Introduction: The war that did not end all wars

Popular memory and historical understanding

The British still seem to take the First World War personally. It would be difficult to imagine a contemporary British historian of the Napoleonic Wars writing a preface about how their great-great-great-grandfather died of typhoid at Walcheren or lost an arm at Badajoz, but it seems almost instinctive to evoke a grandfather at Loos or a great-uncle on the Somme. Moral indignation is not without benefits for a historian; the crimes and follies of mankind do require something other than cold detachment. But history demands perspective, and intense personal involvement can and does lead to distortion.

Hindsight has been the other curse of writing about the war. Of course, it would be absurd to banish hindsight from our historical judgement. It is one of our assets. We know how things turned out and can therefore attempt to explain why they turned out as they did. But hindsight carries risks when applied to understanding the thoughts and actions of people in the past.

We must remember that hindsight is unavailable to those who are living through the experience, and it cannot inform their decisions. We might choose to condemn the First World War as a human tragedy and an error of colossal proportions, but in doing so we must be aware that there is something essentially anachronistic about this. It can lead to unjustifiable wishful thinking based on little more than romantic nostalgia.

It can certainly be argued that Britain gained nothing and lost much as a result of the First World War. The principal results of the war were more than 700,000 young men dead, a similar number injured, many permanently, and a massive increase of national indebtedness. By comparison, the compensations were distinctly limited. There were a few colonial gains, disguised as mandates, which had negligible real value, and, objectively, may have been a burden for the British. There was a modest improvement in working-class living standards and security, and a very

limited emancipation of women. The latter two phenomena were largely accidental and the last is debatable.

Even if these 'gains' are acknowledged, the 'opportunity costs' were staggering. War efforts are by definition wasteful and, according to political inclination, it is not difficult to propose better uses of the energy expended: massive investment in the economic modernisation of Britain and the empire, reduction in taxes to stimulate growth or even social programmes on a near utopian scale. Had there been no war, then Britain, *in principle*, could have built new universities in every major city, hundreds of advanced hospitals, thousands of schools, increased pension provision and childcare, and still experienced a lower tax burden in 1919 than it did. Furthermore 700,000 mostly young lives would have been spared.

No one in 1914 knew or could have known the alternatives outlined here. The alternative they believed they faced was quite different. Their choice was between war and the German domination of Europe. Rightly or wrongly, and to varying degrees, the vast majority of the British people, soldiers and civilians alike, came to believe in 1914 that such domination by Germany would be a disaster. Most still believed it in 1918 and many would continue to believe it for their entire lives.

Happy is the country with no history of defeat. Comparison is instructive regarding this point. In human terms the First World War was a disaster for France that dwarfed the British experience. In absolute numbers, French losses were almost double the British, while in proportion to the population they were more than double. The fighting of the war on French soil led to unprecedented material destruction. Yet the *long-term* cultural trauma of the First World War has not been as great in France. There *is* something worse than bloody and expensive victory, and that is defeat. In French memories, the First World War is bracketed between the debacle of 1870 and the debacle of 1940. The almost unimaginable human suffering of Verdun is modified and mollified by the fact that, in 1918, 'France' had survived. No such compensation was offered in 1870, or 1940. In the words of the singer Georges Brassens, 'Qu'est-ce que c'est la guerre que je préfère, c'est la guerre de "14–18".'[1]

The First World War itself proves this point; that defeat is the worst 'trauma'. The country most overwhelmed by a sense of the futility of the war after 1918 was Germany. There was no compensation at all for the German experience of Verdun or the Somme. Two million young Germans had died for nothing. Nothing and worse than nothing. It was a reality too painful to admit. The only 'benefit' the German people received from the war was democracy, and that democracy was tainted as the product of defeat. This was trauma on an epic scale. The only

escape was fantasy. To make sacrifice worthwhile, victory had to be claimed on some other level, a triumph of the spirit. To make that interpretation work, an explanation had to be found for the mundane and observable reality of defeat. The 'November Criminals' became the alibi of nationalists. They argued against all the evidence that Germany had won the war, but had been betrayed. Conservative Germany did not renounce the war; it renounced the defeat.[2]

