

THE DEATH OF WAR

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*'It's all magnificent really – it's purging us all'
(Gilbert Talbot, a son of the Bishop of Winchester, to
his parents, September, 1914; killed in 1915)*

Introduction

The centenary anniversary of the commencement of the First World War, for Great Britain, was 4th August, 2014. 2016 will witness the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. The war has sometimes been referred to as The Great War, the Third Balkan War (there having been two previous wars in 1912 and 1913), and even 'the war to end all wars'. None of these descriptions held much truth, and even the First World War could only apply after the experience of the Second World War. There has been considerable debate as to the causes of the conflict and its outcome. What is not in doubt is the horrific nature and extent of this war, with significant numbers of deaths on the battlefields with the advent of new technologies of warfare, never seen before, and the impact of the conflict upon the civilian population. Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, is attributed with saying on the eve of war that 'the lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time.' There was in the country, having witnessed the descent into war throughout Europe, following the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Ferdinand, in Sarajevo on 28th June, a sense of both excitement at the prospect of Britain's involvement, but, at the same time a real sense of foreboding and fear. It was a step and descent into the unknown; the war would be like no other, but it was thought to be short-lived. No-one really knew what to expect, but no-one knew what was to really happen. Nothing would ever be the same again. However, the prevailing naiveté immuned the leaders in government and the people from what should have been obvious, at least to some. Armageddon is not an inappropriate description of what was to take place.

Places

On recent visits to northern France, two places have left a vivid and indelible memory. First World War battlefields have an eerie and disturbing silence, where even the birds, mindful perhaps of the location and place of horrific slaughter, exhibit respect for the dead. Two sites have special memories and association, during and following time spent at Vimy Ridge and Beaumont-Hamel, both places of battle, suffering and death.

Vimy Ridge, near the town of Arras, was the place where the Canadian Corps encountered the German 6th Army between 9th and 12th April, 1917. It is the site of one of the most beautiful and stunning memorials, which rises to a significant height and is observable from miles around, including the main motorway from Calais to the south. Much of the wooded area adjacent to the memorial and the ridge, where the main assault took place, is cordoned off because of the presence of live and dangerous ammunition. The trenches nearby, where the opposing troops faced one

another, and which can still be stood in, are so close that direct communication is and would have been possible.

The Canadians sought to take control of the German controlled high ground. This resulted in a Canadian victory but with 10,602 casualties of which 3,598 were killed. German losses are unknown, although 4,000 were taken prisoner of war. The Canadian National Vimy Memorial is Canada's largest and principal overseas memorial. It took 11 years to build and cost \$1.5 million (\$20.27 in today's price). France granted Canada perpetual use of a section of land at Vimy Ridge in 1922. The memorial was unveiled by King Edward VIII in 1936, and Queen Elizabeth II rededicated the restored monument on 9th April, 2007, the 90th anniversary of the battle.

Vimy Ridge conveys both beauty and horror. The escarpment, over which the battle was fought, gives extensive views over much of the surrounding countryside. Like so much associated with World War 1, it is hard to comprehend, imagine or visualise the events of 1917, and the terrible suffering endured upon what is now a small but significant part of Canada, located in a portion of northern France.

Beaumont-Hamel is a small village near the town of Albert, now twinned with the Cumbrian town of Ulverston. It was close to the front lines of the conflict of the war. It witnessed heavy casualties, especially during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. By 1918, the village had been almost totally destroyed.

As at Vimy Ridge, and at so many other battlefield sites, Beaumont Hamel is a place of silent and undulating beauty. However, upon closer examination, the undulating landscape is in fact trenches and shell holes from the battle that took place there. It is hard to imagine, and yet equally possible to envisage the troops marching down the slight hill and straight into the machine gun fire from the German positions, and with the mistaken illusion that mines had destroyed the enemy's capabilities. Beaumont-Hamel is the site where the Newfoundland Regiment made their unsuccessful attack on 1st July, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. This was the regiment's first major engagement. It lasted approximately 30 minutes and nearly the whole regiment was wiped out in that brief space of time. The 74 acre preserved battlefield park has trench lines, memorials and cemeteries, the latter located very near to where the men fell and died. Located at the top end of the site is the Newfoundland Memorial, dedicated to the commemoration of the Dominion of Newfoundland forces killed in World War 1. It is in the form of a bronze caribou, the emblem of the regiment; it is a Newfoundland symbol of sacrifice and a source of identity. The head of the caribou is thrown high in defiance. Such, however, does not mitigate the significant loss of life that took place in what was a brief but almost suicidal assault.

Vimy Ridge and Beaumont-Hamel are but two of many battlefield sites that formed part of what became known as the Western Front. The battlefields and memorials are not only poignant places of remembrance of the dead, but also challenging foci for the living, now one hundred years plus later. Are they testimonies to the futility of that war, or even war in general, or reminders of a fallen humanity and the possibility of the necessity of conflict to resolve humanity's differences, disagreements or aggression?

History

History can be very personal, and there are many historical disagreements and analyses amongst historians. Individual prejudices, pre-conceived positions or just plain academic and research differences all play their part in the attempt to determine what really happened. Some, in moments of honesty, if not frustration, may acknowledge the impossibility of ever knowing, but the historical industry will continue to interest, perhaps amuse and certainly challenge the most recent of assumptions about the First World War.

