

Introduction

The story of Leonard Thompson, a poor farm-worker from Suffolk, where people were 'literally worked to death', provides a good introduction to this complex topic:

We were all delighted when the war broke out on August 4th. ... We were damned glad to have got off the farms.

After training, his regiment was sent to Gallipoli in 1915:

I We all sat there — on the Hellepont — waiting for it to get light. The first thing we saw ... was a big marquee. It didn't make me think of the military but of the village fetes. Other people must have thought like this because I remember how we all rushed up to it, like boys getting into a circus, and then found it all laced up. We unlaced it and rushed in. It was full of corpses. Dead Englishmen, lines and lines of them, and with their eyes open. We all stopped talking.

Thompson fought in the Gallipoli campaign, during which he saw much killing on both sides:

I I shot through so many because I was a machine-gunner. Did they all die? — I don't know. You got very frightened of the murdering and you did sometimes think, 'What is all this about? What is it for?' But mostly you were thinking of how to stay alive. You felt brave and honoured that you should be fighting for England.

He was then sent to France where he 'went through' the Somme, before being captured by the Germans at Arras in 1917, which he describes as 'the worst thing that ever happened' to him because of the near-starvation and ill-treatment he suffered. He was set free in November 1918 and returned home to an altered world.

I The soldiers who got back to the village recovered very quickly. People who had lost their sons felt strange. Generally speaking, we were thankful that it was all over and we could get back to our work. Yet things had changed and people were different. The farm-workers who had been soldiers were looked at in a new way. There were more privileges around than there used to be. ... We felt that there must be no slipping back to the bad old ways and about 1920 we formed a branch of the Agricultural Labourers' Union.

In 1921, however, there was a slump in agriculture:

I The farmers became broke and frightened, so they took it out on us men. We reminded them that we had fought in the war, and they reminded us that they had too! So it was hate all round. Then we had to close down our Union Branch because nobody could afford to pay the membership fee.

Thompson went on standing up for labourers' rights, even though 'it

took a brave man to show his politics in Suffolk all through the 1930s', and eventually 'things changed'.

I am old now. I read library books about the Great War — my war.¹

In his laconic way Thompson tells us much about the varied legacies of war. We see first the shock he received from the grisly sight in the tent and wonder about how difficult he must have found it to talk about such experiences. We understand both his strong desire to return to normality and his sense that life ought to be better than it had been before. We realise that he questioned the war yet felt an enduring pride in what he had done for his country. It is clear that the war remained the most significant event in his life.

Many of the complex political, social and psychological effects of the war are illustrated in the experience of this one man. He felt the brutal tragedy of the war which is so much stressed by some historians, yet it lifted the scales from his eyes in the manner demonstrated by others. Leonard Thompson should help us to avoid oversimplifying the impact of his war.

2 Making Lands Fit for Heroes

KEY ISSUE Did the war make people's lives worse or better?

a) Bereavement and Disability

As with all statistics about the Great War there are conflicting estimates of the number of combatants killed; but it seems clear that some nine million died, about one in eight of those who fought. Historians also disagree about whether it is right to refer to a 'lost generation'. Literally, this is a misnomer; but it seemed a fair description to groups (like Oxford and Cambridge colleges or communities from which Pals' Battalions had been recruited) which lost an unusually high proportion of their number. In New Zealand where 25 per cent of the eligible male population were casualties it felt as if 'almost a generation of the best men were wiped out'.²

All over the world there were people who had lost numerous loved ones. While serving as a VAD nurse Vera Britain received news of the deaths of her fiancé, her brother and two other friends who had just left public school — but few today would sympathise with the fiancé's elitist lament a few months before he was killed that 'the same little piece of lead takes away as easily a brilliant life and one that is merely vegetation'.³ Mrs Neale of Cookleigh lost three of her four sons: one of them had a daughter, Lucy, who never forgot the last walk she had with her 'kind and gentle' father as he went off to war.

I can remember it now as if it was yesterday. I've never forgotten it. I never will, and that's been a lot of comfort to me many times in my life.⁴

Of the five Goodyear brothers who came over from Newfoundland only two survived. In France Madame de Grandiere wrote that 'all the young men of our family had died and all my mother's friends were widowed, except one'.⁵ In the light of this scale of suffering the debate over the term 'lost generation' seems rather academic.

Bereavement was almost universal. Winter claims that 'every family was in mourning', if not for a relative then for a friend or colleague.⁶ The sudden death of friends caused lasting pain. At the age of 100, Florence Billington was still haunted by the loss of her boyfriend. After the war she met a spiritualist who could see a 'very young boy in khaki' standing behind her:

On occasions since, I have felt his spirit visit me, that he was thinking of me and was somewhere near.

