



Remembrance Sunday Address

11 November 2018

Sir John Tusa

Let me begin with a story. Ann and I were leaving a restaurant after dinner with an old friend a few weeks ago. We must have exchanged thoughts about the First World War. Our friend, a similar age to us, then said this:

“When I was 11 years old, my gym master used to tell us stories. He had served in the first war. He’d stand near the old fashioned iron radiator and then suddenly slam his flat hand against the wooden wall of the gym. ‘BANG!’ Then he would say that was the same noise as your mate made when he was hit in the head by a sniper’s bullet. As you can imagine,” said our friend, “we all fell very silent for a few moments.”

It’s worth remembering that the gym master was recalling, re-playing, a forty-year-old memory. But then, our friend had not forgotten the story sixty years later. Such is memory, recollection, recognition, remembrance, commemoration, understanding, just some of the ingredients in the unmanageable, intolerable mix of emotions we feel on a day such as this.

As the French have it, ‘remorse is the neighbour of memory’. With remembrance comes feeling. Though ‘remorse’ is hardly adequate to begin to express our feelings about the actuality of the last hundred years.

A word of clarification. I can speak only of what I feel, know or think on this occasion. My thoughts and feelings are not better than yours. They are the only ones I can vouch for. Please accept them on that basis.

It is right that we keep a particular place in our memories for special people or groups of people, former members of this College. Look around us – the names sculpted in stone in the Ante-Chapel; those carved in wood at the east end. We have just commemorated those 619 members of College who died in the first war.

The College keeps a meticulous register. The six hundred and nineteen names are accounted for in 55 pages of biographies from World War One alone. I randomly choose the letter ‘B’; most of the biographies – can we really call them CVs? – are very short. Many were killed in their twenties. One, Harold Boyd-Alexander, was only 19 when he lost his life. That was on September 7 1914, in the second month of the war. He lies in what is called ‘an isolated grave at La Haute Maison, Seine-et-Marne, France’. I wonder why?

Another casualty was Gordon Butler, son of the then Master of this College, Montagu Butler. The killing was no respecter of persons or position.

Trinity’s Roll of Honour from World War II lists 384 names over 31 pages. I found two of the dead whose fathers had been killed in the first war. There will have been many more. The cemeteries in which they lie range from Greece, to Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, Hamburg, Ravenna and Ferrara and countless others. They have been given respect in their deaths. There are many, though, who have no memorial.

These College Rolls of Honour have a deep immediacy for us. After all, we have walked in the footsteps of these 1,003 former members of Trinity College. They lived in our rooms, walked in our Courts, ate in our Hall, learned in our libraries, lived, laughed and loved in these places and spaces, dreamed in hope of the joys and riches of life to come. It was all ripped from them by war. I don't begin to know what we owe them. It is uncountable, immeasurable. Commemoration and recognition are the first and the least we can offer them today.

Some at the time, many perhaps, had a clear-eyed sense of what lay before them in the war years immediately ahead. A friend told me of the experiences of the composer, Michael Tippett, at Fettes College in 1916. Tippett recalled that most senior boys then knew that they would go to fight and also knew that they would probably die on leaving school. Each boy, Tippett remembered, used to hollow out a space in their study wall or on their desk in which they hoped would be placed the names and dates of their occupancy. In school parlance, they were known as 'graves'. The poet and soldier, Wilfred Owen, understood it all too well in his *Anthem for Doomed Youth*.

What passing bells for these who die like cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns,
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle,
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

Perhaps we can all understand the event a little more through Owen's words.

Or perhaps in the words of Charles Hamilton Sorley, aged just 20 when he was killed in 1915. His body was never found. His kit bag was and it held several of his poems. One is called *When you see the millions of the mouthless dead*. It contains these lines:

Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, "They are dead". Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before".

Such are the most intense personal responses to the experience of the war.

And now, I must admit to a particular difficulty I have with certain kinds of commemoration, at least in their larger scale, monumental forms. During several battles around Ypres, 300,000 Commonwealth troops died. The Menin Gate memorial in Ypres is dedicated not to them – they lie in ordered rows in carefully tended war cemeteries. It commemorates the 54,395 soldiers whose bodies were never identified or found. The walls and ceilings of the Gate are wholly covered to the last inch with the names of these missing dead. Missing? We know where. Yes, in the Flanders mud. The poet Siegfried Sassoon knew about it in his poem *Attack*, with its agonised cry as soldiers physically floundered in the mud:

Oh Jesus, make it stop.

