

## Thinking about the Roll of Honour

*A speech by Rachel, Portobello High School*



Look at this. I have been here for years now and passed by this list virtually every day not thinking about what the list means. It is a list of pupils and teachers who gave their life fighting for our future. Home-grown men from Portobello who joined up as fathers, sons, teachers, parents, pupils but all became brothers fighting for freedom.

Such heroism is passed and bypassed in the hum drum of everyday life. This list is not only honoured in moments like today's ceremony, but it is honoured by the pupils who pass it thinking about their futures beyond these walls for in those plans lie dreams and a freedom that these men sacrificed.

But reflection needs some work – doesn't it?

In some ways 1917 is a time that is unrecognisable to our own experience. I can't imagine a world without mobile phones and the internet – and yet it is quite a leap for young people to feel grateful for these modern freedoms, it is difficult to realise that people, so different, in a time so different are the ones responsible for the freedoms and interests that I, we, enjoy today.

Alexander talked to you about how reflections must have changed over a lifetime– let me talk you through the thought processes that have changed my reflections over the last year.

At first education didn't help – learning about the horrendous physical realities of war made trench warfare seem like a dark nightmare world. It was difficult to believe that these men were swallowed in mud and lost in the harrowing fog of mustard gas. I remember thinking how could this happen – how could we allow this to happen? Education at first, made the gulf between our world and theirs all the greater.

It was only when standing in assembly an epiphany occurred. Glancing at the older students standing at the back – pupils two years older - it dawned on me that they would be old enough to fight. How could these young men be expected to hold their own against people twice their age and experience? How could these boys, still living at home, under the care and love of their parents be equipped to kill strangers and survive years in dark, hostile trenches? Looking at them bored at assembly, twitching to get out of the hot stuffy assembly hall, I could well imagine their initial thirst for adventure as they were promised that the war would only last for a year and that they'd see Europe and be home, as heroes, for Christmas. Imagine a shared adventure pitched to you like that. It was only by looking at these young people, on the brink of life, that I realised how young those first soldiers from school must have been.

I looked at my year group – we look up to those who are higher up the school and would have felt those shuddering deaths of the year group gone before – not to University or to a tangible future built on hard work and dreams, but to war. Think of the whispering realities that would come home with injured soldiers. Think about seeing someone in assembly then only a few months later witnessing his war beaten body scarred forever, and doing that terrible thing of trying not to look

but being shocked at the transformation all the same. Think of the next cohort starting to sign up out of loyalty, patriotism but with a wee bit more trepidation as more and more faces vanish into the murky front.

Schools are a community which binds you for a lifetime through shared memories. I can't imagine reading a list of my classmates' names and mourning for friends, acquaintances and even friends and memories I might have made if the future had been free.

Quite a lot for a moment's reflection isn't it? We owe it to the soldiers of the past to remember but also contextualise their sacrifice by putting our modern selves in their shoes. We are not so different. We have friends, family, ambitions, desires, fears. The more I think of it the more similar we are and the more remarkable their sacrifice was. I have made a pledge to all those who have fought for my freedom. As I grow old, achieve some of my dreams and gain the experience born out of a varied life, I will continue to understand what it is to sacrifice a whole life. As a teenager I am beginning to wonder how young soldiers faced warfare when all their lives they had been sheltered and nurtured. If I become a parent I will THEN understand more the torture of having your precious child in peril and if I am lucky enough to reach old age I'll marvel at how much life was lost NOT IN NUMBERS BUT IN YEARS, IN MEMORIES, IN EXPERIENCES. This is a life time's commitment that I am making to remembrance. I challenge you to do the same.