



# Never Such Innocence: young people's responses to the Great War

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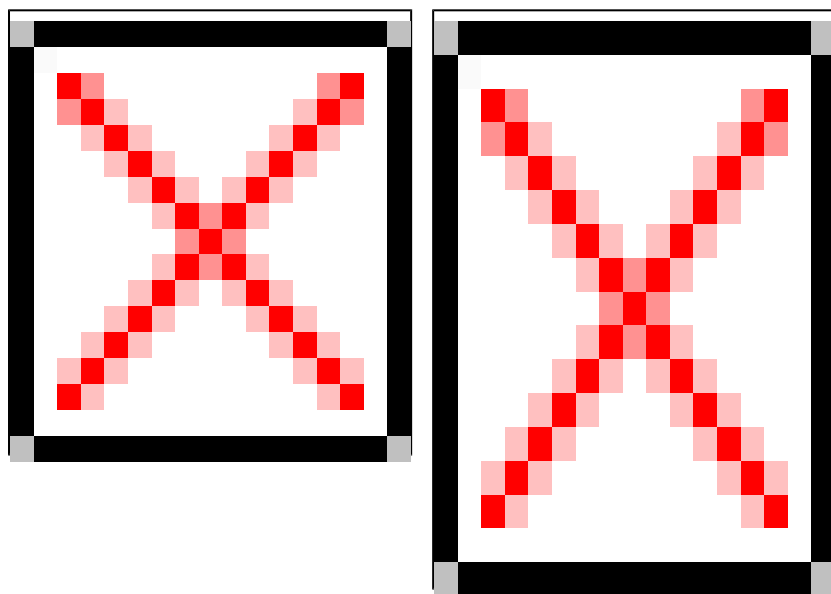
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Review of two books published by the official First World War Centenary charity

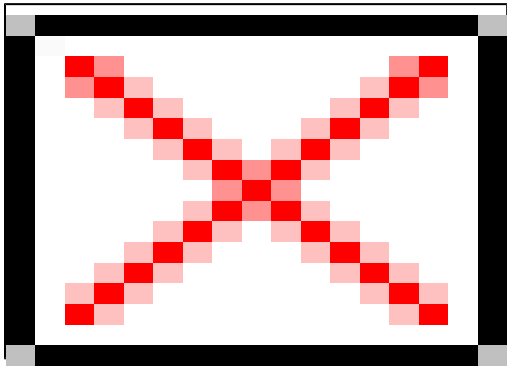
The words are from Philip Larkin's poem, 'MCMXIV'. He evokes a pre-1914 world with its '... dark-clothed children at play / Called after kings and queens, / The tin advertisements / For cocoa and twist, and the pubs / Wide-open all day ...' After such a war, he concludes, there could be 'Never such innocence again'. It's a memorable line, albeit one that may resonate more with adults than young people.



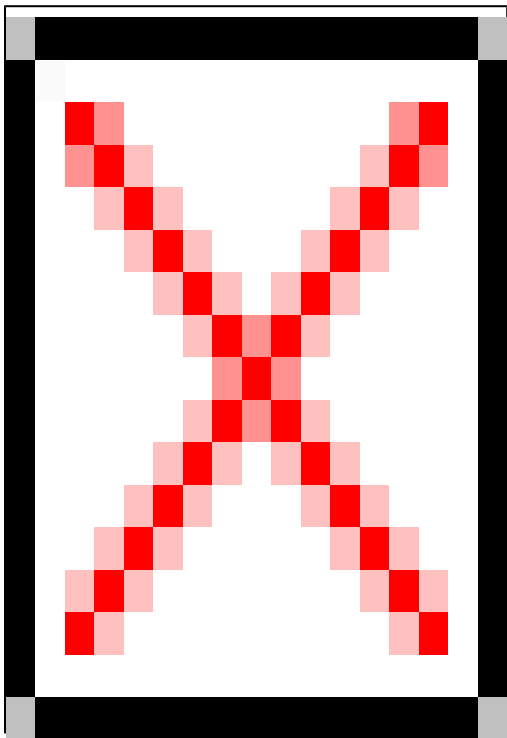
The architects of what they describe as 'the official First World War centenary charity for young people, committed to educating the next generation about the Great War,' adopted Larkin's phrase as their project's title. To mark the Armistice Centenary, the charity has published two substantial books: an anthology of poems, songs and artworks created by young poets and visual artists; and a collection of the resource material the charity made available to schools to support the creation of the kind of work we can see in the anthology. From 2014 to 2018, the charity has organised competitions which have, in total, attracted 11,000 entries from 47 countries; the anthology publishes what judges decided was the best of the work generated by those competitions. Year on year, the charity has increased the variety of the competitions, which have included titles such as 'War in the Skies', running alongside others specifically for Gaelic or Welsh speakers. In 2018, 'Together: a UK-German Centenary Project' asked for contributions offering 'messages of hope and unity for the future'. The anthology's concluding poem is a collaboration between some fifty 11-14 year olds from a German Gymnasium and an Academy in Harrow. A returning soldier in 1918 might well have been surprised if he had been able to see the names of the young people whose futures '100 years on' he'd been told he was fighting for: Khush, Zahed, Sergio, Kashif..... Few echoes here of Larkin's children 'Called after kings and queens'.

