

“OUR DEAD SHALL NOT HAVE DIED IN VAIN”: THE WAR POETRY OF HARRY MIDGLEY

Terry Phillips

The approaching centenary year of the Easter Rising is also the year which marks the centenary of a very different event, the Battle of the Somme, in which two Irish regiments took part. During the last few years, in which the western world in particular has prepared for the marking of the centenary of the First World War, there has been an accompanying interest in the changing ways in which the war has been remembered, both individually and collectively, beginning with the decade immediately following the war (see Winter and Williams). The Battle of the Somme attained a particular significance for Unionists in the newly created jurisdiction of Northern Ireland. As George Boyce comments, “remembering that heroic charge, and that war, became an integral part of Ulster unionist thinking and mythology” (Boyce 200). A consequence of the political situation, in the years immediately following partition, was the appropriation of the memory of the war, and in particular the Battle of the Somme in 1916, as an exclusively Unionist experience, contributing to the construction of a Unionist identity. Amidst the proliferation of personal accounts of the international conflict, both literary and in the form of memoirs, as well as debates about the proper form of public remembrance of so many deaths, one little known publication of this era, Harry Midgley’s collection of poetry *Thoughts from Flanders* (1924), challenged the Unionist appropriation of memory and suggested a more inclusive form of remembering.

Midgley is remembered in Northern Ireland, not as a poet, but as a controversial politician, a former member of the Northern Irish Labour Party, who eventually became a Unionist Minister of Education. The only full-length study of his life is Graham Walker’s *The Politics of Frustration* (1985), which devotes three pages to his army service during the First World War, reflecting the fact that it is considered an insignificant element in his colourful career. His collection of poetry, *Thoughts from Flanders*, has received even less attention and, though it is briefly discussed in Walker’s study, is not even included in Jim Haughey’s comprehensive survey of Irish First World War poetry, *The First World War in Irish Poetry* (2002).

Ten years elapsed between Midgley’s enlistment and the publication of *Thoughts from Flanders*, which apparently includes poems written both during and after the war, yet surprisingly, the text bears marks of haste in its preparation.¹ The haste to

1 The contents page of the 47-page volume shows “A Morning Thanksgiving” as occurring 20 pages earlier, and “Love is Immortal” and “Thy Kingdom Come” as occurring respectively 5 and 15 pages later, than is actually the case, which suggests speed of preparation and is evidence of some indecision about sequence, suggesting that the

publish suggests an immediate political motive, related to Midgley's candidature for the newly formed Northern Ireland Labour Party in the election of October 1924. Graham Walker comments that "the war still prayed [sic] on Midgley's mind and, perhaps with Protestant voters also in mind, he emphasised his own service and the sacrifices of those who gave their lives" (Walker 30).

Walker's comment draws attention to a twofold element in the work. At one level, it is, as the first part of the comment suggests, a significant testament to one man's remembered experience of war, an expression of his own emotions and changing feelings as the war progressed, inevitably mediated by the effects of time, but more importantly by his own values, both religious and political. These values, a strong Christian belief allied with a socialist perspective, not only colour his necessarily subjective interpretations but provide the underlying motive for the publication of the volume. This goes beyond the immediate issue of the 1924 election (although that may have been the cause of the haste to publish) to his concern both for peace and for the just treatment of workers. *Thoughts from Flanders* is more than just a collection of poems. It is a literary text with evidence of design in its structure which introduces a conscious element of selection and emphasis. As Kevin Whelan, drawing on the ideas of Ricœur, points out, "the availability of testimony always enables choice. We can decide how we want to tell our story" (Whelan 4). Hence there is an element of deliberate selection, both in the choice of previously written poems, and the themes of more recent poems, and in the arrangement of the poems within the volume, which is not always chronological.

It is therefore inevitable that the volume will address the issue of how to remember the dead, which was emerging as an important issue in many countries. The instinct to remember is of course a human response to loss and the scale of losses in the First World War made it imperative to address it publicly. The phrase "they shall not die in vain," which occurs more than once in Midgley's poetry, is both an expression of this imperative and a response to apparent futility. It is frequently used in official ceremonies of remembrance, but what is often unacknowledged is that the phrase is capable of multiple interpretations: the resolve to take up arms again in defence of perceived right or justice; the obligation to preserve the supposed ideals of those who died; the determination never to take up arms again, because the futility of war has been demonstrated; the need to protect the ex-comrades and relatives of the dead from poverty and deprivation. A careful perusal of *Thoughts from Flanders* suggests that for Midgley the latter two considerations were of supreme importance.

