

HELLO TO ALL THIS

By Neil Brand

Deep in water I splashed my way
Up the trench to our bogged front line.
Rain had fallen the whole damned night.
O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,
And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,
And get my bloody old sins washed white!

From 'Stand-to: Good Friday Morning'

My Grandfather's name was Frederick Edwards. He was killed in Picardy in September 1917, after a year on the Western Front. His memorials consist of a name carved on the Thiepval Monument, another carved on the memorial outside St. Mary's church in Barcombe, Sussex, and a wife and two children, the village's official 'war orphans'. My grandmother was so scarred by the loss of her husband and the hardship of feeding three mouths on a widow's pension that she put my mother (her second child) through what would now be termed 'emotional abuse'. My mother recalled the Remembrance Day services at Barcombe, hating them because she would be expected to be 'on show'. She never knew her father. He was someone else's memory and a name on a stone, mourned by the nation but entirely unknown to his little girl.

That is one reason, at least, that I found myself trudging across a damp fallow field in the bitter March of this year towards the straggling tip of a village called Villeret, near St Quentin, Northern France. It was the second farmer's field I had walked in two days, the previous one being north of Arras the day before, and my cousins and I were being guided by Frederick's great-grandson, Andy, a TA sergeant who has seen service in Iraq. Andy had conducted extensive research into what we knew of Frederick's service and had miraculously found a method of uploading trench maps onto a handheld GPS. So on this achingly cold winter's afternoon we were walking

exactly in Fred's footsteps, on paths once hacked through the British front Line and roads long hidden beneath Picardy clay, towards the jumping off point of the night attack at which he died.

Before this two-day trek my direct connections to my grandfather had consisted of one surviving letter in which he described the Arras engagement, the official record of his being Missing in Action and some of his personal effects. Oh yes, and the thousands of books about the war in which he fought, and the poets whose genius memorialised that experience for us, the timeless music written in response to that war and, because of my special circumstances as a silent film pianist, the films that my Grandfather's relatives had seen while he was away and those others shot 'officially' across the blighted landscape on which he, and so many others, died.

Many connections, really, connections which would obsess me from the day I learned of my Grandfather's war until today. And just as the muddy fields across which Frederick's grandsons squelched that day seemed to us to exist simultaneously in two time periods ninety years apart, so my view of that dreadful war, of Siegfried Sassoon, of the silent-movie figures I accompany at the piano as they flicker back to life in this new century, seem always to exist in binary vision, concurrently 'now' and 'then', 'here' and in 'another country'. In tracing the line from Grandfather Fred to me I have been privileged to visit the intimate places of First World War experience, to make my own judgements and discover my own treasures – to witness events at first hand through the silent films and imagine them into robust experience through my radio plays; but always beside me was a guide – a Siegfried Sassoon or a Geoffrey Malins, a Charles Masterman or a Richard Holmes, my cousin Andy and even my Grandfather himself. This article, I hope, goes some way towards mapping the landscape of a journey that has taken me years to begin to comprehend – and the discovery that, sometimes, the past is 'now' and 'now' is the product of what we have learned as well as what we experience. And my grandfather walks with me still, more than I had ever realised.

'Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own.
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
The armies who endured that sullen swamp.

From 'On Passing the New Menin Gate'

In investigating a massive and all-encompassing historical event like the Great War I have found that the best approach is that of the coal miner; first sink a shaft deep into the history as it is known and then work outwards along a layer, along the gallery as it were. In that way one investigates in breadth as well as depth, sinking other minor shafts from those to further, broader layers, sometimes, thrillingly, stumbling across some of your earlier shafts. The struggles of the post-war, despairing Sassoon were one of my keys to unlocking the mysteries of that war, his incomprehension of 'peace-complacent' England and the reshaping of his own mind to encompass his sexuality, his anger and his need for spiritual fulfilment. The event in his life which best represented this liminal Sassoon I found in John Stuart Roberts's biography concerning the gift to Sassoon of a car by William Temple, a friend of Frankie Schuster's. After months of self-separation from London society and frustrated writing the car allowed Siegfried the independence to visit his friends, see his country, and come to terms with the next direction his writing must take. In spite of the fact Sassoon could barely drive he made an 800 mile journey in eight days, visiting Thomas Hardy, TE Lawrence and Ottoline Morrell, amongst others. In my radio play 'Between the Lines' I placed the recently deceased Dr. William Rivers in the passenger seat next to him.

