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Remembering the Great War: Writing and Publishing the Experiences of WWI

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Remembering the Great War: Writing and Publishing the Experiences of WWI

Description

The horrors and tragedies of the First World War produced some of the finest literature of the century: including *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*; *Goodbye to All That*; the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas; and the novels of Ford Madox Ford. Collectively detailing every campaign and action, together with the emotions and motives of the men on the ground, these 'war books' are the most important set of sources on the Great War that we have. Through looking at the war poems, memoirs and accounts published after the First World War, Ian Andrew Isherwood addresses the key issues of wartime historiography-patriotism, cowardice, publishers and their motives, readers and their motives, masculinity and propaganda. He also analyses the culture, society and politics of the world left behind. *Remembering the Great War* is a valuable, fascinating and stirring addition to our knowledge of the experiences of WWI.

Keywords

Great War, First World War, Great Britain, memoir, war memoir, memory

Disciplines

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CHAPTER 1

WRITING THE WAR

In November 1918, Captain Angus Buchanan, MC, was in a Red Cross hospital for officers in Brighton. He was being treated there after his return from the war in East Africa. In the previous three years, his body had been through the hardships of life on campaign in a difficult theatre of war, one which deteriorated both men's spirits and their bodies. He had suffered deprivation and disease; he had also dutifully served his nation and empire in a remote corner of the world war. He was a competent young officer, earning promotion and being decorated for bravery. Now with the war seemingly behind him, he took up his pen and while recovering in hospital he wrote a memoir of his war experiences for publication. A week before the armistice that marked the ending of a war in which he had sacrificed his health and risked his life, his manuscript, entitled *Three Years of War in East Africa*, was accepted by publisher John Murray.¹ Buchanan's book was one of the few published depicting the war in Africa, an important work demonstrating the war's global reach, a chronicle of men who served not only their country, but also their empire beyond the western front.

As Buchanan was convalescing in Brighton, Captain Charles Carrington, MC, was in England. He had grown despondent from the boredom of being at home. Carrington had served on the western front since 1915 and had seen much action in the 1/5 Battalion of the Warwickshire Regiment. After fighting and suffering in the abysmal mud of Passchendaele in 1917, Carrington's nerves were strained, and he was granted an extended leave where he was assigned to a reserve training battalion in England. Though lucky to be on leave, he disliked

the experience so much that he longed to go back to the front.² After three years of war, Carrington was used to being busy, performing the hundreds of tasks required of a junior officer in a good battalion in the line. Now idle in his hut, he began to write essays about his experiences and 'bad romantic verses about death and the trenches', while he pined for a return to his men and the troglodyte home he knew in France.³ Carrington found life in wartime England unappealing; the sense of alienation was powerfully acute between a combat soldier and civilians at home who knew little of what life was like in the trenches. Being away from the front, though, had got him writing; indeed the first draft of his *A Subaltern's War*, which he would wait ten years to publish, was inspired by the bored mulling of a combat officer home on leave who was waiting to go back to his men. Carrington eventually got his wish and was given orders to the front. At the time of the Armistice, he was on a train en route to the Italian front.

In Italy, Captain Charles Douie, MC, was standing on the side of a road watching on as a weary British infantry brigade marched past. Like Carrington, for three years Douie had fought on the western front and had witnessed the destructive war as it developed around him. Like so many other subalterns, Douie was young, commissioned as a teenager just out of Rugby. Despite his youth and inexperience, he had grown into command. Unbeknownst to him, on 11 November 1918, the war was over. Reflecting back on that moment – so significant later but one whose meaning he was unconscious of at the time – he wrote of the dust-covered men walking past. 'These men have lived long in the Valley of the Shadow; they had learned there to distinguish between the false and the true.'⁴ Over the next decade, Douie would ponder the meaning of the 'true' war, the one that he survived. Eventually, mustering the courage necessary for all authors, he published his war memoir *The Weary Road* in 1929, a book that was as much a manifesto on the war's generational impact – the legacy of the war to those who lived through it – as it was a record of his own experiences.

Three men, all officers in the British Army, subalterns who had been decorated for bravery and who had grown into their adult lives as soldiers of their empire's war against Germany. They were also authors who wrote and published accounts of their service. Their books – *Three Years of War in East Africa*, *A Subaltern's War* and *The Weary Road* – were attempts by young amateur authors to convey something very difficult

to write for the public: the experience of war. Each of their stories tells us something about the way that war experiences are remembered. Buchanan wrote his account soon after he returned from Africa. His book is documentary; he told a story of a theatre that was not particularly well known and he published the work quickly within a literary marketplace full of stories of the war. His would be one of many memoirs released in the first two years of peace depicting the war's other fronts, its trials and adventures for imperial soldiers. Douie and Carrington's experience was different. They would each mull over their war recollections for a decade before publishing them in 1929. They had the advantage of hindsight to offer context to their experiences, an advantage used to editorialise on the meaning of the war and its changing memory in the 1920s. What was common to all three authors was a similar challenge: to make sense of events that seemed chaotic, traumatic, and often difficult to recall with any degree of clarity. With remembering and narrating came an intellectual process of creating linear stories from disjointed memories, attempts to make sense of a world war that destroyed as much a person's ability to think clearly as it did anything else.

The Great War was a catastrophic world event that affected millions of people in direct and indirect ways. For returning soldiers, volunteers or conscripted civilians in uniform, the experience of war was intensely and traumatically carried forward into their peacetime lives. John Keegan's sentiment that the war was a 'monstrous cultural aberration' was clearly demonstrated by the way the war was remembered throughout the twentieth century in Britain.⁵ The Great War was believed by many to have been an event of widespread social and cultural transformation, often referred to as a type of Armageddon, a pronouncement that dramatically described the feelings of many that British society was forever changed, altered by a sense of social trauma that ran deep in its mournfulness. Modris Eksteins writes that at the end of the war, 'Europe slumped into a monumental melancholy.'⁶ The dramatic importance of the war itself – as well as the feeling of drastic rupture garnered by it – was certainly felt as it was ongoing, its grandness and scale widely commented upon. But similar to the way memoirists recall the events of their earlier lives, the wider significance of the war was not truly

understood until it was juxtaposed with the altered world that emerged from its destruction.

