At this time of remembrance, I feel it’s important to re-tell the tragic story of James Henry Coward, my maternal grandfather’s older brother. Through my research into his short life, I’ve uncovered many details that will be shared in my forthcoming book *Time Again*. Below is a brief account of his story.

When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4th, 1914, James Coward was 26 years old. That September, he married Laura Sayer at All Saints Church in Tufnell Park, Islington. As a newlywed, he wouldn’t have been expected to volunteer for service at the outset of the war.

The couple’s happiness was short-lived. In September 1915, they had a daughter, Edith Laura Coward, but just a few months later, tragedy struck. Laura, just 29 years old, died from a kidney disease. James was left a widower with a young child to care for.

On May 25th, 1916, conscription was extended to married men. However, as a widowed father, James was still exempt from the draft. Yet, in an act that would haunt him, he was publicly shamed. During a train journey, a woman from the White Feather Movement – which aimed to shame men who hadn’t enlisted – dropped a white feather in his lap. The white feather was a symbol of cowardice, and the irony that this cruel gesture was directed at someone whose surname was *Coward* was not lost on him.

Shamed and determined to prove his courage, James told his family, "That's it, I’m going!" He enlisted in the army on October 13th, 1916, at Wood Green, joining the 1st Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment.

Less than a year later, James was dead. On October 4th, 1917, during an attack near Geluveld, Belgium, he succumbed to wounds sustained in battle. The war diary of his regiment describes the day with chilling precision: “The enemy shelled our positions at intervals during the day. The battalion suffered about 100 casualties, a large proportion of which belonged to B Company.” James was one of those casualties.

He was buried at Lijssenthoek Cemetery in Belgium, in grave XX. D.10. He is one of over 9 million soldiers who died in the Great War, a conflict that also left 20 million wounded and 359,150 men missing in action.

In the early 1990s, Edith, now an adult, visited her father’s grave with her sons. She was deeply moved, though it was a bittersweet journey. Edith had never known her father, and all she had to remember him by was a crumpled photograph that she cherished for the rest of her life. She lived to be 87, but she often wept, lamenting the father she never had the chance to meet.

James’s story is a poignant reminder of the personal sacrifices made during the Great War, and the enduring impact it had on families for generations to come.