



CWGC
Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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MEDIA RELEASE

Commonwealth War Graves Commission publishes new Sir Andrew Motion poem on National Poetry Day to mark 100 years since the Armistice

- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) is marking National Poetry Day by publishing former UK poet laureate Sir Andrew Motion's latest poem *Armistice*.
- The work was commissioned by CWGC and inspired by the personal inscriptions on the Commission's First World War headstones, which capture families' final words for their lost ones.
- It forms part of the Commission's 'Shaping Our Sorrow' campaign, looking at how arts, culture and literature played a part in helping survivors and relatives come to terms with the losses in the First World War.
- The Commission also cares for the final resting places of many poets who died in the Great War, and whose words continue to resonate today, 100 years on.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) is marking National Poetry Day by publishing a specially-commissioned poem by Sir Andrew Motion, former UK poet laureate, as part of its work to mark the centenary of the Armistice. Entitled *Armistice*, the piece saw Sir Andrew draw on some of the moving personal inscriptions from the First World War which adorn nearly a quarter of a million Commission headstones around the world.

One in particular inspired the poem's ending – that of Private Roy Douglas Harvey – and hints at the lasting power of the words chosen to commemorate their loved ones.

As the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918, the families of war casualties were faced with the practical realities of how to pay tribute to those who died. The Commission's work to ensure proper burial or commemoration for the one million Commonwealth men and women who were killed posed a global challenge and involved giving next of kin the opportunity to add a personal inscription to the headstones.



Many chose text from the scriptures, while literature and poetry also featured heavily. For some, the task of finding the words themselves, limited to 66 stone-engraved characters, was too much, and the works of Shakespeare, Lord Tennyson and Robert Binyon feature prominently in place of their own sentiments.

Popular examples included:

- Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn – Robert Binyon
- To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die – Thomas Campbell
- After life's fitful fever he sleeps well – Shakespeare

One hundred years later, CWGC is now looking back at those personal inscriptions and the almost impossible task of trying to summarise the lives and hopes of those who died in the space of a few lines. The Commission has a rich heritage of working with leading artists and designers and appointed Rudyard Kipling, who had lost his own son in the war, as its first literary advisor. He had an important influence on the language used to adorn CWGC sites and the words carefully selected by him continue to resonate with people today.

Sir Andrew said: "Commissioned poems such as this are a mixture of planning and accident. In my preparation for the poem, I read various articles by contemporary philosophers and others about the nature of time, and also several books about the creation and maintenance of the War Cemeteries on Northern France. When I began writing it, all kinds of other ideas began to emerge, mostly arising from the feelings I share with everyone else about the gigantic scale of suffering endured during the First World War."

Victoria Wallace, Director General of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, said: "From its inception, the Commission tried to use the very best of contemporary art, design and literature to honour the fallen. We are hugely grateful to Sir Andrew Motion for helping us to continue this tradition as we mark the centenary of the Armistice. His words bring a new perspective on the deeply personal inscriptions families chose. It seems almost impossible to articulate such loss and love in 66 characters – less than a tweet – to commemorate someone in perpetuity.

"Sir Andrew's poem shows us how these words written in stone a century ago can come back to life and inspire new creativity to this day, helping to preserve the stories of those who gave their lives during the First World War."



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The full poem can be viewed on the CWGC website where audio and video of Sir Andrew reading the work are also available.

Private Roy Douglas Harvey, of Glasgow, left Hillhead High School in 1915 and was initially barred from enlisting due to his physique. He was later accepted into the war effort when minimum height and build standards were lowered.

He survived the fierce fighting at the Battle of Cambrai with the 5th/6th Royal Scots and was a part of the long-awaited British advance that began at the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918. He was killed three days later and found with a copy of his diary, current up to the previous day, and his Gem Collins' Dictionary. His school described him as "a reserved, thoughtful boy, who at all times set before himself and acted up to a high ideal of conduct". His headstone in Bouchoir New British Cemetery, France, bears the words '*My task accomplished and the long day done*' and served as inspiration for the finale of Sir Andrew's poem.

Visiting one of the Commission's 23,000 sites around the world gives an opportunity to explore how personal inscriptions reflect not just those who fell, but also those who they left behind. Anyone with an interest can also search the CWGC website where all 220,000 personal inscriptions from the First World War are listed against the war dead.

For more information, video, images and spokespeople please contact:

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Ends.

Notes for editors:

For bodies found on the battlefield that could not be identified, Rudyard Kipling chose the phrase '*Known unto God*' which can be seen on unidentified graves. Another common phrase seen on headstones is '*Their glory shall not be blotted out*', also chosen by Kipling, which was used on headstones of those who had a known burial place which was later destroyed as the conflict drew on.

Notable First World War poets commemorated by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission include:



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Wilfred Owen – died 4 November 1918, while fighting with the Manchester Regiment near the French village of Ors. Buried at Ors Communal Cemetery. Headstone inscription: *“Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth all death will he annul’ W.O.”*

Rupert Brooke – died 23 April 1915 of blood poisoning. Buried on the Greek island of Skyros in a lone grave. Headstone inscription: *“TRUTH DUTY VALOUR Blow out bugles over the rich dead there none of these so lonely and poor of old but dying has made us rarer gifts than gold.”*

Leslie Coulson – died 8 August 1916, during the Battle of the Somme. Buried at Grove Town Cemetery, Meaulte, France. Headstone inscription: *“Nothing but well and fair and what may quiet us in a death so noble.”*

Ellis Humphrey Evans (known as Hedd Wyn) – died 31 July 1917, during the 3rd Battle of Ypres. Buried at Artillery Wood Cemetery, Belgium. Headstone inscription: *“Y Prifardd, Hedd Wyn” (In English – The Chief Bard, Hedd Wyn).*

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) commemorates the 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women who died during the two World Wars. It also holds and updates an extensive and accessible records archive.

The Commission operates in more than 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries.

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