George Littlefair found it difficult to get over the death of a good pal, Joe Coates, who was killed beside him in the trenches. He found some consolation in 1997 when he visited Coates's grave in France:

The last time I saw all the graves, they were little wooden crosses and now they are all nice white marble headstones and I thought what a big improvement. I was pleased.

As is shown in the pieces of oral history quoted above, mourners often found comfort in memories, in spiritualism and in visiting well-tended war cemeteries. Widows and orphans were aided, too, by state pensions, though these were not usually enough to live on.

In most countries pensions were also awarded to the ten million or so servicemen who had been left with permanent disabilities including the loss of limbs, blindness, lung damage, mental disorders and disfigurement. There was further compensation in the respect and help they often received from fellow-countrymen; being a wounded soldier 'counted for a lot' in the experience of Horace Gaffron, who lost a leg at the Battle of the Somme.⁷ Perhaps the least appreciated group were the estimated 12 per cent whose faces had been smashed up by shellfire. The chances of surviving such horrific injuries improved during the war as a result of new techniques in plastic surgery. The Queen's Hospital at Sidcup, for instance, performed 11,000 operations between 1917 and 1922; much was done to rebuild men's faces but even so it was hard, wrote one nurse, 'to rekindle the desire to live' in men who knew that they would be appallingly disfigured.⁸ Near the hospital there were special blue-painted benches which warned local residents that the occupants were likely to have hideous facial injuries. Families could not always accept these patients back and some of them committed suicide. Neither these nor the thousands of shell-shocked servicemen who killed themselves in the 20

years after the war are included in the official death toll or listed on war memorials.

It requires some effort to imagine these traumatic experiences, which are often most vividly conveyed in art and literature. For the people involved, the war clearly brought more pain than gain.

b) Standards of Living

It is harder to weigh up the benefits and losses in post-war standards of living and here, too, historians are divided. The losses are more immediately apparent. On all participant countries the war inflicted huge debts, inflation, disruption of trade, and destruction of homes, land and industrial resources. Every nation had to face the problems of demobilising millions of servicemen. For the Central Powers hunger caused by the continued Allied blockade added to the misery.

However, the greatest affliction of 1918-19 was the mysterious influenza virus which swept the world, accounting for far more deaths than the war itself - around 40 million. It affected alike prosperous and deprived areas, non-combatant and combatant countries, civilians and servicemen, fit and wounded. Its appearance at the end of the war made it harder to bear but there is no evidence that the two catastrophes were linked. In the middle of 1919 it began to disappear as mysteriously as it had arrived; deliverance from the consequences of war was to be both slower and more variable.

Russia was probably reduced to the worst condition of all. Already much affected by the Great War, Russian people had to bear the further strains of revolution, civil war, drought and rapid economic change. Industrial production declined drastically and in 1921 five million people died of famine. Yet even here some recovery was possible. Under the New Economic Policy Lenin made some concessions to capitalism and by 1926 production figures of food, coal and steel were creeping up to pre-war levels.

There were miserable conditions also in central European countries, especially those which had been defeated. In Bulgaria, for example, famine was only prevented by emergency imports from America. During the early 1920s the influx of nearly half a million refugees from troubled neighbouring countries placed such a burden on Bulgaria's resources that the League of Nations had to come to the rescue with a loan in 1926. These instances of international benevolence did not console the Bulgarians, who blamed their sufferings on the losses inflicted by the Treaty of Neuilly (see page 123).

Especially difficult to assess is the situation of Germany where, too, the post-war settlement was held responsible for all economic ills. But even after losing 13 per cent of its territory Germany was much stronger than its former allies and stood more chance of returning to normality. The new democratic regime (known as the Weimar Republic) did much to ease the process of demobilisation by provid-

ing emergency work projects, housing subsidies, dole for the unemployed and, most expensively of all, pensions for those disabled, widowed and orphaned by the war. Not surprisingly, perhaps, such spending was given a higher priority than the payment of reparations. It helped to keep unemployment within bounds in the 1920s – but it created rapid inflation which robbed many people (notably the disabled veterans) of any potential benefits. It is easy now to judge German politicians for their lack of fiscal foresight or even to suggest, as Ferguson does, that 'it would have been better if Germany had had a more authoritarian government ten years earlier'.⁹ In fact, after reaching a crisis in 1923, the German economy began to improve: the introduction of a new currency ended hyper-inflation and American loans under the Dawes Plan enabled reparations to be paid more easily. The Weimar Republic might well have survived had it not been assailed by extreme forces from right and left and thrown into disarray by the Great Crash.

