

The Great Trust: Mrs. Edith Ash's Campaign of Remembrance, 1916-1954

I

As merely one of the myriad obscure women widowed by the Great War, Mrs. Edith Learoyd Ash fails to feature in the voluminous literature that has resulted from that terrible and traumatic event. Yet for nearly forty years, beginning with the publication of the notice of her husband's death from wounds in September 1916, she asserted her role as one of the war's victims by annually inserting an *In Memoriam* notice in *The Times* of London.¹ Her final public act came in September 1954; she was to die on 1 April of the following year, at the age of eighty-nine.² The sheer longevity of her self-imposed task of keeping the public memory of her husband alive, while probably not unique, was certainly very unusual.³ Even more unusual is the fact that, in every year between 1917 and 1953, Mrs. Ash included a maxim or exhortatory aphorism in her memorial notice, each, with one exception, being different in content. These messages, most of which are drawn from poetry or songs, sometimes subtly altered, are the main focus of this study, for they may be used to chart, over many years, the changes and the continuities in Mrs. Ash's attitudes as she coped with the loss of her husband. They may be interpreted in various ways: as evidence of how she dealt emotionally with grief and the memory of loss; of how she reinterpreted the meaning of the Great War over time; of how she responded to some of the main national and international political events occurring during her widowhood; and of how she represented her husband allegorically as time elapsed. Mrs. Ash thus saw her task as more than the regular commemoration of her man, important though that undoubtedly was. She was fulfilling a greater obligation, to a world that had been lost but which she felt still had something of value to offer. Her aphorism for 1947, at a time of post-war gloom, material shortages, dislocation and slow reconstruction, is suggestive of a higher purpose: 'There's not much in the to-morrows at present, but we must keep up the Great Trust'.⁴

Compared with the study of the post-war significance of Armistice Day and of war memorials—from the national monuments such as the Cenotaph in Whitehall and the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey to the tiny temporary shrines established during the war in London's East End—*In Memoriam* notices as sources for understanding the trajectories of grief and remembrance have received virtually no attention from historians.⁵ This is perhaps understandable, as it is easy to assume that such notices either were rare and ephemeral or followed a similar, unchanging pattern as little more than annual family memory markers. In reality, however, *In Memoriams* can provide clues as to changing moods and levels of grief amongst the bereaved over time. They are personal representations of grief that seek a public forum. They are a particular form of remembrance that is a self-conscious reminder to the wider world of individual sacrifice. In that sense and in the post-war

I should like to thank Gavin Daly and Michael Sturma for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ The death notice was published in *The Times*, 5 Oct. 1916.

² *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1954, 22 April 1955. She died in Southsea. Her two daughters placed her death notice, describing her as 'widow of Lt-Col. W.C.C. Ash, DSO, Middlesex Regiment'.

³ Sixteen soldiers who died on 1 July 1916 were the subjects of *In Memoriam* notices in *The Times* on the sixtieth anniversary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Only four, however, had been memorialised a year earlier. By this time siblings of the fallen were inserting most of the notices.

⁴ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1947.

⁵ Mark Connelly, *The Great War, Memory and Ritual. Commemoration in the City and East London, 1916-1939* (Woodbridge 2002);

era they were displays of bereavement that sought to penetrate the carapace of communal mourning and to individualise the effects of mass industrialised warfare. *In Memoriam* notices also spread remembrance observance throughout the year. By appearing on the day of the subject's death (or more rarely on their birthday), they helped to break down the monolithic nature of communal grieving, which was channelled into certain anniversary days such as 11 November, 25 April and 1 July. *In Memoriam* notices were a daily reminder of individuals' deaths and thus not only sustained memories of personal rather than collective sacrifice in an original manner, but also signified, albeit in a small way, the rejection of the post-war habit of characterising the victims of the war as 'the Million Dead'.⁶

The study of *In Memoriams* may thus be seen to fit within the framework of Jay Winter's 'modest proposal' not to '*de-construct*, but rather *shrink* the framework of discussions of commemorative forms in the twentieth century ... [S]hifting the scale of vision from the national and the grandiose to the particular and mundane may help transform our understanding of war monuments, and of the forms of remembrance which occur surrounding them'.⁷ Winter's focus here is confined to war memorials and 'the small groups of people' in communities throughout Europe who have 'always stood between topoi and experience, between sites of memory and collective remembrance', but people like Edith Ash whose forms of remembrance were *In Memoriam* notices may also be seen to stand in a similar position.

II

Only the bare outlines of the early life of Edith Learoyd Ash, née Barnett, are known. She was born in the Kings Norton registration district of Birmingham in September 1865 to Mary and Edward Barnett, her father being a wholesale jeweller.⁸ She was the middle of three daughters and had a younger brother. In 1887, when she was a young woman of twenty-two, her father died and she and her mother went to live with her maternal grandmother in Tanshelf, Pontefract.⁹ Her father had left the family reasonably well provided for, as there were two servants in the household in 1891. How Edith came to meet her future husband remains unknown, but in December 1894 she married, in Marylebone, William Claudius Casson Ash, a Second Lieutenant in the Middlesex Regiment. He was five years her junior, having been born in Marylebone in 1870 to Mary and William Ash, and was one of a family of two boys, of which he was the elder, and two girls.¹⁰ William Ash Snr was a successful businessman, owning a firm manufacturing dental equipment that his grandfather had founded.¹¹

⁶ For widespread contemporary references to 'the Million Dead', see, for example, Bob Bushaway, 'Name Upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance', in Roy Porter (ed), *Myths of the English* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1994), p. 137; Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory. Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg 1994), pp. 11, 125; *The Times*, 17 July 1919, 11 Nov. 1921, 7 July 1924, 18 Oct. 1926, 23 Feb., 11 Nov. 1939; Charles Douie, *The Weary Road. The Recollections of a Subaltern of Infantry* (London: John Murray 1929), p. xiii.

⁷ Jay Winter, *Remembering War. The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2006), p. 135.

⁸ 1881 Census. For some of the background to Edith and her husband I am indebted to the assistance given to me by David Mannus, Julian B and Aussienoel, members of the internet site, The Great War Forum (<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/>).

⁹ 1891 census.

¹⁰ 1881 census.

