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Oxford's Literary War; Oxford University's servicemen and the Great War.

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The last two decades have seen a slow shift in the academic understanding of the impact of the Great War on interwar Britain. The work of a small group of cultural historians has challenged strongly held pre-existing interpretations of the cultural impact of the Great War. However, there is still a popular perception that the war was characterised by the innocent generation of 1914 marching from an Edwardian summer into an Armageddon which killed most of them, and left the survivors bitter and disenchanted, regretting their participation in a futile conflict, and languishing in the inter-war period, deeply marked by this failure. Yet this is not a view of the war that many of its combatant veterans would have recognised, and, in particular, a productive and influential group of literary veterans, all with connections to Oxford University, who were engaged, in the 1920s and 1930s, in writing a different representation of the meaning and experience of the Great War.

A number of important texts, written in the 1960s and 1970s stressed a largely negative understanding of the Great War on the part of British veterans. In particular, Bernard Bergonzi's *Heroes' Twilight* (1965), Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), and Eric Leed's *No Man's Land; Combat and Identity in World War I* (1979) depicted Great War veterans as being defeated by the experience of war, even if their country had 'won'. On a more popular level, the hugely successful play, later film, *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963), a product of the left-wing theatre group, 'Theatre Workshop', also cast the Great War as a futile farce of monumental proportions. The war was constructed by cultural historians, and *Oh! What a Lovely War*, in overwhelmingly negative terms, which it was argued

had given risen to a complex mix of personal, cultural, and psychiatric conflicts experienced by veterans in the aftermath of the war. For example, Eric Leed investigated the relation between the war and the definition of modernity, and, at the same time, examined the way in which men attempted to ascribe meaning to the shock of modern war. Leed's central concern was to examine the way the war changed men who participated in it, and he developed the argument that men underwent a severe test of their self-image as men, and that combatants felt that they had been pushed to the margins of society.

This interpretation, of a war-induced crisis of masculinity, and an erosion of the concept of manliness, has been challenged by a number of historians. The work of Rosa Maria Bracco was responsible for re-focusing the cultural history of the war onto the 'middlebrow' novel. Arguing for the centrality of 'enduring works of literature and more ephemeral popular fiction [as] an intrinsic part and manifestation of the society of their time'¹, Bracco focused on best-selling middlebrow novels of the inter-war period which 'served to provide reassuring explanations of the present reality, and to counter-act the disturbing developments of the modern world by re-asserting well-established values and attitudes'². In relation to the middlebrow understanding of the Great War, Bracco's extensive exegesis of R.C. Sherriff's long-running, and iconic, play, *Journey's End* (later novelised by Sherriff and Vernon Bartlett), re-established the play as being not an 'anti-war' play, but an account of a small group of British officers' experience of war, and an assertion of traditional public school values. Bracco's contentions were taken up by Brian Bond, who tied Bracco's championing of popular literary interpretations of the meaning of the Great War to military historians' defence of the British pursuit of the war, asserting that the war did have meaning and purpose, that it was necessary, and that contemporaries, particularly combatants, saw it as a valued experience. The popular contemporary perception that the Great War was futile, unnecessary and a

'defeat' was, Bond argued, not an historical account of the period, but, rather, derived 'from the radical anti-war and anti-authority movement of the 1960s'³ .

In fact, the struggle over the literary representation of the Great War pre-dates the 1960s, with a group of British ex-combatants arguing against interpretations of the war that they saw as being unduly pessimistic, or, in some cases, overly enthusiastic. At the heart of this inter-war literary struggle were a number of ex-combatants who all had ties to Oxford University. Oxford's most famous literary veterans are Edmund Blunden, T.E. Lawrence, and Robert Graves, along with the non-combatant, but important, figure of Vera Brittain. But Oxford produced more literary veterans than these four. And, together, Oxford's literary veterans made a significant contribution to the cultural history of the Great War, and one that represented a complex understanding of the nature and meaning of the war. Yet that understanding has been absorbed into an undifferentiated myth of disillusion with which most people are familiar today.

