

November 11, 2020 Veterans Day

I suspect our young people and increasingly our older folks have little engagement with Veterans Day or even the idea of a veteran, as so much of life is lived on the surface, Halloween being the autumnal celebration that matters most.

The fantasizing of so much of life has blurred the lines between what is real and what is unreal.

The mobs and mobs of anonymous people that gather for any and all kinds of reasons and no reason at all that has replaced civic life negate any sense of history or continuity rendering what is past as disappeared and a veteran just another just another cartoon character from long ago.. If a veteran is given any real consideration it isn't so much because he/she is an actual veteran of war becoming for us an entertaining, if sentimental, pause at the end of the evening news.

Those surprise returns of mothers and fathers to their child's school or ball game, often with lots of local fanfare and pageantry beg the question of the place and purpose of military service and the role that it might, perhaps, should play in our common life and how a veteran deserves not only appreciation but dignity and care and respect not just when someone buys them lunch at a restaurant as a "thank you for your service" but for the rest of their lives.

I doubt if there has ever been a country that has mothers serving in the active duty military as their fulltime livelihood in order to provide food and shelter and education for their children.

All of the so-called fantasy battles fought by fictional characters in fictional places over fictional issues cannot in any way serve to honor veterans, give meaning to the military, much less educate children with the tools to discern and judge intelligently the place of the military in our national and global communities.

The contemporary knowledge of war is mostly fantasy, the fetishizing of the idea of the military and military like dress, equipment, language, and behavior does nothing to honor the true and real veteran and it lets the general

population off the hook with free coffee at Starbucks or French fries at a fast food restaurant rather than forcing individuals and nations to care for and give more than a few parades with loud motorcycles and firetrucks.

I offer you a few selections of poetry written during and after the First World War that made the point that I try to make, that war is not a fantasy, veterans are not entertainers, and that any nation that maintains a military needs to care for and provide for those who actually serve at the behest of the citizenry from beginning to end and not just with a grave marker or a nice cemetery.

Grandeur of Ghosts

BY Sigfried Sassoon

When I have heard small talk about great men
I climb to bed; light my two candles; then
Consider what was said; and put aside
What Such-a-one remarked and Someone-else replied.

They have spoken lightly of my deathless friends,
(Lamps for my gloom, hands guiding where I stumble,)
Quoting, for shallow conversational ends,
What Shelley shrilled, what Blake once wildly muttered

How can they use such names and be not humble?
I have sat silent; angry at what they uttered.
The dead bequeathed them life; the dead have said
What these can only memorize and mumble.

Disabled

BY Wilfred Owen

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,—

In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join. He wonders why.
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts,
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.
Germans he scarcely thought of, all their guilt,
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.

How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?