One way to understand the war's impact is through the way it was written by men like Buchanan, Douie and Carrington. War memoirs – defined here as retrospective personal narratives – document the experiences of individuals and their opinions on the events that they witnessed.⁷ In the decades following World War I, British publishers released hundreds of non-fiction accounts of the recent war by veterans who were interested in making their war experiences known to the public. These books were incredibly varied in their depictions, but all writers contemplated the meaning of the war against the backdrop of their postwar lives. In hundreds of ways the war was written and remembered by men and women who witnessed it: their stories a mosaic of war experiences, a panorama of war memories released at a time when the dramatic story of the war was more akin to memory than history. The new war literature chronicled the way the war affected individuals, their personal stories a guide to the way that Britons were actively remembering the war in the 1920s and 1930s.

Writing a war memoir was an exercise in retrospection. To do so pitted the author's past with their present knowledge of the world.⁸ Yet, war writers were not divorced from the culture in which they lived, but instead functioned within it. To Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan the war generation created a culture of remembering; through their similar experiences, writers were 'participant in a social group constructed for the purpose of commemoration', and this impulse to remember was one that was shared by nearly all that penned the war's story.⁹ Because they were written, in part, to commemorate, war books carry the baggage of the postwar years as much as they depict the actual war; they are documents that intercede between the reader and the war's experiences through a commemorative filter. The story of the war gleaned from memoirs is one that was retold – and as such reimagined – through the peace that followed.

This chapter considers the writing of British war memoirs in the 1920s and 1930s. The war's history – the very first draft of it – was composed in the 20 years following its conclusion by those who survived its many different fronts and came home with a story to tell and a story to sell. Though varied in their motivations, the war's authors all sought to do two things by writing a war book: to tell a true story about events

they believed to be historically important; and to interpret those experiences for the public.¹⁰ As such, memoirists had both documentary and editorial motivations for writing. Writers hoped their books would be of historical value; that their stories would serve as an adjunct to the history of the war. Writers also hoped to leave their impressions on the war's conduct, to engage with the complicated notion of the war's memory at a time when it was only just being formed, and leave an impression of the war's lasting meaningfulness in the most personal way possible, by discussing its human impact.

Memoirs and history

Historical posterity is an important impulse for memoirists. According to Samuel Hynes, the feeling of being a part of history is particularly acute for veterans. He writes: 'For most men who fight, war is their one contact with the world of great doings.'¹¹ While serving as a second lieutenant in an infantry platoon might be an insignificant experience outside of a particular section of the line, when this experience is published, it becomes something more permanent, perhaps something more meaningful as it is bound, printed, and sold to the public. In terms of the British experience in World War I, the returned soldier's story, through publication, was connected to a long tradition of other war stories; an important part of a legacy of martial publishing into which the memoirs of the Great War fit.¹² Many authors were certainly aware of the importance of their memoirs to history and they wrote so that their stories would become a contributing part of it. Whether authors were writing polemically to prevent future wars, memorially to pay tribute to lost comrades, or adventurously telling the story of a far-flung theatre or experience, the historical motivation – to leave an impact on the emerging history of the war – remained of paramount importance.

Memoirists wrote their accounts at a time when the publishing industry released all manner of war books to readers.¹³ 'War books' in their many forms formed a niche within the interwar literary marketplace. Readers were interested in accounts of the war; the British public was trying to make sense of the events through which they had just lived and both histories and memoirs were published to meet the demand, ones that detailed not only the military campaigns of the war, but also what it was like to fight in those campaigns. *The Bookseller*

records no shortage of war books announced as new releases and had a special category, 'Naval and Military', for books about war.

Much of the war's literature was actually written as history. The massive undertaking of the Official Military Histories under the direction of General Sir James Edmonds is probably the best-known historical effort, for it saw the publication of 29 volumes of military history between 1922 and 1948.¹⁴ These Official Histories were meant to be read by both the public and Armed Forces.¹⁵ Edmonds personally wrote 11 of these volumes and directly supervised the others.¹⁶ Other histories, both general and specific, were published, some written by veterans, politicians or by well-known literary figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle and John Buchan.¹⁷ Regimental and battalion histories were also published, usually in small runs, but important for veterans of distinguished units. Britain was a nation awash with printed war books in the 1920s.

Memoirs were complementary to the vast efforts of historians to document the war. While the historian could describe the great events of a campaign, war memoirists recorded the emotional history of eyewitnesses, explaining how historical events impacted on and changed people.¹⁸ The distinction between the writing of history and the writing of a memoir was one widely commented upon and few war memoirists would have seen their autobiographical attempts as history, though many saw the historical value in writing their stories.¹⁹ Yet the potential usefulness of the war memoir to future historians was a compelling motivation to write and publish a war story because it offered the veteran an opportunity to show how their lived experience influenced history. Charles Carrington's *A Subaltern's War* was one of many memoirs that the author hoped would be important for the eventual story of the war. He wrote in his preface, 'I have decided to offer them [his memoirs] to the public, because no war book written now, ten or fifteen years after the event, can secure the authenticity attached to these stories.'²⁰ Carrington's principal motivation to publish his war book was to preserve what he believed were authenticated memories for the historical record and to release a book of value in an age of sensationalist war literature. Carrington wrote from sources and approached writing his memoir in a similar way to that of an historian.²¹