For France the economic priority was to repair the ten departments which had been devastated by German occupation and looting. Remarkably, this task was accomplished within seven years. In the expectation that reparations would be paid, the French government financed the reconstruction out of borrowing, thus saddling itself with an even higher national debt and accelerating inflation. The French occupation of the Germany's industrial Ruhr area (1923), in reprisal for the non-payment of reparations, not only wrought havoc with the German economy but also proved an expensive venture for France. In 1925 Poincaré brought inflation under control by devaluing the franc. This restored confidence and made French exports very competitive so that industrial production increased. By the later 1920s most French people had a higher standard of living than they had enjoyed before the war.

Brian's situation was similar to that of France. In both countries standards of health and welfare had risen during the war, which had stimulated measures to improve the care of children, the soldiers of the future. By the end of the war British infant mortality rates had fallen to the lowest level ever, whereas as late as 1915 it had been 'more dangerous to be a baby than a soldier'.¹⁰ At the same time trade unions had ensured that the wages of workers, on whom the government depended so heavily for uninterrupted production, had doubled – and not all of this rise was eroded by inflation. It is true that both increased state involvement and the stronger position of organised labour were trends begun in Edwardian times, not entirely attributable to what Arthur Marwick calls 'the deluge' of war.¹¹ But there is no doubt that the war led to better living standards.

At the end of the war Lloyd George's coalition, which sought reelection, made its famous promise to create a land 'fit for heroes', hoping to satisfy the new aspirations of soldiers like Leonard Thompson. At the same time Britain, which had borne the brunt of

financing the Allies, faced a war debt of over £11,000 million and a greatly disrupted export trade. Thus not all reconstruction promises were kept, though there were significant reforms. The Housing Act of 1918 subsidised the building of over 200,000 houses between 1919 and 1921 and the Unemployment Insurance Acts of 1920 and 1921 increased benefits for unemployed workers and their families – though agricultural labourers were excluded from the scheme. Such social policies continued even after the 'Geddes Axe' cut government spending in 1921. By that time the post-war boom was over and unemployment had risen to almost two million. Trade Union power declined and wages fell during the 1920s, as Leonard Thompson and his Union colleagues found. In 1926 a cut in miners' wages gave rise to the General Strike. Even eight years after the Armistice it was still the war which workers invoked. In the words of one Labour MP:

The men who fought from 1914 to 1918 are quite as ready to put their backs to the wall in opposition to those who want to force wages down, as they were to fight the Germans. Threaten us with what you like.¹²

The Conservative Government took up the challenge and some of its members treated the General Strike as another war. After only nine days the government's special newspaper (edited by Winston Churchill) was able to announce that the Prime Minister in Downing Street had received the strikers' 'surrender'. Times remained hard for many working people but 'the absolute destitution which had haunted the poor of Edwardian Britain was banished' in the wake of the war.¹³

It is difficult to generalise about post-war standards of living. From country to country, from class to class, from family to family, from year to year, economic conditions varied. This variation has caused historians to take a pessimistic or an optimistic view according to the angle from which they view the matter. There is, however, general agreement that economic recovery from this long and costly war got under way with surprising speed.

c) Women and Families

Demobbed [from the Women's Royal Army Corps], I went home. There they wanted to treat me as a sort of heroine. ... They praised me for all the wrong things. When I tried to tell them what the War had taught me, they were hurt in their turn.

The feelings of Mrs A.B. Baker, which are similar to those of many men returning home from the front, tell us something of what women gained and lost from the Great War. She was praised for her patriotic contribution to the war effort but in reality her experience was more complicated. She had been sickened by the sight of 'half a

company of men blown to pieces by bombs' at Etaples; she had translated letters from French parents whose daughters had been made pregnant by English soldiers; she had given sexual comfort to a terrified young sergeant; she had visited a Quaker boyfriend who was in prison as a conscientious objector; she had met German prisoners and realised that they were just 'friendly men'; and she had prayed for the war to stop and 'set all us poor prisoners free'.¹⁴ Thinking for herself was her real gain, as it was for many other sheltered young women in Europe.

Thousands of women left home to live in hostels near the factories where they were needed to produce war goods; some served near the front line in nursing corps or in the women's armed services; most earned higher wages than ever before performing jobs normally thought unsuitable for women. In doing all this they were less protected and more independent than most women had hitherto been. Of course the work was often hard, unpleasant and dangerous. In addition women employees frequently faced criticism or even abuse from male colleagues, who feared for their own jobs and wage rates, and from the general public who feared for women's virtue. In Britain, for instance, the Ministry of Munitions trained and paid older women to 'act as guardians', befriending 'foolish girls' and warning any who behaved unsuitably.¹⁵ Married women had additional worries and responsibilities in wartime, especially in countries where there were desperate shortages. For women in Vienna, queuing, scrounging and hunting for food and fuel, the war did not bring much freedom, especially as elderly fathers or young sons took charge where possible; it was felt in this patriarchal society that 'there must be a man in the family in times like that'.¹⁶ To women as to men the war brought grief, anxiety and danger mixed with a measure of pride and opportunity. But did women, as has often been suggested, win from the war permanent improvements in their economic, social and political status? Modern historians are not so sure that they did.

