

Soft Words Butter No Parsnips

The Life and Times of
John Iliffe Poole 1888-1979
Lynda Franklin



John Iliffe Poole, 1920

Gassed in the Great War and labelled a mute after a pioneering laryngectomy operation, **John Iliffe Poole** was given just six months to live but went on to become the longest-surviving laryngectomee in the world and an avid crusader of people's rights.

Poole was an ordinary man who overcame all the odds. No different to millions of other ordinary people who were called upon to protect their country and were somehow proud to face death in the fight for freedom. No different to millions of ordinary people who found themselves struck down by a disabling illness and who faced penury because of it.

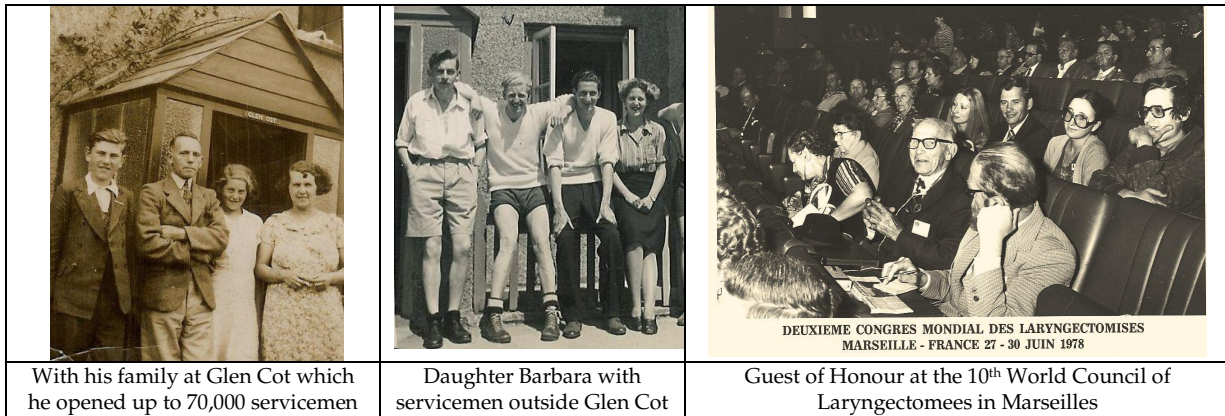
Poole's moving and remarkable story has been lovingly pieced together by his grand-daughter **Lynda Franklin** from boxes of yellowed and tatty papers and photos stored in the attic for over 30 years. The book is filled with pathos, humour, contemporary information and lots of colour photographs.

John Iliffe Poole started out as a humble soldier with the King's Own Scottish Borderers in 1906. Blown up in the trenches, he was exposed to what he described as 'a dose of gas' which developed into cancer of the larynx. Barely able to swallow a teaspoon of water following his landmark operation at Edinburgh Castle in 1924, unaided, he doggedly taught himself to speak, and his pioneering method served as the blueprint for all future laryngectomees throughout the world. His long fight for a commensurate pension is documented, as is losing his only son in the Second World War. He lived to be 91, having survived a further 55 years after the operation.

Poole also left another legacy – a number of fragile visitors' books which bore testament to what he did for other ordinary people in the Second World War when he couldn't go and fight for his country. *When fisherman can't go to sea they repair nets* – his cosy little cottage in Newton Ferrers, Devon, became 'home from home' for up to 70,000 Services personnel from all over the world including Mickey Rooney (serving in Europe as part of the American Forces Network).

For many, this was to be their last taste of home before falling in action and a selection of their poignant words, poems, sketches, sentiments and signatures is reproduced in the book. The author, in fact, was born as a result of a convalescing RAF pilot (one of those visitors) sweeping Poole's daughter Barbara off her feet and marrying her in 1947.

Poole was a man who became an inspiration to many thousands of others and a shining example of courage in the face of adversity.



Synopsis

This is the story of John Iliffe Poole; born when Queen Victoria had been a widow for two decades. He was a Scot and proud of it. He enlisted in the KOSB in 1906 and saw service in Egypt, Sudan and the East Indies before returning to Berwick and going to active service in the First World War. His family had a 'unique record of patriotism' with 13 members in the Army. Poole's two younger brothers, 19 and 20 were killed within the first year; upon the death of one of them, Poole was given a letter written by his brother and addressed to him with a bullet hole through the centre. He kept this for the rest of his life.

