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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Shadow of War

Written by Stewart Binns

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# The Shadow of War

*1914: The Great War Series*

STEWART BINNS

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To all those who endured the Great War

# Author's Note

*The Shadow of War* is a work of fiction. Although largely based on real events (and with many of the characters borrowed from history), all names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used entirely fictitiously.

Many of the characters speak in their local vernacular, especially the old Pennine dialect of North-East Lancashire. Largely gone now, it was still spoken into the 1960s and I remember well its unique colour and warmth. It was an unusual combination of Old English and the nineteenth-century 'Mee-Maw' – the exaggerated, mouthed reinforcements of speech used to overcome the noise of the looms in the cotton mills – made famous by comic actors such as Hylda Baker and Les Dawson.

The meanings of various East Lancashire dialect expressions, as well as examples of Cockney rhyming slang and background facts about military terms, Victorian and Edwardian mores and various historical references are explained in the Glossary at the back of the book.

# Monday 1 June

*Assembly Rooms, Presteigne, Radnorshire*

The Reverend Henry Kewley, Rector of St Andrew's, Presteigne, is in full flow. Tall, silver-haired and supremely self-confident, he has been holding bi-monthly meetings for the town's business community for the past year. There has been a lengthy and tedious debate about the calibre of the town's police force and the condition of its jail, but Kewley is now addressing the issue of Presteigne's future livelihood.

'. . . So, as I said, because of the sterling efforts of all concerned, we have fought off attempts to remove the assizes from our town. Let us give thanks for that great victory. But let me also address our deeper, longer term problems.

'Gentlemen, I now come to a matter of great importance. The appallingly low prices our farmers are receiving are continuing to have a dreadful effect on us all. Let me give you some harsh facts. Although the town is now on mains water, almost all our houses are still waiting to be connected to a fresh, running supply. We have at least twenty cases of diphtheria every year, and the numbers of other serious illnesses – polio, in particular – remain stubbornly high. Our school population is still down, and the issue of recruiting quality teachers is as urgent as it was ten years ago.'

Henry Kewley has his audience of more than a hundred of the good men of the area, all neatly turned out with clean, well-ironed shirts and polished boots, in the palm of his hand. A hugely popular preacher, founder of the local football team and doyen of the boys' club, he is the unofficial leader of the community. He not only has the skills to hold

an audience, his subject is of grave concern to everyone in the room. Presteigne has been in the doldrums for almost thirty years; its once prosperous High Street and pretentiously grand Broad Street are now full of boarded-up shops, closed pubs and empty commercial premises. The town looks grey; its people are disheartened, and many are pitiably poor.

'We are now a town of barely one thousand souls, far fewer than when we were all boys. Rather than bringing trade to the town, the railway has taken business away. The big houses now go to Hereford, or even London, for their fancy goods. The tannery, brickworks, nail factory and sawmill have all closed. Leominster and Ludlow's streets are full of motor cars and their grating horns. But, at the last count, we have only nine registered motor cars and three motorcycles in our entire area. Although I hardly relish the thought of their ungodly noise and dreadful fumes polluting our streets, motor vehicles are a good gauge of a town's affluence. Regrettably, our main modes of transportation remain the sturdy horse and the human locomotion of Shanks's pony!'

Kewley pauses to read his audience. Shopkeepers, small businessmen, artisans, farmers; he can see the anxiety on their faces, but also the expectation in their eyes, hoping that he is about to announce a new panacea to rid them of their woes.

'Coal has to be our future!' he cries.

There are audible moans from around the room as heads are thrown back in exasperation. Two years earlier, a wily prospector, Aaron Griffiths, formed a company and began to sink shafts in the local area in search of coal, the 'Black Gold of Wales'. The first shaft was sunk at Folly Wood, which many of the older and more cynical locals believe is a name which offers an all too apposite moniker.