In France, Theodore Zeldin suggests, the war 'did not make all that much difference to the women'.¹⁷ A higher proportion (40 per cent) than elsewhere in Europe had already been working outside the home. This figure increased during the war and in 1917 women led the way in striking for better pay and conditions. Afterwards, however, women's employment declined and husbands who returned from the front could still by law expect obedience from their wives. Furthermore women in France, where there had been no widespread suffrage movement, did not gain the right to vote until 1944. Whether most of them were unhappy with their lot it is hard to judge.

German women responded patriotically to the extreme demands the war placed on their country. They worked hard to feed their families and also to keep industry and agriculture going – the female workforce increased by 46 per cent. Few questioned the Demobilisation Committee's demand that women should give up

their positions to returning soldiers and 'devote themselves to their former duties of taking care of the home and having children'. But many women did show independence in refusing to return to paid domestic service, often preferring to remain unemployed. Such assertiveness, claims Richard Bessel, aroused fears among men 'whose roles had been severely challenged by the war' – especially as German women had gained equal voting rights in 1919. Bessel goes on to argue that politics remained a 'male realm' because of the dominance of the 'front generation', which was responsible for bringing to power the 'militantly anti-feminist' Nazi Party.¹⁸ He does not mention that large numbers of women voted for Hitler.

The experience of British women during and after the war was similar to that of German women. In their case, too, recent historians find that their war service did them little good. Deborah Thom states that:

War had not challenged the sexual division of labour or the notion of the male bread-winner. These roles were only suspended for the duration and then only in some households.¹⁹

It is true that the gains of 1918–19 – the franchise for women over 30 and the removal of restrictions on women entering the professions – benefited respectable middle-class women rather than, say, the young female munitions workers to whom the government professed to be so grateful. Thus Asquith was being somewhat disingenuous in asking 'How could we have carried on the War without them?' as he announced to Parliament that he had changed his mind on female suffrage.²⁰ Arguably, too, even these concessions would not have been made had it not been for women's pre-war campaigning and progress. But it is a mistake to be too dismissive about women's gains, for all women had the vote within ten years and 'women's attitudes and aspirations had changed in the direction of increased self-confidence and willingness to stand up for themselves'.²¹

All over Europe the most obvious sign of change was in the appearance of women: they looked different in the shorter skirts and bobbed hairstyles which had proved so much more practical in factories, at the front and on the farm. There was a new code of behaviour to go with the new look; the chapone had been an early casualty of the war and it was now acceptable for a young woman to go out to the cinema or dance-hall with a boyfriend or with girlfriends. It is hard to say how far these new habits explain the rises in illegitimacy and divorce which occurred in most countries during and after the war. Much moral concern was expressed about the trends – even though marriage was also on the increase. Most people, men as well as women, were only too happy to take up family life again after the upheavals of war.

3 Depicting the War

KEY ISSUES How and why has the depiction of the First World War in art and literature varied?

This section illustrates the role played by art and literature in colouring our impressions of the war. It cannot do justice to such a rich topic but students can explore it further by looking at the paintings in the Imperial War Museum and similar collections abroad and reading the works of literature mentioned in the footnotes and bibliography.

a) Art and the War

Like so many other people, artists welcomed the war. When Otto Dix joined the German Army, for instance, he hoped that it would give him 'tremendous experiences inaccessible in civilian life'.²² The Canadian Wyndham Lewis urged fellow artists that they could not afford to miss that experience.²³ Since the early 20th century was a time of experimental (*avant-garde*) work in the arts, the war was seen as a new challenge. For Futurist artists, who aimed to break with the past and to celebrate modern technology, dynamism and power, conflict would be 'a violent incentive', wrote Christopher Newinson. And for those artists who explored apocalyptic themes, prophesying upheaval and calamity, the war was a kind of fulfilment.

Many artists volunteered, often joining special Artists' Units. Their skills were in great demand for a range of tasks, such as making models for target practice, constructing masks for soldiers with facial injuries, creating camouflage – or even painting signs for the latrines. Later some were appointed official war artists with the more general duty of depicting the battlefield. Always they worked under the severe constraints imposed by trench life and the censorship imposed by governments.

Moved by the slaughter they had witnessed, many artists felt compelled to convey their experiences in uncompromising terms. They undertook a mission to modify the heroic view of war shown in propagandist posters, advertisements and newspaper prints. Newinson abandoned his triumphalist view of war but still used abstract Futurist forms in paintings like *French Troops Resting* (1916), in which a group of exhausted soldiers take advantage of a few moments' respite by the side of a road (see page 139). General Sir Ian Hamilton, the Gallipoli commander, wrote a preface to the catalogue for the 1916 exhibition of Newinson's works which, he said, would bring the soldier 'closer to the heart of his own experiences than his own eyes could have carried him'.²⁴ The exhibition was well attended and all the paintings sold. Later Newinson abandoned Futurism altogether.