For memoirist E.J. Thompson, historical posterity was also an important motivation for writing. Thompson was the chaplain of the

2nd Leicestershires and served with his battalion in Mesopotamia. He wrote a type of personal history of his regiment entitled *The Leicestershires Beyond Baghdad* (1919). Thompson's methodology was that of a military historian in the first person: he constructed the book from his own memories, from his notebooks, the battalion war diary, and from conversations with his men.²² He believed his memoir to be a valuable future historical source, writing: 'From a multitude of such narratives the historian will build upon his work hereafter.'²³ Historical record was a primary motivation but so was memorialising his unit. Though concerned with the legacy of his unit's conduct in the war, Thompson was clear to distinguish his book as a personal history, one that he believed was of value for its accuracy.²⁴

The connection between lived memory and history was not an exact one and not all memoirists went to the same lengths to validate their memories as Carrington and Thompson. There were many constraints to writing about the war afterwards: lack of documentation, imperfect memories, and social conventions among them. Though some publishers exercised scepticism towards sensational accounts, there was no standard for validating individual memories outside of the author's reputation, which was certainly at stake in an age when veterans clearly read one another's books. Some authors wrote from memory alone, believing their impressions of the war were more important than the exact recalling of the facts of their service. One former subaltern wrote that because he composed his recollections in hospital, 'I was forced to rely mainly on my memory for dates, names of places, incidents, etc.'²⁵ He then added, 'If they have failed to be exact in some cases it is largely due to hypothesis, which is sure to creep in. Also, impressions vary with time and temperament and it is in this light that I hope to pacify my critics.'²⁶

Surgeon Arthur Osburn believed his memoir could offer 'feeling and outlook', traits much more important to him than strict factual accuracy.²⁷ For Osburn, the war memoir's purpose was primarily interpretative. Describing *Unwilling Passenger* as a 'test of memory' he wrote, 'it is not intended to pit accuracy against the more complete and carefully documented diaries of those who wrote down their experiences at the time, and have since published them.'²⁸ Though not a war diary, Osburn's 'test of memory' included clear depictions of the retreat from Mons in 1914 and vivid scenes of battlefield surgery recalled 18 years

afterwards. He was clearly interested in telling a story about his intersection with history, but was careful to disclaim his memoir as strictly that.

Osburn's recollections were not about specific troop movements, dates of significant events, or divisional personalities or politics; instead, his book was a deeply personal account of a career army doctor witnessing the effects of splinter shells and cordite burns on wounded men. Similar to many other veterans, he sought to convey a sense of authority gleaned from his experiences that went far beyond that of historians or even eyewitnesses.²⁹ He wrote critically of the Official Histories: 'Several other incidents are, if I may say so with all due respect, described in the Official History rather as the English would have had them happen than as they actually occurred.'³⁰ He was clear to contrast his memories from August 1914, events punctuated by confusion, chaos and high casualties, with more sanitised depictions of the war as it appeared in the official histories. His impressions of war were exactly that: chaotic and desperate. In this way Osburn used his memoir as a complement to official military history, but also, as a corrective to sanitised depictions that left out a significant part of the war's history, how it impacted individuals and their emotions. He was conscious that his 'imperfect record' was one of interpretative historical value even if it was not strictly history.

Memorialising the experience of war

Memoirs not only leave behind a record of service, they also memorialise the experience of war itself for future generations. Writing of his service in the Scots Guards, Stephen Graham described his motivations for writing as, 'I have thought I could perform no better service than describe the social life and the spirit in these historic regiments of the British army.'³¹ To him, both the history of the events he lived, but also the morale or *esprit de corps* of the men with whom he served, were worthy of remembrance. Graham was not alone: tributes to comrades and the war dead were extremely common, particularly in book dedications. The desire to remember what soldiers went through, what they suffered and endured, was a natural response to the experience of the war. The brutal nature of a war of attrition took its toll on minds, bodies and memories, and soldiers had to adapt to carnage, fear and the lingering prospect of

death in order to cope with losses and trauma. After the war, when men and women began to write their war books, they invariably had to confront difficult memories within a society that still felt acutely the war's losses, a society that did not always understand what veterans went through.

It is impossible to divorce the war memoirist of the interwar period from the culture of war memory in Britain that was created by the war's wake. Jay Winter writes that war books 'are indispensable guides to how some contemporaries tried to come to terms with the slaughter'.³² Coming to terms was an exercise in remembering, often memorialising, a shared experience of comradeship. All veterans who decided to pen a memoir had to confront memories of traumatic events, and many wrote to further public understanding of the war so that their sacrifice would not be overlooked.

The phrase 'traumatic events' is perhaps too abstract. Veterans were reliving memories that were impossible to fit into tidy narratives, yet they often tried to do so. Past and present often blended together in battlefield descriptions as writers attempted to make sense of the war's suffering afterwards. In *Up to Mametz*, Llewelyn Wyn Griffith wrote that whenever he smelled freshly cut wood, he remembered a severed human limb hanging in the boughs of a tree broken by bombardment.³³ Griffith recalled the war's imagery through his sensory memory, which was still powerful a decade after the war's conclusion. A peaceful and pastoral experience, the cutting of green wood, reminded him forever afterwards of the horrors he witnessed. Remembering battle meant trying to explain the inexplicable: to make coherent narrative memories from the fragments of the past reimagined in the present.

