

The Provost's Remembrance Sunday Sermon, 9 November 2014

I hope that tradition and the Chaplain will forgive me if I take as my text this day a verse not from the Bible but from a poem by a member of this college. It reads as follows and I will talk about it later in this sermon:

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not Honour more.

This is Worcester's year of remembrance. All year we have remembered and given thanks for the foundation of our college three hundred years ago, in 1714. We have welcomed back many of our Old Members; we have launched a Campaign to honour our past by securing our future; we have danced all night at our Tercentenary Commemoration Ball; we have remembered our benefactors in a special service in this Chapel. So it is fitting that on this Remembrance Sunday on the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War, we should remember with particular attention those members of our society who fell in that war.

We remember them every year when I read their names, together with those who gave their lives a generation later in the fight to free the world of fascism, and after this short sermon I will read them again, and—as he has done each year during my time as Provost—Tomi will sound the Last Post and the Reveille in their honour. But for the special attention of the First World War centenary we must thank our archivist Emma Goodrum for the exhibition that is currently gracing the Chapel. Thanks, too, to Jessica Goodman, my fellow-editor of our tercentenary book, *Worcester: Portrait of an Oxford College*, for the chapter on Worcester at War, where you may read more of our college and its people during the two world wars.

Let us remember the many who fell, but to stand in for the many here are some snapshots of a very few.

An anniversary is always an occasion for a family reunion and an opportunity for reconciliation of old differences, so it is especially pleasing that we are joined in Chapel and Hall tonight by Wolfgang Ahrens, nephew of our alumnus Richard Hirschfeld, a member of the German Army who was killed fighting the Bolsheviks in 1918. Hirschfeld loved England, loved Oxford and his time at Worcester, so it was a great relief to him that he only ever fought on the Eastern Front, not the Western. He died, heroically, in the Ukraine, trying to retrieve his wounded comrades.

Another Old Member recently sent me a memoir of the short life of Captain David Hirsch, the only Worcester man to have been awarded the British nation's highest badge of honour, the Victoria Cross, conferred posthumously. The citation reads

For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in attack. Having arrived at the first objective, Capt. Hirsch, although already twice wounded, returned over fire-swept slopes to satisfy himself that the defensive flank was being established. Machine gun fire was so intense that it was necessary for him to be continuously up and down the line encouraging his men to dig in and hold the position. He continued to encourage his men by standing on the parapet and steadying them in the face of machine gun fire and counterattack until he was killed. His conduct throughout was a magnificent example of the greatest devotion to duty.

The extraordinary thing about Hirsch is that he was so young that he never even matriculated. In December 1914, he was awarded a Scholarship to read History at Worcester the following Michaelmas. He was seventeen years old. But he joined the Yorkshire Regiment before coming up, so never began his

degree. He had been Head Boy of his school, the best bowler in the First XI and the holder of the mile record. One cannot but help think of Henry Newbolt, 'And England's far and Honour a name, / But the voice of a schoolboy rallied the ranks / "Play up! Play up! And play the game!" We remember him.

But that Worcester should have lost a Hirsch on one side and a Hirschfeld on the other is a mark of our kinship with the German people, and we should give thanks now and always for the unity of our two nations in the last sixty-five years. That unity perhaps began with the magnanimity of the Marshall Plan. I find it moving and symbolic that whereas one of my predecessors at Provost, J. C. Masterman, spent the First World War as a prisoner in Germany and the second as overseer of the XX Committee that succeeded in turning every Nazi spy in Britain into a double agent and deceiving the enemy into the belief that the D-Day landings would take place at Calais, another of our Provosts, Oliver Franks, was the man who oversaw the implementation of the Marshall Plan. He said that it was an easier job than chairing the Governing Body of an Oxford College.

But to return to the First War. Let the few stand in for the many. Here is a typical obituary from the *Oxford Magazine* of 1916, remembering an undergraduate who took up residence as a freshman in the autumn of 1913, ensconced in rooms on staircase 16 in Pump Quad, which we renovated this summer:

