Re-reading the Somme

Adrian Barlow

The Fierce Light: The Battle of the Somme July - November 1916. Prose and Poetry. Ed. by Anne Powell. Aberporth: Palladour Books. 1996. xxiv + 294 pp. £12.00

Battles that enter the historical memory or the historical imagination are usually either heroic victories against the odds (Agincourt) , significant defeats (Hastings) or famous disasters caused by incompetence (Charge of the Light Brigade). The Battle of the Somme does not quite fit any of these categories but contains elements of all three: it produced as much heroism as the human spirit could create or popular nationalism could require; some historians are still divided as to whether it ended in victory or defeat, but most conclude that it ended in a terrible stalemate; many of the same historians are expert in assessing degrees of incompetence and apportioning blame.

Above all, the Somme was a human disaster on a scale it is still hard to conceive: the memorial to the Missing of the Somme records the names of 72,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers for whom there is no known grave—men who literally disappeared off (or under) the face of the earth. No one can produce an accurate total of those who were killed on all sides during the four and a half months of the fighting: 'over a million' simply means they have given up counting.

Now, at the other end of this century, the Somme has come to be its own symbol; like Hiroshima, like the Holocaust, it cannot be defined or described in terms of anything else. Today it seems a necessary event, necessary because without it our ability to understand the twentieth century (and therefore ourselves) is incomplete. It is thus too important to be taken for granted. We have to go over the ground again, no matter how well we think we are acquainted with its histori-

cal facts; *The Fierce Light* enables us to start re-reading the Somme.

> The suffering inflicted on both sides during the terrible months between July and November 1916 has cast a shadow ever since. Countless families still mourn. Many of the men who survived were left with physical disabilities and psychological scars. The sights, sounds and smells of the carnage and destruction haunted them for the rest of their lives. They deserve our gratitude, reverence and individual expressions of atonement; and our assurance that future generations will continue to honour them and those who lie beneath the bloodsoaked fields of Picardy.

This is how Anne Powell concludes her Introduction to *The Fierce Light* (the title comes from a poem by a Scot, John Ebenezer Stewart, killed in 1918). In a sense this book is the editor's own expression of atonement, an attempt to understand—through the words of those who were actually there—what it was like and what it meant to have fought at the Somme. The book is an anthology of writing (letters, diaries, prose accounts and poems) by allied soldiers who actually fought at the Somme, set out chronologically. Thus the reader can trace the course of the battle almost literally hour by hour on day one, 1st July, and thereafter day by day, week by week until the cold and mud of November brought the battle to a ghastly halt:

> No one could struggle through that mud for more than a few yards without rest. Terrible in its clinging consistency, it was the arbiter of destiny, the supreme enemy, paralysing and mocking English and German alike. Distances were measured not in yards but in mud ... (235)

While some of the writers included are familiar—Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, David Jones and Edmund Blunden—most are quite unknown, significant only because they were at the Somme and because they recorded and reflected upon what they saw. It is impossible to finish this book (which also provides maps, biographical notes on the contributors and a good bibliography) without understanding far more about the actuality of war and about its impact on the human imagination than one did at the beginning

The Fierce Light is also an act of piety, for the book is dedicated to the memory of Anne Powell's grandfather, Major W.D.Oswald, who was

mortally wounded on 14 July 1916. The Introduction is essentially a memoir of her grandfather, and a photograph of his grave as it was shortly after the end of the War is reproduced on the back cover.

The Fierce Light contains only two other photographs, but they are critical to an understanding of the book: the frontispiece shows wounded soldiers—walking wounded—helping each other back from the front line. In the centre of the picture are three soldiers, two British and one German, supporting each other as they walk. This, for Anne Powell, is one of the key points that has to be made about the Somme: throughout the months of the fighting, British and German soldiers were literally in it together. They were enemies bound by the activity of trying to kill each other (Robert Graves observes in *Goodbye To All That* the memorable tableau of "a man of the South Wales Borderers and one of the Lehr Regiment who had succeeded in bayoneting each other simultaneously") but at the same time they respected each other, even (on occasion) saved each other, in ways and to an extent which would have appalled Haig and the generals:

> Our men were very good to the German wounded. ... In fact, kindness and compassion for the wounded, our own and the enemy's, is about the only decent thing I have seen in this war. It is not at all uncommon to see a British and German soldier side by side in the same shell-hole nursing each other as best they can and placidly smoking cigarettes. (179)

The remaining photograph is on the front cover. It shows a corner of a rough trench, just dug. In the foreground is a muddy spade with a long handle—the sort that grave-diggers use. Half a dozen men (one can only tell how many by counting feet) are slumped, dead or sleeping, in shallow fox-holes burrowed into the sides of the trench. One soldier, his rifle at his shoulder, sits—apparently on sentry duty. On the ground are scattered helmets, mess tins, packs and other bits of kit. The few trees on top of the trench are predictably blasted.

