



## The French infantryman's experience on the Western Front 1914-16: a soldier-novelist's reaction

by Philip Dutton

2017-11-07 09:03:56

*2017 marks the centenary of the publication in English of a remarkable French wartime novel 'one which aimed to 'tell the truth about the war?'*

The scale of losses experienced between 1914 and 1918 by the French Army was truly shocking. In late August 1914 alone, during the *Battle of the Frontiers*, French casualties totalled well over 200,000<sup>[1]</sup>. But French forces rallied, and with Allied help, pushed the German invaders away from Paris during the crucial Battle of the Marne in early September. In the ensuing trench warfare on the Western Front French armies resisted further enemy incursions, and, as opportunity allowed, launched their own attacks designed to regain national territory. This was a process of unremitting toil, loss, and misery not helped by unfortunate tactical and strategic decisions that played into the hands of a well organised enemy. Dismayed by his own personal encounters with these failures a French soldier participant, already an established writer by 1914 and one with definite socialist sympathies, concluded that many of his civilian countrymen failed utterly to appreciate the savage intensity of the fighting and intolerable conditions of the 'front' - '*this catastrophe of flesh and filthiness?*<sup>[2]</sup>' that their soldiers were condemned to inhabit. He aimed to make good this failure by writing a novel that would tell the truth about the war.

Henri Barbusse's powerfully anti-war novel '*Le Feu*' was imaginatively based on his over 16 months' active service on the Western Front in a French Infantry regiment. Written during a period of recovery after illness, his account was severely critical of the conduct of the war and uncompromising in its depiction of the gruesome realities of front line service. It first saw print in serialised form in the monthly literary journal '*L'Oeuvre*' during 1916 and it was published in book form in December of that year. The English translation of the novel, published as '*Under Fire?*', appeared in June 1917. The novel was warmly received in France and its English translation in Great Britain, received many approving notices.

Regarded as an honest '*piece of anti-war propaganda?*', by Cyril Falls, in his classic critical appraisal '*War Books*' (1930), '*Le Feu*' remains in print. A remarkable piece of wartime writing in its own right, literary scholars have identified the work as having exerted a powerful influence on a number of poets and writers during the conflict and, later, on that group of post-war authors, whose of 'trench memoirs' and war-based fictional works, published in the late 1920s, were largely fuelled by a spirit of anger about the appalling nature of the conflict, and disillusion with its consequences. A response typified in its most extreme form by Erich Maria Remarque's '*All Quiet on the Western Front*' (1929). Both *All Quiet* and *Le Feu* sold, and continue to sell, exceedingly well.

Understandably focus has remained on the continuing debate on the cultural impact of Barbusse's novel, notably

as a forerunner and template of the anti-war, realistic school of 'disenchantment'. But in this concentration of purpose, the identity of the original translator ' William Fitzwater Wray - who first made the work accessible to English readers has been lost sight of. This is a pity as Fitzwater Wray was a fascinating character in his own right, and a good and prolific writer, particularly in his own specialist field ' cycling. And it was a cycling experience in wartime France undertaken by Fitzwater Wray in September 1914 that unwittingly helped prepare him for the task of translating Barbusse's contentious novel.

A longer article about Barbusse and his translator is also available: See [The French soldier novelist and the British cycling journalist: some notes on 'Le Feu' by Henri Barbusse, and its first English translator, William Fitzwater Wray.](#)

### **References:**

- *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade*, Henri Barbusse, Paris, 1916
- *Under Fire. The Story of a Squad*, Henri Barbusse, translated by Fitzwater Wray (author of 'Across France in Wartime?'), E P Dutton & Co, New York, 1917
- *Under Fire: the journal of a squad*, Henri Barbusse, translated by W Fitzwater Wray, introduction by Brian Rhys, J M Dent & Sons (Everyman's Library), 1965
- *Under Fire*, Henri Barbusse, translated by Robin Buss, introduction by Jay Winter, Penguin Books, 2003 (Penguin Classics edition 2014)

### **Online:**

'Le Feu' is available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4380> This is the Fitzwater Wray translation

Teaching resource: <http://h-france.net/fffh/classics/teaching-le-feuunder-fire-by-henri-barbusse/>

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[1] 'No fewer than 80,000 French soldiers were killed between 22 and 25 August, *The French Army Between Tradition and Modernity. Weaponry, Tactics and Soldiers, 1914-18*, by Professor Dr Francois Cochet, in *The World War I Companion*, edited by Matthias Strohn, Osprey Publishing, 2013, p.94. An aggregate figure for French war losses of '1,385,300' (killed and missing) for the period 1914-18 is offered by *The World War I Databook?*, John Ellis & Michael Cox, Aurum Press, 2001, p.269