Because of the vast suffering of the war, the impulse for memorialisation was strong, and tributes to comrades in war memoirs were common. 'For indeed men have suffered things in this war which no individual "on his own" could possibly endure. But our men have endured them because others were suffering with them,' wrote Stephen Graham.³⁴ Feelings of suffering manifested themselves in writing, which was a memorial reaction to trauma by veterans, who longed to show that the war had purpose and was both personally and generationally transformational. To some degree, war books are written so that veterans can 'create meaningful narratives of their wars', and the search for such meaningfulness came in many different forms in the

1920s.³⁵ Many memoirs emphasised endurance at the front, more often than not a trial of human endurance over appalling conditions and high casualties. Friendship – often referred to as comradeship – was another way to find meaning in the war's trial.³⁶ John More, who served in Palestine, wrote his account as a 'reminder of the strenuous times when all were working together for the common cause'.³⁷ He wrote of service and suffering by men who together believed that these experiences had value. By demonstrating the close bonds formed by men who fought and survived through terrible experiences, the implicit virtues of loyalty, charity and friendship were emphasised as important aspects of the martial fraternity. Memorialising comrades ensured their place in the history of the war; men and women whose suffering would otherwise be insignificant in the broader scheme of the war's millions of individual acts of cruelty were remembered in print by individuals who knew what they went through, so that they could show that these experiences mattered.³⁸

An example is R.T. Rees's 1935 infantry officer memoir, *Schoolmaster at War*. In it, Rees described how the process of writing brought back conflicted memories of service that were beginning to fade in 1935. He wrote, 'the mere handling of my pen recalls at once the close smell of the dug-out, the scampering of rats, the rat-tat-tat of machine guns, the ear-splitting bark of guns, the horror of the gas cloud, and the chilly stillness of No Man's Land just before dawn.'³⁹ These images of the western front were familiar to all his readers in the 1930s; they were the ordinary realities of all junior officers in that theatre and were ubiquitous depictions in the war's literature. Rees continued, 'Happily, it also recalls good fellowship in trench and billet, feasts and concerts behind the lines, and above all, the sense of loyalty and comradeship which illuminated even the squalid gloom of war.'⁴⁰ In his account, Rees was interested in showing the war's hardships but also the 'good fellowship' of his comrades-in-arms. Comradeship was an important corrective to the unpleasant realities of service; in memory, it became a central part of the war's reinvented martial virtue afterwards.

Akin to comradeship, pride, affection and loyalty towards regiments was common. Even as wry a writer as Robert Graves adored his unit and memorialised the traditions and elitism of the Royal Welch Fusiliers in *Good-bye to All That*.⁴¹ More important, perhaps, was the notion of the morale of a good battalion, referred to as 'spirit' by Graves; he wrote that

despite appalling attritional losses in the Royal Welch, 'Regimental spirit persistently survived all catastrophes.'⁴² Unit identity, particularly within elite regiments or service branches, accentuated feelings of comradeship. This sense of pride was remembered fondly in many war books, some of which had the unit within the title itself; 19 published memoirs used the preposition 'with' to convey the centrality of unit identity to individual experience. Some authors even wrote specifically to tell the story of a unit. Colonel Neil Fraser-Tytler, author of a collection of edited letters entitled *Field Guns in France* (1922), prefaced his book by writing that it was of primary interest to artillerymen, and 'anyone else who buys the book does so at his own peril.'⁴³ Similarly, Ardern Beaman found *esprit de corps* a motivation to publish his cavalry memoir *The Squadron* (1920). In his foreword, Beaman attributed the writing of his book to his uncle coaxing him: 'Now you've been with a Cavalry Brigade through the most stirring time of the war, why don't you write an account of their life out there.'⁴⁴ With modesty he assured his uncle that he would try to tell a faithful story of the gallant doings of his unit. Beaman wrote: '[the] purpose of this narrative, however, is not unduly to extol the occasional performances of the Cavalry, nor to excuse their many failures and their long periods of seeming inutility. It aims only to paint in plain and faithful colours the life and sentiments of [...] a squadron of Cavalry in the field.'⁴⁵ Beaman wrote to both convey his own experiences, but also those of his unit, an attempt at faithfully reconstructing their conduct in the war filtered through his own lens as a witness.

Just as some were comfortable writing on behalf of their comrades, others found this task difficult. Journalist and former sergeant in the Black Watch William Linton Andrews, author of *Haunting Years: The Commentaries of a War Territorial* (1930), found the balance between memoir and battalion history difficult.⁴⁶ Initially, Andrews wanted to write history but found the task daunting so he turned to writing a memoir. He wrote: 'For I want very much to tell you about my comrades – great-hearted comrades – many of whom did not come home [...] This will be my own story. I shall tell it because it is also the story of thousands upon thousands of others, not in particulars, but in broad essentials.'⁴⁷ The desire for personal recollection, remembrance and collective history was important to Andrews – important, yet still very difficult to write well due to the social restraints and burden of writing

on behalf of others, an imposing task for all who write of small units in war. Former prisoner of war H.C.W. Bishop recalled the limits of telling the story of men that he knew and served with at Kut. He wrote firmly that his was an individual account: 'It is not intended to generalize in any way, since an individual, unless of exalted rank, sees as a rule only his own small environment and cannot pretend to speak for the majority of his comrades.'⁴⁸ Yet Bishop hoped his book would be of informational interest to the 'relatives and friends' of his fellow prisoners of war.⁴⁹ The essential point is that many writers saw the process of writing a war memoir as inherently memorial: an opportunity to earnestly reflect upon their comrades with hope of telling a faithful story of their own war experiences despite knowing the limitations of being one voice of many.

Writing the truth of the war

In their desire to record for posterity their experiences, memoirists invariably framed their books in ways that interpreted the conflict for readers. Though often earnest in their desire to tell truthful stories, literary imagination and the fallibility of individual memories has led many historians to view postwar literature with a healthy dose of scepticism. There is nothing new to this criticism, but it does raise the issue of the importance of truthfulness in war stories. There are different types of truths in war books, and many memoirists were conscious of this fact. The experience of war is one shared by many, but remembered individually; it is a subjective experience that can be interpreted in starkly different ways.