By a slow and hesitant process, the British came to renounce the war. They are still renouncing it. The verdict of popular culture is more or less unanimous. The First World War was stupid, tragic and futile. The stupidity of the war has been a theme of growing strength since the 1920s. From Robert Graves, through *Oh! What a Lovely War* to *Blackadder Goes Forth*, the criminal idiocy of the British High Command has become an article of faith.[3]

Stupidity leads to tragedy. These incompetents butchered the flower of British manhood incessantly for four years without remorse or even, in many cases, awareness. Youth was truly doomed. Under the direction of madmen, they marched like lambs to the slaughterhouse. The enormous success of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy testifies to the power of this view. It would have been far more of a shock to the expectations of the reading public if she had allowed her main protagonist, Billy Prior, to live through the war. Indeed, one could argue that the reason Barker shifts her lens away from Siegfried Sassoon, who is the focus of the first book, to the fictional (and implausible) 'Prior' and the historical figure of Wilfred Owen, is the rather annoying fact that Sassoon *survives* the war and that this is not tragic enough.

Even the comic mode is infected by the tragic; how else could *Blackadder Goes Forth* end except with the death of the main characters?[4] This has become the definitive image of the First World War for a generation. Such was the impact of this scene that it found a place in the top thirty most famous 'moments' ever televised in Britain.

Stupidity plus tragedy equals futility. Even academics can get in on the act here. Niall Ferguson is not a historian to accept the conventional wisdom; he is self-consciously revisionist and deeply provocative. But the final paragraph of *The Pity of War* puts him squarely in the predominant popular tradition:

> The title of this book, then, is at once a sincere allusion to Wilfred Owen's twice used phrase and an echo of the understated idiom of the ordinary private soldier of the trenches. The First World War was at once piteous, in the poet's sense, and 'a pity'. It was something worse than a tragedy, which is ultimately something we are taught by the theatre to regard as unavoidable. It was the greatest *error* of modern history.[5]

Everything in this statement reflects what the mass of people in Britain already think about the First World War. For the British, the war is, at worst, an apocalyptic fall from grace, at best, the definitive *bad* war. In 1996, on Remembrance Day, it was described by former Education Secretary Kenneth Baker as the greatest disaster of the twentieth century.[6] The public rhetoric of Remembrance Day brackets the First and Second World War together, the poppy is worn in remembrance of the dead of *both* wars, and we are told incessantly that the dead of both wars sacrificed their lives to preserve our freedom. But the British public doesn't believe this. It believes that the dead of the Second World War did this, but that the dead of the First World War died in vain. In schools the First World War is taught more as tragic poetry than as history. It is likely that not one in a hundred people in Britain could name a single British battlefield victory of the First World War whilst many people could name at least three victories from the Second: the Battle of Britain, El Alamein and D-Day.

Likewise, the disasters of British arms in the First War are well known: the first day of the Somme, Passchendaele and Gallipoli are the memorable parts of the First World War. By contrast, the litany of British catastrophes that makes up a large part of the Second World War is swept under the carpet. The fall of Singapore, a disaster that dwarfed anything Britain suffered in 1914–1918, has been expunged from popular memory, except in as far as the victims of Japanese camps can keep it alive. As an indictment of the stupidity of the 'military mind', Britain's performance in the Second World War would be difficult to match: from Norway in 1940, through France in the same year, the Western Desert, Greece and Crete in 1941, Hong Kong, Burma, Dieppe, Tobruk and Singapore in 1942, much of the Italian campaign, and good deal of the Bomber Offensive from 1943 onwards, the repeated botched offensives in Normandy, and finally Arnhem in 1944, the latter characteristically 'spun' as a worthwhile near miss. If 'died in vain' means men being killed without contributing anything much to the final victory, then there should be some serious questions asked about 1939–1945. The British do not ask those questions because they have 1914–1918 instead. The extent to which the memory of the First World War has been reshaped as a negative counterpoint to a mythologised version of the Second World War cannot be overestimated. The late John Grigg, in a brilliant short essay, had the audacity to argue that by almost any measure a genuine historical comparison of British participation in the two world wars ought to lead to a more favourable assessment of the First World War. Grigg's thoughtful contribution has been almost entirely ignored.[7]