¹¹ In the Great War the firm's factories supplied dental equipment to the British army. *The Times*, 20 July, 12 August 1915.

Claude (as he was known to Edith) had been educated at Westminster School and in 1890 was commissioned Second Lieutenant in the 3rd York and Lancaster Regiment, the old 65th and 84th Foot.¹² Two years later he transferred to the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex) Regiment, reverting from Lieutenant to his original rank in the process.¹³ He was to remain in this regiment, known as 'The Die-Hards', in various battalions for the remainder of his military career. In the pre-war British army promotion was slow. Ash regained his lieutenantcy in July 1895, was promoted to Captain in March 1900 and to Major in May 1909.

Under the system prevailing in the regular army before 1914, most regiments had two battalions alternating on home service and service in the empire. The Middlesex Regiment was unusual among county regiments in having, from 1900, four regular battalions, but still had only one battalion serving overseas in peacetime. Ash served with the 2nd battalion in India from 1897 and Edith went with him, for their second child, Edith Claudia Kathleen, was born in Madras in 1899.¹⁴ He missed the defeat at Spion Kop and the relief of Ladysmith by not going with the battalion when it moved to South Africa in December 1899. Instead, he returned to England with Edith and their children and in 1901 was appointed captain in the new 3rd battalion. It is possible that, with Edith so recently confined, he had sought permission to return with her to England and thus missed the opportunity to enhance his name in the South African war. Shortly afterwards, however, he did sail for South Africa, as Adjutant in the 5th volunteer militia battalion, but by then the war was over and he returned at the end of 1902 without seeing action.¹⁵ When war broke out in August 1914 Ash had been serving with the 2nd battalion in Malta for nearly two years. The battalion quickly returned to England and equally swiftly was sent to France, arriving in Le Havre in the early hours of 6 November 1914.¹⁶ By this time his cousin, Basil Claudius, had already been killed in France with the Sherwood Foresters.¹⁷

Edith Ash had thus been an army wife for twenty years when the Great War began. There is nothing, except a few faded photographs, to show how she coped with the role of an officer's wife in an imperial army as she entered middle age. She would have experienced exotic places, Malta as well as India, although cocooned within a comfortable and rigid society where her position was strictly prescribed. In England she lived an equally comfortable middle-class life, in a large house, with two servants, in the suburb of Finchley, not far from the regiment's depot at Mill Hill.¹⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that she was anything other than a respectable Victorian wife and mother typical of her class and background. Although for much of her time as an army wife she would have had to accept with stoicism the remote possibility that her husband might be killed in some small war in some far-distant part of the empire, the onset of the Great War in 1914 was to have the same shattering effect on her privileged and genteel life as it had on so many other women less prepared for the death of their husbands in action.¹⁹

¹² *The London Gazette*, 31 Jan. 1890; Ian F. W. Beckett, *Discovering English County Regiments* (Princes Risborough 2003), pp.144-6.

¹³ *The London Gazette*, 27 Sept. 1892.

¹⁴ Their first child, Mary Geraldine, had been born in London in 1896.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 5 Sept. 1902, 5 Oct. 1916.

¹⁶ 2nd Bn Middlesex Regiment War Diary, 6 Nov. 1914, NA PRO WO 95/1713.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 28 Sept. 1914.

¹⁸ 1911 census.

¹⁹ For the view that Kitchener's volunteers 'were men whose parents or wives had not accepted as one of the conditions of a professional soldier's career the possibility of an unknown grave in a foreign country', see *The Times*, 10 Nov. 1928, quoted in Bushaway, 'Name Upon Name', p. 138.

By the time that the 2nd battalion of The Die-hards arrived in France, the 1st battalion had been in almost continuous action for ten weeks and had suffered severe casualties, including its senior officers.²⁰ On 29 November Major Ash was transferred from the 2nd battalion to take command, with the temporary rank of Lt-Colonel.²¹ He was to remain in command until the end of May 1915, but did not subsequently return to the second battalion.²² He was thus present at the battle of Loos on 25 September 1915 when the 1st battalion, advancing slowly through their own gas, suffered very heavy casualties after the preliminary artillery barrage failed to destroy the enemy's wire. Ten officers were killed and seven wounded. Ash was one of the latter and was invalided home.²³

While convalescing he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, awarded the DSO and given command of a new battalion.²⁴ The 23rd battalion was a New Army (Service) unit, raised under the auspices of William Joynson Hicks, MP for Brentford, in June 1915. This was the second battalion raised by Hicks, who sought recruits from football teams, supporters as well as players.²⁵ As a result, the 23rd came to be known as the 23rd (2nd Football) Battalion. Between November 1915 and May 1916 the battalion trained at Aldershot and arrived in France in the first week of May, joining the 123rd brigade, 41st division in the trenches at Le Touquet, where they were introduced to the tactics of static trench warfare.²⁶

In August the division began moving south, towards the Somme battlefields. Intensive training took place in preparation for an attack on 15 September, in which ten divisions were to be involved in what came to be known as the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. The 41st division was given four objectives, the most important being the capture of the village of Flers and consolidation beyond it. Operational orders to the division were emphatic and optimistic:

The attack will be pushed home with the utmost vigour all along the line until the most distant objectives have been reached. For the last two and a half months we have been gradually wearing down the enemy. His moral (sic) is shaken, he has few, if any, fresh Reserves available, and there is every probability that a combined determined effort will result in a decisive victory.²⁷

Ten of the new secret weapons, tanks, were to be used in the division's sector and, for almost the first time, British battalions were to advance close behind a creeping artillery barrage, in the expectation that the first waves of attackers would arrive at their objective before the enemy had emerged from their dugouts.

The 123rd brigade was in divisional reserve on the 15th, but although the initial attacks appeared to go well, with Flers being taken, at about midday the 23rd

²⁰ 1st Bn Middlesex Regiment War Diary, 10, 1 Oct. 1914, NA PRO WO95/1365.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29 Nov. 1914.

²² Thomas O. Marden, *A Short History of the 6th Division* (1920), p. 117.

²³ *The Times*, 6 Oct. 1915.

²⁴ The DSO was for his role in trench warfare. Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, *The Story of the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment)* (London 1916), p. 184.

²⁵ Judging from the casualty list of Other Ranks at Flers, a substantial proportion of the original battalion came from the Birmingham area.

