

Web supplement I to the 'Requiem: The Great War' double issue of *Agenda*



The editor's dear uncle to whom a poem is addressed in her recent collection:  
*Horses Between Our Legs*

Two sequences by D.V Cooke and

## **D.V. Cooke**

**D. V. Cooke** (David Vincent Cooke) was born in Cheshire and graduated in English from London University. He worked for a number of years for The Poetry Library in London and has published in numerous poetry magazines including: *Acumen*, *Babel*, *Envoi*, *Frogmore Papers*, *Orbis*, *Outposts*, *Poetry Wales*, *Stand*, *Swansea Review*, *Tandem* and *Agenda*.

### **In Memoriam – The Lost Country**

(MCMXIV – MCMXVIII)

#### **I – November waking**

As stunned men gently go and wake  
Memory of things past, of injustice done  
And undone, I came again to the unleaving  
Place where gigantic wars had cracked  
And torn the erupting earth into hollow  
Craters no-man-fathomed, where I met one  
As between worlds, as if yet sheltering  
From the guns' irate insistent fury.

You were the one who slew and in turn  
Were slain. Your sleep – the somnolence  
Of these swaying alders, these monuments  
And shrines to remorse and abandoned time.  
Will you wake now away from the guns'  
Throb and deep insistent growling roar?  
You sleep the sleep of a century –  
Your bones being as if channelled  
Into that lost past, they lie whitened  
Like a broken birdcage in the deep  
Trench of your thought – from  
Which the spirit has long since flown.

A slight wind gathers this lost domain,  
Stirs the slender metallic alder leaves  
That drift around these deserted trenches.  
Here a few stray strands of rusty barbed  
Wire and drone of the wind among  
Leaves simulates the howl and whoop  
Of shells and ghosts of things past, over  
Which the surface is stained green again.

## **II – On the Salient**

Clapping you now the hands break bread,  
Once steered the plough that cut the soil  
That carved the land to harvest the dead.

These lands once were blood and earth that bore  
And grew the wheaten field that nourished  
The days and hands that went to war.

The war was trenches dug and attacked  
At point of bayonet – and there  
Like an angel lunged and fought and hacked,

And carved the war that made the lands  
A barren waste. A blood-hewn contract  
Has buried the day, yet once these hands

A rifle held and parried where men  
Fired clip after clip into mounds  
Of flesh till the breech grew hot and then.

The somnolent dead lay around.  
Unbearable detonations – broken  
Men in their own blood dying, drowned.

The soil remains – the soiled remains,  
And over that torn yet fertile plain  
The skull occasional the plough upturns.

## **III – In the dugout**

Duskily as if out of dream  
The long line of trenchcoats come  
Out of their lair and burrow, out of their  
Mud-prolonged darkness; from earth  
And death unbound. Yet summoned  
From this rut and domain we squat  
Or kneel in the saurian dark –  
Mere ghosts of the men we were.

Or scuttle like insects though  
Insects are colossal here – until we are  
Denatured or resort to orisons. Gradually  
The gun-demented roaring lessens or by  
Degree increases. Who now remembers  
Us – remember us as strained faces  
That blossom amid darkness,  
That tunnel these damp hollows.

#### **IV – Lullaby**

Touched by the dawn's coruscating cry,  
The ripening blossom trembled, fell,  
And the guns, the wrangling guns they sigh  
Over farm-house, orchard and dull canal.

Man here is but a turning weather-vane.  
Yet who are these seen in silhouette –  
These fading soldiery that trudge and sweat  
Through vortices of an old campaign?

Under the flowering cherry – supine,  
At ease they lie. Yet once inside a time  
There we sang as light leapt to defend  
And the guns gouged the honorific friend.

#### **V – Requiescat**

His voice was a pure baritone  
And revered it was among the shires,  
Along the banks of the green willow  
That were hallowed with song, with choirs  
Of voices that were gallant and holy.

Yet the war and the mud had done for him.  
The rats chewed his cuticles. He was left there  
To rot on the singing wire; and rot he did  
In that no-man's place – and died of wounds  
Gaping and most bloody. And millions  
Like him, and a whole generation  
Died it did – singing singing multitudes  
In an agony of dying: in an agony he hung  
There – till someone out of mercy  
Put a bullet through his song.

#### **VI – Lessons in obeisance**

Earthward at dawn the deferential  
Young and the honorific friend.  
All the live-long to roam  
As through river-fogs, through green  
Verdure where the lush viridian grows.