This scene is evoked several times in the course of the book. The Australian writer Frederic Manning (author of *Her Privates We*, 1930) puts it thus in 'The Trenches':

> Here in a bay, a helmeted sentry
> Silent and motionless, watching while two sleep,
> And he sees before him

> With indifferent eyes the blasted and torn land
> Peopled with stiff prone forms, stupidly rigid,
> As tho' they had not been men. (217)

> I shall always remember sitting at the head of this little narrow trench, smoking a cigarette and trying to soothe the men simply by being quiet. Five or six little funk-holes dug into the side of the trench served to take the body of a man in a very huddled and uncomfortable position, with no room to move, simply to cower into the little hole. (185)

This was the recollection of Arthur Graeme West, an officer in the Oxfordshire and Bucks. Light Infantry who became a pacifist and wrote letters from the trenches to Bertrand Russell:

> Most men fight, if not happily, at any rate patiently, sure of the necessity and usefulness of their work. So did I—once! Now it all looks to me so absurd and brutal that I can only force myself to continue in a kind of dream-state; I hypnotise myself to undergo it. What *good*, what *happiness* can be produced by some of the scenes I have had to witness in the last few days? (187)

Robert Graves is represented in *The Fierce Light* by two poems and two extracts from *Goodbye To All That.* Both of the poems are shaped from the same material as is in the prose extracts, and the comparisons are illuminating. 'A Dead Boche' transforms an apparently straightforward description (though of course, in *Goodbye To All That*, Graves is rarely as ingenuous as his writing may appear) into one of the poetic icons of the Great War: the image of the dead German soldier "Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired / Dribbling black blood from nose and beard" is offered by the poet as "A certain cure for lust and blood". Siegfried Sassoon produces a memorable image of a German mother sitting at home knitting socks for the son who is at the same moment lying dead with his face crushed into the mud ('Glory of Women'), and Owen writes famously of a strange meeting with "the enemy you killed, my friend". Yet no other British poet from the Great War gazes so unwaveringly at the face of his dead enemy; and by so doing, Graves challenges us (as much as his contemporaries) to define our response—hatred? revulsion? pity?

The second poem is 'Bazentin, 1916', subtitled 'A Reminiscence -

Robert and David'. Here the same material quoted by Anne Powell from *Goodbye To All That* is presented as a dialogue, the two speakers sharing their memories of a particular sequence of experiences. It is clear in this poem that David [Cromlech] is Graves' alter ego, for a nightmare encounter with a mouse, described by Graves in his prose account as happening to himself, is re-attributed to David in the poem. The passage from *Goodbye To All That* ends with Graves' laconic account of how his colonel prematurely reported his having died of wounds.

Indeed, much of the material in this book is laconic in tone, as if the familiar horror can only be re-made unfamiliar when treated as almost laughably inconsequential. This is the note struck often by Graves (and by Blunden in *Undertones of War*—the very word 'undertones' making the point). It is struck again in this final glimpse of the Somme as a kind of Theatre of the Absurd (by Frank Crozier, who rose to become a Brigadier-General and wrote of his war experiences in *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land*, 1930):

> Meanwhile I see a German soldier, unarmed, sitting at a newly made shell hole. I ask him if he speaks English. He does. He was once a waiter at Bude in Cornwall. He is fed up with the war, and glad to be where he is. ... He points to his throat. 'Roach,' I call out, 'any water in your bottle? If so, give this fellow some.' He drinks the bottle dry and is profuse to Roach in his thanks. Might he stay with me, he asks! 'You will be safer behind, old cock,' I say. No, he would like to stay! 'Take him to the dugout, Roach,' I say, 'give him some food and let him sleep—he tells me he hasn't slept for ten days on account of the shelling.' The old sailor and the ex-German waiter walk along together, comparing notes and talking of England. Suddenly there is a cloud of smoke, a deafening roar—exit Roach and the unknown German soldier, killed by a German shell. ... At 10 pm the curtain rings down on hell. The cost? Enormous. I have seventy men left, all told, out of seven hundred. (25)

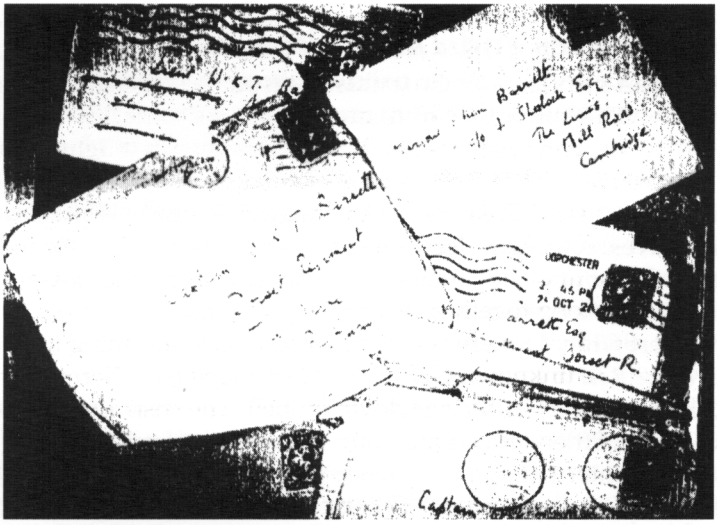
We all think we know what the Somme was like, but the voices in Anne Powell's book remind us that we do not know the half of it. Bringing the Battle of the Somme back to life may seem—when one puts it that way—a rather grotesque project, but since those four and a half months have come to be identified as one of the defining moments for Europe in the twentieth century, the project is as important as ever:

Others on new sensation bent
Will wander here, with some glib guide
Insufferably eloquent
Of secrets we would hide—

Hide in this battered crumbling line
Hide in these rude promiscuous graves,
Till one shall make our story shine
In the fierce light it craves. (xxiv)

The Fierce Light is a richly sobering book, the record of the participants themselves. A re-reading of the Somme must begin with them.

Letters to Ken
from 1917 - 1961



A small volume of 37 previously unpublished letters from Robert Graves to Ken Barrett, a fellow patient at Somerville Hospital during World War I. The letters discuss Graves' first love, marriage, poets and poetry.
Copies may be obtained from Mrs G Doggart, 4 King's Walk, Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 2DJ at £17 each including post and packaging.