There is a Top Brass feel to the charity's parade of Trustees and Committee members, which glitters with titles and the decorations of Senior Military Officers. The original idea for the project belongs to Lady Lucy French, great-grand

daughter of Field Marshal Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force. The 6th Duke of Westminster was the charity's first President. A page early in the anthology is given over to an endorsement from Theresa May. Clearly this is a group which knew how to tap into major funding. No doubt, if a door needed opening, it opened - an enviable ability in times when funding for the arts is so difficult. Not surprisingly, the charity seems keen to tell us that performances and exhibitions of winning entries have been well received by 'distinguished audiences' in venues including Embassies and the House of Lords, while 2018's finalists were awarded their prizes shortly before Armistice Day at Buckingham Palace.



The confirmation of the charity's efforts lies in the anthology. The book is a physical pleasure in itself. The impact of the artworks, frequently in startling colour, is often stunning. As a layman in this field, I would have valued some insights from the young artists and their teachers about the process in terms of thought, emotional engagement and technique. On the few occasions this was provided, the impact of the work was enhanced. The poetry surprised me less - the Great War has been so worked over these last four years in and out of schools that it can be difficult for young writers to transcend the familiar - even the insistent 'Lest We Forget' or the sludge and suffering of the trenches - and to find something uniquely their own. One of the best poems in the anthology stemmed from its writer fusing two apparently unconnected elements from the charity's resource pack; another found her own way, transplanting the menacing tree from Patrick Ness's **A Monster Calls** to the battle-field ('I am the Hornbeam tree, I stand alone / Rooted here on this bloodied throne?'). Lucy French's introduction to the anthology mentions touring Roadshows, artists in-residence and 'exciting and memorable' out-of-school visits in search of unique experiences for the students; more detailed information about how source material was shared with young people would



have been fascinating.

The second volume, with its collection of resources, uses double-page spreads throughout to present information in boxes of print against a range of coloured backgrounds, along with photographs, paintings and maps. A random selection of topic headings for these double-pages might suggest the range of content: Major Battles, Commonwealth

War Graves Commission, Nursing, Music in the War, Belgium, Objections to War, Jewish Community, New Zealand, German Stories, Spies ? more than fifty topics in all. Detail is well-chosen - the information about Wartime Work notes that women who spent the war in factories were rewarded by losing their jobs through the 1919 Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act. The book's title promises 'Stories?', but in fact those boxes of print mostly contain compact summaries of information rather than anecdotes or incidents. Paintings are much reduced in size and sometimes unfortunately lack the colourful detail and impact of the young artists' work in the anthology. The designers have tried to enliven their pages through a series of cartoon figures mouthing speech bubbles, who are intended to serve as guides around the text. So we meet 'Sergeant Bert?', 'Munitionette Molly?' and their colleagues, along with two chatty trench-rats called Fifi and Gaston ('We're here to give you an insight into life on the front line?'). So why then, do Fifi and Gaston later inform us about horrific explosions in munition factories in the UK or the limited strike power of U-Boats? And why would Sepoy Joti, who introduces himself as a veteran of Gallipoli, be chosen to tell us that 'Many children, including Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, searched for sphagnum moss during the First World War.....'? As can happen in the attempt to enliven information in print, there's a sense of trying too hard at times. There is also the odd glitch; to misinform us that Wilfred Owen was killed on 4th August 1918, is to miss the poignancy of his death on 4th November, a few days short of the Armistice.

Despite these quibbles, the book has many strengths ? it is after all a resource to be explored when need and interest demand, not a narrative fiction. Those clear headings should make such searches very possible. Especially at the younger end of the project's age range, an inventive teacher might well be needed to liberate or support the responses of young writers or artists. Unless such teachers feel that the War has been revisited often enough these last four years, the book would provide valuable and detailed reference material. Certainly the anthology reflects how powerfully the project has already released the imaginations of so many young artists and writers around the world.

**Never Such Innocence. The Centenary of the First World War. Children's Responses through Poetry, Art and Song** 9781 9995872 1 5 £19.99

**Stories of the First World War** 978 1 9995872 0 8 £14.99

Both published by Never Such Innocence, November 2018

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