

The Origin of the Unknown Warrior's grave by Revd. David Railton, M.C. M.A.

Extract from "Our Empire" November 1931 vol. VII

At the request of the Editor I write to tell you how it came to pass that "the body of a British Warrior unknown by name or rank was brought from France to lie among the most illustrious of the land" in Westminster Abbey.

"It was a great idea – in fact, an inspiration" said an English working man. And many others have said the same. They say well. For so it was. It came to me. It was somehow sent to me – I know not how – in the early part of the year 1916. It came by inspiration. But you want to know a little more of the manner of its coming? So you shall, indeed.

I came back from "the line" at dusk. We had just laid to rest the mortal remains of a comrade. I went to a billet in front of Erkingham, near Armentieres. At the back of the billet was a small garden and in the garden, only about six paces from the house, there was a grave. At the head of the grave there stood a rough cross of white wood. On the cross was written in deep black pencilled letters "An unknown British Soldier" and in brackets underneath "of the Black Watch". It was dusk and no one was near except some officers in the billet playing cards. I remember how still it was. Even the guns seemed to be resting, as if to give the gunners a chance to have their tea.

How that grave caused me to think! I love every inch of Scotland. I had served in the earlier days as a private soldier in the ranks of a Scottish Territorial battalion. How I wondered! How I longed to see his folk! But, who was he, and who were they? From which of the lonely mystic glens of old Scotia did he come? Was he a citizen of "Auld Reekie"? Was he one of the grand old "Contemptibles"? Was he just a laddie – newly joined – aged eighteen, the only son of a shepherd from the far away Highlands? There was no answer to those questions nor has there ever been yet.

So I thought and thought and wrestled in thought. What can I do to ease the pain of father, mother, brother, sister, sweetheart, wife and friend? Quietly and gradually there came out of the mist of thought this answer clear and strong, "Let this body – this symbol of him – be carried reverently over the sea to his native land". And I was happy for about five or ten minutes. Then, quickly, the most common remark of those days came to my mind – "There is a war on" – so I thought this idea would never be an accomplished fact. I told nobody; yet I could not throw the idea away. Every Padre serving with infantry brigades was bombarded after each publication of casualties with at least this request: "Where - exactly where - did you lay to rest the body of my son? Can you give me any further information? I have been officially notified that he is 'missing, believed killed.'"

To all these questions we were allowed to send a "map reference" only. Oh, those letters of "broken" relatives and friends! They reinforced the idea, so that I could never let it drop.

Later on, I nearly wrote to Sir Douglas Haig, to ask if the body of an "unknown" comrade might be sent home. But it was obvious that even if such a request had been granted, it could have had no personal meaning for those whose relatives fell after that date. So I held my peace with little hope.

I returned to Folkestone in 1919. Do you recall that dreadful year of reaction? Men and nations stumbled back like badly wounded and “gassed” warriors to their homes. The endless shedding of blood ceased but there was no real peace in the souls of men or nations.

The mind of the world was in a fever. Who of the “great” men would be likely to heed the request of an ordinary Padre at such a time? They were all busy. A failure to get the idea accepted might be final. What of the Prime Minister – Mr Lloyd George? He would act quickly if he approved of it. But if he did not? – and he was very powerful in those days.

I could surely go to the noble Haig, most brotherly of men? But I knew something of the strained relationship between soldiers and politicians and he probably would have to ask the Cabinet for leave, assuming he himself agreed. Then there was the Archbishop of Canterbury – wisest and most calm of all “moderns”. But the politicians always lagged behind him, and they might debate it in a hurry and argue it away.

Why not His Majesty the King? After all, there had been no nobler or wiser King in this land. I knew the King would hear any citizen. He would, I felt somehow sure, agree, because he understands the hearts of the people. But I feared His Majesty’s advisers might suggest an open space like Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park, or the Horse Guards for the tomb of the Unknown Comrade. Then the artists would come, and no one could tell what weird structure they might devise for a Shrine! There could be only one true Shrine for this purpose. The Unknown Comrade’s body should rest, if it were possible, in Westminster Abbey – the Parish Church of the Empire. Sometimes I thought of sending this suggestion to one of the newspapers; but who is there that would risk so great a matter becoming a newspaper “stunt”?

Time went on. I spoke to my wife about it, and to an artist in Folkestone. They agreed it would be wise to wait a bit longer but the artist urged me to decide soon which of the men “in authority” I would ask. I waited until August 1920. The rush and noise of “Peace” quarrels seemed to be dying down. Was this a good time? My wife said “Now or never!” So I wrote to the Right Reverend Bishop Herbert Ryle, then Dean of Westminster. I had never written or spoken to the Dean. I asked him if he would consider the possibility of burying in the Abbey the body of one of our unknown comrades. I also made bold to suggest that a real “War” flag in my possession be used at such a burial, rather than a new flag of no “Service” experience.

