Remembrance Day

Leah Fleming

Published by AVON

Extract

LEAH FLEMING

Remembrance Day

AVON

AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2009
1

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-103-9

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Who made the law that men should die in meadows?
Who spake the word that blood should splash in lanes?
Who gave it forth that gardens should be bone-yards?
Who spread the hills with flesh, and blood, and brains?

'Who Made the Law?' Leslie Coulson

11 November 2000

The ceremony is about to begin, the shuffling feet and coughing settle as the dignitaries line up in uniforms, cassocks and mayoral chains. A silence descends over the crowds on this most solemn of mornings.

We stand before the new war memorial in Elm Tree Square while a scuffle of film crews jockey for position. There is a chill Martinmas wind from the north but I am well wrapped with quilt and cushions in my wheelchair.

At last after all these years justice has been done, the dead are honoured; all of them by name. These cobble-stones, once heavy with old sorrows, damp with tears and bloodshed, now sparkle with hope and pride. I never thought to see this day.

No more arguing about things that can't be altered, no more dissention in the village about planning permissions. The names of the dead say it all, etched here on marble tablets.

That I have made the effort to witness this moment is miracle enough at my great age. My eyes are dimming, my hands tremble and my limbs disobey commands. Old age comes not alone, they say, and my heart leaps to see such a

crowd of supporters. I hope our menfolk would be proud that we've settled things at last.

We wait in patience in the chill air, all the West Sharland faithful and their far-flung relatives, all the families represented where possible, prosperous in thick overcoats and stylish black hats with grandchildren, tall as saplings, and great-grandchildren on their knees, bemused by the pageantry unfolding.

There are faces I don't recognise but in their features are echoes of village folk long buried. There is new life and fresh growth here, and that is good.

The clouds part as a ray of weak sun beams down for a second, haloing all the hand-held wreaths and circlets. Blood-red poppies flash on lapels like medals. The golden light glides across the green fells and stone walls above us, across the slate rooftops of familiar old buildings, and my eye turns to the forge in Prospect Row, but it is long gone.

They have put me in the front as one of the honoured guests, alongside the great and the good of the district; just another old matriarch, an 'ancient of days' waiting to pay her respects. There are plans to interview me later but I have other ideas.

In my fancy I see sepia faces hidden in the shadows, a crowd of ghosts watching, waiting with us, faces of the long dead from the war who knew only suffering, sacrifice and shame. What would they make of all this now?

My daughter stands upright, breasted like a plump capon. I am so proud of the spirit she has shown in fighting our corner. By her side her grandson, the spit of his great-grandfather, built like a tree trunk, the wind and sun etched on his bronzed brow.

There is no one left to recognise me, though a few may

guess a little of my history. I am just one of the many visitors and want no fuss. I have been absent so many years but this place is at the heart of my being.

Nothing has changed but everything is changed. The familiar Yorkshire air is sweet after the dryness of the Arizona desert, the rooks caw in the churchyard ash trees even into my failing ears. I had forgotten how raucous and noisy they are.

The cars parked right through the village, the houses expanded into barns and outbuildings, speak of a prosperity and comfort we could only dream of as children.

My mind is flooding with memories. I have completed a circle in coming back to West Sharland, fulfilling a promise, honouring those closest to me, but it is hard to contain the ache still in my heart for their undeserved sufferings. What has driven me back here one last time is a strange yearning, a sense of the wanderer returning to this now sacred space for peace before my long sleep. My days are leaching away, but no matter.

To live long is not enough, and it is a wise soul who knows his beginning and his end and makes some answer for the life given him. Over the years I have thought it fitting to set my own story on paper, to turn over the pages in my mind and wonder where I would be if what was done long ago could be undone. This task has been a close companion in my widowhood. They would not let me fly back so, in my cabin suite on the Atlantic crossing I reread the chapters, relived those parts of my life that brought me from the West Riding to the New World and back.

This journal will be left among the archives of West Sharland when I'm gone, but not before. Perhaps someone will turn its pages with interest and profit from what I write. For, make

no mistake, there are secrets within that belong to this village alone, secrets that explain the real reason why no war memorial was ever erected in our village until now.