Yet when I stand in front of the Menin Gate, how can I take in so many dead, so many individuals, so many human personalities subsumed, perhaps submerged, into one vast statement. I cannot offer one single reaction to the enormity of the whole.

But neither can I muster 54,395 individual responses as they deserve. Understand, I am not indifferent. But I am looking for something more graspable, more specific.

I find it, for instance, in the film archive of the Imperial War Museum, with its hours of black and white film footage of trench warfare. Of those many hours, just a few seconds are fixed in my mind's eye. As infantry climb out of the trench, go over the parapet and start their charge into no man's land, the camera catches one soldier. He reaches the parapet, stands tall and is immediately struck by a bullet. His dead body slides back down into the mud of the trench. As it will do again and again and again for eternity or as long as film lasts. I can understand that.

The overall numbers don't make it easier: ten million dead in the First World War, twenty million severe casualties, eight million with permanent disabilities. Add in the millions killed during the Second World War, including the millions murdered in the Holocaust. The scale of this canvas of killing, murder and destruction is almost too great. It paralyses feeling, crushes understanding, even begins to diminish pity. I need to look elsewhere for understanding, I need to find it in the particular.

Once Ann and her mother, Hilda Dowson, were looking at the war memorial in the grounds of Chelsea Royal Hospital. The names of battles listed there stirred Hilda's memory of the streets of northern industrial towns during the first war. Young men from whole communities signed up to go to war together in what were known as 'Old Pals' Regiments'. Whenever a family received the War Office telegram with news of a death in battle, the house drew its curtains. Often, Hilda remembered, entire streets had their curtains drawn. They had joined together, they died together. As Andrew Motion catches it in his newest poem, *Armistice*:

Long-faced telegram boys prop their bicycles
On lamp-posts and front gates and for the last time
Press forward to deliver their dreadful condolences."

Memorials are all around us. At the top of the steps leading into Waterloo Station, three plaques record the names of the 438 members of Southern Railway who lost their lives in the first war.

At the entrance to the Royal Academy in Piccadilly, the plaque on the left remembers the 35 students of the Royal Academy Schools who were killed; the plaque on the right, the 2,003 members of the Artists' Rifles lost in the first war. What a lot, I find myself thinking. But just one is already a lot.

At the bottom our street, I pass a small sign recording the nine men from the street next door who were killed in the first war. Two of them were 19.

Such moments rightly jolt the memory. I need something more immediate than mere jolting to begin to grasp our century's killing.

In the 1950s, as a National Serviceman serving in the Army, I was stationed near the site of the Belsen extermination camp in north Germany. All the camp buildings had long been demolished; it is a memorial site now, a huge range of tidy, grassed mounds, each with the plain label: 'Here lie the bodies of 5,000 people murdered in the concentration camp'. There is a physicality about that mass grave, with its 5,000 bodies, that I feel I can respond to.

Perhaps I am helped in doing so by the story told by my first editor in the BBC in 1960. Gerry Mansell had been in army intelligence during the allied advance through Germany across the Luneburg Heath in 1945. When they ran into a group of surrendered SS troops, the Germans urged them to divert to this place called Belsen a few miles away. No-one had heard of it. Gerry and his colleagues were among the first to face the walking skeletons and scattered dead bodies of that camp. He never spoke of what he found and saw there ever again.

In the years immediately after the Second World War, what were known as newsreel cinemas had special showings of film taken at the liberation of Belsen and other extermination camps. What my parents were thinking of in taking a ten year old to see such horrors I cannot imagine. Yet that experience, those images, may have led me to go out of my way to visit such sites as an adult, perhaps as an obligation to honour the victims, to grasp at some possible thread of understanding beneath the horrors. It is not comfortable, you would not expect it to be.

At Auschwitz, I stood in front of glass fronted display cases designed to convey the indifference and the scale of the killings that were perpetrated at the camp. Each case was some ten feet by eight feet by six feet deep. One case was packed with a mass of human hair; another with a jumble of battered suitcases, the names of their owners still readable on the attached labels; another, contained just glasses and teeth.

At Treblinka, I watched a group of visiting Jewish children winding their way through the gas chambers, and on towards a large grey mound of ashes – human ashes.

