

# Amnesia

Do not ask me what it was like over there,  
My deeds, such as they were, are not the stuff of pride.  
Fighting in the trenches was a brutal affair,  
Our small triumphs unworthy of those who died.

We plumbed new depths of existence in the front line –  
Unwashed for days, lice-infested, trench-foot, dysentery,  
Surrounded by the sickly-sweet stench all the time  
Of our unburied dead; there was no dignity  
In the trenches, all standards gone, we learned to despise  
Ourselves and those who compelled us to live that way.  
Tension was nerve-wracking – we learned to recognize  
The soft plop of a gas-shell landing on clay,  
The whine of a Moaning Minnie, the howitzers growl.

We learned also not to hear the cries of those who lay  
In No Man's Land, wounded, dying, their piteous howl  
Fading by degrees as death claimed them, one by one.  
Death became our friend, offering an early release  
From the horrors of it all, our duty done.  
We did not mourn the dead, rather we envied their peace.

Who would want to re-visit such a living hell?  
To re-visit is to re-live; we are sworn  
To forget such things; we recall our friends who fell  
In the fighting, as is right; we are the re-born.

Yet there are many times I feel guilty to have survived  
When so many of my brothers-in-arms perished;

No – there is no pleasure in memories revived,  
Save for those whose memories I have cherished.

***Felim O'Neill***



# 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.

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## **Tommy**

You know, I never learned to shoot worth half a damn  
but I could tote a bucket with the best.  
The Flanders mud was firm to me beside Fermanagh glaur,  
and in my hands those canvas buckets  
rested light and easy as the feed for calves.

The dawn was clear that day, First of July.  
That night we’d lain in No Man’s Land  
we dreamed the things of home:  
the Twelfth, the cattle, and the turf,  
the first hay to be mown.

We woke to screaming shells.  
The bugle blew, we ran through where the wire had been cut  
(The lads had done their part)  
to where the sun was rising  
and the shells still burst.

I got there first.  
I crossed that crooked trench in one long stride  
while Frank and Charlie, close behind, the bayonet men  
dropped down to do their work –  
“Cleaning the sheugh,” they said.

The shelling stopped a moment.  
In the calm, a sparrow sang.  
The Thrower (oh, I never could recall his name –  
Portora boy, and good at games, he had ‘the bowling knack’)  
whispered, “Grenades!” – held up his hands.

So then I placed two there and ran ahead, counting to five,  
fell flat to shelter from the blasts, thankful to be alive  
While on the hill behind,  
Beyond the fall of shell  
The German guns replied.

Men fell, my friends  
Black crows impaled upon a maze  
Of barbs and mud.

Then, when the shaking stopped,  
I rose, I heard a groan come from the the trench below  
Cut short as Frank  
Or Charlie  
Did their work.

Again, I handed out the bombs  
and ran above the trench,  
and sheltered from the blast  
and rose again.  
Again.

Then? Then I ran too near, could see inside.  
The men in terror there, who looked me in the eye,  
said, “Kamerad!”  
One lad, his ears stuck out  
Just like young Duncan of the Glen.

The Thrower cried “Why have you stopped?  
We have no time!  
Grenades!”  
And I?  
I handed them.

They sent me home to work my farm.

Now nearly sixty years are gone, young lads  
Who never knew of War except for what they read  
In Hotspur or Commando  
Still are wishing that they were

As I was then.

Yet, having heard of bombs  
In beer kegs and in cars  
Pour scorn on me,  
Who carried in my time  
Bombs by the bucket.

Aye, and still have the scars.

**Jenny Brien**

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## Coming Home

*Trimble's Horse was a squadron of cavalry raised for the UVF by the then owner of the Impartial Reporter. When the Great War broke out, many of these farmers and tradesmen joined either the Inniskilling Dragoons or the North Irish Horse. Those assigned to the Western Front served in the trenches for most of the War, but in the closing months some rode again.*

### Coming Home

I'm all right now. Really, I know  
the War is over and they'll all  
be coming home.  
So much to do: I wouldn't want  
to have you think I'd let the business go.  
My Baker-man

You looked so grand in 1912  
with Trimble's Horse  
escorting Carson through the Town.  
Lances and banners like the knights of old  
– that's when we fell in love.

