Frank Cottrell-Boyce

– Introduction –

How does a nation pull itself together again after a disaster? How do we move on from overwhelming experiences? There was no doubt in A. A. Milne's mind that the First World War was a disaster. On the Somme, he'd witnessed 'a lunacy that would shame the madhouse'. One Austrian Archduke had been killed, he said, and this 'resulted directly in the death of ten million men who were not archdukes'. Before the war he had been a star turn at *Punch* under the editorship of Owen Seaman. Seaman was a gloomy character who was partly the model for Eeyore. He was also an enthusiastic publisher and perpetrator of the kind of patriotic doggerel that cheered those ten million up the line to death. Milne was painfully aware of the part that culture played in soliciting sacrifice. 'Wars are fought for economic reasons,' he wrote, 'but they are fought by volunteers for sentimental reasons.' Seaman whipped up a lot of sentiment. Milne had been a pacifist since 1910. Seeing the Jingo-machine close up must have left a bitter taste. The pressure of it may have been partly why – despite his pacifism – he decided to sign up in 1915. Of course he didn't know then that this was only the first of the World Wars. He had every reason to believe that this was the War to End Wars

– a phrase that was coined by H. G. Wells, who sometimes played for the same cricket team as Milne. The Great War did not end all wars. But he learned that early on. In *The Honour of Your Country* he said that after the Somme 'all the talk in the Mess was of after-the-war'. He goes on to describe a conversation with a colonel whose 'idea of Reconstruction included a large army of conscripts'. The more Milne debates with him the more it becomes clear that nothing that happened on the Somme discredited the idea of war as a tool of diplomacy. The wittier Milne's responses become, the more obvious it is that war will continue to be part of the way we do things.

That cricket team he was in with Wells also included – at various times – J. M. Barrie, Kipling, Conan Doyle, P. G. Wodehouse, and G. K. Chesterton. It was Barrie who formed the team and named it the Allahakbarries, thinking he was playing with a phrase that meant 'God Help Us' – because he himself was such a bad player. So bad, in fact, that he banned the team from warming up at away grounds because the sight of them in action would only add to the opposition's confidence. In fact the phrase means 'God is Great' as you'll know from its appearance in various terrorist atrocities. The kind of violence Milne had witnessed does not go away.

In fact, Milne's 'after-the-war' was a streak of enormous luck. Despite seeing active and highly dangerous service as a signals officer, his later posting – on the

Isle of Wight – somehow left him time to start writing plays. His first was for the children of his colonel. He wanted to give them something amusing 'at a time when life was not very amusing'. Which is a decent enough mission for any writer. Certainly a better one than stirring up jingoistic sentiment (Milne's definition of a patriot was, someone who accuses other people of being unpatriotic). He moved away from *Punch*, ready to hit the West End running. As a successful playwright he would often earn £500 a week at a time when the average wage was about £4. He'd been lucky and he knew it. The American edition of his autobiography was actually called *What Luck*. The sense of being lucky gives the pieces he wrote about domestic life – about sorting out his books or redecorating the bathroom – the glow of unstated gratitude. He was lucky to have books to sort out. Lucky to be alive. Lucky to have got through the war without ever having to fire a shot in anger. Lucky therefore not to have had to compromise his pacificism.

Luck carries with it a sense of responsibility. Lucky survivors often feel they've been saved for some great purpose, or at least that they should make the most of their opportunity. You can sense this in how hard Milne worked to give those pieces their hospitable ease. Nothing is harder than making things look easy. If you read 'On Writing for Children' you'll see he had no patience for any writer who was 'not bothering'. Of a poem that was then a nursery favourite –

John Gilpin – he says 'there are sixty-three verses in it; it should have taken him a month of the hardest work within the capacity of man. When we read it, we know why it did not take him a month.' He was a fierce and fearless critic. In one very funny piece he takes a Sherlock Holmes story to pieces to demonstrate that it cannot be put back together again because it was only held together with chewing gum and sellotape. I don't think I've ever read a more insightful or bracing piece of criticism than his piece on Lewis Carroll and why the 'it was all a dream' ending is such a betrayal. His friend Frank Swinnerton said that Milne 'combined a gift for persiflage with the sternness of a Covenanter', and it shows in the sheer work ethic he brought to the task of making it look like he was doing nothing.

Of course no covenanter is going to be satisfied with 'merely' being amusing. One of the most moving and tortured pieces in this collection is 'The End of a Chapter', his account of why he has to stop writing about Christopher Robin. It's part excuse-note, part examination of conscience. He admits that Christopher Robin only got his name because the Milnes wanted their son to be a great cricketer and great cricketers – like W. G. Grace – have initials rather than names. He jokes about writer's jealousy of his own creation:

> Imagine my amazement and disgust, then, when I discovered that in a night, so to speak, I had been pushed into a back place, and that the hero of *When We Were Very Young* was

not, as I had modestly expected, the author, but a curiously-named child of whom, at this time, I had scarcely heard. It was this Christopher Robin who kept mice, walked on the lines and not in the squares, and wondered what to do on a spring morning; it was this Christopher Robin, not I, whom Americans were clamouring to see; and, in fact (to make due acknowledgement at last), it was this Christopher Robin, not I, not the publishers, who was selling the book in such large and ridiculous quantities.

Overwhelming success is harder to deal with than failure. At least failure has an element of hope in it. Success asserts a huge gravitational pull from which it's almost impossible to achieve escape velocity. Look how Conan Doyle struggled with Sherlock Holmes. How Steve Coogan keeps going back to Alan Partridge. How J. K. Rowling keeps returning to the Potter universe. Milne never returned. His refusal to dilute the legacy is partly why the colours of the Hundred Acre Wood are so fresh. He walked out of the trees, up to Galleon's Leap, and out into the World. Then he tried to stop a war.

The man who invented Winnie the Pooh said that the book he was most proud of writing was *Peace with Honour* – an anti-war polemic written in 1934. Nowadays, the whole idea of campaigning for appeasement in the 1930s has such a bad reputation that it's easy to forget that Milne was not the only one to argue against going to war with Nazi Germany. The book was a