Midgley (who was born in 1892) was raised by an impoverished widowed mother, in a poor district of North Belfast, near the shipyards where his father had been employed. His mother ensured that he stayed on at school, as a full-time student, until the age of twelve. Walker, drawing on the memories of those who knew her, asserts

arrangement is not chronological. Further evidence of haste in the contents page is the misspelling of "Reconciliation," although the title is correctly spelt above the poem.

that “her influence on his early life was unmatched by anyone else” (Walker 2), and awareness of the sorrow of mothers is a recurring element in the poems of *Thoughts From Flanders*. Midgley became active in politics at an early age and spoke at meetings of the Independent Labour Party from the age of fourteen (Walker 3). Along with his two brothers, he joined the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, a regiment of the Ulster Division, on the outbreak of war. While there are a number of reasons why a young man might have joined up, not least being a sense of adventure, it is reasonable to speculate that as a person with an interest in politics Midgley would have given the matter careful thought and that, at least initially, he was convinced of the rightness of the allied cause, a view borne out by the opening poem of *Thoughts from Flanders*, “Joy Cometh with the Morn,” which is subtitled “(My Early Illusion)” (Midgley 7).²

The short volume comprises a collection of 26 poems of varying length. Keith Jeffery, in *Ireland and The Great War*, uses its front cover as an illustration to his chapter on creative work, commenting that “this volume of sentimental Christian socialist verse draws in part on Midgley’s service with the Ulster division” (Jeffery 103). Midgley’s writing cannot be claimed as great or innovative poetry and is reliant on late Victorian forms, usually with regular alternate rhymes and couplets. It is true that elements of his work can appear sentimental, for example these lines from the opening stanza of “Remember the Fallen”:

They played their part and went their way,
Some died at night, and some by day,
But all have proved their faith in life,
Who found their rest and peace in strife. (34)

Like much poetry written about the war, these lines pose an easy consolation for the terrible losses occurred, and the superficiality of the sentiment is compounded by the way in which the second line of the quotation is constructed in the service of the rhyme scheme. Nevertheless, the poems in the volume as a whole offer much more than this. They are informed by the trench experience, and some give a view of war which is so dark as to almost put their author in the category of the protest poets. There is indeed a strain of hope in a better future, mainly inspired by religious faith, and there are some suggestions that at least initially Midgley believed in the idea of the war as ‘a war to end war.’ However, the arrangement of the volume suggests that he wishes to tell his story as one of increasing but not entire disillusion, beginning with a poem “Joy Cometh with the Morn” with its subtitle “(My Early Illusion)” and ending with, arguably the bleakest of all the poems in the volume, “Shot at Dawn.” The collection includes poems written in memory of dead comrades, as well as a small number on other themes, including a few love poems and three poems whose theme is purely religious. Three key poems towards the end explicitly mark the Armi-

2 Walker points out that his decision to enlist marks a difference with the anti-imperialist syndicalism of Connolly, whose Independent Labour Party of Ireland he had supported (Walker 9).

stice Days of 1921, 1922, and 1923. His own views on the war made the manner of its commemoration a subject of some importance to Midgley.

Two factors influence his choice, using Whelan's phrasing, of how to tell his story. He was a committed socialist and a deeply religious man. It is primarily his religious insight which leads him, in all his poetry, to look forward to a world in which all nations will live together in peace. Indeed the concluding two lines of the short eight-line introduction to the volume state emphatically, in relation to the poems, "But the purpose of all is to glorify peace, / And help towards the day when warfare shall cease" (Midgley 4). There is thus no hint of hostility to the enemy, and although love of the land of Ireland is occasionally mentioned, patriotism is never asserted as a motive.

