

Birdsong and regeneration essay sample



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In *Birdsong* the experience of trench warfare is made extremely vivid. The terror of life at the front and in the underground beneath it, is graphically portrayed by Faulks through the eyes of the characters, particularly those of Stephen Wraysford. Stephen, an officer promoted from the ranks, endures the nightmare world of the trenches. The horror of this experience is depicted objectively. Some central scenes in the novel are set in mining tunnels that both sides constructed between their separate trench networks.

The allies and the Germans both dug these mines and countermines; sometimes as Faulks illustrates, one side would succeed in detonating explosions that destroyed enemy tunnels, killing the sappers or burying them alive. Faulks does not give any gratification to any sensibilities in his descriptions of the mutilating and killing. He also vividly evokes the dread of constant noise from the barrage and bombardment, the fear of gas attack and the utter squalor of life-and death-in the trenches.

When there was a battle or a raid, they expected to die; it was the losses through sniper fire, through shells and mortars, the blowing of the tunnel, the continuous awareness that any moment could bring death in a number of different ways that had been harder to understand. Slowly Jack had become accustomed even to this. It took him a day of sleep each time they went into rest before he could adjust to not being in constant fear'. In both novels *Birdsong* and *Regeneration* many of the characters seem to find it difficult to allow the feeling of rest to come upon them as they try to adjust themselves to the lack of fear.

Faulks notes that the reason that shellfire mad the soldiers so nervous was because they had seen the damage they were capable of causing, ' A direct hit would obliterate all visible evidence that a man ever existed; a lesser one would rip pieces from him; even a contained wound brought greater damage to the tissue of the body than a bullet. Infection or gangrene often followed'. Faulks uses overpowering imagery to demonstrate such themes as, the horror and wastefulness of the war ' Once more in ragged suicidal line they trudged towards the pattering death of mounted guns.

Bloodied beyond caring. Stephen watched the packets of lives with their memories and loves go spinning and vomiting into the ground. Death had no meaning, but still the numbers of them went on and on in that new infinity there was still horror', and careless attitudes (link to Birdsong-part where general tells Stephen that the wire isn't cut and not to tell the men about it) of incompetent generals with no regard to the loss of soldiers lives ' Gray shook his head, " the wire isn't cut, you know.

I don't want you to tell your men, but I've been up and down with these things and I can assure you that for stretches of hundreds of yards there is no shell damage at all. The shells have just not gone off. " " I thought it was cut from here to Dar-Es- Salaam" " It's a staff cock-up. Haig, Rawlinson, the lot. Don't tell your men Wraysford. Don't tell them, just pray for them". As Stephen Wraysford wonders at what it is that encourages him to carry on, ' Under the cover of a failing twilight, Stephen Wraysford narrowed his eyes against the drizzle.

The men in front were invisible beneath the bulk of their clothes and the quantities of kit they were carrying... Stephen wondered what force impelled him, as his legs moved forward once more', Faulks also invites us to wonder at the capacity of human beings to endure and survive such unspeakable horror, ' They had witnessed mutilation and death; they had undergone the physical discomfort of cold, wet and fatigue such as they had never thought themselves capable of enduring', and for the most part carry on as normal after it. (link to Barker and how they do not carry on as normal after it).

Regeneration takes [place in Craiglockhart, a Scottish hospital for those whose war wounds are to the mind and spirit (Barker-river commenting on prior and how he must've been funny before the war), not the body. The story centres around four men; established poet and war hero Sassoon Siegfried, novice writer Wilfred Owen, shell-shocked officer Billy Prior and the doctor who treats them all, William Rivers. Sassoon has been sent to Craiglockhart, to discredit him, because his current philosophy, that the war has become one of ' aggression and conquest' is a source of embarrassment to his senior officers.

While there, he strikes up a friendship with Owen and the two spend many hours talking about writing. Meanwhile, Prior, who is fighting to breakthrough a memory blockage, is romancing a local munitions plant worker. And River, who is gradually taking on the burdens of all his patients, is on the way to a breakdown. Through Faulks we discover that men volunteered to fight for a number of reasons. They sought adventure, or escape from the tedium of unskilled work, or as in Weir from Birdsong's case he, " liked the comradeship. It was as simple as that.