Rivers When we first met in 1917 - you were a famous, decorated officer and poet who had flown in the face of the country and your own reputation by writing an open letter to the press protesting at the conduct of the war and refusing to fight. As a result you were sent to me at Craiglockhart, suffering from neurasthenia...

Sassoon ...thanks to Robert Graves who rigged the army medical board so that they would pronounce me dotty rather than have me shot.

Rivers Quite.

Sassoon And where you, Dr. Rivers, treated me with the most delicate touch, the most complete understanding – I can truly say that you never spoke one word to me that was not for my lasting good.

Rivers And you returned to the front. You went back on your defiant letter.

Sassoon I realised that what mattered most to me was not my protest or the war but the well-being of the men under my command who were slogging it out in France whilst I failed to improve my swing on the links at Edinburgh. Obvious, really.

Rivers So you had discovered a cause that was worth fighting, living and possibly dying for.

Sassoon I suppose so.

Rivers Then I would suggest that we are once again in Craiglockhart, you are again under my supervision only now the stakes are, if anything, higher. For the plight of your men cannot tempt you back to life. Your search is deeper – possibly more dangerous.

Sassoon Will you guide me? As you did before in the quiet of your study in the late summer twilight, your glasses pushed up onto your forehead...

Rivers I think you should look on me as the part of yourself that wants to be helped. So, to business. We have time on our side, we have your splendid mind and we have the car.

Sassoon The car?

Rivers Oh, yes. The car gives me a great deal of hope for you. Who do you most admire in your profession?

Sassoon Alive?

Rivers Of course.

Sassoon Thomas Hardy.

Rivers And when did you last see him?

Sassoon Last year – I can't get down so often because...ah.

Rivers You see?

Sassoon I see. Your last piece of unfinished business. Your final patient, my final cure.

Rivers Oh it will never be that. Maybe with luck it will be your first glimpse of the tape that leads out of no-man's land...

Sassoon's 'binary vision' had to be adjusted from war to peace, his bitterness could not be allowed to overwhelm him, nor could he try to 'step aside' from it as Lawrence appeared to have done. His friends represent facets of his own character, challenging, sympathising, but ultimately, teaching him.

Ottoline You never even came to see me off – you were going back to France and I might never have seen you again. And I thought as I sat in tears in the train...this man is incapable of love...but just for me?...or is he incapable of love for anybody? And the one thought broke my heart...but the other filled me with horror for you, my dear...

Sassoon I think I love you more than any other woman...

Ottoline Ah. There's the rub. (*Carefully*) But is there one man you love more than any other?

A BEAT

I do hope so, my darling...because what I heard in your last poems was a voice crying out in a yawning void of loneliness. A voice crying out for justice, yes, for salvation, but ultimately...for love, for all that love defines and celebrates. And since the war your poems have contained barely a grain of love for yourself or anyone else – except possibly for Rivers.

Sassoon (*Hotly*) That's not true! My poem, 'Lovers'!!

'For I can follow you, to bless
and lull your distant beauty where you roam;

and with wild songs of hoarded loveliness

Recall you to these arms that were your home.'

Ottoline Ah, yes, you were *in love* then ... but almost the next poem you sent me...it was all gone, wasn't it?

'I'd have you stand

And look me in the eyes, and laugh, and smite me.

Then I should know, at least, that truth endured

Though love had died of wounds. And you could leave me

Unvanquished in my atmosphere of devils.'

A BEAT

Is that what you want, my darling heroic boy, fighting a war all by yourself against the world and all that's in it? Do you just want to be left in peace to sink, erect and still saluting, into the slough of despond while your friends stand applauding on the bank?