Remembering combat was often a confusing and emotionally jarring experience. When his own veracity was questioned, Robert Graves famously wrote to his critics that 'High-explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary out of anyone.'⁵⁰ Graves's distinction was that men who fought and wrote their war experiences deserved a degree of critical leniency when it came to the details. For men recalling what was likely the most traumatic experience of their lives, truth would be something certainly valued, but also contested by others who had lived through the same events. Graves saw no small amount of futility in the process of validating memories. In as gifted hands as his, the very notion of a 'truthful' or 'authentic' war memoir was an opportunity to question the notion of truth itself, or to ascertain which truths, if any,

were important. To Graves, truth was not necessarily found in strict factual accuracy of events lived and witnessed, but instead deep within the overall transformation of men in battle in the context of their later lives, a form of emotional truthfulness that was far more impactful on readers than accounts of troop movements or strategy.

It is worth noting that Graves was largely an exception. There was something self-defeating in contesting the idea of truth while writing an autobiographical account that would be marketed and sold to the public as such. Graves was accounting for what he called 'the old trench mind', or the confusion found in the psychological disruption of battle.⁵¹ Both factual details and author's impressions are integral to autobiography, and author's prefaces from this period are replete with discussions of methods and disclaimers. Former medical officer David Rorie wrote his memoir from his diary and excused the fact that many of the technical details in his memoir, *A Medico's Luck in the War*, were 'monotonous' because he felt obliged to include them, writing that 'historical accuracy demands it.'⁵² It was not uncommon to write from sources, and many other writers felt a keen desire to be accurate in their depictions. M.C.C. Harrison and H.A. Cartwright's 1930 account of their prisoner-of-war escapes, *Within Four Walls*, was an exceptional story, but one that the authors felt a need to validate in their preface. 'Even though the narrative was not put together until this year the authors have not had to fall back, therefore, upon memory, but have each had the facts before them as they were written down at the first possible moment.'⁵³ That they felt the need to explain their authenticity to the reader demonstrates something about the different types of war memoirs released and the widespread critical questioning of the veracity of war books.

Somewhere between the liar and the visionary was the earnest British war memoirist, diligently reconstructing their war experiences from limited sources and relying, as their first and most important source, on their emotional impressions resurrected from memories that had been fractured by war. However problematic the notion of truth was for writers, it was a virtue important to many if not most who wrote. Max Plowman wrote that his book's appeal came from his 'candid and truthful' depictions, without which 'authorship on such a subject as the European War will, in any case, be valueless.'⁵⁴ His connection between candidness and value is important: memoirs had a truthfulness that went far beyond historical events. They were interpretative and

transformational texts, recounting what Alfred Pollard called 'thoughts and sensations when going into battle'.⁵⁵ Novels could offer a perspective on truth; poetry and plays could as well. But there was something inherently different about authors writing autobiographically, especially in a literary marketplace where veterans both read and reviewed war literature. Writer and historian Guy Chapman saw the idea of sincerity as the principal virtue of English war books, one which he lauded as he compiled his collection of international war writing, *Vain Glory*, in 1937. 'Whether he tells it with greater or less skill, the English narrator is painstakingly trying to put down the thing as he saw it. He is interested in fact, not for the sake of truth but because he wants to get the fact clear in his own head.'⁵⁶ Chapman had served in the war, wrote a war memoir, and understood well the difficulties in trying to put fragmented memories into clean narrative.

As shown above, some authors wrote self-consciously of their attempts at reconstructing their memories, often humbly offering their recollections to readers through disclaimers in their prefaces or forewords. Philip Gosse, son of the critic Edmund Gosse and friend of Siegfried Sassoon, described his war memoir as being a collection of 'experiences and impressions of a very unmilitant individualist who, like thousands of others, suddenly found himself taking part in the great catastrophe'.⁵⁷ His war experiences were mildly described as a series of personal 'impressions' to be taken exactly as such. Former prisoner of war John Still wrote that his book consisted of 'both facts and opinions', a healthy qualification against the work being understood as an objective history.⁵⁸ Cambridge don H.G. Durnford wrote that his memoir was justified by the banality of its story. He wrote, 'The plainness of the story must be its justification. It is subjective and carries no moral.'⁵⁹ Former 51st Highland Division Medical Officer David Rorie concluded his memoir, 'So there you have the tale, such as it is.' He hoped his book would recall pleasant memories of those with whom he served, adding an apology: 'if I have told the tale badly – well, *mea culpa*; but, let me add, *sit meritum vuloisse*. For in the years to come a rough and ready record may be better than none.'⁶⁰ Many were conscious that their works were grounded firmly in the subjectivity of their own recollections, while at the same time they attempted to give truthful impressions of witnessed events, however rough their recollections of those impressions might have been.

The authority of the war memoirist was predicated on the idea that their opinions were formed through their trials and that they could be believed because they had lived through the events described.⁶¹ Chapman wrote in the introduction to *Vain Glory* that there was little reliable truth to be found in the histories of the war, but instead, 'The nearest contacts with truth are the accounts of eye-witnesses of incidents from which a general picture can be built up.'⁶² Like many other veterans, Chapman's preference was for works by authors who had witnessed combat, who had survived and reflected upon their experiences. Though Chapman understood well the difference between history and autobiographical writing – he became a professional historian later in life – he believed the value of literary contributions lay in their ability to supplement the historical record with impressions of participants with the emphasis on feeling and the truth that came through reflection. He reinforced the narrative agency of individuals who had seen the war, in all its aspects, as being cultural interpreters in the interwar period of the experience of war for subsequent generations. This is not altogether different than how some historians see the cultural value of these texts for students interested in warfare.⁶³ For a memoirist, publisher and historian like Guy Chapman, the eyewitness account was of utmost importance to understanding the war, if it could be understood, and offered something far different, but equally of value, to history.

