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A Victory worse than a Defeat?
British Interpretations of the First World War

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A few years ago, in a Radio 4 discussion about the public schools, a female novelist remarked 'and that is why we lost the First World War'. Since no one challenged this revisionist view I wrote to the chairman suggesting that the victory celebrations had been held in London and Paris rather than Berlin or Vienna. 'My dear professor', Robert Robinson replied, 'You may well be right', but it seemed I had voiced a politically incorrect opinion. Many people do indeed apparently believe that the war had been lost, especially those influenced by the film *Oh What A Lovely War!* Its poignant culminating scene shows the whole landscape filled with white British crosses. If everyone had been killed how could one speak of victory? More recently the theme of a whole generation of 'lions' needlessly sacrificed by 'donkeys' had been reinforced by that authoritative source - Blackadder!

Let us briefly examine three additional negative assumptions. First, that the war was not about great political issues. As that influential but unreliable writer, Paul Fussell, put it: 'In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot'.¹ Suffice it to say that at the time the British and Dominions governments believed that a German victory would endanger vital national interests and, despite all the revisionism about war aims and war guilt, this still seems credible. Propaganda certainly exaggerated enemy atrocities but could not account for the sustained British and imperial war effort. The vast majority believed, in Trevor Wilson's phrase that it was a 'necessary war'.

Secondly, there is the seductive argument that Britain could and should have remained neutral, but even with hindsight this is not convincing. A very unwarlike Liberal government agonised over its decision in August 1914, but eventually felt compelled to intervene for reasons both of honour and national interest. Governments also have to calculate the risks of non-intervention: what if Britain had stood aside and France had been overrun?

Thirdly, there is a charge that is harder to counter; that victory was indistinguishable from defeat. Siegfried Sassoon voiced this opinion during the war and Churchill afterward in *The World Crisis*. But these were emotional reactions to the very high costs of staving off defeat: they could not be taken literally and acted upon in the light of the draconian terms imposed on Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Even historians are apt to neglect the iron law of chronology: victory in the early months of 1918 seemed far off and even unlikely. Then, after 1919 it appeared disappointing, first on the home front ('homes fit for heroes'), and later in international affairs ('the war to end all wars'). But this was due to unrealistic hope encouraged by deceitful slogans, and by unpredictable events after the war. These disappointments were not the fault of those who had won the war, and indeed the achievements of Britain and her allies were substantial: Belgium liberated, Alsace-Lorraine recovered by France, the German drive for European dominance checked and her fleet destroyed. Moreover the revolutions and prolonged political and social turmoil experienced by the losers starkly exposes the muddled thinking of those who claim to perceive no difference between victory and defeat.

In the immediate post-war years military historians, like J F Maurice and Spenser Wilkinson were well aware that the British and imperial forces had achieved an outstanding series of victories from 8 August 1918 onwards, all the more remarkable since the allies had been on the brink of defeat in March and April. More recently, however, the tendency has been to dwell on the earlier years characterised by attrition and heavy casualties for minimal territorial gains. So obsessive has been the focus on 1st July 1916 that a generation of school children could be forgiven for thinking that the war had ended there and then in a catastrophic defeat.

On the contrary, in 1918 the Allies - with British and imperial forces playing the leading role - clearly defeated the German armies on the Western Front. Between 18 July and 11 November the British forces took 188,700 prisoners and 2,840 guns, far more in each category than the French, Americans, and Belgians. Following the brilliant operations in later September to break through the Hindenburg Line, the five British Armies skilfully outmanoeuvred the stubborn defenders from a series of river and canal lines on which Ludendorff had hoped to stabilise the front during the winter. In the final days of hostilities the Fourth Army crossed the Sambre canal and the stage was set for a great battle on the Germans' last defensible river line of the Meuse, but the armistice was signed before this could take place.²

Conditions did not permit a breakthrough and the advance to victory was steady rather than dramatic - about 60 miles at an average rate of less than a mile per day. The Germans fought stubbornly against superior artillery assisted by dominant allied air forces. Despite a few cases of large-scale surrenders there was no general disintegration. Nevertheless, the imminence of complete defeat was demonstrated by Ludendorff's resignation and the acceptance of armistice terms which precluded any hope of renewing the struggle.

