



Picnic: July 1917

We lay and ate the sweet hurt-berries
In the bracken of Hurt Wood.
Like a quire of singers singing low
The dark pines stood.

Behind us climbed the Surrey Hills,
Wild, wild in greenery;
At our feet the downs of Sussex broke
To an unseen sea.

And life was bound in a still ring,
Drowsy, and quiet and sweet....
When heavily up the south-east wind
The great guns beat.

We did not wince, we did not weep,
We did not curse or pray;
We drowsily heard, and someone said,
'They sound clear today'.

We did not shake with pity and pain,
Or sicken and blanch white.
We said, 'If the wind's from over there
There'll be rain tonight'.

Once pity we knew, and rage we knew,
And pain we knew, too well,
As we stared and peered dizzily
Through the gates of hell.

But now hell's gates are an old tale;
Remote the anguish seems;
The guns are muffled and far away.
Dreams within dreams.

And far and far are Flanders mud,
And the pain of Picardy;
And the blood that runs there runs beyond
The wide waste sea.

We are shut about by guarding walls;
(We have built them lest we run
Mad from dreaming of naked fear
And of black things done).

We are ringed all round by guarding walls,
So high, they shut the view.
Not all the guns that shatter the world
Can quite break through.

Oh guns of France, oh guns of France,
Be still, you crash in vain....
Heavily up the south wind throb
Dull dreams of pain.....

Be still, be still, south wind, lest your
Blowing should bring the rain.....
We'll lie very quiet on Hurt Hill,
And sleep once again.

Oh we'll lie quite still, not listen nor look,
While the earth's bounds reel and shake,
Lest, battered too long, our walls and we
Should break.....should break.....



Rose Macaulay

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Known to friends as Emilie, she was a novelist and poet. The Daughter of a university scholar and lecturer, she grew up in an intellectually stimulating and liberal-minded home environment. She first attracted attention as a social satirist with a series of novels. She is remembered primarily for her novels satirizing middle-class life.

works include:

"Abbots Verney" 1906,
"The Lee Shore" 1920,
"Potterism" 1920,
"Dangerous Ages" 1921,
"Told by an Idiot" 1923,
"And No Man's Wit" 1940,
"The Towers of Trebizond" 1956

Rose Macaulay was awarded the DBE shortly before her death in 1958.

... close to my ear were the sounds of battle, field guns, heavy guns, the shaking boom, the rattle of musketry, as if we were fighting Germans in the next parish. All came to me in repercussion of sound from the oak door behind me. I stepped a yard to the side and I was in the silence of Surrey; a step to the right, and I was in France.⁵

For Rose Macaulay, in her beautiful poem 'Picnic: July 1917', the sound of 'the great guns' had become a familiar backdrop to summer rambles in Hurt Wood: '... we drowsily heard and someone said, "They sound clear today."' ⁶