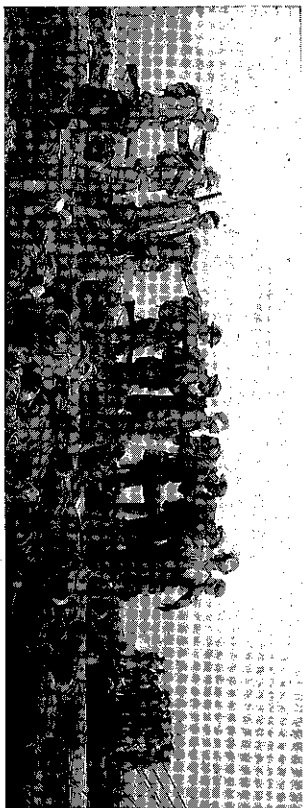
French troops resting 1916 by C.R.W. Newinson.

he became an official war artist but the Department of Information rejected his naturalistic painting, ironically entitled *Paths of Glory*, because it showed dead bodies lying in a trench. When Newinson displayed it with a notice saying CENSORED pasted across it, he was reprimanded by the Home Office.

Even though most of the official British war artists did not toe the government line they were allowed to go on working. Paul Nash arrived on the Western Front in 1917 and witnessed the aftermath of the Battle of Passchendaele – 'the most frightful nightmare'. In 1918 he wrote to his wife:

I | It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on forever. Feeble, inarticulate will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may s | it burn in their lousy souls.

Soon after this Nash produced one of the most famous paintings of the war, *We Are Making a New World* (1918) (see page 140). This battlefield landscape contains no soldiers: but the mounds of mud resemble helmets rising from the ground; the blasted tree stumps represent human remains; and the red clouds symbolise blood. This, together with other 'funny pictures' by Nash, was passed by the censor, Colonel Lee, because it could not 'give the enemy any information'.²⁵ It does not seem to have



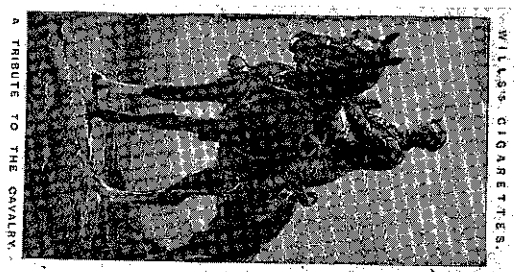
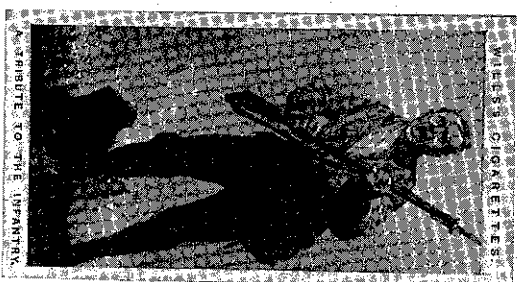
Cassid, by John Singer Sargent



We are making a new world, by Paul Nash.

worried the Department of Information that Nash was conveying such a hostile impression of the war. Another artist commissioned by the government, the fashionable American portrait-painter John Singer Sargent, produced an equally unforgettable image with his realistic depiction of soldiers blinded by mustard gas: *Cassid* (see page 140). It was shown at the Royal Academy in 1919 and hailed as picture of the year.

Even more popular were the late war paintings of Irish artist, William Orpen. Originally commissioned to paint the Peace Conference, Orpen duly recorded the scene in *The Signing of the Peace Treaty in the Hall of Mirrors*, which was well received. But Orpen 'kept thinking of the soldiers who remained in France for ever' and expressed this idea by using the same ornate background of the Hall of Mirrors for another commissioned work, *To the Unknown Soldier in France*. Beside a flag-draped coffin stood two young soldiers, naked apart from their helmets, over whom hovered two cherubs. This painting was a great success in the Royal Academy show of 1923 but the Imperial War Museum (which had commissioned it) found it unacceptable. It can be seen in the museum today but the soldiers have been painted out. Nevertheless, Orpen and his fellow-artists had produced enough revealing work to ensure that the men who fought and died between 1914 and 1918 would be immortalised in their fashion. They had helped to shape a new perception of war. Meanwhile the troops themselves preferred the more traditional heroic or humorous view of themselves as depicted in the cigarette cards and picture postcards which so many of them collected during the war (see below).



