

## Gallipoli

*The moon shines tonight on Charlie Chaplin  
His boots are cracking for the want of blacking.  
The moon shines tonight on Charlie Chaplin  
Until they send him to the Dardanelles*

(First World War music hall song attacking Chaplin's alleged lack of patriotism)

It was, I think, Eric Hobsbawm in *The Age of Empire* who coined the idea of one's shadow memories; things that happened before one's birth but which have been transmitted so intensely by immediate family that they seem part of one's own memories. Hobsbawm describes how for him early-twentieth century Vienna is such a shadow memory. For me, such shadows include the Spanish Civil War and mass unemployment, the two things which defined my parents' politics in the decade before I was born. But of all the events of the first half of the twentieth century which seem to belong to my own experience the most vivid is the 1<sup>st</sup> World War even though it is a time so long ago as to be almost outside even the childhood of my parents.

My mother talked often of her uncles either killed in the war or crippled by it and of seeing men falling from a burning Zeppelin over Enfield. She talked bitterly of an uncle called Jack, who was discharged from the army and who cashed in a disablement pension for a lump-sum of £25. He bought with this a portable machine for making engraved dog-collar disks which he took round markets. She saw him once or twice as he tried to make a living this way then he simply disappeared. I confess to being haunted by a dream of this man, wearing his medals, limping around street markets trying to sell dog-collar disks. But the starkest experience is really the one least talked about; my father's father whom I remember only as an irritable old man who seemed always to be sitting by the window smoking roll-ups. I learnt that he had been buried alive in the trenches for a day and, although rescued, had never recovered from the experience. Before the army he had been a gardener and had met my grandmother when both worked in a country-house, she as a 'tweeny' maid \_ the general dogsbody who made the fires in the bedrooms early each morning and held the bowls into which the Edwardian ladies vomited their meals. (An early dietary programme). But after his discharge, he never worked again and the family was brought up on what money my grandmother could scrape together taking in laundry and renting out rooms in the seaside house where they lived. In the summer, my father and his sister slept in a garden shed so that their rooms could be rented. I have his army discharge papers and his medals, discarded by my father who grew up hating his father or at least that is the interpretation I put on his tight-mouthed silence on the subject. The medals are those given out with the rations, the general service medals one got for putting on the uniform. They are anonymous and for some reason I had two identical ones; a head of the king with a rather gaudy blue and gold ribbon.

It was, I think, not uncommon in the 1950s to feel WW1 as an oppression of history. Its well-documented individual horrors had passed into literature but its pointlessness, the fact that it had been fought for no apparent reason had

become concealed under a congealed national myth. For my generation, the war into which we had been born had been evidently a 'good' war. It had for many of its actual participants been the most exciting part of their lives, the Blitz was even then acquiring its patina of comradeship transcending difficulty and, at its end, there had genuinely been a new start, new horizons. Britain, it has to be accepted, largely missed out on the true horrors of that war. But the previous war, the Great War, which in a vague way was increasingly lumped in with WW2, did not have this resonance. War memorials were simply adapted to include the dead of both wars. Remembrance Day was altered to encompass both. British Legion poppies were used vicariously to cover the vague personal costs attached to both. But the ghosts of the Great War were altogether different from those of 1939-45, their pain and the losses of their families different to a degree that grated more and more as the 1950s ground on with an increasing sense of frustration and lost hopes. Those of us whose involvement in CND was the first leap into politics began to link up the potential mass destruction of nuclear war with the actual mass destruction of the Great War in terms of the vanities and delusions of those leaders who had dragged Europe into such a cataclysm for no reason which made any historic sense. In 1960 or so, it made more sense to see the world as being pulled towards an even more irrational conflagration of global proportions by leaders unable to break out of rhetorical phrases promising that tat would be followed by tit until simultaneously all the missile buttons would be pressed. The Cuban missile crisis was neither the first nor the last moment in which escalating standoffs between belligerent generals seemed likely to precipitate the end.

In these circumstances, it becomes appropriate to question all those aspects of one's national culture which appear to breed such lunatic and irrational behaviour not in the form of a research project but as an urgent matter of survival. One such was the reverence accorded to a war of whose unparalleled slaughter seemed matched only by the madness of its leaders. Joan Littlewood finally put her finger on the centre of it in *Oh! What a Lovely War!* in depicting the senior British general, Haig, and his staff not as serious historical figures, whose tactical and strategic decisions might be open to debate but who had an assured place amongst the great and the good, but as mad buffoons acting in a grotesque pier concert-party and concerned only with their own vanities. The destruction of the myth of national leadership in the Great War and its replacement by mockery and derision was a key introduction to the culture of the 1960s.

