**Lawrence Rowntree**

**by Chris Cade**

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*‘Jean Wilhelma Rowntree’ is dressed in plain 1920’s clothing. The story is set in 1924. Behind her is a poster: ‘Remember Scarborough, Enlist Now!’*

It’s ten years since the Great War started and our world changed forever. One specific day is etched on my memory. The last day of November 1917. Friday. I was just home from the Mount School in York. I was excited about the weekend. I was twelve years old.

I remember the telegraph boy riding up the drive. He must have propped his bicycle against the wall. Anyway, it set Hamlet, our Great Dane, off barking. The front door bell rang. I could hear talking, then it went very quiet.

Next thing I knew, mother was sobbing loudly. My elder sister, Toni (Sara Antoinette) and I ran down stairs. Mother was slumped in a chair in the hall. It was bad news that she held in her hand.

*(reads:)* ‘30-11-17. On His Majesty’s Service. From: The War Office

To: Mrs Rowntree, Low Hall, Scalby, Scarborough

Deeply regret to inform you 2/Lt L. E. Rowntree R(oyal)F(ield)A(rtillery) was killed in action November twenty fifth. The Army Council express their sympathy.’

‘Lawrie, won’t be home for Christmas,’ I remember thinking, ‘and now I’ll never be a bridesmaid.’

You see, Lawrence, our elder brother, was engaged to marry Dorothy Cross. They were childhood sweethearts. They hadn’t set a date with the war dragging on.

Father died before I was born. Mother was expecting me when they sailed to America on Quaker business. He’d been ill for a while, that’s why they’d moved from York to Scarborough for the bracing salt-sea air. I was named after my father. He was John Wilhelm Rowntree and I am Jean Wilhelma Rowntree. I’m at (Somerville College) Oxford, now, reading History.

I’ve seen History in the making. We were crossing Germany when the war started and we got stuck in Switzerland. Mother had taken us to pick up my eldest sister Margaret who had been on holiday there. We heard the guns. I was frightened. The British Consul got us out, somehow.

You must have heard of my grandfather, Joseph Rowntree, he founded the Cocoa Works in Haxby Road in York. Anyway, Rowntrees & Company would have been sending the troops individual tins of chocolate for Christmas 1917 again on behalf of King George and Queen Mary. I remember thinking, ‘that’s not right, Lawrie won’t get his’.

Grandfather was heart-broken to lose his eldest son, but to lose his grandson must have been even more devastating. No one expects to outlive their grandchildren, especially when they are so fit and healthy and in their prime. Lawrie was a sportsman, you know, before the war. Football, swimming and rowing, you name it.

I didn’t understand it at the time, but as one of the Religious Society of Friends, Lawrie could have been a conscientious objector when war was declared in August 1914. Quakers are pacifists, you see. Not cowards as some said. He wanted to do his bit for the war effort, but he couldn’t kill his fellow man.

Anyway, Lawrie was a first-year medical student at King’s College, Cambridge and had studied the year before in Haverford Quaker College, Pennsylvania, near where father is buried. He naturally volunteered for the Friends Ambulance Unit without a great deal of thought, rather than the army. It was founded at his school, you see. Bootham School, in York. The Ambulance Unit would come under the Red Cross. The Friends would relieve suffering and save lives. If anyone could bear a stretcher, it was my big, strong brother.

Everybody thought the war would be over by Christmas. How wrong they were. We could have done with Lawrie and his ambulance here in Scarborough that December, the 16th. A Wednesday it was, just after breakfast. We heard the blasts in Scalby. I thought it was thunder at first. It was German battlecruisers shelling Scarborough. Aiming at the Castle, the lighthouse and the Grand Hotel. But Scarborough had no weapons to defend herself. There was a great panic and lots of people rushed to the railway station and to the outskirts of the town. I remember mother ushering some of the shell-shocked inside at home, we had plenty of room in Low Hall. I remember my governess didn’t come and there were no lessons that day. When the dust settled, we found out eighteen innocent civilians, men, women and children were killed that morning and many more injured.

