

Fifth Eutopy: The Christmas Truce 1914

The Day Peace Broke Out

*God heard the embattled nations sing and shout
"Gott strafe England" and "God save the King,"
God this, God that, and God the other thing.
"Good God," said God, "I've got my work cut out."*

J.C.Squire [attributed]

A shot in Sarajevo that long-ago summer, and much of Europe was precipitated into entrenched warfare along a front of hundreds of miles, not, as one of its casualties said at the time, *'like swimmers into cleanness leaping'*, but into the Flanders mud, so deep that its swamps claimed drowned victims of its own.

All over England they left their ploughshares, their ledgers, their blackboards and - to the dismay of Lord Kitchener, who had not thought that one look from him would have such a lemming response - joined Fred Karno's Army, to tramp the impromptu parade grounds, hastily cleared of cattle, with their wooden rifles.

Such was the eagerness of the young men of England "not to miss the fun of fighting the Boche", that soon there were more 'soldiers' than uniforms to clothe them, nor even shaped-wooden 'weapons' for parade-ground practice.

"Over by Christmas"

Such was the fear that "*the War will be over by Christmas*" that offices, schools, factories and shops were emptied of their menfolk so that they might join the fun.

In his poem MCMXIV (in Alan Bennett's words, "*in Roman numerals, as if it were carved on a war memorial*"), Philip Larkin evokes the England which these apprentice - these *amateur* - soldiers left behind them:

*Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word - the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.*

In his patriotic afflatus, Rupert Brooke spoke for a generation:

*Now, God be thanked Who has
matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and
wakened us from sleeping. . .*

The Common Soldier was quickly disabused of such noble aspirations, and he was forced to reason from hard premises to an inescapable conclusion, that, in the words of a song:

"We're 'ere becoz we're 'ere," iterated to the tune of **Auld Lang Syne**.

Moreover, they became witnesses to the progress of the War.

Of their dead comrades they knew that, in the words of another song:

*"We seen 'em,
We se-e-n 'em,
'Angin' on the ol' barb' wire"*

Not Over by Christmas

The war, however, was not over by Christmas, for the daily killing, by rifle-volley, gun-shell and sniper's bullet, claimed thousands of young men on both sides, mostly French, British, and German.

In a different kind of patriotism from Brooke's, the Brass Hats at H.Q., "*absolutely prohibited*" fraternisation (or 'brotherhood'), and enjoined on the troops ". . .*the absolute necessity of encouraging the offensive spirit*".

The Truce: Christmas Eve 1914

*Deine Zauber binden wieder,
Was die Mode streng geteilt
Alle Menchen werden Bruder,
Wo dein sanfter Flugel weilt. . .*

Your sweet magic, frees all others,
Held in custom's rigid rings,
All men on earth become brothers,
In the haven of your wings

An die Freude Friedrich von Schiller

In their book, **The Christmas Truce 1914**, Malcolm Brown & Shirley Seaton set the scene that Christmas Eve:

"Frost transformed the scene. The pools froze. The huddled shapes. . . dead men. . . lay white with rime. Rime turned the copses into Christmas trees, and softened the hard outlines of ruined buildings. It was a beautiful sunny day and very clear Christmas trees. . . It was incredible.

"First the lighting of large fires behind the enemy lines. . . next the appearance of numerous small lights on the top of the enemy's trenches; then, the playing of. . . tunes on bugles or horns, after which they suddenly burst into songs of all kinds. . ."

Eutopic Witness

The italicised, paragraphs hereafter are direct witness-statements by participants of this fifth 'eutopy'..

“Across the Blank Space of No Man’s Land”

. . . Cheers were coming across the blank space of no man’s land. Then they saw dim figures on the German parapet, and more lights; and with amazement that it was a Christmas tree being set there, and around it were Germans talking and laughing together. . .

. . . from the German parapet a rich baritone voice had begun to sing. . . Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.

Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations. . . in such positions as to suggest that they were hung on Christmas Eve.

The grave and tender voice rose out of the frosty mist; it was all so strange; it was like being in another world, to which [I] had come through a nightmare; a world finer than the one [I] had left behind.. ?