Richard Holmes, in a superb debate on the War Poets at the IWM in 2006 made a comment which has haunted me ever since – ‘Today, just as in the First World War, we at home have no idea what we are sending our young men to face.’

One reads again and again of the men who returned home unwilling to talk about their experiences, so that those at home would know neither the horror that been unleashed, nor the fundamental changes it had wrought in the combatants. My Grandfather didn't come home, but he did write a letter in April 1917 to his sister Em, working at the time in a munitions factory in SE London, which contains the lines...

‘I was very glad to hear you were all close together and getting on so well and I hope you will all keep well and be able to stick it as the shells play a very important part in an advance – it was a grand although an awful sight when we advanced on Easter Monday to see our shells falling in the German Line – it was all on fire and as we advanced the artillery lifted their fire to the next line and there was not much fight left in the Germans when we got there, they were coming out in dozens with their hands up...’

A world of experience is hinted at between the lines of this letter, above all a determination that his sister should feel part of what Fred was doing – she was working in munitions for him, he was defending her, the sense of a shared burden is uppermost in the letters written by the soldiers to their kin. As Fred's Grandsons walked the Arras battlefield he had fought across, we retraced his steps counting the hours each twenty yard stretch had taken, according to the Northumberland Fusiliers' Regimental records – first sixty yards in an hour, then twenty-five yards in another, then he is across the German front line, then another hour before moving half a mile forward again, eight hours in total to the furthest point his company reached that day – then he and his comrades stopped, but not to rest – they held the position for a week, as his letter puts it –

‘...snow and rain and bitter cold and no sleep...’

And as we walked, hunched against the cold, our minds enveloped in the experience of Easter Monday 1917, we picked up the odd pieces of battle flotsam, a spent cartridge, a piece of shell casing, an ammunition clip. My cousin kicked over a white object and froze – we stopped to look – unmistakably a fragment of human hip bone.

‘I lost my mate, we was standing together in a German trench when a shell burst and killed him but never hurt me only knocked me over by the explosion – we had three officers wounded out of four and several men but I expect you will see by the papers more than I can tell you...’

‘By the papers’ and...other wonders. By 1917, Em could ‘see more’ by another, vastly more immediate medium. Fictional features about the war were becoming common in cinemas by 1916, but before then there were the Roll of Honour films. These were reels of still pictures of men serving at the front, taken before embarkation and lovingly sent in by their wives and sweethearts to be filmed in batches and projected with respect in their local picture-houses alongside dramas, travelogues and Chaplin’s first comedies. These are formal shots, photographers’ studio images captured against a background of foliage or painted backdrops, sometimes in an ill-fitting new uniform, always with a formality of bearing and a strange distractedness about the eyes.

The British Silent Film Festival, of which I am a director, took the Great War as its subject in 2004, and these haunted, moving films opened the event. Dr Mike Hammond of Southampton University, the world’s authority on British film and the First World War, pointed out that these men had not died in battle – they were being celebrated because they were fighting at all, protecting their loved ones. As a pianist on that occasion I had to decide what to play as their images flickered by - my binary vision had to be immediately addressed – should the music carry the pity of war (the obvious choice) or the ‘positive’ 1914 option, a more unsettling atmosphere for a modern audience? ‘I Vow to Thee My Country’ turned out to be not the ironic but the correct answer, for these men in the Roll of Honour films represented to their people, and now to the modern audience, not sacrifice but service, not waste but honour. Their stiffness of bearing and the devotion of their families at home became almost unbearably moving against a musical frame which represented hope and steely determination.

The Roll of Honour films were the innocent cinema of the Great War and would mostly be gone by the middle of 1915 as the numbers of dead rose incalculably. By 1916 the cinema-going Home Front public were hungry for war news - but how could the powers-that-be counter despair, loss, the terrible cost of the battles of that fateful year?

