PERCEPTIONS AND MEMORIES OF THE GREAT WAR

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I should say at the start, that I deliberately steered clear of doing any historical re-
search for this paper. I wanted to give you my personal perception, particularly as it
was formed while I was growing up, of what the Great War meant to me and to my
community, and how we may have been shaped by it. I didn’t want cold facts to in-
terfere with my recall of how I interpreted things.

As we know only too well in this part of the world, perception is massively important,
and it and history are seldom even close companions, never mind completely in
tune with one another. While we’re on the subject, with all due apologies to any his-
torians in our midst, I suppose written history itself often enjoys no more than a
nodding acquaintance with the truth.

Also, regarding perceptions and memory, these are mine alone, and, as such, they
may not chime entirely with those of someone raised just a few doors from me,
never mind with those of entire communities.

Looking back on it, while I was growing up, during the 1950s and 60s, on a little
country housing estate a few miles outside Lisburn in Co Antrim, it was the Second
World War that was all-

There was a man from the town who used to walk the roads night and day, in
all weathers throughout the year. He would be wearing goodness knows how
many pairs of trousers and just as many coats, even when the sun was spli-
ting the trees. The adults would be particularly angry if we children mocked
him, he was treated with far more respect than would have been usual in those
days for somebody in his predicament—the word was that he had been shell-
shocked during the war.

The little church that I attended every Sunday was within a mile of the old Long
Kesh airbase at the Maze—some of you may recognise the name from the
site’s later incarnation as a prison—and in the graveyard at the back of the
church there was, and still is, a straight row of about 20 grey, uniform head-
stones, all along a hedge to one side. Beneath each was a young airman—
they came from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and so on—and they had
all been killed during the war. Either in accidents at the airbase, or from
wounds received in battle.

A lovely old neighbour woman, a widow, used to walk with my mother and us
children the near mile or so to church every Sunday, and then back again.
Granny Woods was her name, an English woman, deaf as a post. A very odd
time she would refer to Billy in her conversations with my mother. Billy, I learnt,
had been her youngest son, lost at sea during the war, but she never accepted
that he was dead. She would sometimes say ‘When our Billy comes home…’

Now, Granny Woods was completely sane, frighteningly so, at times. She just found
it easier to live with hope, than the reality.

I remember well, not long after I’d started the grammar school in town, taking fright
at this man who couldn’t speak, he always wore a cravat at his throat, and made
grunting noises if he wanted to catch someone’s attention. A few times I’d noticed
him staring at me when I passed him on the street, which was a bit unsettling. This
particular day he approached me making these noises, and I took off like a hare.
For a while after that, every time I spotted him, I would cross the street, or turn and
head off in another direction.

It turned out that he and his brother had joined the army with an uncle of mine, as
part of a whole bunch of young fellows from the town who signed up at the same
time. They’d served together throughout the war, in North Africa mostly. He’d rec-
ognised me as an Adams, and was just trying to say hello. He and I were on great
terms after I learnt that.

I think I should mention that Star—for that was his nickname—and his brother were
Catholics, and the group of young fellows from the town who joined the army to-
gether was completely mixed. They remained friends for the rest of their days, and
would parade together through the town every Remembrance Day, medals proudly
on display.

There was the farmer we used to work for as children, with the scar tissue all
across his midriff that you could see when he stripped to the waist during hot,
summer days. He had been badly wounded during the war. And the neighbour,
who, when he came home drunk, which was quite often as I re-
member, would occasionally line the local lads up, and then march us up and down, good-
naturedly bellowing military-style orders—all much to our delight, and much to
the embarrassment of his own children. He was a Second World War veteran;
I think, in hindsight, he must have been a frustrated sergeant ma-

On Remembrance Sundays, the Church Lads Brigade, of which I was a mem-
ber, used to parade to our little church, along with the local Girl Guides. Col-
ours would be lowered, and the Last Post sounded. The minister, who was ex-
RAF himself, would adjust the normal service for this annual commemoration
of the fallen and the wounded.

My parents would occasionally refer to how hard it had been during the war-
time rationing—and I used to think to myself: even harder than this? I’m one of
10 children you see, eight boys and two girls, of working-class parents, so it
wasn’t easy at the best of times.

Before most of us were born, my parents had lived for a while on the other side
of Lisburn, nearer Belfast, and sometimes they would recall how the main Bel-
fast road, just outside their house, had been “black with people” the morning
after Belfast was bombed. His “Easter egg to the people of Belfast”, as Hitler mocking called it.

I could go on forever painting these little pictures from my post-war childhood. But you should realise that our rural housing estate consisted of only 38 houses, and that the absolute limit of my daily interactions was less than three miles in any direction. If we extrapolate from that tiny, unexceptional community of mine, to right across Northern Ireland—not very scientific, I know—we can at least begin to imagine the impact the Second World War had.

