



THIS THING OF MEMORY

THE IMPACT AND COMMEMORATION OF
THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN POETRY

DAVID HYNES

[This Thing of Memory](#) by David Hynes

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Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) November 2014

It was inevitable that there would be a relative abundance of poetry published in this, the centenary of the start of the First World War.

“What on earth was this centenary meant to evoke? Anything? Should it mean anything to us?”

“Well, not if we keep thinking the Great War is too exalted to analyse or too entrenched in pathos and tragedy to begin to question its legacy. So, I began to conduct my own investigations into the Great War, to see what personal relevance this conflict still had over me.

“And, lo and behold, I discovered the Great War was entirely relevant- and not just to me, but to all of us.”

David Hynes

For some reason, WW1 has proved a popular topic with poets (established and new alike).

If you have ever attended an open-mic night you are likely to have heard, at least, one. The majority of them seem to give the impression that the speaker (sometimes, 'the shouter') have actually taken part in the war, giving the impression that they are not really referring to the war, but their own little battles; the theme of WW1 exaggerating their petty downers (no-one feels more sorry for a poet than the poet him/herself).

So I approached David Hynes' collection with trepidation. To give the volume a sense of occasion, GWL released it on Armistice Day - an interesting marketing ploy. But is it any good? Does it speak to us of why this unique conflict should mean anything to us? Does it throw new light on how we consider WW1? Well, not really.

Hynes, in the Introduction and on his [Huff Post Blog](#), makes much about the research he had carried out before he "decided to write some poems". Much of what he says makes it sound as if he had simply read a few primers for GCSE History (he may benefit from reading Frank Furedi's *First World War- Still No End In Sight*, for an understanding of why WW1 still means so much in our contemporary times). He does though cite the BBC archives, *The Daily Telegraph*, Max Hastings and David Stevenson, as his sources. The apogee of any enlightenment in the volume is, perhaps, reached in the poem *India*:

:

**As soon as Britain embroils itself in war, India
In her heathen, polytreacherous ways, will
Strike for independence, mark these words
While we fight half-Christians, she'll become the Hindia.**

**Yet India rallied. Pallied. Tallied over a million,
Half-bankrupted herself in her role as pillion and
Fought in every theatre of war, killing fellow Muslims,
Freezing in Ypres; storming for us throughout the Middle East.**

It feels like a one of those “Why we shouldn’t hate immigrants” lessons. However, one cannot escape the sheer cringe worthiness of it: ‘Pallied’, ‘Tallied’, ‘Pillion’; not only do the words grate, but they are totally inappropriate, in as much as they mean nothing. There are quite a few lines, throughout this collection, that made me wince.

Take the opening verse of *The Ditch*:

**Today I’ve dug a ditch.
Taken the day off work.
My interest hitched,
A suspicion lurked.**

What is immediately striking about *This Thing of Memory* is how very English it is, not any modern day English, but one set in the first half of the twentieth century. The best of the poems have a Betjeman feel to them and the alliteration is not nearly so awkward. For example:

**And the people drink it too
All of Oxford Street as silent as an unbuilt zoo
Its monkeys know something is about
And the worst thing to do would be to idly shout.**

But this is a million miles from the Great Man's work. Betjeman may have used a similar structure for his form, but he sure as hell knew that much more was needed in order to create, even a half-decent poem.

And this is the major drawback with Hynes' work here: his inability to create a decent image. His attempt at creating similes and metaphors falls flat throughout and the reader is left to wonder quite what this is all about (**Bubbling antebellum for/ England's thank-you polites – *The Lull***).

Oddly enough the one poem that comes close to capturing the voice of the triumphalist Tommy, is a ditty titled *We Won And We Celebrated It*:

**The biggest secret which all Europe knows. That the beer would
Be brimming, the haus full of singing no matter what the cost,
The reason for low-key German parties is that they bloody lost.**

Though I feel the Tommy would have given it a better rhythm.

What in the world possessed GWL to publish this volume, is anyone's guess. It is not as if they are a new company just starting out, they have been in business for over a decade. I can only think that they were on the look-out for something that would be relevant to this year's centenary. But I have to wonder if they employ any proof readers, or has the expectation for quality disappeared entirely?