Writer Rowlands Coldicott prefaced his *London Men in Palestine* (1919) in a similar vein. 'You will not find in this book the full-fig military narrative,' he wrote. *London Men*, though not military history, was still an important contribution, he argued:

comments upon strategy, divisions rehandled in words, talk of the characteristics of a general. The net of prose is set in sight of smaller birds; chiefly a mass of private sorrows and rejoicings are entangled here. Out of a number of personal narratives of this kind some ultimate history of the war may be compiled.⁶⁴

His memoir was meant to be exactly that – one work of many in which the eventual story of the war would be written – personal memories as something that could be compiled as the true chronicle of the Great War. 'We require all the personal narratives we can get; and, in my opinion,

the more personal and intimate the better,' recalled Thomas Hope Floyd in his 1920 memoir *At Ypres with Best-Dunkley*.⁶⁵ He continued, 'Only thus can we see the recent war in all its aspects.'⁶⁶ Each war memoir was one part in understanding what men and women went through in the war. Samuel Hynes writes in *The Soldiers' Tale* of 'the truth of war experiences as being the sum of witnesses, the collective tale that soldiers tell'.⁶⁷ Hynes's description of the universal soldier's tale, a type of Braudelian sum of all possible war stories, fits closely with the contribution men like Coldicott and Floyd believed they were making to the war's legacy – one part of many from which an eventually true story could be understood, however visionary it was in its storytelling.

Interpreting truth

There was a strong desire by many writers not only to report on the war's conduct, but to also interpret the war's meaning to the next generation. This is not an uncommon response by those who witness any manner of traumatic events. 'Bearing witness is an aggressing act,' writes Kálí Tal.⁶⁸ 'The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate.'⁶⁹ Then as now, veterans were motivated to 'speak out' or truth-tell about their experiences, engaging with the concept of the living memory of events that they had witnessed. With emphasis on the inherent authority of the combat witness to interpret war, often a volunteer civilian or conscript in uniform, the war book was an influential cultural symbol of the 'real' or authentic war experience for those who have not experienced combat. The confessional aspects of war literature are particularly prevalent in World War I books; the idea of an outpouring of truthful emotions after the war is a prominent trope. In part this was because censorship during the conflict fostered distrust afterwards and feelings that the true suffering of soldiers was not accurately reported. As the era progressed, some feelings of bitterness became heightened and expressed in war literature. War bitterness, something found in nearly all war literatures, was not unique or uniform in British war books. Instead, war memoirs broadly reflect the same ambiguity consistent with the general population's varying beliefs on the war's greater meaning.⁷⁰

The motivation to 'speak out' was one shared by some memoirists in this period. Many Great War books were disillusioned and/or darkly

graphic in their portrayals of combat and the psychological effects of war. If the memoir was not history, exactly, then it was meant to reflect authentic experiences and feelings; yet emotional authenticity was something impossible to reconstruct through hindsight. Vera Brittain was one of many who felt a sense of generational burden in writing her war memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933). Describing her own youth as being smashed up by the war, Brittain's emphasis was on truth-telling about the war's horrors and its lasting trauma upon her generation, a polemical motivation for penning a memoir.⁷¹ Writing from her letters and diaries, Brittain reconstructed her war experiences and put them within a wider context of her feelings about the war afterwards, using sources to reconstruct memories that she put within the context of her life and beliefs in the early 1930s. Truth was exceptionally important to her story, but her truths were not universal ones. Brittain's authority as a writer was limited to the events that she witnessed, her insight important but filtered through her postwar feelings about the war's legacy.

As Brittain reconstructed her memories she looked through old papers to piece together her narrative.⁷² She was not alone: many others drew from documents or physical ephemera to write their accounts. Rooting through old letters, diaries and trench kit was a way to connect memories to composition, handling artefacts a means of authenticating memories. Material culture played a significant role in the process of reconstruction – of remembering – and, especially as the years went on, it became a vital way to show the reader that the author had not only lived the events described, but went through a physical process of remembering. Mottram recalled handling his old revolver and webbing as he sat down to write his 'personal record' of service. 'Like everyone else, I write without final authority. Only the Dead know the ultimate fact about War.'⁷³ Handling personal mementoes was a way to spark those memories, yet also an emotional process of reinvention for the writer as they confronted their memories. Objects were powerful props aiding the memoirist, but also conveying a sense of legitimacy to the reader.

One way to lend credibility to one's memoirs was to have an authoritative person or celebrity write an introduction. Writers turned to general officers and well-known literary figures to authenticate, endorse and contextualise their books. General Sir Hubert Gough,

former commander of the Fifth Army on the western front, wrote the preface to Geoffrey Dugdale's slim memoir *Langemarck and Cambrai* (1932).⁷⁴ Similarly, Major General Rt Hon. J.E.B. Seely authored the foreword to Alfred Pollard's *Fire-Eater: Memoirs of a V.C.* (1932). Seely wrote a firm statement of martial spirit in keeping with Pollard's message: 'Every boy must long to receive the Victoria Cross. In this book he will learn how to deserve it.'⁷⁵ No less a figure than Field Marshal Allenby wrote the preface to Bernard Blaser's *Kilts Across the Jordan* (1926). Blaser served in Palestine and his book is a somewhat rare account by a common soldier in that theatre. Allenby commended the accuracy of the work and added his firm endorsement, 'I recommend to everyone this book.'⁷⁶ This was warm praise from the highest ranks of the British Army towards the common soldier. Though there was certainly criticism towards generals and politicians by soldiers during and after the war, the fact that many veterans had generals write on their behalf demonstrates that the surviving men of the war generation were not uniformly disillusioned with their commanders, but instead, many of them relied upon these commanders to preface their books.

