

**Weekly Read week 10B. This is an extract from the novel 'Birdsong' by Sebastian Faulks, published in 1993. 'Birdsong' tells the story of a British man called Stephen Wraysford at different stages of his life both before and during World War 1. In this extract, Jack Firebrace and Arthur Shaw, miners in the tunnels at the Front, observe the first day of the Battle of the Somme in Northern France.**

Jack Firebrace stood with Arthur Shaw on raised ground near what they had called One Tree Hill, watching. They expected a swift passage, almost unopposed.

Jack was muttering, Shaw saying nothing at all. They saw the Scots coming up out of their burrows like raving women in their skirts, dying in ripples across the yellowish-brown soil. They saw the steady tread of the Hampshires as though they had willingly embarked on a slow-motion dance from which they were content not to return. They saw men from every corner walking, powerless, into an engulfing storm.

Their own contribution to the day, the vast hole that had been blown at twenty past seven, had given the enemy ten minutes in which to take their positions at leisure. By the crater they saw young men dying in quantities that they had not dreamed possible. They had not fired a shot.

The excess of it made them clutch each other's arms in disbelief.

'They can't let this go on,' said Jack, 'they can't.'

Shaw stood with his mouth open. He was unmoved by violence, hardened to the mutilation he had seen and inflicted, but what he was watching here was something of a different order.

Please God, let it stop, thought Jack. Please let them send no more men into this hurricane.

The padre, Horrocks<sup>1</sup>, came and stood with them. He crossed himself and tried to comfort them with words and prayers.

Jack turned his face away from what he saw, and he felt something dying in him as he turned.

Shaw has begun to weep. He held his miner's hands to the sides of his head and the tears coursed down his face. 'Boys, boys,' he kept saying. 'Oh my poor boys.'

Horrocks was trembling. 'This is half of England. What are we going to do?' he stammered.

Soon they all fell silent. There was an eruption from the trench below and another wave went up into the pitted moonlike landscape, perhaps Essex or Duke of Wellington's <sup>2</sup>, it was impossible to see. They made no more than ten yards before they began to waver, single men at first picked out, knocked spinning, then more going as they reached the barrage; then, when the machine guns found them, they rippled, like corn through which the wind is passing. Jack thought of meat, the smell of it.

Horrocks pulled the silver cross from his chest and hurled it from him. His old reflex still persisting, he fell to his knees, but he did not pray. He stayed kneeling with his palms spread out on the ground, then lowered his head and covered it with his hands. Jack knew what had died in him.

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<sup>1</sup> *padre* -Padres were chaplains or priests, who would live with the soldiers to host Sunday services and carry out burials when soldiers died.

<sup>2</sup> *Essex or Duke of Wellington's* – The Essex Regiment and Duke of Wellington's Regiment were part of the British Army.

- Read paragraph 2, beginning 'Jack was...' List **four things** that Jack does or sees in this paragraph.
- What **simile** is used to describe the Scottish ('the Scots') soldiers?
- What do you understand about Shaw's emotional state in the paragraph that begins 'Shaw stood with his mouth open'?
- In the paragraph beginning 'Soon they all fell silent...' how does the writer use **language** to describe the fighting? Pick out at least **three language techniques** the writer uses, and explain the effect of each one.
- Consider the effect of the writer's choice of the **sequence** (order) of events to **structure** this extract:

-what is the effect of including the sentence 'They expected a swift passage, almost unopposed' in the opening paragraph?

-At what point in the extract does the writer focus on a significant change in Jack's emotions? Choose a specific phrase and explain why it is effective that the writer has included it at this point.

-What do you think is meant by the last line of the extract 'Jack knew what had died in him', and how does it link to something described earlier?