

**WAR OF WORDS:
THE BRITISH ARMY AND THE WESTERN FRONT**

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"You will all have a sense of what you *think* I am going to say before I have actually uttered a word. For a British audience there is no other event of world history that double-clicks on our collective memory icon in the way that First World War does. Mud, blood, barbed wire; shell-holes filled with dead bodies; subalterns with wispy moustaches staring out of sepia photographs, great aunts who never married.

Contemporaries instinctively called it Great: La Grande Guerre, Weltkrieg, and we can easily see why. Of course it was not the largest single event of world history: that ghastly honour must go to the Second World War, which in terms of human suffering and material destruction was infinitely worse for the world as a whole. But for Britain alone the First World War actually caused more casualties, which partly accounts for the fact that it is remembered in a particular way here. Many who lived through both conflicts agreed with Harold Macmillan and J. B. Priestley that the First World War as a more significant watershed than the second. Barbara Tuchman may have been the first to use the analogy of 1914-18 as an iron gate separating the present from the past, and it has proved very appealing since.

So there it lies, overgrown, like the trenches that still lace the landscape of Northern France, but somehow dug deep into our consciousness. And it usually enters that consciousness not as history, but as literature. One of the problems with trying to teach the First World War is that your audience has always read Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks before you get to them. My lectures are not generally total failures (I realise grimly that this may be an exception) but when talking to school-children about the First World War I often sense that I am on a loser: if it is Holmes versus Owen, then Owen wins every time.

I want to look at the war in two ways. Firstly, by summarising how we have got where we are today in terms of its historiography. This is relative simple and very unoriginal: a frontal attack with plenty of supporting fire. Then I'd like to go a little deeper, and to examine what the war actually meant to the men who fought it: what do they tell us that we often forget? This is a more complex task, which takes me squarely up against a lot of uncut wire. So here we go: first the easy part.

I am certainly not the first historian to complain that it was far too literary a war. Cyril Falls began the process even before the Second World War; Correlli Barnett continued the movement thirty years ago and only last year Brian Bond's *The Unquiet Western Front* fired yet another well-aimed burst into an enemy who shows little sign of falling, but lurches on, stick-grenades in hand, intent on doing yet more mischief to our

understanding. Professor Bond suggests that 'the "real" historical war abruptly ceased to exist in November 1918.'¹ What followed was the resurrection and reworking of the war largely in terms of novels, memoirs and war literature in general. Indeed, Paul Fussell, in his influential book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, suggested that the war was uniquely awful and as such lay 'outside history', explicable primarily through its literature.

This process has not simply affected the way we think of history: it strikes a resonance through the present and on into the future. Omer Bartov described what he termed 'the invention of memory' when he considered the effect of war literature in both France and Germany. 'Experience of loss and trauma extends beyond personal recollection,' he argued, 'and comes to encompass both individual and collective expectations of the future.'² When Bartov presented this paper to an audience composed largely of military historians in Edinburgh seven years ago there was a good deal of muttering in the ranks (some of it, sadly, from me) about psychobabble. But the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that Bartov has identified a key element of the process. By studying the war as literature we do not simply colour our view of the past and make it all but impossible to teach the war as history. We go on to tint our picture of the present and our image of the future too. When Second World War soldiers wanted to describe something going particularly badly they spoke of 'The biggest balls-up since the Somme.' For years it was impossible to attend a military presentation without a clip of *Blackadder Goes Forth* discussing the strategic imperative of inching Field-Marshal Haig's drinks cabinet closer to Berlin, and in the first Gulf War British camps in the desert were named after Captain Blackadder and his cronies. When I commanded a battalion my driver was nicknamed Baldrick; my adjutant Percy, and I could guess the rest.

No sooner had its last shot echoed away than some participants recognised that the war they knew was being hijacked. Charles Carrington, who won his Military Cross at Passchendaele, complained:

It appeared that dirt about the war was in demand... Every battle a defeat, every officer a nincompoop, every soldier a coward.³

Cyril Falls, another veteran turned academic, saw how:

Every sector become a bad one, every working party is shot to pieces; if a man is killed or wounded his entrails always protrude from his body; no one ever seems to have a rest... Attacks succeed one another with lightning rapidity. The soldier is represented as a depressed and mournful spectre helplessly wandering about until death brought his miseries to an end.⁴

In practice it was not that simple, for many of the men writing in the 20s and 30s – Robert Graves and R. C. Sherriff amongst them – were actually ambiguous about the war, and actively resented being termed ‘anti-war authors.’

Ambiguity became less marked as the war receded. Oddly enough, this happened at precisely that moment when, had the war been considered primarily as history, the appearance of a wide range of new sources – not least the first of the Official Histories – might have been expected to have broadened understanding. Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, first published in 1929 and made into a film the following year, was an important milestone. Remarque’s own experience of the war was very limited. The very undisillusioned Charles Carrington served at the front perhaps a hundred times longer than the horrified Remarque. But in a sense this is part of the problem. Ghastly though a couple of weeks at the front must have been, they were all Remarque had to go on: what we have is memoir as pastiche, which more accurately reflects the state of its author and his friends in 1929 than the condition of the German army twelve years before.