On another picture-house screen a company very like my Grandfather's marches past, smiling, caps waving – huge field guns recoil with silent violence as another enormous shell is pitched into the enemy lines - a man with haunted eyes carries his mate along a trench towards the camera, men go 'over the top', fall and lie almost still and prisoners and captured equipment begin to pile up – the film is 1916's 'The Battle of the Somme'.

Jean I feel as if I'm really a part of it all at last...seeing this with my own eyes I understand more what I'm fighting for – oh, the writers are fine, of course...

HG Wells Why, thank you...

Jean ...but this...this is wonderful...because it can't lie, can it? Pictures taken of the real thing – it makes you more...complicit somehow.

Masterman We're calling it Britain Prepared – it will go into the picture houses of the nation and across the sea to the neutrals...

Wells Pictures like this can lie, you know...

A BEAT

Not the pictures themselves perhaps but...the selection – the way the shots are lined up...they can lie all right. They can lie through their teeth...

A BEAT

You know these navy shots are a lie, Charlie – just as you know people will stand up and cheer for them. We English have developed to the fullest extent the vices of safety and comfort; we're the spoilt children of peace.

Masterman (*Head in hands*) Give me strength...

Wells We have a hatred of science and dramatic behaviour; we can see no reason for exactness or intensity; we dislike proceeding "to extremes". Ultimately we believe everything will turn out all right. Partially because between us and the mess in France is this magnificent sight – men defending us on land and sea.

Jean That's not...

Wells Well one day, and soon, the war will come to us all in this island, even in this city, as sure as we breathe and in a way we cannot predict, any more than the men in those ships. You're preparing a nation for the unthinkable...

Masterman And what would you do, Wells? Stay silent?

Wells Tell them I don't know what it will be like.

Masterman I can't do that.

Wells (Quietly) Oh, Jean? Have you heard from your brother recently?

Jean (Furious) How *dare* you?

Masterman That's unforgivable, Wells...

Wells I'm showing you the truth!! What assurance can you or I possibly give Jean that her brother will return?!

Masterman The assurance of hope, Wells – perhaps of faith, although I wouldn't expect you to understand that...

Jean I'm not a fool - I don't want words – not from either of you. I just want to think that all is being done to support Frank and keep him as safe as possible. Can either of you give me that?

Masterman Yes, Jean. I believe I can.

Wells You can't. It's not possible.

In my Radio 3 play 'Seeing It Through', I addressed the extraordinary secret machinations behind the establishment of Britain's War Propaganda Bureau under Charles Masterman in 1914. He established his propaganda link to the nation by inviting twenty-five of the country's most famous writers to a meeting in Whitehall on September 7th 1914 and secretly recruiting them to write articles, poems and stories supportive of the war. These were aimed initially at Germany and the non-combatant countries but eventually, of course, became the conduit for the presentation of the war to the home front. Much of what we now think of as the jingoistic war literature of 1914-15 was a direct result of this initiative and as the war continued all concerned were to find themselves tainted by association. Sassoon and his generation found their voice in counter-attacking precisely

this knee-jerk patriotism and Masterman himself fell from power in 1916 and died much too young in 1927.

Jean Lloyd George broke him, you know...I was at least partially to blame for that...

Wells You weren't to blame at all – such confused times, and the worst was yet to come – Loos, the Somme, Passchendaele – I think he saw it all coming...

Jean I still don't know what more we could have done...

Wells I have the misfortune of having every twist and turn of my attitudes committed to paper – the war took away my credibility along with that of most of the writers in that room in September 1914. Hardy was right...

Jean We thought we were doing the right thing...

Wells Conan Doyle lost both his sons, a brother and two brothers-in-law to that war and now only Spiritualism keeps him from the abyss – Kipling lost his only son, Barrie lost his beloved Godsons, we all paid a terrible price...

Jean And ten years on it was all waste and futility, if you read the young men who were there.

Wells It's us they rail against. With good reason. I met Graves and Sassoon at the Reform – lectured them, rather, I'm afraid...

