

The Damned Generation

By Maurice Connolly



*The sun it now shines on the green fields of France,
There's a warm summer breeze that makes the red poppies dance,
And look how the sun shines from under the trees,
There's no guns, no barbed wire, there's no guns firing now.*

Billy O'Neill had just turned nineteen. He was a fit, strong country youth who was born and reared near Ardfinnan, Co. Tipperary. This was a big day in his young life. After conducting his initial training in Clonmel he was allowed home the previous day to bid farewell to his family. The month was March and the year was 1915. Clonmel was the main Irish Depot of the Royal Irish Regiment. Tomorrow, with the rest of his battalion he will be on his way to Aldershot, in England. He found the excitement of the whole adventure overwhelming. Ken Ryan, from a small farm close to the village, had enlisted the same time as himself. Billy was walking down the narrow lane where he was to meet up with Ken. Both will then be transported to Clonmel by pony and trap, accompanied by ken's father, Sam.

The previous evening Billy had spent a few hours with his young sweetheart, Maggie Keane. She was a soft hearted, doe-eyed, innocent girl. She said that she'd pray for him every day that he'd return safely to her. She gave him a special prayer, sealed in a little leather cover. She made him promise that he'd keep it with him always. It would protect him. They had walked down by the river, stood under a tree, kissed and embraced. He felt her soft tears against his cheeks. More tears as they kissed goodbye. She said she wouldn't go to see him off. She couldn't bear that part of it.

Billy's mother, Annie, his father Pakie, and his five siblings joined him as he walked down the narrow lane. The family, like lots of families at that time, were extremely poor and dressed accordingly. Pakie worked as a farm labourer for very little wages. They felt proud of Billy, he looked such a fine cut of a lad in his smart uniform. They became aware of the pony and trap approaching in the distance.

The mood changed. Tears welled up in Annie's eyes and she commenced to sob, as did the oldest girl, Brid. Pakie patted Billy on the shoulders a few times, turned round and walked back up the lane; he didn't want the others to see the tears run down his cheeks. The pony halted. Greetings were exchanged. Annie and Brid hugged Billy. The two boys said "Good-luck, Billy." The two little girls, with the pinched, hungry faces, wrapped their hands round Billy's legs, not wanting him to go.

"Take care of yourself, Billy boy," Annie said, "and may God look after you."

"It's all right, it's all right," Billy reassured them. "It'll be all over soon." He extricated the little ones' hands and heaved himself up to the sanctuary of the trap.

Billy, too, was struggling to contain his emotions. But, on no account, could he cry in front of Ken or his father. Grown men didn't cry in public—especially soldiers.

"Git up there Jilly," Sam said. "And good luck to you all."

Jilly set off at a lively clip. All waved goodbye once more.

"Parting is always hard," Sam said

Billy looked back at the disheveled, ragged appearance of the warm, closely knit family

he loved so much. By pony and trap was a lovely way to travel. Scenery could be appreciated and admired at leisure. Jilly, the beautiful roan pony knew this road well. Sam allowed her to travel at her own pace. He had a great fondness for the pony. Everyone had.

“When will we travel this road again?” Ken pondered aloud.

“Everyone says it should be over soon,” Billy replied.

“I’d say it will; it won’t last too long more,” Sam said with conviction. “The British Empire, France, Russia—too many big powers on the one side.”

“I hope it won’t be over before we get there,” Ken remarked eagerly. “I just can’t wait.”

“We’ll see a bit of the world. We’ll have some great stories to tell when we get back,” Billy stated with enthusiasm.

“Learn to keep your heads down and don’t be acting the heroes; that’s my advice to you,” Sam warned.

Halfway to Clonmel they halted to give Jilly a brief rest. Sam had a nosebag of oats in the trap which he draped over the pony’s head. She munched away on the oats. Ken opened a small parcel. He handed Billy a bottle of lemonade and took one himself. Sam accepted and uncorked a bottle of stout. Ken passed around some sandwiches. Billy thanked him, thinking to himself that this was a nice gesture.

They eventually got to Clonmel and crossed the old bridge leading to the main section of the town. They heard rousing marching music and saw people standing on the footpaths. They pulled over to a little green patch—allowing Jilly to graze—and got out to have a look. The army was on parade and getting closer. Billy’s nerves tingled with excitement. An officer, mounted on a grey horse led the parade, followed by a brass band, the colour party and the ranks of marching soldiers. It was an impressive and glorious sight. The onlookers applauded, clapping their hands. Perhaps it was orchestrated as a recruitment drive; whatever, it was a memory to cherish.

