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Great Britain's Great War

Written by Jeremy Paxman

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Let's not forget

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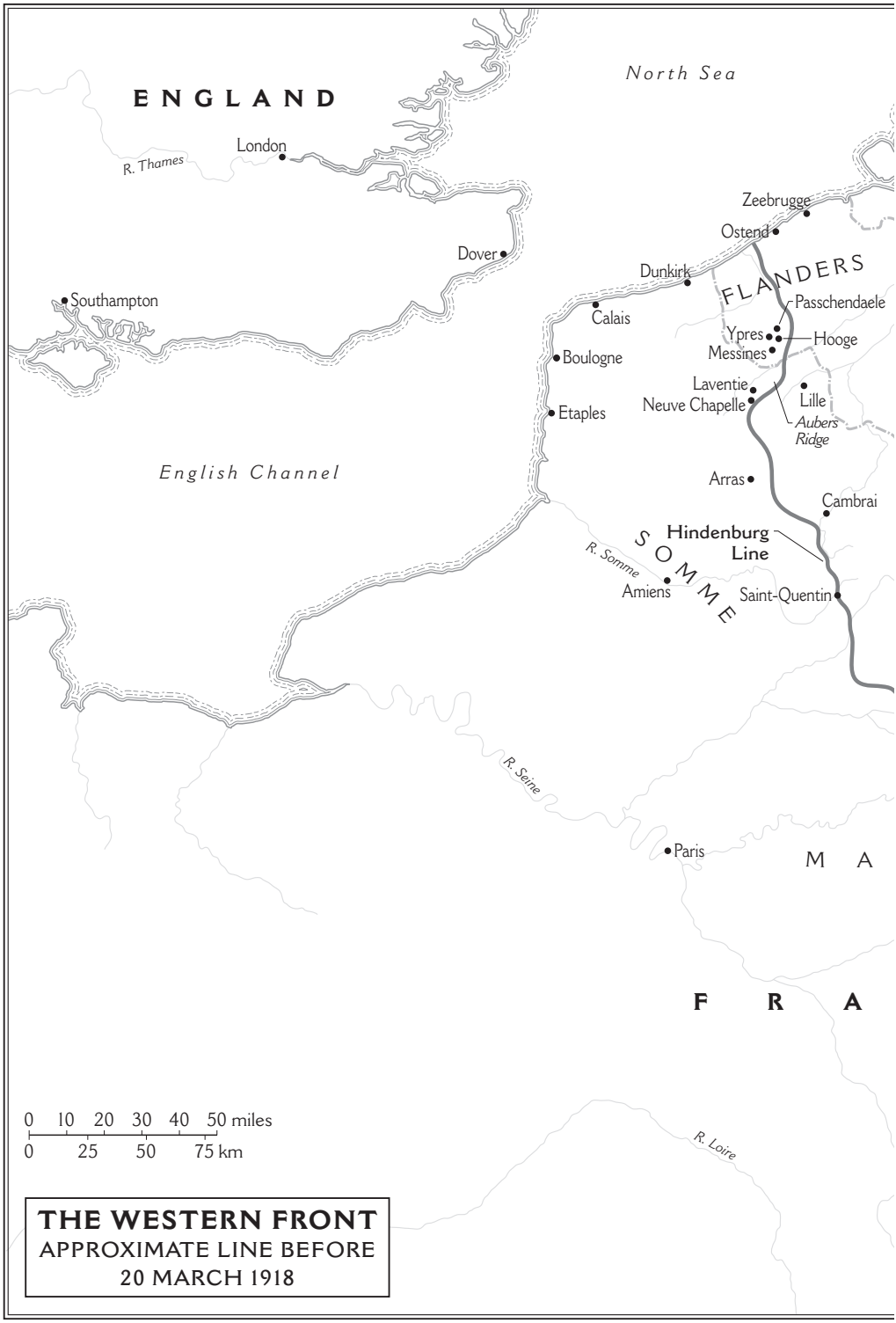
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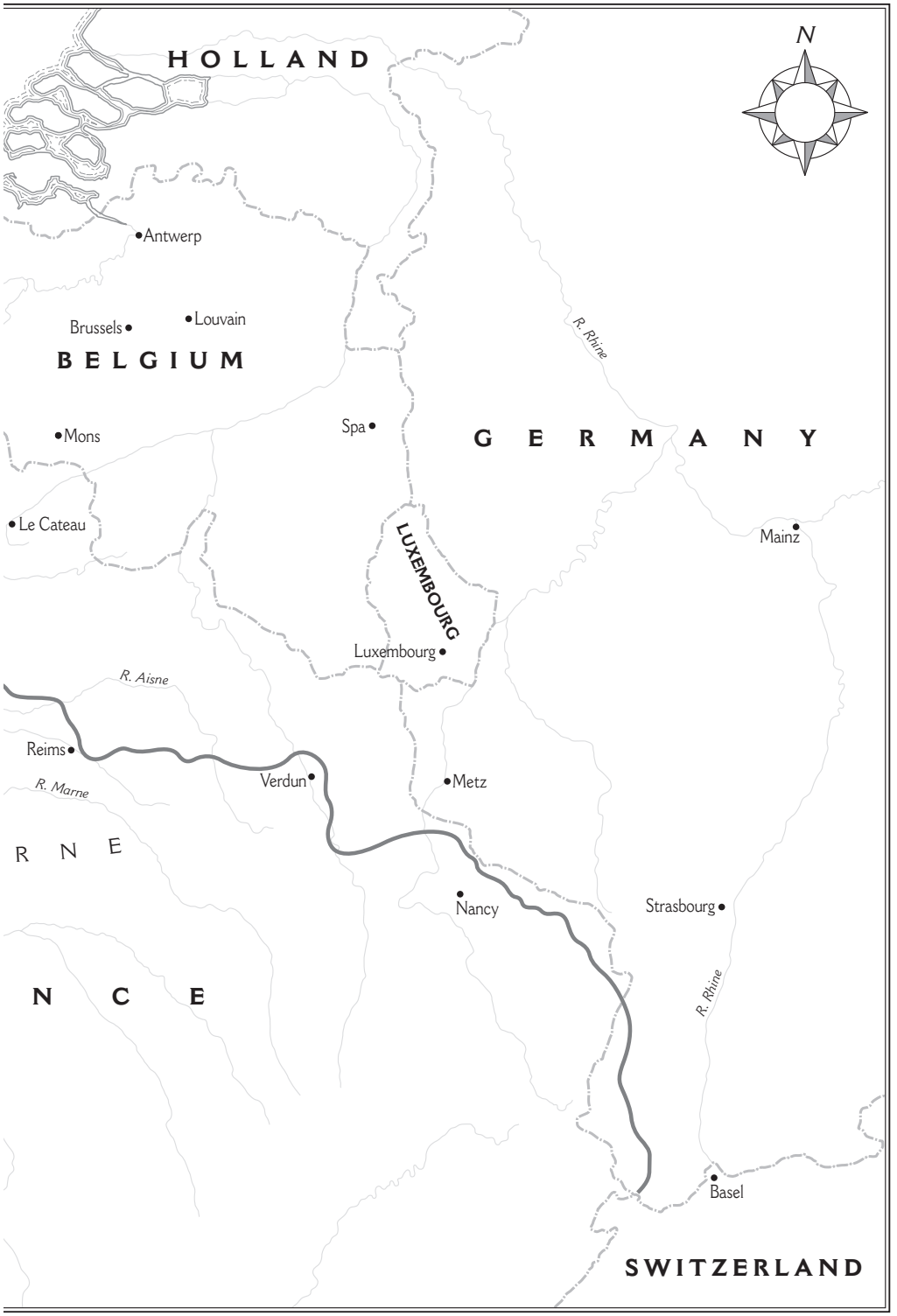
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Introduction