On the other side of No-Man's Land Otto Dix also struggled to

communicate his view of the slaughter. The semi-abstract *Signal Flame* (1916) is a shocking scene of dead soldiers entangled in barbed wire (see front cover). Dix was unable to forget his experiences after the war and used sketches he had brought back from the front to produce a series of 50 gruesomely realistic etchings entitled *War* (1924). One of them shows worms crawling out of a skull; and if Dix's obsession with death's capacity to sustain life seems too sensational it should be compared to the matter-of-fact memory recorded by a British war veteran:

1 I was told to go back into what had been No-Man's Land and bury the old dead of the Newfoundland Regiment. ... They looked very ragged, very ragged and the rats were running out of their chests. The rats were getting out of the rain, of course, because the cloth over the rib cage made quite a nice nest and when you touched a body the rats just poured out of the front.²⁶

Dix also painted many mutilated ex-soldiers, who symbolised his revulsion from war. His work was never popular in Germany and was to incur the wrath of the Nazis, who banned him from exhibiting in 1934 and burned some of his paintings.

The war, therefore, stimulated in soldier-artists not so much new styles of art as an intense effort to express the truth. Artists not directly involved in the fighting reacted in other ways. The ageing Claude Monet, a close friend of the French Prime Minister Clemenceau, painted water-lilies as the 'only way to avoid thinking about what is happening'²⁷ – though this was difficult since his son was at the front and wounded soldiers constantly passed by his house at Giverny. After the war he gave a series of these peaceful, consoling paintings to the nation. A very different response was that of the Dada movement, founded by Tristan Tzara in Switzerland in 1915. Feeling that the war had 'institutionalized absurdity' and killed individuality itself, the Dadaists depicted only the illogical and the ridiculous – 'a harlequinade made of nothingness'. The most authentic contemporary artists, they claimed, were the field commanders who 'painted in blood'. Dadaism did not last long but it helped to give rise to the 'warped imaginings' of the post-war Surrealist movement.²⁷

b) The War in Literature

Many ordinary soldiers also did sketches of trench life and the battle-field – but there were many more who wrote about their experiences. Poetry was quite widely read – many a knapsack contained a comforting slim volume – and the war inspired many to try their own hand at verse. Some 2,925 British war poets have been identified. Similarly, the war encouraged prose and 400 novels by ex-servicemen were published in Britain alone. These works were devoured by other veterans, like Leonard Thompson, who had an insatiable desire to read about

the war. It would be interesting to know which of the two main kinds of books he preferred – the romantic or the disenchanting.

Britain's favourite romantic war-poet was Rupert Brooke, whose *1914 and Other Poems* (1915) sold very well in its year of publication and was reprinted 28 times by 1920. Educated at Rugby and Cambridge, Brooke was already an established poet before 1914; he joined up eagerly but never took part in battle as he died of blood poisoning on the way to Gallipoli in 1915. In poems like 'The Dead' he expresses the patriotic mood felt by so many at this stage in the war; he urges bugles to blow out over 'the rich Dead':

1 These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
5 Their sons, they gave, their immortality.²⁸

There is evidence that front-line soldiers, anxious civilians and bereaved relatives found solace in such words. In Ernest Raymond's best-selling post-war novel, *Tell England* (1924), three public-school boys join up at the age of 18 and when one of them is killed their Colonel quotes Brooke's lines to his friends. All three eventually die and the army padre (a character based on Raymond himself) survives to 'tell England' of the 'beauty' of their sacrifice.²⁹ This is typical of the romantic view presented in most war literature published during and soon after the war. It tended to use an exalted vocabulary – words like 'honour', 'valour', 'sacrifice' – which disguised reality; Brooke's 'sweet, red wine of youth' does not conjure up the same image as 'young men's blood'.

In Germany an even more heroic spirit prevailed, which is typified by Ernst Jünger. He served in all but the first two months of the war and received special training as a stormtrooper – as well as 14 wounds. His account of these experiences in *Storm of Steel* (1920) vividly conveys the excitement and fulfilment to be found in battle (see the quotation on page 42). His warrior is 'a new kind of man, a new species, destined to rule'.³⁰ From the community of such comrades a new and better Germany would grow, prophesied such writers as Jünger. This was a theme which Hitler was able to exploit for his own purposes.