To tell the truth, I fell for  
Ragamuffin, black as coal,  
three times the winner at the County Show.  
You loved that horse, I loved that horse  
so – well – you know.

Two years later and you'd gone  
for King and Country Trimble said,  
Join the Dragoons!

I'd never thought to be  
up every morning four o'clock

lighting the ovens, kneading dough.  
There's no one left I trust to do the work –  
the good men left with you.

Their women used to ask for fadge –  
the way we baked it, for the Front  
"Put them in mind of home."  
But now they all stop talking as I pass.  
The widows mourn.

And Ragamuffin pulled the spring cart till the day  
he broke his leg, caught in the wire.  
I didn't want to, but I wrote to say  
I had to shoot him. You replied  
"Thank God he was not here."

But then I heard the tide had turned –  
the German lines had broke, and you  
Were up again on horseback, riding in pursuit.  
Lances again, and you were at the head!  
I know, I read about that charge.

I tore the paper up to start  
the kindling  
in the morning dark.  
I heard it crackling and recalled it said  
"...against machine guns... men and horses...  
none came back."

I'm all right now. Really.  
I know the War is over: so before  
I light the ovens I will go again out to the dark  
To listen for his hoofbeats on the street  
when Ragamuffin brings you home.

## Recall

Once we were proud. We rode among  
The best our county had to show  
Blood-bound, we offered up ourselves for Country  
and for King – They brought us low.  
We gave our blood for all that was to come  
And all the past.  
We dug to hide our bodies in the dirt.  
Blind moles, shell-shocked and gassed,

Not only us, but half the world, English and Scots  
Frenchmen and Fenians too – to my surprise  
Clung to the clay like currants in a dough  
Put to the proof, to rise, to face the fire.

But now...

I wish I could recall the men who rode with me  
Because the pain of loss crushes my soul  
The Sergeant grimly staring at the guns  
The madcap Corporal yelling, "Tallyho!"

I wish I could recall the hooves beneath my feet  
Pounding on grass, and stirring up the blood  
Releasing all we'd bound so many years  
Glad to be free at last and doing as we should.

I did not hear the guns begin to speak  
Crackling with fire and burning to the bone;  
The screams of men and horses swept aside,  
A door slammed shut and I was left alone.  
Upon a misty plain beneath a sunless sky  
No one to call my name, no one to say, "Well done.  
My good and faithful servant. You have borne it all.  
Now is fulfilled the Covenant you signed in blood."

Nothing at all, except for one  
Lone horse, as black as coal  
"Raggy, old friend! Thank God you're here!  
What of my wife, my home?"

I'm reaching out my hand, for on your brow  
Instead of a white star, a deep black hole  
My fingers go inside and feel the blood  
There – still and pulseless, dark and cold.  
I think, "Is this a dream? I should be waking now."  
But no. I cannot wake until I'm home.

***Jenny Brien***

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## **Armistice Day, Skibbereen, 1919**

And everything stopped.  
The shop lad running over Mardyke  
caught mid-stride, the cart  
he might have dodged, laden with churns –  
Stopped.

And the town is hushed.  
The crows sit silent on the rooftops,  
down below,  
dogs wait their masters.  
Still.

The Maid of Erin  
towers above the men who left.  
Widows and orphans wear  
the medals of the dead.

Yet, further back, and almost out of mind  
by the Post Office, drawn by mules,  
a gun-team, and its carriage draped  
in Union flags.

The men who left, and those who stayed,  
will not forget.