I had had no friends before and suddenly I found that I had, if not the friendship then at least the company of hundreds of men my age. When I was commissioned I found that some of them even looked up to me. It was a grand feeling". Most believed it was their patriotic duty to fight what was generally believed to be just a war against Germans. Many of those who signed up were younger than the official minimum age of 19 (Birdsong-Tipper and other quotes). Younger citizens thought it would be fun to be in the army, others saw the army as an opportunity to get away from strict parents.

On the battlefield, however, younger soldiers were finding out that it was not as enjoyable as they thought it would be, ' A sharp wailing sound began a few yards down the trench. It was a shrill, demented sound that cut through even the varying noises of gunfire. A youth called Tipper ran along the duckboards, then stopped and lifted his face to the sky. He screamed again and again, a sound of primal fear that shook the others who heard it. His thin body was rigid and they could see the contortions of his facial muscles beneath the skin. He was screaming for his home'.

In Birdsong we are shown that corpses as well as food scraps that littered the trenches, attracted rats. Some rats were extremely large. Whilst collecting bodies Weir and a few of his men stumble upon one or two of your more grotesque kind of rats, ' They moved low towards a mine crater where bodies had lain for weeks uncollected. " Try to lift him".... On Weir's collar a large rat, trailing something red down his back.... Bright and sleek on liver, a rat emerged from the abdomen; it levered and flopped fatly over the ribs, glutted with leasure.

Bit by bit onto stretchers, what flesh fell left in the mud. ' (birdsong-quote form fat, bloated rat comment on corpse when collecting bodies) Faulks's writing reflects a desire to paint the details of war as graphically and realistically as possible, to suggest the degradation and futility (uselessness) of the war. The nature and the length of the war led people to question many things; the motives of generals and politicians (link to Sassoon/sassoon's actual declaration), religion and the purpose of life itself.

This is reflected in both Birdsong and Regeneration. We also find that between offensives, death and severe injuries were caused by random shelling, ricocheting bullets (link to Weirs death) and grenades. In Regeneration, talking to Rivers about his war service, Burns says, " You can't let yourself know that you want to be wounded, because officers aren't supposed to think like that. And, you see, next to a battle, a patrol is the best chance of getting a good wound". Bombs were easily hurled without warning into enemy trenches.

Faced with the prospect of being killed or permanently disabled, soldiers sometimes hoped that they would receive a blighty wound and be sent home. In some cases soldiers shot themselves in an attempt to end their time on the front line. Others killed themselves rather than carry on in the trenches (before offensive-birdsong) " In the trenches, it's shrapnel or head injuries. On patrol, if you're lucky, it's a nice little hole in the arm or leg. I've seen men cry with a wound like that".

He said, " Cry with joy". In some cases men would endure no more, stand up on the fire step and allow themselves to be shot by an enemy sniper. In

Birdsong Stephen's beloved war companion, the one person who, " Alone had made the war bearable, is shot by an enemy sniper, when he ' limbed onto the fire step to let a ration party go past', as a result of inappropriate cover, ' Jack noticed that some of the sandbags on the parapet had not been properly replaced from the day when the infantry had gone over them'.

Moments before Weir is shot Faulk's mentions that on his way to meet his men ' he looked happier than usual', the language used here suggests that perhaps he was fully aware of the consequence of his actions and that the gesture, resulting in his death was intentional on his part, the fact that he was cheerier than usual implies that he knew that he was getting out of it all. (link to weir-might've been intentional on his part, mention the perhaps implied use of language by Faulks-he was cheerier than usual- perhaps he knew he was going out of it) Soldiers subjected to continual exposure to shellfire were in danger of developing shell shock (birdsong- whoever, got so used to shellfir that he could distinguish distances/casualties, ect). Early symptoms of shell shock included tiredness, lack of concentration, etc.