The British have been and still are deeply ambivalent about war. The liberal and Christian heritage tells them that war is wrong; utterly wrong

and utterly evil. But the same heritage tells them that they must be prepared to defend the values of that heritage to the death. If they recognise 'pure evil', they should oppose it and, so, war can be the lesser evil. The Nazis, in retrospect, were easy to fight. It takes an extraordinary act of pacifism will to claim that Nazism was really a lesser evil than 'war'. As a result, the war of 1939–1945 is sanitised and romanticised in order to lessen the lesser evil. It is an inconvenient truth that the Second World War, like the First, was cripplingly expensive, bloody and frequently mismanaged. It was, in short, a war; and all wars are like that. There are of course some revisionists who argue that Britain had no direct interest in defeating Nazism; that left alone Hitler's Reich would have collided with Stalin's Soviet Union and that these two evil empires would have bled each other white. Leaving aside the questionable morality of this, and the idea that depravity across the Channel is no concern of the islanders, the practical fact that the emergent victor of that conflict would have become unstoppably powerful makes this argument unappealing. Both morality and long-term self-interest appear to argue that Britain was right to go to war against Nazism in 1939.

What the British have forgotten is that in 1914, throughout the First World War, and for some time afterwards the majority of the British people believed precisely the same thing about the Kaiser's Germany. In retrospect this may appear deluded, but the First World War was not fought in retrospect and to understand it we must stop re-fighting it that way.[8]

The war they were fighting was the 'war to end all wars'. H. G. Wells popularised this term in August 1914. For Wells it was also 'the last war'. This was a term that would come retrospectively to encompass an irony due to the ambiguities of the English language. Whilst the war was being fought it was the last war meaning 'final', a war to end war itself. By the 1930s as the prospect of a Second World War loomed the idea of the 'last war' began to mutate into meaning the 'previous' war. The working title for this book was 'The Last War' but I was convinced by editors that this would be taken by most people to mean the 'Second World War'. This nicely illustrates the gap in understanding that both writer and reader must overcome in order to penetrate the minds of those who actually experienced what we *now* call the 'First World War'.

Remembering the home front

There is a disproportionate fascination amongst the public with the mud and blood of Flanders. The proportion of books written about the lives of the vast majority of the population on the home front is small by comparison, once again a contrast with both the academic and popular history

writing of the Second World War. Although Wells apparently also coined the term 'The People's War' in 1914, we tend to reserve this perspective to 1939–1945. There is a thriving literature on women's history and the issue of the change (or lack of change) in gender roles and recently a burgeoning literature on the issue of the memory of war. But the central question of how and why the British people endured the upheaval of war remains to a large extent unanswered.

Answering this question involves walking a narrow line between new cultural history and old social history. The construction of contemporary reality through culture – its practices, unspoken assumptions and linguistic conventions – needs to be brought into connection with quotidian experience – hunger, cold, injury, grief, boredom and exhaustion – which are certainly framed and understood through discourses, but which have a reality beyond the purely linguistic, albeit one which is more or less impossible to recover unmediated. It also needs to be remembered that understandings of the world are also about real and existing power relations between people, and that these have practical dimensions. Finally it should be remembered that languages and discourses are not as deterministic as some post-modern scholars would assert, and that language is a tool to be used and not simply parroted. This reinforces my view that occasionally it is important to allow contemporary voices to be heard through extensive quotation, to bring home a sense of the individual voice making use of the general language framework for their own purposes. So, in short, this book contains quite a lot of numbers and quite a lot of doggerel! As perhaps some compensation I have largely avoided using oral history collections. As a central contention of this work is that it is important to view the mentalities of the First World War without reference to the Second, there are serious problems with people trying to reconstruct their attitudes in 1914–1918 in interviews after 1945.

