



1914 and Christmas: What Might Have Been

As Americans come to dread the increasingly bromidic nature of the festive season (where, that is, they are still allowed to celebrate Christmas at all), they might find it profitable to reflect upon the First World War. For it was that conflagration that did so much to make the West what it is today.

It engendered nearly all the most fashionable slogans of our time: “democratic crusades,” “national self-determination,” “the rights of minorities.” The creed attributed to neocon apparatchik Michael Ledeen simply echoes, in vulgarized form, the disinformation from “the war to end all wars.” “Every ten years or so,” as Ledeen has never denied saying, “the United States needs to pick up some small cr*ppy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business.”



Turning our eyes, with some relief, from battle in its current manifestations — the rent-a-mob Fox News boosterism; the complete disconnection between those who do the dying and those who do the cheering; the sanctimonious speeches by Barack Hussein Bush or whatever the Dear Leader’s name now is — we are forced to confront the far greater horrors of what our ancestors endured. Patrick Buchanan, among others, has referred to these horrors as initiating the “European civil war.” Historian Edmond Taylor observed in 1963 that “the trench warfare of 1914-1918 was perhaps the cruelest large-scale ordeal that the flesh and spirit of man have endured since the beginning of the Ice Age.” As to its practical results, novelist and critic Richard Aldington (who himself survived the Western Front for two years) called it “a struggle for prestige so futile that its apologists are forced into defending it because it Europeanized Turkey.”

During modern combat — Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan — “the best and the brightest” can usually worm themselves into Beltway think-tanks, and thence run no greater physical risks than are involved in spewing forth screeds about the “duty” to export “freedom” and “women’s rights” to Burkina Faso within 24 hours. But in World War I, “the best and the brightest” perished in the same mincing-machine as the doughboys, the Tommies, and the poilus. London-based military chronicler Lyn MacDonald, in her study *1915: The Death of Innocence*, singles out as characteristic the fate of Britain’s aristocratic stud-book, *Debrett’s Peerage*. This directory needed to have its 1915 edition delayed because “so many heirs to great lands and titles had been killed, that it took the editors many months to revise the entries of almost every blue-blooded family in the United Kingdom.” British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith lost a son. Hilaire Belloc, the great poet and journalist, lost a son. Another great poet, Rudyard Kipling, lost a son. Future German President Friedrich Ebert lost *three* sons.



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Equally notable is the body-count among artists and intellectuals of the time. France's Alain Fournier, creator of the exquisite novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, was killed in 1914. So was the eminent French poet and philosopher, Charles Péguy. America's own Alan Seeger, whose verses had been admired by T. S. Eliot, joined the French Foreign Legion and was killed in 1916. Also killed in 1916: Britain's H. H. Munro, who wrote superb short stories under the pen-name "Saki," and who, refusing an officer's rank, enrolled as a private. Killed in 1918: English poet Isaac Rosenberg. Killed in 1918: another American poet, Joyce Kilmer.

Perhaps Wilfred Owen was the casualty whom literature could spare least. Born in Shropshire, near Wales, in 1893, Owen originally considered a career as a clergyman in the Church of England. Abandoning this, he first worked as a private tutor, and then enlisted: first in the Officers' Training Corps, then in the Manchester Regiment. Invalided out, he then returned to the carnage, and won the Military Cross. What he saw and heard changed him forever: "My subject," he wrote, is "War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. All a poet can do today is to warn." Warn he did, in lines that, once read, haunt the mind eternally:

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that, at Christmas 1914, sanity did break through. At certain points on the Western Front, a Yuletide armistice occurred. Some soldiers on both sides traded gifts: chocolate, whiskey, and cigars, for example. Stanley Weintraub, formerly of Pennsylvania State University, explains what happened near Ypres, Belgium, in his *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*:

For most British soldiers [writes Weintraub], the German insistence on celebrating Christmas was a shock after the propaganda about Teutonic bestiality, while the Germans had long dismissed the British as well as the French as soulless and materialistic and incapable of appreciating the festival in the proper spirit. Regarded by the French and British as pagans — even savages — the pragmatic Germans were not expected to risk their lives on behalf of each beloved *Tannenbaum* [Christmas tree]. Yet when a few were felled by Scrooge-like gunfire, the Saxons ... stubbornly climbed the parapets to set the endangered trees up once more.