²⁶ Everard Wyrall, *The Die-Hards in the Great War* (Uckfield n.d.), Vol. 1, pp. 211, 242. The 123rd brigade comprised the 23rd Middlesex, 11th Queens, 10th Queen's Own and 20th Durham Light Infantry. All were New Army units.

²⁷ Operational Order No. 21, 14 Sept. 1916, 10th Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment War Diary, NA PRO WO 95/2638.

Middlesex was ordered to advance to assist the 124th brigade along the right of Flers wood. In the attack that followed Ash personally led one of the two advanced companies. At 5pm he was severely wounded and taken from the field. By the end of the day the battalion had lost half its complement as casualties, including three other officers killed and eight wounded.²⁸ Ash was taken to the military hospital at Étaples, but died of his wounds on 29 September.²⁹ He was buried in the local military cemetery.

III

The last time that Edith Ash saw her husband would have been just before the 23rd battalion left for France in March, six months before he was killed. She would have heard of his wounding within days of the 15 September battle and while it was not unknown for relatives of the seriously wounded to make emergency trips to French hospitals, it appears that Edith had neither the resources nor the opportunity to do so.³⁰ Ash's wounding was officially reported in *The Times* on 26 September and his death notice was published on 5 October. In this, a brief synopsis of his military career, he was described as 'the beloved husband of Edith Learoyd Ash'.³¹

On the first anniversary of his death, two *In Memoriam* notices were placed in *The Times*. This pattern of two notices was to continue until 1931, with Edith supplying one and an unknown relative the other.³² This was an unusually long time for two notices to be published and reflected a continuing desire within the wider family to express a focused and public remembrance of their lost relative. Analysis of the *In Memoriam* notices in *The Times* of those killed on 15 September 1916 shows that only one officer received two notices annually for a longer period (until 1933). This was Captain James Leslie Buckman of the 12th East Surrey Regiment, an only son. This battalion had been raised in Bermondsey and Buckman's father, the borough treasurer, had been Executive Officer of the recruiting committee.³³

The *In Memoriam* notices submitted to *The Times* by Edith Ash may be divided into a number of phases, roughly representing stages she went through during her bereavement. Since Elisabeth Kübler-Ross first published in 1969 *On Death and Dying*, her authoritative analysis of the psychology of grief, it has been generally accepted that the bereaved normally passes through five stages of grief, before the full acceptance of loss is achieved.³⁴ These stages are anger; denial; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. They are not necessarily endured sequentially and the bereaved can revert to an earlier phase, skip a stage, or even never reach closure. Pain, guilt, loss of faith and loneliness are common features of the process of bereavement.

²⁸ Wyrall, *Die-Hards*, pp.306-7.

²⁹ Ash received a posthumous Mention in Despatches, his second, in January 1917. *London Gazette*, 4 Jan. 1917, p. 235.

³⁰ For examples of family members, usually mothers and/or fathers, visiting dangerously wounded relatives in France, see *Flight Magazine*, 28 September 1916, p. 840; Gerald Gliddon, *The Aristocracy and the Great War* (Norwich 2002), p. 35.

³¹ *The Times*, 29 Sept., 5 Oct. 1916.

³² The second notice was a conventional *In Memoriam*, beginning 'In loving memory of . . .'. Its wording scarcely changed throughout the period of insertion.

³³ John Aston and L. M. Duggan, *The History of the 12th (Bermondsey) Battalion East Surrey Regiment* (London: Union Press 1936), pp. 3, 5. Buckman had transferred from the 8th Gloucesters, presumably with his father's blessing. An *In Memoriam* notice was also inserted on Buckman's birthday every year, which fell, ironically, on 11 November. The two notices came from his parents and from an uncle and aunt.

³⁴ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner 1969).

Edith Ash's *In Memoriam* maxims may partly be understood as representations of her journey through bereavement, but more importantly as time passed, as representations of a strategy to use her husband's memory for broadly political, yet not politicised, purposes. The first phase lasted from 1917 until 1921 and reflected her grief as it spiralled into numbness and passivity. By the time of the first anniversary of her husband's death she appears to have passed through the denial stage, for her notice was a conventional example of using Christian resignation to express sadness, regret and, seemingly, acceptance of his death. Emphasising that Ash had died on St. Michael's Day and signing herself 'His M. F.' (possibly a reference to a term of endearment he had used to her), she acknowledged that 'What has got to be has got to be, and what is, is best. And what is, is God's will, and therefore must be best'.³⁵ This biblical allusion to *Romans 12: 1-2* suggests stoicism buttressed by faith, but it also mirrored the sense of 'fatalism' that pervaded fighting men on both sides of the trenches and which she may have perceived in her husband's attitude to war.³⁶ Certainly, British subalterns rightly had a fatalistic attitude towards their chances of survival in the trenches.³⁷ The British rank and file soldier too, it was claimed, was particularly prone to fatalism, although most often in a superstitious form 'where God was ... a mascot and prayers became more fervent as danger loomed'.³⁸ But on the home front this fatalism was often given a Christian slant. For example, in a popular sermon subsequently published in *The Church Times*, as a pamphlet and in a book entitled *The Heroic Dead*, Canon F. Homes Dudden, Master of Pembroke College, suggested that:

We have all heard of the so-called 'fatalism' that was said to pervade the British Army. And no one, I suppose, could have better understood the utter futility of worry than the Tommy in the trenches. So many things might happen which no efforts of his could hinder. He could not stop a shell from bursting in his trench ... so what on earth was the use of worrying? 'What has got to be, has got to be', he argued philosophically. 'If your number's on it, you'll be for it; if it's coming, it's coming, and if it's not it's not, and you can't help it anyway, so let's get on with the job' ... you may call it fatalism or what you will. But it is uncommonly like the attitude of cheerful, untroubled carelessness that is recommended to us by Jesus.³⁹

Dudden expressed this view in a sermon offering reassurance to soldiers' relatives and solace to the bereaved, but for Edith, suffering the first pain of loss and consumed by misery, the doctrine of fatalism, Christian or otherwise, was to hold no lasting consolation.

³⁵ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1917.

³⁶ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: CUP 2008), p. 88.