‘Baby killers,’ Winston Churchill (First Lord of the Admiralty) called the enemy. I don’t know how many children were killed, but I do know I was frightened and I slept with Toni that night. ‘Remember Scarborough, enlist now!’ said the posters. Oh, they make it sound so glorious to go and do your duty for king and country!

Well my brother, Lawrie, didn’t enlist at that stage as he was already volunteering in France with the Friends. He had been sent to Dunkirk in the October. I know the details because he wrote a journal. He gave it to grandfather one leave when he was back home. Grandfather gave it to me when the war finally came to an end. I shall always treasure it.

The more I read of the horrors of war, as he saw them, the more I pray for lasting peace for the world. Was this really the war to end all wars? I think Lawrie himself was shocked by what he saw and what he had to deal with. He called his journal ‘A Nightmare, in three acts.’

*(reads from the ‘journal’:)*

‘The wounded French soldiers were brought in, in train loads of 400 to 600 from the trenches in Belgium. They were on their way to the big base hospitals in Le Havre, Cherbourg and further down the coast……Dunkirk was really just a rest station where the bad wounds could be re-dressed and the men fed….no serious operations were performed there.’

At first, the Friends Ambulance Unit looked after their patients in evacuation sheds:

*(reads:)* ‘No beds for the men, just straw, which was apparently left there until it wore away and which was thick with dirt, blood and septic dressings from those who had been there before……Where the wounds were septic, the pain could usually be eased a good deal by letting out the matter and helped on the way towards cleanliness by the peroxide spray and iodine.’ I bet that stung!

As well as driving motor ambulances, Lawrie had taken grandfather’s car, a huge Daimler, with his permission of course. Grandmother argued with him. She was reluctant to let ‘her’ car go. She’d be even more upset if she realised what Lawrie did with it. He painted it camouflage grey and clocked up thousands of miles dodging shells and delivering medical supplies, clothes and food and drink into war torn towns where they had makeshift hospitals.

The Friends were unpaid volunteers who found themselves in life threatening situations. Ever modest, Lawrie, praised his friends rather than take any glory himself. One in particular was Jack King:

*(reads:)* ‘He had been working up at the Ypres dressing station for the last four days feeling very ill….. a temperature of 102…..he had been running in and out of the inferno they had made of Ypres, risking death or worse any moment, through a town peopled only by the dead and the dying and half-crazy civilians. He must have brought out about 100 people. All under fire. If anyone ever deserved recognition of valour it was him.’

Had the war sent my brother ‘half crazy?’ I wondered. After he’d been back home to Scalby on leave in Spring 1916, Toni and I were told to leave him to sleep and recover. I didn’t know it then, but he must have been writing the last bit of his journal in his bedroom. We thought he had hated his experience, yet it seems he was itching to return to his ‘nightmare’:

*(reads:)* ‘… the desire to get out again is very strong. The excitement of it, even the fear is enticing; the glorious feeling when you overcome difficulties you thought were insuperable, and the jolly companionship of everyone which you get in face of a common danger.’

Why did he want to risk his life in a foreign land with his friends rather than be safe at home with his family?

He made his choice when under the Military Service Act, conscription was announced for all young single men in March 1916. He had just celebrated his 21st birthday. He had just become the man of the house. What a dilemma he must have faced.

He could have been a conscientious objector and continued doing good work behind the front line, but no, he chose to drive into the firing line. Not ambulances this time, but tanks! The Motor Machine Gun Corps, ‘C’ Company. But I thought his conscience wouldn’t let him kill his fellow man. Perhaps what he had seen and endured already had changed his mind. Perhaps it was the pressure of conscription. Perhaps it was the fear of being taunted with a white feather. Perhaps he didn’t want to think it through too much at all and just wanted action. Whatever it was, I was frightened for him, but he did look smart in uniform. *(Puts on army hat and reads oath of allegiance, as if she was her brother)*

‘I, Lawrence Edmund Rowntree, 40022, swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, his heirs and successors, and that I will as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty in person, crown and dignity against all enemies and will observe and obey all orders of his Majesty and of the Generals and officers set over me. So help me God.’ (Hat off)

But God didn’t help him. Where was he posted? The Somme in France. All the tanks in ‘C’ Company were named after French drinks beginning with ‘c’. No, his wasn’t ‘Champagne’. He had nothing to celebrate. His tank was ‘Crème de Menthe.’ It sounded like one of Rowntree’s mint chocolates!