Three days later the Dean replied to my letter as follows:

“I am perhaps not altogether in a position to give you a final decision on either of your two suggestions. But they make a strong appeal to me. On first consideration of them I find myself warmly inclined to favour them... If I could obtain the War Office permission, I think I could carry out the rest of the proposal – the interment, etc... However, I must not move, or talk, too fast. The idea shall germinate.”

August went by and September. No further news! The first and second weeks in October brought nothing. But on October 19, 1920, the Dean wrote me the letter which I knew would find a grateful response in the hearts of most of the people in our land,

and perhaps in time, of other lands as well. I will quote the Dean's letter in full, as it is typical of his courtesy and practical manner of getting to work without saying much.

“The Deanery,
Westminster SW1

Dear Mr Railton,

The idea which you suggested to me in August I have kept steadily in view ever since. I have been occupied actively upon it for the last two or three weeks. It has necessitated communication with the War Office, Prime Minister, Cabinet and Buckingham Palace. The announcement which the Prime Minister will, or intends to, make this afternoon, will show how far the Government is ready to co-operate.

Once more I express my warm acknowledgement and thanks for your letter.

Yours sincerely
Herbert E. Ryle, Bp.
October 19, 1920”

It is therefore to this most noble Dean – since passed to his rest – that we owe the carrying out of the whole idea. To this day I do not know what difficulties he had to overcome. Bishop Ryle was a great man and a humble man. Without his consent and aid, the Shrine would never have been in the Abbey, If “Officialdom” can place the monument of so great and world-famed a man as Kitchener, creator of armies, in an out of the way corner of the Horse Guards, what might they have done with the body of an unknown warrior?

How wonderful Bishop Ryle worked at every detail. At his suggestion French soil was brought in 100 sandbags, with which to fill in the grave. He agreed to accept the Union Jack – the Padre's flag – for use on that day. A year later, he actually arranged to allow a squad of a battalion in which I served to place the flag on the pillar where it now is.

The only request the noble Dean did not see his way to grant was the suggestion I gave him – from a relative of mine – that the tomb should be described as that of the Unknown “Comrade” rather than “Warrior”. I preferred that title, as I thought that most people might consider “Warrior” to mean “soldier”; whereas it means “sailor” just as much; also, it seemed more homely and friendly.

The flag which is now in the Abbey was used during the War at Holy Communion, as a covering for the rough box, or table, altars. It was used at Church Parades and Ceremonial Parades. It was the covering – often the only covering – of the slain, as their bodies were laid to rest. For all I know it may have been used in Belgium or France when the actual “Unknown Warrior” was slain. For the “unknown” received exactly the same attention as the “known”. It is not a new “bit of bunting” bought for the occasion but a real symbol of every Briton's life. Indeed, it is literally tinged with the life-blood of fellow Britons.

I am sometimes asked if our people have really grasped the meaning of that Tomb. I can only say that I have received numerous letters, and many men and women have spoken to me about it. They have all grasped something of the true meaning. Those whose loved ones were amongst the “unknown” know that in this Tomb there may be

– there is – resting the body of their beloved. They know also that he is not there himself, though he may often be near. They have, moreover, learnt the unity of all types of men at that grave. They see that in the long run, all men of goodwill are comrades in life, death and the hereafter.

No one knows the “Unknown Warrior’s” rank, his wealth, his education or his history. “Class” values become vanity there. He may have been wealthy, or one whose home was in a slum. He may have been a Public School boy or a gypsy. Many people have not yet grasped the fact that he may have come from any part of the British Isles, or from the Dominions or Colonies. And there are still a good few who do not realise that he may have been a sailor. The Royal Naval Division served in France. It contained a good few men who had served on the sea most of their lives or during the early part of the War. Besides this, there were a good many men who served in the Marine Services, and who subsequently joined the Army. He may have been one of the clergy of the Church, who served as a combatant officer, or in the ranks. No one knows what his “profession” was. He may have been – till his country called – one of the “idle rich”. It is quite likely that he was a communicant of the Church, or a Roman Catholic, a Jew, a Salvationist, a Wesleyan, a Presbyterian, or a member of any other, or of no religious denomination.

Our children should be taught most carefully that this one Warrior is just a representative of all Britons who fell in the Great War, known or unknown. The wording on the grave declares: “Thus are commemorated the many multitudes who gave the most that man can give”. Had such a thing been possible, the nation would have given the same honour to each of her sons.

A few people – comparatively few – see what the “Unknown Warrior” might have become in the service of mankind here. Who can say whether or no the War killed in the person of the “Unknown Warrior” the man who would have been the great “Genius” – to lead the rising generation in its gigantic tasks? If so, and as Christ saw him fall, it is not hard to think of Him praying again, over a world gone mad, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”