Getting near their destination Billy said he’d hop out and allow Sam and Ken the opportunity to say their goodbyes in private. He thanked Sam, who in turn wished Billy the best

of luck, telling him to look after himself. It wasn't long before the two friends were reunited and they entered the military barracks together. What an adventure awaited them! The significance of it all was taking time to register. Going overseas; going off to war. Wasn't it what the politicians and clergy were urging men like Billy to do. Go and fight for the freedom of small nations. Fight for little Catholic Belgium.

On to Queenstown by rail and then by boat to Liverpool. Billy and Ken were fascinated by all the new things they were now experiencing. They were never on a ship before. A crewman warned them that there was always the danger of the ship being torpedoed. The German U-boats were creating havoc. Ken got seasick. "Christ I'm dying," he said, his face having turned green. Then the final trek of their journey, on to Aldershot. Ardfinnan seemed a long way off now. The masses of military men were everywhere, all preparing to embark for France. The war was on everyone's lips. Nobody spoke about anything else. Ken got a black eye; he had a fistfight with a Dubliner who called him a thick, ignorant, country bogman.

The physical training was pretty fierce, the hardest Billy and Ken ever endured: the drill on the square, the forced marching through the surrounding countryside weighed down with heavy kit, the endurance course, the crawling under barbed wire; everything to toughen the new recruits. Everything to toughen them for the apocalypse into which they would soon be heading. They enjoyed the rifle training; firing their .303 rifles at targets. Then the bayonet practice. Billy experienced a slight shiver as he felt the sharp, sleek, cold steel and realized what it was actually meant to do. They screamed as they charged at hanging bags of sand and plunged the bayonets home.

"No mercy!" the Sergeant Major shouted aloud. "Show no mercy because no mercy will be shown to you. You will soon be on your way. We have done all we can to prepare you. I hope your bodies are hardened by now. I want your minds to be hardened also. The enemy you will be facing is a tough, dangerous foe. You will have to be just as tough and uncompromising as he is. For if you don't," he roared, "you will be dead soldiers. Remember that, always remember that."

Disturbing rumours were soon circulating: where the troops were going was no cakewalk. The Western Front was a dreadful place. If there was no hell on earth then it was reputed to be the closest thing to it. Those readying themselves to go tried to ignore these reports, convincing themselves that it couldn't be that bad. The band played them off to war. The spectators cheered. Girls dashed across, planted kisses on their cheeks and inserted flowers in their buttonholes. They all felt proud, like heroes.

If Billy and Ken had any doubts, when they finally reached their destination their worst fears were soon confirmed. This, they quickly realized was indeed an awful place. The first thing they noticed on their way to the front line was the smell—rotting bodies in shallow graves, men who hadn't washed for weeks because there were no facilities, overflowing cess pits, chloride of lime used to stave off infection, cordite, and the stagnant mud everywhere. In the trenches they soon became aware that rats were a constant companion. They were there in millions, everywhere, gorging themselves on human remains. They grew to the size of cats. Lice became a big problem, breeding on filthy clothes. Then, the constant wet and cold. They were warned that the mud and unsanitary conditions could cause trench foot which could turn gangrenous and require amputation. A number of men appeared to be suffering from shell shock. It was brought starkly home to the new arrivals that death was everywhere in the trenches—at any time, day or night, it could be your body lying in the mud. Horrified and shocked at finding themselves in this hellhole, Billy and Ken resigned themselves to the grim reality that they had no choice now.

The days started off before dawn with 'stand to.' Men were roused from whatever fitful sleep they had got and ordered to the 'firing step.' Many raids were carried out at dawn. After 'stand to' there was an inspection of men and rifles by a senior officer. After that there was a breakfast of sorts.

The trenches came alive after dark as men fetched food and supplies from behind the lines. Canned corn beef was the staple diet. Six ounces of meat and six ounces of vegetables was the daily allowance. This was eventually replaced by pea soup and a few lumps of horse

meat. The men strung out rolls of razor sharp barbed wire as frontline protection. Duckboards were laid in trenches and on paths to stop feet from sinking too deep in the mud.

