

Niamh Croall – Higher English Creative Essay

I didn't recognise the face that stared back at me from Mum's iPad. Yet there was something strangely familiar about the young man's face. Maybe it was his aquiline nose, or the way his eyes smiled even though his mouth remained straight. I had a strong sense of having met him before, but I knew I hadn't. The photo looked very old fashioned, not black and white like other family photos I had seen, more a faded yellow and brown. Sepia, that's what you call it, like the kind of image you might see in a museum. He was wearing an oversized flat cap which reminded me of a character from *The Broons*.

"Who is he" I asked, regretting it almost instantly. Since Mum had started researching our family tree I had been subjected to many tedious snippets about long dead and forgotten relatives. "Did I know my great great Granny had 11 children and lived to be 92? Or that her cousin had died in the Poor House?" It was dominating the conversation at home and I was getting fed up with her compulsion to catalogue the dates of birth, marriage and death of multiple generations. The sooner Mum lost interest and moved on to her next project the better. "He's your great great uncle Patrick" she replied, then added with a slight wobble in her voice "and he was a very brave man".

Later that night in bed I lay awake for what seemed like hours, replaying over and over what Mum had gone on to tell me. She had produced more photos, newspaper cuttings and army records. She'd certainly done her homework on Patrick. I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to drift. I was in Coatbridge - not the Coatbridge of now - the Coatbridge of 1915 where the air was thick with the choking smoke from the blast furnaces and the buildings looked like they had been dusted in black icing sugar. Where the smell from the numerous factories crept into your hair, your clothes and your bed like a sulphurous will-o' the wisp.

I tried to imagine what thoughts went through Patrick's head on 26th May 1915, as he travelled to Portsmouth with his comrades from the 1/5th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry. Was he scared, did he have any sense of impending doom, or was he excited at the prospect of his first voyage overseas? But my thoughts wouldn't fly. They kept coming back to the bloody futility that is war, all war, but especially the First World War.

Patrick must have been injured at some point in 1916 because there was an army record from September that year saying that he had been granted permission to wear a "Wound Stripe". How efficient of the British Army to make sure the world permanently knew you'd been wounded, even if the scars weren't visible. I wondered if men like Patrick wore their stripe with honour or whether it

simply marked them out as unlucky sods who'd been injured, but not quite badly enough to be able to sit the rest of the war out in a convalescence home. I had a hunch it would have been the latter.

In early 1917 Patrick had been awarded a Military Medal for outstanding bravery in the field of battle. Mum had found several newspaper cuttings recounting how Patrick, hospitalised in Aberdeen from a severe wound to the back, had been visited by the Baillie of Aberdeen who presented him with his medal and a watch - a gift from the people of Aberdeen in grateful thanks for his bravery. One of the articles described how a nurse had bent down to fix the watch round his wrist and I imagined him lying there in excruciating pain, humiliated in front of the assembled dignitaries that he was unable to do the fastening for himself.

The luck of the Irish certainly wasn't with Patrick, for as soon as his back had healed he was unceremoniously returned to his battalion to continue providing the enemy with another poor soul to shoot at. There was a bitter taste in my mouth as I pondered this turn of events. Soldiers like Patrick were just numbers on an index card somewhere in an army records office. Patched up and fed back into the military machine, to be spat back out when fate dealt her next cruel blow.

I might not have been that interested to start with, but as the time passed I found myself drawn into Patrick's story and, as you would root for the good guy in any action movie, I let myself hope that there might be a happy ending to this one. Perhaps Patrick came home after the war, settled back into the routine of life in the Iron Works, married a local lass and had a large brood of bonny bouncing babies. But war is a cruel mistress and there are no winners in battle, just those who die and those who survive.

I hadn't realised what I was looking at when Mum first held up the photo. The sky was cerulean blue and there was vibrant green grass in the forefront. This was no sepia print, and my heart felt light for a few seconds as I was tricked into thinking that Patrick had made it out of the war in one piece and had lived the life I fervently wished for him. Then my eyes settled on the middle of the scene where a large rectangular block of pale sandstone stood erect. My heart sank and I could feel my eyes start to prickle and my throat to tighten. There in front of me was a headstone, one of thousands of headstones all lined up and facing the same direction, like soldiers on parade. The inscription simply said

Private P. Croall

Highland Light Infantry

8th November 1917

I desperately wanted the photo to be wrong but I knew it wasn't. Patrick had returned to his battalion at some point during 1917 and he'd finally been dispatched to meet his maker by the Ottomans during The Third Battle of Gaza, thousands of miles from his family and all that was familiar to him. The irony that Gaza is in the Holy Land was not lost on me.

Tears caught in my throat and I sent up a silent prayer that it had been quick; that he hadn't been scared or in pain; that he hadn't had a chance to grieve the life he would never have. But Mum's determined doggedness to dig out the facts would deal one last cruel blow as I learned that Patrick died the day after the battle ended, and my heart shattered into a thousand pieces as I came to understand how his life would have slowly seeped away from him, like the sands of time, until he took his last breath and his light was extinguished by the eternal darkness of death.

Patrick's story ended, like the stories of nearly 10 million soldiers who died on all sides during World War I. His remains may lie buried unceremoniously in a field in the Middle East, thousands of miles away from his home town, but thanks to Mum our family will now be able to remember him once more.

Word Count - 1225