free of vermin at an Infantry Regiment in Freiburg in Baden. The first of April I joined up and after approximately four months military training I was a full soldier in my regiment.

We had no idea of any impending war. We had no idea that danger of war exists. We served in our blue and red uniforms but on the 1st August 1914 mobilisation orders came, we had to put on grey uniforms and at 2 o'clock in the morning of the 4th August, 1914, we marched out of Fribourg [sic] with torches.

Silent, without any music, without any singing. No enthusiasm. We were really packed down by our luggage and our kit which weighed per man 75 pounds.

We crossed the Rhine over a very wobbly pontoon bridge, into Elders. We marched, mostly at night until we approached a huge forest in front of the Elders town of Mulhouse, or as we called it, Mülhausen.

The focus of attention of the whole world was centred almost exclusively to the northern most part of the fighting line, namely to that part of the German Army which invaded Belgium. Nobody had any idea outside France and outside the French General Staff, that

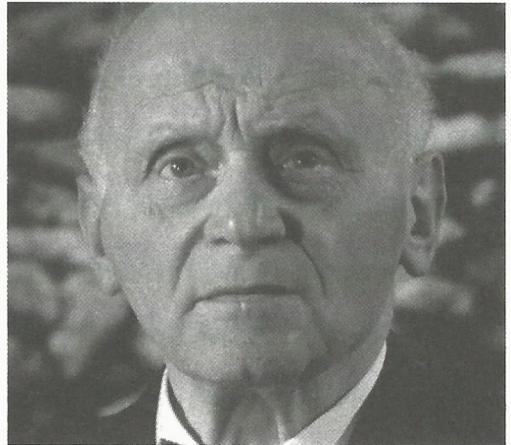


fig 2: Stefan Westmann (BBC)

the whole French Army, the First French Army was poised to jump into Alsace, to cross the Rhine and to go into southern German.

We came to this big forest. Miles and miles of nothing but forest with dense under wood and there the whole division, the 29th German Division, was hidden.

A solitary French aeroplane came, didn't see a thing and returned. The French Army, in the meantime, had entered Mulhouse, or Mülhausen, and there they celebrated victory. They brought with them coloured posters which proclaimed that victory would be there, *la gloire, la liberation d'Alsace*, which by the way was completely German speaking and German inhabited part of the world, and they celebrated and got drunk.

They didn't even care to put out sentries at approaches to the town and at 4 o'clock in the morning on the 10th August we left our hideout, we marched in single line through very high cornfields and without saying a word, in complete silence we entered the town of Mulhouse.

There we found the French soldiers partly drunk, partly asleep and only comparatively small resistance was put up by Alpine troops. The French retreated in such a haste that we actually had to run after them. At first we found heaps of French army blankets which the soldiers had thrown away.

Then we found French greatcoats. Then we found French knapsacks. Then we found French belts with ammunition pouches full of cartridges. And finally in barns hidden or sitting just on the roadside, the exhausted French soldiers, who waited only to be taken prisoner.

The French 7th Army Corps retreated till they came really under the muzzles of the big guns of the French quarters of Belforts. We took the French soldiers with us and then new came to a place called Altkirch.

Altkirch saw some action before in so far as the French Army Corps attacked two German squadrons of Light Cavalry which held them up for ten hours.

In Altkirch we were stationed, we were billeted in a factory. We were fast asleep when all of a sudden a terrific infantry fire started. We rushed out and we fired in the direction where the bullets came from. The reason for this firing was that the German sentry challenged a light and as there was no reply he fired at that light.

The bullet hit a wall next to another German sentry who thought that he was fired on and fired back, and so two German companies fired at each other like mad. And the whole reason was that the midwife attending the birth of a baby moved about with a lamp in her hand.....

We only went on and on and then we were entrained again in cattle trucks to be brought against the fortress of Antwerp. Meanwhile we entered Péronne and we were marched through Valenciennes and Douai into the coal district of the Pas des Calais.

There we dug at first small trenches, slit trenches, each man for himself. Then we connected the trenches and then the whole trench system from the North Sea to the Alps was formed. In front of our trenches near La Bassée was a brickworks. The French used to put their bricks together as high as houses and on top of these houses there were machine guns which prevented us from going near them.

