

Thought for the month, November 2018

NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO FORGET

For anyone who has never been involved in armed conflict either as combatant or civilian, the experience of war is impossible to imagine. My own faint impressions were gained through school visits to First World War trenches in Belgium, studies of history and pouring over family records listing the death of my great-great-grandfather in France towards the end of the war.

That conflict, the first of two unprecedented national traumas of unimaginable scale experienced within a couple of generations, faded from living memory with the death of Harry Patch and its other last surviving military veterans earlier this century; but since 2014 the nation has been engaged in a conscious intensive effort to commemorate, understand, educate ourselves and honour the dead. The special commemorations associated with the centenary of the 1914-18 war come to an end this month with director Danny Boyle's 'Pages of the Sea' art installation. Based on beaches all around the UK's shores, the work will feature vast portraits of soldiers who left those beaches with special connection to the areas concerned. Boyle began work on the project believing it should represent a form of closure on our official remembrance of the war but through researching the lives of the individuals portrayed, has now come to feel differently.

I agree – the First World War may no longer be living history but its effects shaped the way we live in countless ways and continue resonate through international conflicts today. More importantly, the sacrifices made both on the front lines and in homes and communities across the country were so great, so shocking, they can only make some kind of sense if we attempt to understand the political, social and military context that led to them, using that understanding to resist the kind of stratagems that take governments down the path to war and to reshape the social and economic structures that make it more likely.

At a time when bombast and careless aggression seem to be returning with a vengeance to international relations, the centenary of the cataclysm that was WW1 is a reminder to take a national knee, pause for breath and examine our own part in the systems that generate conflict. After all, 100 is an arbitrary number; the 40 million people killed in the conflict that officially ended on 11th November 1918 is not.