



Woodbine Willie Poet and Padre

I have always been intrigued as to why the poems and writings of Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, more popularly known as Woodbine Willie, have not enjoyed the same profile as those of his contemporaries like Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooke. It must be admitted that his “rough rhymes” perhaps lack the sophistication of some of the more classical war poets, yet they convey a raw emotion that betrays Kennedy’s unstinting commitment to the trenches rather than the officers’ mess, and a desire not simply to describe the scenes that confronted him, but to try and make sense of them. These are perspectives that we are the poorer without.

Long overdue therefore is Searchlight Theatre’s powerful production “Woodbine Willie – poet and padre” which was premiered at this year’s Edinburgh Fringe, and brilliantly captures his anguish and humour in the face of the horrors of world war one. Having been a member of Industrial Christian Fellowship’s executive for over a decade, I have become closely acquainted with GS-K through his writings, and to see him so effectively brought to life is truly moving. The script skilfully weaves together many of the original poems and reflections that he penned before and after the war, tracing his own journey from being an enthusiastic advocate of military service, to detesting war in its every expression.

David Robinson brilliantly captures the man and his relentless determination to make sense of Christian faith in the face of experiences and circumstances that left many questioning their very humanity. His performance is ably supported by Michael Taylor and Oliver Ward who earth Kennedy’s ministry in the lives of two Tommys who, despite their respective naivety and cynicism, are inescapably drawn to him and the faith about which he was so passionate – stories that the final scene reminds us could be told a thousand times over by those who in real life encountered this 20th century prophet.



Although set in his famous front-line ‘vicarage’, the production affords the audience glimpses of his life and ministry before and after the war, reminding us that his was a lifelong commitment to engage faith in the most difficult and challenging of circumstances. There are moments when you are crying with laughter at his quick fire humour, and moments when tears are induced by his poignant and evident love for humanity, so brutally assaulted by this barbaric conflict. And from it all emerges not only a skilful representation one of history’s forgotten heroes, but an account of Christian faith that no less connects with the pain, reality and hope of today’s broken world.

Perhaps the greatest asset of this superb production is its profound simplicity. It is this that allows Studdert Kennedy’s personality and writings to rise to the fore, and having encountered this truly remarkable man, any audience cannot help but be deeply moved and inspired.

Phil Jump – Chair, Industrial Christian Fellowship