The opening poem, "Joy Cometh with the Morn," one of the longest poems, its 83 lines extending over ten stanzas of varying length, introduces some of the key themes. Its opening suggests the twin inspirations of nature and religion:

List to the song the birds are singing,
 Their wailing cry on the evening air.
 List to the bells so solemnly ringing
 Their message of human despair. (7)

The poem goes on to emphasise the plight of mothers who mourn, "the flower of the grief stricken mothers" (8). The grief of mothers, doubtless reflecting Midgley's affection and admiration for his own mother, is a recurring theme. However, it is important to note that it is all mothers whose voices are heard, not just those from his own country: "And the song that they sing is heard the world o'er."

The poem is expressive of the poet's personal memories but also his concern with the purpose of remembering, as can be seen from the lines which follow:

Our mighty dead have died not in vain,
 Though bitter the pain, 'tis not loss,
 They gave, that in giving freedom might reign (8)

At this point in the poem, the assertion that the dead have not died in vain may be read as suggesting a purpose in war and a willingness to fight again, if necessary, to ensure that the spoils of victory are not lost and indeed may well represent the poet's view in the early days of the war. Nevertheless, as the poem continues and the title of the poem is invoked, there is the strong suggestion that the greatest freedom for which these men have died is freedom from war:

Then joy shall truly come with the morn,
 And war shall forever cease,
 And man cleansed from hate, in love reborn,
 Shall dwell in eternal peace. (9)

The implication that the way of ensuring purpose in the deaths of so many can only be by the abandonment of hatred and war, and that the deaths should be remembered in a way which works towards this end, is a theme that continues throughout the volume.

The religious inspiration for this faith in a world without war is expressed in the structure of “The Two Hills – Kimmel and Another,” which reflects that of the lamentation psalms, a movement from near-despair to joy. Towards the end of “The First Hill,” the poet wonders “why some people think; this is the will of God” (13), thus countering a view widespread among Christian commentators on the war that in some way those fighting were carrying out the will of God, that their sacrifice was in some way to be equated with the sacrifice of Christ.³ The Second Hill is in fact a vision of God’s kingdom on earth, an idea later taken up in “Reconciliation.” The ensuing description of an idyllic pastoral landscape culminates in a vision: “Of every nation on the earth in love and joy entwined: / No more to reap the harvest of hatred’s bitter seed” (14).

The title refers to Mount Kimmel, a hill in the Ypres Salient, eventually taken by the Germans in the Spring Offensive of 1918, which is the subject of the first part of the poem. “The First Hill” suggests Midgley’s own remembered experience of the reality of life in the battlefields of the Western Front, with the accompanying destruction of a once pleasant landscape:

Lit by the gun flash, soaked with blood and tears,
 [...]
 A hill once green and fertile, and pleasant to the
 view,
 [...]
 Now mangled and distorted, in ruin and decay, (12)

Once again the grief of mothers is evoked, as the poet describes the battle scene:

And all along the hillside lie figures cold and still,
 Each representing empty lives which nought on
 earth can fill ;
 The broken-hearted mothers who weep, and sigh,
 and pray,
 For end of war’s foul night, and dawn of peace-
 ful day ; (12)

Nevertheless, the final despairing lines of “The First Hill” with the Biblical phrasing of “How long, O Lord, how long?” are answered at the opening of “The Second Hill” with its vision of the Kingdom of God:

Kissed by the sun, watered with dew,
 Wrapt in divine repose by nature kind and true,
 Smiling and peaceful, in majesty serene,
 And o’er the green clad hilltop reigned loveliness
 supreme. (13)

The Christian’s hope for a better world emerging from the present darkness, so well expressed by the structure of the lamentation psalms, inspires several other poems in the early part of the volume, such as “The Bells,” a response to hearing “bells ring-

3 For example, the English poet Alice Meynell, after making exactly this parallel to the sacrifice of Christ, claimed, ‘The soldier dying dies upon a kiss, / The very kiss of Christ.’ Alice Meynell, “Summer in England,” 1914 (Reilly 73-74).

ing in a little French village behind the firing line, on Christmas morning" (17-18), which, in the movement from lamentation to hope, is structured similarly to "The Two Hills." A darker poem which still makes use of the antithesis of suffering and joy is "In Prison." Its religious inspiration is clear from the opening of the second stanza, with its echo of the Epistle to the Corinthians:

Oh force, where is thy victory? O prison, where
 thy sting?
 Far beyond thy bounds and ramparts my spirit
 taketh wing.
 And I dwell in lands of happiness, of joy, and
 love divine, (15)

There is an indication, from a close reading of this poem, that the assertion in "Joy Cometh with the Morn" that the dead gave their lives that freedom might reign, which could be read as implying that this better world might come about as a consequence of the allied war effort, has been abandoned as "an early illusion." Towards the end of the first stanza, the speaker reflects that "Force may order all my movements, which from me by *lies* [my italics] it bought, / But it cannot order or destroy sweet liberty of thought," (15). The implied disillusion with the war is emphasised by the final line of the poem, "But my spirit hath found freedom in this man created hell" (16).