Alongside the evolution of a literary cult which, by and large, came to see the war as waste built on futility and compounded by human error, there grew up a historical genre which was scarcely less influential. During the war there had been two major schools of strategic policy in Britain. One, the easterners, took their tone from a letter written by Lord Kitchener to Sir John French, British commander-in-chief on the Western Front, at the very beginning of 1915. Kitchener suggested that the German lines in France might well be ‘a fortress which cannot be taken by assault,’ and suggested that there might be merit in looking elsewhere. Gallipoli and Salonika were both offspring of this logic. The other, the Westerners, would have agreed with Sir Douglas Haig, who took over as C-in-C in late 1915, that the war would only be won by beating the German army in the field. And as Haig announced in his final dispatch, this could only be accomplished by ‘one great continuous engagement.’

Historians still squabble about Haig’s honesty. Some detect a rock-line dedication to this continuous engagement throughout, and see a strategy justifiably based on attrition. Others detect genuine hope of a tactical breakthrough in the summer of 1916 on the Somme and a year later at Third Ypres, scent the most seductive of modern military buzzwords, manoeuvre, and say that the continuous engagement was a post facto justification for a breakthrough that failed. I believe that, in a sense, both are right. Attrition and manoeuvre across history are often contrapuntal in time or place. First we attrit, and then we manoeuvre against a weakened enemy. Or we attrit in the north, to pin the enemy to his positions, in order to weaken him for our manoeuvre in the south. I am convinced that Haig expected a period of attrition to be followed by manoeuvre: that, surely, is the real reason for his retention of a cavalry corps, the basis of a pursuit arm which would turn manoeuvre into rout. That in itself was not wholly foolish, and a good deal of sensible opinion now tends to the view that the Germans might indeed have won in March 1918 had they retained a sizeable body of cavalry.

But I digress. What happened in the 1920s and 1930s is that the Easterners, who had shown little sign of winning the war, certainly won the historical argument. Churchill’s *The World Crisis* lambasted offensives on the Western Front which were, he declared, ‘as hopeless as they were disastrous.’ Churchill had served as a cavalry officer, charging at Omdurman in 1898, and had been a battalion commander on the Western Front in early 1916. I can forgive him much on those counts alone: whatever he lacked it was not physical courage. But what of Lloyd George, whose mid-1930s *Memoirs* announced the bankruptcy of ‘narrow, selfish and unimaginative strategy and... [the] ghastly butchery of a succession of vain and insane offensive.’ He accused generals not simply of professional incompetence and ignorance of the real conditions, but of personal cowardice. These accusations gloss over the fact that, as Prime Minister, Lloyd George had a personal responsibility for the very strategy he criticised. It would be rather like Tony Blair lamenting that the Chief of the General Staff was dead set on going to Baghdad and there was not really a lot that he as Prime Minister could do about it. And Lloyd George was not right to carp about the cowardice of First World War generals. About 58 were killed, or died of wounds received. Three divisional commanders were killed at Loos in September 1915, more British divisional commanders than were killed by enemy fire in the whole of the Second World War. Generals were many things: but they were not cowards.⁵

There was a more weighty combatant in the wings. Basil Liddell Hart, whose evergreen captaincy veiled about six week’s service at the front followed by a longer stint in the Educational Corps, argued that Britain’s commitment to the Western Front clearly violated his own, oft re-invented, strategy of indirect approach and clear-sighted description of the British way in warfare. Britain should have avoided that lethal concentration of troops and gone somewhere else. Gallipoli had been promising, and T E Lawrence had done really well in the desert. He could produce no evidence that the destruction of railways in the Hejaz made the teacups rattle in Berlin, but no matter. What had really brought Germany down, he argued, was naval blockade and internal collapse. I must not trivialise Liddell Hart, for he remains a commentator of rare insight, was helpful to students and, even late in life, was capable of surprising generosity to Haig. But he is the archpriest of the argument that there must have been a better way: his liturgy, after all these years, still has the power to inspire.

The historical debate – not really the right word, for there was never much debate about it – was rejuvenated in the 1960s. Things like the growth of an independent youth culture, the Cuban missile crisis, the Aldermaston marches and the Vietnam War encouraged iconoclasm, and the generals of the First World War received unprecedented critical attention. But although the reduction in the release period of Public Records from fifty to thirty years meant that most documents on the war became available in 1968, there was no immediate rush to re-interpretation based on this evidence. Indeed, perhaps the most influential book ever written on the war, A J P Taylor’s *The First World War: An Illustrated History* was little

more than a triumphant flambeeing (with the blow-torch lit by Liddell Hart) of the left-overs of the 1930s.

On re-reading it I am stunned by its brilliant, incisive, overweening juxtaposition of bons mots, real insights and excruciating, unmitigated garbage. 'Failure [at Third Ypres in 1917] was obvious by the end of the first day to everyone except Haig and his immediate circle,' it declares. Obvious, that is, to everyone except the German high command, which grew gloomier as the battle wore on, and thousands of British participants, whose letters and diaries testify to a confidence not shared by those writing in the foreknowledge of failure. Even the Australian official history, its volumes not generally accused of excess affection for the Poms, speaks approvingly of 2nd Army's attacks up the Menin Road in September, almost two months after everyone was meant to have lost confidence in the battle.