Few military historians would dispute these facts or the inference that the defeat of the German armies on the Western Front was crucial in accounting for the collapse of the Central Powers. In the past decade or so new approaches and original research have moved on to more specific issues related to 'the learning curve' which, it is widely accepted, rose steadily and impressively from mid 1916. Thus attention focuses on such topics as Technical and Tactical innovation and the levels at which they were implemented; the performance of individual commander and units, especially the divisions. Even staff officers, the butt of so

much uninformed criticism, are now the subject of doctoral research. While the old debate about the relative merits of tanks and artillery rumbles on there is now growing appreciation of improvements across the board in doctrine, training and all-arms co-operation. As Trevor Wilson eloquently expressed this a decade ago:

'What was particularly noteworthy in the operation of these last 100 days was the co-ordination between the various elements. Infantry, artillery, machine-guns, tanks, aircraft, and wireless telegraphy all functioned as parts of a single unit. As a result of meticulous planning, each component was integrated with, and provided maximum support for, every other component. Here, more than anywhere else, was the great technical achievement of these climatic battles. It was not that the British had developed a war-winning weapon. What they had produced was a 'weapons system': the melding of the various elements in the military arm into a mutually supporting whole'.³

Why then have these remarkable achievements by what was essentially an amateur and largely conscript Army been obscured in the public consciousness by the notion of unrelieved horror, disillusionment and futility? The outpouring of a flood of 'disenchanted' and even bitter war literature in the late 1920's and early 1930's was certainly influential in some quarters, but several critics, including myself, have challenged the definition, depth and extent of 'anti-war' sentiments regarding the First World War. firstly, bitter individual memoirs, mainly by sensitive intellectuals, did not represent what the vast majority of ordinary soldiers or their relatives felt about the war, or what they read. Secondly, the influence of the best-known 'war poets' at that time was by no means as important as is now assumed. Wilfred Owen's published verse had achieved only very modest sales by 1930 and, on this criterion, even the readership of poets like Sassoon and Rosenberg was minute - in comparison with the consolatory poets such as John Oxenham, the Rev G A Studdert Kennedy ('Woodbine Willy') and Robert Service. During the war, for example, Oxenham's verses sold in hundreds of thousands and his 'Hymn for the men at the Front' - sold seven million. It is not difficult to understand why these versifiers were vastly more popular than poets of a much higher literary calibre. As Martin Stephen sums up:

'In their different ways Oxenham and Woodbine Willy told those who read them that this was a war for decency and peace, and that suffering and salvation had ever been allied in the form of a young man nailed to a cross. Service told them that to fight was both the decent and manly thing to do, and brought a sense of humour to telling the tale'.⁴

Thirdly, and even more damaging to the literary myth, scholars such as Hugh Cecil and Rosa Maria Bracco have shown that the bulk of middlebrow fiction cannot be construed in any way as 'anti-war'. 'It is often forgotten', Cecil writes, 'that this early wave of patriotic war books enjoyed far more acclaim than any of the later 'disenchanted' British war novels, such as Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, 1929...*Book for book, the British public over a thirty year period...seem to have preferred the patriotic to the disenchanted type of war book*'. Cecil goes on to make the case that these best-selling novels by V M Yeates, Richard Blaker and others now largely forgotten, were welcomed by ex-combatants because they 'told the truth about the war' and are consequently still valuable for contemporary students of the conflict.⁵

Rosa Maria Bracco's argument is epitomised in her title *Merchants of Hope*.⁶ Middlebrow writers of fiction did not attempt to camouflage the horror of war but their main aim was to

soften the impact of the break it represented by reasserting links with the past. Their tone was essentially conservative and reassuring, for example in stressing the absolute value of war-time comradeship, the history of the regiment, past great battles, country home, and the English countryside.

