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Home > News > Opinion

Opinion

Keep omagh words simple

Friday, September 21, 2007

By Eric Waugh

When it comes to memorials, I have always thought fewest words are best. The folk in Omagh have endured enough already. They should not now be put through a petty dispute about the wording on their planned memorial. That wording should never seek to score points. It should be for remembrance alone, not politics.

If explanations are desired for the visitor from afar, there should be ample scope for them on an accompanying panel nearby. But the memorial itself should not be debased to the level of a political tract. Names and dates will do, with perhaps an agreed quotation.

When the drama of the selection of the unknown soldier of the Great War was played out in Flanders and Westminster in November 1920, culminating in his burial in the Abbey, the arrangements largely reflected the very simple idea of an little known Army padre, the Rev David Railton.

In the spring of 1916, when the plans for the four and a half months' campaign known as the Battle of the Somme were being drawn up, he was returning from the front line one evening at dusk to his billet near Armentieres, south of Ypres.

Behind it was a small garden and in it a single grave. A cross of raw, white wood stood at one end. On this had been scrawled in deeply-indented lead pencil, 'An unknown British soldier (of the Black Watch)'.

He felt very helpless in his inability to do anything to ease the pain of the unknown family to whom that particular patch of earth would be of supreme significance. But he never forgot it.

In August 1920, nearly two years after the Armistice, he finally summoned up the courage to write to the Dean of Westminster, Herbert Ryle, that he might consider burying in the Abbey the remains of an unknown soldier. The inspiration spread upwards quickly, to the War office, then to Number Ten, to the Cabinet and finally to Buckingham Palace. The rest, of course, is history.

At the funeral service on November 11, as the choir sang Psalm 23, the coffin was laid in soil from the Ypres salient and a slab of black marble from Namur was placed on the top of the tomb, which is inset in the floor just inside the great west door. It was Dean Ryle who composed the wordy inscription which is engraved upon it. It goes on and on at some length; and then there is, from my recollection, a text from the Bible engraved round the margin. So simple an idea, I have always thought, rather spoilt by this last fussiness.

The French also espoused Railton's inspiration. If you stand beneath the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, in the chilly breeze which ruffles the great tricolour above and which appears to blow round the slight eminence of the Etoile even on the hottest day of summer, you will find a simple dedication indeed: "Ici reste un soldat inconnu, mort pour la patrie." That is all. And, in that setting, it says it all, does it not?

Fr Tom Toner wants to see more police on the streets of west Belfast. Do not we all? In east Belfast, north and south too! And in the urban and rural reaches of all six counties! But the rest of the nation is the same.

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Everyone wants to see the old-fashioned bobby back. They say he is no longer to be seen.

They say he spends too much time filling up forms. Well, we have it from the horse's mouth. Stuart Davidson, an English constable, says they could achieve much more if they were allowed to get out from behind their desks. He says young colleagues are leaving the UK in droves, just when they are becoming useful, to join the police in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. One Australian force is recruiting 600 new officers, the majority of them British.

Davidson himself has been in Canada to see policing in Alberta. Briefed one evening, they all went out on patrol to look for criminals. Not two or three officers, he said, with the rest left behind doing paperwork. They all went out. Soon they picked up a 15-year-old drunk with a knife. He was charged and taken home to his parents within the hour. Do that in the UK, said he, and the paperwork would fill the rest of the shift. ("Gee," said the Canadians, "how do you guys ever solve anything?")

Davidson maintains that police services in the UK have become machines of social engineering, not crime-fighting. As for the emigration, when even the police start leaving the country, he suggests it may be time to admit to problems. In Northern Ireland we could tell him we have been here long ago - when Patten, in his anti-RUC zeal, lost the baby with the bath water. We now pay the price.

The experience which would guide the way to a practical solution of Fr Toner's community problem is now well settled in, thank you, and sinking a sundowner on the terrace at Los Arenales del Sol.

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