Leon Wolf's *In Flanders Fields*, whose publication actually predated that of Taylor's book, was in many respects a more respectable work. A study of the 1917 campaign around Ypres, it is well-written, and makes good use of memoirs and inter-war histories. But it confirmed the primacy of a school of historiography which is not interested in the facts because it has already made up its mind. There is no real sense of the campaign's strategic purpose. However much or little we admire Haig, it is worth asking quite what he was meant to do in 1917 with his main ally in a state of mutiny and the navy begging him to get German submarines off the Flanders coast. And there is no feel at all for the British army's vast improvement in tactical method.

Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* applied the same method to the war's earlier years, although – and I say this with respect for a man who brought some much-needed colour into British politics – it contained a streak of casual dishonesty. Its title is based on the 'Lions led by Donkeys' conversation between Hindenburg and Ludendorff. There is no evidence whatever for this: none. Not a jot or scintilla. Liddell Hart, who had vetted Clark's manuscript, ought to have known it. It is history delivered with all the flair of a late-night speech in the Commons after supper at Wheeler's with a bottle or two of Bolly: amusing, malicious and gassy. The real problem is that it sold well then and still does so now. It is the sort of book that the ordinary man on the Clapham omnibus reads because it tells him what he wants to know.

But help is at hand. The scrabble of feet on duck-boards announces the arrival of supports. First there was John Terraine's *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier*, published in 1963, and really a brave and remarkably impartial piece for its day. Terraine held his ground alone for some time, assailed by pastiches like *Oh What a Lovely War*, but by the mid 1970s revisionism with some real scholarly weight behind it crashed into the argument. Historians like Tim Travers, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson worked with the documents to look at the British high command, Peter Simpkins examined at the New Armies, Paddy Griffith charted the improvement of British tactics, and John Bourne, of the admirable centre for First World War Studies at Birmingham University, initiated a mass of work on the background of British generals. It is a cruel reflection on book-buying that some of the most important work

was not the most widely read: J. G. Fuller's *Troop Morale and Popular Culture* and Gary Sheffield's *Leadership in the Trenches* have never enjoyed quite the sales of Alan Clark's *Donkeys*.

I do not applaud the appearance of these works just because some of them are revisionist – as it happens I find myself in the uncomfortable No Man's Land of historiography, collecting salvos from both extremes – but because they are serious and scholarly in a way that an awful lot of earlier work simply was not. Last year's publication of the first volume of Hew Strachan's magisterial *First World War* does, in a way, mark a turning-point in the whole process: here we have scholarship blended with emotion, and a successful attempt to look at the conflict as a world war, not just as the Western Front with attached sideshows.

So why am I still unhappy? Partly because of a question of focus. Many of the war's historians are preoccupied with the big political, strategic and operational issues: Was the war avoidable? Had Britain any other course of action in 1914? Were British generals actually geniuses rather than donkeys? Was the Treaty of Versailles too hard or too soft? How well understood was the post-Somme doctrine for divisions in the attack? In the process they often lose sight of the men who actually fought the war. True, they get anthologised, and we have lots of examples – some of them actually very good – of the historian as copy-typist. And there is an ever-widening use of oral history, so that the words of this fast-disappearing generation can reach out to tell us what it was really like.

Or can they? I make this point as gently as I can, for it is no conventional politeness to say how much I admire the men who fought on the Western Front. But the interviewing of veterans in the 1980s and beyond concentrated, as it must, on those who had survived. Sometimes this survival was, in and of itself, the most remarkable thing about them. And sometimes they played their roles too well: they became Veterans, General Issue, neatly packed with what we wanted to hear, exploding at the touch of a tape-recorder button. Up to my neck in muck and bullets; rats as big as footballs; the sergeant major was a right bastard; all my mates were killed. And, in part at least, they tell us this because they have heard it themselves.

Let me give you an example, which has actually influenced the way that historians have written about the war. Here I must give credit to David Kenyon, one of my research students, who has dug out the facts and figures. On 15 July 1916 the British attacked and overran much of Longueval Ridge, the German second position on the Somme battlefield, in a well-executed night attack. They had planned to bring cavalry forward to exploit and, in the event, failed to do so. Why? I think you already know. The silly old cavalry, not a chin between them, charged into High Wood and were cut to pieces by machine guns. And an artillery officer actually watched it happen:

It was an incredible sight, an unbelievable sight. They galloped up with their lances and pennants flying, up the slope to High Wood and straight into it. Of course they were falling all the way... I've never seen anything like it! They simply galloped on through all that and horses and men dropping on the ground, with no

hope against machine guns, because the Germans up on the ridge were firing down into the valley where the soldiers were. It was an absolute rout. A magnificent sight. Tragic.⁶