But after all this, the ghosts of the Great War still hang in the air. Ted Hughes wrote about a popular beauty spot near Hebden Bridge that cordite traces still lay in the air and the ghosts of men whose bones had "*melted in Asia Minor*" lurked in the trees. These elliptical words refer to local men who joined the Lancashire Fusiliers and were shipped away to Gallipoli to die in one of the more exotic sideshows of the Great War. The words lodged themselves in my mind and so I am travelling down to Gallipoli to find what remains of these men.

Driving west from Istanbul along a smooth motorway, one swings close to the Sea of Marmara, a wide expanse of water with the coast of Asia visible only as a smudge on the horizon. The big tankers and container ships are so far out as to be indistinguishable. After about two hours, the far shore closes in to form the straits which lead through to the Mediterranean, the Dardanelles, and one enters the tongue of land which forms their European shore, the Gallipoli peninsula. The straits are barely five kilometres wide and the ships suddenly

seem too large, hemmed in by hills, with all their detail clearly visible. Suddenly the total insanity of the campaign strikes home.

It seems to have been Churchill's wheeze or at least he took it up with mad enthusiasm as First Lord of the Admiralty. The plan was to sail an Anglo-French battle-fleet through the Dardanelles and the Sea of Marmara to anchor off Istanbul and once there to shell or threaten to shell the city, a tactic which says much about British attitudes towards civilian casualties in non-European places. It was believed that this would be enough to frighten the Turks into leaving the war in which they were mainly a bother to the southern flank of Russia. The Czar had appealed for help to his cousin, George V, and something had to be done. Quite what would have happened if the Turks had simply evacuated the city and left the fleet to rot passes into fantasy as what actually happened was the obvious if mundane outcome. Turkish guns along both shores plus minefields laid across the straits sunk enough ships to cause the fleet to hastily retire. Plan A being a disaster Plan B was hastily organised. This entailed landing a mixed force of British, French, Australian and New Zealand troops at various points around the peninsula who would capture the guns and allow the ships through. They duly landed in April, 1915 and for the rest of the year they slugged it out with well-organised Turkish forces who always held the high ground and were able to shoot down on the ill-supplied men below them. In January, 1916, after further landings at Suvla Bay in August conducted with almost total incompetence, the generals finally gave up and evacuated what was left of the Allied troops. In all, about half a million men were casualties on Gallipoli; split about equally between Allied and Turkish.

The entrance to the peninsula is Eceabat, a small, inconsequential kind of place with a couple of cheap hotels and a backpackers hostel. Its main function is as the northern landing place of the ferries which come across from Canakkale on the Asian side of the straits. Huge articulated lorries pull off the ferries starting the long pull up to the Greek or Bulgarian borders and onward. Also a few coaches carrying the Gallipoli tours from the bigger and classier hotels in Canakkale. The only signs that this town has some wider significance are two bars at each end of the road through town; the Vegemite Bar and the Kangaroo Cafe, each with crude but appropriate paintings on the outside. In a way both modern Turkey and Australia were born here in 1915 and it is mainly Turks and Aussies who now come here to pay their respects. In the spring of 2001, the Australian cricket team stopped by for a spot of male bonding and there is a steady stream of backpackers who come through heading for Anzac Beach and the Nek.

I drive out of Eceabat with Major and Mrs Holt for company. This couple seem to have made it their life's business to write detailed guides for all the Great War's battlefields which include every cemetery, every mark of war still remaining, each place where men died. Gallipoli in their frame is really a sideshow; the 7,594 Australians and 2,431 New Zealanders who died here were much less than the French losses of 27,000, a number whose obvious approximation suggests an unwillingness to be bothered too much. For the French, the Dardanelles campaign is so dwarfed by Verdun and the Western Front that it is almost forgotten. Even so the Holt's have carefully catalogued all that is now left of the slaughter beginning with the shore batteries as one leaves Eceabat, some marked by special memorials to the Turkish gunners who stood by their guns as the battleships pounded them, desperately hoping to silence them before the mines exploded. Some of the forts are old, pre-

dating Islam, some pre-dating Christianity. This is a very ancient place. Up on the cliffs of Cape Helles at the tip of the peninsula one can see over the Plain of Troy, something not forgotten by the well-educated public-school boys who likened the expeditionary force to Agamemnon's Greeks. At least at first they did hoping that this was to be their lovely war. Rupert Brooke died *en route* of a fever and was never to be disabused of this hope.