Christmas Day: “a Wonderful Day”

“Most British accounts suggest that it was the Germans who made the overtures. . . Some German reports give the honour to the British”:

“Hallo! Hallo! you English, we wish to speak.”

“If you English come out and talk to us, we won’t fire.”

“It was so strange that they had not been fired upon; it was wonderful that the mud was gone: wonderful to walk easily on the paths; wonderful to be dry, to be able to sleep. The wonder remained in the low golden light of a white-rimed Christmas morn. [I] could hardly realise it; but [my] chronic, hopeless longing for home was gone.

“Here we were laughing and chatting with men whom a few hours we had been trying to kill”.

“. . . and so we went on, singing everything from ‘Good King Wenceslas’ down. to ordinary Tommies’ songs, and ending up with ‘Auld Lang Syne’, which we all, English, Scots, Irish, Prussian, Wurttembergers, etc. joined in. It was absolutely astounding, and if I had seen it on a cinematograph film I should have sworn that it was faked!

. . . They struck up with ‘God Save the King’. . . The Tommies gave three cheers in return.

“Offering you some cigars, I remain,

yours truly. . .”

“It did feel funny walking alone towards the enemy’s trenches to meet someone halfway and arrange a Christmas peace. It will be a thing to remember all one’s life”.

“For an hour both sides walked about in the space between the two lines of trenches, talking and laughing, swapping baccy and cigarettes, biscuits, etc. . . you would never believe that we had been fighting for weeks” with ‘our friends the enemy’ ‘strolling about as if in Hyde Park. . . like a crowd of kids with a day’s holiday”.

Everyman’s Land

“Little groups of soldiers met and mingled, while their comrades peered from their parapets, incredulously looking on, as the grey shapes moved cautiously towards each other, talked, lit cigarettes, the whole scene lit by a bright, frosty moon.”

“Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill”.

“I wouldn’t have missed the experience of yesterday for the most gorgeous Christmas dinner in England.”

“One of the Highlights of my Life”

*“It was a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere;. . . there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches and then there were those lights - I don’t know what they were. And then they sang **Silent Night - Stille Nacht**. I shall never forget it. It was one of the highlights of my life.”*

Brown & Seaton record that : *“Other accounts suggest that whole groups of friendly enemies were rounded up before the camera like guests at a wedding.”*

Playing Football

“There was no sort of ill-will between us. . . There was no referee, and no score, no tally at all. It was simply a melee - nothing like the soccer you see on television.”

“I have seen demonstrated in front of my very own eyes that suddenly people who were killing each other, you know, and were going to kill them again when the day is over, still are able to sit together and talk to each other.”

“Even as I write I can scarcely credit what I have seen and done. This has indeed been a wonderful day”.

“On Earth,” or ‘in Heaven’?

“What on Earth is going on? An extraordinary thing, really; two nations singing the same carol”.

“Here we were laughing and chatting with men whom a few hours we had been trying to kill”.

Mutual Burial

“The Germans. . . who seemed extraordinarily fine men. . . beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us to bury our dead. It seemed too ironical for words..”

“We then had a most wonderful joint burial service. Our Padre. . . arranged the prayers and psalms, and an interpreter wrote them out in German. They were read first in English by our Padre and then in German by a boy who was studying for the ministry. It was an extraordinary and most wonderful sight. The Germans formed up on one side, the English on the other, the officers standing in front, every head bared. Yes, I think it was a sight one will never see again.”

“It was not war, but it was certainly magnificent.”

End of the Truce

[When the Truce was forcibly ended by the officers both sides], *“the soldiers who had fraternized subsequently refused to fire on each other, and had to be removed from the trenches and replaced by other men”*.

One German wrote to his English friends across No Man’s Land:

“Dear Camarades [sic], I beg to inform you that it is forbidden us to go out to you, but we will remain your comrades. If we shall be forced to fire, we will fire too high. . .”

One non-combatant judgement was:

“One human episode amid all the atrocities. . .”

Arthur Conan Doyle