Casualties were certainly heavy. *German casualties*, that is. The war diary of the attacking cavalry brigade, compiled at the time, reports that large number of Germans – perhaps more than fifty – were ridden down and speared in the initial charge, and 32 prisoners were taken. When German machine-guns opened fire, the brigade's machine-gun squadron came into action and silenced them, and yet more prisoners were taken. The entire cavalry brigade lost eight men killed the whole day, most of them, incidentally, not in the charge at all. It was a lucky infantry company which did not suffer more heavily. Nobody tried to gallop into High Wood: the contemporary accounts of British infantry on its edge make that absolutely clear. What would have been the point? The cavalry plan was to exploit across the open ground between the woods, and even the densest dragoon would have realised that a partly-shelled wood in full summer foliage, filled with wire and trenches, is not the place to gallop into.

In short, this poignant vignette of an old-fashioned charge into the mouth of death is the purest moonshine. But A J P Taylor rises magnificently to his task: 'This glorious vision crumbled into slaughter as German machine-guns opened fire.' And the more far more serious Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson talk of the machine guns taking care of the cavalry, when the reverse is true. The eyewitness was a brave man. He was not consciously lying. He was telling an interviewer what he believed the truth to have been. And that truth reflected, *inter alia*, half a century of reading precisely those books which I've already talked about.

So we should be somewhat cautious about oral history: sometimes forgotten voices tell us about imaginary incidents. Far better, I think, to go back to what people thought at the time. And in the case of the First World War there is really no excuse for not doing so. Both the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum and the Liddle Collection in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds are bursting with letters, diaries and an assortment of ephemera. And when I say bursting, I mean just that: new material is arriving faster than a single diligent historian can keep up with. However gloomy I get about being an historian, I am always excited by opening one of those big brown archive boxes, and tipping out letters on YMCA notepaper from the Infantry Base Depots at Etaples, a leather-bound Jermyn Street diary, or a Field Message Book with its flimsy, carboned paper and waterpoofed cover. There is something unutterably poignant about a diary entry written by somebody who didn't know whether he would be alive to eat his supper that day. I am not suggesting that we ought not to read Sassoon and Graves, Campbell and Carrington, all published after the war: but the closer we get to events the better our chance of finding out how people really felt.

What do these documents tell us that the wider literature does not? Time limits me to just one essential point: this was an army of extraordinary diversity, and this, the result of its wholly unprecedented expansion and accompanying social transformation,

coloured absolutely everything it did. Personal accounts stress this diversity, and emphasise not only the danger of generalisation and the utter futility of deconstructing the war's history to focus on experience out of context. This is Rule One: I am not altogether sure that there is a Rule Two.

It is as rash to speak of the British army in the First World War as about the British University in 2003. Even Oxford and Cambridge Colleges are not the same, and there is rather more of a difference between, say, Balliol College Oxford and a former Polytechnic in the West Midlands. Thus a Regular footguards battalion had almost nothing in common with a New Army battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers. A battery of Territorial artillery, hailing from the same bit of Yorkshire and retaining a deep sense of regionality and civilian identity, was nothing like J Battery Royal Horse Artillery, tangibly old army throughout the war.

It is not just that some units were better than others. It was that they were different, often markedly so: to understand the army's microsociology we need to look at the way that soldiers saw the closed world inside the regiment. Units dressed differently (in the British army uniform really means multiform), fought differently, behaved differently in the line and out of it, and had different ways maintaining discipline. Private Bill Shotter of the 5th Lancers always called his troop sergeant Charley, and got a job for him after the war. The regiment was informal off parade, and pre-war relationships were not swept away by heavy casualties. No 5th Lancer was executed during the war. In contrast, Driver James Mullaney of 72nd Battery Royal Field Artillery shouted 'what about some bloody tea' when his battery was harnessing up, and then struck his Battery Sergeant Major when the tea-break did not materialise. He was shot for it, shortly after Gunner Thomas Hamilton of the same battery was shot for hitting Second Lieutenant Oates. There was no easy informality in that unit: Oates was struck after he brushed aside Gunner Hamilton, who began the conversation with a perfectly reasonable: 'Beg pardon, Sir...'⁷

There were at least four armies: Old, New, Borrowed and Blue. They may not look distinct to us, but at the time a man was perfectly well aware of which tribe he was in. The Old army, the Regulars, sent 100,000 men to France in August 1914, and by Christmas its battalions, 30 officers and 1000 men strong that summer, had only 2 officers and 20 men of the original compliment left. The Regular army looked pretty much as we would expect: officers who needed private income, and soldiers who, in a majority of cases, were able to cite no civilian trade on their enlistment forms. Wellington would have understood it well. But it did not last. Regular ranks were winnowed yet again by the spring offensives of 1915, and by the rough and tumble of another three years of war. The keen-eyed Dr James Dunn, regimental medical officer of the regular 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers, charted the steady decline of Regulars in his own battalion, until by the end there were perhaps a couple of dozen left.⁸ There were some exceptions. The Guards Division, formed in 1915, retained a distinctive character because it always kept control of its recruit-training depot at Caterham, which turned out guardsmen in a pre-war image, and always ensured that Grenadiers went to Grenadier

battalions, and so on. At least one of the reasons for the division's fine fighting record is exactly this: insistence on high standards, and sufficient clout within the army to ensure firm links between the training organisation and units in the field.

