

# Twelve River RIPPLES



## Favourite Poem

Here's a famous poem that really needs no introduction.

### **Dulce et Decorum Est**

By Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

## Favourite Poem cont.

This visceral and disturbing poem, written over a hundred years ago, lays bare the waste and horror of war. Soldiers, young men who would have been strong and athletic, are trudging like beggars under sacks – their dignity stripped away from them, their attention diverted, so much so that the gas shells that drop *softly behind* are momentarily ignored. Owen, who was an officer, probably sounds the warning – *Quick boys* – reminding us that many of the conscripts were barely men. This is followed by an *ecstasy of fumbling* as the men struggle into the safety of their masks.

One soldier does not manage to put his gas mask on in time and suffers the ravages of the gas attack on his body. He is flung into a cart, his face contorted like *a devil's sick of sin*.

Owen ends the poem with *Dulce et Decorum est, pro patria mori*, quoting Horace, a Roman poet, who states "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

The poem describes the horrors of war. There is no gallantry, no honour, and the men are subjected to appalling suffering. We can almost hear the noise their feet make while they trudge through the sludge, swearing and blaspheming as we all would if we had to experience this.

I remember, years ago, when I visited Ypres in France, reading the names of the soldiers that lost their lives carved into, and covering, an enormous tower at the centre of the vast military graveyard. Some had been identified, some were missing in action, others whose bodies are still mangled in a field somewhere – and as I read the names, this poem ran through my mind. I felt an incredible sadness, seeing all the lines of gravestones standing to attention.

Re-reading this poem, it seems that not much has changed in the world. The horrifying technology is new, but the brutality and jingoistic aggression still remains. Maybe one day we will understand that war is 'the old lie' and live in peace together.

*Simon Black*