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The Dove Has Claws

Thirty-three Novembers have gone since Britain won the war to end all wars. On the eleventh day of this month we remember those who died in the Kaiser conflict and in the Hitler holocaust. Do we learn by their sacrifice?

by

H. E. BATES

IT strikes me as being a small but significant irony that the dove, a bird almost universally recognized—but not quite—as the emblem of peace, innocence and conjugal fidelity, is really none other than the common wood pigeon, a predatory, wild and powerful creature, greedy and cunning, arrogant and shy, beautiful, and difficult to catch.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that peace, for which the bird is so ancient and inappropriate a symbol, is also elusive. Those of us who now approach our middle forties have spent roughly a quarter of our lives in or under the shadow of war.

The fifties and sixties, a little more fortunate, have spent a pained and bewildered sixth of their time listening to the sound of arms and the reassuring patter of theorists proclaiming that the Maxim gun, then the

WAR is a very real thing to H. E. Bates.

In 1939 he was a quiet countryman, living at Little Chart, in Kent, writing what it pleased him to write, and gradually achieving fame and no small fortune. Then conflict plunged him into the R.A.F. and he was sent to live on bomber stations. They told him: "Write short stories about what you see." Under the name of "Flying Officer X," Bates produced a series of tales about the air crews of the R.A.F. He told not of daring deeds but of how the men endured and thought. Then came Burma and from that journey the fantastically successful novel, "The Purple Plain." The peace of his village, his family life, his neighbours, mean more to Bates than the glory of victories.

200-lb. bomb and, finally, the atom bomb would each succeed in the miracle of outlawing war.

Our children have not been quite so fortunate. They played at air-raid shelters before they could dig with buckets and spades; their nurseries were full of guns instead of butter. About half their lives have been spent in listening—or perhaps not listening, and who would blame them?—to solemn proclamations by their elders that they loved peace, hated war, and would go to any lengths, always including war, to gain one or reject the other. "We want only to be at peace with the rest of the world," might well be written over the tomb of our time.

Now, as the time comes round again to stand or kneel by the Cenotaph that honours so simply the imperishability of some millions of our dead, it occurs to me that it might not be irreverent, but perhaps salutary, to suggest that the British



"The monolith in Whitehall is for some people a stark background to their daily life"

"The Time Comes Round Again To Stand By The Cenotaph That Honours S

are not, after all, a peace-loving people: that we have been preaching, far, far too long, the wrong sermon to the world and have been, in consequence, paying the bitterest of prices for this twisted misconception of ourselves.

I would like to suggest, with humility, that we are, by nature and geographical accident and inheritance, a highly belligerent people: not that we necessarily like war but that we are greatly skilled and experienced and attuned to it by tradition and sheer necessity; and that perhaps we ought to give up, for a time, the rather dubious symbol of the dove carrying an olive branch in its mouth and substitute, as a more accurate reflection of what we are, have been and probably always will be, the famous words "Come the four corners of the world in arms and we shall shock them."

Before this suggestion shocks you, the reader

who every November 11, at this time of remembrance, mourns a father buried in the mud of Marne or a son lying under the sand of Libya or a husband far away under the heat of the Burma plain, have a brief glance back over the pages of British history. It would be tedious and in the space of this article impossible to go back in detail over a thousand years of these islands' excursions into war. It is enough to say that during a great deal of that time we have been engaged in war, preparing for war, or recovering from war.

We have fought, in Europe, every major Power and most minor Powers with the exception of Portugal. The long, bitter wars with France, the fiery Elizabethan epic against Spain, the struggle with the Dutch, the Marlburian feats of Ramillies and Blenheim, the little business of the Crimea, the two ghastly wars of

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annihilation against Germany and Austria that finally involved Italy as our enemy for the first time—ruthlessly, through the centuries, through various reigns of defensive or aggressive patriotism from Henry V to Elizabeth and Anne down to Victoria and the Georges of our day, Britain, or perhaps more truly England, has been waging a continual war.

Almost always it is the same war, fought for practically the same reason, namely the prevention of the dominance by a single Power over the European mainland, and brought always to a successful conclusion, even if at terrible and increasingly bitter cost, as far as we are concerned.