In 1922, a collection of short pieces about the war appeared under the title, *Disenchantment*. The author was Charles Edward Montague, who had been educated at the City of London School, and Balliol. Montague was mentioned in despatches three times, and served on the Western Front until the war's end. It was subsequently claimed that Montague's book marked the beginning of the anti-Great War school of writing⁴. But this is to misread his book. Montague was disenchanted, but with the civilian population, not with the efforts of Britain's combatants. In Montague's eyes, not only had the servicemen upheld Britain's honour, but they were also the main guarantors of peace in the post-war period. Only they could be relied upon, just as they had been in 1914-1918. This approach to understanding the war – the lauding of combatants at the expense of non-combatants – was also a central theme of Arthur Hamilton Gibbs in his bitter and intense memoir, *The Grey*

Wave (1920). Gibbs, who was educated at St. John's, had been following an acting career in the USA before the war, but he joined up to endure four years of fighting on the Western Front, mostly in the Royal Field Artillery. *The Grey Wave's* central theme is of the unshakeable heroism and endurance of British combatants, and their betrayal by the civilian population, senior officers, war profiteers, and anyone else who had not experienced combat. *The Grey Wave* is a bitter and disillusioned book, but Gibbs, who also wrote two war novels, saw value in the experience, value that was found in the nobility and heroism of his erstwhile comrades. For men like Gibbs, it was this combatant virtue which helped give meaning to the war.

The question of the essential meaning of the war came to a head in 1929 with the publication of a key anti-Great War text – *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Remarque's famous book, which was published in English in March, 1929, rapidly became a best-seller, with its English-language publishers claiming 195,000 copies sold by August. But Remarque's picture of the war drew heavy fire from British ex-combatants, and particularly from Oxford veterans. Oxford literary veterans argued that there was value to be found in the war, and sought to counter what they saw as the one-sided approach of writers like Remarque. Edmund Blunden, the author of one of the finest memoirs of the war, *Undertones of War* (1928), and another ex-combatant, Cyril Falls, later Chichele Professor of the History of War, were co-authors, with H.M. Tomlinson and Ralph Wright, of an important bibliography of war books, *The War, 1914-1918*, published in the same year as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In their introduction, the editors of *The War, 1914-1918*, outlined their view that the war had renewed a belief in human values: 'a revelation of the spirit of man, and a strong argument for the future expression of heroism and self-sacrifice in better fields'⁵. Cyril Falls reinforced this argument in his *War Books, A Critical Guide* (1930), in which he attacked those writers who had, he said:

'set themselves, not to strip war of its romance – for that was pretty well gone already – but to prove that the Great War was engineered by knaves and fools on both sides, that the men who died in it were driven like beasts to the slaughter, and died like beasts, without their deaths helping any cause or doing any good'⁶.

Like Falls, T.E. Lawrence, and Edmund Blunden, who was a significant figure at Oxford in terms of the literary legacy of the war, had been angered too by another book published in 1929 - Robert Graves' *Goodbye To All That*. Graves' account was seen to be self-serving, and written primarily to make money rather than give an accurate account of the war experience. Other similarly questionable motives had earlier been identified by Blunden in C.E.M. Joad's editing of the diary and letters of Joad's fellow member of Balliol, A. G. West. West had served with the Public Schools Battalion, and then the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, before being killed in April, 1917. He had serious misgivings about the prosecution of the war, but when Joad edited West's papers he suppressed anything that did not underline those misgivings. Blunden did not wish to avoid the horrors and the suffering of war, but he felt that too much attention was being given to books that presented a deliberately one-sided analysis of war, an analysis that effectively left people without hope.