The questions as to the origin of the war centre around whether such was just an inevitable clash of fading and perhaps failing empires, which was merely triggered by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. There were the issues of political and territorial influence, particularly, but not exclusively in the Balkans, reflecting issues that predated 1914. Previous conflicts, whether in the Balkans or between France and Germany have the air of unfinished business, if not revenge, and there was the sense of the inevitability of war. The dynast emperors of pre-war Europe and Russia, whilst related to one another, were interminably jealous and megalomaniac. In some respects the war of 1914 was a clash of personalities and personal rivalries that had no compunction or conscience about consigning millions of their citizens to their deaths, whether in the trenches of the western front, the eastern front or in the Balkans and the Italian border. When on the morning of 28 July, 1914, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria signed his declaration of war on Serbia, he wrote:

'To my peoples! It was my fervent wish to consecrate the years which, by the grace of God, still remain to me, to the works of peace and to protect my peoples from the heavy sacrifices and burdens of war. Providence, in its wisdom, has otherwise decreed. The intrigues of a malevolent opponent compel me, in the defence of my Monarchy, for the protection of its dignity and its position as a power, for the security of its possessions, to grasp the sword after long years of peace.'

None of this was true, and the suggestion that providence was in some way responsible was at best disingenuous or even just dishonest. Those who were either sent to fight or volunteered were not providentially ordained to die for the defence of the Emperor's monarchy, or anyone else's for that matter. The armies located on the borders of the empires were dangerously poised for mobilisation and consequential action. Austria's ultimatum to Serbia, knowingly impossible to agree, precipitated the mobilisation of forces against Serbia, which resulted in Russian mobilisation against Austria and Germany, which in turn, because of an alliance, secured Franco-German mobilisation and eventually war. Britain's attempt to remain outside of the conflict, given its concern at the strength of the German navy, lasted as long as the German invasion of Belgium and the guarantee of protection, to secure Britain's declaration of war on 4th August, 1914. There was now no looking back, only looking forward into the abyss. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson wrote in his Pastoral Letter of December, 1914:

The well-being, nay the very life, of our Empire may depend upon the response which is given to the call for men, and I think I can say deliberately that no household or home will be acting worthily if, in timidity or self-love, it keeps back any of those

who can loyally bear a man's part in the great enterprise on the part of the land we love.'

This was a clear statement from the Archbishop for the defence of the Empire, with a moral injunction that would be difficult to refute.

Consequences

It goes perhaps without saying that the immediate consequence of the war was the loss of so many men and so many injured. The horror of the battlefield had not been fully known or appreciated when the empires clashed, locked horns and then secured a stalemate with attrition and blood for the ensuing four years. Devastating injuries and images of battle were often not spoken about. It was left to poets to convey both the horror and the futility. There were a number of specific consequences which impacted upon the rest of the century and into the 21st century.

- The loss of so many men changed the gender balance to a significant degree. Women had already made a substantial contribution to the war effort, and for the first time the civilian population had direct experience of the war as a result of bombing. The demand represented by the suffragette movement, prior to the war, became an imperative after the war. Women were to continue to play a greater part in social and economic life of the nation and the vote, albeit only for those over 30 years of age, was a natural and reasonable consequence;
- The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia was to create a new and politically strident empire in the east that would impact upon not only the balance of power throughout Europe but also an ideological war that was to last for at least to 1989. Whether such can be directly attributed to the First World War continues to be a matter of conjecture;
- The Home Rule for Ireland legislation of 1912 was put on hold because of the war but was to return with a vengeance in 1921. Conscription was not introduced into Ireland. The Easter Uprising of 1916 in Dublin was a minor interlude, but the treaty negotiated in the main by Michael Collins with the British Government, resulting in the partition of six counties of Ulster from the rest of Ireland, remained a violent context even after the Civil War and until at least 1998. Although many Irishmen, north and south, fought and died in the war, the underlying aspirations and tensions remained and were exacerbated;
- The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 although settling the terms of the armistice settled very little else. The creation of nation states across previous boundaries, not least in respect of the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, resulted in further divisions and the creation of subsequent tensions, especially in the Middle-East and Eastern Europe which were to be the pretext of subsequent conflicts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Together with significant reparations, demilitarisation and humiliation, the consequence was the seed for the rise of fascism and the Second World War, fed especially by the depression of the 1920s.

The consequences of the First World War were to have a lasting impact over the following 100 years.

Theology

There are perhaps a number of theological implications and questions concerning the First World War.

- Was it in any sense a 'just war'? Should it have been fought and could it have been avoided? Is pacifism and conscientious objection a valid response and action in the face of a war with little justification? Was or is there a Christian duty to fight? In comparison with the evil of Nazism and the Second World War, there appears to be little moral justification beyond the destruction of authoritarian empires;
- Prior to the horrors of the First World War, there was little criticism of some of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Theologians and church leaders now had to address the question of why or how a loving and omnipotent deity could allow or permit such devastation of life and limb. Many church leaders were judged by a population who felt led to slaughter by politicians, generals and others of the establishment;
- There were two immediate theological consequences: a need for prayers for the dead, hitherto not permitted in protestant denominations, and which was to impact upon Church of England liturgical reforms of the late 1920s; and the rise of spiritualism, reflecting the need for many to converse with departed loved ones. H G Wells was a noted convert to the latter;
- The war had a significant impact upon church attendance and the reduction of which continued throughout the 20th century. No longer could the Church claim the answers or the justification for the slaughter represented by 20th century warfare.

Perhaps the most poignant theological challenge is represented by a soldier's letter to his parents on the eve of the Battle of the Somme:

'I took my Communion yesterday with dozens of others who are going over tomorrow; and never have I attended a more impressive service. I placed my body in God's keeping, and I am going into battle with His name on my lips, full of confidence and trusting implicitly in Him.....should it be God's holy will to call me away I am quite prepared to go....I could not pray for a finer death; and you, my dear Mother and Dad, will know that I died doing my duty to my God, my Country and my King. I ask that you should look upon it as an honour that you have given your son for the sake of King and Country.'

Really?