What I picked up as I was growing up, for it certainly was never said directly to me, is that war is terrible, but it is what men do when they have to. And men have to when their country needs them, and Great Britain is our country, so if she goes to war we go with her.

Something else I understood: that it is a matter of great pride that Northern Irishmen have always been among the first to volunteer, ready to sacrifice themselves for their country—it is what we expect of our people, it is one of the things we most pride ourselves on.

As an aside, I was reading a while back about the Scots-Irish communities of the Appalachians in the US, and it struck me that their attitude is remarkably similar to this. During wartime, a disproportionately higher number from those communities than from any other in the United States volunteer for military service—the next in line, incidentally, are the black communities.

All of this evidence, of the Second World War was swirling around me throughout childhood, and though I thought of it as normal, I was nonetheless acutely aware of the enormity of it.

Gradually, and I don’t recall precisely how, I came to realise that there was a yet bigger, even more terrible memory of service and sacrifice lurking in the collective consciousness of my community. I slowly became aware that, while no one questioned in the slightest how terrible the Second World War had been, there was also a firm conviction that it didn’t hold a candle to the Great War—or the First World War as we know it.

There were men referred to, I never personally met any of them, who had served in both wars. But there was a subtle difference in the language used. People had “fought in” the second war but had “survived” the first. It was invariably Ulstermen in the First World War, whereas, as often as not, it was Northern Ireland men in the second.

Gradually you learned of the absolute butchery of the First World War, and of what Ulster had sacrificed. There was, and is, in the unionist mind, no greater or more potent symbol of bravery and sacrifice for country than the First World War, and that applies most especially to the Somme and the 36th Ulster Division.
At the very mention of the Somme or the 36th Ulster Division, a mental image is immediately formed of ranks of young Ulstermen, many of them wearing orange regalia, clambering out of the trenches in their thousands, and rushing forward on a sunlit morning, a great number of them to their certain death. You learned, with pride, that they had managed to fight their way further forward than anyone else—but at a terrible price. There had been barely a family in Ulster that had not suffered the loss of someone at the Somme.

There was mention of entire streets in parts of Belfast, where every house had lost at least one family member at the Somme, where the boy on the bicycle never stopped coming to deliver the dreaded black-bordered telegrams. Of the woman on the Shankill Road who had lost three sons during the First World War.

The time of the Second World War might be referred to in the context of humorous, sometimes even bordering on nostalgic, stories from that period, but the First was seldom spoken of at all—and if it was, it was always with absolute gravity, and in awe of what had happened. There was no room for humour or nostalgia where it was concerned.

My sense has always been that unionists have never had any difficulty in accepting that the First World War was largely a meaningless exercise in slaughter, at least in comparison to the Second, which was more than justified by the dangers that Hitler posed to democracy, the Holocaust, and the overall murderous brutality of his regime. But this meaningless loss, as it were, wasn’t a matter for resentment, if anything it reinforced the esteem in which the men were held, and the sense of “dutiful sacrifice”: it reinforced the sense of “my country, right or wrong”.

The Somme, far more than any single historical event or series of events, before or since, and certainly more than the Second World War, also left a largely unspoken but widely held view that Britain is in our debt—that such unquestioning loyalty deserves reciprocation.

There was also a great deal of resentment at the Republic remaining neutral during the Second World War, or the Free State as it was always referred to during my childhood, whereas it didn’t get a mention in respect of the First.

I think, to be perfectly honest, by my time most people didn’t realise the level of sacrifice that broader Ireland had made during the First World War. Those that did know of it, most likely felt that it was offset by choosing neutrality during the Second, so didn’t feel that it deserved recognition.

You see, unionists saw no good reason for the Free State to remain neutral during the Second World War, but could think of plenty of bad ones. They didn’t actually consider it as neutrality at all, but something just short of open collusion with Germany against Britain—and therefore the South siding with Germany against us. You had talk of lights being deliberately keep burning at night in the South during the blackout, as a reference point for German aircraft, and even of the Germans being guided in to bomb Belfast.
In one sense, it would be difficult to overestimate the impact the First World War had on the unionist psyche, but it should not be imagined that a feeling of Britishness stems mainly from the experience of that time; or even that it was strengthened an awful lot by what happened. I suppose, if anything could be said in this regard, it is that Britishness was merely reaffirmed by the First World War experience, albeit in the starkest way.

Ask any unionist about him or her being British and they’ll look at you blankly—in the same way a French or German person would if you asked them to explain or justify their nationality, or, I suppose more accurately, to justify their sense of self.

For a unionist, being British isn’t something that they choose; it’s simply what they are. I always smile when wishful-thinking journalists or politicians read what isn’t there into unionist complaints about how a Westminster government is treating them. A unionist in Belfast complaining or protesting about a government at Westminster is no more a sign of a possible shift in national allegiance than is a person protesting in Leeds or Glasgow or Dublin. All around the democratic world, people complain about their governments all of the time, but it doesn’t mean that they want to change national allegiance.