The Cigar Box

Uncle Charlie and his friends. They had no idea what modern war would be like.

There is a photo on the wall. It was taken, most probably, in the spring of 1915, and shows eight uniformed men in the jaunty confidence of youth, bedrolls slung over their shoulders. They stand, arms around each other's shoulders, caps askew, one with a cigarette in his mouth, another with a pipe. They smile cheerily. The bright spring sunshine leaves deep shadows on their foreheads. In the middle, arms folded, a young man with a heavy moustache leans on a roadsign: 'DANGEROUS! KEEP OFF THE TAR'. This is my great-uncle Charlie. He has a Red Cross badge on each shoulder and grins broadly.

In his entire military career Uncle Charlie won no medals for bravery, never advanced beyond the most junior rank in the army and almost certainly neither killed nor wounded a single German.

He had enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps and his job was to save lives, not to take them. The 1911 census records Charles Edmund Dickson as a twenty-year-old living in Shipley, working as a 'weaving overlooker' in one of west Yorkshire's numerous textile factories. Uncle Charlie looks a slightly unconvincing soldier, cutting none of the elegant dash of glamorous young officers like Rupert Brooke. He fills the uniform, for sure. In fact, he looks as if, with a bit of time, he could more than fill it.

On 7 August 1915 this bright young Yorkshireman, with his affable, cheery face, was killed in Turkey.

Uncle Charlie's is one of 21,000 names carved around the Helles Memorial, a great stone obelisk at the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey, surrounded by fields of grain nodding in the breeze off the sea, and clearly visible to the boats that run up and down the coast from the Aegean to Istanbul. He was my mother's father's younger brother, dead well before she was born. Yet as children we were all familiar with him seventy or more years later – Uncle Charlie was a present absence. I often meant to ask my mother what she knew of how he had died, but I never did, and now she's dead I never will. Family legend had it that he signed up in the rush of naive, enthusiastic young recruits in 1914. Like most men of his background, he had almost certainly never been abroad before he travelled to his death on the far side of Europe.

How exactly he died may never be known, but the causes and circumstances of his death are easier to explain. His detachment of the Royal Army Medical Corps had been despatched to Gallipoli as part of First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill's ill-conceived attack on the 'soft underbelly' of the enemy, its purpose being to relieve the stagnation of trench warfare in France and offer a decisive breakthrough. Clement Attlee, the 1945 Labour Prime Minister, once told Churchill that his Dardanelles adventure was 'the only imaginative conception' of the entire war. In truth, the scheme was one of the most wrong-headed, incompetently managed and murderous of the entire catastrophe. The idea

had been for the Royal Navy to blast their way through the Dardanelles, the narrow strait that leads to Constantinople (as Istanbul was then called) and, by attacking Germany's ally, Turkey, to open a new front in the war. When the navy discovered that Turkish mines and well-positioned shore artillery made it impossible to force the strait, British generals compounded the disaster by putting tens of thousands of men ashore in an attempt to destroy the Turkish batteries and safeguard the sea passage from the land. They had underestimated both the difficulty of the terrain and the quality of the Turkish army: British and allied soldiers had to fight their way out of the sea and then scale cliffs and hillsides in the face of well-established Turkish machine-gun positions. After the best part of a year of misery British commanders admitted defeat. Captain Attlee was one of the officers in charge of the evacuation of the peninsula: the retreat from Gallipoli was the only successful part of the entire operation.

The family never learned precisely what killed Uncle Charlie. Was he machine-gunned to death? Was he one of the thousands who had been weakened by the dysentery and typhoid that quickly spread among the men, pinned down in disgusting conditions in the gullies below the enemy machine guns for days on end? The memory of some others who died there – bakers' sons from the Orkneys; gardeners and footmen from the royal estate at Sandringham; the almost 500 men of the Dublin Fusiliers; or the son of the vicar of Deal who won the Victoria Cross for repeatedly wading ashore under fire to rescue wounded men from the beaches – has been kept more conscientiously alive. The deaths of over 11,000 Australian and New Zealand soldiers at Gallipoli are venerated as a sacred part of their nations' histories.

All I know about Uncle Charlie is contained in an old, brown, broken-sided cigar box found among my mother's effects when she died in 2009. She never smoked cigars, so presumably it was passed to her complete with most of its contents. Inside, at the top of the small bundle of documents and effects, was the paper every family dreaded to receive: Army Form B 104-82.

Uncle Charlie must have made it clear when he signed up that his mother, Florina, was a widow, for the printed 'Sir', with which the form begins, has been scored out and replaced with a handwritten 'Madam'. The impersonal tone resumes with the printed sentence 'It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has this day been received from the War Office, notifying the death of —', and here the colonel in charge of Medical Corps administration at Aldershot has inserted into the blank spaces Charlie's name, rank and number, adding 'Number 34 Field Ambulance, of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force' in the space left blank for his unit. 'The cause of death was —', and here an entire line of the form is left empty, which the colonel has made no attempt to fill, just writing the single, unilluminating word 'wounds'. Personal effects, the form states, will be sent on later.