A general could offer unique interpretative insights into the book that followed. Major General Sir Ernest Swinton, who after the war became the Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford, wrote the introduction to Charles Douie's *The Weary Road* (1929). He wrote:

His book, written from the heart, with deep conviction, is cheering. It is essentially an act of justice and a tribute to our million dead. It tells us something of what they cannot tell us, of what the vast inarticulate majority of those who still live cannot tell us.⁷⁷

Swinton's endorsement came with the message that Douie's work was meant to tell the story of those who could not tell it themselves, an indication of the historical importance of the work to follow. This type of preface lent vast credibility and distinction to an individual's war story.

Like former commanders, literary luminaries sometimes contributed prefaces. Arthur Conan Doyle, who lost his son in the Great War, wrote the introduction to Captain J.L. Hardy's prisoner-of-war memoir *I Escape!* (1927). Doyle complemented Hardy's prose and labelled him a courageous 'man of action'.⁷⁸ Hardy was one of the great serial escapers

of German captivity, his story sensational and adventurous, and Doyle's endorsement lent the work authority. The American cowboy novelist Owen Wister, a popular fiction writer of the early twentieth century, was so taken with a dinner talk given by Major Vivian Gilbert on the Palestine campaign that he wrote the preface to his *The Romance of the Last Crusade* (1923). He wrote:

none have I heard who could hold an audience in public with a war tale as Major Gilbert did. Such tales should be told and should be set down. They set to remind us of the greatness in man at a time when his littleness seems chiefly to the fore.⁷⁹

As the title would suggest, Gilbert wrote a heroic account of his experiences in Palestine, which Wister put into the perspective of early 1920s war weariness.

Praise could also come from established relatives. Journalist Philip Gibbs wrote the introduction to his brother Hamilton's book *The Grey Wave* (1920). Philip Gibbs had been a war correspondent and was generally critical of the war's conduct by its general officers. His brother witnessed the war from the front lines as a junior officer. Philip wrote of his brother's experience:

He had not the same broad vision of the business of war – appalling in its vastness of sacrifice and suffering, wonderful in its mass-heroism – but was one little ant in a particular muck-heap for a long period of time, until the stench of it, the filth of it, the boredom of it, the futility of it entered into his very being, and was part of him as he was part of it. His was the greater knowledge.⁸⁰

Gibbs verified the truthfulness of his brother's book and spoke of the ability of the witness to add something more valuable about the human condition of war than the journalist or the historian. The 'greater knowledge' was the moral truth of the survivor to speak on the war's legacy.

A good preface could also offer a bit of panache that would distinguish a book or create a framework for understanding the text that followed. Osbert Sitwell wrote the introduction to Carrol Carstairs's *A Generation Missing* (1930). Carstairs's book was a memoir of service in

the Guards Division and rather similar to many other junior officers' accounts that had been published. Sitwell gave the book a glowing introduction speaking to the authenticity of the work that followed. He used his preface to editorialise his own bitter memories of the war, hoping that more disillusioned books could lead to world peace: 'one would like to see, even in war books [...] a little more contempt and scorn, as well as hatred, for the war.'⁸¹ Though Sitwell characterised *A Generation Missing* as a thoroughly disenchanted text – certainly the book shows no great affinity for war – Sitwell's preface framed the book darkly for readers.

As the 1920s wore on and more war books glutted the literary marketplace, prefaces began to discuss and debate the phenomenon of the war book itself. With so much ink spilled by war writers, the preface was a way to discuss the work that followed in light of other books in the same genre and to separate one account from the many others. The bestselling novelist Ian Hay wrote in the foreword to R.T. Rees's *A Schoolmaster at War*, 'For the last yen years we have been submerged by a flood of so-called war books, which depict the men who fought as brutes and beasts – as living like pigs and dying like dogs – disillusioned, drunken, and godless.'⁸² The purpose of these books, to Hay, was to present the war in such a bad light that it could not happen again.⁸³ Hay viewed war as a test of 'human virtue', one which his generation had passed. Like many authors, he lamented much of the popular literature of the Great War because he saw it as being harmful to the memory of the soldiers who served.

As participants in the same conflict, many of whom shared similar experiences in combat, authors were bound to have different opinions about their service. These feelings became even more acute in the decades following the war when the legacy of military service was considered against lives in peacetime. Feelings of disillusionment and war-weariness were discussed and debated. When Carrington eventually published *A Subaltern's War* in 1929, he did so with a polemical epilogue where he addressed his concerns over the war's representations in popular culture. Disillusionment to Carrington was a misinterpretation by the public of soldiers being 'fed up' at the end of the war – tired and cynical but not disillusioned with cause or country. He saw disillusionment as a cultural trope, in his words a 'legend' that had developed as a means of explaining something that was much more complicated, the feeling of soldiers as

they adjusted from war to peace.⁸⁴ Like Douglas Jerrold's pamphlet *The Lie About the War* (1930), Carrington's epilogue demonstrates the importance of the public debate over the memory of the war as it was played out from within war books themselves. Carrington was not fundamentally a militarist, but like Hay, he found the turn in public sentiment from celebration of victory in 1918 to regret in the interwar period decidedly problematic for members of his generation who had paid dearly for their victory.⁸⁵

