

A) What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

- Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

B) The way most people witnessed the war, however, was in the bodies of the wounded men returning and the faces of those who had received a letter or telegram informing them of a bereavement. Above all, these were the years of visible death. A little over 6 million men were mobilised to fight in the war, and more than 722,000 died (41,000 of them after the Armistice from their wounds), though an accurate figure will never be found. But the danger was unevenly distributed. One in eight fighting soldiers was killed, and nearly a third wounded. Including those taken prisoner almost half, 47 per cent, of the army were casualties. The worst place was Flanders: for every nine men sent there from Britain, five would be killed, wounded or reported missing. In the navy people were half as likely to be killed (though few were wounded: ships sank, and that was that). In the Air Force the death rate was just 2 per cent. Nor was the danger equally distributed by class and geography. Scots took a disproportionate share of the deaths, as did the Ulstermen: both were used as shock troops in some of the worst battles. Officers were disproportionately more likely to be killed, and junior officers especially so (though seventy-eight British generals also died). From the main Oxbridge colleges the ratio of deaths was twice the national average. A survey of peers aged under fifty and their sons concluded that a higher percentage of ducal families had suffered violent death over the fifty years from 1880 than during 1330-1479 – the period of the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses. And being a front line subaltern, the lowest ranking officer, was particularly dangerous. Those who think of painters and writers as effete might be interested to know that no regiment, battalion or division of the British army suffered higher casualties than the Artists' Rifles, the 28th Battalion of the London Regiment, which specialised in training subalterns – so much so that they were known as the Suicide Club.

C) I have not been able to write for some time, but I have much to tell you now. All leave was cancelled, and we were told confidentially that in a few days the Battalion would take part in a charge on the German trenches.

So we prepared for it. The men charged 'dummy' trenches, and practised bomb-throwing. The machine gun officer went through all his guns, and I took all extra precautions. The men were in excellent spirits, and sharpened their bayonets and cleaned their rifles most industriously. Sick men tried to get well for it, and a sick Officer who heard of it came out of hospital; but they all realised its gravity.

We went up to the trenches from which we were to jump up on the night of the 14th. It was an eight-mile walk, and the pipers played us for four miles. There was a tremendous stream of men along the road, as a whole brigade was to attack. The men were in the best of spirits, and sang all the way. My stretcher-bearers who had had their number increased to 24 making as usual a joyful noise, and had finally to be silenced by the Adjutant. We halted at last, for we had to go up to the trenches by a by-path, and I said Goodbye to as many Officers as I could. I had been ordered to stay back on a main road half a mile behind the trenches, and felt very sore about it, but I went up to see what the ground was like.

At 2 a.m. a terrific bombardment began, and went on till 4 a.m., but I was so tired that I dozed through it. But at 5 a.m., I was woken up by the first batch of wounded coming down. They came along a long communication

trench in a steady stream. Meanwhile the Huns began to put crumps and shrapnel down the road. Our C.O. arrived with an artery bleeding in his head, which was troublesome to stop, and we had to lie him down at the back, as a crump landed too near the dressing-station for safety. Then news came that a Captain Cunningham was lying exhausted at the top end of the communication trench. So he had to be fetched down. I then found the trench blocked with men who had dropped exhausted trying to drag themselves along. The Huns were putting big shells into the trench, and making direct hits, so that in places the trench was blown in, yet not a single wounded man was hit all day. It was a weary job helping poor Cunningham down the trench. He was hit in the leg and arm, and was very brave. We got some more men back at the same time, but when we arrived at our place we found that another crump had burst just outside our dressing station, and wrecked it, and had killed four men next door.

When I got out of the trench it was getting dusk, so I went off with a trusty man, and searched for the wounded. I knew where the charge had taken place. We found most of them in a little coppice. They lay behind trees, in 'dug-outs', and in the bottom of trenches. They were so weak that they could not call out. Their joy and relief on being found was pitiful, and fairly spurred me on to look for more. It was awful work getting some of them out of their trenches and 'dug-outs'. It was hard to find men enough to carry them away. I had to appeal for volunteers for the men were dead beat. Finally, at dawn, we got our last wounded away from a very advanced point, at 4 in the morning. Altogether, we had collected 18 men behind the trenches, and were pretty well certain that none were left.

D) 'He had first trench watch. He gulped a mug of chlorine-tasting tea, and then started walking along to the outermost position on their left. A smell of bacon frying. In the third fire bay he found Sawdon and Towers crouched over a small fire made out of shredded sandbags and candle ends, coaxing the flames. He stopped to chat for a few minutes, and Towers blinking under the green mushroom helmet, looked up and offered him tea. A quiet day, he thought, walking on. Not like the last few days, when the bombardment had gone on for seventy hours, and they'd stood-to five times expecting a German counter-attack. Damage from that bombardment was every-where: crumbling parapets, flooded-saps, dugouts with gagged-mouths.

He'd gone, perhaps, three fire bays along when he heard the whoop of a shell, and, spinning round, saw the scrawl of dusty brown smoke already drifting away. He thought it'd gone clear over, but then he heard a cry and, feeling sick in his stomach, he ran back. Logan was there already. It must have been Logan's cry he heard, for nothing in that devastation could have had a voice. A conical black hole, still smoking, had been driven into the side of the trench. Of the kettle, the frying pan, the carefully tended fire, there was no sign, and not much of Sawdon and Towers either, or not much that was recognisable.

There was a pile of sandbags and shovels close by, stacked against the parapet by a returning work party. He reached for a shovel. Logan picked up a sandbag and held it open, and he began shovelling soil, flesh and splinters of blackened bone into the bag. As he shovelled, he retched. He felt something jar against his teeth and saw that Logan was offering him a rum bottle. He forced down bile and rum together. Logan kept his face averted as the shovelling went on. He was swearing under his breath, steadily, blasphemously, obscenely, inventively. Somebody came running. 'Don't stand there gawping, man,' Logan said, 'Go and get some lime.'