

Tommy's Ark – Soldiers and their Animals in the Great War

by Richard Van Emden.

Bloomsbury Publishing plc., 2010.

The horrors of the trench warfare that epitomise the First World War are widely known and extensively documented. In addition to the terror engendered by armaments and poison gas, the privations of the trenches themselves and the senseless and mindless slaughter, soldiers had to put up with other morale-sapping horrors like lice and other vermin.

What is less widely known is that many soldiers took animals with them to the Front, and not just the horses, mules and carrier pigeons that were part of the campaign but other creatures that boosted their morale and softened the anguish of separation from home and loved ones.

Tommy's Ark is divided into five sections, one for each year of the war, and subdivided into three parts: the war in that year, the natural world in that year, and Soldiers' Memories. The poignancy in each section is added by the final part where verbatim testimony by servicemen at all levels, of varying length, is reproduced. It is clear that animals both witnessed and intimately cared for brought not just love but a measure of sanity in an insane situation.

The soldiers' memories are sometimes funny, sometimes sad, sometimes beautifully observed, sometimes shocking but building up into a total picture that will last long in the memory. The monument to animals in war in Park Lane, London, is a powerful testament to the sacrifices made by non-human combatants in conflicts, and Tommy's Ark is a reminder of the solace animals brought to troops while on active service.

This is a wonderful book.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh