

Letter from Scotland

My great uncle died in the First World War, along with 140,000 other Scottish soldiers. He was just 23 years old, a major in a gunnery unit. He was killed at the second battle of the Somme, on 25 May 1918, just months from the end of “the war to end all wars.”



“And here we lie, between the crosses, row on row.”

I wrote his name, Edwin Fry, on one of the tiny wooden crosses laid out in neat rows in Princes Street gardens by the war

veterans' charity Poppy Scotland. His young spirit lies there, with 8,000 others, as part of the Remembrance ceremonies being held this weekend across Scotland and across the world.

I felt so guilty, as I looked at those crosses. Guilty, because we have broken faith with those who died on Flanders Fields. We have allowed the tragedy of war to break out again and again. There are 20 conflicts going on today, killing thousands every year and creating hundreds of thousands of refugees.

The solutions are so obvious but we just don't adopt them. Strengthen the United Nations by ending the veto. Stay in the European Union. It has kept the peace in Europe for 60 years. Arrest despots and bring them to court. Settle the Israel/Palestine dispute. Build commercial and scientific links between East and West. Get rid of nuclear and chemical weapons. Expand the international aid programme. Concentrate international efforts on common threats such as climate change and disease. Encourage more sporting and cultural links.

On too many of the above, we are heading the wrong direction, led by Trump's America, Putin's Russia and Xi's China. And if we are not very careful, we will drift into another world war, as we did in the years running up to 1914.

Part of this weekend's commemorations will no doubt include an element of "when will we ever learn." But the national service in Glasgow Cathedral, and at church services and war memorials through the country, we are at risk of being so overwhelmed with the sadness of it all that we forget the call to action the bugles also proclaim.

Over the last four years of commemorations, we've seen all the dreadful battles of the Great War remembered at each anniversary – the Somme, Mons, Ypres, Loos, Verdun, Arras, Jutland, Amiens, Passchendaele, Marne. We've also seen events marking the sinking of the Otranto, the Tuscania and the

Iolaire, the rail crash at Quintinshill. We've learned about the role of women in the First World War, those who kept the factories working and the home fires burning, and those who like Dr Elsie Inglis served in field hospitals abroad.



Elsie Inglis grave in Dean Cemetery Edinburgh

But I haven't seen much analysis of how the Great War started and what might have been done to prevent it. Was it all down to the failure of the politicians of the day? Or was there something in the nationalistic mood of the times which made the drift into war inevitable. And if so, is there such a mood today?

People say it could never happen in these days of open democracy, distrust of the ruling classes, unrestricted media press coverage, the advent of social media and the sheer materialism of our times. But I'm not so sure.

There's a madness in the air almost everywhere you look – North Korea, the Middle East, Russia, America, Brazil, eastern

Europe, and in Brexit Britain. The Scottish Parliament this week did its bit to try to calm things down. MSPs voted in favour of a “peoples vote” on the terms of our exit from the European Union.

But I for one, on this Remembrance Sunday, will stand in front of the war memorial outside my church and feel a great deal of shame and fear.