



Peace at Last: A Portrait of Armistice Day, 11 November 1918 by Guy Cuthbertson.

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In *Peace at Last*, English professor Guy Cuthbertson¹ (Liverpool Hope University) aims “to expose a key moment in history—one that is entertaining, enlightening, and culturally significant” (18), specifically, the last day of fighting in World War I and the first day of peace, when tears and laughter of blessed relief marked the end of the greatest catastrophe in modern European history to that date. The author promises to take readers to celebrations and spectacles in every corner of Great Britain, in order to show how Armistice Day later came to be devoted to the solemn remembrance of the dead.

The book’s six chapters examine the “Great Rejoicings” and “After the Party” phases, during which Britons celebrated the end of the putative “war to end all wars” before settling down to the fun and the sobering realization of what they had suffered in 1914–18. (The book also contains endnotes, a guide to further reading, an index, and twelve pages of illustrations and photographs.)

News of the armistice was often first received in small villages with close connections to the combatant forces. The conflict had been a “world” war, but the announcement of its end was local. In an especially discerning passage, Cuthbertson observes that the news typically filtered through local postmasters or newsagents. For instance, the postmaster of Hawarden in Flintshire received word at 8:30 a.m. Hours before the binge of celebrations and patriotic self-congratulation got underway, those with personal ties to the forces had already construed the meaning of the war in ways that official memorials never changed:

Ernest Barnes, the future Bishop of Birmingham, in the countryside and on his way to the newspaper shop ..., saw in an otherwise unremarkable street a child’s flag tied to a child’s chair, placed in a cottage doorway (these small details of the day can feel as moving and significant as any political statement or indeed any battle). That small flag suggested that some peace news had arrived. And then three doors further down, at the newsagent, the young woman behind the counter, who was dressed in black because she had lost her husband in the war, said, without emotion or enthusiasm, “It’s going to stop today.” That village heard early because there was an air force station nearby. I was silent, trying to see the new world that had come into being: and she said in that same even voice: “I’m glad it’s over; there’s been too much killing.” I have often thought since of her words. We had won the greatest war in our history and the verdict of simple humanity was “There’s been too much killing.” (31)

Oddly, as people learned of the armistice, their first instinct was to make a racket. Bell-ringing became the ubiquitous sound of the day. Early in the war, bells had rung as if to welcome its arrival, but the Defence of the Realm Act (8 Aug. 1914) promptly imposed restrictions, though war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen wrote—often in anger—about the ringing of bells. And

1. His previous works include *Edward Thomas, Prose Writings: A Selected Edition*, vol. 1 and, with Lucy Newlyn, vol. 2 (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011); and *Wilfred Owen* (id., 2014).

the popular memory of church bells was so firmly fixed that their return seemed to denote a kind of divine permission:

The wartime journalist Michael Macdonagh ... recalled that “when the hands of the dials pointed to XII, Big Ben struck the hour, booming it in his deep and solemn tones, so old and so familiar.” A large crowd in Parliament Street and Whitehall listened silently to the bongs as they sent the hours out across London and the Thames. The time didn’t matter, but the clock did. The clock, the face and voice of London, the face and voice of democracy and freedom, was gruffly encouraging the capital to go and celebrate. It was a moment to remember even though many people seem to have misremembered the time. And that was the end of the first hour of peace. (100)

What sort of celebration after four years of deprivation, fear, and sacrifice would not have featured excess? The afternoon and evening of 11 November witnessed a Feast of Fools or Saturnalia. Bonfires and macabre burnings of the Kaiser were everywhere, and alcohol fueled various bad behaviors. The national anthem and *Land of Hope and Glory* were sung enthusiastically and coherently. But much of the celebration, Cuthbertson notes, was a spontaneous attempt to revive feelings of national community, in large part imaginary, that the war had destroyed:

An ancient, rural, organic Merrie England was, indeed, the image that had been offered during the war by posters, postcards, songs and poetry, and here, at the Armistice, there was a manifestation of an England that had seemed dead. People had been fighting for an old country, and this is what they got, with church bells, folk dancing, communal life and bonfires. (173–74)

The celebrations were also reactions to an overwhelming sorrow that had gripped Britain since the Battle of the Somme, a despondency that cut the ties between those who had served at the front and could not forget, and the men and women who had tended the home fires. Wilfred Owen did not survive to share the anger of fellow soldiers,² like Sassoon and Robert Graves, who found the celebrations disquieting or grotesque. It was not true, as D.H. Lawrence claimed in a typical spasm of overstatement, that “at home stayed all the jackals, middle-aged, male and female jackals” (214), but those who had fought for England had seen the future at the front and sensed that it was not, in any measure, “merrie.”

The book’s last chapter clarifies how Armistice Day evolved into Remembrance Day in recognition of all that was lost forever when Europe went to war with itself in August 1914. Students of the Great War will take from *Peace as Last* an appreciation of the capacity of human beings to find hope and meaning even in a self-inflicted disaster recently concluded.

2. “Owen was killed in action on 4 November 1918 during the crossing of the Sambre–Oise Canal, exactly one week (almost to the hour) before the signing of the Armistice which ended the war, and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant the day after his death. His mother received the telegram informing her of his death on Armistice Day, as the church bells in Shrewsbury were ringing out in celebration.”—*Wikipedia*, s.v. “Wilfred Owen.”