Surface coal has been found in the area over the centuries, and it has often been said that there are rich seams under-

ground. Griffiths has sold over 800 shares in his company but, so far, little of consequence has been found and the locals, not known for having a generally optimistic outlook on life, have become increasingly sceptical.

With Aaron Griffiths sitting directly in front of him on the front row, and undaunted by the groans, Kewley continues.

'I know we have not yet had a positive result, but we must support Mr Griffiths. He is offering more shares and is prepared to sell some in exchange for credit from his suppliers.'

Kewley is suddenly interrupted by an old farmer, who rises to his feet with a broad but contrived smile on his face.

'Reverend, you be a persuasive cove, there's no doubt o' that, but those drillings have brought up beggar all, bar a few ton o' stone and hundreds o' gallons o' water.'

There is laughter all around the room, but Kewley is unperturbed.

'Carwyn, dear old friend, we all know of your misgivings about the project. But we need something new to bring prosperity to the town. I appeal to you to be more patient and much less pessimistic.'

Carwyn's fabricated smile disappears, to be rapidly replaced by a sneer.

'Henry, you've called us 'ere again. We were a-thinkin' you had somethin' new to tell us, but yer just makin' another appeal for Aaron Griffiths, who's had enough outta us already.'

A large, handsome man just turned forty, resplendent in his frock coat and towering top hat, jumps to his feet. He is Philip Davies, the local auctioneer, Urban District Councillor and Reverend Kewley's most ardent supporter. Half a head taller than any man in the room and with a voice like a growl of thunder, he gives old Carwyn a withering look.

'Carwyn, you should temper your remarks. The good reverend is only offering his advice in the best interests of the town.'

The old farmer sits down, shaking his head. He is muttering a response as he does so, his comment just audible to those with a good ear.

'In the best interests of Griffiths and his bloody shareholders, more like.'

The meeting starts to break up as men leave from the back of the room. They have heard enough about Presteigne's coal escapade and are annoyed that Kewley and Davies have nothing new to offer to improve the town's prospects. Not only that, two hours of depressing town business and speeches – most of which have been dreary – have made the audience thirsty. The Duke's Arms, just down Broad Street, is the town's most popular rendezvous. It is a fine hostelry with a renowned bar and a revered home-brewed ale.

Already seated in a quiet corner of the low-ceilinged, timber-framed saloon bar are the three Thomas boys: Hywel, aged nineteen, the eldest, and his two younger brothers, Morgan and Geraint. All three work on their father's farm to the west of Presteigne. Once the source of a modest living, Pentry Farm is going through hard times, which have had a devastating effect on poor old Rhodri, their ageing and all but bedridden father.

Hywel's brow is etched by furrows of anxiety. His stare is vacant; his eyes do not register the simple furnishings and usual accoutrements of an archetypical British hostelry. His thoughts are elsewhere, seeing the lush green fields of Pentry populated by fewer and fewer sheep, its cottage farmhouse in urgent need of repairs to its roof and its barns increasingly dilapidated. Then his Da comes into his mind's eye. He used to worship the ground he walked on; now he has to carry him to his bed every night and change him when he soils his pants. He closes his eyes momentarily to stem the tears that are beginning to form.

With the Thomas boys is a friend from school, Tom Crisp, who, unlike them, is from English stock and proud of it.

Tom is the first to comment on the sudden influx of the well-to-do of Presteigne.

'Putting the world to rights again?'

Hywel smirks disdainfully.

'Aye, as usual. Trouble is, they couldn't hit their own arses with a shovel.'

Tom responds in defence of two of them, men he admires.

'I know most of them are busybodies who act like sheep, but old Kewley's a good man, and Davies is all right. They've been good to us young ones.'

'Aye, but the other buggers make me choke on me beer.'

The Duke's Arms used to be one of three pubs on Broad Street, a wide, elegant thoroughfare of medieval and Georgian structures that reflects Presteigne's better days. There were six more drinking haunts on the High Street, which has a similar mix of buildings. Now the Duke and two rivals are the only survivors.