Above all, as I've argued in my contribution to *Facing Armageddon*, 1996, the very term 'anti-war' is far too general and vague to provide any precise indication of an individual writer's beliefs about the Great War, and hence much less, their influence on the public. Nearly everybody is 'anti-war' in principle in detesting the prospect of large-scale killing, destruction, suffering and social disruption. Those who survived the war of 1914-18, whether combatants or civilians, had many legitimate grounds for bitter reflections: the dreadful conditions and uniquely heavy casualties; the rash promises, deceitful propaganda and political incompetence; and, most serious of all for combatants, the feelings of betrayal by those at home: the shirkers, strikers, profiteers and 'civilian militarists'.

Moreover, it is now more widely understood that even writers generally agreed to be 'anti-war' such as Owen and Sassoon were ambivalent alike in their military careers and their reaction: they were efficient and even bellicose officers leading soldiers who were killers and well as victims; enjoying some aspects of the war while savagely denouncing others. As Robert Wohl neatly puts it:

*'Ambivalence toward the war is the main characteristic of the best and most honest of the war literature. The same men who cried out at the inhumanity of the war often confessed that they had loved it with a passion and wondered if they would ever be able to free themselves from the front's magic spell.'*⁷

Most significantly, of the millions who fought, only a handful would subsequently write that the war had been futile and not worth pursuing to victory. Even C E Montague's famous title *Disenchantment* was misleading because what he chiefly criticised was the decline in idealism from the heady days of 1914 which, perhaps, only a minority of his fellow volunteers had fully shared.

I now propose to examine briefly the ambiguities of three well-known components of the 'anti-war' myth: a personal rebellion, an autobiography and a play. In June 1917 Siegfried Sassoon invited court-martial by denouncing the war as unjust in a letter to the press, resigning his commission and throwing his medal into the Mersey. His anger was inspired as much by the atmosphere in England and the perceived duplicity of politicians as by the conditions at the front. Indeed Sassoon could be classed as a 'war lover' and warrior who was never happy when away from the front, but this side of his character is absent from his poetry. Later, in *Siegfried's Journey* he came close to admitting that his brave moral gesture had been an error.

*'I must add that in the light of the subsequent events it is difficult to believe that a Peace negotiated in 1917 would have been permanent. I share the general opinion that nothing on earth would have prevented a recurrence of Teutonic aggressiveness.'*⁸

Robert Graves was another dubious recruit to the anti-war brigade. He was indignant to be classed with anti-war writers on the publication of *Goodbye to All That* in 1929, and for the

remainder of his long life remained very proud of his war service with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

*'In any case Graves' title was accurate: he was saying goodbye to all that; including the stuffy conventions of pre-war society; war-time hysteria and immorality on the home front; and personal problems at the time of writing, including a marital crisis and being grilled by the police on suspicion of attempted murder.'*⁹

Lastly - the play. R C Sherriff's *Journey's End* has long occupied such a key position in the myth of anti-war literature that it comes as quite a shock to discover (notably from R M Bracco) that this was entirely at odds with the dramatist's intention, not only when the play made its amazingly popular debut in 1929, but for the whole of his life. The origins of this ambivalence lay in the complete contrast in outlooks between Sherriff and his first producer, Maurice Browne. Sherriff's career had been transformed for the better when he was commissioned into the 9th Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment and saw active service in France. Like Graves he remained extremely proud of his regiment and the comradeship he found there. By contrast Browne was a pacifist and a conscientious objector who had remained in America throughout the war. Sherriff would later write that his character were *'simple, unquestioning men who fought the war because it seemed the only right and proper thing to do...(it was a play) in which not a word was spoken against the war...and no word of condemnation was uttered...'*. When the first reviews appeared in 1929 Sherriff had protested that he had not tried to point any kind of moral; he had merely wished to perpetuate the memory of some of the men he had known. One perceptive critic noted that while the play answered the question 'What was our war like?' it did not address the issue 'What did the war mean?' Dr Bracco charts the various answers given to the latter question. Among recent misinterpretations of Sherriff's own beliefs and intentions she cites the blatant example of a Methuen's Study-aid book for young students which describes the play's basic theme as *'basically depressing...a message-carrying play designed with a definite purpose in mind: to make people ponder the stupidity and horrors of war'*.¹⁰