I was amazed and rather terrified to be phoned up by Charles Masterman's 94-year-old son, Neville, immediately after the play's broadcast. I apologised that he had not been contacted by the BBC but he assured me that in spite of being a distinguished Professor of History at the University of Wales 'obscurity has claimed me for its own...!' He seemed pleased with my portrait of his father, with the exception of the scene I had invented in which Masterman is forcibly 'sobered up' by his secretary just before a parliamentary session. I asked him about Charles Masterman and it was clear that he revered his father rather more than he knew him – his mother had written a superb, privately published memoir on her husband's death and it was obvious from that that Masterman was a major figure in Lloyd George's administration, particularly in spearheading his massive social reforms, and had tried to do the decent thing in promoting Britain in wartime. For me he was a true hero, a flawed Man for All Seasons with an impossible job to do, and running a propaganda ministry was no place for

idealists – his place was taken by John Buchan and ultimately Beaverbrook.

Wells ...tell me – what happened to Frank?

Jean He's here – there look, in uniform...

Wells Why that's fine!!

Jean Masterman saved his life, I'm convinced of it – he's...better now – he was ill for a while...then Masterman made him liaison officer to one of the cameramen on 'The Battle of the Somme'...

Wells That film was Masterman!! I never knew!!

Jean Of course not. Nobody will ever know what he achieved – the war paintings, Singer Sargent, Stanley Spencer, Nevinson – all commissioned by Masterman – the films, the books – and he could never take credit, particularly after Buchan took over – he was quintessential Whitehall – stay in the background, pull the strings and enjoy the power in private...and swallow the bitterness...that's the bit he couldn't manage...

To the cinemagoers at home The Battle of the Somme film was a dreadful wake-up call – for the first time they had some notion of 'the hell where youth and laughter go'. The film survives intact; indeed it is now inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World register. Its bleak images are unchanged, silent, used in countless war documentaries at which the mine at Hawthorn Ridge seems to symbolise every shell burst on the Western Front.

My cousins and I stood where Geoffrey Malins set up his camera for that shot on the morning of July 1st 1916. The Hawthorn mine is now an odd ellipse of trees on the skyline, in front of us was the low, declining ridge below which our attacking armies jumped off at daybreak, and to our left was the famous 'sunken lane', ironically the only objective in the area actually taken that day. Malins filmed men actually falling on the slope opposite, scythed down against the background of grey escarpment which made it, mercifully, too dark to distinguish for their relatives back home. A full digital restoration of the film in 2006 brought the carnage to light for us, our generation being the first to see what Malins saw.

But all who came to France on battlefield memorial visits after the war could see what happened at the sunken lane. The Lancashire Fusiliers are caught there on film just before their attack – eyes haunted, one man’s lips framing the words ‘I hope we’re not in the wrong place, because next time I’m just going to bomb them all and get out of here’. The post-war visitor needs only walk up the little slope they’re facing and over the lip of ground they jumped off from, now topped with sparse, scrubby trees, and there, not seventy yards away, is their cemetery with easily as many white, cross-bearing stones ranged between the walls as men crouched in the lane in that image. Beyond them lies the terrible Devonshire Trench, its memorial carrying the words ‘The Devonshires held this trench – The Devonshires hold it still...’

The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

‘Attack’

How could the film of ‘The Battle of the Somme’ be good propaganda, released in September 1916 when the casualty figures were known and whole streets in Barnsley, Hull, and Accrington were swathed in mourning black? How could showing the families’ real death and wounds make them more determined, not less?