It is Presteigne's hard times that have closed the pubs, not austere Welsh Presbyterianism. Although it sits in a small valley amid the picturesque rolling hills of Radnorshire, the least 'Welsh' of Wales's counties, it is also surrounded on three sides by the English border. Offa's Dyke is to the west, not the east, placing the town in England's domain since antiquity. Indeed, the Welsh name for the town, Llanandras – the holy place of St Andrew – has all but been forgotten.

England is within touching distance at several places around the town and begins at the small bridge on the River Lugg at the bottom of Broad Street, only a few yards from the ancient church of St Andrew. The Lugg is but six yards wide at the bridge. On its east bank is the cottage of the Lewis family, of Welsh descent, but who live in England. While on the other side is the Browns' cottage, who are English through and through, but reside in Wales.

Despite the porous border and the dominance of the English colossus next door, those locals who are Welsh,

especially the hill farmers, are ferociously proud of their Celtic heritage. They speak their antique language at every opportunity, either privately within their families, or very publicly to affirm who they are. It is a badge of honour.

But, in the main, the language of Presteigne is English and its accent contains only a hint of a mid-Wales lilt, leavened by the rustic drawl of neighbouring Herefordshire. Even the Welsh-speaking farmers sound like rural English folk when they speak the language of their Anglo-Saxon neighbours.

The Thomas boys all speak Welsh, but only at home, or except when they want to annoy Tom Crisp, who invariably responds with the habitual litany of 'Taffy' jokes and insults about hill farmers' supposed carnal appetites for sheep.

Geraint, a lithe seventeen-year-old, a year younger than his brother Morgan, and two years Hywel's junior, is at the now crowded bar, having just ordered more beer.

Suddenly, the door of the Duke is flung open and a distressed young woman rushes up to the boys' table. It is their sister, Bronwyn, Morgan's twin. She has run the five miles from their farm and is flushed pink, her thick black hair clinging to a face soaked in tears and perspiration.

'It's Da . . . I canna wake 'im!'

The three Thomas boys are on the move in an instant. They tumble into their horse and cart moments later, leaving Tom to pay for the beer. But Bronwyn calls after him, pleading.

'Tom, come with us, please!'

Tom throws a shilling on to the bar, forgoes the change and chases after the Thomas clan.

The ride to Pentry Farm is a torture for the four Thomas siblings. They fear the worst. Da has been ill for years and, after his wife died suddenly two years ago, has become mentally as well as physically ill. He is morose and difficult to live with.

After only a hundred yards, Bronwyn grasps Tom's hand and begins to sob. They have been lovers since the winter, but have managed to keep it to themselves. Hywel has had his

suspicions and, seeing the clasping of hands, realizes its significance. He smiles and rests his hand on theirs, a gesture which is a comforting acknowledgement for both of them. The younger boys do not even notice, they are too focused on the farm track ahead and getting home as quickly as possible.

When they reach the quaint but ramshackle cottage, Da is still slumped where Bronwyn left him, in his chair by the fireplace. His head is resting on his shoulder; trickles of saliva have run down from the corner of his gaping mouth and dripped on to his shirt. His face is cool to the touch, his pallor exaggerating the thick black stubble on his chin.

Hywel feels his father's forehead and checks for any hint of breath from his mouth, or the glimmer of a pulse at his neck.

'He's gone.'

His voice is clear, trying to control his emotions. Both the younger brothers walk out into the farmyard to hide their tears and Bronwyn collapses into Tom's arms.

Hywel goes over to comfort her.

'Bron, I know it's 'ard, like, but go and 'elp the boys. They need someone to mother them.'

He guides her gently to the door, hugging her as he does so.

'Tom, will you help me get Da on to the cart and take him to the undertaker? Bron will stay 'ere with the boys.'

