Opening extract from

Stories of World War One

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INTRODUCTION

I only really became properly aware of World War One when I went into the sixth form of my south London grammar school, way back in the early 1970s. I had chosen to do English Literature as one of my three A levels, and found myself studying the poetry of Wilfred Owen. I was soon totally gripped by his work, the tiny number of beautifully written, deeply felt poems about his experiences as a young officer that he had managed to complete before he was killed in action a week before the war ended.

Reading them made me want to find out more about him, and about the war itself. So I read whatever I could find – the poems of Siegfried Sassoon, for example, and the great memoirs of the war, including Sassoon's own *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves, both of whom knew Owen.

I read lots of history books too, and learned what a wasteful conflict the war had been. It began in 1914 and lasted over four years, during which eight and a

half million soldiers died, almost one million of them from Britain and its then empire. There was fighting in many parts of the world, but it was the horror of trench warfare in France and Belgium that captured my imagination – the slaughter of thousands of young men for a few yards of bomb-blasted mud.

After a while I began to realise that I'd known about the war all along, but hadn't taken much notice of it. In the entrance hall of my school there was a board bearing the names of former pupils who had died in the war, and it was quite a list. There was a local war memorial too, a tall obelisk of white stone with a much longer list of names carved on it. Every year on the nearest Sunday to 11th November – the day on which the war ended in 1918 – wreaths were placed around the memorial. And whenever 11th November itself fell on a weekday, we would have a special school assembly with a full two-minute silence, so we could remember 'those who had given their lives for their country'.

From then on, I noticed war memorials in many places. I played rugby for my school, and saw memorials in the entrance halls of the schools we visited. There were memorials in other London suburbs, on the sides of office buildings and factories, in stations and in parks. Many were similar white obelisks, but some were big and dramatic and

included statues of soldiers. In later years, I discovered that there are memorials everywhere in these islands – in every village and town and suburb, in the centre of every city. It is almost as if a silent army of ghosts haunts the land which they left and never returned to in life. But with so many dead in such a short time, how could it be otherwise?

Of course, when I first started reading Wilfred Owen's poetry, many of the soldiers who had fought in the war were still alive, elderly men in their seventies and eighties. They have all gone now, but most families still have stories about great-grandfathers who fought in the trenches, great-uncles who were killed, others who returned maimed or disabled for life, either physically or mentally. World War One – or as it was called at the time, *The Great War* – runs like a scar through all of us. In many ways it made this country what it is today, and that is why we should always remember it. That's the point of all the war memorials, of all the Remembrance Day services, of all those poppies we buy.

Yet for me the best way to remember the war is through the words of writers. This is something Wilfred Owen himself recognised. He wrote that 'true poets must be truthful', and by this I think he meant that the truth of what happened is to be found in the poems and stories written about it. That's

where you'll find an understanding of the impact of the war on the people who lived through it, and who came after. And that's why I came up with the idea for this anthology of short stories. I thought there couldn't be a better way for today's young readers to find out about the war than by putting a collection of great stories in your hands, especially as the anthology is being published in this centenary year.

I wanted this book to cover as wide a range as possible, which is why you'll find stories set in very different places. There are stories about young men in the trenches, of course, but also about the people they left behind, and about what happened to them and their families because of their experiences. There are stories about the impact of the war on children, in this country and in France and Belgium and Germany. There are stories about soldiers from Britain's empire who fought in the war – about young men from Ireland, India and Australia. There is sadness and pain and suffering in these stories, but there is hope too, and I have a feeling that if Wilfred Owen himself could read them, he would approve.

I like to think so, anyway.

Tony Bradman

THE MAN IN THE RED TROUSERS

JAMILA GAVIN

Author's note:

I very much wanted to reflect the participation of Indian soldiers in World War One and during my research came across Khudadad Khan, the first Indian soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery. Even more poignant was that by belonging to the Duke of Connaught's 129th Baluchi Regiment, his uniform was so incongruous for the muddy battlefields of Europe with their bright green turbans and jackets, and conspicuous bright red trousers. I didn't look any further. A story was already forming in my mind before the research was over.