But enough. The age-old ceremony begins. The silver band is marching down the hill, gathering a crowd just as it did all those years ago in the late summer of 1914. How trusting, how ignorant, how innocent we were back then. Little did any of us know what heartache lay ahead . . .

1

GOLDEN SUMMERS

Yorkshire, 1913–14

Pack up your troubles in your old kitbag
And smile, smile, smile . . .

George Asaf, 1915

1

August 1913

It was just another Yorkshire afternoon in high summer with nothing to mark it out as a day that would change their lives for ever. The young Bartley brood had done their Saturday chores in the morning heat, watered the horses waiting to be shod under the shade of a clump of elderberry trees in the paddock behind the forge. Newton and Frankland, their broad shoulders tanned like leather, were pumping water from the well into the slate tank at the back of the yard for Father's wash in the zinc tub. It was time for his Bible class preparation. Asa Bartley never liked to touch the Holy Book with blacksmith's rusty fingers.

Selma, his young daughter, made her usual rounds of the village shops with her mother's wicker basket: off-cuts for stew from Stan, the butcher, soda crystals for Monday's wash tub from Mrs Marshbank at the Co-op, stopping to chat with neighbours taking advantage of the end of their shift at the cotton mill, and picking up a second-hand copy of the local *Gazette*. It was one of the hottest afternoons in the whole summer. Doors were wide open onto the street with strips of beaded rope pinned over the lintels, waving

in the breeze to discourage the flies, windows propped up with bedding hanging out to bleach in the sunshine, stools set outside in the shade to catch passers-by for crumbs of gossip. Dogs panted in the shade and the forge cat, Jezebel, was curled up under a hedge.

The rooks were silent for once, high up in the ash trees of St Wilfred's, West Sharland as Selma scuttled through the ginnel short cut between Main Street and the forge, her striped cotton shirt clinging to her liberty bodice, her long skirt and petticoats sticking to her thin legs. She was boiling hot and dying for a swim.

'I'm going down to the Foss,' she announced when she brought in the paper and the change. Essie was laying down the best rug for the Sabbath, tidying away the bread, cheese and pickle dinner. It was too hot for a full meal. There was a pot jug of lemonade on the dresser, covered with a beaded cloth ready to be put back on the slate shelf under the stairs; the coolest place in the cottage.

'Not on your own, you're not,' Essie replied. 'You'll wait while Frank and Newt do their chores. You know I don't like you going down there alone. It's private land. I don't want her ladyship on my doorstep again and her with such a down on chapelgoers.'

The Cantrells owned everything in Sharland. They didn't mix in the village; they were more gentry folk than farmers. The colonel was serving in the army and his boys were away at school. They were churchers not chapellers, and lived at Waterloo House with their sons, servants and a carriage. Lady Hester was queen of the district: Father said she was above herself. Selma had never seen her sons except far down the field in the annual cricket match between the school and the village.

'Mam, I'm boiling in all these clothes and they'll be ages yet!' Selma protested. If only she could strip off like her brothers, who jumped in the water in their undershorts or, better still, with no clothes at all. As the youngest and the only girl she had to tag along with them to school, to chapel. Her best friends, Sybil and Annie, lived on scattered farms and it was over a two-mile walk uphill to play with them.

The path from the village to the Foss was well trodden by village children. It was a secret cavern, a hideaway, where the beck cascaded over silver stone shelves, falling headlong into a deep pool overhung with trees and bracken, a hiding place for salmon and trout, and the slabs were cool to bare feet. There was always lots of splashing and fooling about, but the water was cold and shallow in parts and fathoms deep in others. You had to know where to jump in. It was supposed to be haunted by a highwayman who fell to his death when chased by the squire's men in the good old days.

Half an hour later, Selma was trudging behind her brothers. They could hear squeals of laughter ahead echoing across the rocks. There would be the usual gang of village lads all vying for a good jumping-off point, with silly girls giggling, eyeing them up. Selma shivered by the cool shade of the trees. She thought all that romancing was embarrassing. She never knew where to look when the boys took off their shorts.

Now there were strangers in their pool, picnicking across the bank, boys she'd never seen before, dressed in proper one-piece swimming costumes, with a basket of food on a rug. They stared across at the intruders, nodded but said nothing.