Mussolini had the same opportunity in Italy where war was celebrated even more passionately. The poet Gabriele d'Annunzio engaged in daring exploits in all three services, even though he was over 50. 'I owe the highest and purest conquests of my spirit to the bloody and muddy war,' he wrote. After the Armistice he longed for 'a heroic reason to go on living'; he found it in 1919 when he led the invasion of Fiume (see page 124), where 'our war completes itself, crowns itself'.³¹ For the writer Filippo Marinetti, founder of the Futurist movement, the uniforms, machinery, sounds and smells of war were beautiful; he fought in the First World War and later in

Italy's Abyssinian campaign, which he regarded as 'the finest futuristic poem which has yet appeared'.³²

On the other hand, writers disillusioned with war tried to communicate its often horrifying reality. They described everyday incidents instead of conjuring up high-flown themes. They drew attention to pain rather than excitement and conveyed futility rather than glory. One of many examples is Wilfred Gibson's 'Breakfast' (1917):

- 1 We ate our breakfast lying on our backs
Because the shells were screaching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
- 5 When Jimmy Stainthorpe played full-back instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took a bet, and dropt back dead.³³

From the pens of Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg (see pages 106 and 44), Wilhelm Klemm and Alfred Lichtenstein, Benjamin Peret and Guillaume Apollinaire flowed verse in the same sardonic vein. Apollinaire, for instance, seemed to be 'laughing at the risks' with his word pictures written in forms which reflect the subject matter – a coffin, a bursting shell, sheets of rain. Not all this work emerged during the war, when censorship rules applied; in fact it is amazing that Barbusse's outspoken novel, *Under Fire*, was published in both France and Britain in 1916 (see pages 39–40). Only four of Owen's poems had appeared before he was killed and the first collection was not published until 1919. This contained his own preface which sums up his approach and that of many other soldier-poets:

- 1 This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The
- 5 poetry is in the pity.³⁴

Like the art exhibitions of this time, this volume had a mixed reception. Some critics hailed Owen as the greatest poet of the war; others condemned these 'shell-shocked' verses.

Ten years after the Armistice the controversy about the disenchanting as opposed to the idealistic depiction of the war was intensified when a host of works by ex-servicemen showed the war in a far from favourable light. From Britain came Edmund Blunden's memoir *Undertones of War* (1928), R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (1928), Richard Aldington's novel *Death of a Hero* (1929), Graves's memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), Frederic Manning's novel *Her Privates We* (1930) and a new volume of Owen's poetry with an introduction by Blunden; from Germany came Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929); from America came Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929); and from

France came Louis-Ferdinand Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932). All these works (especially *All Quiet on the Western Front*) were widely read at the time, as they have been ever since, undoubtedly shaping our perceptions of the war. They have often been blamed for creating an anti-war myth and fuelling pacifism (see pages 40 and 41). One charge is that these writers give an unduly depressing view of war service. In fact, all their books tell of the comradeship, the sense of duty, the stoicism, the food, drink and cigarettes, the recreation, the jokes, the beauties of nature which helped to keep soldiers going. Even Sassoon, who had lost his faith in the war by 1917, remembers feeling cheerful on the evening before the Battle of Arras:

- 1 Having seen the men settled into their chilly barns and sheds, I stuffed myself with coffee and eggs and betook myself to a tree stump in the peaceful park of a white chateau close to the village. ... The sun was just above the tree-tops: a few small deer were grazing; a rook flapped overhead; and some thrushes and blackbirds were singing in the brown undergrowth. Nothing was near to remind me of the War; only the enormous thudding on the horizon and an aeroplane humming across the clear sky. For some obscure reason I felt confident and serene. My thoughts assured me that I wouldn't go back to England tomorrow if I
- 10 were offered an improbable choice between that and the battle.³⁵

The close similarity between this passage and Sassoon's diary entry for that day (7 April 1917)³⁶ suggests an answer to another criticism: that these post-war reminiscences lack authenticity. Of course they should not be read as documentaries, but all were based on the first-hand experience of men who had served at the front. It had taken them ten years or so to publish because, says Aldington, it was 'a question of trying to communicate the incommunicable'.³⁷ As well as the happier moments, they contain some terrible stories and images, more upsetting than anything a soldier would write in a letter to his family. Aldington's hero George Winterbourne walks over a captured area in 1918:

- 1 The ground was a desert of shell-holes and torn rusty wire, and everywhere lay skeletons in steel helmets, still clothed in the rags of sodden khaki or field grey. Here a fleshless hand still clutched a broken rusty rifle; there a gaping, decaying boot showed the thin, knotty foot-bones.
- 5 He came on a skeleton violently dismembered by a shell explosion; the skull was split open and the teeth lay scattered on the bare chalk; the force of the explosion had driven coins and a metal pencil right into the hip-bones and femurs. In a concrete pill-box three German skeletons lay across their machine-gun with its silent nozzle still pointing at
- 10 the loop-hole. They had been attacked from the rear with phosphorous grenades, which burn their way into the flesh, and for which there is no possible remedy. A shrunken leather strap still held a battered wrist-watch on a fleshless wrist-bone. Alone in the white curling mist, drifting slowly past like wraiths of the slain, with the far-off thunder of

is drum-fire beating the air, Winterbourne stood in frozen silence and contemplated the achievements of civilized men.³⁸

