



Dead Poets Speak

Anzac Day 2016 message from
Rt Rev Andrew Norton, Moderator of the
Presbyterian Church Aotearoa New Zealand.

Listen carefully to the Anzac Day rhetoric this year.

Listen to those who speak of war and of peace and to the nationalist jingoism; some of what is said makes sense, much does not.

Sooner or later they will dig deep for a poem to speak of words that cannot be spoken, to utter a truth only a poet possesses.

A poem is not an argument or war to be won. A poem lives in the trenches of the ordinary and extraordinary, fear and faith, life and death.

For a moment, I wonder what they would say, if the dead poets were to rise again and speak at our Anzac Day parades?

For this we died?
If not for love what have we done?
You know not the dust or the blood stained earth
and mourned not the death of another mother's son.
Your blind eyes see not their tears flow.

Freedom from what?
To be consumed by consumption
and to hell with the rest
as you admire your flat white silver fern.
Oh how we silence the hushed up wrongs.

Have you news of my boy Jack
washed upon the Turkish shore?
By wind and tide tens of thousands flee
and to you, if you will keep faith with we who died
we throw the torch; be yours so hold it high?

Let the dead poets voices be heard,
if not I fear their death was in vain.

- Andrew Norton (2016)

My poem was inspired by and draws from works by noted wartime poets Rudyard Kipling, Charles Sorley, Wilfred Owen and James McRae. As you think about Anzac Day this year, I invite you to reflect on their poems that expose their feelings about and experiences of war. Let the dead poets' voices be heard.



WHEN YOU SEE MILLIONS OF THE MOUTHLESS DEAD
by Charles Sorley

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before."
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.

MY BOY JACK
by Rudyard Kipling

"Have you news of my boy Jack?"
Not this tide.
"When d'you think that he'll come back?"
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.
"Has any one else had word of him?"
Not this tide.
For what is sunk will hardly swim,
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.
"Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?"
None this tide,
Nor any tide,
Except he did not shame his kind –
Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.
Then hold your head up all the more,
This tide,
And every tide;
Because he was the son you bore,
And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!



THE SEND-OFF
by Wilfred Owen

Down the close, darkening lanes they sang their way
To the siding-shed,
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.
Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray
As men's are, dead.
Dull porters watched them, and a casual tramp
Stood staring hard,
Sorry to miss them from the upland camp.
Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp
Winked to the guard.
So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.
They were not ours:
We never heard to which front these were sent.
Nor there if they yet mock what women meant
Who gave them flowers.
Shall they return to beatings of great bells
In wild trainloads?
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,
May creep back, silent, to still village wells
Up half-known roads.

IN FLANDERS FIELDS
by John McRae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.