These examples illustrate the tendency to misread or misrepresent complex personal experiences and texts in the light of later and quite different political and cultural assumptions. Phrases such as 'the horror of the trenches' are then repeated endlessly without much knowledge either of history or even of the supposed anti-war texts. In any case harrowing personal accounts of dreadful conditions and heavy casualties do not add up to a national revulsion against Britain's role in the war. They were contraverted by many former combatants who stressed their positive experience in the war and especially the unique value of comradeship. These writers included Douglas Jerrold, Charles Carrington, Guy Chapman, Graham Greenwell, Sidney Rogerson and many more. In 1929 T E Lawrence warned his friends against blaming all their current problems on the war. The war, he noted, seemed more horrible in retrospect...than when they were in it. He dismissed *All Quiet on the Western Front* as *'post-war nostalgia shoved into the war period'*.¹¹

I have so far tried to suggest that disenchantment with the First World War was mainly literary in character, ambivalent or confused in the selection of targets and, above all, limited in its impact on the general public. Despite the boom in war books and severe criticisms directed against military leadership in the First World War, it is surely significant that a new generation proved willing to make a similar sacrifice in the late 1930's to stop German aggression a second time, and that long before the full horrors of Nazi extermination policies had been publicised.

In a curious way, coming to terms with the justification of Britain's role in the First World War has been made more difficult by participation in the Second. The Kaiser was obviously not such an evil force as Hitler, and German atrocities in the First World War, greatly exaggerated by propaganda, were dwarfed by Nazi barbarism in the Second. Consequently A J P Taylor's judgement that the Second World War was, ultimately 'a good war' has been widely accepted, whereas it is hard to apply any terms of moral approbation to the first. Nevertheless both wars were fought mainly for reasons of British national self-interest, and only towards the end did the Second World War acquire the mantle of a moral crusade.

So far I have concentrated on literary rather than historical interpretations of the war, but it was clearly the historians' responsibility to bring home to the public the magnitude of the war effort and the British forces' leading role in the final, victorious phase of the war. This task was necessarily left largely to non-professional historians since at that time very few academics were interested in the subject and only one, C R M F Cruttwell of Oxford, tackled the First World War as a whole, publishing in 1934 a lively and quite critical study which is still worth reading.

It is safe to assume that the multi-volume official history had little influence on the public. Its volumes on the Western Front appeared irregularly and out of sequence over many years; they were mind-numbingly detailed; and expressly intended for a professional military readership.

One official historian who did evince concern to reach a wider public was Cyril Falls, whose survey of *War Books* in 1930 was robustly critical of the 'disenchanted' school. Unfortunately, for the historiographical debate, his admirable volume (*The First World War*), which praised Haig and stressed that the German Army had been soundly beaten in 1918, was not published until 1960.

The two military critics and historians who dominated the inter-war scene were Major-General J F C Fuller and Captain B H Liddell Hart. As a convalescent subaltern in 1916 Liddell Hart had written a fulsome eulogy of the British high command and staff, but by the 1930's his views had swung full circle and he became sharply critical, especially of Haig and Robertson. His (and Fuller's) plausible defence of their critical stance was that more could be learnt from defeats than victories, coupled with anxiety that the Army hierarchy had learnt nothing and would repeat the bloodbaths of the Somme and Passchendaele in a future war. Fuller became particularly sarcastic and intemperate, for example remarking of one despised general who had been awarded the GCB that the initials must stand for 'Great Cretin Brotherhood'. As critics of the inter-war Army many of their shots were probably on target, but as influential historians of the First World War their approach was too polemical.

