

5 December 2014 for immediate release

# New poem from Ian McMillan read by young players from Liverpool FC premiered to parliament



Sunderland FC Under 12s lay poppies at a First World War cemetery in Ypres

Over 300 young footballers from all 20 English Premier League under 12 teams have written poems about the First World War battlefields of Flanders. Their words have been transformed into a new original poem by **Ian McMillan**.

**The Poetry Society** and **Barclays Premier League** worked together to coordinate the creation of the poem to commemorate the centenary of the **First World War** as part of the **Football Remembers** project. The poem will be performed by young Liverpool FC players Tyler Morton and Seb Losa on the **9th December at a parliamentary reception**. It will then be read in English, French, Flemish and German at the final international leg of the tournament the following week.

Since 2011, the Premier League has held the **under 12s Christmas Truce International Tournament** in Ypres, Belgium, developed to honour the Christmas Truce football matches that took place on the Western Front in December 1914. This year, to commemorate the centenary of the First World War, the Poetry Society and Premier League worked together to enhance the educational aspect of the trip for the young footballers taking part in the tournament. Leading poets **Simon Barraclough, Steve Ely, Chris McCabe, Nick Makoha, Deanna Rodger** and Poetry Society Director **Judith Palmer** accompanied the under 12s and helped them produce their own poems inspired by their visit. These explored their feelings about the First World War and the original Christmas Truce football matches in 1914, where soldiers laid down their arms on Christmas day to play football together. Their poems were then distilled into the final piece by Ian McMillan.

Ian said of the experience: "It's been exciting and humbling to work with the words proved by the young footballer/writers, proving once again that poetry is a real team sport!" Deanna Rodger, who was the poet-coach for Hull, Chelsea, Stoke and Leicester, added: "Walking around war memorials is emotionally and morally challenging as an adult; to see these sites through these young boy-footballers' eyes brought a perspective of wonder and clever curiosity."

Martyn Heather, Head of Education at the Premier League said "It was hugely rewarding working with the Poetry Society during the Christmas Truce Tournament in Ypres. We try and let our young footballers have a range of difference experiences in their education and we know the boys found it a very creative process. As well as learning they were understanding the power of words.

"This is a unique piece of work and wonderful example of what team-work can achieve. The writers from the Poetry Society have expertly captured the thoughts of the boys and then passed them on to Ian. What Ian has written is a beautiful and very poignant poem. Celebrating the spirit of the 1914 Christmas Truce in the words of young footballers following in their footsteps 100 years later is an apt and fitting tribute."

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The Christmas Truce International Tournament qualifiers and education weekend took place **14-16 November** in Ypres, featuring all 20 English Premier League U12 teams and young teams from Germany, Belgium and France.

**NOTE: The poem is embargoed until the parliamentary reception at 6pm on the 9th December.**

**The Game: Christmas Day 1914**

*It is so cold.  
The lines of this poem are sinking  
Into the unforgiving mud. No clean sheet.*

Dawn on a perishing day. The weapons freeze  
In the hands of a flat back four.  
The moon hangs in the air like a ball  
Skied by a shivering keeper.  
All these boys want to do today  
Is shoot, and defend, and attack.

Light on a half-raised wave. The trench-faces  
Lifted till you see their breath.  
A ball flies in the air like a moon  
Kicked through the morning mist.  
All these boys want to have today  
Is a generous amount of extra time.

No strict formations here, this morning;  
No 4-4-2 or 3-5-1  
No rules, really. Just a kickabout  
With nothing to be won  
Except respect. *We all showed pictures,  
I learned his baby's name.*  
Now clear the lines of this poem  
And let's get on with the game.

No white penalty spot, this morning,  
The players are all *unknown*.  
You can see them in the graveyards  
In teams of forgotten stone;  
The nets are made of tangled wire,  
No Man's Land is the pitch,  
A flare floodlights the moments  
Between the dugouts and the ditch.

A hundred winters ago sky opened  
To the sunshine of the sun  
Shining on these teams of players  
And the sounds of this innocent game.  
All these boys want to hear today  
Is the final whistle. Let them walk away.