Lying underneath it in the cigar box is another form, apparently signed by the War Secretary, Lord Kitchener:

> The King commands me
> To assure you of the true sympathy
> Of His Majesty and The Queen
> In your sorrow.
> Kitchener

Inside a cardboard tube is another mass-produced letter of condolence, a sheet of paper bearing the printed signature of the king, commemorating Private Charles Edmund Dickson for having joined those who had answered their country's call and 'passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom' and demanding that his name be not forgotten. A thick card envelope contains a 'Dead Man's Penny', a heavy bronze plaque about the size of a tea-saucer, decorated with a robed Britannia holding a trident in one hand and a garland in the other, with a growling lion at her feet. It is inscribed with Uncle Charlie's name and the words 'HE DIED FOR FREEDOM AND HONOUR.'

There is more in the box. Two days before Christmas 1920, Florina received another printed form, this time accompanying a medal – the 1914–15 Star – 'which would have been conferred upon Private C. Dickson had he lived'. In September 1921 – six years after her son's death, and almost three years after the signing of the Armistice – another official letter arrived, this time informing Uncle Charlie's mother that her dead son had been awarded the British War and Victory Medals. There were, apparently, some 6.5 million of these medals issued, sufficiently ubiquitous that, together with the earlier star, they were known as 'Pip, Squeak and Wilfred', after cartoon characters in the *Daily Mirror*. But the letter about Uncle Charlie's medals was treasured enough to be folded and tucked into the cigar box. Whoever gathered together these official documents had also included the residue of the state's intrusion into Florina's life: her 1917 sugar ration card, a copy of the certificate of Uncle Charlie's birth in 1891 in Shipley and that of her own death in 1924.

And that was almost all I knew about Uncle Charlie. A little research reveals that his was a very ordinary family: Florina's death certificate describes her as the widow of a 'Wholesale Grocers' Traveller'. Family legend had it that Charlie had faked his age when he signed up and that he was cut down by machine-gun fire as he waded ashore on his eighteenth birthday. The briefest glance at the papers in the box would have shown us that part of this was plainly untrue – that his twenty-fourth birthday had occurred almost six months before he was killed. But this imagined version of his death seems somehow to express a greater truth than the mere facts. How many other families in Britain have some similar ancestral story?

These stories fade by the year. My mother made the pilgrimage to seek out Uncle Charlie's name among the thousands etched into the wall of the Helles Memorial. Someone helped her find it, and it turned out to be so high above her head that when she posed for a photograph she could only point it out with the aid of a branch cut from a nearby tree. Then she plucked a few heads of lavender from a bush, recalled some words she had read of Mustafa Kemal

Atatürk – the father of modern Turkey and a veteran of the Gallipoli fighting – that all who had died there were now sons of Turkey, picked three small pebbles from the ground, put them in her handbag and climbed back on to the bus.

I doubt I shall ever go to see his memorial or that my children will. In the one hundred years since it began, the First World War has slipped from fact to family recollection to the dusty shelves of history, too incomprehensible in its scale, too complicated in its particulars, to be properly present in our minds. It is no longer our fathers' or even our grandfathers' war but something that happened to someone who might or might not have had our name, who possessed perhaps a recognizable nose or mouth, but who has nothing really to do with us. The very last military survivors of 'the war to end war' died in the early years of the twenty-first century, at which point bloody experience gave way finally to print and theory, and the whole thing is now as far distant from us as the battle of Waterloo was from Uncle Charlie when he died at Gallipoli in 1915.

In France, the killing fields of the Somme, where over a million men shed blood, have long since returned to chalky grassland on which local farmers grow wheat and barley, peas and sugar beet. Dozens of roadside signs to this or that immaculately maintained cemetery testify that something awful once happened here. There are strange, unnatural depressions in the ground, and if you kick the tilled earth pieces of rusted metal, spent bullets and round grey shrapnel pellets tell of another reality. Still, on a July afternoon, the sky is big, the finches sing in the trees and the chalk-streams babble clear. The war is long gone and, if not forgotten, it at least nestles comfortably among a shared set of hazy assumptions: countless men mown down in the mud, all victims of numbskulls in epaulettes, all slain for no purpose.

