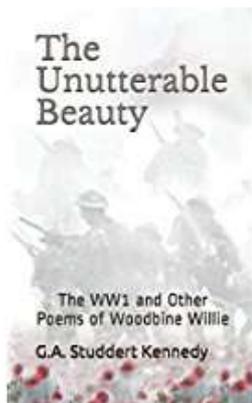


Holt WI

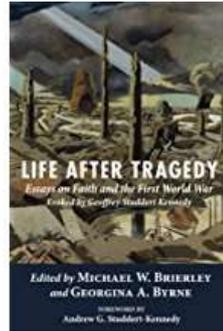
So, who is this? Sad eyes, big ears, a phenomenal intellect, a disarmingly big laugh, flashing oratory, a modern “saint” who dedicated the first three decades of the twentieth century to the poor and disempowered, who nonetheless brushed shoulders with royalty, who was awarded the Military Cross for valour and died still a young man?

Born 1883, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was one of 14 children born to his Irish clergyman father. He grew up in the slums of Leeds, surrounded by grinding poverty, which, despite his own relative affluence, ignited something in young Studdert Kennedy that led him to become a resolute champion of the oppressed and those in dire need. Later nicknamed Woodbine Willie, Studdert Kennedy, son of Leeds and Worcester, was a prolific reader as a child and was accepted by Trinity College, Dublin, when only a boy of 14. He passed 3 years at Leeds Grammar school before moving to Ireland for university, working not only at his studies, but showing talent as a sportsman (rugby, running, boxing), a poet and an orator. After a double first at Trinity and two years teaching, Studdert Kennedy followed his father into the Anglican Church.

For four years in Rugby’s Mission church Kennedy preached sermons that held his massive congregation of the poor spellbound, boxed with the local children, founded the “ministry of boots” to provide wherever possible for the poor and had to be restrained by his housekeeper from giving everything he possessed away. This habit remained throughout his life and it is recorded that his wife later had to take a deep breath on returning home to find him dismantling their bed to give it to a poor and sick parishioner.



After a brief period in Leeds helping out his elderly father as curate, the Church moved Studdert Kennedy to Worcester, where his parish in St Paul’s had a congregation of 4000 impoverished people. He was loved and respected in equal manner for both his generosity, of time and money, and his fiery defence of those who could do little for themselves. Not without controversy, he won the day over the design of the Crucifix that still stands where the church in St Paul’s once stood. Christ is depicted with his head held high, triumphant not defeated. And that was Studdert Kennedy’s Christianity. It was active, forthright and totally dedicated to spreading the gospel, serving others practically and spiritually.



The out break of World War I came and initially Studdert Kennedy encouraged young men to sign up – a fact he later bitterly regretted, once he had persuaded the church to release him from parish duties so that he could serve as an army chaplain. The experience of the trenches changed his view entirely, as his poetry shows. It was in a way station at Rouen in France that Studdert Kennedy acquired his nickname. Carrying two rucksacks, one with New Testaments and one with packets of cigarettes, he would greet the troop trains and dole out both to the soldiers. Later, at the Front himself, he was awarded the Military Cross at the Battle of Messines Bridge, for fetching both morphine for the wounded and also two wounded soldiers back to the dressing station, under fire.

In the aftermath of World War I, Studdert Kennedy left his church to work for the Industrial Christian Fellowship, again becoming a voice for those with none and serving to outlaw injustice, becoming involved with the miners' strike and marches for better working conditions or for more help for the unemployed. Through the offices of the Dean of Worcester Cathedral, King George V heard Studdert Kennedy preach and, in response, the king guaranteed to contribute to the fund set up to aid the poor as long as Studdert Kennedy preached for him once a year. Working tirelessly for others, and with his health compromised by life-long asthma and probably the conditions in the trenches, a bout of flu caused Studdert Kennedy's death at only 45 years of age. But his story deservedly lives on, in his poetry and books about social injustice. This week saw the 100th anniversary of his being awarded the Military Cross. And a beautiful memorial to his memory can be found in the Millennium Window of Worcester Cathedral.

So Woodbine Willie was the subject our talk this month, in many ways a sad story, but an inspirational one and yet another reminder of the history on our doorstep.

History of another sort and not quite on our doorstep was experienced by members of the group as we visited the American Museum in Bath. Here replica rooms of the early settlers in New England jostle with the artistry of quilts and a remarkable exhibition of costumes and photographs from the Jazz Age. Housed in a large mansion, the collections include genuine artefacts that range from Native American moccasins to Shaker costumes and boxes, the innards of a tavern and an early preacher's home.

Now we are looking forward to the Worcestershire Federation Annual Council Meeting in Malvern in October and our own AGM next month, when we will have the opportunity to look back over a busy year of speakers, outings and events.