As if this were not enough, we have found time for a number of belligerent excursions elsewhere. We have fought the French in Canada and India, colonists in America and Africa, tribal insurgents in India and Africa, rebels in China and Burma,

saboteurs in various mandatory territories and, if you dare introduce so delicate a subject, our fellow belligerents across the Irish Sea. These campaigns were not always successful for us: but it is not beside the point to note that on the most notable occasion of our defeat it was by people of our own stock.

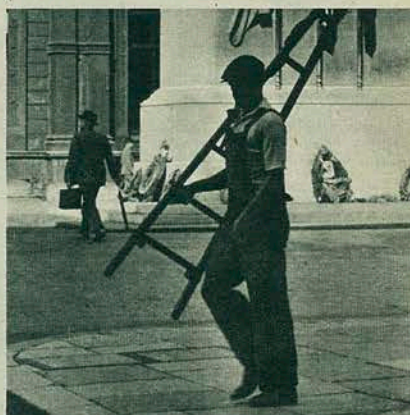
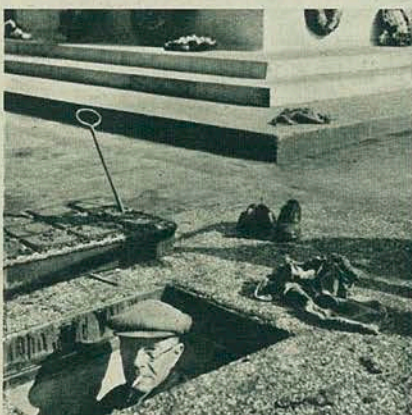
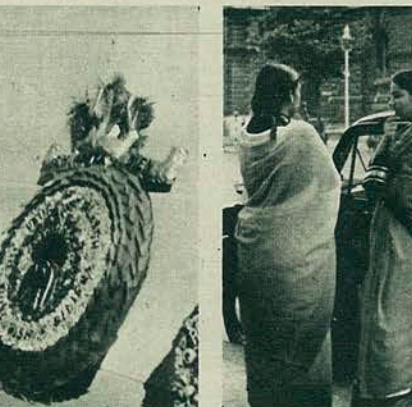
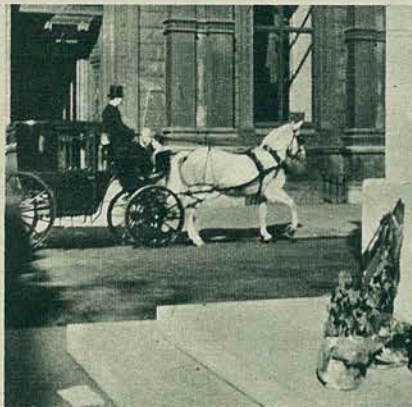
It is also to be noted, I think, that whether we were defeated by colonists, as in North America, or whether we defeated them, as in South Africa, sooner or later they came back to join us in the business of preventing the emergence of a single dominant Power on the European mainland. In this way, we fought, either alone or as the foremost Power concerned, more wars than anyone in history.

So it is not really surprising that the art, or perhaps more accurately the instinct, of war is very deeply inbred in us. Painful though it

OVER



The Dove Has Claws—continued



"Men And Women Who Appear, On The Surface, To Have Less Belligerence Than Fieldmice"

may be to suggest such a thing on the eve of a time for remembrance, history shows, I think, that we are a warlike people. Accumulative experience of war has permeated even the most unlikely of us—so that whenever war comes to Britain the response to it is not necessarily seen at its most remarkable in those with soldierly mentalities or occupations.

Out of the offices, the factories, the schools, the universities, the laboratories, the mills, the farms and the shops come streams of men and women who appear, on the surface, to have less belligerence in their natures than fieldmice. They grope out from the fog of their drab lawful occupations into the blinding light of war; they put behind them thoughts of the eight twenty-seven to the office and take up a gun, a ship or a Spitfire; they grow cunning, they invent things, they grow reckless and even brave; they present the magnificent paradox of the worm turning out, after all, to be a snake with fangs.