*It has been so cold. The lines  
Of these poems will be found, written  
In the unforgotten mud like a team sheet.  
Remember them. Read them again.*

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**For further information or to interview the poets, contact Robyn Donaldson on 020 7420 9886  
or email [rdonaldson@poetrysociety.org.uk](mailto:rdonaldson@poetrysociety.org.uk)**

### Notes to Editors:

#### THE POETRY SOCIETY

The Poetry Society was founded in 1909 to promote a “more general recognition and appreciation of poetry”. Since then, it has grown into one of Britain’s most dynamic arts organisations, representing British poetry both nationally and internationally. With innovative education and commissioning programmes and a packed calendar of performances, readings and competitions, the Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages. It publishes the magazine *The Poetry Review*, runs the National Poetry Competition, the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award and the youth performance poetry championship SLAMBassadors UK. The Poetry Society’s early history was deeply connected with the writers of World War 1. Throughout the period its magazine, *The Poetry Review* premiered new work by writers such as Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, Leslie Coulson and Marian Allen. [www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk)

#### THE POETS

##### Ian McMillan

Ian McMillan is poet-in-residence for The Academy of Urbanism and Barnsley FC. He presents *The Verb* every week on BBC R3 and he’s a regular on BBC Breakfast, *Coast, Pick of the Week, You & Yours, Last Word* and *The Arts Show*. He’s been a castaway on *Desert Island Discs*. Previously he was resident poet for English National Opera, UK Trade & Investment, Yorkshire TV’s Investigative Poet and Humberside Police’s Beat Poet.

##### Simon Barraclough

Simon Barraclough is a poet, writer, and tutor living in London but originally from Huddersfield in West Yorkshire. He is the author of the Forward Prize-finalist debut, *Los Alamos Mon Amour* (Salt, 2008), the limited edition ‘boxed pamphlet’, *Bonjour Tetris* (Penned in the Margins, 2010) and *Neptune Blue* (Salt, 2011). He is also the editor of the collaborative Hitchcock-homage, *Psycho Poetica* (Sidekick Books, 2012) and co-author of *The Debris Field* (Sidekick Books, 2013). At the moment he is working on a full-length book and live event entitled *Sunspots* (due in 2015) and has been poet in residence at the Mullard Space Science Laboratory since January 2014.

##### Steve Ely

Steve Ely is a poet, novelist and biographer. His book of poems, *Oswald’s Book of Hours*, was published by Smokestack Books in 2013 and was nominated for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in poetry. His novel *Ratmen*, was published by Blackheath Books in 2012. In 2015 he will publish a second book of poetry, *England and Ted Hughes’s South Yorkshire*, a biographical work about the former poet laureate’s early life in Mexborough, near Doncaster. He’s read his work on BBC Radio 3 and his poems have been published in several prestigious publications, including *The Sunday Times*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Poetry Review*, the *Forward Book of Poetry 2014*, *The Tablet* and many more. This year he was commissioned by the Poetry Society to write a long poem rising out of the First World War for their event ‘The Pity’ and he is currently teaching an online poetry course for The Poetry School. Ely’s work explores a range of themes – nature, landscape, conflict, identity, politics, England and the English – and football. He’s written poems about his own twenty-five year career as a Sunday League footballer (a tragic downward spiral from mercurial Bergkamp-esque genius to Grant Holt style ‘lump’ – a book-length work is planned eventually) and several footballers past and present – including Lionel Messi. As well as writing, Ely works as a freelance Educational Consultant and sometimes teaches in secondary schools, on a short-term basis. Formerly a Headteacher, he worked in schools for twenty years as a teacher of English, Religious Education and Humanities, over the years taking football teams from year seven to the sixth form. He supports Barnsley (allegedly) but these days spends more time watching the Leeds United under 21 team – because his nephew Frankie Mulhern plays for them.