Lieutenant Charles Fabian Saunders, Northamptonshire Regiment, youngest son of the late Edward Saunders F.R.S., and grandson of William Wilson Saunders F.R.S., was born on January 20, 1895. As a boy he was very delicate and was therefore not sent to a Public School. He matriculated at this College as a Commoner in 1913, and joined the O.T.C. When War was declared he enlisted in the University and Public Schools Battalion, and a few months later he obtained a

commission in the Northamptonshire Regiment. Before joining he returned to Oxford for a course in the Officers' Training School, and spent part of it in his own College. In early life he had been obliged to avoid any great physical exertion; but he was well made, and while at Oxford he was found to be a fast and graceful runner, and during his training distinguished himself at two inter-regimental sports meetings and was spoken of in the newspapers as a "beautiful quarter-miler". On September 1, 1915, his regiment was ordered abroad, and on the 25th of that month, when it was taking part in the attack at Loos, he received shrapnel wounds in the head. After three months' sick leave he joined the Reserve Battalion for light duty. On July 13, 1916, he rejoined his old regiment and took part in the attack at Guillemont on Friday, August 18. He was slightly wounded on getting over the parapet, but remained on duty. Later in the day he was hit again while holding his position in the Quarries exposed to heavy machine-gun fire from both flanks. He was the only officer of his company left, and was encouraging his men, as a brother officer writes, "both by his word and example". He went back to have his wound dressed, but collapsed while returning after this to the remnant of his men. Another officer wrote that he was "just about the straightest and best man God ever made", and another "he was a capital fellow, always so awfully cheery; I don't think I ever saw him lose his temper with anyone".

He was rather shy at the beginning of his time at Oxford, feeling the disadvantage of not having shared like others in the life and activities of a big school; but he was much liked, and, as he was gaining strength and developing his powers, gave promise of a successful career here and in after life.

We remember him.

And here is Willie Elmhirst—we thank his great-nephew Colonel Marcus Elmhirst for reading the Second Lesson tonight—writing to his mother just a week before his death at Serre in 1916:

Out here one becomes so used to the idea of death, and that in most unpleasant forms, that it comes to seem a very small thing indeed. I have seen some far from pleasant sights during the last few days, but it is astonishing how little it affects one.

In the memoir of Elmhirst that accompanies the diary of his Freshman year at Worcester, published half a century later with an introduction by Masterman, his brother writes that ‘the intimate and liberal freedoms of Worcester were, for him, without doubt a Paradise Regained.’ We remember him.

The eternal sorrow of the war is the loss of friends who shared that paradise. Among those to whom Elmhirst was closest were Golightly, Rhodes Scholar, Senior Colonial student, killed in action July 1916, and Curran, Commoner, Military Cross and Croix de Guerre, killed in action, October 1916. We remember them as we remember the words of Jesus in the Gospel of St John that we heard in the second lesson: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’

Elmhirst’s very British understatement—the carnage of the Western Front merely described as ‘some far from pleasant sights’—and the youthful gallantry of such boys as Hirsch and Saunders were shaped by the public school code of honour that drew on classical ideals: the *Dulce et decorum set pro patria mori* of the Roman poet Horace. The idea of honour has a long history. Back in the seventeenth century, when our nation descended into civil war, people had to make choices: to retreat from the world of action and political engagement, or to do the honourable thing and engage. And, if they engaged, to do so on the part of the cause they thought was right. Richard Lovelace of Gloucester Hall—Worcester in its older incarnation—made the choice and signed up to fight on the royalist side. His celebrated poem ‘To

Lucasta going to the Wars' contrasts the bliss of love with the call of honour. But what he says to his beloved in the verse that I cited at the beginning of this sermon is that his 'inconstancy' to her in putting his military calling above his love for her should really make her love him more not less. He is giving up the easy life of lying in his lover's arms for the tough choice of doing what he believes to be the right thing. Whether or not we believe that he fought on the politically correct side, we should honour the idea that it is worth making personal sacrifices in order to make your college, your community, your country, your world a better place. Even today we may say to our own loved ones, with our alumnus Lovelace, 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, / Loved I not Honour more.'

The First World War shattered for ever the old classical and public school code of honour. Most famously:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! ...

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen.

But even as we argue causes and question the meaning of nation, of *patria*, in a globalised world, we should continue to honour those who have the courage to say goodbye to their loved ones and answer the call to risk laying down their own lives in defence of the right of us all to dissent from any single faith or ideology, to risk laying down their lives in the fight against tyranny, be it that of Hitler or of Islamic State.

The least that we can do is to honour their memory and to shed a tear for the way in which the brevity of their lives gives special poignancy to their time at Worcester. Let me end by quoting another poem by a Worcester man. In the penultimate line you might take the liberty of substituting the name of his college for that of his county.

In 1914 Nowell Oxland was Captain of the College rugby team and Secretary of the Lovelace Club. In 1915, he wrote this poem on a ship bound for Gallipoli, where he fell at Suvla Bay:

We shall pass in summer weather,
We shall come at eventide,
When the fells stand up together
And all quiet things abide;
Mixed with cloud and wind and river,
Sun-distilled in dew and rain,
One with Cumberland for ever
We shall not go forth again.