Bronwyn watches as her father's body is taken away to Presteigne. It follows the same winding route the livestock take on their way to the slaughterhouse. But this is her Da. She tries to remember him before he became crippled in mind and body by age and anxiety. When he whistled while working in the yard, or when he told her wonderful stories about his own Da and Tad-cu, both of whom refused to speak English and could neither read nor write.

She wants to be strong for Geraint and Morgan but cannot stop the tears or the awful sense of foreboding about the future.

# Tuesday 2 June

*Royal Fusiliers' Albany Barracks, Parkhurst, Isle of Wight*

Serjeants Maurice Tait and Harry Woodruff loathe the Royal Fusiliers' Albany Barracks. Both Cockneys and army veterans, they have served all over the Empire in some remote and dangerous outposts but, to them, the rural Isle of Wight might as well be India's North-West Frontier.

The nearest pub is a mile away and although their serjeants' mess is comfortable enough, and the barracks as good as any, a location in the green fields beyond a sleepy English market town is not their idea of home. To compound matters, the other battalions which make up the army's 9th Brigade at Albany – the 1st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers and the 1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers – both speak alien languages, 'Geordie' and 'Jock', which might as well be two dialects of Chinese as far as the two London boys are concerned.

Not only are the other soldiers provincials – 'peasants', as the Londoners call them – they like their beer full of hops, all pale and frothy, not like the rich malty ales of the south, which are much more to Maurice and Harry's liking. The Jocks and Geordies keep complaining about the beer in the south being 'flat' and 'sweet', leading Maurice and Harry to offer what they think is sound advice to remedy their dilemma: 'Fuck off back up north, then!'

'Let's walk into Newport, Mo.'

'Bollocks, mate; I'm knackered. Let's get some nosh 'ere and call it a night.'

'Come on, we'll just 'ave a couple, then stroll back; it's a

nice evenin'. Maisy will do us some chips when we come back.'

'She bloody won't. Your "couple" will be six or seven, and the kitchen'll be closed when we stagger back.'

'So, we'll scoff some chips in Newport.'

'Bloody 'ell, 'Arry, you've got a cast-iron belly. I can't swill gallons o' beer like you, then load up on chips.'

'Is that right? What abaht two years ago in Dublin, then?'

'Ah, that was different. Mick beer is as weak as piss!'

As Harry knew he would, Maurice eventually gives in and they are soon striding down the road into Newport. It is a pleasant market town, not without a few little architectural gems, and typical of rustic England. But its charms are lost on two fusiliers who have travelled the world and much prefer the hubbub of London. Lifelong friends, they joined the Fusiliers in 1896 at the age of sixteen and are now about as experienced army veterans as it is possible to be. Now thirty-four years old, with eighteen years' service, they are approaching the twenty-one-year maximum permitted by British Army Regulations.

After serving for three uneventful and tedious years at the Curragh, the British Army's main camp in Ireland, twenty-five miles west of Dublin, they sailed for South Africa in 1899 to fight in the Second Boer War, an experience that was far from humdrum.

After some banter about the delights of a couple of Newport's voluptuous beauties, and some whistle-whetting endearments addressed to the ale soon to be consumed, their idle chatter turns to their greatest preoccupation: soldiers' tales of enemies fought and battles won and lost.

'D'ya remember that fuckin' big Boer what nearly did for yer at Colenso, Mo?'

'He 'ad no chance; I were ready fer 'im.'

'Bollocks! If I 'adn't plugged 'im, he'd 'ave skewered yer like a pig on a spit.'

'Yeah, yeah, but I tell yer what, I 'ope we never 'ave to face firepower like at Tulega Heights ever again.'

'Just stay close to me, mate; the bullet that'll do fer me ain't been made yet.'

'No, 'Arry, don't say things like that; it's tempting faith.'

'Tempting, *fate*, Mo; tempting *fate*.'

'Whatever it is, don't tempt it!'