'It must be them twinnies of Cantrells', alike as two peas,' whispered Newt with a respectful nod in their direction.

Selma eyed them up with interest. They were tall and gangly, about fifteen or so, fair-haired and slender as willows, not rugged and leathered like her brothers. She'd never seen a proper bathing suit before on a lad.

Newt and Frank stripped off their workday shirts and breeches to splash in the water. None of the Bartleys was a strong swimmer but they were good at diving underwater, turning circles and coming up somewhere far away from where they'd gone in. Selma dipped her toes in the water and screamed.

Not to be outdone, the two boys on the far bank started shouting. 'Fancy a diving match?' one of them turned and yelled. 'Come on, let's show these bumpkins how to dive!'

The other brother hung back, watching as first Newt and then Frank, intent on their own fun, ignored the jibe by jumping off the ledge midway. Selma edged herself into the water, embarrassed to take her clothes off now there was an audience. Better to paddle and not show off Monday's washing to strangers.

One of the boys swam across the beck and climbed up onto the slate ledge jutting out above where Newt had jumped in. Selma gawped up as the boy postured on the edge and made a perfect dive into the pool. He rose to the surface grinning, and that was the first time she clapped eyes on Guy Cantrell. The other twin was already clambering up even higher to the topmost shelf that none of them had dared use before.

Frank shook his head. 'I wouldn't go that high, chum. It's not safe.'

'I'm not your chum,' the boy pouted.

'Don't be a fool, Angus. Do what the young man says,' yelled his brother.

'Come on, Newt, can't let them toffs show us up!' Frank shouted in defiance.

'I never took you for a coward, Guy!' yelled his brother from his rocky perch.

It was then that Selma knew that something awful was about to happen and she couldn't stop it. 'Don't jump, please, Frank, on our mam's life. Showing off's not worth it!' Selma screamed. Frank hovered, shocked at her outburst, and backed off just as Angus Cantrell took a flying leap from the highest ledge, plunging down into the dark abyss, down and down and not bobbing up again.

Everyone was in the water, sensing something was wrong. Guy was splashing about, unsure of his bearings now. Selma pulled off her skirts and dived deep, opening her eyes to get her bearings. Newt was already down there, coming up for air, gasping before diving down again. It was Frank who spotted the boy curled up on the rock floor. Selma and Newt dived in to grab him but he was wedged.

'Over here!' she screamed to Guy, who dived with them to rescue his brother, pulling and tugging to set the boy free.

They dragged him to the surface. There was a gash on the side of his head. He was not breathing. Guy took over, turning him on his stomach, lifting his arms to raise his chest. 'Come on, Angus! Someone go and get help! Give me a hand,' he ordered Selma, while Frank ran off as bid. It felt like hours before the boy coughed and spluttered but then promptly fell back into unconsciousness.

'He's alive!' said the boy with the ink-blue eyes glinting

with fear and relief as he looked up at the Bartleys with gratitude.

Selma swam across the beck and waded back with the picnic rug over her head to cover Angus's cold body.

'What a daft thing to do!' Newt said.

Selma wanted to kick him. 'Shut yer gob! Let's get some warmth into his limbs. He's so cold. Pile all our clothes on him.' She felt so helpless. They must keep him warm and dry while they waited. That was what you did with a sick horse.

It was an age before the servants from the House arrived with a flurry of blankets and Angus was passed from arm to arm until he could be placed on a dog cart. Still he made no movement.

'Hell's bells! Mother will kill us for this,' sighed Guy, who looked close to tears.

Selma resisted the urge to reach her arm out to him. 'Praise God, he's alive and that's all that matters,' she whispered.

'Thanks to you and your brothers. My mother will be so grateful. What a frightful thing to happen – and I don't even know your names,' he said, reaching out to shake their hands. His fingers were like ice, his lips trembling with shock and chill.

'We're Bartleys from the forge, my two brothers, Newton and Frankland, and I'm Selima but everyone calls me Selma for short. Sorry we were trespassing on your land.'

'Thank God you were. From now on feel free to enjoy this cursed place. I don't think I'll ever dare come here again. We'll be gated by Mother when she hears about this. What unusual names you have . . . I'm Guy Cantrell, by the way, and you must call me Guy. How can we ever thank you?'

