

“Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori”

On a recent trip to Apulia, the region that forms the heel of Italy in the far south, I noticed the above inscription on the war memorial in Alborobello.

A literal translation is “that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”.

In Britain we will be more familiar with the quotation as being the title of the poem by Wilfred Owen, published posthumously in 1920, but the line is originally from “Odes, 3.2” by the Roman poet Horace who lived 2000 years ago, so perhaps it should be no surprise to see it on an Italian war memorial.

The memorial is an obelisk about 30’ high and the names of the Great War dead are inscribed on three sides of the plinth. There are 129 names recorded for the period 1915 – 1918.

In 1914 Italy was a neutral country, having signed a pact with Germany and Austria-Hungary, but in May 1915 Italy joined the Allies after Britain extended to Italy a loan of £50m and agreed to support Italy’s territorial claims against Austria-Hungary for what is now most of northern Italy bordering the Alps.

Italy’s late entry to the war did not prevent some 6,000 Italians living in France volunteering to join the French army in 1914, the majority being placed in the Foreign Legion.

The panels on the war memorial make interesting reading – there are several unusual aspects when compared to British war memorials.

The dead are listed in alphabetical order by surname and then first name and, as with British memorials, it is apparent that many families lost several members. No unit information is given but three are described as “*Ufficiale*” and two as “*Sergenti*”.

Two of the dead had the same name, Giovanni Piepoli, and so are further distinguished by the addition of their fathers' Christian names, "*di (of) Angelo Vincente*" and "*di Vitantonio*".

The majority of the names, 101 of the 129, are commemorated on panels headed "*Morti sul Campo*", literally "Dead in the Field".

A further 5 are listed as "*Morti In Prigionia*" - "Died As Prisoners". This is a dubiously low figure given that 16% of the 600,000 Italians taken prisoner died in captivity. This was not a result of deliberate mistreatment but a combination of poor local conditions and the Italian government's strict adherence to international convention in refusing to send state aid to its interned combatants. Italian statistics for losses in the Great War are, however, quite unreliable due to poor or incomplete record keeping at the time and lack of official interest subsequently to establish the facts.

20 men are listed as "*Morti Par Malattia Contratta In Guerra*" - "Died Of Malaria Contracted In War" - 15% of the total.

The Italian army was ravaged by several malaria epidemics, particularly in 1917 and 1918, and some units lost more casualties to the disease than to enemy action. Italian units fought mainly in what is now the north of Italy, Macedonia and the Balkans, not regions we would regard today as malarial areas but Italy was not declared to be malaria-free until the 1950's.

3 men are listed as "*Morti In Francia Nell'Esercito Americano*" - "Died in France in the American Forces". These were men who had emigrated to the States and joined the Army there but still remembered locally by their families. Mass emigration to America started in the 1880's, particularly from the impoverished south of Italy, and by 1914 approximately 9 million had left the country, most destined for North or South America.

Paradoxically emigration from the area around Alborobello was comparatively low - the area was so

poor that peasants had few possessions that could be sold nor any land to borrow against to buy a passage to the New World.

The poverty and lack of education or opportunity in the area also meant that it was more difficult to avoid conscription, either by being in a reserved occupation or by being able to influence the decision by other means.

The military region of Bari, which covered Alborobello, sent the highest proportion of conscription-age males and yet after the war it received the lowest level of state assistance. The continued neglect of an already impoverished area led to conflict in the 1920's between the landowners and the landless peasants – a peasant Socialist movement achieved some success in improving the lot of the agricultural workers but it was soon brutally suppressed when the Fascists came to power.

Today the region is increasingly popular as a destination for foreign tourists but, as in any other country, how many pass by these memorials unaware of the social history of the time when these men died? Did they consider “that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country”?

