

Thoughts on 11th November

Last Wednesday a colleague asked me why I was commemorating the First World War, and it was a moment before I realised that he was alluding to the poppy I was wearing. I gave him my answer, and went away thinking.

Why is it that of all the conflicts of the twentieth century, the First World War has burned itself so deeply into British collective memory that we use the anniversary of the Armistice of 1918 to remember our war dead? At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the guns fell silent. Within two or three years after that a tradition was established of a two-minute silence at 11am on 11th November, when the entire nation stopped all normal activities in remembrance of those who died. Religious services were also held, wreaths laid on the war memorials which sprang up all over the British Isles in the 1920s, Last Post sounded before the Silence and Reveille afterward. Poppies were sold as an emblem of remembrance and to raise money for widows and families of the dead and for the living casualties.

Some time later, after a Second World War, practice changed. The commemoration moved to the nearest Sunday to 11th November, and the purity and symmetry of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month was lost. Recently, however, there have been attempts to revive the tradition, and this year many will observe the two minutes at eleven o'clock on Monday, the 11th.

1968 was the only year in the entire twentieth century in which no British serviceman was killed on operations. Since then we have had more than thirty years of attrition in Northern Ireland; we have had the Falklands, the Gulf War, Bosnia and Kosovo. Now we have Afghanistan. Yet it was 1914-18 which brought the reality of war home to the British people. Previous wars had been fought in distant places, and mainly by regular troops. The First World War was the first war in which the mass of the British people were closely involved, because it was the first in which the British services were thrown open to voluntary enlistment for the duration of the war rather than the seven or twelve

years of regular service. From early in 1916 there was conscription, but it is the volunteers of 1914 who make the greatest impression on the mind. Lord Kitchener, as Secretary of State for War, called in the first days of the conflict for 100,000 volunteers to augment the regular army, and more than three times that number had volunteered by Christmas, over a million before the end of 1915. More than eighty years later, we find it impossible to understand what motivated them, what it was in the atmosphere of the day that made it imperative for them to abandon their ordinary lives for the army.

My maternal grandfather was one of these volunteers, one of Kitchener's "Second Hundred Thousand" in fact, and my paternal grandfather a 1914 soldier of another kind. Both of them survived the war, but in their different and similar ways are not unrepresentative of their generation. Since both died before my birth, I never knew them, but this is a time when I think of them, and feel a certain pride.

Herbert Langsford Matthews was born in Nottingham on 22nd February 1885, and named, in a fit of parental romanticism, after a military hero of the day, Major General Sir Herbert Stewart, who had died of wounds a few days earlier whilst attempting to relieve General Gordon in Khartoum. But otherwise there was little of romance in his early life. His mother died when he was four. His father, who lurched from one failed business venture to another and was apt to take out his frustrations on his son with a belt, remarried soon after. Perhaps his stepmother was not actively cruel, but certainly after the birth of her own child she had little time for the young Herbert or for his sister, and wished to see the back of them at the earliest possible moment. At the age of fourteen Herbert was sent to sea, and at fifteen he was stranded in Sydney, but whether by accident or someone's design is a matter for conjecture. By then his family had emigrated to Ontario to get away from his father's creditors, and he worked his passage aboard various ships to join them. The reconciliation did not last long, though a photograph survives of father and son standing proudly in a dugout canoe they had made. Herbert then worked his way across Canada to British Columbia where he spent the next few years in various jobs on the railways, in the logging camps, and at sea.

With that sort of early life, one would expect Herbert Matthews to be a somewhat cynical individual, at the very least, and entitled to have considered that he owed the land of his birth nothing at all. But when war broke out in 1914, he made his way to Vancouver, signed up aboard the first available ship bound for a British port, and on arrival went to the first recruiting office he could find. That recruiting office was in Cardiff, which was why a Canadian born in Nottingham found himself as Private 16402 of the 11th Battalion The Welch Regiment.