One day we got the order to attack these brickworks and to take them. The only possible means to take them was by a surprise attack in full daylight and we got orders to do so. We cut zigzag lines through our barbed wire entanglements and at noon we went over the top. We ran approximately a hundred yards when we came under machine gunfire which was so terrific that the losses were so staggering that we got orders to lie down and to seek shelter. Nobody dared to lift his head because the very moment the machine gunners saw

any movement they let fly.

And then the British artillery opened up. And the corpses and the hats and the arms and the legs flew about and we were cut to pieces.

All of a sudden the enemy fire ceased. Complete silence came over the battlefield and one of the chaps in my shell hole asked me, 'I wonder what they're up to?'

Another one answered, 'perhaps they are getting tea.' The third one says, 'don't be a fool. Do you see what I see?' And we looked over the brim of our shell hole and there between the brick heaps, out there came a British soldier with a Red Cross flag which he waved and he was followed by stretcher bearers who came slowly towards us and collected our wounded.

We got up, still completely dumb from fear of death and helped them to bring our wounded into our trenches. One hour later a British Army doctor came out, again with a Red Cross flag and he arranged a truce for two hours to let us collect our dead ones. I never forgot this generosity of the British, which I must say took place shortly before Christmas, 1914.

Near La Bassée in the slit trenches we lay in and in front of us we had the French trenches, dug in, dug out, we really didn't know anymore what was the first trench, the front trench and what were the reverse trenches.

One day we got orders to storm a French position. We got in and my comrades fell right and left of me, but then I was confronted by a French Corporal. He with his bayonet at the ready and I with my bayonet at the ready.

For a moment I felt the fear of death and in a fraction of a second I realized that he was after my life exactly as I was after his. I was quicker than he was. I tossed his rifle away and I ran my bayonet through his chest. He fell, put his hand in the place where I hit him and then I thrust again. Blood came out of his mouth and he died.¹⁰

I felt physically ill. I nearly vomited. My knees were shaking and I was quite frankly ashamed of myself. My comrades, I was a corporal there then, were absolutely undisturbed by what had happened. One of them boasted that he had killed a poilu with the butt of his rifle, another one had strangled a captain, a French captain.

A third one had hit somebody over the head with his spade and they were ordinary men like me. One of them was a tram conductor, another one a commercial traveler, two were students, the rest were farm workers, ordinary people who never would have thought to do any harm to anyone.

How did it come about that they were so cruel? I remembered then that we were told that the good soldier kills without thinking of his adversary as a human being. The very moment he sees in him a fellow man, he is not a good soldier anymore. But I had in front of me the dead man, the dead French soldier and how would I liked him to have raised his hand.

I would have shaken his hand and we would have been the best of friends. Because he was nothing like me but a poor boy who had to fight, who had to go in with the uniform of another nation, who spoke another language, but a man who had a father and mother and a family perhaps and so I felt.

I woke up at night sometimes drenched in sweat because I saw the eyes of my fallen adversary, of the enemy, and I tried to convince myself what would have happened to me if I wouldn't have been quicker than he, what would have happened to me if I wouldn't have thrust my bayonet first into his belly.

Why was it that we soldiers stabbed each other, strangled each other, went for each other like mad dogs? What was it that we, who had nothing against them personally, fought with them to the very end and death?

We were civilized people after all. But I felt that the culture we boasted so much about is only a thin lacquer which chipped off the very moment we come into contact with cruel things like real war. To fire at each other from a distance, to drop bombs is something impersonal.

But to see each other's white in the eyes and then to run with a bayonet against a man it was against my conception and against my inner feeling.

In June, 1915, I was wounded. A shell exploded behind me and I caught several shell splinters, one of them penetrated my pelvis. I was brought back to a field hospital and later to a base hospital in St Quentin where they found that I was otherwise all right apart from bruises...and then a few weeks time I was ready for duty.

I was expecting my commission as an Infantry Officer which we called in those days an express ticket to eternity, because the life of a Subaltern in the trenches was not counted by months, but by days or weeks.

They found out that I was a medical student and so I was transferred to the Medical Corps and was commissioned to the rank of Second Lieutenant, or as you would call it in the British Army, a Probationer Surgeon.