**Jenny Brien**

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## [It was my Birthday Today](#)

*As a collector of military antiques for almost fifty years, I am fascinated by the personal items associated with conflicts of the past that come into my ownership. While uniforms, rifles and bayonets may represent the face of War, it is often the small personal possessions that have been handed down to family members from the past that tell the real story of war and loss.*

*The medals and Death Pennies of the First World War symbolise a generation long gone and often forgotten. These once proudly displayed decorations are now in the hands of collectors and museums, who try in their small ways to remember a soldier lost in history.*

*It was my Birthday Today simply asks you to stop and reflect on one man who never grew old.*

## **It Was My Birthday Today**

It was my birthday today and no one remembered or called out my name. It was my birthday last year and no one remembered. They said that *at the going down of the sun, we will remember them*, but no one remembers me.

Is my name carved somewhere on some stained and moss covered memorial but never read? Is my name ever called out, my story ever told and anyway does anyone even care?

I am 118 today and I remember when I was 18; 20; 50; 70; 100, but no one else remembers me. Am I 18 or 118 and does it really matter any more?

Medals sent home in a brown cardboard box once proudly framed by my mother and nailed to a wall along with a large brown penny, now never cleaned.

What happened to those medals? Taken down, given away, sold and sold again and now lying in a glass case to be picked up and examined but never understood. Does anyone even read my name and, for even that split second, am I remembered and is my name shouted loudly?

It is my birthday today, no grave, no marker, no name, just medals lost to a family who I never had. No sweetheart, no wife, no children, no grand children, no nephews, no nieces, no one to remember.

My name floats in a light soft French breeze entombed in a mud filled crater, lying beside a *Deutsche Soldaten* who sleeps my sleep and whose body and name will also never be found.

Sometimes, a child walks the fields above me and picks up a brass button from the soil now disturbed by a French farmer's plough. I hear laughter as she runs to a mother with arms extended, but no one remembers me.

It was my birthday today, no presents, no cards, no singing, no dancing, no drinks bought and no fleeting memories.

They say that we never grow old, but how do they know?

How do they know what we felt in the line, on the firing steps, on the trench wall, mud hiding the tears and sweat and fear?

Whistles sounding, bayonets fixed, ladders slipping, guns blazing, men and horses screaming, tears falling, ears bursting and eyes open in shock and terror.

Now – SILENCE.

It does not hurt any more, as life stops, to view the scene around me.

No heroes return, no kisses on the dockside, no slaps on the back, no drinks in Laverty's, no mother waiting at the end of the lane.

It was my birthday today, and I remember the smell of cordite and smoke and the sound of shellfire and screams, just before my life stopped forever.

We had moved 100 yards, through the wire, always in a line. The Sergeant shouts, *Stay in line boys, stay in line*. John Watts drops to my left, James Telford sinks to his knees on my right but still we walk in line.

*Heads up lads, for King and Country, give them Hell*

It was my birthday today and today I would see a giant rise before me. A wall of black earth that man created to entomb a generation. A wall of black earth that would rise before me and take my last breath away.

A giant German shell burst that can tear the very earth to its core.

No bullet hit me, no shrapnel wounds – just black French soil. I felt no pain, no panic but remember looking to heaven and blue sky as the heavy black

snow fell on my body and I ceased to breathe the morning air.

Darkness, no movement, quietness, no room to move or breathe – and did I even try to breathe?

It was my birthday today and I ask you to think of me, to read my name out loud, to say a prayer for me, to talk of lost Great-uncles – and for one fleeting second to say my name again so that I can be remembered.

It was my birthday today.....

**Philip Faithfull** owns [The Abingdon Collection](#), Omagh, open by appointment.

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## No Man's Land

I'm laying here callin'  
But no one comes near me,  
maybe nobody hears me.

That's Tommy close by me  
upside down in the mud,  
I call him to help me and  
he would if he could.  
We came here together  
to slaughter the Hun,  
we said we would fight them all  
till the very last one.

I'm laying here callin'  
but no one comes near me,  
maybe nobody hears me.

That's wee Geordie Nugent  
layin' out bye me,  
his eyes are shut tight.  
He's surely not sleepin',  
Get up Geordie and fight.

I'm lyin here callin'  
but no one comes near me,  
maybe nobody hears me.

