



THE POEM WE ALL REMEMBER

Narrated by Ian McMillan

Dulce et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owen

“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.”

Those words graphically bring to life a terrifying gas attack on a British trench during the First World War.

They’re from one of the most famous poems of the war, “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen.

After his terrible experience in the trenches he suffered from what they used to call ‘shell-shock.’ And he wrote that in a psychiatric hospital in 1917. And it’s brutal and bloody and graphic and it captures the feelings of men caught in the hell of war.

Since I first read *Dulce et Decorum Est* at school, I've found Owen's work inspiring. Because he wears his heart on his sleeve and he spares us no detail. And he makes us confront war's darkest demons.

[Continues reading poem]

"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."

The poem ends with Owen's sarcastic condemnation of jingoism: "*Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori,*" which translates as 'It is sweet and honourable to die for one's country'.

Owen returned to the frontline in 1918, and just a week before the end of the war; whether he thought it was sweet and honourable or not, he died for his country.

At the time, he was just another soldier poet writing about the war. So why, after all these years, do we see Wilfred Owen's poetry as a defining image of World war One?

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