Billy and Ken had become conditioned, and experienced heavy fighting at the second battle of Ypres. Being countrymen and familiar with horses they were sent with a convoy to collect supplies from behind the lines. The area was subjected to a heavy barrage and they were forced to remain overnight not returning to their position till the next day. As they approached they became aware of a strange, foul odour. They had already seen some atrocious sights, but what confronted them on their return was the worst horror they had ever witnessed: The first poison gas attack of the war had taken place. Caught unawares, there were hundreds, thousands, of dead or dying soldiers all along the line. Ashen-faced, shocked, they watched soldiers spitting, suffocating, twisted in mortal fear, their faces turned blue while they coughed out mucus and blood from their tortured lungs.

The war raged on, seemingly unending. The gas was now the greatest dread, being a feared weapon on both sides. The mustard gas blistered the skin and bled the lungs. Billy found it impossible to get used to the suffering and screams and blood of Flanders. Seeing the remains of men shattered by shell blast; seeing the flower of youth sent to death and mutilation. Ken was moved to a different sector. Both could only hope that the other survived. The initial glory was long gone. Survival was what the soldiers were aiming for now.

Word filtered through about the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. The troops couldn't believe it. It felt like a dagger to the heart. British and Irishmen shooting each other on the streets of Dublin! How could it happen? Then a couple of weeks later news leaked about the executions of the leaders of the Rebellion. Another mind-numbing shock, tinged with anger now. Attitudes changed. What are we doing out here? A lot of men questioned.

"How could the army be so stupid?" Dublin Davy fumed. "How could they?"

Straight away the camaraderie between the soldiers from Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland cooled or, in some instances, dissipated entirely. A month later, Davy went home to Dublin on furlough. Eventually, when he returned, he reported that everything had

changed at home.

“You’d be despised now if you were seen wearing khaki. We’re not wanted back in Ireland anymore,” he vehemently declared.

“What are we going to do then?” Billy asked in despair.

“What are we going to do? That’s a good question. We’ll have to stick this basterin’ nightmare out; what else can we do?”

“They all urged us to join, to enlist, to come out here,” Tom Griffin from Wexford spat out. “They fuckin’ sent us out here. Now they don’t want us back.”

“I’ll tell you what we are now—we’re the damned generation, that’s what we are,” Davy sadly added, with a futile finality to his voice.

Billy’s leave fell due. He decided he wouldn’t go home. He might bring trouble down on the heads of his family. He’d spend it somewhere in France. Others were doing the same. He’d try and write a letter home later on. He did so in his scrawly hand:

Hallo Mam and Dad and everyone,

I hope this finds you all well. Sorry I did not rite before now but I am not into leters. Do not worry about me at all as I will be al right. I think of you all the hole time. Maggie is always in my taughts. I am sending you six pound. Keep the fiver to buy someting for everyone when Cristmas comes round. Give the pound to Maggie and tell her to buy someting nice to wear. I will not rite again. I am no good at it. I pray that I will see you all very soon. I love you all and miss you all very much. I think of you first thing at morning and last thing at night. Give my dearest love to Maggie.

Your loving son,
Billy

The war of attrition rumbled on. After seven months Billy and Ken were reunited. The psychological impact of trench warfare had taken its toll on both men. Both looked as if they

had aged about a dozen years. Their faces had a sunken, intense, gaunt appearance. Ken related a particularly bad experience he had about a month previous: a shell burst close and part of a comrade's head and brains splashed onto his face. Billy, too, had a brush with sudden death when a shell smashed into the trench close to where he was crouched. It didn't explode but buried itself in the soft salient of Flanders earth. Some thirty per cent of the shells fired from both sides failed to explode.

In July 1917 a huge push was planned near the town of Passchendaele. This was to be a decisive battle that would finally break the back of the German Army. All the troops that could be mustered were rushed to the front, over a large area. The third awful Battle of Ypres-- or Passchendaele, as it became known-- was about to commence. For days and nights the allied guns pounded the enemy lines. Over four million shells blasted the German positions. It started to rain incessantly. For the soldiers waiting in the trenches, the conditions couldn't be worse. The trenches started to fill with water. The clinging mud was everywhere; that, and the rats. The rats ate through corpses to get at the liver.