And in the end, justified by centuries of experience undergone by their fathers in similar

situations, immensely aided by a native genius for the creation of weapons and a belief that patience is after all a weapon, too, they triumph.

Having triumphed, they then present another paradox. They are terribly and deeply sorry. They are filled with magnanimity. They begin to feel an uneasy and ungentelemanly embarrassment—they have knocked the other fellow down and, good heavens, perhaps it was, after all, a bit much. They get the fellow to his feet and dust him down and now, damn it, it turns out that the fellow is broke, too. In this situation of growing remorse and a feeling of caddishness, they lend the fellow something with which to buy himself, as it were, a postwar cup of coffee.

They even begin to explain to him that, after all, they didn't really mean it. They desire to shake and be friends. It was done, they say, in the heat of the moment—but now, at last, the quarrel is over for ever. This has been, they declare, the war to end war.

It is now time to let the dove of peace out of its cage. It duly appears and feeds, with its

customary greed, from the hands of people who now begin to proclaim us as a peace-loving nation, desiring never to go to war. The fire-eaters from the eight twenty-seven, the umbrella-carriers descended directly from those English bowmen who could pierce a three-inch oak door are forgotten.

Quiet scientists like Barnes Wallis, who with implacable cunning invent bombs capable of blowing 100-foot holes in Ruhr dams formerly thought to be impregnable, go back to the laboratory and the drawing-board. It is time to call thoughtful citizens warmongers and popular to wave warning fingers about old battleaxes whose monstrous policies will land us into yet another war that, as always, will end civilization.

War, I think, will never end civilization; but civilization can do something, I think, to end war. And it is my feeling, based on the incontestable notion that the British are highly skilled and superbly gifted and vastly experienced and incorrigibly determined in the art of war if only for the simple reason that they have been

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at it so long, that we can do more than any other people on earth in that direction.

Nothing could be more plain, between the time of crossbow and Spitfire, muzzle-loader and Sten gun, through all the history of gentle-faced fighters like Wolfe and Nelson and prayer-book generals like Cromwell and Montgomery, that war, not peace, is our second religion. And the sooner we remind the world of this simple fact, and the sooner the world grasps it, the better.

For it seems to me that it would be the grossest betrayal of those whose symbolic grave is this monolith in Whitehall if we were again to repeat, as we have done twice in this century, the abysmal tragedy of being trapped into war simply through allowing our potential enemies to believe that we were men with only doves in our hands. The real tragedians of our time are not Hitler and Mussolini; the two dictators were simply the fools who did not read English history—where they could have at least discovered that our traditional invasion-point for Europe has so often been "the mouth of Caen."

The tragedians are those among us who speak with high-toned fervour of outlawing war without offering any other means of outlawing it other than the words they utter. Words, merely of themselves, will never outlaw war; and words, I suggest, may well have spilt more blood this century than swords. No Biblical catchphrase has in fact been more disproved in this century than "the soft answer turneth away wrath." It is not in fact war-

mongers that bring us this week to the Cenotaph; it is the bitter fruit of the soft answers.

The men who lie behind the Cenotaph did not expect and did not give soft answers; they simply paid for the old paradox that it is possible for men of courage to win a battle and men of stupidity to lose it again. A great contemporary historian has said: "History, from the time of the Roman Senate until the Parliament of our own day, is full of examples of this apparent paradox. Assemblies of men of valiant blood can be made wise by the dangers of war, but the power that assured victory brings, or seems to bring, may deprive them of judgment."

Part of that lack of judgment arises, as I see it, from a tragic readiness to proclaim that we have only doves in our hands, to forget to remind our enemies, potential or otherwise, that our aptitude for belligerence is the most fearsome and remarkable in the world.

If, at this thirty-first year at the Cenotaph, we could succeed in doing that, we might, as a young man of battle has said, "have justified, at least in some measure, any right to fellowship with the dead, and to the friendship of those with courage and steadfastness who are still living and who could go on fighting until the ideals for which their comrades had died were stamped for ever on the future of civilization."

Mark the words "go on fighting." They were written by one of those gentle, deceptive Englishmen with a sword in the other hand: a young man old in humility and fire, one of the undefeated we now remember.



"At the going down of the sun . . . we will remember them"

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