'It was nothing,' Frank blushed.

'Make sure your dad has his horses shoed at our place,' quipped Newt, the elder, apprenticed as a farrier, heir to Asa Bartley's smiddy and always one for the last word. Selma turned pink, embarrassed, and nudged him hard.

'Of course . . . Better go now. Mother will be back soon and Father will be furious. She will want to thank you in person, I'm sure,' Guy repeated, pausing to smile at Selma.

She stared back as if a magnet were pulling them together until they both dropped their eyes. One look into those deep blue pools and thirteen-year-old Selma felt to have grown three years in three hours. She had come to play at the Foss as a child; why did she now feel she was leaving here closer to a woman? Suddenly she felt naked, her chestnut hair dripping wet, hanging in rat-tails, shivering in her darned underwear, shabby, uncouth, ashamed to be just a blacksmith's daughter. One look from Master Cantrell and she didn't know who she was any more.

Hester Cantrell saw the doctor's new motor car parked in the drive, blocking her carriage from the front portico. Annoyance quickly changed to panic. What was he doing here? Not waiting for the step to be let down from the carriage, she stumbled out, rushing up the steps of Waterloo House with an energy that belied her fifty-three years. 'What the blazes is going on, Arkie?' she said, storming past the parlour maid, and looking to Mrs Arkholme, the housekeeper, standing at the foot of the stairs, wringing her hands.

'I'm sorry, Lady Hester, but it's Master Angus. He's had an accident in the Foss . . . I took the liberty of calling Dr Mac. He's with him now.'

'Why wasn't I summoned? You knew where I was . . .

Those Board of Guardians meetings at the workhouse are such a waste of time.'

'Beg pardon, ma'am, but there wasn't time.'

Hester raced up the stairs, tripping over her long silk skirt, her heart thumping and the wretched sweats making her cheeks flush like rouge. This was no time for her usual decorum.

Angus was lying on his bed, his face swollen and bruised and his eyes shut. There were stitches on his left temple.

Hester turned to her other son. 'What happened this time?'

Guy muttered the whole story about Angus going too high, the village boys warning him and his mistimed dive. 'If the Bartleys hadn't been there, and their sister, I dread to think . . . It was awful, Mother, and I was useless.'

Angus opened his eyes sheepishly, sighed and went back to sleep.

'Now don't get your mother in a state, young man,' ordered the doctor. 'It's no' as bad as it looks. He's a wee bit concussed and shaken, but lots of rest and sleep will sort him out in no time.'

'He ought to be in hospital,' said Hester, examining her son closely. Mackenzie was a fool, in her eyes, driving around in his car like a lord, living above his means with his silly wife called Amaryllis, for goodness' sake, and far too friendly with the natives. She would get a second opinion.

'Hospital would be fine if it weren't twenty miles away. Movement and sudden jerks would be unwise. Rest, but no sleeping draughts, mind, just in case.'

'In case of what?' she demanded.

'If he's sick and drowsy after tomorrow I want to know, but give the laddie a chance to settle himself. Nature

knows best. He's had a lucky escape. Yon Foss has seen a fair few into the next world. Ah, but boys will be boys . . . the wee devils!'

'Thank you, Doctor. You will call later,' she ordered.

'Of course, Lady Hester. Do you want a nurse?'

'That won't be necessary. I shall see to my son myself.'

'The colonel is abroad, I hear,' said the doctor, packing up his Gladstone bag.

'That is correct. I shall inform him immediately.' She was not going to endure his presence a moment longer, but he turned to Guy, who stood pale-faced by the window.

'You look like you need a brandy, young man. How old are you now? How time flies, and you so tall already . . . Don't worry, Angus'll live to plague the life out of you for a while longer. He's done far worse falling off his horse.'

How dare he be so familiar with her son? 'Arkie, show Dr Mackenzie to the door. I'm sure you've got plenty of patients waiting.'

'Funnily enough, I'm quiet. It's too braw a day to be sick and I've sewn up all the cut fingers at haytiming, but if it stays this hot, the old folk'll peg out if they're daft enough to go walking midday.'