Ken peered over the parapet at the pock-marked, shell-holed, nightmarish landscape. Nothing left standing but a few stumps of trees; the lingering, horrible smell of contaminated mud, cordite, mustard gas and decaying corpses assailed his nostrils. The bombardment kept pounding away. At night the flames from the shells lit up the sky. "How could the Germans survive that?" he murmured to Billy in awe. "How could they?" But he knew they would, the same as at the Somme and elsewhere. "It must be driving men fuckin' mad," Ken mumbled. He was actually feeling worried about Billy. Was he starting to crack or something? He had changed lately, gone quiet, mentally on edge—a different man.

When the soldiers opened their eyes at morning they felt paralysed with the wet and cold. When Billy looked down the line what he saw were hulks of men moulded in mud from head to toe. He looked out at no man's land, where the moans of dying men never seemed to cease. He felt his hands tremble. What was coming over him? Was his nerve failing? He knew what was coming next. He was well aware of the casual way the generals dispatched wave after

wave of brave men on suicidal missions for negligible results. General Sir Hubert Gough, who commanded the Irish forces, was one of the worst in this respect. The shelling would soon halt; the Germans would drag themselves from the bowels of the earth, position their machine guns and destroy the advancing British infantry. Word circulated that the attack was imminent.

The long night stretched out. Reinforcements kept arriving all along the frontline. It would be a huge assault—a crucial battle, maybe. Nerves were frayed as the troops waited for dawn—the last dawn for a great number. With shaking hands men scribbled letters, some prayed more than usual. All were secretly terrified. The shelling stopped abruptly. The first advance would go over the top at 7am. Ken and Billy stayed close. Ken noticed Billy's non-stop trembling. The rain had stopped pelting down. A nerve shattering, brief stillness, suddenly engulfed the whole theatre of war. Then something strange happened; a skylark was heard singing. Battle-hardened, fatalistic eyes gazed upwards. How could this little bird, now circling and singing, have possibly survived?

Tots of rum were being distributed. A weary priest made his way along, offering a general absolution to anyone who cared. The men were instructed to get ready. The order to 'fix bayonets' was shouted out. A crazed looking Captain with a revolver in his hand was preparing to be the first to go. Looking left and right Ken noticed a few men getting sick and vomiting. All were aware that the next few minutes could be their last few minutes on this earth. Billy glanced down at his watch—a watch he had removed from a dead German's wrist. It was the only item he had ever taken from a dead soldier. His mind was in turmoil What was happening! He started to shake uncontrollably. He had been listening to stories of men being held down screaming whilst their shrapnel mangled limbs were sawn off. Pale-faced, Ken reached over and said 'Good Luck.' Billy nodded. The whistles sounded. Screams and curses rent the air as the men scrambled up the short wooden ladders and out over the top. Straight away the shell and field guns opened up, coupled with the rattle of the deadly machine guns and other assorted weaponry; then the screams of pain as heavy machine gun bullets thudded home, shattering flesh and bone.

Ken and Billy had mastered the art of staying alive. Keeping low and using the churned earth and shell-holes as cover they closed on the enemy trenches. Sheer force of numbers were forcing the Germans to withdraw. The attacking troops were now hurtling grenades at the defending soldiers. Fierce hand-to-hand fighting ensued. In the dust, smoke, confusion, roars and mayhem Ken was pushed from behind and stumbled into the now undefended trench. Of the others who had made it to safety some had their hands on their knees and were panting heavily. Dead and wounded bodies, in various twisted forms were stretched out on the blood spattered trench floor. A small number of Germans had surrendered and they stood about in a frightened cluster, looking every bit as wretched as their captors. For the attacking forces it had been a victory of sorts, but at what a cost.

Ken sought Billy out. It took some time but eventually he found him, hunched up, on his own, staring at the ground. Billy was struck down by a complete and utter dark depression. Perhaps it was the accumulation of the mental strain he had constantly endured. He needed medical attention. Ken tried to make conversation but received little response.

From the forenoon on the men worked feverishly repairing the trenches and digging others back to the support lines. Sporadic attacks kept everyone alert. Ken again located Billy who had given up conversing with the other soldiers. He hunched down beside Billy and offered him a cigarette. Tough Sergeant Sweeney—Swearin' Sweeney—from Carlow picked his way along.

"Keep your fuckin' heads down," he barked to no-one in particular. "Don't you know there are deadly fuckin' snipers out there." He called Ken to one side.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked Ken. "Could he be shell-shocked, do you think?"