³⁷ Winter, *Great War and the British People*, pp. 89-90; Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1983), p. 56; Anthony Fletcher, 'Patriotism, Identity and Commemoration: New Light on the Great War from the Papers of Major Reggie Chevenix Trench', *History* 90 (2005), p. 538.

³⁸ Richard Holmes, *Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Harper Perennial 2005), p. 523; Norman D. Cliff, *To Hell and Back with the Guards* (Braunton: Merlin Books 1988), p. 68; Hugh E. E. Howson (ed), *Two Men: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1919), p. 293.

³⁹ F. Homes Dudden, *The Heroic Dead and Other Sermons* (London: Longmans Green 1920), p. 87.

Christian resignation could not prevent Edith from despairing. She felt alienated and wished to hide from the world, if not to withdraw from or shun society entirely. In 1918 her epigraph was: ‘To see and remain unseen, to observe and remain obscure, is my motto’.⁴⁰ She had a similar message in 1919: ‘I don’t want to shine in any kind of glory. Let me be unsought for and left alone, and I won’t bother anyone’.⁴¹ Her ambiguity reflected her altered social status in the world, the inevitable consequence of her husband’s death. She was no longer an officer’s wife and the connection with her wider ‘family’, the regiment, was weakened if not totally broken.⁴² More broadly, inevitably but unwillingly she was being transformed from wife to war widow. Even though she shared the status of war widow with many thousands of other women, however, her age made her position anomalous. At fifty-one years of age when Claude died, she was much older than most widows and closer to the age of mothers who had lost sons in the war. It is perhaps not surprising that she sought to half-hide from a world that offered her no fixed position. By 1921 she had physically retreated from her old life too, having moved from London to Southsea in Hampshire.

At the same time Edith could not associate herself with the patriotic view that this destructive industrialised war had somehow been glorious. Her reference to avoiding glory probably referred to the government’s plans to hold a victory parade in Whitehall in November 1919. Her attitude fitted the public mood, for the parade ‘resembled a funeral march’.⁴³ This attitude was confirmed in 1920, when, as ‘E. L. A’, she spoke on behalf of her husband: ‘Don’t mention that word “gallant” in connection with me’.⁴⁴ During the next year she reached the nadir of her depression and grief. All she could offer was a notice ‘In faithful memory’ of her husband.⁴⁵ There seemed to be nothing more to say. All she had left were her memories of a life now gone and her husband’s medals, for which she had applied in 1921 soon after retiring from London.⁴⁶

IV

But phoenix-like Edith Ash rose from the ashes. The catalyst may have been the marriage in the summer of 1922 of her younger daughter (a statement that life must go on). Or it may have been that she visited her husband’s grave at Étapes in that year. The epigraph of 1922 hints at such a visit, although more likely it is an oblique reference to King George V’s visit to Étapes cemetery in May.⁴⁷

Seek out – less often sought than found –
A soldier’s grave, for thee the best,
Then look around, and choose thy ground,

⁴⁰ *The Times*, 28 Sept. 1918.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1919.

⁴² The programme for the unveiling of the 8th Division memorial at Aldershot in 1924 is among the Ash papers held by the National Army Museum, suggesting that Edith attended the service. NAM 9305/159/25.

⁴³ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory. War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: CUP 2007), p. 22.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1920.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1921.

⁴⁶ Medal Index Card, W. C. C. Ash, NA PRO WO 372 (accessed on-line through Ancestry.com). Edith had asked for his 1914 Star in November 1917, but did not apply for his other medals until February 1921.

⁴⁷ Edith kept a press cutting of the visit, dated 13 May 1922. Ash Deposit, NAM 9305/159/23.

And take thy rest.⁴⁸

This is the last stanza of Lord Byron's poem 'On this Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year', written at Missolonghi in January 1824, only a few months before his death. The poem is initially a lament that 'The flowers and fruits of love are gone'. Still capable of love, but without its prospect, Byron mourned that 'The worm, the canker, and the grief / Are mine alone!'. But the poem is a demonstration of how the lack of reciprocal love can be transcended, by espousing a noble cause, in Byron's case the cause of a shackled Greece.

Awake! (not Greece—she *is* awake!)
 Awake, my spirit! Think through *whom*
 Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake,
 And then strike home!

It is hard not to accept that the romantic Byron, with his reputation as the epitome of the volunteer soldier prepared to sacrifice himself for freedom, played his part both in reawakening the spirit of Edith Ash and supplying the seed of an idea that was to give purpose to her life.⁴⁹ For the next three years the messages she wished to convey in her *In Memoriam* notices were mediated through Byron's poetry. By 1923 she had begun to gain some comfort from the fact that, though time passes, the honour won by the war dead remained to sustain the memory of their sacrifice:

The rolling seasons pass away
 And Times, untiring, waves his wing,
 Whilst Honour's laurels ne'er decay,
 But bloom in fresh, unfading Spring.⁵⁰

From *Childe Harold*, in 1925, Edith reiterated her satisfaction that the dead remained honoured ('Honour decks the turf that wraps their clay, / . . . In these behold the tools'), but she did not shy away from the (Napoleonic) war disillusionment that Byron's poem expressed:

The broken tools, that tyrants cast away
 By myriads, when they dare to pave their way
 With human hearts – to what? – a dream alone.⁵¹

By the mid-1920s it was clear that not only had the pre-1914 world disappeared, a sad reality confirmed by the appearance of a Labour government in 1924, but also that Lloyd George's 'land fit for Heroes' had not materialised.⁵² The upper reaches of society had succumbed to a febrile frivolity, while organised labour

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1922.

⁴⁹ For Byron's role in the development of 'The myth of the War Experience' (the Great War as 'a meaningful and even sacred event' in which the views of the frontline soldier are privileged), see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990), pp. 30-1.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1923. The lines are from Byron's 'Answer to a Beautiful Poem, written by Montgomery, Author of *The Wanderer in Switzerland* etc etc entitled "The Common Lot"'.

⁵¹ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, Canto I, stanza XLII.