Even the formidable efforts by military censors could not completely prevent the news of this impromptu fraternization from leaking out over the next week. A London newspaper, *The Daily Mirror*, mused in its edition of January 2, 1915:



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The soldier's heart rarely has any hatred in it. He goes out to fight because that is his job. What came before - the causes of the war, and the why and wherefore — bother him little. He fights for his country and against his country's enemies. Collectively, they are to be condemned and blown to pieces. Individually, he knows they're not bad sorts.... But now an end to the truce. The news, bad and good, begins again. 1915 darkens over. Again we who watch have to mourn many of our finest men. The lull is finished. The absurdity and the tragedy renew themselves.

More than ninety years on, the mind almost refuses to function when contemplating the sheer industrial scale of the slaughter which followed that glimmering of Christmas hope. In one day (July 1, 1916, at the Somme), 19,240 British troops perished. Some of the smallest countries had some of the highest casualty rates. Australia, with a population of only four million, and with all-volunteer fighting forces (no conscripts), lost 59,000 dead: 65 percent of the total enlistees.

For Owen, the experience of combat seared away all surface piety, and burned into him the image of the Crucifixion. In a letter to his friend and fellow author Osbert Sitwell, he wrote: "For 14 hours yesterday, I was at work — teaching Christ to lift His cross by the numbers, and how to adjust His crown; and not to imagine He thirst until after the last halt. I attended His Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected His feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that He is dumb, and stands before His accusers." From his poem *Agnus Dei*:

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride?
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast?
By whom the gentle Christ's denied?
The scribes on all the people shove?
And bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love?
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

"Bawl[ing] allegiance to the state" brought its own forms of domestic vileness. To quote Edmond Taylor again:

In France a kind of forgery mill, supported by secret government funds, grounds out fake photographs of German atrocities to back up the no less coldbloodedly fabricated news reports of Belgian babies with their hands wantonly hacked off, of women with their breasts cut off by German bayonets or sabers, of factories for making soap out of human corpses.... Twenty years later the scars left on the public mind by this wartime atrocity propaganda — which of course was speedily exposed after the fighting ended — were still so inflamed, that American newspaper correspondents in Europe had the greatest difficulty in persuading their editors to print authenticated reports of authentic Nazi atrocities.

Edith Cavell, the Brussels-resident British nurse judicially murdered in 1915 by a German firing squad, proclaimed before her death: "Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone." This was not a sentiment readily understood by the average media spin-doctor, then or today. Owen remained immune to artificial civilian orgies of odium. One of his masterpieces imparts a terrible twist to the Biblical account of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac:

So Abraham rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife....
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,



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A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

This last line indicates what could have been the war's greatest single catastrophe: its demographic impact. Pope Benedict XV implored the belligerent powers to lay down their arms "while there are still any young men left." Lord Lansdowne, former British Foreign Secretary and a Protestant, wrote an open letter urging peace before "the prolongation of the war leads to the ruin of the civilized world." The resultant outcry over his words destroyed his career.

Owen never witnessed the acclaim which, eventually, his poems achieved. On November 4, 1918, a week before the declaration of peace, he was shot dead in northern France. The postwar "land fit for heroes to live in" had no place for him. Instead, the prevailing obsession consisted — as one otherwise insignificant British cabinet minister put it — of "squeezing Germany until the pips squeak." Future Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin described the new parliamentarians of 1918 as "a lot of hard-faced men who look as if they had done very well out of the war." Belloc's friend G. K. Chesterton expressed himself still more acidically, citing lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* as if they had been uttered by a profiteering tycoon:

The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

Maybe the simplest and most direct description of what 1914-1918 meant for mankind came from Sir Maurice Bowra, British professor of Greek and Latin literature, who fought in the trenches. At least Bowra made it through the hostilities. Later he told one of his students, in words that should give even the most self-confident peace-time historian pause: "Whatever you hear about the war, remember it was far worse: inconceivably bloody — nobody who wasn't there can imagine what it was like."

Photo: Cross left in 1999 at the site of the 1914 Christmas Truce



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