A similar process of transformation went on in the New Armies, battalions of wartime volunteers who were often recruited, as Pals' Battalions, from specific areas. For instance, Accrington and the surrounding cotton towns of East Lancashire produced the Accrington Pals, and Glasgow formed three battalions of Highland Light Infantry: the Tramways battalion, the Boys Brigade battalion and the Glasgow Commercials. There were middle class men, who would never have joined the regular army in a month of Sundays, proud to serve as private soldiers, and some wholly bizarre phenomena like Company Sergeant Major Stewart Roberston of B Company 5th Cameron Highlanders: 'a Roberston of Struhan, the son of a colonel, the grandson of a major-general, and an undergraduate of Magdalen College Oxford.'⁹ It is hard to exaggerate just how good was the human material in many of these units. Lieutenant Talbot Kelly, a gunner officer supporting the New Army 9th Scottish Division, describes a parade shortly before the battle of Loos in September 1915:

Our Scottish infantry created an enormous impression on our minds, Never again was I to see so many thousands of splendid men, the very heart and soul of the nation. These were they who, on the outbreak of war, had rushed to enlist, the best and first of Kitchen-er's New Armies. And here we saw them, bronzed and dignified, regiments of young gods.¹⁰

Loos was a worse day for Scotland than Flodden: 'When shivered was fair Scotland's spear, and broken was her shield.' Lance-Corporal Andrew, serving in a company of Glasgow university students, wrote that: 'it was clear that 6th Camerons as a fighting force had ceased to exist.' He saw RSM Peter Scotland looking at his prostrate colonel and asked if he should get a stretcher bearer. 'No use,' replied the RSM, 'the old man's dying.'

The division lost six thousand officers and men at Loos: 5th Camerons went into action 820 strong and emerged with two officers and 70 men. I know that Britain's war dead of 700,000 are not, in that ghastly term, 'statistically significant,' and that there was no 'lost generation' in a literal sense. But I am constantly struck by the qualitative loss, especially at battles like Loos and the Somme, when the nation really did lay upon war's altar its dearest and its best.

Most New Army battalions faced their first – and sometimes last – real test on the Somme in the summer of 1916, and many never really recovered their regional character after that. Indeed, such was the impact of heavy casualties on small communities - attacking Serre on 1 July ripped the heart out of Sheffield and Accrington – that the War Office abandoned regional recruiting, and New Army battalions were, increasingly, simply topped up by replacements who came through the Infantry Base Depots at Etaples.

The Territorial Force – 'borrowed', in my jargon, because its members were civilians who carried out part-time military training – retained regional identity longer, in part because its members had different terms

of service and enjoyed some political support for their argument that they should only serve in the regiments they had enlisted in. It sheer diversity mirrors that of the army more widely. The all-Territorial London Regiment included battalions like the 5th London (The London Rifle Brigade), in which all ranks were on first-name terms off duty, and private soldiers paid an annual subscription equivalent to a month's pay for a regular soldier. The latter practice was continuing as late as 1915: regulars were genuinely mystified that men had to pay for the pleasure of serving in France. The London Regiment also had the decidedly down-marked 11th London, allegedly the Finsbury Rifles, but known, from the location of its Drill Hall and the alleged propensity of its members, as the Pentonville Pissers.¹¹

One of the best divisions in the war, 51st Highland, was a Territorial Division, and although it is clear that fewer and fewer of its soldiers actually came from the Highlands, it retained a distinctive Scottish flavour to the very end. A gunner officer saw the division, already very hard hit, coming up bravely through the wreckage of his battery to counter-attack in March 1918.

It was magnificent and too moving for words. No music, not even the trumpets of the French cavalry which I heard screaming their wild song of triumph after the armistice, has stirred me as deeply as the sobbing, skirling pipes of the 51st Division playing their survivors back into battle, and I stirred with pride as I watched those glorious Highlanders swinging by – every man in step, every man bronzed and resolute. Could these be the weary, dirty men who came limping past us yesterday in ragged twos and threes, asking pitifully how much further to Achiet le Grand?

Who could behold such a spectacle and say that the pomp and circumstance of war is no more?¹²

Territorial units often retained a strong sense of regional identity, and their discipline, at its best, reflected the tradition of the civilian workplace rather than the manual of Military Law. Men retained a strong sense of what they had been once, and would be again. A sergeant in the Northumberland Hussars was outraged to be reprimanded by his RSM, and said as much: the RSM was only a regular warrant officer – but *he* was Forester to the Duke of Northumberland. His troop commander, masquerading as an officer but really a local landowner, took the point perfectly.