When internally examining Sassoon for symptoms of shell shock, Barker through Rivers informs the reader that the obvious signs of this would be ' twitches, erks, blinks and repeated ducking to avoid a long exploded shell', and also ' shaky hands'. (link to Rivers description of shell shock when first meeting Sassoon and doing a mental check of his mannerisms). Eventually the men suffered breakdowns. Some doctors argued that the only cure for shell shock was a complete rest away from fighting (regeneration quote). If you were an officer you were likely to be sent back home to recuperate.

However the army was less sympathetic to ordinary soldiers with shell shock. Some officers took the view that these men were trying to get out of fighting (regeneration-sassoon board meeting shellshock quote) According to Faulks the majority of soldiers' diet in the trenches consisted of Bully Beef, Bread and Biscuits. Obviously, this general lack of food and therefore nutrition and the never ending, constant strenuous physical strain the men endured took its toll as Sassoon in Barker's Regeneration recalls his 'horror at their physique.

Many of them were almost incapable of lifting their equipment, let alone of carrying it mile after mile along shelled roads. I'd ended one march pushing two of them in front of me, while a third stumbled along behind, clinging to my belt'. Faulks implies that the officers were well fed, but the men in the trenches were treated appallingly (Birdsong-stephen and dinner meeting) Men in the trenches suffered from lice. They created a sour, stale smell. Various methods were used to remove lice.

A lighted candle was fairly popular, but the skill of burning lice without burning your clothes was only learnt with practice, 'Jack had at first viewed the lice on his body as simple parasites whose presumption had made him indignant. The way they dug their ugly fawn-coloured bodies into the private pores of his skin had revolted him. He took great pleasure in holding a lighted candle and working it slowly p the seams of his clothes where the insects lurked and bred. Usually their fiery deaths were silent, though occasionally he would here a satisfying crackle.

He would do Shaw's clothes for him too because Shaw did not have the delicacy of hand and was liable to set fire to his underwear... There was a sense of relief when some of the creatures were gone... Jack always felt they had no right to be there in the first place. The evident advantage in cutting back the numbers was the temporary relief it gave from the sour, stale smell the creatures left, though even this relief was qualified, since the odour was usually compounded or overwhelmed by stronger and more persistent bodily smells' (birdsong-two links; one about how to do it and one about how somebody who hadn't got the hang of it yet).

Where possible the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of water ' the rare drama of divisional baths. Jack's company was marched three miles back from the front to an old brewery. Jack enjoyed the ritual and was amused at the optimism of young officers who were sure that the brief plunge would cure the hygiene problems of the men for good', meanwhile their clothes were being put through delousing machines ' At the old brewery men lined up and undressed in their clothes. The underwear was thrown into a pile, a grey crawling heap...

The men joked at the women who had to perform the task... They gave their tunics and trousers to others who, under the direction of Jack's platoon sergeant, carried them to the corner of the barn-like room where a Foden Disinfector, a machine that was dragged optimistically up and down the front line, was supposed to fumigate them... Jack climbed into a tub with several men from his platoon... Here, in the old beer barrels, there was a moment of friendship and relaxation such as had barely been known.

Evans and O' Lone began to splash the water at each other... Jack found that he had joined in. He felt guilty for a moment towards the memory of his dead comrades, as though he were not being respectful... He would take any pleasure that helped'. (birdsong baths and vats scene with references to the delousing ladies). Later, through Jack we find that, unfortunately, this rarely worked ' By the time they had reached their billets Jack felt the first irritation on his skin.

Within three hours the heat of his body as he marched had hatched the eggs of hundreds of lice that had laid dormant in the seams of the shirt. By the time he reached the front his skin was alive with them'. (birdsong-walking back from the vats-and within 30 mins the sweat caused the lice eggs to hatch out). As well as causing frenzied scratching' ' Tyson had once been driven so frantic that the medical officer ordered him to have fifteen days rest. The constant irritation had proved more wearing to him even than the sound of heavy guns or the fear of dying'.

Jeanne's noticing that Stephen was unaware of his constant scratching and other quotes), lice also carried disease. During her meeting with Stephen Isabel becomes aware that' ' he had changed almost beyond recognition, she thought. He was badly shaved and he scratched his body all the time, apparently without knowing it'. Faulks reveals that the soldiers were encouraged to write letters to friends and family in Britain. Most men decided it would be better to conceal the horrors of trench warfare.