The road cuts inland after ten kilometres or so and skirts the western side of Achi Baba, the hulking hill which lies across the peninsula and from whose summit all the battlefields can be seen. The Turks held it throughout the year, watching troop movements and laying guns. Its capture was a key objective of the Allied forces, never accomplished through three separate assaults. The southern coastline comes into view after a few kilometres more, the Aegean Sea, which could be patrolled by the navy and through which the troopships and supply vessels would come. On 25<sup>th</sup> April, British and Irish forces landed at four separate beaches along this coast, Australian and New Zealand troops went ashore some way to the west whilst the French landed just on the tip of the peninsula. The most westerly British landing was at the 'Lancashire Landing' with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, which included Hughes' uncles and other young men from the Calder Valley.

The cemetery for Lancashire Landing is almost identical to the others, big and small, that I have seen in Egypt, Burma and northern France and Belgium. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission decided on the layout long ago; a surrounding wall about head high, low white stones in parallel lines, and at the end a single large monument with flanking stone benches on which one can sit and look back down the rows of crosses. They are always immaculate; in May the Gallipoli cemeteries smell sweet and have innumerable flowers growing around them. The messages on the stones are picked from the small selection of clichés allowed by the CWGC; only in the Australian cemeteries for some reason are occasional personal messages allowed to "Our dear son" or suchlike. The stone records name, rank, age and regiment; they are apparently placed randomly unlike the French cemetery where officers are placed closest to the memorial with other ranks behind.

The French cemetery is similar in structure to the CWGC sites but Gallic in all its details. Black metal Lorraine crosses, close clipped cypresses, lots of stone chips and few flowers. Looking at the names I am suddenly aware of the obvious but unmentioned detail. Nearly all the French troops were, like the Aussis and Kiwis, colonial from Senegal and the mystical Armée de l'Orient. These were mostly black or Vietnamese young men charging up Achi Baba.

In the Lancashire Landing cemetery nearly all the stones have crosses on them. There are only four exceptions carrying Stars of David; one is a nineteen year old Jew from Belfast, the others are from the Zion Mule Battalion, one of the oddities thrown up by war. Supplies were carried up from the beaches either on men's backs or on mules with the latter being organised either by Greeks or by this oddity, the first Jewish military unit organised since the Maccabees or so the reference books say. They came mostly from Alexandria and were all Zionists committed to setting up a Jewish home in Palestine. The leader was Joseph Trumpledor, a Russian socialist, some references say Bolshevik, who had lost one arm fighting in the 1904 uprising



Joseph Trumpledor

in Russia and had since been in exile in Egypt. The unit's original title had been the Assyrian Jewish Refugee Mule Corps but this proved too much for their first colonel, John Patterson, who renamed them with the more appropriate title. (And yes, Patterson was the big-game hunter whose exploits in shooting tigers in East Africa were immortalised in *Man-Eaters of Tsavo*. Presumably organising hunting safaris was good enough experience for taking over a mule transport brigade.) The men of the Zion Mule Battalion suffered casualties even greater than the armed soldiers. It is reported that they acted with exceptional bravery often taking part in assaults though, strictly speaking, they were not supposed to be armed. They went in with 737 men and left at the end with 134 despite being reinforced in the interim. Before embarking they said Caddish for their dead and cut the throats of the remaining mules. The Holts' report, bizarrely, that they were then asked to go on to take part in the suppression of the Easter Uprising in Dublin and, on refusing, were disbanded. A reformed group stayed in Egypt, entered Jerusalem with Allenby and formed the basis for subsequent Jewish armed forces. Trumpledor later died in a skirmish with Arabs in the subsequent British Protectorate of Palestine and is now something of a hero to contemporary Zionists.

One of their dead, a Private Bergman, lies in the Lancashire Landing cemetery. He was aged 60 and, according to the Hughes, was probably the oldest casualty on the Allied side. One might suppose that he had a better notion of just why he was willing to die on this hillside than the lads from cotton towns who surround him. The Turks were the nominal governors of the land he wanted for his people. Like Trumpledor, he may well also have been an exile and a socialist, seeing no conflict between his politics, his religion and his nationalist ambition. If he had not died here then he might well have also have died in one of the small fights which erupted all over Palestine in the years after this war, part of the small trickles of conflict which branched out from here to full-scale war and mass repression.

The main British memorial stands right on the tip of Cape Helles, a huge pillar with all the names of the dead whose bodies could not be found carved on it and on the surrounding walls. In the listing for the Lancashire Fusiliers, which runs to 1,246 names, I find what, ostensibly, I came for. A dozen Greenwood's and eight Sutcliffe's; the names of the men who in the upper Calder Valley still come to decorate one's house or who run schools or drive taxis. They would have known each other, more or less, gone to the same schools, worked in the same mills, encouraging each other as they waded ashore under the Turkish guns which steadily blew them into fragments over the subsequent seven months. The pillar is made not of local stone like most of the cemeteries

but was brought over from the opposite shore from the same quarries from which the walls of Troy were, possibly, built. The public-school scholars got their way in the end.