My Blue army refers to the conscripts. Over five million men served in the army during the war, and almost exactly half of them were conscripts, called up in consequence of a series of Military Service Acts who took effect in early 1916 and became more stringent as the war went on. Some waited to be conscripted on point of principle: they would come willingly when called, but they would not volunteer. Others struggled hard against going, and the government became increasingly draconian in doing away with exemptions and re-examined men who had failed medicals earlier. There were those who, like Alfred Hale, whose journal in the Imperial War Museum was published as *The Ordeal of Alfred M. Hale*, found the whole business an agony. An Oxford-educated middle-aged man of independent means, in 1916 he found himself thrown into a training organisation which ground the individual into nothing. Bullied, sworn at, despised because

of his ungainliness, he became an officer's servant, and spent his war polishing Sam Browne belts and scrubbing out dixies.

But we must not judge all conscripts by Alfred Hale. In 1918 the British Army in France was composed of just over 50% 18 year olds. They had grown up during the war, had seen older brothers and senior schoolmates go, and expected to go themselves. Frederick Hodges and his school-friends went to enlist in March 1917, before being formally called up.

My friends and I had been quite determined not to be classified as anything but A1 when we joined up so half a dozen of us had gone into strict training during the winter. We went for long runs through country lanes outside the town, and we formed a boxing club and spent two evenings a week boxing in a room in one of the local shoe factories.

He went to France in April 1918, and found himself, as so many reinforcements were, preremptorily transferred from the Northampton to the Lancashire Fusiliers, but he quickly bonded with his new battalion. When issued with ammunition he reflected:

We accepted that our young lives were no longer our own in this crisis, and that our country expected us to sacrifice them. I felt no fear. The grave situation overwhelmed personal fear.

He was a full corporal by the time he was nineteen. He saw only two cases of shell-shock and one of cowardice, and has nothing but praise for his officers. He saw some British graves in October 1918:

I walked slowly past them, and noted that Captain Hamilton now had a posthumous MC, and that Lieutenant Gibbs was a captain... I noticed that both these fine young officers were aged twenty-four and at the time I thought this was quite a mature age; in the circumstances of their young lives, it was.¹³

By this stage Etaples, with its hated Bull Ring training area, simply posted officers and men to battalions that were short. The old army's regimental system had ceased to exist: there were Brummies in the Black Watch, Scousers in the Royal Fusiliers, Jocks in the Kensingtons and Irishmen everywhere – although by way of compensation the Connaught Rangers had a French-speaking company of Jersey men. What comes across so clearly from personal accounts is the way men took on the tribal markings of their new regiments. Percy Smith, who has left his own little mark on history in a few scribbled notes in the Imperial War Museum, was not enthusiastic about the war in 1917.

If the relatives and wives of us boys knew the real state of affairs out here they would worry more and more and most likely there would be an unrest in the country.

But soon he was very proud of his regiment – whatever it was, for he doesn't tell us. He told his mum.

The regiment I am in is a fighting regiment. We are always on the move we never stop at one place long, it was the first regiment out here when war is declared and we have some fine fellows. Fritz sure knows when we are about.¹⁴

We can get a good feel from letters like this about the conundrum of 1918. How did this army of 18 year olds push the Germans back across France, capturing

twice as many prisoners as the French, Americans and Belgians put together? It cannot be that the Germans stopped fighting: about 80,000 British casualties a month proved that. In part it is true that the German practice of putting the bravest and the best into stormtroop battalions, which inevitably suffered most heavily, had done serious structural damage to the German army. But the real reason, I think, is that in 1918 the British army had become the sort of force that military historians traditionally have a high regard for: inexperienced but generally enthusiastic soldiers led by young and very experienced commanders.

So contemporary documents and subsequent memoirs illustrate the extraordinary diversity of this army, and show us just what a difference even individuals of comparatively low rank – a battery commander here, a company sergeant major there, could make to men's lives. It is very striking to see just how well-regarded officers and NCOs are in the majority of private soldier accounts. I say majority, and remember my earlier warning about generalisation. Of course I have references to the brutal and the incompetent, the cowardly and the snobbish. But I have read nothing written at the time which portrayed officer-man relations in as black a light as W H A Groom's *Poor Bloody Infantry*, published in 1975 with the explicit aim of preventing the war from becoming romanticised. Romanticised? In 1975? There is plenty of admiration for officers like: 'Captain Haybittle, who stood in full view of the enemy on No 1 gunpit. Our brave Captain Haybittle, whose conduct that day was beyond all praise.'

Private George Fortune of 18th Lancashire Fusiliers wrote:

Our officers and NCOs were wonderful the way they used to do their duty. They were always watching over us and seeing we got a hot drink. We used to have a drop of water out of our water bottles to help make the tea. One day I had drunk all of mine and could not give any. I told our officer I did not want any tea. He said 'you must' and 'come and see me when we are out of the line.' I went to see him and he gave me another water bottle.

