**Everyone Sang**

BY [SIEGFRIED SASSOON](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/siegfried-sassoon)

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;

And I was filled with such delight

As prisoned birds must find in freedom,

Winging wildly across the white

Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;

And beauty came like the setting sun:

My heart was shaken with tears; and horror

Drifted away ... O, but Everyone

Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

One hundred years ago (today) the **Armistice of 11 November 1918**  ended fighting on land, sea and air in [World War I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I) between the [Allies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allies_of_World_War_I) and their opponent, [Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Empire). Also known as the **Armistice of Compiegne** from the place where it was signed, it came into force at 11 a.m. Paris time on 11 November 1918 ("the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month") and marked a victory for the Allies and a complete defeat for Germany, although not formally a surrender.

The armistice was signed in a railway carriage of the private train of Allied Supreme Commander, [Marshal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshal_of_France) [Ferdinand Foch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_Foch),

The actual terms demanded that the fighting stop, that Germany evacuated and hand over its weapons and return all its prisoners.

Although the armistice ended the fighting, it needed to be prolonged three times until the [Treaty of Versailles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Versailles), which was signed on 28 June 1919, took effect on 10 January 1920

Although the information about the imminent ceasefire had spread among the forces at the front in the hours before, fighting in many sections of the front continued right until the appointed hour. At 11 am there was some spontaneous fraternization between the two sides. But in general, reactions were muted. A British corporal reported: "...the Germans came from their trenches, bowed to us and then went away. That was it. There was nothing with which we could celebrate, except cookies.’ On the Allied side, euphoria and exultation were rare. There was some cheering and applause, but the dominant feeling was silence and emptiness after 52 exhausting months of war.

The poem ‘Everyone Sang’ was written by Siegfried Sassoon, in 1919, the year following the end of the First World War, and the jubilant singing that features in the poem has been interpreted as a reference to the Armistice and captured the popular mood at the time.

The speaker of the poem hears everyone around suddenly burst into song, and the sound of singing fills him with delight. There’s a suggestion that this delight is related to a feeling of relief and, indeed, release: he likens it to the feeling a bird that had been caged must feel when it is freed and allowed to fly away.

We can only imagine the feeling of relief from ordinary people and members of the armed forces at the news that war was over – their lives and the lives of their friends, colleagues and loved ones were no longer at risk. Like a bird released from a cage the pent-up anxiety was let loose.

We might see the sound of singing birds as nature’s reminder that the world will go on, despite the sacrifices being made by thousands of men in the trenches. Indeed, they reckon nearly twenty million people lost their lives in the First World War alone.

Today as we gather on this poignant Remembrance Day we know that the world goes on, yet we pause to remember the sacrifice given so that we at least could go on and live as free people. For some people the cost of that sacrifice meant that their personal world was shattered. ‘Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their lives for their friends’ as the Gospel of John says. The long road of grief whether in service of your country or in normal life, is to try and carry on life without those we have lost.

Sassoon probably didn’t have the Armistice in mind when he wrote ‘Everyone Sang’, but rather soldiers singing in the trenches. Often the troops sang hymns as a temporary and spontaneous desire to sing as a way of keeping one’s spirits up during a time of death, warfare, and uncertainty.

Whether it was intended to be interpreted as such or not, ‘Everyone Sang’ struck a chord with readers after the end of the First World War, because it seemed to capture the mood of exhilarating release felt by everyone following the Armistice.

Well, nearly everyone. One notable detractor was Robert Graves, a friend of Sassoon and a fellow poet. He was a survivor of the trenches, who offered his opinion that, ‘“everyone” does not include me.’ The end of the war was not a time of rejoicing for him because he still carried the scars of war, especially shell shock and post-traumatic stress. Not everyone can sing. There will always be dissenting voices, opposite opinions, if you truly live in a free society. Not everyone sings the same tune and healthy debate leads to a healthy society.

The poem ends with *“Everyone’s voice suddenly lifted;”*: The ‘lifting’ of the voices here also suggests elevation — a transcendental tone. *“beauty came like the setting sun:”*: Sassoon again uses language to convey a purity of experience. The *“setting sun”* here suggests death, sublime beauty– and an end.

*“My heart was shaken with tears: and horror drifted away…”*: the emotional and spiritual power of the song moves the listener so that their worst thoughts and memories of the war *“drifted away”* like mist or fog.

*“O, but Everyone / Was a bird;”*: *and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.”*: The sense that the listeners experience is sublime and timeless; moving beyond words, to suggest here a religious image of the eternal singing of humanity.

Siegfried Sassoon said he was a ‘religious poet’. Despite his often-turbulent life he was a devout Christian. The question of the presence or otherwise of God during the war was a profound one. God’s presence or otherwise in our world, in death, in life after death, is a profound one still.

The Christian faith has its origin and centre in a man who was cruelly taken at the prime of his life, giving himself for others, demonstrating the love and forgiveness of God for all, even unto a painful suffering death on a cross. Yet our faith was born through his resurrection and the hope that suffering and death is not the end and does not have the last word. So, the apostle Paul writes that our troubles achieve for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Cor 4.17-18). The Book of Revelation (especially ch. 5) pictures heaven as a place where God will wipe away every tear and death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, and the singing will never be done. There is a chance for redemption and justice and peace in God’s eternal plans.

That is the trajectory for the future according to the Christian faith. Hopefully Christians at least will remember where all life is ultimately going.

But Remembrance Day is about the past. We remember those who served their country and those who lost their lives. But we dishonour them if we do not remember why they had to fight and resolve to learn from the mistakes from the past to avoid war again.

Many historians believe that the seeds of the Second World War were sown in the armistice agreement initiated on this day one hundred years ago. The humiliation of Germany, the harsh conditions of reparations, led to resentment and a desire for revenge. 21 years later on 22 June 1940 in the very same railway carriage, in the very same spot in Compiegne where the 1918 Armistce was signed, [Adolf Hitler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler) demanded and received [the surrender armistice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armistice_of_22_June_1940) from France.

How you treat your enemies is important. If you humiliate them and rub their noses in it, you will be storing up for yourselves a backlash of bitterness and a desire for revenge. It was not for nothing that Jesus called us to love our enemies – in other words treat them with the dignity you would want to be treated if you were the loser. How hard it can be to let go of the injuries we nurse, but how badly they hurt us when we do not.

The world is a dangerous place at the moment. The passions and pride that brought us into two world wars are still evident in human nature: a tribalism that is suspicious of the foreigner; scapegoating of minorities; a disregard for facts and the rule of law; divisive politics based on fear, rabble rousing and separatism. Let us remember history and learn from it.

One hundred years of remembering. Lest we forget the dedication, service and sacrifice of those who served their country. Lest we forget the reasons why wars begin. Lest we forget how to win the peace and love our enemies. May one day everyone sing that war is no more.