Maurice and Harry took part in the relief of both Mafeking and Ladysmith, two events which saw the British Army at its heroic best, winning fierce encounters with courage and discipline. But they also participated in examples of British intolerance and brutality, where vanquished opponents were treated with contempt and worse. Such stories are never part of their reminiscences – in the hope that, if they are not mentioned, they will fade from their memories, but they never do. Even so, like most of their comrades, they have become inured to the horrors of battle and to the barbarity of war.

They returned from South Africa as non-commissioned officers, each with five battle clasps to their Queen's South Africa Medal and, much more importantly, the extra pay to go with them. They served in India for two years from the beginning of 1903, another sojourn that was hardly dull.

'D'ya think we'll ever get sent back to India?'

Maurice's face lights up.

'It would suit me. Don't mind a bit of warmth – and a hot black arse!'

'Delhi belly and a dose of the pox more like!'

'As long as we don't 'ave to trek up them fuckin' Himalayas again, chasin' after them mad Tibetees.'

The British Army's expedition to Tibet was typical of the kind of punitive action all colonial armies are required to undertake from time to time to deal with 'troublesome natives'. In atrocious conditions, the Royal Fusiliers trudged

all the way to Lhasa to quell an uprising instigated by the Dalai Lama. It was a vicious action, where British forces with Maxim machine guns and Lee-Enfield rifles killed thousands of Tibetans armed only with matchlock muskets and sabres. Not particularly proud of what they had to do in Britain's name in another far-flung corner of the Empire, Maurice and Harry knew there was little point dwelling on it. They did what they were trained to do; they took a breath, stuck out their chins and got on with it.

They returned home with India General Service Medals and Tibet Campaign Medals, replete with Battle of Gyantse clasps, to add to the already strikingly colourful row of ribbons on their chests – and an extra sixpence in their pay.

Upon their return, they transferred to the newly formed 4th Battalion Royal Fusiliers to stiffen its ranks. They joined the same platoon, part of C Company, and were barracked at Parkhurst. With their service record, they have become senior soldiers of great renown and are well known as a couple of hard-nosed, seasoned veterans who you would definitely want on your side if 'push came to shove'.

They thought they had done well to avoid another stint in India, but soon regretted their transition to the 4th when, after a year or so, the bucolic delights of the Isle of Wight began to wear thin.

Now, as the two of them see Newport town centre in the distance and begin to sniff the malty aroma of Burts Bitter, which they regard as one of the island's few saving graces, they quicken their pace down Holyrood Street and are soon settled into the Railway Tavern, their favourite haunt. It is a quiet pub, full of friendly locals, and not popular with either the Geordie or Jock fusiliers. If it was, the two Londoners would go elsewhere.

Bitter is only tuppence ha'penny a pint in the Railway, whereas it is thruppence in London. As serjeants, they are

earning 16 shillings a week. As single men, they are housed and fed by the army, so have plenty of silver in their pockets for beer and baccy.

Beer, baccy and the occasional liaison with the fair maidens of the island are the men's only distractions. If they get desperate, some of their female acquaintances are street girls from the town's back alleys, or tarts who set themselves up in 'nests' in the hedgerows near the barracks. Every now and then the top brass clear out the nests for a while, especially if there is an outbreak of venereal disease, but on the whole the girls are regarded as a necessary evil to keep the men content.

The life of a professional soldier in barracks is a long monotony of training, drills and exercises. Although discipline is enforced sternly, it is not as harsh as it used to be, when floggings were commonplace. Besides, experienced soldiers know how to deal with the 'bull' and to keep a low profile. The food and accommodation have improved dramatically since the service days of Maurice and Harry's fathers and grandfathers, when men were housed worse than cattle and fed like pigs. But boredom remains and leads to lethargy and often boils up into tension, bullying and sometimes violence.

The two veterans like and respect most of their officers. They often have to take orders from newly arrived young lieutenants who have hardly begun shaving, and some of the senior officers can be arrogant or unpleasant, but, on the whole, there is mutual respect and goodwill.

Harry's mood becomes more and more reflective as the Burts Bitter takes effect.

