

# What It Was For

---

A poem on Canadian enlistment in World War  
One

Jaclyn Salter

4/1/2014

It was for the white feather

Handed with accusing eyes and a sneer

By people who didn't realise what it was they were shaming people into.

It was for the hollow bellies

And starving eyes

That stared into another empty bowl and wished for anything to eat.

It was for the stories of glory and fame

Told by people who didn't understand the irony

In *Dulce Et Decorum Est*.

It was for the people who talked of the Germans

As easily squashed bugs,

Cowards that would run from the first gunfire.

It was for the English pride,

The connection to the Motherland

That the French could never quite remind people wasn't theirs to start with.

It was for the easy shrug

Saying *oh, it'll be over by Christmas*

Never realising that it would become a lie.

It was for the reassurance of the quick victory

That didn't account for the letters

That began *It is my painful duty to inform you...*

It was for the prime minister with the strained eyes

Convincing people that forced enlistment was necessary

As mothers sobbed and fathers raged.

It was for the keenness of the seventeen year old boy

Who wanted to travel the world and shoot the bad guy

Not realising the bad guy was another seventeen year old just like him.

It was for the pride in the flag

That even still marked us

As England's to call when necessary

And the men and boys took these reasons

And held onto them as machine guns rattled

And mustard gas reached with ugly tendrils.

And realised eventually

There's no honor in dying for your country

No sweetness in the black spreading across your eyes.

And we remember them who fought for these reasons

Lived by these reasons and died by these reasons.

Lest we forget.

Word Count: 302 (717 with Accompanying Notes)

## Accompanying Notes

World War One was a horrifically unique war. Never before 1914 had trench warfare been seen, nor the tank, nor mustard gas. This was a horrific lesson in the sheer brutality that would eventually develop into the face of conflict that the world knows today.

Before this was known, the people who wanted to enlist came in floods. Many of them were young males who wanted to see the world, and saw this as a way to travel for free. The popular conception was that it was just a small conflict, and that the war would only go until Christmas of 1914. However, as the war dragged on, people began realising that this was untrue.

Almost all of the reasons the average person went to war were flawed in some respect, or found to be later on. Fathers who enlisted to help feed their families died, leaving the family struggling just as much in the days before there was any kind of social security net. The white feather, used to shame men not in uniforms, spread like wildfire after originating in Britain and spreading to the other Commonwealth countries.

Prime Minister Robert Borden introduced conscription in 1917, when it was clear that the war would take far more men than originally thought. This infuriated and alienated the French, who had been promised they would not be forced to enlist. This was one of the key moments in the division between English Canada and French Canada and has left a divide that is still evident today.

I have included a reference to *Dulce Et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen, a British war poet who effectively captured the irony in one of the reasons for enlistment- pride in one's country. I find this poem to be one of the most authentic representations of what the fighting was like, as well as an accurate commentary on the differences between the portrayal of the war by the people encouraging enlistment and the actual reality.

In this poem, *lest we forget* has two meanings- the original, reminding people to never forget those who fought and died in the line of fire, and to remember why these people fought, what inspired them to leave to countries they had never seen to fight for people they had never met. Passion, fear, interest, and need are a small section of the near countless reasons people chose to bear arms for Canada, and in doing so put Canada on the beginning steps to sovereignty.

## Bibliography

"Conscription, 1917." *Canadian War Museum*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

<<http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/guerre/conscription-e.aspx>>.

Duffy, Michael. "White Feathers." *First World War.com*. N.p., 22 Aug. 2009. Web. 20 Mar.

2014. <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/whitefeathers.htm>>.

Lamin, Harry, and Bill Lamin. *Letters from the trenches: a soldier of the Great War*. [Pbk. ed.

London: Michael O'Mara Books Ltd., 2013. Print.

"Official Notification of death of Bertie Huggins." *The First World War Digital Poetry Archive*.

University of Oxford, n.d. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

<<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa/document/9024/3937>>.

Roberts, Dave . "Wilfred Owen- Dulce Et Decorum Est." *The War Poetry Website*. N.p., n.d.

Web. 18 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html>>.

"The Canada/Britain Relationship." *McMaster University Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

<[http://library.mcmaster.ca/archives/exhibits/worldwar\\_canadabritain](http://library.mcmaster.ca/archives/exhibits/worldwar_canadabritain)>.