Such accounts are no more harrowing, however, than the unsensational memories recorded in recent years by war veterans (see, for example, pages 130 and 142). The sum of other evidence suggests that Paul Fussell was right in claiming that 'the war was much worse than any description of it in the 1920s or 1930s'.³⁹

Nevertheless, critics claim, these middle-class writers (most of whom were junior officers) give 'a highly subjective, unbalanced and misleading version' of front conditions. They reacted more strongly than working-class soldiers against trenches where, writes one historian, the amenities were no worse than those of an average 'slum yard'.⁴⁰ Let Leonard Thompson reply: he came from a family of ten living in a brick-floored cottage with no running water within a mile but in the trenches of Gallipoli, he writes, 'we wept, not because we were frightened but because we were so dirty'.⁴¹

Needless to say, memoirs and novels do not tell us the whole truth about the war. They do not tell us about international diplomacy or political manoeuvres or military strategy because their authors had no experience of these matters. But the literary work of the men of every nation, class and rank who fought in the war forms an important part of our evidence, valid in its own terms. It should be read by anyone who wants to gain some idea of what it felt like to fight in almost unimaginable conditions. For, as Ezra Pound graphically put it, they knew what it was to have been 'eye-deep in hell'.

c) Conclusion: Remembering the War

All forms of art, says Peter Conrad, were affected by the war which 'brutally and irrevocably modernized mankind'.⁴² Civilians were no less conscious of it than servicemen. The composer Edward Elgar, whose pre-war music had been filled with optimistic, patriotic themes, wrote his sorrowful Cello Concerto in 1919 to express his sense of loss. The war was assimilated into post-war Modernist writing like that of D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf. Its lingering presence is summed up vividly by Woolf's Mrs Dalloway; when news of the suicide of a shell-shocked young man is brought to her while she is entertaining, she thinks: 'In the middle of my party, here's death.'⁴³

Another who was left with an abiding sense of death was Britain's bereaved imperialist poet, Rudyard Kipling, one of whose *Ephithaphs of War* introduced this book (see page 1). For several years after the war Kipling worked with others to provide suitable cemeteries and memorials for those who had been killed. Travellers today can observe the fruits of such labours all over Europe, where the tiniest villages commemorate those who were slain and whole towns, such as Ypres in Belgium which was completely rebuilt in the 1920s, are sites of

memory in themselves. From the autoroutes of northern France motorists can see huge battlefeld monuments like those at Thiepval and Vimy Ridge, as well as innumerable war cemeteries. Mountain walkers or skiers might come across the grim war memorial on Monte Grappa in the Italian Dolomites or Brancusi's fine commemorative sculptures at Tirgu-Jiu in the Romanian Carpathians. From a cruise-boat on the eastern Mediterranean passengers could glimpse the coastal graveyards and memorials on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey. Over eighty years after the end of the war new names and graves are still being added as more soldiers' remains are found and the sites continue to be visited by descendants, tourists and students.

Kipling also undertook the task and the duty of writing a history of the part played in the war by the Irish Guards, his dead son's regiment. It took him five years of research, using official records, diaries and interviews with surviving members of the regiment, to create this monument to service and sacrifice. Like much imaginative literature about the war, Kipling's fine history (published in 1923) conveys a wide variety of experience and emotion. It ranges from personal anguish over the heavy losses of the Somme to regimental pride about a creditable parade put on for an inspection by the King of the Belgians. Kipling is filled with wonder at 'what armed mankind faced in the trenches in those years'. He marvels 'that, while they lived that life, it seemed to them sane and normal, and they met it with even temper and cool heads'. At the end of the book he expresses his own mixed feelings, as well as those of the men themselves, as they disbanded in Spring 1919:

1 They had been a 'happy' Battalion throughout, and ... one that had 'done as well as any' in a war that had made mere glory ridiculous. Of all these things nothing but the memory would remain. And, as they moved — little more than a Company strong — in the wake of their seniors, one saw, here and there among the wounded in civil kit, young men with eyes which did not match their age, shaken beyond speech or tears by the splendour and the grief of that memory.⁴⁴

This present book has tried to evoke both the splendid courage and the terrible grief brought forth by the First World War.

References

- 1 R. Blythe, *Akenyfeld: Portrait of an English Village* (Allen Lane, 1969), pp. 38–44.
- 2 C. Pugsley, 'New Zealand: The Heroes Lie in France' in Cecil & Liddle, *Eleventh Hour*, p. 208.
- 3 Roland Leighton to Vera in A. Bishop & M. Bostridge (eds), *Letters From a Lost Generation* (Abacus, 1999), p. 111.
- 4 R. Van Emden & S. Humphries, *Veterans* (Leo Cooper, 1998), p. 207.
- 5 Cecil & Liddle, *Eleventh Hour*, p. 102.
- 6 J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (CUP, 1995), p. 2.