But remember the danger of generalising. Sergeant Watts, in contrast, was not popular: 'He made me clean the metal washbasins with sand. The water was ice cold, and the sand got into my broken chilblains. Since 1919 I have been looking for that Bastard,' mused George Fortune. 'It's not too late yet to kill him.'¹⁵

Corporal Robert Iley saw his commanding officer, Charles, Earl of Feversham, fall leading his battalion in the assault on 15 September 1916. 'When people scoff the aristocracy,' he wrote, they should look at Duncombe Park Helmsley and see what that man left to die in action.'¹⁶. And even those who did complain, noisy and often, about the aristocracy, and who welcomed the Russian revolution (surprisingly the case with as many officers as soldiers) often saw no inconsistency in becoming NCOs or officers themselves: their political views had little impact on their own conduct of the war. On 23 January 1917 Will Fisher, a lifelong socialist, recorded in his diary:

DEATH OF MY BOY GEORGE. The lad is better off: he is free from wage slavery and the insults of class rule.

Yet he volunteered at the very start of the war and then soldiered on, despite the TB which eventually killed him, rising through the ranks of the Royal Engineers, happily noting in his diary on 2 May 1919: 'Promoted Company Sergeant Major. The top of the tree.'¹⁷

And regard for officers by soldiers cut the other way too. I have come across only one account in which an officer consistently reviles his men as worthless and idle. The war brought many middle-class officers into close contact with men they would not normally have met in their ordinary daily lives, and many of them were transformed by the experience. There are constant references to men's courage; to their endurance; to their resolution when wounded. Many officers found it hard to understand (as have many historians) how men who owed their country so little could do so much for it. A staff officer gives a fly on the wall account of a conversation at Headquarters 4th Army in 1916: none of the officers present could understand why their men fought on: it was, just as Baldic would have said, a mystery.

Many historians have overplayed the role of harsh discipline in maintaining morale, and we have become almost indecently obsessed by the death penalty. The surprising thing about the death penalty is not how many diarists comment on it, but how few. Lieutenant Colonel Rowland Feilding and the Reverend Julian Bickersteth were amongst those who deplored it, the latter all the more because he shared the last minutes of two condemned men. But a private in the Royal Fusiliers noted in his diary, having just read the official notification of three capital sentences, that the army needed an extreme sanction, or more might fail. Private Frederic Manning and his comrades thought that Miller the deserter deserved to be shot: it would, as Corporal Hamley cheerily put it, 'encourage any other bugger who's thinking of deserting.'¹⁸

What soldiers resented far more was No 1 Field Punishment. This, introduced in the 1880s, was specifically a substitute for flogging: it punished a man but did not let him off duty. He was tied to a fixed object, often a wagon wheel, for two hours a day. It was nicknamed crucifixion, though apologists maintain that the victim's arms were left by his side. But in the summer of 1916 tank gunner Victor Archard wrote:

I saw No 1 Field Punishment inflicted for the first time. The prisoner has been strung for several hours against the railings at the main entrance to camp, with his arms tied to the rails about a foot above his shoulders.¹⁹

The punishment was widely reviled by officers and men alike: diarists are outspoken on the subject. It was 'an insult to citizens who have volunteered to fight for their country;' 'a reflection of the brutal ways of the old army;' and 'inhuman and degrading.' Its prevalence meant that many soldiers felt that it might easily happen to them, whereas it was actually quite hard to get shot by firing squad. Between August 1914 and November 1918 there were some 238,000 courts-martial in all theatres of operations, resulting in 3,080 death sentences, of which 346 were actually carried out, three of them for murder, itself a capital offence in civil law.²⁰

What is striking is just how close most men's horizons were. The next meal; the rum ration; getting out of the

line; going on leave. Money or its lack was a constant worry. The infantry private got a shilling a day, and by the war's end his teenage daughter would be doing much better as a munitions worker, and, as an Essex vicar recorded with horror, spending fourteen shillings and sixpence on a hat. Money was subtracted for all sorts of things, usually items that the soldier needed but did not want; rates of exchange seemed designed to disadvantage the British, and there was not much cordiality to the Entente in towns like Hazebrouck or Amiens where omelette and chips cost a day's pay and a moment of stolen pleasure cost three times as much. Much as historians might wish to believe otherwise, men spent little of their time talking about the high command. An army padre, Harold Davies, wrote on 17 October 1916 that:

There is a curious difference in the interest which is taken in generals at Divisional Headquarters and lower down in the brigades and battalions. At divisional headquarters they were full of [the new general] and could talk of nothing else. In a battalion nobody talks of the general or cares a hang about him. At present I am one of the very few officers in 4th Bedfords who knows his name.²¹

Douglas Haig, commander in chief of the BEF from December 1915 until the end of the war, features as arch-donkey in much of the literature. In contemporary accounts he scarcely features at all. In dozens of diaries I have come across a handful of mentions, most of them favourable. He looked very tired indeed by 1918, but till then his soldierly manner made a favourable impression. Even the army commanders are rarely mentioned. Sir Edmund Allenby features because of his obsessive regard for discipline. His nickname was 'the Bull', and the Morse code BBL for 'Bloody Bull Loose' announced that he had left his headquarters. Sir Herbert Plumer (Daddy to his soldiers but Drip, because of a long-running sinus problem, to irreverent young officers) features for just the opposite reason. He was regarded as competent and thoughtful: men liked serving under him, and said so.