As Wrayford in Birdsong and Prior in Regeneration both demonstrate, as a result of the Defence of the Realm Act that was passed in 1914 all letters

that the men wrote should've been read and censored by junior officers. (stephens reading of the letters before the big push/bombardment). A number of offences were punishable with death, including mutiny, disobedience, desertion, sleeping or being drunk on post (jack firebrace and other quotes about his sleeping on post punishment) and striking a superior officer.

Regeneration and Birdsong look at the horrors of war and the effects they have on the men who endure them. Sassoon and Wrayford both argue that the war is wrong. Sassoon in Regeneration is similarly resentful of the home front attitudes towards the war. When asked by Rivers as to whether he might find it difficult to feel safe whilst others are dying, he replies, " Nobody else in this stinking country seems to find it difficult. I expect I'll just learn to live with it. Like everybody else".

Barker earlier on in the novel notes that ' Sassoon's determination to remember might well account for his early and rapid recovery, though in this case it was motivated less by a desire to save his own sanity than by a determination to convince civilians that the war was mad'. (quote). They question, which in turn asks ourselves to question, without looking through a haze of patriotic pride, when a nation's political, economic or moral position is in enough jeopardy to warrant the horrifying debt of blood that will inevitably be incurred.

When discussing Sassoon with Bryce, Rivers comments that he doesn't believe him to be a pacifist, but that, ' It seems to be entirely a matter of horror at the extent of the slaughter, combined with a feeling of anger that

the government won't state its war aims and impose some kind of limitation on the whole thing'. Faulks announces that the war is a pitiless human activity and the depiction's of it should be equally pitiless, as in any war, nothing human is sacred and nothing human should be spared.

It's as if death was meaningless, Once more in ragged suicidal line they trudged towards the pattering death of mounted guns. Bloodied beyond caring, Stephen watched the packets of lives with their memories and loves go spinning and vomiting into the ground. Death had no meaning, but still the numbers of them went on and on, in that new infinity there was till horror. Faulks puts his finger on it when Stephen says, " It sounds strange, but we have degraded human life so far that we must leave some space for dignity to grow again". (birdsong-non cut wire-wraysford).

Amongst the earlier chapters of Birdsong, Stephen is described by Faulks as a person having ' artless enthusiasm' and an ' outrageous sense of right and wrong' and is also said to have quizzical eyes'. The war seems to transform the characters of Wraysford's novel, as it does to the characters of Braker's novel. Later on in Birdsong, and after seeing and enduring what they had we find that the war has done exactly that to the character of Stephen Wraysdord, when visiting Jeanne she tells him that she was worried by his listlessness.

It was as though he had given up hope and was allowing himself to drift, he said it was hard not to when the attitude of the people at home to what they had endured was one of " indifference", Jeanne also notices that ' he had grown very thin and his skin had become lined and leathery around the eyes.

Their expression was no longer guarded, to Jeanne it seemed “vacant”, ‘this was the man who eight years earlier had so stirred her younger sister’. They will never again know life as it was before the pointless horror and betrayal of the war. It seems that whatever life remains to them will be lived in the awareness of what they have witnessed.

Barker's *Regeneration* is reserved but makes a telling point about the dehumanising experience of the war, often the deepest wounds endured in battle are not those done to the body, but those suffered from the mind, the personal, psychological devastation wrought by combat, the kind that makes day to day existence almost unbearable. Doctors may be able to regenerate the flesh, but mending a broken spirit requires considerable more time, energy and skill (link to rivers methods and theories and other doctors theories and methods) The environment of *Regeneration* is well set up without heavy exposition.

When Rivers is visiting a colleague he is shown the effects of the newly used electric shock therapy, a device for turning men into fighting zombies. Barker directly writes about men's struggle with possible loss of masculinity ‘in the war, you've got this enormous emphasis on love between men-comradeship-and everybody approves’. She notes the feminine side of men that emerges ‘Fear, tenderness-these emotions were so despised that they could be admitted into consciousness only at the cost of redefining what it meant to be a man’. when experiencing combat, in how they are forced to mother each other. ... In war, you've got this enormous emphasis on love between men-comradeship-and everybody approves’. As Barker comments, ‘Fathering, like mothering, takes many forms beyond the biological. Rivers

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had often been touched by the way in which young men, some of them not yet twenty, spoke about feeling like fathers to their men. Though when you looked at what they did. Worrying about socks, boots, blisters, food, hot drinks... One of the paradoxes of the war-one of many-was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was...