That's Sergeant McGillion,  
we call him Booty for short,  
he could be a bit crabbit but  
not a bad sort.  
His clean boots are missin'

Oh my God. Where's his legs?

I'm layin here callin  
but no one comes near me,  
maybe nobody hears me.

The guns are all quiet,  
there's blue in the sky.  
My friends, all dead around me.  
Is it my turn to die?  
I'm layin here callin'  
and callin'  
and callin'

Then I hear mammy sayin'  
Is that you callin' me son?

## **No Mans Land 2**

They call us the *Body Snatchers*. We collect the dead from the battle fields. After the battles we can hear cries for help, but by the time we get to them it's too late. Some are still twitching as life leaves them.

We gather them up. Sometimes we have to dig them out, lifting the pieces we can identify: legs, arms, feet. Heads are the worst. The helmet protects the skull but the face is blown away exposing the jaw and baby teeth that have not grown down.

We have cudgels for the rats, some as big as cats. When they refuse to give up their feast we beat them like savages. There are days I pretend they're the enemy, other days they're generals sitting in their comfortable high class billets drinking red wine while the red blood of young men flows freely through the mud.

We do our best to match up the bodies but, how can you match up a pair of boots the feet still in them? Or three fingers wrapped around the trigger of a twisted rifle?

Their war is over now.  
We will do the same again tomorrow.

***Pheme Glass** is retired and lives in Omagh. In 2013 she self published a book of poetry titled 'Seeds of Memory.'* She has just finished a novel which will be published in early 2017.

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# Wilder Mind

*The decade 1912-1922 brought many changes and whilst there is a justified focus on the horrors of the First World War, there were other socio-political phenomena like the Woman's Suffrage movement. The circumstances of the war brought into sharper focus the role of women in our society and was a turning-point on the road towards greater gender equality.*

*I was surprised, intrigued and delighted as a poet to receive this voice and it is a great pleasure to paint in this little historic detail and to share it with my friends.'*

## **Wilder Mind**

In the end it was not the endangerment of my soul  
That occupied most of the concerns of my Father;  
Nor even the base corruption of my innocent flesh  
That still brings such potent flame to feminine cheeks  
With the very recollection of memories too candid  
Rather it was the fated encounter with a wilder mind.

How do I explain this to an unfettered generation?  
Whose lives are lived unencumbered by convention  
With preternatural sophistication that astounds me so.  
My girlhood was spent at some ease in a gilded cage  
Peering out onto a world that was changing too fast;  
A Fairground carousel that would not pause for me.

My Grandparents had lived through the Crimean War  
Many were unmanned by the tumult of those times  
Bestowed their children with the fragility of life.  
My Father sought solace and comfort in the Church;  
After his Boarding school, College and Seminary  
He secured a comfortable parish in a rural idyll.

My Mother lived in a place that I never visited;  
She only decorated the diorama of my childhood  
A mute swan floating serenely from room to room.  
Outside she glided from house to automobile to shop  
Or wherever her ethereal presence was commanded  
With seeming little volition that you could call hers.

I was raised in a Parsonage of generous proportions  
Yet so much was off limits by my Father's dictate  
I was escorted to family rooms by dear Nanny Grace  
Until I retraced those exact same steps on my own.  
No other thought ever occurred to me to do different  
I fell into line with scarce plaint from a rebel heart.

I was seventeen before I slipped the captive bonds

Father somewhat assured of my mature sensibility  
To go walking in the woods or down by the canal.  
The untamed young men of his fevered imaginings  
Were scarce and women now worked the fields;  
Kitchener's harvest turned the world topsy-turvy.

The sun seemed to be burning up the entire Earth  
So hot it was on that day that I first met Esme.  
She was naked as Eve as she came out of the water  
I turned my head away in coltish embarrassment  
But I was drawn to her skin swarthy with the sun  
With droplets of water that sparkled as diamonds.

Unabashed, she beckoned me over with a smile  
As she stood on the bank towelling herself down  
Before tying her still-damp mane of gypsy curls  
The blackest shade of many a starless night  
With just a single strand of boatswain's twine  
Before donning a simple shift with floral pattern.