But the work which surely did most damage to the generals and their part in winning the war was Lloyd George's *Memoirs*, published in six volumes between 1933 and 1936. The former Prime Minister, assisted by Liddell Hart, clearly delighted in demolishing the reputation of Field Marshal Earl Haig, by then safely dead. Haig's entry has five columns in the index, including this sample:

- *His reputation founded on cavalry exploits.*
- *Insists on premature use of tanks.*
- *His refusal to face unpleasant facts.*
- *his limited vision.*

- *Viciously resists Lloyd George's attempts to get Unity of Command.*
- *His stubborn mind transfixed on the Somme.*
- *Prefers to gamble with men's lives rather than to admit an error.*
- *Completely ignorant of the state of ground at Passchendaele.*
- *Painstaking but unimaginative.*
- *Narrowness of his outlook.*
- *Incapable of changing his plans.*
- *His liking for great offensives.*
- *Unequal to his task.*
- *Did not inspire his men.*
- *His ingenuity at shifting the blame to other shoulders than his own.*
- *Only took part in two battles during the war.*

So, it is clear, the Prime minister was not wholly satisfied with his Commander-in-Chief! But note also two further entries:

- *Lloyd George had no personal quarrel with...*
- *(and) No conspicuous officer better qualified for highest command than.*

One should also not miss the index entries on 'Military Mind' which include:

- *Military Mind, narrowness of.*
- *Stubbornness of, not peculiar to America.*
- *does not seem to understand arithmetic.*
- *Represented by Sir Henry Wilson's fantastic memorandum.*
- *Obsessed with the North-West Frontier of India.*
- *Impossibility of trusting.*
- *Regards thinking as a form of mutiny.*

In reacting to the often dreadful conditions on the Western Front some historians found consolation or escapism in strategic 'might have beens'. This contrast to the Western Front has given a special appeal to the tragic failure at the Dardanelles, epitomised by John North's elegiac *Gallipoli: the Fading Vision*, 1936.

Even more attractive as a romantic alternative to the Flanders' bloodbath was the Palestine campaign where the spotlight obsessively focused from the early 1920's on T E Lawrence's peripheral exploits rather than Allenby's vastly larger armies. Here the terrain gave scope for rapid and far-reaching mobile operations, culminating in spectacular victories - the recovery of Jerusalem with its echo of the crusades - and the advance to Damascus.

Finally, on the inter-war period, an all-too-brief reference to the influence of films. In the late 1920's, surprisingly, it was still possible to produce a series of patriotic - indeed jingoistic - films, including the battle of Jutland, and even the Somme. Then in 1930, Lexis Milestone's celebrated film of E M Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* made a tremendous impact on Britain as in New York, Paris and Berlin where it was eventually banned by the Nazis. On the enormous popularity of Remarque's works and their runaway success '*as evidence of the malaise that had engulfed the post-war world, and as a symptom of the spirit that had betrayed a generation and its hopes*'.¹²

Disappointment with the fruits of victory and the terrible prospect that another war might be looming diverted attention - already flagging - from how the First World War had been won to why it had broken out and how a Second might be avoided. In the quest to promote peace and international co-operation the public was deemed to require a new iconography of war: one which emphasised its suffering, destruction and futility.

I now come to my main contention or thesis; namely that much of what the public today believe to be the objective truth about the First World War really derives from the radical anti-war and anti-authority movement of the 1960's.

A portent of the new wave of ultra-critical interpretations of the First World War was Leon Wolff's *In Flanders Fields*, published in Britain in 1959. Wolff's searing description of conditions at Passchendaele introduced the horrors of the Western Front to a new generation, including myself, satiated with a decade of accounts of how Monty had beaten the Desert Fox and knocked him for six out of Africa. Wolff's anger and indignation suffused the book: the futile offensive should have been stopped but it had dragged on into November mainly due to Haig's obstinacy. The 'butchers' were fair game but, by contrast, 'the curs' (politicians) got off relatively lightly. Wolff tried to be fair and even-handed but his conclusion was devastating: the war had 'meant nothing, solved nothing and proved nothing', and in the process and killed eight and a half million men.¹³