Battle of the Somme, 1916

For 7 days and nights we were under incessant bombardment. Day and night the shells, heavy and light ones came upon us, our dugouts crumbled. They fell upon us and we had to dig ourselves and our comrades out.

Sometimes we found them suffocated, sometimes smashed to pulp. Seven days and seven nights. Soldiers in the bunkers became hysterical. We wanted to run out and fights developed to keep them in the comparative safety of our deep bunkers.

Even the rats became hysterical. They came into our flimsy shelters to seek refuge from this terrific artillery fire. Seven days and seven nights we had nothing to eat, nothing to drink, but constantly fire, shell after shell burst upon us. And then the British Army went over the top.

The very moment we felt that the British artillery fire was directed against the reserve positions, German machine gunners crawled out of the bunkers, reddened eyes, sunken eyes, dirty, full of blood from the blood of there [sic] fallen comrades and opened up terrific fire.

The British Army had horrible losses and they'd estimated that they lost within the first 10 minutes of the Battle of the Somme fourteen thousand dead. Our regiment lost approximately seventy five per cent of its men and after ten days in the front line we were withdrawn....

1918

A week or so before the beginning of the German offensive in Flanders, in April 1918, I was attached to Infantry Assault Battalion and my orders were to establish and advance a first aid post....Near Merville I came to a British field hospital, completely intact and there I saw for the first time since years the abundance of material, equipment which we didn't know anymore about. Amongst other things I found cases full of surgical gloves. The German doctors had to operate with their bare fingers. They had to go into the purulent and contaminated wounds with their bare hands and

the only thing to wash our hands with was a kind of sand soap. Two parts sand, one part soap.....You know the German Army and the German doctors didn't have bandages! What we used was scrap paper to wind round the wounds of the soldiers and one can imagine how long that lasted. They just dissolved as quickly as many of the greatcoats our soldiers had to wear which were made of paper fabric. We didn't have any cotton wool anymore.

The only thing we had was a kind of cellulose and this we put on the wounds because we didn't have even gauze or this little bit of gauze we had which was soaked in blood and puss had to be washed again and again, sterilised again and again until it freely fell to pieces. Such was the shortage at the end of the war.

Harry Patch died aged 111 in 2009. He was famously known as 'the last Tommie [sic]'. In a letter written in 2007 he described his experiences as part of the 'PBI – Poor Bloody Infantry':

We weren't heroes. We didn't want to be there. We were scared, we all were, all the time. Any man who tells you he wasn't is a damn liar. Life in the trenches was dirty, lousy, and unsanitary. The barrages that preceded battle were one long nightmare and when we went over the top it was just mud, more mud mixed with blood and you struggled through it with dead bodies all around you, any one of whom could have been me.¹¹

It was just shell holes, and the team made its way forward in a line. It was absolutely sickening to your own dead and wounded, some calling for stretcher-bearers, others semi-conscious and beyond all help, and the German wounded lying about too,

and you couldn't stop to help them. I saw one German – I should think he'd been dead some time – well, a shell had hit him and all his side and his back were ripped up, and his stomach was out on the floor, a terrible sight. Others were blown to pieces; it wasn't a case of seeing them with a nice bullet hole in their tunic, far from it, and there I was, only nineteen years old. I felt sick...¹²

We came across a lad from A Company. He was ripped open from his shoulder to his waist by shrapnel, and lying in a pool of blood. When we got to him, he looked at us and said, 'Shoot me.' He was beyond all human help, and before we could draw a revolver he was dead. And the final word he uttered was 'Mother!'

I was with him in the last seconds of his life. It wasn't a cry of despair, it was a cry of surprise and joy....Yet I'm positive that when he left this world, wherever he went, his mother was there, and from that day I've always remembered that cry and that death is



fig 3: Harry Patch (17th June 1898 – 25th July 2009)

not the end.¹³

We shall remember them, the survival of memoirs ensure that the memory lives on. Yet our remembering is subject to competing narratives on the meaning of the Great War. Do we retain the official view, endorsed by some politicians and military historians, that the sacrifice was honourable in defence of the traditional policy of maintaining the balance of power against the threat of German hegemony? Or do we subscribe to the view that Britain should have remained neutral in a conflict that ultimately led to the Russian Revolution, the break up of the Austrian and Ottoman empires, and the rise of Nazi Germany?