A similar argument was advanced by Douglas Jerrold in *The Lie About the War* (1930). Jerrold was educated at Westminster School and New College, where he read history. He served with the Royal Naval Division at Gallipoli and in France, and in 1930 was the editor of the *English Review*. His booklet was an attack on novels which, he claimed, presented a partial view of the war. He criticised sixteen books in particular, including Graves' *Goodbye To All That*, Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*,

and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Jerrold was particularly scathing about Remarque's novel, and argued that 'not only was the war neither futile nor avoidable, but it was not believed to be either by the men who fought'⁷. Instead of the 'defeatist' views of the war, characterised by 'false rationalisation of post-war facts or fallacies'⁸, Jerrold argued that 'it is time we got back to the truth – unromantic, unchivalrous, unadventurous, unadorned by the marvellous, the epic or the obscene, simply WAR'⁹, but a war that had defeated German militarism, seen the end of three oppressive empires, and laid the foundation of the League of Nations.

Jerrold's booklet certainly struck a chord with other Oxford commentators. The Chichele Professor of Military History at the time, and a key figure in the development of the tank, Major-General Sir Ernest Swinton, in an introduction to Charles Douie's *The Weary Road* (1929) contrasted extreme, 'German', views of the war with the allegedly more balanced view of British veterans:

'*The Weary Road* comes to us at the right moment to show how very different it is [the 'German' view] from ours, and to confirm in unmistakable terms the striking contrast. It is a relief to have the staid, solid British point of view, which lies between the two extremes of despairing disillusionment and perfervid exaltation'¹⁰

That sideswipe at Remarque and Jünger was one that most Oxford literary ex-combatants, and others, would have approved of.

It was Swinton's 'solid British point of view' which best characterised much of the output of Oxford's literary ex-combatants. These men sought to understand their experiences of the Great War in traditional ways. They praised the endurance,

loyalty, steadfastness and heroism of British troops, they reasserted basic tenets of the public school ethos, and they sought to find value in the war. Edward Thompson, a fellow of Oriel College, and a recipient of the Military Cross, wrote three popular novels of the war in the middle east, *These Men, Thy Friends* (1927), *In Araby Orion* (1930), and *Lament for Adonis* (1932), which used traditional tropes to praise manly fellowship and stoic endurance. In these novels British officers have knightly and chivalric attributes, and are even compared to Christ. Thompson's novels now seem dated, and are difficult to read, but R.C. Sherriff's play, *Journey's End*, remains popular. Douglas Jerrold called it 'that fine play'¹¹, and it was a major success in London's West End, with around 500,000 people seeing the play, many of them ex-combatants of the temporary officer type. We now tend to see *Journey's End* as a classic anti-war play, but this is not how Sherriff saw it. Rather, he sought to celebrate the pluck and endurance of young British officers fortified by the public school spirit. Certainly, the play is claustrophobically realistic, and some contemporary commentators were not happy with Sherriff's portrayal of officers drinking to excess, but his central message was a traditional one. What is interesting is that Sherriff was educated at Kingston Grammar School (and New College), and was not, therefore, a public schoolboy himself. But he was a partisan of that ethos, and lived a strangely enthusiastic schoolboy life.

Sherriff was not the only Oxford-educated veteran who sought to laud the traditional values of fidelity and endurance, and their role in securing victory. Ronald Gurner was educated at Merchant Taylors' School and St. John's, and taught at Marlborough before the war. He experienced only one day in the frontline, but was severely wounded, and awarded the Military Cross. After the war he taught in London County Council schools, and wrote a number of novels about school life. But he also wrote a war novel, *Pass Guard at Ypres* (1930), which he intended as a homage to the men that had fought in the Ypres salient. The theme of the book is

manly endurance – the officer hero, Freddy Mann, returns again and again to the front, knowing that he will die in the salient. Eventually he does succumb, and Gurner ends his novel with a strange conversation between the spirit of Ypres and the dying man. The ‘Voice of Ypres’ and the dying Freddy Mann enter into a dialogue:

“Mine are high lessons, soldier: have you learned?”

“What lessons should a soldier learn?”

“Courage.”

“I have learned much of Courage.”

“Faith?”

“Yes, Faith – but I had forgotten.”

“Friendship, too, so great that before it death is a little thing?”

