

Speech at the grave of Rupert Brooke
St George's Day 2015
"He wears the ungathered blossom of quiet"

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thanking you for joining us today as we mark the centenary of the death of Rupert Brooke.

This is my first visit here. But like all of us who have known Brooke's poetry since our childhood years, I have long known that that "corner of a foreign field that is forever England" lies here, in this peaceful grove in a still valley, off Treis Boukes Bay, on Skyros.

Brooke had enlisted in the Royal Navy, seen action in Antwerp and, from March 1915, was in the Eastern Mediterranean theatre. His ship entered the Dardanelles, but was withdrawn to Moudros, the great harbour on Lemnos that had been the centre of allied forward operations since February 1915.

At the end of March, he was in Egypt, where he fell ill from dysentery and sunstroke, and was bitten by the mosquito that would cause his death. His company was then recalled north, to take part in the Gallipoli operation.

From 17 April, his ship moored off Skyros and the men exercised here. We know that Brooke visited this quiet and beautiful place.

But soon after, Brooke fell ill. The at first unnoticed mosquito bite led to blood poisoning. He died on a French hospital ship in the bay in the afternoon of St George's Day: the feast day of England's patron saint and the patron saint of Skyros; and the date on which Shakespeare was born and died - an important conjuncture for a poet. He was 27 years old. A party of diggers brought his mortal remains to this place and he was buried towards midnight on the same day.

Such was his fame in England that his death here was a noted event, seen by some - even in the hardheaded calculations of military men - as an ill omen for the Gallipoli campaign.

He left behind several, slim volumes of poetry and a small but important corpus of war poems. They are marked by a higher idealism and, perhaps, sentimentality than would be the case for those servicemen exposed to the full horrors of the Western Front. But in them, the presence of death is always strongly marked. These are not pretty words.

For us today, this isolated grave in its isolated valley may seem anomalous. We are remote from the centres of the Great War: the battlefields of Flanders and Gallipoli. And we are remote from Brooke's milieu: the ethos of post-Edwardian Cambridge, the Georgian poets, burnished young men and women living out their neo-pagan ideals.

But neither Brooke nor this Aegean theatre of war should be overlooked.

Brooke's poetry matters still. It matters for its continuation of a long tradition in English letters of lyric intensity, carried off in suave tones. And for its projection of a certain mood of Englishness, both visionary and troubled.

And this theatre matters still. From here, in the Aegean and on the Macedonian Front, empires were dissolved and the boundaries of states redrawn.

Brooke's centenary today is an opportunity to kick against historical amnesia. To educate a new generation of Britons and Greeks about what happened here from 1915 to 1918.

Over the next three years, my Embassy, working with other missions in Greece and with Greek partners, will play a full role in that essential task.

The poet's physical remains here, the great statue that stands in his honour in the town, and the imperishable body of poetry he left behind are material for inspiration and remembrance.

Let us then remember.

Let us remember in Brooke's own words:

*The feet that ran with mine have found their goal,
The eyes that met my eyes have looked on night.
The firm limbs are no more; gone back to earth.
Easily mingling....*

*What he is yet,
Not living, lives, hath place in a few minds...
He wears*

*The ungathered blossom of quiet; stiller he
Than a deep well at noon, or lovers met;
Than sleep or the heart after wrath. He is
The silence following great words of peace.*