Domestic. Caring. As Layard would undoubtedly have said, maternal... the war that had promised so much in the way of 'manly' activity had actually delivered 'feminine' passivity and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known. No wonder they broke down'. (regeneration quote and birdsong quote-perhaps sleeping or drawing quote). Faulks, not so directly, also demonstrates this. Barker reflects on the effects of war on the soldiers in the front lines during world war one without entering the battlefield; with the exception of dreams sequences.

Sassoon is best known for his 1917 public refusal to serve in the war any longer, a war that he called "a senseless slaughter". In *Birdsong*, Faulks also uses on many occasions, imagery associated with slaughter, on one occasion he mentions an excited party of young officers who had experienced only six months at the front and who 'had not been there for the great slaughters of the previous year and could not foresee the mechanised abattoir that was expected in the impassable mud of Flanders in the months to come'.

Barker demonstrates Sassoon's heretical into conversations between Sassoon and Rivers, examining the reality that the psychological terrain that soldiers must struggle with is even more brutal than the trenches. Sassoon in

Regeneration is similarly resentful of the home front attitudes, when asked by Rivers whether he might find it difficult to feel safe whilst others are dying, he replies, " Nobody else in this stinking country seems to find it difficult.

I expect I'll learn to live with it. Like everybody else". Barker earlier on in the novel notes that Sassoon's determination to remember might well account for his early and rapid recovery, though in his case it was motivated ' less by a desire to save his own sanity than by a determination to convince civilians that the war was mad'. Prior's plight is reminiscent of the situation of so many combatants who could not explain the horror of their experiences to civilians awaiting their return.

When visiting Jeanne, Stephen tries to explain to her that it was hard to show any enthusiasm or hope and to keep himself from drifting when ' the attitude of people at home to what they had endured was one of indifference', ' he only managed to exist'. When Stephen asks Weir why he is so anxious to survive, Weir answers that his life is all he has and that he wants to hold on to it in the hope that perhaps it will all come clear in the end, that he will go on to do great things. In reply to this Ellis says that " Most people in this war want to survive so that we can win it.

We are fighting for our country", it is his opinion that this is why the men suffer and die, for the good cause of the people back home. However, Weir does not share this opinion, after going back home on leave he found himself infuriated at the ignorance and selfishness of the people back home " those soft pigs have no idea what lives are led for them. I wish a great

bombardment would smash down along Picadilly into Whitehall and kill the whole lot of them” “ Even your family? ” “ Particularly my family. Particularly them. I tried to explain to them what what it was like and do you know, my father was bored.

He was actually bored with the whole thing. I would especially like a five day bombardment on their street. And on the people who went on strike for more money in the factories when we were dying on a shilling a day... I would like to see them walk into the enemy guns in tiny thin lines. For one shilling”.

(quote from weir and prior and link to home front attitudes) Soldiers couldn't put into words or even contemplate beginning to describe to the people back home, the things they had seen and done. In *Regeneration*, Rivers gives his professional opinion on Prior's failure to speak, " I imagine...

Mutism seems to spring from a conflict between wanting to say something, and knowing that if you do say it the consequences will be disastrous. So you resolve it by making it physically impossible for yourself to speak. And for the private soldier the consequences of speaking his mind are always going to be far worse than they would be for an officer”. The silences that punctuate Barker's text are even more powerful than the words spoken, Barker departs from the battlefield, away from the firing shots, the explosion of shells and the barking of commands to explore what happens when silences must be addressed, filled and understood.

Rivers's job involves making men ' sane' by making them willing to go back to mud, slaughter and the bodies of dead comrades, with equanimity (get quote from *regeneration* that they dont want to go back to his) The setting of

Birdsong-life in the trenches, a landscape crammed with peril, is potentially claustrophobic. A virtual slaughter of the Somme. Faulks delivers us a superb insight into what it must've been like for an 'ordinary' soldier in world war one. Faulks, in depth, describes the mud and blood and Wraysford's attempt to retain a scrap of humanity while surrounded by it.