⁵² Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London 1990), p. 137.

expressed increasing militancy.⁵³ Woodrow Wilson's 'war to end all wars' had been won, but the fruits of victory had been meagre, especially for veterans. Had the sacrifice been for no purpose? It was a question that Byron had asked and Edith was to appropriate in her 1924 *In Memoriam* notice:

Is all that desperate Valour acts in vain?
And counsel Sage, and patriotic Zeal
The Veteran's skill, Youth's fire
And Manhood's heart of steel?⁵⁴

The question was representative of the sense of bewilderment pervading European societies in the aftermath of catastrophe and was unanswerable. In the mid-1920s most of the surviving veterans of the war remained silent, still coming to terms with their experiences. In this situation it was understandable that Edith looked back to the past to find a poet who appeared to represent her uncertain and contradictory emotions. For a while Byron suited her purpose, although ultimately his range and depth of experience could not make the results of industrialised war intelligible and his romantic hero—anti-authority, sexually promiscuous and cynical, as well as chivalrous and liberty-loving—could not stand as Edith's *beau ideal*.⁵⁵ But she took from Byron the general idea of the chivalrous knight (Childe Harold was a candidate for knighthood) and was to develop it in the following years.

V

Edith's public acceptance of the loss of her husband came on the tenth anniversary of his death and with it came clarity and certainty: that his (and her?) sacrifice had not been in vain; that he had died to protect traditional values; and that his death, honourable, dutiful and chivalric, mirrored his life. Ash was 'One of many who perished not in vain'.⁵⁶ Over the next dozen or so years, until war clouds again loomed on the horizon, Edith built up an idealised representation of her husband as a noble warrior—'my hero, my soldier-laddie'—who placed his patriotic duty above all else and sacrificed everything for his country.⁵⁷ This image sought continuity with the past by evoking the ideals of medieval chivalry and of pre-industrial patriotism. The Great War as social fracture, industrialised carnage or awful watershed was to be ignored.

Edith's shedding of her doubts and uncertainties coincided towards the end of the 1920s with a wave of war literature as veterans found their voices in fiction, 'faction', poetry and autobiography. 'Disenchantment and defiance are the chief notes' of the poetry, wrote one anonymous literary critic, and the same might be said of some writings in other genres, often by the same relatively small group of surviving war poets, with Siegfried Sasson, Edmund Blunden and Robert Graves at

⁵³ Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London 2002), p.7; Brian Bond, 'Disenchantment Revisited', in Michael Howard (ed.), *A Part of History: Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War* (London 2008), p. 117.

⁵⁴ *Childe Harold*, Canto 1, stanza LIII.

⁵⁵ For an example of the inability of Byron's poetry adequately to represent the reality of trench warfare, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London 1979), p. 170.

⁵⁶ A line taken from Adam Lindsay Gordon's 'By Flood and Field (A Legend of the Cottiswold)', in Gordon, *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (Melbourne 1867). Edith used this in *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1927.

⁵⁷ The phrase comes from Robert Burns' song of 1785, 'The Jolly Beggars: a Cantata', and was used by Edith in 1931. *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1931.

the forefront.⁵⁸ They developed ‘a new, iconoclastic language of truth-telling about war’ and rejected “the Big Words” (or ‘high’ diction) that had underpinned the war effort.⁵⁹ Honour, chivalry, glory, patriotism and duty were concepts that disillusioned veterans thought politicians and warmongers had misused to persuade tens of thousands of young men to volunteer for a war that had led to their deaths in horrendous conditions for no good purpose. They thought these words belonged to a world that was now as dead as those whose remains lay broadcast in fields and cemeteries in France, Belgium and around the Mediterranean and Aegean shores. As Blunden said of *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, at a ceremony when Sassoon won the Hawthornden Prize in 1929, the book, which dealt with the “golden age” before 1914, was ‘a spiritual history of the last phase of country England’.⁶⁰

Despite support from intellectuals and pacifists, the anti-war poets’ claims of victory for the modernist worldview were premature.⁶¹ Although their works are still in print and form a major foundation stone of popular views of the Great War today (‘they remain at the heart of the modern British mythology of the First World War’, states one recent historian), they had less impact on the attitudes of the majority of middlebrow Middle England during the interwar years.⁶² Rather, most of the bereaved, whose feelings had been ignored by this new school of ironic frontline war literature, continued to seek consolation from ‘well-established Victorian sentiments and the euphemisms of wartime propaganda’.⁶³

The ‘Big Words’ that the war poets satirised and rejected were precisely the words that Edith Ash applied to her husband. She ignored the poems and the verses of Great War veterans, the one exception being Grantland Rice’s, an American sports journalist and Great War veteran whose first book of poems was published in 1917 before he went to war and were traditional in subject and character.⁶⁴ Instead and as might be expected, most of Edith’s sources were from the Victorian era. Many of her literary intermediaries were celebrities in their day and often anthologised, but the reputations of few have survived the passage of time. Among those in whose work she found meaning was Adam Lindsay Gordon (1883-1870), a Scotsman who was to be embraced by Australians as one of their national poets, and William Henry Ogilvie, another Scotsman to be found in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ ‘The Georgian Writers: Some New Reputations, Survivals from a Past Age’, *ibid.*, 3 May 1935. For the view that Paul Fussell, in his celebrated *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford 1979), focused on only this very small group of disillusioned war poets, see Leonard V. Smith, ‘Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-Five Years Later’, *History and Theory* 40 (2001), p. 243.

⁵⁹ Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 22; Goebel, *Great War and Medieval Memory*, p. 10.

⁶⁰ *The Times*, 13 July 1929.

⁶¹ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge 1995), pp. 2-10, who argues that modernism only ultimately triumphed after the Second World War and the Holocaust.

⁶² Don Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London 2005), p. 155. See also, Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (Oxford 1993); Hugh Cecil, *The Flower of Battle: How Britain Wrote the Great War* (London 1996); Peter Simkins, ‘Everyman at War: Recent Interpretations of the Front Line Experience’, in Brian Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford 1991), pp. 311-12.

⁶³ Gregory, *Silence of Memory*, pp. 120-1; Goebel, *Great War and Medieval Memory*, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁴ Mark Inabinett, *Grantland Rice and His Heroes. The Sportswriter as Mythmaker in the 1920s* (Knoxville 1994), pp. 2-5; *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=R031> (accessed 23 March 2010).

⁶⁵ Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870), <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040302b.htm>, accessed 17 Mar. 2010; William Henry Ogilvie (1869-1963), <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A110076b.htm>, accessed 17 Mar. 2010.