In spite of the disillusion expressed in this poem, the constantly recurring theme is the hope that a better world can be built and that this is the sense in which the dead shall not have died in vain. A foregrounding of the theme of building a better world, in memory of the dead, begins just after "In Prison" and "The Bells," with two poems in memory of dead comrades, "Lest We Forget" and "In Memoriam." These mark the beginning of a sequence of poems which focus explicitly on memory. "First Xmas after Armistice, 1918" records, in its title, the beginning of the process of remembering, which now becomes not personal memory but the collective remembering of a group. The opening reflects a tension between rejoicing that the war was over and mourning those who were dead. The concluding stanza states clearly one of Midgley's major preoccupations:

We must resolve that come what may,
 Our dead shall not have died in vain,
 But life and love shall with us stay,
 And universal peace shall reign. (24)

Of the multiple interpretations of the phrase "they shall not have died in vain," referred to above, "Life and love" and "universal peace" are declared as Midgley's priorities.

This is confirmed by "In Flanders Fields." There is in the title an obvious reminder of John McCrae's poem of that name, described by Paul Fussell as the most popular poem of the war (Fussell 248), which has subsequently become a byword for propagandist poetry. The final four lines of Midgley's poem recall the opening of McCrae's:

In rows the crosses, neat and clean,
 In Flanders Fields can now be seen,
 They bid us keep the memory green,
 Of those who Fell in Flanders Fields (27)

The language, particularly the phrase “neat and clean,” is markedly different from that of most of the preceding lines of the poem, which vividly describe the horrors of the battlefield, and these final lines serve as an ironic comment on McCrae’s “crosses row on row” at the end of the latter’s poem, which makes no mention of the horrors (Walter 155). There is no suggestion in Midgley’s poem of continuing to fight, as McCrae puts it, of holding high the torch. All that Midgley’s poem presents the dead as asking is to “keep the memory green, / Of those who Fell in Flanders Fields.” Once more the reader is reminded of the fundamental ambiguity of keeping the memory of those who died, which can be used in the cause of war or the cause of peace. For six of the poem’s seven stanzas there is an unremitting account of the effects of battle:

The shell-holes mark the war-worn way,
 [...]
 How sickly is the smell to-night,
 In Flanders Fields ;
 [...]
 How loud to-night the guns are booming,
 In Flanders Fields ;
 [...]
 The shrapnel screams, the star-shell’s flare,
 Flings forth its lurid angry glare, (26)

The poem evokes the reality of warfare on the Western Front, suggesting the terror induced by the sights and sounds of battle, as well as the destruction of the land, and thus is in marked contrast to the poem to which it may be seen as an answer.

One poem, placed immediately after, evokes personal remembrance, in a very significant way. “A Message from Flanders” tells the moving story of the death of a young Irish soldier whose dying message, for his mother, is to be conveyed by “his comrades, men of Anglo-Saxon Race,” and the poem tells us, “He was all the son of Erin that their ranks had ever known, / Yet in common understanding had the seed of love been sown” (28). In the context of the subsequent War of Independence it carries its own pathos, but suggests something of all that the poet sees of any value in the war, the sowing of the seed which will establish “universal peace.”