If Thomas Frederick Lyon, born in Liverpool on 15th August 1878, had a less bleak start in life, his origins were scarcely comfortable. He left school at thirteen, and worked for a time as an errand boy before becoming an engineering apprentice. His father died a lingering and painful death from throat cancer shortly before his seventeenth birthday, and from then on he was the main family breadwinner – he had three sisters in domestic service, but they earned scarcely more than their keep. At some time in the late 1890s he joined a local unit of the Volunteers, a home service force which became part of the Territorial Army in 1908. Perhaps he would have liked to be a regular soldier – his father had served twelve years in the Royal Marines – but felt this impossible because of his domestic responsibilities. There is a photograph showing Sapper Lyon of the Royal Engineers, aged perhaps nineteen or twenty, proudly wearing the scarlet and pillbox hat of Queen Victoria's army, and with what is clearly a very new moustache. As well as cause for pride the Volunteers gave him something which was lacking in his ordinary life in industrial Liverpool: horses to ride, camp every year in Wales and the Isle of Man, perhaps also a breath of freedom from the burdens of providing for a widowed mother. There are signs too that he wished to better himself and was interested in the technical developments of the day. The Royal Engineers were then responsible for army signals (a separate Royal Corps of Signals was not formed until 1920), and Thomas Lyon was an early member of the Volunteer Telegraph Company which was formed in Liverpool in 1903. Clearly he was a good soldier; by 1913 he was a sergeant, and wore the Territorial Efficiency Medal awarded for twelve years' unblemished service.

The 11th Welch went to France in September 1915, and spent a short period there before embarking for Salonika, Greece, where they spent the rest of the war. Salonika was a relative backwater, and the 11th

Welch spent much of their time building roads. However, the fighting against the Bulgarians there was sufficiently fierce for Private Herbert Lewis to earn a posthumous Victoria Cross in September 1918. If he did not perform any such dazzling deed of bravery as did his comrade, Corporal Herbert Matthews nevertheless suffered the hazards of war. During his time in Salonika he was wounded in the leg, contracted dysentery, and while acting as a gas instructor inhaled sufficient poison to leave his lungs permanently damaged.

In 1914 the Territorial Army was liable only for home defence, and its members could be sent overseas only if they volunteered. Sergeant Thomas Lyon duly volunteered, but did not go overseas until 1916. He spent most of his active service at Combles, at the southern end of the Somme front and a major centre of military communications. The Royal Engineers were regarded with some scorn by the frontline infantry, having a less dangerous role and, as skilled technical tradesmen, considerably better pay. All the same, Thomas Lyon had two narrow escapes from death in the course of the war, the first when he fell with his horse and was rolled on, the second when a shell burst sufficiently close to blow off one of his boots, while by some freak of blast he was left untouched.

Neither Herbert Matthews nor Thomas Lyon would have considered themselves heroes. Indeed, Thomas Lyon's war medals are still in the envelopes in which they were sent to him; they have never had their ribbons attached, certain proof that he never wore them. As far as they were concerned, they simply did their duty: Thomas Lyon as a long-serving Territorial Army soldier, doing what he was trained for; Herbert Matthews perhaps because of a romanticism which had survived the chaos of his early life – had he wished simply to join the army, he could have done so easily enough in Canada, but as an Englishman born he chose to come home. Their war service was unremarkable. Some might say that they both had a cushy war, and compared with many they probably did. But that is not the point. The real point is that they were volunteers, that they were prepared to go wherever the British Army chose to send them, and to serve in whatever way was demanded of them, in exactly the same way as their fellow soldiers who were not so fortunate.

What happened to them afterwards? During the war, Herbert Matthews had renewed acquaintance with a girl cousin, who had spent the war as a volunteer nurse in addition to her ordinary work as a teacher. In August 1919 they married, in the teeth of family opposition, and duly had three sons and a daughter. Herbert joined the Inland Revenue in Liverpool – a far cry from his adventurous youth – and remained with them until his retirement in 1950. In the Second World War he served part-time in Civil Defence. He died in 1954, from tuberculosis aggravated by the wartime damage to his lungs. Thomas Lyon, by now in his forties, seems to have given up the Territorial Army after he came back from the war. He worked as a fitter maintaining dockyard installations until he retired in 1946, and died in 1950. Having been an apparently confirmed bachelor, sharing a house with his two elder unmarried sisters, he married in 1926, aged 48. His bride was a widow, and clearly he made up for lost time, as not only did he acquire three stepchildren, but produced two of his own in the first two years of the marriage.

When we think now of the First World War, we think immediately of those who were killed or grievously wounded, and that is as it should be. But we should not forget those who also served, and when the war was over took up their ordinary lives once again. Their service was often undramatic, certainly unglamorous. But they also served, and we who follow them owe them two minutes of our time once a year.