This book is intended to provide an interpretation of the course of the war for the civilian population of Britain. It begins with an attempt to understand why the population consented to war. It attempts to get away from the generalisation of war enthusiasm, an idea which has clouded our understanding since the inter-war period. But it does not deny that in a broader sense the majority reaction to war was patriotic and in some respects idealistic. It then proceeds to consider the role of propaganda.

Again, the intention is to move away from the assumption that the British sustained the war effort because they had been manipulated and fooled. This is not to deny that a culture of hatred towards the enemy developed during the first year of the war, but the suggestion is that this process was more organic and less artificial than is commonly supposed. The third chapter considers one of the guiding ideas of the first two years

of the war: that of volunteerism and voluntary action. While it considers the well-documented story of volunteering for the Army, it seeks to extend this by considering the broader dimensions of the voluntary phenomenon. It also considers the limits of this, the degree to which voluntarism came into conflict with ideas of fairness, and argues that this concern in itself drove the population to accept increasing compulsion. This leads to the next chapter which begins to analyse the importance of the idea of sacrifice and its role in balancing the demands made on social groups. This in turn leads to a consideration of religion in wartime and the role of ideas drawn from traditional religion in underpinning the popular understanding of war. The next two chapters follow the growing sense of crisis on the home front as the strains of war eroded idealistic concepts of sacrifice and gave way to increased resentment and increasing internal enmity. This manifested in particular as sharpened class and ethnic antagonism. Finally it turns to the aftermath of victory. The argument is that the language of sacrifice was remade in order to stress universal grief as the common experience of war and that this is to some extent a mythology designed to cover up the social tensions that the war had created. The future understanding of the war would be shaped by this idea of universal bereavement.

The book is intended as an argument and an interpretative synthesis, and not as a textbook. It does not outline the high political narrative of the war, although it is intended to provide some thoughts on how a new political structure based on mass voting emerged after 1918. It is also not structured to engage directly with some of the existing paradigms of debate; for example, whether the war was radical or conservative in its effect on British society. I return to this point in the conclusion, but in some respects I find such a stark dichotomy conceals more than it reveals.

Much excellent recent work has been shaped around the idea that wars are intensely gendered and gendering events. I certainly have no quarrel with this, but it is not the only interesting thing about civilian life during the war and, precisely because other historians have done it so well, it has not been the central focus of this work, although such work has certainly influenced parts of the argument. Finally the neglect of military history, strictly defined, in this work should not be construed as disrespect for the extraordinary contributions of historians of the British armed forces, who have produced an increasingly sophisticated social history of men at war; indeed quite the contrary. In fact, central to this work is an argument that the mass experience of Army life and of combat, and the human consequences of military operations were *the* main pillars of civilian existence during the First World War. The great conceptual revolution of modern historical writing about the war has been the escape from the idea of the

utter isolation of civilian life from 'the trenches'. That there is an existential gap between those who have been under fire and those who haven't seems a reasonable proposition, but the 'myth of war experience' as applied specifically to 1914–1918 has distorted our understandings of the contemporary linkages and dynamics of the nation at war. Which leads to a final apology. The nation that fought the war was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The break-up of that United Kingdom, in large part as a result of the war, is central to any overall history of the 'British' war. I have written on this subject elsewhere, but I have not found a way to integrate *that* story without massively over-burdening this book.

Above all it is hoped that the book will open some paths for future scholars to explore. It is likely that some arguments will need to be modified or even abandoned under future research scrutiny. I am all too aware of barely scratching the surface of the available material, but if this work generates further sympathetic consideration of those who lived through these dramatic times, sometimes maligned and frequently the victims of the condescension of posterity, I will be very satisfied.