One way that authors reacted to 'sensationalist' war literature was by tempering their depictions of carnage. Though it was popular for writers in the late twenties to use grotesque scenes of 'battlefield gothic' in their works, many authors found graphic images of the war's gruesomeness tasteless, and they adopted milder imagery out of decency.⁸⁶ Geoffrey Dugdale deliberately sought to avoid grotesque depictions in his book. He wrote, 'I have avoided as much as possible the gruesome and disgusting side of the war; these episodes are dim in my memory and thankfully forgotten.'⁸⁷ Dugdale contrasted his memories, or as he called them, his 'plain statement of facts', with those of other writers: 'I never saw an officer drunk in action, nor did I have any of the unpleasant experiences which many authors of war books seem to have had, although I was in France for eighteen months.'⁸⁸ Some portrayed the war positively as an adventure. Thomas Hope Floyd's memoir *At Ypres with Best-Dunkley* was full of positive recollections of service, with occasional bouts of terror. 'For any boy who, like this boy, craved for excitement, and, while hating war theoretically and disliking it temperamentally, was not blind to the romance and drama of it all, there was ample satisfaction in the Great War,' he recalled.⁸⁹ H.G. Durnford, who was imprisoned by the Germans at Holzminden camp, wrote on the reissue of his book *The Tunnellers of Holzminden* (1930) that his book seemed quaint in hindsight, especially when he compared it to more sensationalist texts released at the time. 'It barely touches the battlefields, recounts no actual horrors and does not emphasise the spirit of good-bye to "all that".'⁹⁰

Another way that authors engaged with the memory of the war was to discuss aspects of service that they believed had been neglected by the public. Captain Alfred Pollard, author of the obviously heroic *Fire-Eater: Memoirs of a V.C.*, indicated that he wrote his memoir to reclaim the virtues of military service despite the war's many tragedies. Pollard

seemed to enjoy fighting, but acknowledged that his men thought him a bit mad for his bloodlust.⁹¹ He, like Carrington and Dugdale, was frustrated with the way postwar literature was depicting soldiers, but to him there was another side to the coin that was not being depicted in war literature. 'The War is said to have brought out the beastliest instincts in man,' he wrote. 'It certainly brought out the noblest – self-sacrifice, unselfishness, comradeship.'⁹² Though Pollard thrived in the military and exhibited great courage under fire, he knew he was an anomaly and believed that war, in general, was to be avoided for the best of humanity.⁹³ Pollard disliked war in an abstract sense, but found combat to be an adventure, a word also used by Carrington to convey the high spirits and positive morale of soldiers as they endured terrible combat on the western front.

The desire to write of the war's purpose runs against the stereotype that the war generation saw only futility in their experiences. Historian Daniel Todman has written in *The Great War: Myth and Memory* that many veterans saw purpose in their war experiences and that ideas of the war's futility were not universally felt.⁹⁴ The literary record demonstrates this variety of opinions. For memoirists, the impulse to show purposefulness and meaningfulness was strong, and functioned in tandem with their intentions to memorialise comrades. The desire to pass on their insights to the next generation is consistent with Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan's observation that the veteran, or witness to war, is an agent of these memories to the greater society.⁹⁵ For authors in the interwar period, a case can be made that their transmission of war experience to the wider public, whatever its objectives or intentions on the part of the author, created a collective body of works of remembrance that defined the experience of war for the public at large as a war that was hard fought, but ultimately meaningful to its generation.

For some memoirists, writing had a more pragmatic purpose than the complexities of the war's legacy. A war book could convey lessons for the next generation. Former ranker John Gibbons wrote his *Roll On, Next War!* (1935) to tell his son what he needed to know about army life: 'the Next War will come in his time, and I wish to give him a fair chance of deciding for himself whether or not to join the army.'⁹⁶ Gibbons found army life difficult. He wrote to teach his son of the hardships of combat and to give him the benefit of the practical tips he learned in the army. From scrounging to shirking, his book is written as an old soldier's advice

to a new recruit. Similarly, Hugh Bayly's memoir *Triple Challenge* (1935) decried the decline in British manhood since the war, the author asking British women to expect more martial spirit from boys.⁹⁷ Another author concluded his memoir with a call for rearmament in 1923 as a means to promote the 'gospel' of peace by preparing for war. He wrote, 'A weakly armed nation of un-drilled and decadent males cannot with any hope of success preach this gospel.'⁹⁸ As the 1920s turned into the 1930s, these messages become more substantial. In Douie's memoir *The Weary Road*, he hoped, rather modestly, that his book would influence his comrades and future generations alike. He wrote:

My hope is that its publication may induce other soldiers of wider experience and greater literary merit to put on record their memories of the war. The record of our tragic experiences may help our children: we could not save ourselves; we may yet save them.⁹⁹

This tone of sacrificial reminiscence was unmistakably mournful, but it was also hopeful that a future war could be prevented.

Since the war itself, British memoirists have engaged with the public memory of the war, attempting to shape the ways in which the war was being remembered. In the interwar period, memoirists helped to write a new story for readers, that of the war's impact on individuals. They wrote conscious of historical legacy and to contribute their own voices to the war's legacy as it was first being considered. Essential to the memoirist's sense of identity was the personal 'voice' of the author, noted by Paul Edwards to be the true lifeblood of these texts, a voice that has now faded completely from direct memory.¹⁰⁰

The motivations for writing a war memoir were varied and individual, but the desire to record events witnessed and to interpret their meaning for the wider public remained essential. The notion of truth was an important virtue: the authenticity of autobiography something that separated the genre from fiction. By giving the war a human voice, memoirists created a supplemental archive of war recollections for the emerging history of the war in the 1920s and 1930s as that history was written.

Though selective reconstructions, war memoirs were written to convey and preserve a life-changing experience, one written about in a commemorative literary marketplace that allowed veterans' many different voices to be heard. Veterans engaged with the concept of the memory of the war in their books, placing their work within the context of others. Though varied and individual in their interpretations, all memoirists were conscious of the importance of the events they were describing for history. As such, war memoirs remain for historians what they were at the time that they were published: a contested and debatable collection of varying opinions on the most significant event for the war generation.