

# The Great War in Memory, Writing and Drama



The *Literature of Irish Exile* 17th Annual Autumn School took place on Saturday October 15th at the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, Ulster American Folk Park. The theme was *The Great War in Memory, Writing and Drama* and featured writing by Fermanagh Writers and the Omagh Robins WW1 Drama Group which had been developed in the *Living Legacies 2016 Writers' Summer School*.

There were stories, poetry, drama and family history, all centred around the events of 100 years ago. Those who experienced the War at first hand are all now long dead. There is no one now like Owen or Sassoon who can tell us what it was like face-to-face. Others have taken their place, writing of other wars. In *#Flashback*, poet Kate O'Shea gives a glimpse of a different conflict, one that was once familiar to many of us.

Yet the legacy of the Great War lives on, and in some ways we have perhaps a fuller picture than those who lived then. Throughout our research it became clear time and again that the soldiers at the Front did not – indeed, could not – convey the true horror of what they were living through to their loved ones back home, or even afterwards, for reasons made plain in Felim O'Neill's Poem *Amnesia*.

If there is a common theme to our work, it is that of 'reading between the lines' – digging behind stoical words to reach for the bitter reality. This is seen in John Monaghan's poem *The Truths I Couldn't Tell*; in Dianne Ascroft's story *A Wonderful Experience*, about a librarian serving as a medical orderly; and also in the dramatised reading of *Frank's Letter*, in which reader, sender, and scribe all comment on the text.

The original letter in this work was provided at the Summer School by Brenda Winter Palmer, author of *Medal in the Drawer*. From this, John Monaghan, John Llwyn James and Kathy O'Donnell composed two letters as sequels. From a passing mention in one of these to 'poor Mrs Corey', John Monaghan was inspired to write *Mrs Corey's Lament*; and I, the two linked poems in *Coming Home*.

There are other ways connecting with the past besides letters. John Llwyn James's poem *Wilder Mind* reflects on the home front, where some found liberation in a changed social order. His mother, Anna James, herself

partially sighted, gives voice to men blinded by gas and shell in *The Band of Blind and Bugged*. Pheme Glass has a well researched poem and prose piece about the men who died alone in *No Man's Land*, and those who came for their bodies. Philip Faithful is a medal collector, and that is reflected his haunting *It was my Birthday Today*, about one of the many who 'do not grow old.'

My own connection is through the memories of others. *Tommy* is based on an old man I once knew in our village, who spoke of carrying 'bombs in buckets.' I did not realise what he was talking about until many years later.

And finally, there is *Armistice Day, Skibbereen, 1919*, based on one of the earliest memories of my own mother – Avesia Brien, née Wolfe, born 1915, died 2013.

Do these fictional tales of imaginary people give a true account of what the Great War was 'really like'? Of course not. In some way we know more about the War than the people of the time, but in many, many ways we know much less. So many of the tiny details that made the story real to them are lost forever. We cannot remember it all.

Each generation tells the story in its own way, filtered through its own experience. In the end, the stories we tell, and how we tell them, are the true living legacy of the Great War.

### **Jenny Brien**

As writers we would like to thank the Living Legacies team of Elizabeth Crooke, Johanne Devlin Trew (both Ulster University) and Kurt Taroff (Queen's University Belfast); the staff of the Ulster American Folk Park, Brenda Winter Plamer, and all of the many others who helped this event to come about.

The featured image is *Gassed* by John Singer Sergeant © IWM (Art.IWM ART 1460)