1 Going to war*

> It is the achievement of Bloch and Norman Angell to have shown that even a successful conflict between modern states can bring no material gain. We can now look forward with something like confidence to the time when war between civilised nations will be considered as antiquated as the duel, and when the peacemakers shall be called the children of God.
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> G. P. Gooch, *The History of Our Time: 1885–1913*[1]

> The fourth of August 1914 caused no great burst of patriotic fervour amongst us. Little groups, men and women together (unusual, this) stood talking earnestly in the shop or at the street corner, stunned a little by the enormity of events. But soon public concern yielded to private self interest.
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> Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century*[2]

Jingoism and war enthusiasm: the myth of 1914

The predominant interpretation of the war is clear on one point: the British people went to war because they wanted to. According to Arthur Marwick, 'British society in 1914 was strongly jingoistic and showed marked enthusiasm for the outbreak of war.'[3] Images of cheering crowds outside Buckingham Palace, of long lines outside recruiting offices, of soldiers marching away singing 'Tipperary' dominate folk memory.[4]

The major sources for the idea of mass enthusiasm had obvious reasons for promulgating the idea. For wartime pacifists the war was irrational, and therefore support for the war was irrational. The first clear reference to 'enthusiasm' was a speech by Arthur Ponsonby in the House of Commons on Monday, 3 August 1914, referring to 'bands of half drunken youths waving flags … the war fever has begun'.[5]

* This chapter was written before I was able to see the doctoral thesis by Catriona Pennell, presented for examination at Trinity College Dublin in 2008, on public reactions to the outbreak of war in the United Kingdom. Fortunately her impressive and imaginative research on a vast range of sources, public and private, largely supports the conclusions presented in this chapter.

It flattered the self-proclaimed heroic image of the pacifists to perceive themselves as isolated and far-sighted individuals who were 'above the melee'. The classic text in this regard is Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*. Russell describes how he 'spent the evening walking the streets, especially in the neighbourhood of Trafalgar Square, noticing cheering crowds, and making myself sensitive to the emotions of passers-by. During this and the following days, I discovered to my amazement that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war.'[6]

It certainly seems strange of Russell to claim to have been 'amazed' in 1914 at 'average' people's delight in war, when the idea of 'jingoism' had been firmly established in Liberal circles at the time of the Boer War.[7] Russell was undoubtedly brave in his stance in 1914, but it is quite clear that what really disturbed him was not so much 'mass enthusiasm' as his isolation in Liberal political circles after the invasion of Belgium. This sense of betrayal was best exemplified by Russell's friend and fellow opponent of the war, Ottoline Morrell, who vowed to 'cut' those of her friends who had defected to the 'jingo' cause.[8]

This image of 'war fever' received support from the memoirs of politicians. The decision for war in 1914 was taken by a very small number of men, but the idea that it was resoundingly endorsed by the population as a whole became a useful fiction in spreading the blame and avoiding awkward questions of personal culpability.

David Lloyd George gave a classic retrospective description of 'war enthusiasm':

> The theory which is propagated today by pacifist orators … that the Great War was engineered by elder and middle aged statesmen who sent young men to face its horrors, is an invention … I shall never forget the warlike crowds that thronged Whitehall and poured into Downing Street, whilst the Cabinet was deliberating on the alternative of peace or war … multitudes of young people concentrated in Westminster demonstrating for war against Germany.[9]

This passage must be regarded with enormous caution. When Lloyd George implied that the people impelled the declaration of war, he was justifying his own decision for war. The description of 'war enthusiasm' is clearly a defence against the accusation that 'old men' sacrificed the young. But the fact remains that the 'crowds' did not declare war on Germany, the Cabinet did; and Lloyd George personally played an important role in persuading Liberal Britain to accept war.[10]

Any consideration of the events of 1914 should start by acknowledging that the very idea of a uniform enthusiastic reaction from the 'masses' owes more to contemporary beliefs of the excitability of mass society, widespread amongst Liberals and Conservatives alike, than it does to