##### Nick Makoha

Born in Uganda, Nick Makoha fled the country with his mother, as a result of political overtones that arose from the civil war during the Idi Amin dictatorship. He has lived in Kenya, Saudi Arabia and currently resides in London. He has presented his work at many international events and toured for the British Council in Finland, Czech Republic, the US and the Netherlands. His pamphlet, *The Lost Collection of an Invisible Man*, was published by Flipped Eye in 2005. His poem “Vista” was used as part of a video installation to promote the Turner prize in 2008 for Tate Remix. Currently working on his 1st full collection *The Second Republic*, Nick has had poems shortlisted for the Flamingo Feather poetry competition, New Generation African Poets, Troubadour International Poetry Prize and the Arvon International Poetry competition. He was one of ten writers on a programme called The Complete Works: a national two year development programme for ten advanced Black and Asian poets.

##### Chris McCabe

Chris McCabe’s collections are *The Hutton Inquiry*, *Zeppelins*, *THE RESTRUCTURE* and *Speculatrix*, published in December 2014 by Penned in the Margins. He has recorded a CD with the Poetry Archive and was shortlisted for The Ted Hughes Award in 2014. His plays *Shad Thames*, *Broken Wharf* and *Mudflats* have been

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#### For further information

Telephone Robyn Donaldson  
on 020 7420 9886 or email  
[rdonaldson@poetrysociety.org.uk](mailto:rdonaldson@poetrysociety.org.uk)

The Poetry Society,  
22 Betterton Street, London WC2H 9BX  
Tel: 020 7420 9880 Fax: 020 7240 4818  
[www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk)

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performed in London and Liverpool and he has written a book of prose, *In the Catacombs: a summer among the dead poets of West Norwood Cemetery*. He works as the Poetry Librarian at The Saison Poetry Library and teaches for The Poetry School.

**Deanna Rodger**

Deanna Rodger is an actor and spoken word poet. She is the youngest UK Poetry Slam Champion (2007/8) and completed vocational acting training in The National Youth Theatres (NYT) REP Company 2012. She has written and performed as a poet and actor in 2012 Olympic Team Welcome Ceremonies, Buckingham Palace, Speakers House, 10 Downing street and Honey Coated Dream as well as delivering two TedX performances. She has recently completed the audio book recording of 'Feral Youth' by Polly Courtney and is currently writing her one woman show *LondonMatter* which has received support from POP Productions (IdeasTap, Sky Arts), Roundhouse Camden, The Albany and the Arts Council. She is co founder of two popular spoken word events Chill Pill and Come Rhyme With Me and is in poetry collectives: Point Blank Poets (Biennale UK Artist International award 2011) and Keats House Poetry Forum, as well as leading on Podium Poets and workshops in and around the UK.

**BARCLAYS PREMIER LEAGUE**

The Barclays Premier League is the most watched continuous annual global sporting event in the world. Last season 13.9 million fans attended matches with record average stadium occupancy of 95.9%. Across nine months of the year, 380 matches are viewed in 175 countries with coverage available in over 650 million households.

The quality of Premier League football and the interest that it generates allows us to support all areas of the sport. This season we will invest in more than 50 new artificial grass roots pitches in communities across the UK and deliver hundreds of projects that focus on improving sports coaching in schools and inspiring young people to play sport. The financial investment in this important area of our work will be £56m.

On top of this, the Premier League also invests in the Football League, the Football Conference and other football bodies. Premier League football provides in excess of £1bn per season to the Exchequer in tax revenue.

**FOOTBALL REMEMBERS**

'Football Remembers' is the series of programmes and events being delivered jointly by the Premier League, The FA and the Football League, in partnership with the British Council, to commemorate the First World War. From Friday 5 to Monday 15 December 2014 we are running 'Football Remembers Week' to celebrate the spirit of one of the most iconic moments of WW1, the 1914 Christmas Truce football match.

Football Remembers kicked off in May 2014 when the partners launched a Football Remembers education pack that was sent to more than 30,000 schools across the UK. It includes resources to help children learn about the Christmas Truce and football's role in recruitment and morale during the First World War. Football Remembers also features legacy projects that ensure young people will continue to learn about WW1 for decades to come. The programme will continue to 2018, highlighting the involvement of footballers and football.