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4-11 November 1918: Wilfred Owen and armistice Day in Memory and History

In an early preface to his collected war poems, Wilfred Owen wrote of his work that "The subject of it is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity". After having survived so much trauma and disillusion on the Western Front, Wilfred Owen was killed in action on the morning on 4 November 1918 while fighting at the Oise-Sambre Canal in Northern France. One week later, at the eleventh hour of 11 November, the Armistice went into effect. That same day, as church bells rang in the Armistice, Owen?s mother would receive a telegram informing her of her son?s death. If there is a poetry to the "pity of war" as Owen believed, it lies in the timing of his death so close to the end of hostilities on the Western Front.

For most British soldiers that survived to the Armistice on the Western Front, their letters and diaries reveal a rather diverse range of reactions. After living amidst the constant noise of gunfire and explosions for years, some found the sheer silence that followed at 11 am disturbing. Feeling a sense of anticlimax, some expressed anger that they didn?t get to advance into Germany. Others, after experiencing in 1918 some of the most brutal military engagements of the First World War (notably the Spring Offensive to the Hundred Days Campaign), were too tired to even care, and chose instead to sleep through it. Several soldiers desperately searched for food and (especially) alcohol to celebrate in the ruins of France and Belgium. Most soldiers, however, wondered the same thing: "When do we get to go home?"

In many ways, the Armistice cannot be remembered without invoking the tragic death of Wilfred Owen on 4 November 1918. Its timing represented what other war poets and later generations would see as the futility of the First World War. Indeed, for many, the public memory of Armistice Day would over time come to be epitomized by Wilfred Owen and his invocation of both the "poetry" and "pity" of war; it is the reactions of those that saw the "pity of war" that often take center stage in the public memory of Armistice Day. Siegfried Sassoon derided in his diary the "loathsome ending to the loathsome tragedy of the last four years" that he saw in celebrations in London (1983, 282). Robert Graves wandered off "along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan?cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead" (1998, 227-78). Even the timing of the Armistice itself "at the eleventh day of the eleventh month of the eleventh hour" of 1918 had a seemingly poetic ring to it.

But did other British soldiers believe that their service was pointless on 11 November 1918 and beyond? After the Armistice, these men often would say the same thing: I have "done my bit" in the First World War. A rather vague interpretation of their wartime experiences, "done my bit" could have many personal attitudes to wartime experience. With the Armistice approaching its own Centenary, it is important to remember that it meant something, not nothing, to each person for their own reasons. What, then, drove these soldiers to the Armistice and the end of the First World War? What compelled Wilfred Owen, despite his belief in the "pity of war", to fight to his death on 4 November 1918, with the end a mere week away?

Works Cited

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