The new spirit of iconoclasm and ridicule was encapsulated in the title and contents of Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, 1961. Here was revived a potent myth of a generation of soldier lions sacrificed by incompetent officer donkeys who were too stupid to appreciate that the war could have been won more economically in the East. Haig, not yet Commander-in-Chief but already cast as Donkey-in-Chief, was excoriated as a 'combination of ambition, obstinacy and megalomania'. Academic reviewers were not impressed either by Mr Clark's scholarship or his judgement. Michael Howard found the book entertaining but worthless as history. It was a 'petulant caricature of a tragedy and, as a memorial to the dead of 1915, a 'pretty deplorable piece of work'.¹⁴ Nevertheless it sold well and remains popular, due perhaps in part to the celebrity of its author.

On a completely different scale was the BBC's epic twenty-six part series *The Great War*, first shown in the summer of 1964 and immediately repeated during the following winter. As Alex Danchev has pointed out, the series made a tremendous impact on the public with an average of eight million viewers for each episode. The distinguished team of script writers were given an unusual amount of influence in relation to the visual material even in the final production. Chief among them was John Terraine, already the author of *Douglas Haig* and emerging as a doughty defender of the primacy of the western Front and champion of the British performance there. Despite much friction and disagreement among the script writers, Terraine's 'positive' interpretation featured prominently in many of the episodes.

Ironically, the medium proved to be much more powerful than the message. Audience Research Reports revealed that the visual images of the ravaged battlescapes, the broken bodies and the faces of the haggard survivors had made a vastly greater impact than the text. Viewers were struck by the horrors of war and the appalling waste of young men. Thus the series mainly served to confirm the myths which Terraine and some of his colleagues had hoped to demolish or modify; above all the 'horror of trench warfare' and the utter futility of the first World War.¹⁵

Lastly, I will discuss briefly the play and, even more influential, the film of *Oh! What a Lovely War*, produced in 1963 and 1969 respectively. I am indebted again here to Alex Danchev for bringing out the inspirational role of Raymond Fletcher, who acted as more than 'historical adviser' to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop production of the play. Fletcher, later a Labour MP, was a journalist, a fan of Liddell Hart and a fierce opponent of Terraine and any author who 'white-washed' Haig and the generals. Fletcher revealingly described his three hour harangue to the Theatre Workshop group as '*one part me, one part Liddell Hart, the rest Lenin!*'. He injected a powerful, two-pronged impetus to the play: as an entertaining vehicle in the class war it championed the working class or ordinary soldiers against the upper class officers who callously sacrificed them; and also served as a contemporary warning - drawn from the supposed miscalculation of 1914 - against the risks of nuclear war.

The historical limitations of the play are evident in its structure: Act 1 dramatises 'innocent' hope of victory and optimism; Act 2 stages three recent popular historical texts; namely Barbara Tuchman's *August 1914*, 1962, Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* and Leon Wolff's *In Flanders Fields*. These books focus respectively upon the years 1914, 1915 and 1917. There is some effort in the play to cover events in 1916, but on 1918 it has almost nothing to say. Thus the awkward, embarrassing issue of eventual victory was avoided and the message came over loud and clear: '*the War as a whole was visited upon a compliant lower class by an upper class which claimed a superiority it could not justify*'. This sort of clap-trap reminds one of Wully Robertson's derisive snort '*I've 'eard different!!*', which is particularly relevant in this context since he had risen from private to field marshal. As the theatre and film critic, Derek Paget disarmingly admits, reliance on these sources and the emphasis on contemporary concerns made the play '*a poorish source for knowledge about the Great War, (but) such an excellent source of knowledge about the early 1950's.*'¹⁶

Richard Attenborough's film adaptation has largely eclipsed the play in the public memory. It caused a sensation world-wide when first screened in 1969, and has been described as 'the perfect TV extravaganza', not least because of its all-star cast. The setting on Brighton Pier, was frivolously satirical, and the dialogue displayed little concern with historical accuracy or fairness. Though obviously 'anti-war', it was more specifically anti-authority and especially anti-officer. The First World War was a disaster because the officer-donkeys '*combined homicidal imbecility with vainglorious ambition*'. A composite 'Haig figure' representing all the red-tabs shouldered most of the blame; there were 'butchers' aplenty but 'The Cur' (Lloyd George) was conspicuously absent. As Danchev concluded '*it was the greatest exercise in debunking for forty years*'.¹⁷