Faulks brings to life a stunning confrontation with the reality and meaning of war. He portrays a surreal world, 'He wanted to sleep, but his eyelids were flickering too much. Each time sleep seemed near his body jolted it back from it. Eventually he fell into a half-waking state, like the one he had found on the train in which brightly illuminated scenes from the last two or three years occurred at random in his mind. Incidents and men he had forgotten recurred with vivid intimacy, and then were gone. He tried to pull himself back from the lurid sequence of memories.

He kept seeing Douglas falling off the stretcher on the slippery floor of the trench as a shell landed; he could hear the lifeless thump of his passing body. A man he had forgotten, called Studd, came back to his mind, his helmet blown back and his scalp raked by machine gun bullets as he bent to help another man who had fallen'. Wraysford finds it difficult to feel safe whilst others are dying. 'It seemed a strange way, Stephen thought, in which to have passed the war, like rodents in a separate element.

It had shielded them from the impact of the impact of the big attacks and the sights of bodies piling up, but the world of the miners inhabited his own imagined horror'. Faulks demonstrates the way the war explored the deepest reaches of their minds. Braker makes a good and obvious point through the

character of Rivers, who tries to justify and put Sassoon's declaration into perspective to persuade the board to empathise with Sassoon who has had to deal with the "grief at the death of his friends.

Horror at the slaughter of everybody else's friends. It isn't clear to me why such emotions have been ignored", Faulks also deals with soldiers struggles to find normality outside these conditions, 'For all his lice-free clothes, he felt lumpish and awkward in this tidy, feminine room. He wondered if he would ever re-find his ease and naturalness in normal surroundings, or whether he had now evolved into a creature whose natural habitat was corrugated-iron ceilings, wooden walls and food hanging in rat-proof parcels from rafters'.

Faulks in more depth than Braker recreates the nightmare conditions of world war one, whereas Barker deals in more depth with the issues of sexuality and detachment alongside the damaging effects of war on the human psyche. Faulks shows how along the whole line, trench life involved a never ending struggle against water and mud (link to prior and his recollection when walking through mud he is reminded of the hard trench mud decisions-on outing; dead animals) Duckboards were placed at the bottom of the trenches to protect soldiers from problems such as trench foot.

Faulks takes a different approach than Braker in several ways. First of all, there is a romanticism about his book, although, this romanticism does not extend to the scenes of horror on the battlefield. Wrayford experiences love and loss before the war and this colours his view of the world and his place in it throughout. Faulks uses the highly romanticised love affair at the

beginning of the book to provide a stark contrast when, six years later, we find him in the trenches. And this is where Faulks differs. Barker shows us the effects of the war, but in regeneration there are no scenes actually set in the war.

Faulks takes us into the world of the trenches and also into the world of the miners who were brought into dig tunnels under the enemy trenches. ‘ Stephen glanced to his right. He could see a long, wavering line of khaki, primitive dolls progressing in tense deliberate steps, going down with a silent flap of arms, replaced, falling, continuing as though walking into a gale’. The battle scenes are very effective and bring the experiences alive to the reader. ‘ He looked behind and saw a second line walking into the barrage in no mans land They were hurled up like waves breaking backwards into the sea.

Bodies were starting to pile and clog the process’. The scale of destruction that takes place at the disastrous allied attack at the Somme is particularly disturbing and in this scene two of the miners are trying to come to terms with the unthinkable carnage they are witnessing, ‘ Jack Firebrace stood with Arthue Shaw on raised ground near what they had called One Tree Hill, watching. They expected a swift passage, almost unopposed. Kack 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 form which they were content not to

return. They saw men from every corner walking, powerless, into an engulfing storm. Their contribution to the day, a 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 Jck, ' 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, though jack. Please let them send no more men into this hurricane. The padre, Horracks, 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 had begun to weep. He held his miner's hand's to the sides of his head and the tears coursed down his face. ' Boys, boys,' he kept