The Anzac landings lie further along the coast, never fully joined up to the British and French. They are even now desperate places, narrow stony beaches backed by earth cliffs cut through by narrow, winding gullies. The Australians were landed on the wrong beach entirely; too small for proper supply and lacking even a name, it was too late to change their minds, they had to hang on and try to fight their way up the gullies to the Turkish trenches which lay along the crest of the cliffs. It was here that they acquired the national nickname of Diggers as they burrowed into the sides. You can see the main gully, the Nek, in Peter Weir's film, *Gallipoli*, watch Mel Gibson run down the actual place where the Australian Light Horse and the Australian Infantry were decimated and worse. It was here and at Suvla Bay, a couple of kilometres further along the coast, where a final landing was attempted in September, that the Australians acquired their distaste for British control, their national contempt for Poms. At Suvla Bay, the generals got the beaches right, mostly, but screwed up their communications and left the landing force to sit exposed to shell fire whilst they sorted out the mess.

In fact most of the Anzacs who landed were very closely tied to Britain. The great Australian hero of Gallipoli is John Simpson Kirkpatrick, the 'man with the donkey', who carried wounded men down and water up the so-called Shrapnel Gully, known to the Turks as Kuruku Dere – the Valley of Fear – day after day from 25<sup>th</sup> April until 19<sup>th</sup> May under fire until he too was killed by a sniper. He was denied a Victoria Cross, even after organised national campaigns in Australia as late as 1967, on the grounds that no one outstanding act of heroism could be singled out from his almost continuous bravery and that to honour such might serve as a bad precedent though for what was never made clear. He was from South Shields by birth and had, apparently, joined up in the Medical Corps so that in transit through England he might see his parents again. He never made it past Asia Minor. As a small salve to our Australian reputation, he has a memorial outside the South Shields Metro station. (South Shields had the highest proportion of its population killed in WW2 of any town in Britain, merchant sailors who died in the Atlantic and Russian convoys, so they may sympathise with forgotten heroes. I was told this by a survivor from a vessel sunk on the way to Murmansk as we shivered and stamped our feet selling *Morning Star's* at a strike meeting on Shields Quay in 1966. Ships were tied up three deep along the quay, a final gathering of the British merchant marine before its disbandment.)

The Anzac cemeteries above the beaches are mostly small places, some stuck out on isolated cliff promontories which mark some little outpost held for a few weeks. After the war, as one of the Armistice conditions, the whole area was handed over to the Allies as one large war grave and for years round here bodies and bits of bodies were pulled out of overgrown crevices. Most of the cemeteries have plaques recording the names of men who died somewhere in the vicinity and mass graves for unidentified bits. Even after searches, over two-thirds of the Allied bodies were never found. The Australian regiments have a democratic kind of ring; 13 battalions of Australian Infantry and 10 of the Australian Light Horse. The New Zealand forces were named after the places they came from, Canterbury, Auckland, Otago and one, racially defined, Maori unit.

It is possible to see just why Australians come here so much. This is where they stopped being a half-grown convict colony and became a country. It is also possible to see why the main Turkish memorial is so grand, almost grandiose, and why there is a constant flow of Turkish parties in their cemeteries. Turkey lost its blowsy empire in this war but, simply by the fact of throwing back an invasion of its heartland, it also became a proper country. Mustafa Kemal, later Ataturk, effectively commanded Turkish resistance on Gallipoli and his success, when contrasted with the generally incompetent performance of other generals, led to his becoming the first head of modern Turkey.

But to be English, standing on Cape Helles, is to be reminded only of just how much we have blundered around squandering human life in the name of some greater civilisation. There is a direct line from this place to Kabul in 2001 and Baghdad in 2003, the readiness to kill people in far-off places because we think we know best. The sun sets in a huge red orb here sinking into the Aegean Sea and it is very easy to be carried off in thoughts about all those, back to Theseus, who saw the same sunset. On my way to Eceabat I stop off again at the Lancashire Landing cemetery and sink my grandfather's medals in the small patch of bare earth in front of Private Bergman's stone. I really don't know why.

There is only one redeeming story from Gallipoli. When the Allies finally were forced to realise that all the killing was pointless, they were faced with the difficult military task of withdrawing with a minimum of further loss. It was all finally accomplished one night in February, a silent pull-back with all the usual *Boys Own* tricks of fires left burning and wires pulled at a distance to fire batches of rifles. A typical triumph, it has since been recorded, of British military planning and ingenuity as not a life was lost. But according to at least one contemporary Turkish historian, the Turks knew quite well what was going on. But having repelled the foreign invaders from their home soil they were content to let them go in peace without further killing. Driving back to Istanbul I hope the story is true.