This all-too-brief discussion suggests that a new wave of campaign histories and military biographies, an outstanding TV series and a radical, debunking play, later turned into a film, introduced the post-1945 generation to the Great War. But, inevitably, it was history given a very powerful 'spin' by contemporary concerns including a new phase of the class war, a challenge to traditions and hence resentment of authority - particularly in uniform - and fear of war both conventional (as in Vietnam) and nuclear.

Through their texts and references these works revived interest in the anti-war writers of the 1930's and thereby prompted a further surge of popular, non-scholarly publications. I need mention only the obsession with the first day of the battle of the Somme which, for example, features prominently even in Sebastian Faulks' novel *Birdsong*, and John Laffin's *Butchers and Bunglers*, a late emotional throw-back to earlier polemical disputes.

With a few honourable and encouraging exceptions, such as the balanced *Timewatch* reassessment of Field Marshal Haig in July 1996, television programmes have generally taken the easy option of reinforcing received views and recycling myths which might be summarised as Oh! What a Ghastly and Futile War. This was, alas, true of the seven part series *1914-1918* produced by the BBC Education Department at the end of 1996. While admirable in its evocation of atmosphere and with stunning photography, it deserved Correlli Barnett's stinging critique (in *The Spectator*) entitled *Oh What a Whingeing War!*¹⁸ It dwelt heavily on the dreadful conditions, suffering and casualties, but largely evaded the hard political questions about the great power issues at stake and why a 'peace without victory' proved unobtainable. Most directly relevant to this lecture, it failed to explain how the blundering Allied military leadership of the middle war years had won a remarkable victory in 1918. These defects and omissions may perhaps be put right next year in commemorating the 80th anniversary of the remarkable transformation of Allied fortunes from the nadir of March 1918 to the victorious conclusion of the war in the autumn. Let us hope that a balanced and well-informed television series is, even now, in the making.

During the long period when the politically correct views of the First World War prevailed, i.e., of the military incompetence and futility, 'Colonel' John Terraine; supported by a few trusty NCO's, remained doggedly in his forward command post. He insisted, in book after book that;

1. Conditions in the 20th century's first great industrialised war ruled out brilliant generalship in the main theatre or any quick route to victory,
2. that from 1916 Britain bore the main burden of the war on the crucial front against a very powerful enemy, and wore him down through attrition warfare and
3. that the war had to be won, and *was* won on the Western Front by the Allies, with Haig and his armies playing the leading role.

Now, Terraine's sector has been relieved and soldiers (scholars) from Britain, the Commonwealth and the United States are carrying the war (debate) forward into fresh ground only lightly scarred by the barrages (polemics) of Terraine, Laffin, Alan Clark, Denis Winter et al. Since the publication of the pioneering study *Fire Power* by Bidwell and Graham in 1982, a brigade of scholars, including Tim Travers, David French, Peter Simkins and John Bourne have exploited the full range of sources now available to throw new light on such issues as civil-military relations, biographies of lesser-known generals, controversial campaigns, and the higher conduct of the war. There are also encouraging group projects in progress examining the performance of all the divisions on the Western Front and the levels at which innovations were implemented. The Australasian team of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have demonstrated how successful combined operations for limited advances ('bite and hold' tactics) were introduced in 1916, but only fitfully applied in 1917. Gary Sheffield has shown that officer/other rank relations were generally very good, *pace*, the *Monocled Mutineer*. Paddy Griffiths has gone furthest in arguing that in doctrine, training and tactics the British forces had achieved parity at least with the Germans in the final year of the war. Paul Harris has contended that Haig and GHQ welcomed the tank but were realistically aware of its limitations. Even if some claims for the British Army's receptivity to new ideas and weapons are disputed as excessive, a broad consensus is clear: historians are now exploring and charting the improvements which were so successfully implemented in the final months of the war.