Start to finish this was a tribal army: introspective, suspicious of outsiders, the Jocks or Micks or Geordies next door, the gunners behind, the new company commander or the dug-out brigadier. Its war aims embodied a general belief in British superiority – one officer wrote that if the Germans won and invaded England they would still be laughed at in the villages as ridiculous foreigners. There was a deeper sense of personal obligation, ties between man and man that were part-feudal and part-industrial.

It was generally bad at hating. Men killed prisoners when the general mood favoured it: the German gas attack of April 1915 generated a wave of brutality. In the British case this was informal and unstructured. Major Lord Stanhope was shocked to see a French general interview a prisoner, ascertain that he had been involved in the gas attack, and then order a sergeant major to 'take a file of men and take that man to the wall at the bottom of the garden.'²² A quarry-full of prisoners was grenaded at Arras in 1917 for unwisely applauding the success of a German counter-attack which had included the bayoneting of British wounded. Or they killed for personal reasons: A Scots Guards sergeant always asked permission to shoot prisoners

after a battle to avenge his brother. Or perhaps they killed for sheer convenience: it was sometimes quicker and safer to kill a man that to take him back through the barrage. The Germans, for their part, behaved in just the same way. Ghastly game, hard rules. But do not deconstruct hostility: there were rules for it as for everything else, and they varied from place to place and tribe to tribe.

The army varied, too, in its approach to the increasing volume of very good publications that chart the British army's tactical progress. There remained a wide difference between theory and practice. Even the much-praised emphasis on platoon training, initiated by Lieutenant General Sir Ivor Maxse, the first director-general of training in France, often fell on stony ground. Why? Because as personal accounts tell us, platoons were often too small and their membership too turbulent to enable the system to work. What happened during the war, though, was that the four armies became well-integrated. Leaders – from generals to lance-corporals – learnt, and the system grew better at codifying that experience. Promotion became open to talent in a way that it never had been before. I despair when I read that most officers came

from Eton or Winchester. Most of the nearly 100,000 officers commissioned in the last two years of the war came from Ikley Grammar or Mean Street Board School by way of a sergeant's stripes, and very good they were.

And that, I suppose, is where we came in. The army of 1918, warts and all, represented the greatest collective endeavour of the whole of British history: over four million men went to France and nearly three quarters of a million stayed there forever. As the war went on they drifted apart from the land that had raised them, and lived in a world with its own rules, values, beliefs and language. They celebrated the armistice in silence, not with wild rejoicing. And then they went back to pick up their lives. For most of them the war was not, *pace* Paul Fussell, a break, a sundering. It was, as Private David Jones termed it, in parenthesis, bracketed into a busy life.²³ It soon became evident that they had won the war but lost the peace, and the corrosive effect of this sense of collective betrayal can hardly be over-emphasised. The positive diaries become the bitter memoirs as Military Crosses and Military Medals went to the pawnshop. And so we remember the war not as we might, through the eyes of 1918, as a remarkable victory dearly won, but through the eyes of 1928 as a sham which had wasted men's life and squandered their courage."

- 1 Brian Bond *The Unquiet Western Front* (Cambridge 2002) p.26.
- 2 Omer Bartov 'Trauma and Absence: France and Germany 1914-1945' in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds) *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-45* (London 1997) pp 348-358..
- 3 Charles Carrington *Soldier From the Wars Returning* (London 1965) p.264.
- 4 Cyril Falls *War Books* (London 1995) pp.i. ix.
- 5 See Frank Davies and Graham Maddocks *Bloody Red Tabs: General Officer Casualties of the Great War 1914-1918* (London 1995).
- 6 Quoted in Lyn Macdonald *Somme* (London 1983) pp.137-8.
- 7 Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War* (London 2001) p.357.
- 8 Captain J. C. Dunn *The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1919* (London 1987) pp.503-4.
- 9 I. G. Andrew Papers, Liddle Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
- 10 R. B. Talbot Kelly *A Subaltern's Odyssey* (London 1980) p.50.
- 11 Personal information from the late Field-Marshal Lord Harding, who chose to join this battalion before the war because, as a post-office clerk, he would not have obtained a commission in a smarter one. He rose to the rank of temporary lieutenant colonel during the war and transferred to the regular army at its end.
- 12 Arthur Behrend *As From Kemmel Hill* (London 1963) p. 82.
- 13 Frederick James Hodges *Men of Eighteen in 1918* (Ilfracombe 1988) pp.21, 41.
- 14 Percy Smith Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum
- 15 George Fortune Papers, Family Collection.
- 16 Robert Iley Papers, Liddle Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
- 17 William Fisher *Requiem for Will* (privately printed by his nieces, Monmouth 2002) pp.63. 99..
- 18 Frederic Manning *Her Privates We* (London 1930) p.81.
- 19 Victor Archard diary, Tank Museum Archives, Bovington, Dorset.
- 20 Corns and Hughes-Wilson *Blindfold and Alone* pp. 102-3.
- 21 The Reverend Harold Davies Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum.
- 22 Lord Stanhope Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum.
- 23 David Jones *In Parenthesis* (London 1961) p.xv.