Christmas

 1914

There was, of course, more than one football match

In the long line of unofficial truces

That stretched all along the front in Flanders;

Indeed, the matches themselves were a sort of climax,

Punctuating the peace that started before Christmas

With shared burying of the dead in No Man’s Land,

And that lasted in some areas until the early spring.

But on Christmas Eve, Christmas trees appeared,

Glowing in the gathering Tannenbaum twilight:

‘Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree,

How lovely are your branches’;

Miracle of miracles, the rain stopped,

A full moon stepped across the cloudless sky,

A hoar frost shimmered in the starlight,

Boots crunched on mud now stiff as duckboards.

Soldiers moved as if in a trance or dream,

Climbing out of their trenches, milling around,

Swopping bodies, kodaks, insignia, Schnapps, beer,

Tobacco, jam, stew and addresses;

Saxons laughed at Scots, blue beneath their kilts,

Over at frozen, peaceful, Ploegsteert Wood,

Then caps were dropped on the ground for goalposts.

Kurt Zehmisch, 134th Saxons, wrote in his diary:

‘Eventually the English brought a soccer ball from their trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was. The English officers felt the same way about it. Thus Christmas, the celebration of Love managed to bring mortal enemies together for a time… I told them we didn’t want to shoot on the Second Day of Christmas either. They agreed.’

So there they were, dodging shell holes, fox holes,

Barbed wire, ditches, turnips and cabbages,

Some roasting a pig together, chasing hares,

Feasting further on plum pudding and wurst,

In what Sergeant-Major Frank Nadin called

‘A rare old jollification, which included football.’

His comrade in the Cheshires, Ernie Williams said:

‘The ball appeared from somewhere, I don’t know where, but it came from their side… They made up some goals and one fellow went in goal and then it was just a general kickabout. I should think there were about a couple of hundred taking part…Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was no sort of ill-will between us…There was no referee, and no score, no tally at all. ‘

So fraternization continued, with singing and smoking,

Tea and cocoa, until darkness descended,

When as Private Mullard of the Rifle Brigade said:

‘Just after midnight you could hear, away on the right, the plonk-plonk of the bullets as they hit the ground, and we knew the game had started again.’

And so the dream ended, the nightmare restarted,

No more ‘Wotcha cock, ow’s London?’

Nor, ‘Are you the Warwickshires?

Any Brummagem lads there?

I have a wife and 5 children there.’

No more: ‘ we started up ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’ the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words ‘Adeste Fideles’.’

No more ‘Dearest Dorothy, Just a line from the trenches on Xmas Eve – a topping night with not much firing going on & both sides singng.’

No more ‘Friede auf der Erde’, ‘Peace on Earth’,

No more headlines like ‘TOMMY’S TRUCE BETWEEN THE TRENCHES’.

Instead, a boast of sharing cigars

‘with the best shot in the German army…but I know where his loophole is now and mean to down him tomorrow.’

Instead, the German Londoner who shouted:

‘Today we have peace. Tomorrow you fight for your country;

I fight for mine. Good Luck.’

Instead, ‘ I do not wish to hurt you

But [Bang!] I feel I must.

It is a Christian virtue

To lay you in the dust.

Zip, that bullet got you

You’re really better dead.

I’m sorry that I shot you-

Pray, let me hold your head.