"I'd say he could be. He needs help"

"I'll get someone to have a look at him. In the meantime keep an eye on him, will yah?"

"I will Sergeant."

"Good man." Sergeant Sweeney said, squeezing Ken's shoulder and then shuffling away. Ken rejoined Billy. After a few moments Ken said, "Remember the day we travelled in the trap

to Clonmel? I often think back to it.”

“We’ll never see Clonmel again,” Billy intoned in a low voice.

“Jesus, don’t say things like that...It was a lovely peaceful day...that day.”

“It feels like a hundred years ago,” Billy vaguely responded.

“Little did we know then what we were in for. Listen, Billy, we’ve come through a lot together. This basterin’ thing will have to end soon. I don’t want anything to happen to us now. Do you hear me?”

There was a pause. Billy suddenly asked, “Ken, are your clothes dry?”

“Dry enough. Why?”

“Will you keep this for me? It’ll keep you safe.” He offered Ken the little leather covered prayer he had got from Maggie.

“Christ, no, that’s yours. That’s the keepsake you got from Maggie, isn’t it?”

“That’s it.”

“Can I have a look?”

“Here y’are.” Ken stepped forward, turned sideways to avail of the light, and started to read. The prayer offered divine protection to the bearer...

“It’s nice,” Ken said, turning back. “No! Christ!” Billy was halfway up the side of the trench. Jumping forward Ken grabbed him by the legs but he knew it was too late—he had heard the crack of the rifle. Ken slid back in shock and despair, his hands clasping Billy’s limp form. The dreaded letter from the British War Office would soon arrive in Ardfinnan. Billy would merely be another minute statistic to add to the other hundreds of thousands who had already perished.

The greatest catastrophe in history ended in 1918—on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Ken survived the whole conflagration. In NCO rankings he had been promoted to Lance Corporal. Like a great deal of others he found it hard to re-adjust to civilian life. Former soldiers were not made welcome by a large section of the Irish population. The country at that time was in turmoil. Ken was warned and decided it was

advisable to keep a low profile. That was his nature, in any case. Sam Ryan and all the family were overjoyed at his safe return. The war years had been extremely stressful for everyone.

One of the first things Ken wanted was to call to Billy's home. He was made welcome and sympathized with Annie, Pakie and all the family. They had struggled to come to terms with their great loss; finally they had, in a way, become resigned to it. Maggie arrived along. Maggie and Annie still wore black. Ken was struck by the beautiful young woman Maggie had developed into. In a spontaneous show of mutual regret they embraced. Ken informed them that Billy had died instantly—with no pain; that he had only been talking about them all shortly beforehand; how much he missed everyone and looked forward to returning home. Nobody would ever know the exact circumstances of Billy's last moments.

Maggie had left a deep impression on Ken. For days and weeks afterwards he still visualized her arms about him and that brief, soft touch of her cheek against his. She had such a genuine honesty and beauty about her. He was completely captivated by her. He wondered should he ask her out? Then he felt a worrying guilt about it—her relationship with Billy. Would it be right, ethical—was that the word? Would it somehow sound in bad taste? He dwelt on this point and concluded that perhaps it's something that Billy would really have wanted — someone to look after and care for Maggie. He'd surely have wanted that. Was that what he meant when he gave him that little prayer.

Ken plucked up courage. He'd have to ask her. He just had to. He suddenly thought of that little leather-covered memento. He made it his business to call to see Maggie. He met her on the road as she walked home from the shop. He produced the item and suggested that maybe she'd like to have it back. She held it in her hand as memories flooded back: tears welled up.

"It didn't keep him safe," she said.

"It did, many times," he comforted. "He always kept it in his pocket here, close to his heart."

"Thanks Ken," she said. "That's nice of you." There was a slight pause.

Writing Raw

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“Maggie,” Ken asked, “have you any man in your life at the moment?” He feared her reply. She bowed her head for a moment.

“No, Ken, there’s no one.”

“Would you—would you consider me?”

“Yes. I’ve thought about you a lot. Somehow, for some reason, I’ve felt close to you already.”

The End

Maurice Connolly bio: Many moons ago, when I was a young man I wrote two stage plays that were performed widely in Ireland. Due to many 'ups-an-downs' in life i gave up writing until relatively recently. I have since written the novel 'Referne' and many short stories. I live in County Wexford, in the South-East of Ireland.