Military historians such as Ian Beckett,¹⁹ Correlli Barnett and myself have expressed frustration at the persistence of myths and obsolete judgements on key aspects of the First World War. I have written on several occasions in the last decade that the time must surely be coming when the First world War can be treated objectively as history (like the Napoleonic wars or even World War 2) rather than viewed -often from a narrow selection of literary sources - as a national trauma whose myths can be used to inculcate the futility of all wars.

As I have suggested today, within the ranks of military historians that time has already come, but on the popular front we still struggle against the appeal of the ubiquitous 'war poets' on the one flank and their television ally Blackadder, on the other. I place on record with no satisfaction, that Blackadder has been cited as a historical source in an undergraduate essay.

Still, I believe it is possible to end on a positive note and I trust you will excuse the military metaphors. Military historians have now sorted out their command problems, their Intelligence is sound, and they are perfecting their operational skills - not least in the Centre of Military Archives here! They have summoned their reserves and built up their stocks of tanks, guns and ammunition. They must attempt one more 'big push' to obtain the decisive breakthrough. Their offensive will not be motivated by a triumphalist or militaristic spirit, but will seek simply to re-establish what was common knowledge to the generation which fought the war;²⁰ namely that for Britain the First World War was a necessary war. Though unexpectedly costly, and in some respects disappointing in its aftermath, the conflict was worth pursuing to victory - a victory which was undoubtedly preferable to defeat.

Endnotes

¹ Martin Stephen, *The Price of Pity*, 1996, p230

² John Terraine, *To Win a War. 1918, The Year of Victory*, 1978, p258

³ Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, 1986, p586

⁴ M Stephen op cit, pp138-147

⁵ Hugh Cecil, *British War Novelists*, in Hugh Cecil and Peter H Liddle eds., *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, 1996, pp801- 816

⁶ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope. British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939*, 1993, pp12, 198

⁷ Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 1980, p219

⁸ Ibid. pp98-100. Siegfried Sassoon. *Siegfried's Journey, 1916- 1920*, paperback edition, 1982, p57

⁹ Brian Bond, *British 'Anti-War' Writers and their Critics*, in Cecil and Liddle eds., *Facing Armageddon*, p821

¹⁰ Bracco, op cit, pp149, 152-3, 178, 185-6

¹¹ Wohl, p120

¹² Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, 1989, p298. Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory*

¹³ Brian Bond, *Passchendaele: Verdicts, Past and Present*, in Peter H Liddle ed., *Passchendaele in Perspective*, 1997, p481

¹⁴ Michael Howard's review of *The Donkeys* in *The Listener* 3rd August 1961

¹⁵ Alex Danchev, *Bunking and Debunking: the Controversies of the 1960's*, in Brian Bond ed., *the First World War and British Military History*, 1991, pp263-288. I have drawn heavily on this brilliant essay in the discussion of *Oh! What a Lovely War*

¹⁶ Derek Paget, *Remembrance Play: 'Oh! What a Lovely War' and History* in Tony Howard and John Stokes eds., *Acts of War: The Representation of Military Conflict on the British Stage and Television since 1945*, 1996, pp86-90. While correcting some historical errors the author commits one himself; namely that Alan Clark had been Liddell Hart's pupil at university! I am indebted to Dr Steve Badsey for drawing my attention to Derek Paget's chapter.

¹⁷ Danchev, p285

¹⁸ Correlli Barnett, *Oh What a Whingeing War!*, in *The Spectator*, 18 January, 1997

¹⁹ Ian Beckett, *The Military Historian and the Popular Image of the Western Front, 1914-1918*, in *The Historian*, Spring 1997 and his bibliographical essay in, *Facing Armageddon*, op cit, pp891-5

²⁰ 'The task of the historian is often to recapture for a new generation the meaning of events that were perfectly well understood at the time they occurred'. Laurence Freedman reviewing a history of the Cold War in *The Evening Standard*, 22 September, 1997