As these examples suggest, Edith Ash did not confine herself to English literary figures. Thomas Moore (1779-1852), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) and James Jeffrey Roche (1847-1908) were Irish; Alexander Anderson (1845-1909), another Scot; only Cosmo Monkhouse (1840-1901) was English (and he served a purpose for Edith somewhat different from the others). They shared in common, however, a Romantic, often Gothic, spirit and the Victorians' great interest in medievalism, empire and adventure. Using selections of their writings as building blocks, Edith Ash (re)created her husband as a dashing, heroic, sporting and chivalrous knight, who sacrificed himself on the altar of duty for his country.

The *chevalier* Ash was brave, the very 'type of our chivalry'.⁶⁶ On the day he died, 'A strong man was stretched, a brave heart was stilled'.⁶⁷ No tears needed to be shed: 'Give his ashes never a sigh'.⁶⁸ Only a 'Death-drink' from his comrades was necessary, for he was 'a brave man gone to where we all must go'.⁶⁹ In 1932, the tenth anniversary year of the king's visit to Étapes cemetery, Edith was reminded of her husband's grave, surrounded by so many others. Beside him were his 'Fellow labourers in life' and it was but just that 'they slumber in death / Side by side as befits the true brave'.⁷⁰

Before the trumpet of duty called him to modern war, Ash, ironically like Sassoon, had been a sportsman, his main interests being cricket and hunting (the latter an essential requirement for a pre-war British officer, especially one who served in India). For Ash, cricket was a passion. He had played for Westminster School against Charterhouse in 1888 and subsequently played for the school's Old Boys, Free Foresters, Berkshire and, once, in 1896, for MCC against Cambridgeshire. He had also served on the committee of Middlesex CC.⁷¹ Edith illuminated this side of her husband's character by espousing the common pre-war metaphor of sport as preparation for war, using lines from a poem by Grantland Rice, who was celebrated for his likening sport with ancient combat:

And when the One Great Scorer comes
To write against your name,
He won't record the result of the match
But how you played the game.⁷²

Rice was writing about American gridiron football, but the most renowned poem associating sport with war was Sir Henry Newbolt's poem *Vitai Lamparda* (1897), in which dauntless resolution and courage on the school cricket field reached their apotheosis on an imperial battlefield, where the subaltern's rallying cry was 'Play up!

⁶⁶ Gordon, 'By Flood and Field', used by Edith in *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1927.

⁶⁷ From Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's poem 'Phaudrig Crohoore', first published in *Dublin University Magazine*. See William Richard Le Fanu, *Seventy Years of Irish Life: Being Anecdotes and Reminiscences* (London 1896), pp. 93-6. In the poem Crohoore (Patrick Connor) died in the 1798 rebellion, after kidnapping 'the love of his heart', Kathleen O'Brien. For Edith's use of the poem, *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1929.

⁶⁸ Gordon, 'By Flood and Field', used by Edith in *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1927.

⁶⁹ Adam Lindsay Gordon, 'Gone', in Gordon, *Poems by Adam Lindsay Gordon* (Melbourne 1893). Edith used the last four lines of the poem in *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1930.

⁷⁰ From Thomas Moore's Irish melody, 'Lay His Sword by His Side', used by Edith in *ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1932.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18 July 1896. The 2nd Middlesex won the association football Rovers Cup in India in 1897 and, of course, the 23rd Middlesex was a 'football' battalion.

⁷² Grantland Rice, 'Alumnus Football', *Songs of the Stalwart* (New York 1917). Edith has changed the third line, which Rice wrote as, 'He marks – not that you won or lost'. *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1926.

Play up! and play the game!'.

Cricket and fox hunting were integral parts of the world that Sassoon had lost.⁷³ Edith, too, focused on the imagery of fox hunting, not to explain or lament the passing of its world, but partly as a metaphor for her husband, the knight on horseback, and partly as a reminder to politicians, vacillating and reluctant to act decisively against the threat from fascism. In 1936, the year that Hitler invaded the Rhineland without opposition, Edith took her message from William Henry Ogilvie's poem, 'The Straight Goer'. Ogilvie, whose definition of a 'true sportsman' was a man who has 'a noble knight's contempt for low, left-handed things', was an admirer of Adam Lindsay Gordon, with whom he shared a love of horses. 'The Straight Goer', ostensibly about foxhunting, was a metaphor for life. Its main theme was the distinction between those, whether fox, hound, horse or rider in hunting pink, who played by the rules and did not hold back, and those who shirked or 'skirted'. Ogilvie had no time for the fox of 'The ringing, hanging hen-roost thief' type, or for 'The loafing, skirting, loud-mouthed hound that hangs about your horse'. The game of life is played best by the fox that 'holds his point though fools and fate combine', while 'The leader running straight and true's the hound of our desire'. As in sport, so in life, thought Edith, when she used Ogilvie's following lines:

And in the larger field of life let skirterers stand aside,
Make way for those who want to work, and those dare to ride,
The only one who is worth a place to risk a fall with Fate,
Is he who steels his gallant heart and rides his country straight.⁷⁴

Of all the 'Big Words' Edith sought to keep pure in the interwar years, duty—probably the primary ideal in the Victorian revival of chivalry—was of most significance for her.⁷⁵ Only duty could have taken her husband away from her; only duty could have persuaded him to make the supreme sacrifice. 'His duty first; all the rest was second', her message of 1934 stated.⁷⁶ It was Claude's badge of gentility. That she accepted, albeit probably with some regret, her husband's order of priorities is suggested from her 1937 message, taken from James Jeffrey Roche's poem 'Sir Hugo's Choice'. Sir Hugo was a French knight and Warder of the Aisne and Picardy region (incorporating, of course, the Somme battlefield where Ash was killed). His great exploits and deeds filled the 'book immortal of chivalrie'. But disaster struck when a rival kidnapped the princess he was about to marry. Just as he was setting off in pursuit, he received from the king an order to join him in the war against the Flemish. Sir Hugo obeyed his king; left the princess to her fate; and was killed in battle. It was better, as the poem went, that he were to die 'in the full noontide of an

⁷³ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Weald of Youth* (London 1942).

⁷⁴ William Henry Ogilvie, 'The Straight Goer', in Ogilvie, *The Collected Sporting Verses of W. H. Ogilvie* (London 1932); *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1936. The lines Edith used may also have implied criticism of the unemployed.

