

Fierce Light

Statement from Suzie Hanna

My Grandfather served in the Signals Regiment throughout WW1 at the Somme, Ypres, and afterwards in the Army of Occupation. He suffered shell shock, gas poisoning, enteritis, frostbite and all the horrors of trench warfare, and returned home very sick, unmanned, and unable to work. Like many others he refused to go before the medical board as an army pension was seen as a guarantee of permanent unemployment, and he had every intention of returning to work. He did this gradually, but for the rest of his life he preferred to live in a boat, a wooden shed by the river, and eventually in a caravan in the woods. When he did get work it was outdoors, telegraphing fish sales information to London from Yarmouth Quay. I remember him as a very gentle man, his face still scarred by frostbite, who, with endless patience, taught me carpentry when I was a small child.

I have read a raft of WW1 poetry and prose, and have a particular love of David Jones's 'In Parenthesis'. Although written many years after the war ended, it carries a profoundly 'live' sonic and tactile sense of the conditions, relationships and rhythms of trench life and death. Inspired by this research, I have tested some animation media, and have found that animating backlit mud, paint and pigment under the rostrum can convey a dramatic sense of the 'theatre of war', sudden flares, flickering faces, and the liquid geometry of a battle torn landscape. Images of the Somme show a typical European farming landscape being terribly rendered into, literally, a sea of mud.

WW1 is celebrated by tributes to the Glorious Dead, but men like my Grandfather who survived it were handed medals but no proper support. They had to deal with the enormity of their experience when returning to their previous lives. Domesticity could be a problem for many after living outdoors for years. In this film my aim is to use the available IWM imagery as pictorial reference for the Battle of the Somme, and bring into this background a soldier returning home from battle, using the mutable qualities of animated mud to convey the massive differences in scale and his mental struggle with containment of the changing situation, (with reference to *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* by Ben Shephard).

Dr Alisa Miller is a cultural historian of the First World War who has published widely on the literature and aesthetics of the period. She has recommended relevant source material and will work as an advisor on the creation of the animated imagery.

NB

Since writing this I have been offered Bill Manhire's excellent poem 'Known Unto God' as the basis for the commission. It does celebrate the glorious dead but in such a way as to give life to them, and it brings us from the Somme battlefield into the present day, where victims of war are drowning as they try to escape their terrible situation. I feel that the subject, treatment and scale will be appropriate for the fluid geography that 'mud' will offer as a medium for animation. Bill Manhire mentions voices in his postscript, so I have a query about the possibility of creating the soundtrack, recording voices as he directs.