Even so, on a bone-chilling November afternoon at Tyne Cot cemetery in Flanders, the war nourishes an emotional tourism, where you might, as I have, come across half-a-dozen middle-aged British visitors, all wearing poppies; twenty teenage German girls in hired Australian army uniform (including puttees), which they have matched with pink or purple bobble hats; and nine or ten

parties of Belgian primary schoolchildren. Some of these children are whooping and shouting as they scramble up the steps of the vast memorial cross, behaviour which would have scandalized the men who designed the cemeteries, but which is now encouraged by their teachers. A sullen Dutch teenage boy in another school party spits on a grave. There are poppies laid at individual plots and wreaths at the memorials, most of them bearing the name of a British school and adorned with a poem written by a student, in all of which the central message is the same: what a futile waste. Even the headstone of one Second Lieutenant Arthur Conway Young reads, 'Sacrificed to the Fallacy that War Can End War', for indeed this 'war to end war' did not do so. So what was it for? As the craters in the tilled ground near by attest to a more murderous life in the fields, the present lies as a palimpsest on the events of a century ago. Familiarity has not bred contempt so much as indifference.

The First World War has settled into our solid, unexamined prejudices, its causes and consequences submerged in sentiment, an episode of history that is more felt than thought about. If it is recalled at all, it is in black-and-white or sepia tones, grainy, dim and distant in a high-definition world, an impression which seems to confirm our belief that it was the product of (as well as an end to) our long-lost innocence, an express journey from naive enthusiasm to bitter disillusion.

Perhaps Uncle Charlie and his friends really did march off to war singing 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'. Certainly, Julian Grenfell, eldest son of the sporting Lord Desborough and his society hostess wife, actually talked about it being 'like a picnic when you don't know where you're going to'. In November 1914 he wrote that 'It is all *the* best fun. One loves one's fellow man so much more when one is bent on killing him.' Six months later he was dead. In the generations since, we have all come to see the war through the eyes of Wilfred Owen in 1917:

> What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
> Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

When Owen used the phrase 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' ('It is sweet and right to die for one's fatherland') as the ironic title for another of his poems, he could assume his readers would get the bitter reference to Horace, whose original was meant in earnest. Google the Latin phrase now and the first 600 listings thrown up by the algorithm are all drawn from Owen's poem. It is fine verse – probably the best anti-war poem ever written – but was there really nothing more to the conflict that convulsed a continent than the 'old Lie'?

The First World War was as consequential as the Fall of Rome, the French Revolution, the invention of the nuclear bomb or the Al Qaeda attack on the New York World Trade Center. The immediate political repercussions were obvious: if so many young British, French and Russian citizens (to say nothing of Canadians, Australians, Indians, Irish, New Zealanders, Belgians and many others) had not lost their lives, a militaristic Germany would likely have built a European superpower. The thwarting of German ambition, however, created the conditions for the rise of fascism in Europe, as in Russia it set off the revolution that brought in seven decades of totalitarian rule, and thus the Cold War. The war finished the Ottoman empire and transformed Turkey from an Islamic sultanate to a constitutionally secular republic. It consigned the great aristocratic dynasties of the time, the Romanovs, the Habsburgs and the Hohenzollerns, to history.

In strictly numerical terms, the British did not suffer as badly as some other countries. But the war was the mechanism by which Britain became recognizably its modern self. Victorian time-travellers transported from 1880 to the spring of 1914 would have found themselves pretty much at home. If they had travelled on a further four years, they would have been baffled by what they saw.

There were over 700,000 British participants in this change who never lived to see the new society, so if the eight friends in Uncle Charlie's picture suffered at the same rate as the rest of the army,

by 1918 four of them were dead, wounded or missing. There were so many copies of the miserable Army Form B 104-82 to be delivered that postmen resigned their jobs rather than face the sight of yet another family in tears on the doorstep.