And there to find the sunken barge  
Or the estaminet hung precariously  
Amid a tumulus of heaped brick –  
To go through the ruined colonnade  
Of forked trees; to find the tombstone  
Kept below stairs. Or where the wounded  
Were once by barge evacuated, where mind  
Does ache, does ache amid wild rumours,  
With air vanquished from lungs; to go  
Into the long day's decaying; to follow  
Those who had journeyed where death  
Had double-dyed their lips to cherry;  
To find the lush entombment of those  
Green and early days. To kneel  
Among the mind's frayed edges  
Where death once held his dog days,  
There among ruins to saunter; to find these  
Relics around the flowering cherry tree  
Where I slew you and you slew me.

## VII – Song of the bones

It is summer in the sultry southern downs,  
In this green and calcified country –  
This rolling chalk country composed of bones.

In a rollicking the larks are going  
Upward through the sprung and tufted field.  
Their song is in praise of their own one calling.

Along the narrow path silence engages,  
And is the silence of those who endure  
The long-day's war and all its ages.

What think you now whose bones were erased?  
*I think I come to a country in decay –  
Where the population has been replaced;*

*Where the laws and customs are not mine;  
Were traded for those of a barbarous tongue  
Whose cause and outcome led to decline.*

A century has clawed away the debris.  
Yet what brings your bones back to this time  
That will not now lie still nor silent be?

*It is the speech of bones about to be said,  
Where another's plangent eloquence guards  
The day and time does tread, does tread, does tread.*

## Martin Caseley

**Martin Caseley** is an English teacher, essayist and poet, living in Stamford, Lincolnshire. He regularly contributes reviews to the Stride magazine website ([www.stridemagazine.co.uk](http://www.stridemagazine.co.uk)) and his most recent poetry collection, *A Sunday Map of The World*, appeared in 2000. He is working on new poems and essays.

### Disinterring a Story

(Ernest Harold Marles

b. 1887, Somerset,

d. 1917 nr. Bethune, Arras.)

(i)

So at last, the story's disinterred,  
the mud dried up, the iron harvest hurled,

scrap, rusting high beside the fields and roads,  
and silence settles.

Coaches bounce their loads

past Hyde Park Corner, round the Menin Gate;  
we file off quickly: we cannot be late.

At eight 'o'clock each evening sounds their fate.

(ii) *His Story*

His story  
passed down through the family  
like a saint's relic,  
a knuckle or a finger-bone,  
fragile pages turned over in the hand.

His story  
becomes ancient history,  
takes on the quality of myth,  
lacquered, impermeable,  
impossible to reach the truth  
over there...



too distant now to celebrate.

(v) *The war, the war*

The war in the published memoir,  
the war up on the screen,  
the war that sleeps forever  
in the fitful, waking dream.

The war of the stirring poster  
and the white feather; grainy  
Craiglockhart film of the limb,  
fluttering forever.

The war of the trench exploding  
into particles of earth;  
the shrapnel of the modern world  
slouching into birth.

The war in 1000 days,  
the war of 'never again',  
the war of the Pals' Battalions,  
the war of the foxhunting men.

The war of the iron harvest  
that still seems to be ours;  
the war that will not let us rest  
in the small, muttering hours.

The trench war, the war in the air,  
the war to end all wars;  
the 'over by Christmas' confidence,  
the war of the good, brave cause.

That war they would not speak about;  
the war we cannot stop thinking about.

(vi) : *What did we expect?*

So the coaches inch along the lanes,  
past the farms, following the brown, mud-coloured signs

to the rows of bleached standing stones, regular with age,  
a petrified scream, even teeth of graves  
outraging the wide, wide skies. The regulars have plans,  
have brought their own beer (none of that Belgian stuff!) and  
discuss regiments knowingly, loudly, for hours.  
Then it becomes a subdued tourism  
revolving, as it does, around the silence standing around the graves,  
before they troop back on the coach, ticking  
in the sun.

Ernest's, when we find it, is a humble affair: a quiet corner  
of a village cemetery and a small quadrant  
assigned to commonwealth soldiers.  
Not far off, beyond the railings,  
is a scrubby side-street with a garage  
and a laundry in the cool shadows  
and someone is driving off. Nothing much is happening  
in the middle of the day; cats laze  
on bonnets in pools of lassitude.  
We take it all in; there is a hundred years  
of silence to break.

What  
did we expect? Having pieced together the story  
of emigration and letters, only to find we know less  
than we assumed,  
more than we suspected. Photographs present  
a military mask, correctly. Standing there,  
taking pictures, we speak the usual platitudes,  
read the rain-smearred messages left on surrounding stones;  
the coach grumbles into life  
and as we leave, at slower than marching pace,  
the traffic is free and light all down the Arras road.

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