

ON WAR MEMORIALS

By P. G. KONODY

“**G**REAT nations,” says Ruskin in his preface to “St. Mark’s Rest,” “write their autobiographies in three manuscripts:—the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three the only quite trustworthy one is the last. The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune, and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children, but its art only by the general gifts and common sympathies of the race.”

One might go further than Ruskin and say that the book of a nation’s deeds would be meaningless, or at least undecipherable, without the book of art which supplies the needed key. The book of art is older even than the book of words. To the book of art we have to refer for our knowledge of the earliest civilizations. As we turn its leaves, we read of the rise and fall of mighty Empires, of social and political institutions, of great individual achievements, and above all, of the wars that play so dominant a part in the history of the nations. For war, or rather victory, has always had a stimulating effect upon artistic production; and many of the triumphs of early art that have been saved from the destruction wrought by time or by the hand of man, are commemorative of war-like achievements: they may, indeed, be regarded as war memorials. Moreover, the book of art is more reliable than the book of words. Not that the artist was less prone to exaggerate than the chronicler, or less given to flattery of the powers that employed him. But the historian, as a rule, was too much absorbed

in *events* to trouble about the daily life, the appearance, the surroundings of the pawns on the chess-board of history. There was no need for him to describe what to him was obvious. A war, for instance, means to him statistics, strategic and tactical movements and their results, treaties and alliances, and the glory of individual rulers or generals. The sculptor and painter, on the other hand, have to visualize their subject and to build it up of those material details which the chronicler scarcely touches upon, as being too obvious, but which, in their ensemble, constitute the life and civilization of a period.

Unconsciously, when we think of Assyria, of Pharaonic Egypt, and even of ancient Greece, our mind dwells upon the alabaster reliefs of the Nineveh palace, the sphinx and the pyramids and temples on the banks of the Nile, the Parthenon and the countless masterpieces of classic art. These landmarks of art make the landmarks of history realities. If it were not for the book of art, fragmentary though it be, events that have decided the fate of nations and of continents — Karchemisch, Pelusium, Marathon — would appear to us as vague and unreal as the history of Olympus and Walhalla. Nor is this all. In the course of the ages the work of art, created as a memorial to some great historical event, assumes an importance greater than the event itself. Posterity admires and treasures it for its own sake, and not for the cause that has brought it into being. Thus the sculptured or painted memorial, from being a record of history, becomes part and parcel of history, and a vastly important part of it to boot. For it is the only aspect