⁷⁵ For duty as an ideal for the chivalrous Victorian gentleman, see Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven 1981).

⁷⁶ Taken from Alexander Anderson, 'Phillips of Pelhamville', first published in Donald MacLeod (ed.), *Good Works for 1886* (London 1886), p. 765. It is likely, however, that Edith took the lines from a section entitled 'Stories of Heroes' in E. Davonport, *Story Poems for Young and Old* (London 1891). The poem is a highly fictionalised account of a train crash in America, in which the driver, Riley Phillips, warned of an oncoming train just before he died. In reality, Phillips survived and no other train was at risk. Blake Bell, 'Historic Pelham', <http://historicpelham.blogspot.com/2007/12/1886-poem-representing-fictionalized.html> (accessed 13 January 2010). Davonport's book was republished in 2007.

honoured name' than ignore duty to his country. For Edith it was a 'simple story / Of Duty dearer than love or life'.⁷⁷

There was no bitterness in Edith's messages as she sought to establish her husband's place in 'the Book of Glory',⁷⁸ but she could not always conceal her continuing sense of loss, her sadness and her loneliness. Suggesting that it had a particular resonance, she repeated a message only once, in 1935, after first using it two years before. It came from Cosmo Monkhouse's 'A Dead March', which had been first published in 1890 and anthologised five years later:

Play me a march low-toned and slow –
A march for the silent tread.
Fit for the wandering feet of one
Who dreams of the mighty dead.
Lonely, between the bones below
And the souls that are overhead.⁷⁹

Despite the uniqueness of her way of dealing with her husband's death, which she continued to romanticise, Edith was still struggling to cope with its consequences two decades after the event.

VI

One expectation that most of Middle England shared with the war poets in the interwar period was that the Great War had been 'the war to end all wars'. By the late 1930s these hopes were becoming increasingly illusory, if they had not always been so.⁸⁰ In September 1938 Edith Ash's annual message coincided with a major international emergency: the Sudetenland crisis. Indeed, the highpoint of appeasement, Britain and France's agreement with Germany in Munich, was signed on the very day Edith's *In Memoriam* was published. On the surface, her message appeared to be a continuation of her previous focus on duty taking a man away from his loved-one. The source was 'Emer's Farewell to Cucullain', Irish lyrics set to the music of 'Danny Boy' and published in 1882.⁸¹ But the lines used by Edith also suggest another purpose: to exhort the Chamberlain government to stand up to the threat from Nazi Germany, even if war was the consequence. Clearly, Mrs Ash was no appeaser.

But go! Connacia's hostile trumpets call thee,
Thy chariot mount, and ride the ridge of war.
And prove what feat of arms befall thee
The hope and pride of Emer of Lismore.⁸²

⁷⁷ 'Sir Hugo's Choice' was first published in *Scribner's Magazine* and then in *Ballads of Blue Water and Other Poems* (Boston 1895), pp. 36-8. Edith probably took it from Davonport's *Story Poets for Young and Old*. Her *In Memoriam* is in *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1937.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Cosmo Monkhouse, 'A Dead March', in Edmund Clarence Stedman (ed.), *A Victorian Anthology 1837 to 1895* (London 1895), p. 277. *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1933, 29 Sept. 1935.

⁸⁰ Jay Winter, 'Foreword', in Laurence Housman (ed.), *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (1930: Philadelphia 2002), pp. xviii-xxi.

⁸¹ [Albert Percival Graves], 'Emer's Farewell to Cucullain', in *Songs of Old Ireland: A Collection of Fifty Irish Melodies* (1886).

⁸² *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1938.

The government, however, continued to slink like ‘skirters’ until Hitler’s invasion of Poland finally forced its hand.

As we have seen, in the interwar years Edith frequently used the idiom of a Romantic Victorian medievalism in her annual public commemoration of her husband. In doing so, she had conformed to widespread practice, for after 1918, having been ‘essentially . . . a discourse of identity, . . . medievalism was transmuted into a discourse of mourning in an age of industrialised carnage’. Her favourite trope, of the chivalrous knight bravely putting duty before self-interest, was part of ‘a discourse recovering the individual soldier who had perished in the anonymous battles of materiel in the machine age’.⁸³ Most commentators agree that this nostalgic discourse disappeared as a result of the Second World War. If, as Winter writes, in the interwar period ‘most men and women were still able to reach back into their “traditional” cultural heritage to express amazement and anger, bewilderment and compassion’, the different scale of atrocity that the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear destruction represented rendered all traditional languages meaningless.⁸⁴ Chivalry could not survive Auschwitz.

Edith Ash’s own war journey followed the broad contours of this analysis, although she began to avoid Victorian medievalist imagery at the beginning of the war, years before the full horrors of the Death Camps and the atomic bomb were common knowledge. The war itself, with its barbarous attacks on civilians and its genuine threat to the integrity of the nation state and the English way of life, appeared to make the medievalist idiom redundant. Although seemingly abandoning her allegorical approach, however, Edith retained the essence of her pre-war campaign, a vital part of which was the unbreakable link between the past and the present. A greater realism replaced allegory, with the knight of chivalry being superseded by the combatants of the Great War, whose example she used to embolden the new military generation. Her message published just three weeks after the outbreak of war conflates the men of 1939 with the men of 1914:

As it was then, so it is now,
With her ships and planes and guns.
Proud England shows her Might and Right
Because of her dauntless sons.⁸⁵

These sons (‘You, and those like you’), as ‘in years gone by’, are connected by ‘the same simple words, / “courage to do or die”’.⁸⁶

In the dark days of September 1940, with the RAF in desperate conflict with the Luftwaffe in the skies over her home, Edith made this conjunction more explicit. She imagined the Great War dead encouraging the new generation of warriors to protect England’s freedom as they themselves had done (thus conflating the achievements of the Great War generation with the objectives of the contemporary generation in a way that would seem incongruous to those who today continue to view the Great War as futile):

From the ranks of the valiant dead

⁸³ Goebel, *Great War and Medieval Memory*, p. 14.

⁸⁴ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, p. 9. See also Gregory, *Silence of Memory*, p. 172; Connelly, *Great War, Memory and Ritual*, p 8.

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 28 Sept. 1939.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1941, 29 Sept. 1942.