'Yes, quite,' Hester sighed. Would the fool ever go? 'Goodbye, Doctor.' She waved him away, then pulled down the window blinds to stop the sunlight shining on Angus's face. 'Ask Shorrocks to organise a bath, Guy – it'll ease out any stiffness – and I'll get Cook to send you up a coddled egg and soldiers.'

'Mother, don't fuss, I'm fine . . . Angus was just showing off as usual. He can be such a chump.'

'I turn my back for five minutes and you get up to mischief again.'

'We're not babies. It was so hot and we just fancied a swim.'

'What were those village brats doing on my land?'

'You know everyone plays in the Foss when it's warm. It's tradition.'

'Not while we're in residence for the summer, they don't. I shall speak to the Parish Council.'

'Oh, Mother, the Bartleys saved Gus's life. You ought to be singing their praises, not punishing them. I told them you would be grateful,' Guy argued. He always stood his ground, just like his father. What a fine soldier he would make one day, she thought, but she must be firm.

'Sometimes, Guy, you overstep the mark . . . Over-familiarity with the lower orders breeds contempt and disobedience. Playing cricket against the village is one thing, but cavorting in front of locals is another. It is your duty to set an example, not make promises on my behalf. Ask Arkie to have tea sent up here. I'll sit and watch over Angus, just in case . . . He really ought to be in hospital.'

'I wish Father was here. He promised to be home for the hols.'

'The army needs him. There's talk of war with Germany. The situation demands all the staff officers to be making contingency plans. We mustn't worry him now about such folly. Run along. Have a warm bath, you're shivering in that indecent bathing suit.'

Hester needed to be alone. Angus looked so fragile and battered, poor darling. Nothing must harm either of her precious sons, her golden eggs. They were so late coming into her life. At nearly forty she had feared she was barren and then they came together one terrible night when all her dignity was abandoned in the struggle to bring them

into the world. Guy Arthur Charles came first, all of a rush, and then the shock when another baby emerged, Garth Angus Charles, taking his time. Two for the pain of one, her beautiful boys, alike in every way. In one night her world was changed for ever and she loved them both with a devotion that knew no bounds.

Looking round at the mess in Angus's bedroom – cricket bats and fishing rods, horse crops, rugby shoes, clothes scattered on the floor – she sighed. He was such an energetic boy, full of pranks and madcap ideas. He was a skilled horseman, winning rosettes to prove his competitive spirit. On the wall were stag antlers, model ships and biplanes, and a map tracing Colonel Charles's campaigns in South Africa. The twins were as bad as each other when they were home. At school it was another matter. They were put in different houses, beaten for any misdemeanours but excelled on the sports field and in the Officers' Training Corps.

It was always so quiet when they were away. That was why she'd begged Charles to let her buy Waterloo House, so she could be close for their exeats and any public concerts at Sharland School, the great stone fortress that stood on the edge of the moor.

To think that life could have ended for one of them this beautiful afternoon didn't bear thinking about. Horse treks and camping out over the Dales would be out of bounds for the rest of the holidays after this escapade. Now she must be gracious and receive their rescuers, but of all the children to save Angus why did it have to be the blacksmith's brood of non-conformists?

Only last week she was in her carriage doing a round of charitable visiting when she chanced to see the blacksmith striding along the cobbled narrow street in his leather

apron, shirtsleeves rolled up, showing muscled arms the colour of walnut oil. His black curly hair was far too long under his cap, more like a gypsy's locks. She looked down at him from her carriage, expecting him to doff his cap in deference but he swaggered on as if she was nobody of consequence.

'Stop the carriage!' she ordered Beaven. 'Go and ask that man why he has been so rude.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said her coachman, pulling up until Bartley was alongside them. 'Hey, you, why didn't you pay the usual respect to her ladyship?'

'Oh, aye,' said Asa Bartley, looking straight at her with those coal-black eyes. 'You tell your mistress I bows to no man but my Maker, and that's a fact!'

Hester flushed at such insolence and demanded that Beaven drive on. The blacksmith might own his business but he rented his cottage from the Waterloo estate. How dare he be so rude?