The increasing focus on collective remembering culminates in the three poems which mark the successive Armistice Days of 1921, 1922, and 1923. While the proper way to remember the war, the balance between celebration and sorrow, was an issue in many countries,⁴ it became a particular issue in Belfast, which was plunged into an immediate post-war political crisis by the Sinn Féin election victory of 1918, the War

4 See, for example, Dan Todman’s discussion of Armistice Day in mainland Britain (Todman 49-58).

of Independence, and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty at the end of 1921. James Loughlin has charted the process by which, through Armistice Day commemorations in 1919 and 1921 and the opening of the Thiepval Memorial in 1921, the contribution of all Ulstermen to the First World War, and to the Somme in particular, was reduced to the contribution of the more or less exclusively Protestant Ulster Division of 1916 (before the reorganizations of 1917 and 1918 altered its exclusivity). The 1921 Armistice Day commemorations were particularly politically charged, occurring as they did in the midst of the Treaty negotiations. The commemorations were described as “one of the most impressive spectacles ever” by the *Belfast Newsletter*, which went on to argue that the sacrifice of gallant men “has not been forgotten [...] at the present time, when the security of Ulster is even more seriously threatened than it was in the momentous years preceding the outbreak of war” (Loughlin 144). Catherine Switzer comments on the Unionist character of Armistice Day parades in Belfast, with the presence of union jacks and the singing of “God Our Help in Ages Past” strongly associated with Carson, and points out that they were often attended by people in Orange regalia and representatives of the RUC and Ulster Special Constabulary (Switzer 106-107). However, she also points out that while prevailing academic literature suggests that commemorations were “aggressively Orange and Unionist,” some commemorations were markedly conciliatory in tone, and there were those who wanted to use memory to forge cross-community friendship (Switzer 108, 113-115). Richard Grayson suggests that “there is some debate over how far unionists consciously appropriated remembrance of the war,” citing nationalist reticence about remembrance (Grayson 171, 173).

Midgley, for his part, in his own words quoted in the *Northern Whig* of 27 May 1921, “did not believe that the partition of the working classes of Ireland would ever solve the problems of the country” (Walker 22), and it is reasonable to suppose that such commemorations, which inevitably became politicised by a combination of chance and design, not only added to his broader disillusion with the treatment of the classes he sought to represent, but grieved him by their tendency to divide, and to exacerbate the potential for conflict.

The 1921 Armistice Day poem “Remember the Fallen” opens with a focus on the poppy, with its associations of blood and with a simple plea to remember, but then the old question reasserts itself – remembrance for what end? The second stanza answers this question:

In mourning those who bled,
We join with every nation
[...]
Death scatters all elation,
And free's [sic] the mind from hate. (34)

It is a clear assertion that mourning is not a matter of triumph or the preserve of one nation, but that grief for the dead should bring all nations together and mean that war is less, not more likely, if as a consequence the world is freed from hate. The senti-

ment carries a special, and indeed an ironic, resonance in a political context where the very act of remembering the dead was creating even further division. The last stanza unequivocally states the purpose and rationale of remembering the dead:

They died that war might perish,
 For ever and for aye,
 That freedom all might cherish,
 And truth and right hold sway ;
 Their sacrifice is ended,
 For us the task is here,
 To bring the vision splendid,
 For which they paid so dear. (34)

This concluding stanza, to some degree, runs counter to the tone of disillusion expressed elsewhere, notably in "In Prison," but arguably this simply expresses a political awareness of the need to concede something of the rhetorical justification for the war, in order to add weight to the advocacy of the values of peace and reconciliation.

The exclusive focus on the Ulster Division continued through succeeding commemorations, and the political imperative, while not quite so urgent after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, remained important through the years of the Boundary Commission. Peace seemed far away from a Belfast which saw 498 deaths between 1922 and 1924, including a number of ex-soldiers; and detention without trial, again including some former soldiers (Grayson 156-160). It is unsurprising therefore that Midgley's second Armistice Day poem is entitled "Reconciliation." In its opening stanza it draws on the idea which inspires "The Second Hill," the belief that the Kingdom of God is to be built, not in another world, but on earth:

Sleeping, ever sleeping, in the fields across the sea
 There are those who wait the coming of the
 great world peace to be,
 When we turn our swords to ploughshares, and
 transform our hate to love,
 And on earth we build the Kingdom, that we
 picture up above. (35)

The poem portrays the dead as united by their fate and explicitly calls for forgiveness and reconciliation amongst the living: "Let us bury all divisions in remembrance of this day, / So that peace amongst the nations shall forever with us stay." It is a clear statement of the purpose of remembrance, eschewing all elements of military celebration. The relationship of the poem to commemoration is made explicit by its concluding words, "O'er all the graves in Flanders, the poppies red, now grow, / And nature has ordained it, that they cover friend and foe." It is a warning against the appropriation of the symbol for one side in the recent war and, by implication, in the newly created jurisdiction of Northern Ireland.