One answer lies in the music chosen to accompany the original release. Morton Hutcheson, the music correspondent of trade magazine ‘The Bioscope’ supplied a set of suggestions of music to be played with the film wherever it was shown and these were widely taken up. Their general thrust is positive, determined, the ‘Light Cavalry Overture’ accompanies the attack, the hymn ‘Autumn’ the views of the dead, at no time do we hear Tipperary or Keep the Home Fires Burning (which Sassoon cordially hated, exclaiming ‘They play it constantly, even during the hottest weather’). The images may be pure Owen and Sassoon, the smiles and

helmet-wavings of ignorance, the stares of terrible knowledge, the mud, the metal, the vast spaces blotted with smoke and the tight, damp places where people had to exist – but in the music was a heartbreaking attempt to place meaning upon this chaos, the conviction that it was all worthwhile, Wilfred Owen’s ‘lie carved deep in the stone’. But this ‘lie’ was just a truth that simply could not see far enough – it was the truth of the simple respect for early losses in the Honour Roll films, the ‘lie’, that of incomplete and terrible, unknowable knowledge. These are, for us today, the last glimpses of the Land of Lost Content. For Sir Henry Newbolt, the film of the Battle of the Somme was nothing less than a religious experience.

O living pictures of the dead,
O songs without a sound,
O fellowship whose phantom tread
Hallows a phantom ground —
How in a gleam have these revealed
The faith we had not found.

From *The War Films* by Sir Henry Newbolt

But another poet was back home at the time of the release of the Battle of the Somme’s sequel, ‘The Battle of Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks’, and for him the public celebration of propaganda images was a far more bitter affair.

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
‘We’re sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!’

From *Blighters*

Hutcheson recommended the ‘March of the Gladiators’ to match the first shots of rolling tanks, music more familiar to us as the opening bars of marching circus acts – ‘Ba Ba babada Dup Da Da Da’. The Wonder Weapon was a prancing pony in its musical accompaniment. No wonder Sassoon, who had experienced the real thing, was sick to his stomach. But did he see a show, or one of the live interludes that often accompanied film shows at that time?

An abandoned tank was one of the markers used to draw up the 1st and 3rd Companies, Tyneside Scottish, near Villeret at 23.50 on the night of September 8th 1917. Ninety-three years later Fred's grandsons stood in a fallow field at that jumping off point looking towards the enemy line which was just out of sight beyond the crest of the ground. 'Of course' remarked Andy – 'they'd form up here out of sight, the enemy wouldn't know they were there until they came out of the smoke at the top of the slope.' He cast a soldier's eye over the field. 'It was a well-planned attack. You have to be in the terrain to understand it...'

We don't know how Fred died; possibly in the attack (part of a general push towards the Hindenburg Line which successfully captured all its objectives), or from sniping once the line was captured, or whilst carrying a message back to battalion HQ. My mother heard all three explanations. Six months later the Germans rolled unstopably forward across that same field and many miles further West, Hitler's Panzer divisions did the same twenty-two years after that, Patton's tanks Eastwards four years after that, the Paris-Calais autoroute North-South fifty years after that. Only now there is something more there than a farmer's field, a hedge and the still-undisturbed remains of war – there's a wreath, hung on a fence in 2008, still untouched today, commemorating one soldier amongst the hundreds, if not thousands, who fell there. Not an Unknown one – one named, remembered and celebrated. My Grandfather.

Was ever an immolation so belied
as these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.'

From '*On Passing the New Menin Gate*'

What Sassoon couldn't bear was the minuteness of the names on the new white wall, the numbering of individuals. He was reacting to the democratisation of the fallen, and with a jolt on first reading this poem, I realised that here was the cruellest loss to befall my mother and grandmother – for the weight of national mourning raised every fallen soldier of the Great War to the status of the Unknown Soldier – a place of honour in Westminster Abbey, a Cenotaph turning Whitehall into a graveside, a memorial in every village, a Roll of Honour in every church.

But in return, the grieving relatives had to give him up as a man – no Loving Fathers or Brothers, no Deeply Beloved Sons or ‘Here Lies...’ - the decision, taken at ministerial level, not to repatriate any of the fallen in France and Flanders resulted in an endless, memorialised parade of soldiers with rank and number, grieved by all but forever de-personalised as individuals. My Grandfather was a 32-year-old carpenter who built the best staircases in Barcombe. Only for eighteen months was he Private F. Edwards, 48051, Northumberland Fusiliers. Now, he is that for good, carved deep in the stone. No wonder my mother hated Remembrance Day.

Neil Brand
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