The only way we can grasp the sheer scale of this loss is to simplify it, resulting in the received version of these vast and complicated events – the common man ordered to advance into machine-gun fire by upper-class twits sitting in comfortable headquarters miles away – a version that has sustained so many of us for generations. It is such an easy caricature. In 1936, David Lloyd George, who had been Prime Minister during the war, was talking of how 'the distance between the [generals'] chateaux and the dug-outs was as great as that from the fixed stars to the caverns of the earth', as if they *preferred* to be miles away from the action, when the truth was that in an age before radios, with communication by runner, messenger dog or carrier pigeon, the closer a commander was to the action, the fewer men he could control. The attitudes of many of today's grandparents were shaped by the 1960s musical *Oh! What a Lovely War* with the British commander, General Haig, manning a turnstile to charge visitors to watch the carnage, while staff officers played a game of leapfrog. A generation later and the same point of view underpinned the 1989 comedy series *Blackadder Goes Forth*. When General Melchett tells Captain Blackadder that he will be 'right behind him' in the charge over the top, Blackadder mutters, 'Yes, about thirty-five miles behind.' *Blackadder* was comedy – and rather a good one – yet it is now played to school classes by history teachers. It seems to have become much easier to laugh at – or cry about – the First World War than to understand it.

There is something unsatisfactory about all this received wisdom. Can British generals really have been as indifferent to the fate of their men as the image of 'lions led by donkeys' suggests? Siegfried Sassoon expressed it powerfully in his poem 'The General':

'Good morning; good morning!' the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

* * *

But he did for them both with his plan of attack.

The accusation of bluff stupidity and callous unconcern is as powerful now as when the poem was published in 1918. Let Uncle Charlie and his friends stand for all of the victims of military incompetence: the Gallipoli fiasco was distinguished by lamentable intelligence, poor planning, serious misjudgement and, in many cases, appalling leadership at the highest level. But is this adequate as a reading of the entire war? The most dim-witted high command would surely not have consciously planned to throw away soldiers' lives, and so make defeat more likely? Of course they blundered. But in the end the donkeys and the lions won. As for the poisonous legacy of war and the unrealized promises of peace, these surely were not the fault of the generals. Yet we are stuck with the default conviction that the First World War was an exercise in purposelessness.

That was not the prevailing view at the time. Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' was not published until after his death, when the war was well over, and the great harvest of anti-war memoirs and novels did not appear until ten years after the Armistice. It is simply nonsense to suggest there was generalized opposition to the war at the time it was being fought. On the contrary, Lord Kitchener's appeal for volunteers in the early days of the war had been so successful that lines at recruitment offices snaked for blocks down city streets. When he had predicted in August 1914 that the fighting could drag on for several years and would be won by what he called 'the last million men', his gloomy prediction was beyond the imagination of most of the cabinet and

much of the military high command. Yet the unimaginable happened. Throughout it all, the resolve of the British people did not weaken. Charles Edmund Dickson and his cheery pals standing around the newly resurfaced road had joined up to embark upon an adventure. In that, they were naive. Yet, while there were serious mutinies in the German, French and Russian armies, there was nothing on a comparable scale among British soldiers. Why did men continue to fight if the thing was so obviously merely cruel, callous and futile? But continue to fight they did, and their families continued to support them and to suffer the separation, the anxiety, the rationing and the rest of the privations of wartime. They endured to victory. To understand how this was possible we need to get beyond the trite observation that the deaths of Uncle Charlie and his comrades were no more than a tragic waste. What aggravates our ignorance is the false assumption that we *do* understand the First World War. We need to cast ourselves back into the minds of these men and their families, and of their leaders, to try to inhabit the assumptions of their society rather than to replace them with our own.

I began this book after hearing a secondary schoolteacher set a homework essay in which her pupils were to answer the question 'How Does Wilfred Owen Show the Futility of War?' The question displays the easy, shared assumption on which so many of us approach the subject: the conviction not merely that this particular war was pointless but that *all* war is pointless. Yet most of us do not share the same prejudice about the Second World War – even if four times as many people conscientiously objected to it than to military service in the First World War. It seems to have become much easier to understand the 'Great War for Civilization' as poetry rather than history, and as anti-war poetry at that. How, one wonders, would the teacher explain to her students that after writing his celebrated denunciations of battle, Wilfred Owen returned to the Western Front to continue fighting, and, furthermore, described himself in his last letter to his mother as 'serene'? It was, he said, 'a great life'. The greatest of all war poets, Owen

was killed before he ever had to explain it himself. His death confirmed his poetry's status, and that of the First World War, as the Urtext of the conviction that *all* war is futility.

It won't do. The first step towards a true understanding of the First World War is to recognize why so many people at the time believed it to be not only unavoidable but even necessary.