Of course, images such as these cannot make sense, if sense and decency and humanity have anything in common. They describe but they can explain nothing. That has to be accepted, bleak a vision as it is.

I look for another perspective, that of the artist. Many are sparing, restrained even, with their images of slaughter. In the recent exhibition at Tate Britain, 'Aftermath of War', Felix Vallotton's 1917 painting of densely packed crosses in the war cemetery at Chalons sur Marne carries his bitter observation: 'The mathematical carnage we got used to over the past three years'.

Others like William Orpen resort to symbols. *To the Unknown British Soldier in France* relies on just a single helmet and rough cross in a shallow empty trench. That's enough. One helmet, one cross, one trench. Orpen couldn't avoid adding his comment: 'The only tangible result is the ragged unemployed soldier and the dead'.

Nobody painted the war dead, the maimed, what everyone called the crippled and their exploiters more powerfully and savagely than the German, Otto Dix. His sole purpose? 'Artists should not proselytise or reform – all they have to do is to bear witness'. Which Dix did with lacerating and unflinching honesty.

Contemporary artists bear witness in their own ways. The German artist, Wolfgang Tillmans, has created an installation of 24 images for the Albertinum Gallery in Dresden. One shows the words of France's President Mitterand in 1995: 'Le Nationalisme, c'est la Guerre.' ('Nationalism is war.')

Another carries the Litany of Reconciliation from Coventry Cathedral, gloriously rebuilt after its destruction by bombing during the second war. Some of its lines ask forgiveness from:

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class.
The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth.
Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee.

How timeless they are, how sadly prophetic. Have we learned?

Yet another of Tillman's images in his polyptych is of a single stone from the ruins of the bombed Coventry Cathedral. Over the years, its bomb scarred surface has become overgrown with lichen, smoothing out, soon even obliterating, what it once represented, and the memory scarred on its surface. Time does this. Even commemoration and remembrance will become overgrown by the forgetful lichen of our human memories.

In this mosaic of my own memories, reactions, reflections and experiences of my own century, I need to return to the personal, the simple, the uncomplicated. Memory has its own order.

My grandfather was a citizen of the Habsburg Empire. In the first war, Josef Sklenar fought in the Austro-Hungarian Army on the south eastern front. When asked about the war he explained that when the Serbs attacked, he usually fired his rifle well over their heads: "They were all poor devils," he explained, "just like us, and they were Slavs."

My wife's great-uncle lost both legs in the first war. When asked how it happened, he explained that he was made to march up and down to the front line to look like reinforcements. The endless marching, he said, wore his legs down. How else could he make his experience palatable?

My own house master, Bruce Douglas, survived the entire war. The average survival time of an infantry officer in combat then was just 4 hours. He explained his own experience tersely: "When I joined my company in the front line, I was the most junior officer. By the end of the day, I was the most senior."

A friend told of her father who often spoke of how the camaraderie of the trenches made the war almost enjoyable. Yet forty years later, as an old man, he would wake up screaming at the nightmare memories that engulfed him.

Recently, we sat in the parish church of Sheere in the Surrey hills. Its lovingly polished first world war brass memorial lists 33 names. The parish only had 1,900 people at the time. A villager, a young woman called Rachel, told our friend, Moira Williams, of her first war memory. Rachel had always been told by her father that ladies never wore their hair down, or, as importantly, never free-wheeled downhill on their bicycle. 'One sharp November morning, Rachel was dispatched to pick up a parcel (from the station). She cycled off, collected the parcel, then had to push her bike up the long steep hill to the top of Newlands Corner – at 170m a famous beauty spot with glorious views across the weald to the far South Downs. Half way up the hill she heard the bells of the nearest church begin to ring. By the time she reached the top of the hill all the bells in all the villages as far as she could see had joined in. Rachel stood there at the top of the hill looking across the weald to the far ridge of the South Downs. She knew what it meant – the end of the Great War. She was on her own with no one around to share that extraordinary moment with. She took all the pins out of her hair, undid her plaits, then free wheeled all the way to the very bottom of the hill.'

She looked like a wild thing. Her father didn't say a word – he just rounded up the whole household, they walked across the stream and on to the square, where all the villagers were laughing and weeping and cheering with joy. And then, recalled Rachel, "Everyone went on into the church to be with the sons and brothers and fathers and sweethearts who would never be coming home again."

The village of Shere, in the Surrey hills, one hundred years ago, this morning.