Rings forth the imperial strain:
 What we did for England's freedom
 Ye bravely do again.⁸⁷

The dialogue of encouragement and exhortation between the Great War dead and the armed forces of the next generation continued in Edith's 1943 message, with a challenge from the past being boldly answered by the present in Churchillian language:

Can'st thou? Once more that challenge
 Came sounding down the years;
 We can, rang forth the answer,
 Thro' blood and sweat and tears.⁸⁸

Edith's rhetoric was now less exalted than before the war and her Romantic imagery was more muted, but until most of the danger had passed she still relied on 'high' diction language to make her point.

Edith Ash's messages during the war years followed the ebb and flow of Britain's fortunes. Until 1943 she had expressed a patriotic defiance and a determination 'To keep the old flag flying'.⁸⁹ As the war turned in the allies' favour, there was little triumphalism in her messages. Rather, there was pride that the nation had possessed the resolution once again to make the sacrifices required to meet the challenge of war. In 1944, she described those who were fighting as 'This Happy Breed':

Oh, not in sorrow only, but in proud gladness,
 We go on learning of each valorous deed;
 We prove as time goes on, that *ever* with us
 Are those who earn the name, "This Happy Breed".⁹⁰

Once again, Edith associated the present with the past. The phrase 'This Happy Breed' comes, of course, from John of Gaunt's monologue in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, one of the most patriotic speeches in the English language. It was also the title of Noel Coward's play, written in 1939 but not performed on stage until 1943. A film of the play was first shown in the cinemas in the following year. Coward's production is about an ordinary suburban London family in the interwar years. It intermixes the events of their daily lives and their conflicting responses to some of the great events of the period: the demobbing of soldiers in 1919; the General Strike of 1926; Edward VIII's abdication in 1936; and the Munich crisis of 1938. There is some intergenerational political friction. Head of the family Frank Gibbons, with his next-door neighbour Bob Mitchell, are both veterans of the Great War and represent a conservative response to major events. In 1926, as strike-breakers, they volunteer to drive and conduct a London bus (returning home drunk, singing *Rule Britannia*); Frank is strongly opposed to the Munich agreement of 1938. At the same time, however, Frank acknowledges the need for social change, but at a slow, incremental "English" pace. The play ends before the war begins, with Frank and his wife leaving

⁸⁷ Ibid., 29 Sept. 1940.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 29 Sept. 1943.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 29 Sept. 1941.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 29 Sept. 1944. My italics.

Clapham to live in the country (a retreat from the modern world to a pastoral ideal?).

It is unsurprising that Edith was attracted by the play's message and used it herself, for it suggested that the lower end of Middle England embraced the values that she admired.⁹¹ Frank's Disraelian conservatism, an unfulfilled product of the Great War, may not have been prominent in Edith's interwar messages, but the film's representation of English stoicism and resilience certainly was, even though refracted through a Romantic prism. *The Times'* reviewer of Coward's play thought that Frank Gibbons spoke 'for an England which though tired is still possessed of an invincible stamina'.⁹² In 1943 there may have been an element of propaganda in this judgement, but the capacity for endurance was a characteristic that Edith herself certainly exhibited.

VII

Edith was eighty years of age and her husband had been dead for nearly thirty years when the war ended. With the crushing of Germany, she felt that finally the dead of the Great War could rest in peace and that therefore her campaign was over:

And when the Call to Peace came sounding later,
When years ahead had vanquished every foe,
Then may our heroes rest for ever with us,
To ease our hearts in memory's tranquil glow.⁹³

This last line suggests the mellowing of her grief, although she continued to display regret that the happy years of her marriage had been cut short by 'the Call' that led her husband to the battlefield.⁹⁴ In the post-war years she reverted to using the Romantic and chivalric literature from the period of her married life and again confined her maxims to the memory of her husband alone, as a brave man following his duty.⁹⁵ Even the classically English knight, St George, made his appearance in 1951, when she used the expatriate American Louise Imogen Guiney's poem 'The Knight Errant' to express her husband's chivalrous preference for:

A short life in the saddle
Not long life by the fire.⁹⁶

In Edith's case, the Second World War did not lead to the abandonment of the Victorian Romantic idiom and its words of 'high' diction. She remained steadfast to a past world that had disappeared everywhere but in her mind.

Edith Ash's long career as her husband's remembrancer may be interpreted as an extraordinary love affair that ended only with her death, nearly forty years after her husband's. Her final message, in 1953, is particularly appropriate and poignant:

⁹¹ It also noticed the camaraderie of the British Legion. Connelly, *Great War, Memory and Ritual*, p. 204.

⁹² *The Times*, 1 May 1943.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1945.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1948.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1949, 29 Sept. 1950, 29 Sept. 1952.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1951. Louise Imogen Guiney, 'The Knight Errant (Donatello's St George)', in *A Roadside Harp: A Book of Verses* (London 1893). The screen of the war memorial at Ash's old school, Westminster, has a solid oak carving of St George slaying the dragon at its centre. C. F. Kernot, *British Public Schools War Memorials* (London 1927), p. 220.

O, memories!
O Past that is!⁹⁷

These are the final lines of George Eliot's 'Two Lovers', a poem concerning two young people from the first blush of their romance, through their fecund married life, to their old age. It is a story of sharing and togetherness and a lifetime of loving.⁹⁸ Such a prospect for Edith was to be abruptly cut short by a war that not only destroyed her happiness but also the world that she knew and understood and felt comfortable with. She survived by finding a purpose for that traditional world that also enabled her publicly to keep her private memory of her husband alive and to make him useful, even after death. She would have profoundly disagreed with Sassoon's accusation, in his bitter misogynist poem 'Glory of Women', that 'you believe / That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace'.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1953. In 1954 there was no maxim attached to her *In Memoriam*.

⁹⁸ George Eliot, 'Two Lovers', in Jone Johnson Lewis (ed.), *Women's History: Poems by Women*, http://womenshistory.about.com/library/etext/poem1/blp2_eliot_two_lovers.htm (accessed 23 March 2010).

⁹⁹ Siegfried Sassoon, 'Glory of Women', in Jon Silkin (ed.), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, 2nd Ed. (London 1981), p. 132.

Mrs Ash with her two daughters.