As for Britain, the cost of the war was horrendous, not merely from the huge loss of British and Colonial troops, but in Britain's devastating decline in economic and political status. Do we dishonour the dead on all sides in the war by raising the question – was it worth the ultimate sacrifice?

The Home Front in Bath:

Louie Stride was born in Bath in 1907. Her memoirs published in 1985 reveal a very poor childhood. Her mother was a prostitute and she lived a life on the streets.¹⁴ The account is an example of reconstructed memory recalling a childhood in old age. Professor John Burnett, an authority on the subject, considered Louie's account one of the finest examples of working-class autobiography.

So the 1914 War loomed nearer, and I was 7 years, 2 months when it was declared. I remember the day so well, and all the regulations it brought with it. The troops started being recruited, and bands marching, and the songs that were sung. I knew them all, 'Blighty' and 'Tipperary' and 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. I had a very retentive memory and could sing them all. I daresay my bit of Welsh ancestry made me a music lover too. All the songs of earlier years I could sing to myself, the ones my mother sang to keep me quiet. 'Who were you with last night?' and 'I wouldn't leave my little wooden hut for you', and 'Bill Bailey won't you come home', and poems too.

So it went until 1915, we were living a bit better now, not quite such hunger. My mother got very bold and brought men back to the attic, and I would discreetly disappear. It would be soldiers, and of course no shortage of them as Bath had a lot of big houses and schools that were taken over as billets. In 1916, there was a contingent of Canadian soldiers who came to Prior Park College, and one of these called regularly. In fact, he was there so much that the others kept away. He had some reason to stay in England, and to my great joy, they were married. Just fancy that, for me a Dad at last! Now nobody could scoff and sneer at me any more. Of course me being nine years old didn't know as much as I thought I did!

However, it meant my mother would not go out 'on the streets' any more, and she didn't either, also it meant food, and that was my main gain. But alas, I also didn't know he was a hopeless alcoholic. One was used so much to drunkenness in the poor it didn't get noticed. He was a slightly wounded soldier, in the knee, nothing much, he was pulling a fast one to get out of the war and all its carnage. He was in the Royal Highlanders of Canada, and was quite a good looking man especially in uniform. He was a good deal older than my mother. The Canadians were paid a lot more than the British Tommies, and it used to cause friction I well remember. What did I care if he was drunk? I used to wait down the street and hold his hand all the way home. I was so proud my mum was married, and believe me I told the world, no hiding away for me any more I was as good as the rest.



fig 4: **Louie Stride at Walcot Infants School. Louie is next to her class teacher.** *Photograph courtesy of Louie Stride*

Whether they went off and got married in a drunken bout, and he didn't know what he was doing I just can't think, but the fact remained, and I think he did regret it. My mother, as I said earlier on was odd. Whether it was the fact of having me and being turned out, which was a heinous sin in those days, or the resultant starvation, or maybe the drugs she was using not to contract venereal disease, I just don't know but her mental condition certainly was deteriorating. He didn't seem to notice, and me? Well she was always queer and that was it. It was only in a quiet way, she would sit by herself for hours on end and talk to herself very quietly and she would crochet and knit. She was very industrious in this way, but at the last corner of her lace tablecloth, or whatever, she would go awry. Poor soul, who knows what torments of conscience she suffered? She died many years after in an asylum...

Until his demob he had to live at Prior Park where he was stationed, and from there he could bring food, cheese and such like things, at least we were never so hungry as in former times. But came a rude awakening, didn't the Agent find out about the wedding, and we had to go at once, such a scene. I don't know whether he thought she was a permanent mistress or whatever, but I do know we never had any money or food from him just the free attic for services rendered. Any way, my step father had to move fast to get us out and our belongings. He got a most dreadful place, all he could find in a hurry, and cheap it had to be as he had not received the gratuity, only bits and pieces at a time, and that was soon disposed of in the pubs on himself, my mother never drank intoxicants at any time.

