

Remembrance Sunday 2014 St Marylebone 11 am

“I did not count the number who died as I knelt beside their stretchers. Great strong broken men who apologized in whispers for the trouble they gave in dying; slender boys whom I held in my arms while they cried for their mothers and who mistook me for some anxious woman I would never see; old, patient, humble men, as old as my old ones, who went quietly, so modestly; the French *poilus* of 1914 – 1918. I see them still, marching up the long roads of France in their clumsy boots and their heavy grey-blue coats that were too big for them; dogged, patient, steady men, plodding to death in defence of their land. I shall never forget them.”ⁱ

Those words were written by Mary Borden, thirty years after the battle of the Somme and just a year after the end of a second great war in which she had set up and run, at her own expense, a medical unit caring for the injured and dying troops of France.

In 1929, Borden had published what she described as “a collection of fragments”; a memoir full of what one reviewer criticized as being full of “ugly” images, “mannerisms” and “repetitions”.ⁱⁱ

But the recurring, fragmentary terror of ugliness was precisely what Borden, the Chicago-born rich young heiress, was trying to convey in her first hand account of war.

Borden knew, as those whom she nursed knew, that war is never a linear progression of battles which end either in ignominious defeat or glorious victory, but a hellish, dirty, jagged and fragmentary recurring nightmare, played out in the all-too-real waking lives of peasants ripped from their small holdings and bank clerks torn away from the safety of their counters.

Today, there are few who can actually remember anything of the Great War.

The children of men killed or injured are themselves now in their nineties and they are, perhaps, the only ones who can actually now remember anything first hand of the effects of that war.

For the rest of us, we have to rely on the words of people like Mary Borden, on the poems written, or at least composed, in the mud and filth of the trenches or on pale so-called 'realizations' which are brought to life on our television screens and which we can watch from the safety and comfort of our armchairs.

But we do try to remember or, at least, try to keep the remembrance alive, and we do so not just to honour those who fought and died as well as those who fought and lived, but to keep on setting before us the reality of the nightmare-world governments and nations all-too-easily sleep walk their way into.

In some senses, of course, the Great War of 1914 – 1918 continues today and its realities are still being painfully felt and experienced in the lives of our contemporaries.

The Armistice might indeed have been signed at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, but the war which now devours Syria and Iraq, and which threatens to drag Turkey and Iran, the Lebanon and, perhaps, the whole of the Middle East in its wake, has its roots planted deep in the blood-and-mud-filled trenches of Flanders.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary Borden, like the millions of men and women who were caught up in the Great War, could never forget what she had experienced and witnessed; all we can do is to try to catch a glimpse of war's excruciating, fragmentary and recurring realities through the lenses they supply and, in so doing, to commit ourselves not only to keep on remembering the 37,000,000 men and

women who were killed or injured in the Great War^{iv}, but to work and pray and strive for the peace that they were denied.

If we want to understand today and to shape tomorrow, we need to know and to go on remembering what happened yesterday.^v

ⁱ Mary Borden quoted by Hazel Hutchinson in her Introduction to *The Forbidden Zone, A nurse's impressions of the First World War*, Mary Borden, Hesperus, 2013, first published 1929, p. xvi

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, p. xiv

ⁱⁱⁱ The break-up of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the artificial division of Greater Syria by the French and the British, the establishment of the state of Israel and, ultimately, in the rise of IS and other terrorist groups and alliances.

^{iv} http://www.1914.org/why_remember/ 9,000,000 soldiers died as a result of the fighting; 6,000,000 civilians died from disease or starvation; 21,000,000 wounded.

^v *Ibid.*