Esme was a water gypsy, busy working the canals  
Two older brothers now having gone to France  
Her family thus reliant on her for an income.  
I was much dazzled by her worldly intelligence  
That diminished the learning from my books;  
Her uncommon poise, confidence and grace.

We would meet regularly after that first time  
I would bring food filched from our kitchen  
That she consumed hungrily with gratitude  
And then taking home all of which remained.  
I couldn't imagine living from hand to mouth  
But she made a virtue of this grim necessity.

Esme would often laugh so raucously at me  
At the layers I removed to swim with her;  
My whole naked body would flush furiously  
But I was determined to show my courage  
In throwing off the shackles of convention  
To be as fancy free as I imagined her to be.

Oftentimes, we would just let our flesh bake  
As we lay together on the roof of Celeste  
The barge she used to transport the freight.  
She would hold my hand, fingers entwined  
And tell me all the many adventures she had;  
I believed every word slipped from her lips.

My soft fair skin burned in that coarse sun  
Esme treated it with home-made Camomile;  
The creamy lotion and gentle hands soothed.  
I still put the herb in my bed linen laundry

So that my sheets and pillowcases may sing  
That plangent lullaby of a sweetest memory.

The world had changed on that sultry Summer;  
Perhaps it was just me but everything felt odd.  
I was now taller and I stood up to my Father  
Telling him politely that I had my own ideas;  
I would thus follow my own path with dignity  
Blessed with the light of Esme's wilder mind.

*John Llewellyn James*

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## #Flashback

Different War

Falls Road. Barbed wire walls. Barred windows

An '80's paint-flaked door swings to and fro,  
creaking in night stillness

Wide eyes, search the darkness  
A presence, palpable

Little comes to the eye, save for the gleam  
of spit and polished high-gloss boots

A faint awareness  
Heartbeat. Deafening. The Silence

Cigarette smoke clings to the air

A sudden flash – light lands on the rifle butt

Something rustles in garden shrubbery – breaking cover  
they fall in, exit to the crackle and hiss of a radio call

'Come in  
Romeo-Victor-Hotel'. ... ..

Feet away, babies and children settle to sleep in cots,  
metal bars smoothed to the touch, with the passage of time

Exhausted parents lay down to take their rest  
floor mattresses, make-shift beds

Desperate, for one night – free from heavy footfall,  
distant voices, the whir and drone of vehicles on tired streets

That Door. Bangs. Shut !

**Kate O'Shea**

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## The Band of Blind and Buggered

**Huw**

First in line, as I have some vision  
...slightly blurred.

I am well used to the dark as a miner.  
(Must find a way to live like this.)  
At least I can still sing.

Oh God. What a needless war.

\*

**Prentiss**

I joined up to get away...

Goodbye to the windy island  
Isolated, with bloody sheep.

Got to London – what a revelation!  
Warmth and cultured people.  
I was eating a meal  
When all hell broke loose.

All is now darkness – not going back  
to Orkney.  
London's out too.  
Go South to find something to do.  
(But who wants a blind shepherd?)

Oh God. What a mindless war.

\*

**Séamas**

Must not stumble for the men behind  
...and those in front.

Just a flash – then black darkness.

Won't be able to gather flax  
Though I could learn to weave.  
Will my girlfriend be waiting for me?

God what a sodding war.

\*

#### **Chaplain**

I asked to go to the Somme  
To bring comfort and succour to our troops  
Two days in and shrapnel hit my face  
Left me scarred and blinded

Now I cannot read God's Holy Word  
Or serve the Eucharist.  
(Though I may take Confession.)

Oh God. What an unholy war.

\*

#### **Lance**

I enlisted as my family expected  
For centuries we have served our country.

Blinded now and incapable of walking upright.  
(Will I be able to ride a horse?)  
No more hunting, though fishing is possible.

My brother will take over our Estate.

God. What a wasteful war.

#### **Anna James**