It was a one up and one down cottage, a misnomer, owned by Bowlers, aerated water company and plumbers, in a small back yard in behind a row of houses in Great Corn Street. It must have been there before the terrace of houses was built, they were large houses and I daresay at one time good class people dwelt there, and maybe this hovel, for that was all it was, belonged to the stables or some such thing. It was so dark after our lovely attic, tap in the yard, but no other facilities that I can recall, we must have used a bucket! We moved in, but the next thing I knew my step father had joined up with the British Expeditionary Forces. What made him do this? It must have been the fact that he couldn't get a job, or rather he did get one but it was street sweeping and he was a bit above that. Suffice to say he joined up and we were back to square one as they say. One thing he didn't do a bunk as he could have done, we wouldn't have been any the wiser, but we thought he had as the Army allowance was such a long time coming.

I used to sit out on the pavement obeying my mother's instruction to wait for the postman. Of course, I was not going to school, in fact I did very little schooling the whole of my school life, between having no boots to wear, I wore hob nails a size too small always as they were a shilling cheaper or else no food, and I suffered so frequently from fainting and nervous collapse that I just was not able. But the new Education Act was in force and in consequence my mother was summoned for my non-attendance on two occasions. The first was a caution, and the next time a fine of five or ten shillings luckily after the soldiers allowance came through. The forms had not been completed correctly, hence the long hold up. We did get the back money and such feeds we had then...

The woman who lived in the house in front of us, number fourteen, was a big, fat, motherly woman, named Mrs Perrett. She had six children, one was a cripple, a boy younger than myself. My mother always kept to herself, and if anything was required, it was my job to do her bidding. She wasn't cruel or unkind in any way except for ignoring my presence more or less. Her attitude had always been that as I wasn't supposed to be there, I wasn't, and I was ignored accordingly, but she could be very violent if aroused, and she always threatened me that she would send me to the nuns if I ever told anyone I was hungry. This was because once when I was much younger and we passed a cake shop in Cheap Street, Shapleys (afterwards Marks and Werry's), and I yelled my head off. I wanted one of the buns in the window, and a passer-by fetched a policeman, and I never asked or let anyone know by word or deed ever again that I was hungry. The threat of the orphanage and the nuns hung over me like the proverbial sword of Damocles...

So I would sit on the cold pavement with a pin and pick out these snails. It would be good protein I daresay! Had the best myself and took some into my mother, but not everything, she would be too suspicious as to how I came by it. There were dozens and dozens of children like myself, deprived and certainly had the makings of juvenile delinquents, but I don't think many of us did. We all stole, yes, but only for our immediate needs. On our way to school was a fish and fruiterers, it was run by a man named Harry Wetten, and I'm quite sure he used to shut his eyes to an awful lot. The veg and fruit would be outside and as we went by we would surreptitiously steal, or rather 'whip' a carrot or anything, even a cabbage leaf, and I remember one time I got away with a kipper. I ate it raw, as it was in the playground and stunk the classroom out! Nobody bothered, they thought I was lucky!

Just about this time, 1917, the powers that be recognized there was a problem with hunger among some families, and decided to do something about it. So a 'canteen' came into being. It was in St. Michael's Place, or St. Michael's something... It was in the charge of an ex-navy man, I believe by name of Mark Lane, he did the cooking I know. His

wife was a very superior person, very much like Queen Alexandra, she wore high necked blouses and was a very austere person. Children from various schools were picked out for this special dinner every day, and I was (thanks to the governess Miss Roach), one of the lucky ones. Such food I can't describe, the smell alone would make me faint with delight at the anticipation of good things to come. One day we would have lovely thick soup, and Mark Lane was seemingly severe, but one could see the pleasure behind the so masked face when he saw the gusto and enjoyment. We had second helpings, too, till everything was gone. Then another day it would be steamed spotted dick, a pudding cooked in a cloth, and unmasked at the end of the table, and gee whiz that nectar and ambrosia and a bit of sugar was something to be talked about all the afternoon. There were three from our school! Perhaps I hadn't better mention names. Then another day would be rice on a plate, another day rice pudding, one didn't have the two, it was war time remember, and things were going pretty badly. Another day would be bread and cheese, and cocoa usually on a Friday, as this did not entail much washing up. The cheese was old hard stuff put through a mincer, and we had it in 'nobs' on the bread, and squashed down into it with our fingers. Famine did you say? It sure was, but not so bad as of yore for me, and I was well! Really nothing much the matter with me what a good meal couldn't cure...