The final Armistice Day poem, significantly entitled "To All Mothers," is based on the idea that the love of a mother for her children is the nearest thing human beings can know to the love of God. The mother's grief is described in biblical terms, as "a love

which passeth understanding," and her grief is compared to the suffering of Christ, "Through life's Gethemane thy heart is ever yearn-/ing, / Bowed 'neath the weight of war's most cruel / cross." (37). Consistently the cross is used to suggest a Christ figure who shares in human suffering, rather than one who makes a sacrifice to atone for human misconduct.

The poem concludes with the by now familiar plea for unity across national boundaries, a longing

[...] for the day when war shall be no more,
The dead of every nation form the Union,
Which binds the suffering hearts of every land, (37)

The Armistice Day poems reflect something of Midgley's opposition to sectarianism,⁵ a part of his general disillusion with post-war Belfast, but the emphasis on universal peace and references such as "every nation" and "every land" suggest that his primary concern was with the militarisation of remembrance, which was an inevitable consequence of such division. As Switzer comments, "a discourse which placed emphasis on ideas of glory, valour and patriotism was often voiced in Northern Ireland, particularly during the 1920s" (Switzer 109).

The Armistice Day poems are a direct address to the nature of official collective remembrance and as such focus on the meaning of war, which for Midgley can only be that it demonstrates the need for peace. However the need to ensure that "they shall not have died in vain" extends to the obligation to preserve the ideals of those who died and significantly to the need to protect their ex-comrades and relatives from poverty and deprivation. For Midgley, deeply committed to the Labour movement, this was his primary concern.

Almost immediately after he was demobilised he became a Trade Union organizer and fought hard on behalf of ex-servicemen who were unemployed after the war. Belfast saw an increase in unemployment, as production in shipbuilding, linen, and engineering, staple industries of the city, fell. After the failure of a strike in the shipyards, the May Day parade of 1919 was the largest ever seen in Belfast. At the 1920 May Day parade, Midgley congratulated German and Russian workers on their recent struggles, as well as speaking for social measures and against the uncaring treatment of ex-servicemen (Walker 18), thus demonstrating what, for him, was the message of the war, the necessity for people of all nations to work together for justice, national affiliation being irrelevant. It is therefore unsurprising to find that the theme of building a better world for those who fought, and indeed for all people, continues in the final poems of the volume. Some disillusion is suggested in "The Onward Way" that

5 Midgley in his later career became considerably more sectarian, opposing the influence of the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland, initially over the Church's hostility to his stance on the Spanish Civil War (Walker, Bairner & Walker).

The hope for which they struggled, toiled and
bled,
A world controlled by justice, truth and right,
has not, as yet unfolded to our sight ; (Midgley, 38)

Although the line which follows declares, "Yet still we hope," the words express dissatisfaction with the treatment of ex-soldiers and with the post-war world in general. A particularly significant poem is "A Workers Te Deum," in one sense a traditional prayer of thanks, each of the fourteen line stanzas ending with a prayer, "our thanks / To Thee O Lord" and "thanks to Thee / Most Holy Lord." In another sense it is almost a prayer of thanks to the workers. The prayer of thanks in the second stanza opens:

For tired suffering hearts in every land,
Who toil in sorrow, sunshine, gloom, and pain,
The symbol of their strength, the strong right hand
Of Labour, which toils that we may gain
Our Daily Bread ;
For all collective strength of hand and brain,
The fruits of which result in common gain,
Producers of our food, our clothes, our all, (42)

It is an emphatic assertion of the role of the working classes and their right to fair and dignified treatment and a testimony to Midgley's lifelong commitment to their interests. The poem is of uncertain date, but presumably written around the same time as the final armistice poem, its final lines repeating once again that belief in peace rather than war, "A peace not based on force or strength of arms, / Nor ushered in amid war's wild alarms ;" (43).