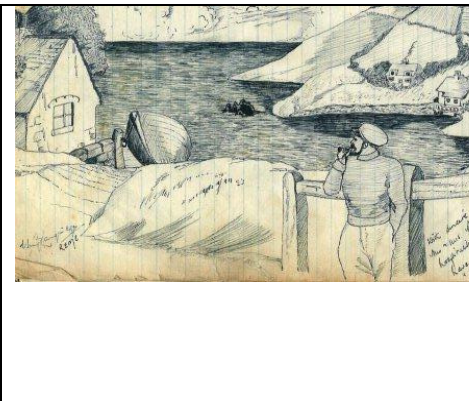
While fighting in the trenches on the assault on Cambrai on 30th November 1917 (lauded as a 'landmark' battle), Poole was blown up and as he lay there during the long wait for the stretcher-bearers, he was gassed. The gritty reality of life during the Great War and a remarkable historical framework and modern-day context is captured in great depth within this chapter. Poole sustained horrible injuries, was shipped back to England, operated on and within eighteen months pronounced fit to rejoin his regiment.

England was not the place he left - with strikes and post-war depression taking hold, it was in a fragile state. In 1923, Poole underwent tests and was finally operated on in June 1924 – incredibly one of the first of its kind for carcinoma of the larynx. He weighed 9½ stone and was given 6 months to live. It was fortuitous that his surgeon Dr Douglas Guthrie, who went on to become an international leader in this field, took a keen medical interest in Poole's case. Still considering himself very much a guinea pig however, he was left to his own devices after the operation to try to learn to speak again.

The book documents his fight to have his carcinoma declared the result of gas inhalation during the war, but it was to take 9 months and an appeal before the Pensions authorities changed their mind. They increased his pension but still his fight continued as the goalposts kept being moved as to whether his young wife and two babies would be provided for too. Declared 100% disabled, he was then discharged as unfit for further duties. He was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct medal for over 18 years' service.

Poole astounded the medical profession by creating a technique for speaking without his voicebox. In 1926 he spoke in great detail at a Symposium attended by ENT specialists from all over the world about his blueprint for speaking. Taking notes was an American doctor who went back home and perfected the method, before sending it back to England. This caused a flurry of press coverage in 1934 as this became the first incidence of a person speaking on the radio. Poole was proud to be the pioneer, and throughout his long life he was heralded as such. Poole spent the rest of his life promoting education and awareness of cancer of the larynx and fighting to get support for those affected.

When the Second World War broke out, Poole could not fight. Instead, he and his wife Winifred opened up their picturesque cottage, Glen Cot in Newton Ferrers, a Devon fishing village, to up to 70,000 service personnel from all over the world as there were no facilities for them in the locality. They came from bases far and near. Unfortunately, Poole and Winifred's only son Donald was killed as part of the British Expeditionary Force in September 1944 but this only reinforced the couple's efforts to give every visitor through their doors a wonderful welcome and some good, home cooking. A penny for a bun and a penny for a cup of tea and soon, Winifred was making up to 600 apple pies a week. The Pooles never turned anyone away, only too aware that for some, it would be their last taste of home life.

<p>It's comfortable and homely In this little place, A haven when lonely, And you've got a lovely face. When its portals you enter The atmosphere you feel, Then your mood has to surrender, For on it peace sets its seal. An apple tart, a cup of tea Which backs you up to end, They do it just for you and me, That hand on the way, which they lend. ITS NOT A CANTEN - but a haven, A place you must appreciate, Its memory of which you'll be savin' Till you reach your own garden gate. So PLEASE, please remember Your appreciation to show, By leaving it as you found it, Before you go!!</p> <p><i>W. Naughton</i></p>		<p>O'Seanas R. Thompson 319 Alderman's Green Rd Coventry 9/5 Thomas H. Sadler Dunedin New Zealand D. B. Bardsley 129 D. Lett Lane Blifton York H. Bullock Wanganui New Zealand J. Lubini Auckland New Zealand P. R. Bace Phobis Bay of Pelly New Zealand A. W. L. Bonnah. Parnouby Auckland New Zealand W. S. E. Taylor Aberdeen Scotland G. D. Oaker Colli Villa Alberta Saskatchewan A. Wainking RN 1/4 Haslemere London J. Maxwell Colli Villa Alberta Canada Mickey Rooney Hollywood USA James Borkhell 27 Friday St Leighton Buzzard R. J. Long 118, Sandstone Rd, Leamington Spa L. W. Moor 74 Kingsley St, Sydenham Kent J. Sullivan Lamb. St. Blanaid Kilgobbin G. M. Bailey 24 Coving Way Bolton R. Kezzer 7 Farnham St. Scotland</p>
<p>One of many poems written in the Visitor Books, Glen Cot</p>	<p>Example of picture drawn by one of the servicemen in the Visitor Books, Glen Cot</p>	<p>List of names including Mickey Rooney in the Visitor Books, Glen Cot</p>