One Sunday, when Bath had a large quota of wounded soldiers stationed in various camps and hospitals around, a couple of older girls took me for a walk. They were out for 'pick ups', I knew quite well what they were up to, but [felt] very important to think they wanted my company, me nine years old and so tiny! One knew the soldiers by the blue uniform they wore. [Going up Jupiter was the local slang for taking money from soldiers near the statue in the dell in Victoria Park.]...

So 1917 passed, and odd letter [came] from 'somewhere in France' for us, and sometimes two or three weeks together, which was read and re-read, and carried around by myself as I was so lonely. Some houses fared much worse. They had telegrams or missives from the War Office saying [a] son or husband was 'missing presumed killed'. One sorrow was everybody's sorrow and everybody helped and sympathized. In spite of the odd rows they were all best friends in times of trouble, and everyone knew everybody's business, some of the families being established in the area for many years...

It was very noticeable the shortage of men, most of [the houses] were inhabited by women on their own, mostly with children, either having been left in the lurch by men they had lived with, some were genuine war widows, and two in the street had husbands working...

Some of the women took in soldiers who deserted, usually colonials, Australians were very much in evidence. I remember one young woman, who lived in the little house on the corner, who had a very smart Australian hidden there for quite a long time, but she was rounded on, and the military police came and took him one day. She was very upset, I remember, and some while after she had a baby girl which I used to mind while she went out charring. I wonder if the child ever knew? I don't expect so. I can remember all the names but won't divulge!

Notes

1. Max Hastings, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War*, (William Collins, 2014), Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (Penguin, 2009 ed), Margaret Macmillan, *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe abandoned peace for the First World War*, (Profile Books, 2014).
2. Chris Morash, 'Literature, Memory, Atrocity', in Chris Morash and Richard Hayes, editors, *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine*, (Irish Academic Press, 1996, pp. 110-118. See also Graham Davis, 'Reconstructed Memory: Irish Emigrant Letters from the Americas', in Britta Olinder and Werner Hu
3. John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* Glasgow, 1861, p.147;. see also Graham Davis, 'Making History: John Mitchel and the Great Famine', in *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion*, edited by Paul Hyland and Neill Sammells, (Macmillan, 1991), pp. 98-115.
4. For memory theorists on 'constructive memory', see Gillian Cohen, *Memory in the Real World*, (East Sussex, 1989) and Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980). For an interesting discussion of memory and the First World War, see Robert Tombs, *The English and their History*, (Allen Lane, 2014), pp. 639-644.
5. Wilfred Owen, Dulce Et Decorum Est, *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, BBC Books, (first published 1998, 2006 edition), p. 20.
6. The most authoritative account of Bath and Great War is Andrew Swift, *All Roads Lead to France: Bath and the Great War*, (Akeman Press, 2005).
7. I am grateful to Dr. Brian Griffin for alerting me to the grave of Private Viles.
8. Ralph Staight letters, Bath Record Office. I am grateful to Colin Johnston at Bath Record Office for identifying this source.
9. This is an edited transcript of an article that appeared in *The Daily Telegraph*, 14th March 2014.
10. Quoted in *The Independent*, 14th March 2014.
11. This incident has echoes of a similar account in Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (Little Brown, 1929) Where Paul Baumer stabs a Frenchman in a shellhole and sees him as an individual.
12. Harry Patch with Richard Van Emden, *The Last Fighting Tommy: The Life of Harry Patch. Last Veteran of the Trenches, 1896-2009*. (Bloomsbury, 2008) p.93.
13. *ibid*, p. 94.
14. Louie Stride, *Memoirs of a Street Urchin*, edited by Graham Davis, (Bath University Press, 1985). For a wider, national look at the Home Front, see Richard Van Emden and Steve Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An Oral History of Life in Britain During the First World War* (Headline Book Publishing, 2003). For the experiences of women, See Kate Adie, *Fighting on the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 2013).