Most of the poems, for all their acknowledgement of suffering and the high price of war, retain a certain optimism, derived from religious faith and socialist ideas, which suggest a route to the improvement of the human lot. Events in Ireland after the war, both political and economic, although they must have depressed and frustrated him, seem not, from a reading of the poems, to have deterred Midgley from his faith in a better future until the final two poems in the volume, which suggest a more despairing frame of mind. The penultimate poem, "The Mighty Dead," takes up the theme of the preceding half dozen poems, that in the name of the dead a better world must be created, but the tone at the opening suggests for the first time a lack of confidence in a better future, "Our mighty dead, shall they have died in vain? / Shall this old earth learn nothing by our loss" (46). For Midgley, the meaning of the deaths of so many can only be that the suffering of the war should have ensured that war was never resorted to again, and that the human lot should be improved.

Most significantly however, the poem ends with a striking plea:

O people of our well loved native land,
Unite in this most promising of years
Unite and work as comrades hand in hand.
[...]
Work for a peace that knows not tyrants might,
That seeks not added power, nor pride of place, (46)

It is a rare expression of love for Ireland and direct address to people in Ireland. It suggests anxiety about continuing conflict in Northern Ireland, and the reference to tyrants suggests Midgley's concern to express the fact that the workers have a common foe in those who misuse power, not in those who give their allegiance to any particular flag. It expresses his frustration at the sectarianism which saw members of his own Protestant community seeking to protect their historic occupations in the skilled sector at the expense of Catholics seeking work, as the post-war employment situation in Belfast deteriorated and reached its height in the massive expulsion of Catholics from the shipyards in July 1920.⁶

The final poem, "Shot at Dawn," comes as something of a shock to the reader of the whole volume. Its content, unlike that of the immediately preceding few poems, takes us back to wartime conditions and suggests that it was probably written during the war years. It is in many ways the bleakest of all the poems, and it must be significant that it is placed last in the volume. It is an account of a young boy, shot as a deserter. The description evokes the naivety with which he, in common with the poet himself, and many others first joined up, as he remembers, "those he had left in boyish glee / When caught in war's flowing tide."

Then comes a description of the horrors this young lad experienced,

The guns played havoc with nerves and brain,
His senses were dazed and blind,
He had stood in the trench in mud and rain,
Till the agony swamped his mind. (47)

The story has become familiar to subsequent generations, although at the time deserters received little understanding and their end was considered shameful.⁷ However, the standard response is subtly questioned. The penultimate stanza ends, "And "Shot at Dawn" is remembered still, / By those who gazed on his face." The phrase is glib and obliterates the individuality of the unnamed soldier, but the final stanza reveals that those of his own land and race who shot him do not forget so easily, "I know the men who served out there, / "His Murder" will not forget." The word is a shocking challenge to the majority of Midgley's contemporaries who would not have considered the act to be one of murder. This is the final line of *Thoughts from Flanders*.

Nevertheless, the volume is a collection predominantly of hope, inspired by the writer's Christian and socialist beliefs, but, as the final poem suggests, with an increasing element of disillusion. It bears witness to suffering, but falls short of a state-

6 Grayson quotes Marie Toner Moore, speaking of Daniel McKeown her grandfather: "My grandmother believed that it was because of his Catholicism that he was denied work and I understood from her that he believed this too. She often remarked that he was wont to say 'so much for the land fit for heroes'" (Grayson 153).

7 One example of changed attitudes is the unveiling in 2001 of the Shot At Dawn Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, England.

ment that the deaths were futile, choosing instead to invest value in their sacrifice because it taught humanity the ultimate futility of war. The religious inspiration does not fall back on the easy equating of the soldier's death with the death of Christ, as an act of atonement. Where Christ is alluded to, it is as fellow-sufferer. Remembering at an individual level and at the level of collective remembrance plays a key part in the rhetoric of the poems, but always the point of remembering is to create a better world and avoid a recurrence of conflict. The disillusion with the post-war world, felt in Ireland and elsewhere, is given added impetus by Midgley's dislike of sectarianism, primarily because of its contribution to class division. The volume is the only literary work Midgley ever produced. It is not great poetry but provides a powerful personal witness to one man's experience of the war on the Western Front and the post-war events in his native city of Belfast. It is testimony to his belief in an alternative future of collaboration in creating a just society, which a hundred years later remains to some extent an aspiration.

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