Their guests filled many visitors' books full of poems, sketches, observations, cartoons and little homilies, with three volumes surviving to this day. They make sad but uplifting reading, as do the letters Donald wrote home before he was killed. For the Pooles' selfless work they won accolades from King George VI, Lady Astor, the Lord Lieutenant of Devon, the Red Cross, all sorts of charities and the heads of all the Armed Forces. Most importantly, for them, were the thanks of the ordinary people, those brave people who fought for freedom.

The war over, the couple retired, but Poole cranked up the PR machine regarding the plight of the laryngectomee. His name was put forward for the Birthday Honours List, but sadly he didn't ever receive that sort of recognition. However, he was a very proud man indeed upon being invited to one of the Queen's Garden Parties. He and Winifred were awarded the *Daily Mirror Gold Medal for Humanity*.

The longer he survived after the operation, the more interest grew in his medical case. In view of his celebrity status, he was an amazing self-publicist, always writing letters. If a little outspoken, Poole was a shining example of personal empowerment, "If I can do it, surely you can. Just get off your arse and try!"

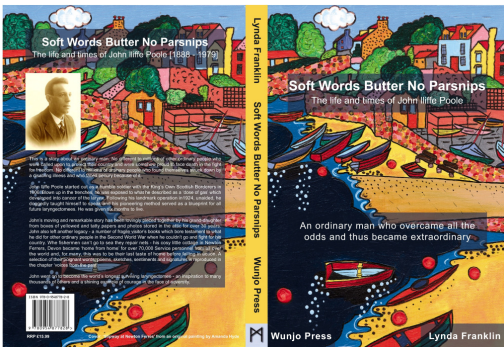
He founded several laryngectomee support clubs. Up until his 91st year he continued with normal life which was visiting people before and after their operations, doing all of his own shopping, and of course, corresponding. He was Guest of Honour at the 10th World Council of Laryngectomees in Marseilles. He is listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the oldest surviving laryngectomee, which, at the time he died in 1979, was 55 years from the date of that revolutionary operation.

A note from the author:



Lynda
Franklin
(here aged 5)

“John Iliffe Poole was my grandfather, and ‘as tough as old boots’, or otherwise he would not have survived. The early memories I have are largely visual and auditory and very much from a young child’s perspective, the latter ones came to me via letters, notes and photos which have given me a grown up’s perspective over his life and times. The more I read, the more convinced I was that here, right in front of me, was a story that deserved to be told, the story of an ordinary man. Throughout his long life he battled and fought and this is the story of how an ordinary man became extraordinary and managed to survive all the odds. And there are few things more inspirational than this to other ordinary people.”



Wunjo Press RRP £15.99.

183 pages, full colour throughout.

Available 1 July from www.wunjopress.com

Contacts

For more information, a press copy of the book, further images or interviews with Lynda Franklin, please contact Zoë Franklin on 0044 7779 081875/
zoe@wunjopress.com

Editors' Notes

About Wunjo Press

Set up by Lynda Franklin in 2004, Dorset-based Wunjo Press has published two previous books inspired by the philosophy that there are so many astonishing tales to tell and it would be sad indeed if our nation’s stories died along with our heroes.

Many have wartime experiences like Lynda’s father ‘Witt’ Wittridge, the spitfire pilot and aviation pioneer who wrote *An Evil Boy*, published 2004.

A modest man by nature, he found it hard to believe that his story would be of interest to a wider audience but Wunjo Press knew it would be and his book is a testament to him and people just like him, unsung heroes of our time.

Lynda’s first book *Shoestring Warrior*, was about a different battle – this time against famine, floods, green fields and grey suits.

Against the backdrop of some of the most beautiful countryside in England, all the forces were stacked against two half-crazed owners trying to save a humble centuries-old dilapidated farmhouse in 30-odd acres of untouched countryside. What should have been a gentle tale of rural bliss, was transformed into a rollercoaster ride that almost turned into a fight to the death. A book that just had to be written and a cautionary tale for those wishing to retire to the rural idyll! First published by Wunjo Press in 2005.

Each of the three titles published by Wunjo Press, although dealing with what could be considered sad and tragic content, all convey a sense of fun, a degree of irreverence and an infectious joy for life.