What has changed since the First World War, in how unionists view themselves, is that a distinct sense of Irishness that once ran alongside the Britishness has all but disappeared. Personally, I think that is a great pity.

My father was born only a few years before partition, so I imagine while he was growing up, the casual, unthinking reference points in everyday conversation were still all-island in their nature.

They certainly remained that way for him throughout his life. He would unthinkingly talk of someone being “the smartest—or daftest—person in Ireland”, or of something or someone being so uncommon “you’ll not find another one between here and Dublin”, that sort of thing.

My father was a solid unionist, but if you’d asked him whether he was Irish, he’d have looked at you as if you were daft, and probably replied: “Why, do you think I sound like an Australian”.

I believe it was the Second World War, far more than partition that began to erode the sense of Irishness within unionism—and the Troubles, which had a bigger impact than the other two combined, virtually obliterated it.

For what it’s worth, when I’ve thought about it at all, I’ve always considered myself British and Irish: Irish of a particular type if you like. I’ve often wondered, who on this island, or anywhere else for that matter, has the right to define Irishness for everyone else—who has a right to set a standard that has to be met?

After the First World War, as far as I could read the attitudes of my father and people of his vintage who grew up during that period, unionists still felt themselves to be
distinctly Irish as well as British—much in the same way that Scots, Welsh and English people do. So, perhaps contained in that was some recognition, after all, of the sacrifice that Irish people as a whole had made. Or maybe old habits just died hard, and it just took some time for the reality of partition to begin to influence everyday conversation.

It would be wrong of me to give the impression that the atmosphere I grew up in was overtly militaristic; I don’t believe that it was. If you think about it, given how soon it was after the end of the war, it would have been surprising if there hadn’t been traces and signs of it all around me. Neither did any of this command more than a tiny fraction of the attention of me and my contemporaries; it is only in hindsight that I appreciate how all-pervasive it was.

I want to extend just a few random thoughts to finish up with.

As we move further away from the Troubles, I detect signs of a reclaiming of their Irishness by the unionist people, and I delight in that. A type of Irishness that they will define, and that they believe, as do I, is no less legitimate than any other.

I think this coming back to Irishness has been helped along, in no small way, by successive Irish presidents, governments and senior political figures, and the constructive role they have played in the peace process—and this includes the present government, I should add.

As soon as you begin to list names, you’re certain to offend someone by leaving them out: but springing immediately to mind are, presidents Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese—and of course Martin McAleese—Albert Reynolds, John Bruton, Martin Mansergh, and most of all I think, even though it may no longer be fashionable to say anything positive about him, Bertie Ahern—to whom the people of Northern Ireland owe an enormous debt of gratitude.

And speaking of saying things positive, it is now a fact of life, in my opinion, that unionists get a fairer press in the Republic than they do anywhere else, including in Northern Ireland. This wasn’t always so, of course. At one time there were only a few lonely media voices in the South brave enough to go against the general consensus, but they were being heard in the North, and they made unionists question whether in fact the Republic was the monolithic ogre of their nightmares. Those people did more I think than even they probably realise to lay the ground for the peace process and the nowadays greater level of understanding that exists across this island: chief amongst them were Eoghan Harris, Ruth Dudley-Edwards and Kevin Myers.

Finally, the decision by the Republic to formally recognise and commemorate the people from this part of the island who served in the Great War, and indeed the Second World War, has helped accelerate the healing process, both within Ireland and between the two islands. It is also, in its own right, manifestly the proper and decent thing to do.
Commemoration of the fallen and the injured in battle, is not the same as a celebration of a particular war, or of war itself.

Or it shouldn’t be, but often develops into that—though that sort of thing will be discussed later, I believe.

In respect of war, I think we need to be careful that, as so often happens in the affairs of man, we do not allow the pendulum to swing from one extreme position to the other. From where once we glorified war to where we totally reject the idea that war can ever be necessary. It is a balance between those two positions we need to find.

Things are never as clear-cut as that 1970s film title suggested: *What if Someday They Gave a War and Nobody Came?*

It would certainly have been a good thing if no one had turned up for the Great War, but what if nobody had turned up to challenge Hitler after he came rampaging onto the world stage?

No doubt there are other Hitlers out there waiting their chance, so we should never dismiss conflict as a last option—but we must always remain mindful of the cost of war and the multifarious damage that it does.

Thankfully, war is over on this island—there can be no “what ifs” or “buts” about it—the conflict is gone, and gone for good.

The time is now for getting to know one another again, for building relationships founded on mutual respect.

This institute is playing a vital role in all of that; I thank you for inviting me along today.
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