My name's Lotte Becke. I hope you'll remember me if all this ends badly. You see, I'm Flemish and I live in Flanders, though you would call it Belgium, but don't let Uncle Henrik hear you.

We're at war with Germany. I don't know why. I'll be ten next month. My sister's called Els, she's only five.

We're sitting in the back of the cart, our legs dangling, our backs hard up against a mountain of our possessions: tables, chairs, clothes, bedding, cutlery, everything we could pile onto the cart pulled by our farm horse, dear Nellie, who was too old and bedraggled to have been taken off to be a war horse. Old Henrik had come banging on our door, his voice panting and gasping as if he would have a heart attack. 'Leave, leave – NOW,' and Mother told Els and me to get out the cart and harness up Nellie, while she flew round grabbing at anything and everything, hurling it up onto the back of the cart. I heard her weeping and muttering, 'Oh, I can't leave this, I must have that, this belonged to Grandma, and this was your father's favourite plate. Oh, where is your father?'

Where was Dad? So many people had fled. Uncle

Henrik said Belgium wasn't meant to be on anyone's side. He said we were neutral, but that meant nothing. Kaiser Bill's troops walked in anyway and, within a month, had occupied our country without so much as a by your leave. There wasn't much our little army could do against the might of the Germans – though we gave them a run for their money, but half our village have left, looking for refuge in England, France or Holland.

Mum wouldn't go. 'Cowards,' she cried. When Dad's army unit was scattered, he went to join the resistance, helping the French. 'If more men had been like him, we wouldn't be running like rats,' she cried.

All this time Mum had stayed put, refusing to leave, even as we heard the guns and shells getting nearer, and more of the village fled. 'Your father may come home. I can't have him coming back to an empty house, and no food on the table.'

Food. What food? Every evening, ever since the fighting got nearer and nearer to us, Els and I had scrambled into the turnip and potato fields with sacks, scrabbling in the muddy furrows for anything we could find. Poor Farmer Bodiecke, what could he do? Then he ran too, abandoning his crops, so we felt they were ours for the taking. It wasn't just us; there were others. I saw Michael a little further away.

THE MAN IN THE RED TROUSERS

He was in my class at school – when there was a school. It was hit by the bombardment, and set on fire because some soldiers had been sheltering there, so it doesn't exist now. None of us caught each other's eye; all of us ashamed as we stole from our neighbours. But we couldn't starve, could we? At first we didn't need to steal; Father Bernard from the church got everyone to contribute wheat, potatoes, turnips, carrots – anything they could to build up a store so that food could be distributed fairly. There was always a line of us queuing up for our ration. But then…

On 28th October 1914, British intelligence intercepts German radio traffic. Germans preparing to attack near Hollebeke at 05:30 on 29th October. Aerial reconnaissance spots German transport columns on the move.

I was up my tree. I can see Hollebeke from here. It's our nearest town and I saw them coming. Mama hates it when I climb trees. She says it's unladylike. But this is my secret tree, and it's where I climb to get some peace from everyone, and I can think. Everything's bad at the moment with this war, and Mama is so nervous and irritable. Well, everyone is. So there I was, up at the top of my tree, and I saw

them emerging out of the misty horizon: an army – like a great, never-ending river – coming towards us. I saw them with my own eyes.

Of course, I slid down my tree so fast I grazed my knees and arms, but I had to tell Mama and Uncle Henrik.

'This is bad,' muttered old Uncle Henrik. 'And it's going to get worse. We've got to leave, Marta. They're coming here.'

'No, no!' My mother wouldn't hear of it. 'Why would they want to come to our village?' And she went back to fiercely scrubbing some muddy turnips, as if she could scrub out her fears and the sounds of war we'd put up with for days and days.

'It's bad,' old Henrik repeated. 'They'll come. Things will get worse.'

Could it get any worse? The Germans, French and British had already been fighting ferociously in all the woods and ditches and trenches around us. The noise was so terrible, I thought our brains would burst, or the sky would crack, and all the time it was the screams and moans of wounded and dying soldiers which never seemed to go away.

