

Letter from Scotland



In Flanders Field the poppies blow

I have in my hand a half-penny minted in 1914. It's worn and faded, almost black with age, but you can still see King George V's head on it and that awful date. I'll be taking it to show my scout troop tonight as we discuss the Great War. It's so hard to imagine what those times were like and what the war was really about.

Was it a war of defence against the threat of invasion by the Kaiser's evil empire? Was it a fight between democracy and aristocracy – as many Americans believed? Or was it a kind of tribal bloodletting which mankind is fated to endure as part of the rhythm of history, like universes go through big bangs?

Whatever it was, it completely recast our world. Maps were redrawn, aristocracy was blown away, women were liberated, governments took a hand in our daily lives. The changes were massive, because the shock itself was so great. Nine million soldiers were killed and seven million civilians, on all sides. In Britain, one in seven young men died. Scotland suffered especially badly, losing 147,000 soldiers.

I know I'll be shaking when we lay the wreaths on the war memorial outside my local church on Remembrance Sunday, particularly on this 100th anniversary. I'll be looking down on the yellow leaves fallen on the green grass and wondering if we can ever forgive ourselves for that war, and for all the wars since. Iraq and Afghanistan may be over but we are now engaged in another struggle, this time against the Islamic State. We do so little to prevent wars happening in the first place and then we are surprised when we get drawn in, usually with the best intentions.

To speak of other things this week seems disrespectful. And yet the task of building a better world must go on. Lord Smith and the party representatives are in the process of rebuilding Scotland after the minor earthquake of the referendum. This week they've been sifting through the 380 submissions made to them on what the new devolution settlement should contain.

Meanwhile a new umbrella group has joined the debate, the Scottish Campaign for Home Rule, led by Labour's Henry McLeish and the SNP's Andrew Wilson. It hopes to draw "civic Scotland" into the discussion and seek a consensus on the new powers that should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. "Civic Scotland" this week includes a new recruit, Alistair Darling who announced he was retiring as an MP while he was still "relatively young" (60) and after a career as a "safe pair of hands" in a string of ministerial roles in Labour governments, ending as Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the Better Together campaign.

Mr Darling is backing Jim Murphy in the race to succeed Johann Lamont as leader of the Scottish Labour Party. From early soundings it looks like Mr Murphy has won the support of most MPs and MSPs. But they only have a third of the electoral college vote. The unions seem to be falling in behind Neil Findlay and the membership section may prefer the centrist candidate Sarah Boyack. All will be revealed on 13th December.

A party leader's lot is not always a happy one, of course, as Alex Salmond found out this week. He was recreated, ridiculed and roasted on a bonfire in East Sussex. A large effigy of Mr Salmond – along with the Loch Ness Monster – was part of the bonfire night parade in the village of Lewes. The organisers, the Waterloo Bonfire Society, explained they have a tradition of "creating satirical tableaux based on topical events." Mr Salmond said it was completely unfair to involve Loch Ness Monster but if the people of East Sussex want to liken him (Mr Salmond) to Guy Fawkes in trying to blow up Westminster, then so be it.

Finally, another interesting society made the news this week, the Speculative Society at Edinburgh University. This secret, men-only society has been going since 1764 and is one of the oldest debating clubs in the world. However it seems it's going to have to change its ways since the university is insisting it joins the 21st century and admits women as members.

I dare say Robert Louis Stevenson, one of its more famous old boys, would be surprised to learn it hadn't moved with the times. This year's RSL Day, marking the author's birthday on 13th November, will be celebrating his travel writing and it so happens that I am currently reading his first book, "An Inland Voyage", written when Stevenson was 26. It's a charming and philosophical account of a canoe trip – with a friend from the Speculative Society Walter Simpson – along the rivers and canals of Belgium and France in 1876.

Again this was a different world from ours, before the Great War trampled on those quiet rivers and canals. Before everything changed so much and so tragically. And before we understood how important keeping the peace must be.