Men like him didn't know their place. These chapel ranters were behind all the stirrings of unrest in England: the Labour Movement and trade unions, socialist ideas of all being equal, women wanting to register for the Vote and such like. The Women's Suffrage Society had the cheek to send wagons round the villages canvassing for support from Sharland's millworkers, encouraging them to strike for better wages. She blamed all the unrest on the preachers in the pulpits of these stone chapels, giving workmen ideas above their station.

'God bless the squire and his relations, And keep us in our proper stations,' went the verse of a hymn. That was how society worked. How could any army survive without discipline and rank? Rank first and foremost. Orders must

be given and obeyed, that was the key to social cohesion. Charles's generals and his staff knew how to plan battles, and their foot soldiers, under officers, must carry out the orders without question. It was always thus.

Bartley had insulted her rank and class by his insolence and now she must forbear this insult to show Christian fortitude to stomach making conversation with his children. But one thing was certain. No child of his would ever be employed on the estate. Dissenters' children had too much spirit to be knocked back, asked too many questions. They were difficult foals to break in. Their kind were best ignored and kept a bay: a different tribe, and long may that continue.

Angus seemed comfortable enough so she gathered up some of the mess on the floor. What must the doctor have thought of the clutter – that she was slack with her servants? The eye of the mistress was worth two of her hands, she mused. Arkie must make sure the room was more presentable for his next visit. She didn't want any tittle-tattling to his silly wife.

Hester caught a glimpse of herself in the dressing mirror. She'd never been an oil painting: tall, on the gaunt side of slender, but well corseted to give a robust shape and bolstered bosom like her heroine, the new Queen Mary. Her thin cream dress was a little frivolous for a Board of Workhouse Guardians meeting but the weather was so hot. That was the trouble with country living, you had to be so careful to set a suitable standard.

A military wife knew how to dress appropriately, to impress junior officers' wives as to what they must aspire. There were formal school visits to endure, dressing discreetly with nothing to cause the boys embarrassment, especially

being such an older parent: no fancy jewellery or lavish trimmings on her picture hats. The risk of under- or over-dressing in such a backwater was a balancing act she found quite within her grasp. If she stuck to muted colours: mauve, taupe, eau-de-Nil, stone and her beloved silver grey for her palette, her spirits rose. Afternoon and tea gowns, skirts blended with tweed and dull plaids, furs and country tweeds were what she ordered from her dressmaker in London. Silk and wool, cotton lawns and simple lace trim distinguished her as top drawer at a glance.

Yorkshire might have smoke and soot but the best woollen cloth in the world was just over the hills in Leeds and Bradford. She felt dignified in such quiet shades. Colour was for the young fry and dress uniforms. She was a colonel's lady, daughter of an earl, albeit the youngest of many sisters, well enough placed to receive calling cards from the Birkwiths of Wellerby Hall and Lady Sommerton, the aunt of the headmaster of Sharland School. His wife, Maud, was the cousin of Lord Bankwell.

It was important to know where one was placed on this ladder. There were those who tried a little too hard to climb up a rung, like the vicar's poor wife, Violet Hunt.

Then there was Dr Mac, with his ambitious wife and their two pretty daughters, one of whom was old enough now to be brought to her sons' attention. All to no avail, of course; her boys were far too young for such entanglements. They were destined for the army and glittering careers.

Hester sat down on the window seat, suddenly exhausted, staring out across the walled garden, through the orchard that went down to the river, across to the great moors rising above. A patchwork of bronzed squares and golden greens

caught her eye where the grass had been mown off for hay. Such was the heat haze that the stone walls dividing up the fell side shimmered like silver ribbons.

This part of the West Riding of Yorkshire was remote but not unpleasantly so. There were plenty of regular trains into Leeds and a direct line to London through the Midland Railway. The Dales' rough-hewn beauty, a grandeur of limestone scars and moor, was growing on her. She liked the fresh damp air, for they were removed from the worst of mill chimney smoke.

Most of the locals were pleasant plain folk who made few demands on her services. Once the boys were out of school and established she would think again about where to settle. Charles preferred the southern uplands, the Sussex Downs, to this rugged terrain. Soon he would finish off his career at a desk in London, if all went to plan. But she didn't like these rumours of war. He was far too old for battle service now. Her boys were nearly sixteen. Hester shivered. Surely they would be far too young to be mobilised, should any threat occur?