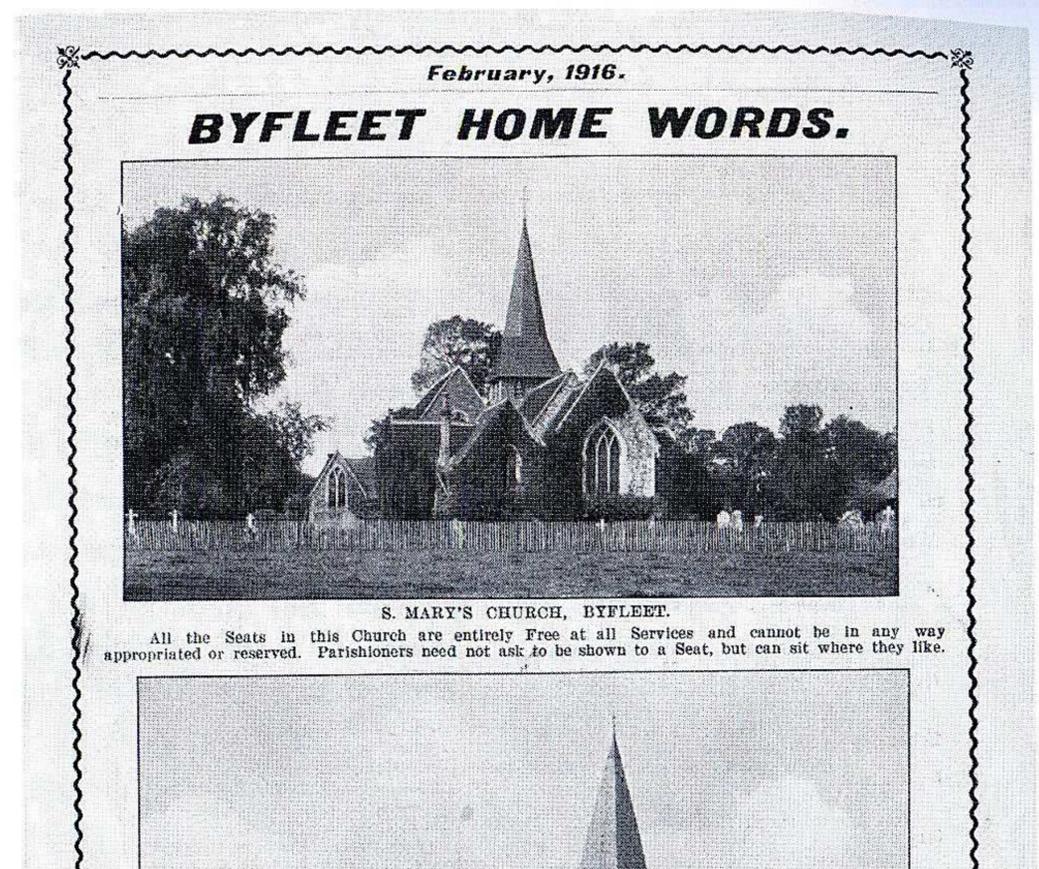
The bombardment of London was also audible and visible. In September 1917, Frederick Robinson was alarmed to see 'numberless shells' exploding over London, though it was 20 miles away, and commented, 'To have actual hostilities going on within earshot and within sight brings it home as nothing hitherto has done.' ⁷

Even time was affected: on 21 May 1916, British Summer Time was inaugurated and it was ordered that clocks be put forward an hour. Not all approved, some calling the new summer time 'All fools' day' and others refusing to adjust their clocks. ⁸



Frederick Arthur Robinson, indefatigable Cobham diarist (courtesy of IWM, Docs.11335)

Though many people did believe that the war would be short and sharp, more thoughtful observers realised that it would be a conflict like no other. James Chuter Ede, a member of Surrey County Council's Education Committee, wrote, 'Here, as in all places, we move in the shadow of the Great War ... The dislocation of the world as we knew it forces itself upon us at every turn.' ⁹ The Rector of Godstone reflected in the September 1914 parish magazine, 'With a suddenness that is difficult and almost impossible to realise, we find ourselves to-day engaged in a war that has no parallel in the history of the world, and of which none of us can foresee the end ... It will be a long and arduous struggle.' ¹⁰ The Rector of Byfleet wrote, 'The greatest war ever waged: the largest hosts ever mustered: and between the Christian nations! It is appalling and it is horrible.' ¹¹ The Bishop of Winchester in Farnham Castle advised, 'It is sober truth that in its



Picnic July 1917 poem by Rose Macaulay praised in: In the Shadow of the Great War, Surrey 1914 - 1922 by Surrey County Council and Contributors, 2019.

favourable. Vera Brittain, in Kingswood, 'felt the sinister shudder of guns from the Belgian coast shake the Caterham Valley like a subterranean earthquake', ⁴ while Eric Parker, guarding the Chilworth Gunpowder Works, recalls standing by St Martha's Church, high on the Downs, while:

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