The Germans want to get to Leper. That's a town not far from here near the border with France, and they call it Ypres. The British and Belgians are fighting tooth and nail to stop them, but the Germans

are desperate; their plan is to overcome the coastal ports in Belgium and France and conquer France. That's what old Henrik said, and there's nothing he doesn't know. It all sounded like one of our board games; snakes and ladders. But we knew it wasn't. Somehow, our village is becoming the centre of a life and death battle; Gheluvelt. Have you heard of it? It's near Hollebeke, not far from Leper/Ypres. We're only small, and very insignificant, but old Henrik was sure they would come to our village because we were high – well, high for round here where everywhere else is flat as a pancake. We're on a kind of ridge, overlooking the Menin to Ypres Road in both directions.

'What will happen if the Germans get Leper?' I asked.

'For goodness sake, Lotte,' snapped my mother, 'questions, questions! Get out of my hair. Take your little sister and amuse her. We have so much to do.'

So I grabbed Els's hand. She didn't want to come, and began struggling and crying. 'I'll show you a secret if you'll shut up!' I hissed at her. So she shut up, and I dragged her along a winding path through the deep undergrowth, till we reached my tree. You see how dire things had become for me to show my little sister my most treasured secret?

I made her sit at the bottom, while I leaped for the over-hanging branch, and swung myself up.

'Lotte!' gasped Els. 'You're not allowed to climb trees. What will Mama say?'

'Nothing,' I snapped, 'if you don't tell on me.' I climbed higher and higher.

'Can I come up?' Els shrieked.

'No! You're too little.'

'What can you see?'

Below me, the army came relentlessly closer; above, the sky hung grey, watery, merciless, as if heaven itself had closed its doors. Not even birds seemed to want to fly across its impenetrable face.

'I can see thousands of soldiers,' I cried. 'Men pushing cannons on wheels, horses, poor horses, struggling to pull machine guns, churning up the mud, soldiers on bicycles – hundreds of them, and trucks, platoons of foot soldiers, men with guns, bayonets and grenades.'

'Lotte, it's raining,' my sister wailed.

Yes, it was raining; again. And soon the army looked like a vast population of ghosts advancing through swishing curtains of rain.

'We'd better go to the barn,' I said, slithering down again. I had a deep knotted fear in my stomach.

'I'm hungry,' she whined.

'So am I,' I retorted, running ahead of her to the

barn. When we got there, we found Michael huddled in a corner.

'Why don't you go home, Michael?' I asked rather fiercely, like a cat defending its territory. I suppose I didn't sound too kind. He had never been a friend of mine. In fact, he had no friends, and the other children liked to tease him dreadfully for his red hair, and for being a Walloon. We Flemish don't much like Walloons round here. I mean, in Flanders we speak Dutch and they speak French. Anyway, he didn't seem to have a father but only a mother who was so poor he often came to school without any shoes.

Michael didn't move. Then I saw he was crying. It's the sort of crying when your face doesn't crumple up. He just stared at me, with the tears rolling down his blank face.

'I've got a turnip,' I said, digging into the pocket of my smock. 'Do you want it?'

He nodded wildly, and almost snatched the small, muddy turnip from my hand. Els and I watched in silence, as he gobbled it up mud and all, as if he hadn't eaten in days, and all the time we could hear the rain outside coming down in a steady roar. Then I pulled out another turnip and gave it to Els. 'Leave some for me,' I said.

It had been exciting at first; war. Last July, in full

summer, when war was declared, we'd been helping with the harvesting, when suddenly all the men of our village put on uniforms and went off to fight; Dad too. I would have gone if I'd been a boy, and older. But I had to stay with my mother and all the other women and children and old men, to keep the farms running. The weeks went by; the war got closer, and we heard most of our army had already been smashed. Where was Dad? Old Uncle Henrik and my mother argued dreadfully. He said we should leave, but she wouldn't.

Autumn arrived, and so did the rain. The Germans came up the road like fire-spitting dragons, and the French and British troops piled in to stop them. Shells and mortars from both sides crashed all around us. The noise made my heart shake and my ears shudder. Worst was when I went into the village to get food, and a mortar fell right into the bread queue. I saw my first dead bodies close up. That day, I felt fear.

'But why, Uncle Henrik?' I asked. 'Why do they want war?'

'Why, why!' my mother shouted irritably, holding her head. 'Why is the world round? Stop asking silly questions, Lotte.'