“I have known such friendship: Robbie –“

“Sacrifice, also; have you learned to give?”

“I have given all.”

“And Pain: is Pain your master?”

“No.”

“Or utter Weariness?”

“I have fought Weariness and overcome.”

“Death, then. Is death yet fearful?”

“I am prepared to die.”

“These are high lessons: have you learned them all?”

“A little: I have tried-“

O mighty Voice of Ypres triumphant, speak!

“PASS ON, THRICE TRIED, TO BE FOR EVER OF THE BROTHERHOOD!”¹².

In this unearthly dialogue, the dying officer is welcomed into the ranks of all those who had been tested by suffering and death in the Ypres salient, and, by extension, elsewhere during the war, and had passed that test.

In addition to Blunden's *Undertones of War*, and Graves' *Goodbye To All That*, Oxford also produced two other notable memoirs of the war, by Guy Chapman and Stanley Casson. Again, these memoirs sought to present the war experience in the way that Blunden wished it to be portrayed, that is, in the round. Traditional virtues were stressed in Chapman's *Passionate Prodigality* (1933), and in Casson's *Steady Drummer* (1935), in addition to the familiar horrors of the war. Chapman, who was educated at Westminster School, Christ Church, and the London School of Economics, served with the Royal Fusiliers from 1914-1920, was mentioned in despatches twice, and won the Military Cross. In *A Passionate Prodigality*, he wrote of the 'compelling fascination of war', and his memoir is a powerful historical document encapsulating the purpose of the early volunteers. This is of particular interest, as all of the Oxford literary ex-combatants were, like Casson, volunteers, and, as with other literary volunteers of the 1914-15 period, there was a generally uniform desire to reassert the idealism of that group of men.

Oxford's literary ex-combatants presented a different understanding of their experiences from that which is common today. Unlike some contemporary, and many post-Second World War commentators, they did not, on the whole, see the Great War as being characterised by the twilight of heroism, but, rather, as providing evidence of widespread and sustained heroism, particularly on the part of the volunteers of 1914-1915. Further, they saw their experiences of combat as vindicating traditional codes of behaviour, which stressed endurance, courage, and loyalty. These codes either stemmed from the public school ethos lauded by Sherriff, or, in the writings of Anthony Bertram, and J.B. Morton, for example, from

the supposedly native virtues of the British people. They did not seek to minimise the terrible nature of the war, but they were not disillusioned by the Great War. Neither did they see the war as negating traditional forms of understanding and remembrance. In their writings, these Oxford veterans attempted to present the war in the round, seeking moral purpose in a terrible experience, and linking the experiences of Oxford-educated veterans with those of the wider world.

Further Reading:

Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight; A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Constable, 1965)

Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope; British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939*, (Berg, 1993)

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Jessica Meyer, *Men of War; Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

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¹ R.M. Bracco, *Betwixt and Between; Middlebrow Fiction and English Society in the Twenties and Thirties*, (University of Melbourne, 1990), p.1

² *Ibid.*, p.6

³ B. Bond, 'A Victory worse than a Defeat? British Interpretations of the First World War', the Annual Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives Lecture, King's College, London, given 20th November, 1997; <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/lhcma/info/lec97.htm> accessed 5th February, 2011.

⁴ See, for example, Bernard Begonzi, *Heroes Twilight* (Carcanet, 1996 paperback edition), pp.139-40.

⁵ Edmund Blunden et al, *The War, 1914-1918. A Booklist*, (1929), p.2

⁶ Cyril Falls, *War Books; A Critical Guide*, (Peter Davies, 1930), p.x

⁷ Douglas Jerrold, *The Lie About the War*, (Faber, 1930), pp.28-9

⁸ Ibid., p.37

⁹ Ibid., p.48

¹⁰ Introduction to Charles Douie's *The Weary Road*, (Murray, 1929)

¹¹ Jerrold, *The Lie About the War*, p.36

¹² Ronald Gurner, *Pass Guard At Ypres*, (Dent, 1930), pp.240-1