

Service of Remembrance and Dedication at Merchiston 9 November 2008

“Look down and swear by the slain of the war that you’ll never forget” – words from a poem written by a survivor of the First World War, who had known the horrors of the trenches, had been invalided out, to spend time at Craiglockhart Psychiatric Hospital, now part of Napier University, he had thought acutely about the rights and wrongs of war, had seen the stupidity of the senseless loss of life, but also he acknowledged the bravery, courage, and selflessness of men in war, and that at times there is a necessity of war.

Sassoon’s words in *Aftermath* call on us to honour the dead – from two World Wars, many conflicts since then, and now in Iraq and Afghanistan, to remember the awfulness of war, and never to forget those who lost their lives in conflict. In the piece he provides graphic details of the horror of wounds, of fearful conditions and death – and he finishes the poem with another command never to forget even in the best of times: “Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring that you’ll never forget.”

Among those we must never forget are all those Merchistonians listed on the memorial plaques at the entrance to this Hall, and all the service personnel who have been killed since this Service was last held.

The two quotations sum up what today should be about – honour to those who died fighting for their loved ones, and for a particular way of life, and that we must not dishonour the dead by either living life badly nor forget for what they fought.

At school in the 1960s I wondered amid the ceremonies, and particular prayers of the day what was the relevance of the Remembrance Day Service for those of us with no direct contact with war – however, over the years three particular events have helped me to realise the truth in Sassoon’s words and have given me personal reasons for seeing the relevance of this annual return to view the past.

During a year’s teaching exchange in Australia, I visited a small country town in New South Wales, 250 miles from Sydney – an agricultural town serving the needs of the surrounding farms and yet in this place 12,000 miles away from the United Kingdom stood a cross and war memorial and on it were inscribed the names of some 75 young men who lost their lives in two World Wars. Men who answered the call to fight to protect the then British Empire. Their loyalty to a country far, far away was inspiring and humbling, the way the younger sons had left farms and homesteads to serve a King and country. The world of Gallipoli, the trenches of France and the jungles of South East Asia were so distant from the flat, sun-baked expanses of wheat, and grazing. As I viewed the war memorial on that hot Remembrance Sunday and tried to marry the two worlds of peaceful farming and the awful din and ghastliness of conflict I felt admiration for these people and their families and gratitude for what they had given – enabling me to enjoy a life of peace in England and Australia – that country town is a place I will always hold in my memory, as I will the list of the names of people I never knew but who must never be forgotten.

My second moment was also abroad and occurred during an October half-term holiday in Tunisia. Late one afternoon after a day’s sight-seeing, I came to a war-cemetery just outside Tunis. In the warm glow of the early evening sunshine, stood the beauty of the white entrance arch of the cemetery, surrounded by flowers, and the stark engraved lettering announcing the site of a major battlefield of the North African Second World War campaign. Then I walked through the gate and met an amazing sight – row upon row of white headstones, manicured grass, and swept paths all contributed to a picture of perfect peace and order, and yet each of the thousands of headstones marked the grave of a soldier killed far from home, serving his country, his friends, and family – and the

sense of the awful difference between the peacefulness of the scene before me, and the brutality that caused this site to be necessary was sharpened keenly as walking down the rows the most striking feature on the stone was the figure against each man's age – 19, 20, 22, 18, 23, 19, 21 and so on. These young men, miles away from the world they had known died on the edge of a desert in a conflict to preserve a way of life. These young men and the Australians are some of the many we ought to honour today, and they are the servicemen whose deaths we should never dishonour by forgetting them or for what they fought. We will be positive in our remembrance if we strive to lead better lives, and to create a more peaceful world.

My third moment came in 1975 in the staff Common Room and began with a newspaper headline "Army Captain murdered by the IRA". The article that followed described the abduction and interrogation, torture and execution of a young serviceman, Captain Nairac. War had intruded into my comfortable and peaceful life – Bob Nairac came to Oxford University on an Army Cadetship, and I had known him as a genial, outgoing extrovert who was always a smiling and generous helper of others. He played rugby vigorously, had won a Boxing Blue through courage and effort but above all was a most positive person who loved life, and made full use of all his opportunities and abilities. After Oxford he returned to the Army, and before long had gone to the streets and countryside of Northern Ireland. Later he had become a member of the SAS (not surprising given his courage, his sense of adventure and his wish to be involved). Then in a small Northern Ireland border village he was abducted from a pub, tortured and put to death – and even one of his IRA killers was later to comment on his outstanding courage. Bob Nairac – a young man who believed in freedom, in the cause which he was serving, who had so much of life in front of him – and yet the awfulness of conflict ended it. For me a particular person who comes to mind on this day of Remembrance. He would want today to be positive, and one of purposeful remembrance in relation to the present and future.

My three events: a war memorial in rural Australia, a war cemetery in North Africa, and a murder in a field in South Armagh make Remembrance Day for me, and my feelings are summed up in the words written over the gates of a Second World War Cemetery at Kohima in the Burmese jungle which state so clearly what we alive today owe to those who died in war.

When you go home
Tell them of us and say
That for your tomorrow
We gave our today

RM Ridley
9 November 2008