Old Henrik put a sympathetic arm round me. 'It's her nerves, Lotte,' he soothed. 'You see, it's like

this…' He almost sang out the situation:

'The Germans hate the Russians,
and Russians love the Serbs,
and the Serbs hate the Germans,
but the Austrians love the Germans,
and the English love the French,
and the French don't love the Russians
but decided to make friends with them,
and any friend of the Russians is an enemy of the Germans.

'So when the Austrian Prince Ferdinand was assassinated in Serbia, the Germans thought this the perfect excuse to go to war against Serbia as they had to defend their friends, the Austrians;

'and the Serbs are friends with Russia,
and Russia would be forced to fight on their side,
and the French would have to side with Russia,
and the English would have to side with France,
and all the allies promised to protect us – Belgium –
and…and…and…'

Uncle ran out of breath and sighed as he used his finger to draw up the lines. 'See, Lotte, that's how small wars become world wars. Let it be a lesson.' He might have added, 'If you survive.'

But my head was spinning and I couldn't

remember who was friends with who. All I knew was that in our country the Flemish hated the Walloons. 'And what about us, Uncle Henrik, who's friends with us?' I wailed.

It was the morning of 29th October 1914. Henrik came yelling and shouting, his voice almost soprano in panic. 'We've got to go!' It was raining so hard, it thudded into the ground like bullets.

It had been raining for days. When there was a lull the woods dripped, as if trying to rid themselves of the weight of autumn rain. The fields were waterlogged, and we always came back from foraging in the fields all muddied from our eyebrows to our toes. Today, we hadn't even had time to scrub off when we fled our house. We could hear the boom of cannons, and shells whistling through the air, and there was the constant rat-a-tat-tat of rifles. At last Mother agreed.

So here we are: my mother is up front driving our farm horse, Uncle Henrik's sitting next to her, and Els and me are at the back, clutching our dog, Loki, between us. I hear mother flip the reins and urge Nel forwards when there is a whistling, and a bang. All hell breaks loose. I don't know how to describe it. We had nearly reached the end of our lane to join others on the Menin Road; one minute there was just

the creaking of cart wheels and horses and children's voices and babies crying, and the next it was like all heaven and earth collided.

Explosions: whistling, whining, sizzling. People running; screaming; then there is one big bang right under our cart.

My mother flies through the air, her arms outstretched, as if suddenly she has become a bird, and Els and I find ourselves in the road, I don't know how. Perhaps we flew too, but I'm all huddled up on top of my sister, cradling her head next to mine; deafened, blinded, and in such shock we don't cry, or scream. I feel nothing; no sensation inside or out. We crouch together; I don't know how long. Finally, I raise my head. My mouth is open but no sound comes out. It's as though my eyes hold all the terror to themselves; that scene of devastation around us. Then I blink, I breathe, I howl; such a howl, that Els flings herself into my lap crying, 'Mummy, Mummy! I want Mummy.'

I see Uncle Henrik. He is dead. I won't tell you how I know; so is our horse, Nel. And there are lots of other dead bodies and animals around. Perhaps Loki's dead too. I can't see her. I can't see my mother. I whimper once. 'Mama!' I wonder if she's been blown into another country; and us too. I have known this street all my life; I was born in this

village; been to school here and know everybody; but at that moment, I think, we too are dead and gone to hell. I can't recognise anyone or anything. I can't even see how to get back to our house.

But then I look up, and there through the swirling grey of smoke and rainy sky, I see my tall brave tree; my secret tree. How strange that the mortars and bombs and shells had raked through the undergrowth and flattened all the shrubs, yet not touched my tree. There she stands for everyone to see; a secret no longer, glistening with raindrops, like a beacon, its leaves brown and orange in the watery autumn light. Although it is scorched and disfigured, I recognised my tree by the red-spotted handkerchief which I'd tied to an upper branch just to claim it as mine. Now I know where I am.

I lift Els to her feet and kiss her. 'Let's go home,' I say, taking her hand. Perhaps Mummy will be there.

She wasn't. But Michael was.

* * *

A Soldier of the British Empire

Don't go, don't go.
Stay back, my friend.
Crazy people are packing up,