Anyway, all the tanks in the British Army were at Ancre in the first ever tank battle. The men suffered from the heat, the noise and the exhaust fumes as well as being thrown around inside the tank. No wonder they were all violently sick! C5, ‘Crème de Menthe’ had its tail wheel blown off and somehow Lawrie got shrapnel in his b…. b…. ‘buttocks’, was how they phrased it on his medical record. He was sent home, on a hospital ship, and then by train from London to Edinburgh. 3rd class. It was a long way to sit on a wooden seat, with his….. predicament. At least he was given a comfortable bed in the military hospital and treatment to ease his…. situation.

He must have had some thinking time while he was recuperating in Scalby. He was home again for the week which included my 11th birthday, November 8th, 1916. He decided to apply for a commission, to become an officer. He was accepted and became a 2nd Lieutenant in the 26th Army Brigade, Royal Field Artillery. I remember being so proud. Mother said, ‘Officers are not on the front line, they have to see the bigger picture. They command their men from behind. He’ll be much safer.’

It was at the Battle of Passchendaele, the 3rd Battle of Ypres, that he was killed in action. It seems that they were heavily shelled unexpectedly and there were many casualties. Mother was sent the telegram as next of kin. Dorothy as his fiancée received his medals.

Do you know the motto for the Royal Field Artillery? ‘Ubique Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt’. I’ve studied Latin, so I’ll tell you what it means: ‘Everywhere, Where Right and Glory Lead’. Oh, they make it sound so glorious to go and do your duty for king and country! It’s no consolation that my brother became one of the glorious dead.

He had such a future in front of him. He was going to be a doctor. He was going to change people’s lives. I want to carry on his good work, in some way, one day. I want to live up to his principles. Let it be known, I am a Rowntree, too.

He’s buried at the New Military Cemetery in Vlamertinghe, Ypres, alongside three men from his unit, ‘A’ battery, amongst a total of twenty-one men from the 26th Brigade of the R.F.A. It’s not quite the ‘jolly companionship’ Lawrie had in mind when he enlisted…….

(as if talking to him:) ‘I know you lie near to where you fell in Belgium, Lawrie, but I’d rather visit you at the war memorial in the churchyard in Scalby, if it’s all the same to you. St. Laurence’s Church, (spelt with a ‘u’ instead of a ‘w’), where you and Dorothy would have been married. It’s no more than a stone’s throw from Low Hall, over Kirk Beck. It makes me feel like you’ve come home.’

It hit grandfather hard losing his grandson. He never talks about it. He bought land in York next to the River Ouse for a memorial to the workers from Rowntree’s Factory who (reads:) ‘at the cost of life or limb or health and in the face of indescribable suffering and hardship served their country in her hour of need.’ I’m sure in his mind it is also in remembrance of Lawrie.

‘Rowntree Park will be a public park with gardens and a lake, Jean,’ grandfather promised, ‘a place to be at peace with nature, like Peasholm Park in Scarborough.’ I remember when Lawrie used to take us to there to run and play. It opened just before the war. We took Hamlet and walked from Scalby.

Do you know, grandfather still makes a weekly pilgrimage to Scarborough? He’ll be 88 this year! It keeps him fit, he says. It must be the bracing salt-sea air.

*Jean turns to look at the poster: ‘Remember Scarborough, Enlist Now!’*

Sources: Chrystal, Paul: The Rowntree Family of York, Blackthorn Press, 2013 Rowntree, Jean Wilhelm: Oral History, I W M Production Company, 1995-02-15 Rowntree, L. E: A Nightmare in three acts, unpublished, 1916 Rowntree Society, The: Lawrence Rowntree Exhibition, text and images, 2017 <http://www.mylearning.org/remember-scarborough--wwi-bombardment> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RaidonScarborough> <https://scalbywarmemorial.wordpress.com/names/lawrence-rowntree> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/mar/15/guardianobituaries.media>