

Letter from Scotland #2



Old soldiers, now in their 80s and 90s, are spending this weekend on the beaches of Normandy remembering the D-Day landings 70 years ago. The industrial scale of Operation Overlord – 6,000 ships, 9,000 aircraft, 156,000 men landing on five beaches across 50 miles of French coastline – is hard for us to imagine. So too is the scale of the dying – 4,500 Allied soldiers on the first day of the invasion alone – and the sense of national desperation that hung on the outcome. But what, I wonder, are these old soldiers making of the civilisation they helped to save ?

Yesterday, we were given one man's answer. Harry Smith (91) from Yorkshire has published his own searing indictment of modern Britain. In 200 lyrical pages this veteran of the Great Depression and the Second World War laments what he sees as the folly of imperial wars abroad, the passing of the welfare state at home, the continuing class divide and “the appeasement of the monsters who rule the corporate world.”

He rails against the loss of our great industries, the fallen state of the NHS, the bale-out of the banks, the cost of mortgages, even the new-fangled fracking for gas. This retired carpet salesman is so unashamedly left-wing he could be an old-time Red Clydesider. He began his working life in 1930 at the age of 7 in Barnsley, as an after-school barrow-boy and the only breadwinner in the family. He served in the RAF during the war and began writing for the camp newspaper. He's since gone on to write for The Guardian and now has a series of books to his name. But this is “Harry's Last Stand” and he writes:

“I have lived through nearly a hundred years of history, I have felt the sting of poverty, as well as the sweetness of

security and success and I don't want to see everything we've worked for fall apart. As one of the last remaining survivors of the Great Depression and the Second World War I will not go gently into that good night. I want to tell you what the world looks like through my eyes, so that you can help to change it."

Later this month we'll be commemorating other battles. Armed Forces Day takes place on 28th June in Stirling, the same day, controversially, as the 700th anniversary of Bannockburn. The two events, just a couple of miles apart, will be jousting with each other for visitors and for political attention. We are in for a summer of "historic" moments, culminating in the referendum in September.

This week the referendum-ing has involved President Obama and The Queen. The president, speaking in Brussels, made no attempt to hide his preference for Scotland to remain in the United Kingdom. The Queen had her words written for her by David Cameron. " My government," she told MPs at Westminster, " will continue to implement new financial powers for The Scottish Parliament and continue to make the case for Scotland remaining part of the United Kingdom."

There's also been the usual weekly exchange of reports on oil revenues and welfare costs in an independent Scotland. Labour launched its own "no to independence" campaign. It drew Gordon Brown out of hiding to call for a joint plan for further devolution from the three main unionist parties, now that the Conservatives have finally decided to abandon their "line in the sand" on the issue.

Edinburgh folk have been enjoying their new tram system. Over 21,000 people used it on the first day, mostly for joy rides it has to be said. But passenger numbers have been holding up well since, boosted by the One Direction concert at Murrayfield on Tuesday. But by Thursday, the first minister was announcing a judicial inquiry into what went wrong with

the project which – as we all know – managed to come in three years late, for twice the original cost and half the original length.

The trams have also had their first incident. A 14 year old girl was knocked down on Princes Street on Wednesday but fortunately she was not hurt. It's been said that she didn't hear the tram coming because she was wearing headphones.

A much more serious accident took place in the Borders last weekend which has shaken the car-rallying world. A competitor in the James Clark Rally left the road at Swinton and ploughed into a group of spectators. Three were killed and another two seriously injured. It came after an earlier crash in the same race in which four people were injured. An official inquiry has been launched and lots of questions are being asked about the actions of race stewards and organisers.

But to end on a happier note – Lulu is back ! The Glasgow-born singer is to top the bill at a concert to mark the opening of the Commonwealth Games on 23rd July. It will take place on Glasgow Green and will include a long list of other home-grown stars, including Eddi Reader and Rab Noakes. Meanwhile over at the refurbished bandstand in Kelvingrove Park, the Glasgow band Belle and Sebastian will be entertaining still other crowds. The opening ceremony itself, without its planned live demolition job, will have to be pretty spectacular not to be overwhelmed by these sideshows. I wonder if the old soldiers will be impressed with any of this.