'Still fancy runnin' a boozer when you ged out?'

'I do, a nice little country job up in Eppin' Forest.'

'But you don't like the countryside!'

'Yeah, but it's nice up there and I'm talkin' about a boozer, not a bloody tea shop. It's on the railway, so it's easy to get

into town and, of a Sunday, it brings all the Londoners up fer a day out.'

'Sounds like a nice little earner. If I went for a boozer, it would be up in Norfolk somewhere. I went there once as a boy with me old fella. It's as flat as fuck but pretty, like; you know, windmills and all that. Yeah, a nice quiet pub on the Broads, I fancy that.'

Maurice and Harry joined up together and hail from Leyton, East London. Not real 'Cockneys' by strict convention but, like most Londoners in the British Army, it is an appellation they are happy to accept – especially Harry, who cherishes his Jack the Lad persona.

'I don't s'pose life's too bad. We'll 'ave our pensions soon, and much better ones than our old fellas got.'

'Not 'alf! Twenty-five years in the Coldstream, both of 'em, right through the Crimea: Alma, Inkerman. Then they 'ad to sell their fuckin' medals when they retired to keep us warm and fed!'

When serving abroad or away in barracks, Woodruff and Tait senior were heavy drinkers, frequent brawlers and not averse to the charms of the opposite sex, which is why they never rose beyond the rank of corporal. On the other hand, they were, in the words of the vernacular, 'as good as gold' with their wives when at home on leave. Except, that is, if anyone challenged their good name, or insulted their loved ones. Then, retribution would be swiftly delivered and brutally effective.

No one messes with the Woodruff and Tait families. Their rented homes are just four doors apart in Bromley Road, Leyton, a modest mid-Victorian terraced row of neat houses with small bay windows to the front and tiny back gardens to the rear. The Drum, which Maurice and Harry still think is the finest ale house in the world, is just fifty yards away on Lea Bridge Road, where their fathers still drink every evening much to their mothers' chagrin.

As boys, Maurice and Harry were inseparable. They were good athletes. Maurice played for Essex boys at cricket and spent long hours every summer at the county ground on Leyton High Road. Harry was a classy footballer and went down to West Ham Park to play for Upton Park Football Club for a couple of seasons, the proud holders of the title '1900 Olympic Football Champions'.

However, both boys' sporting potential was thwarted when they joined the army. They now sometimes play for their battalion, but overseas postings have meant that opportunities have been few and far between.

Harry comes back from the bar with two more jugs of beer in his hands and a smile on his face.

'There are two Geordie corporals in 'ere. Bloody nerve! They're at the bar talkin' abaht the officers' mutiny at the Curragh – or at least that's what I think they was on abaht!'

Maurice has scant regard for officers at the best of times.

'Officers' mutiny! If the ranks had mutinied, they'd 'ave been shot! Ireland's a fuckin' mess; if the Micks want home rule, I say, let 'em 'ave it. As for those Unionist fuckers up north, running bloody guns from the Germans – they should be put up against a wall, startin' with that Carson bloke.'

Harry is less vitriolic about the senior ranks, but is not keen on the cavalry – neither its officers nor its men.

'The fuckin' Cherry Bums was at the heart of it – 6th and 15th Lancers – stuck-up bastards. I remember them from Ladysmith – tossers!'

'That reminds me, 'Arry, do you remember that Churchill fella from Ladysmith, riding in, wavin' 'is hat like the conquerin' 'ero? He's done all right fer 'imself, ain't he?'

'He has that. Lord o' the fuckin' navy, ain't he?'

'Yeah, he was all right, though; came up and spoke to us. Not many of 'em do that.'

'Funny little fella, baby-faced with a little ginger tash. Couldn't 'alf talk!'

'What about those Geordies in our boozer?'

'Oh, they're all right; one is a 'ell of a good left-hand bat an' a decent bowler.'

'That's all right, then . . . I didn't think Geordies played cricket.'

'Neither did I.'