[2] *Under Fire*, Henri Barbusse, translated by W Fitzwater Wray, introduction by Brian Rhys, Dent & Sons, 1965, p.269

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## **Tagore in the time of war 1913-1919**

by Sneha Reddy

2017-02-08 12:10:21

# *Ideas and influence of poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore during the First World War*

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*Marking 100 years of Tagore's lectures, delivered in Japan and USA, published in 1917 under the title 'Nationalism?'*

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'In wartime when the Czar of all Russia [has] lost his throne without a word and Kaiser's crown looks terribly insecure' that I should be drawn into politics does not in the least degree prove that politics of late has developed undreamt of poetical qualities? it only shows that at present in India things have come to such a tangle that even a poet had to be requisitioned for the purpose of a mock fight in a political playground'

*-Rabindranath Tagore, 1917*[\[1\]](#)

When Tagore won the Nobel prize in literature for *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings* in 1913, the first non-European to do so, he was a rage in the West and, then, he was not. His friend Ernest Rhys, writing in 1915 said, 'India greatly appreciated the honour'. As for Tagore, himself overwhelmed by the publicity, he admitted to feeling like his 'shelter' had been taken away (Rhys 1915: xiv). Rabindranath was one of the thirteen children born to Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi, in Kolkata in 1861. He belonged to a prominent family of philosophers and religious reformers that occupied an influential position in Bengal. Although Tagore is best known for his poetry, he was also an accomplished novelist, artist, dramatist, essayist and made prolific music compositions. His work gained international prominence just as the winds of nationalism and mutual distrust swept across the European continent and morphed into a conflict in 1914. The poet saw the oncoming war as an assault on humanity and explored its political and cultural consequences through his writings. European intellectuals and literary figures who witnessed the war's brutality at their shores sought 'insights coming from elsewhere' and for many, Tagore's voice 'fit the need splendidly' (Sen 2011). India's own engagement with the war was complex. The country, then a part of the British Empire, supplied the Allies with thousands of troops and its main political organisation, the Indian National Congress, while being 'overtly supportive of the war?', was also 'willing to protest and exploit its consequences'. This article is a study of the complexity of those circumstances and Tagore's own experience of the war as he moved from being 'readily co-opted' for Anglo-imperial propaganda to becoming an independent force against the war and colonialism. The importance of Tagore lies in the capacity of his poetry and writings to 'anticipate and contribute' to the political changes they 'provoked' (Featherstone 2013: 182). As Nandy has argued, 'Tagore was an insider'. In rejecting Tagore, one risks rejecting an 'important part of the modern consciousness' in India (Nandy 1994: 4).

First World War poetry is said to have some 'classic features' such as: the 'lyric testimony of the broken body?mouth, eyes, the 'gashed' head'set against the abstract rhetoric of honour'. It can be argued that a lack of conformity to the 'British constructions of war memory of the dominant model of the trench lyric' has reduced the space for archipelagic and colonial poetry. There is also a 'neat' alignment of the words with moral agendas which are often bound up in the 'politics of cultural memory' (Das 2013b, 2013: 26). For instance, during the war years in Germany, Tagore's works were advertised with those of novelist Franz Werfel to project their 'humanity and pacifism?', and by 1915 Tagore came to be idolised as the 'poet of peace in the noblest sense of the word' (Kaempchen 2012). In another instance, Tagore's poetry, 'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word??', was found in the pocket book of Wilfred Owen, himself a famous Great War poet.<sup>[2]</sup> In the context of the war, Tagore thought that India's own multicultural past could offer something valuable to both contemporary India and the world. He found many things to say, some very practical... Nevertheless, the 'listening in the West [was] firmly tuned to more other-worldly themes' and as soon as these ideas fell from favour, he found himself marginalised (Tagore et al. 1997: xviii). This explains a part of the puzzle in understanding his forgotten place in Great War memory.

*The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred  
The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash  
of steel and the howling verses of vengeance  
The hungry self of Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its own shameless feeding  
For it has made the world its food*

Above is an excerpt from a poem that Tagore wrote on the last day of the nineteenth century.<sup>[3]</sup> Recalling Tagore's departure from England in 1913, Rhys narrated how 'amid the bustle of the railway platform at Euston station?he spoke with concern of the need for a better understanding between his people and ours' (Rhys 1915: 158). That same year in his book, *Sadhana*, Tagore pointed to the increasing aggression in the West: 'they are ever disciplining themselves to fight Nature and other races; their armaments are getting more and more stupendous every day; their machines, their appliances, their organisations are forever multiplying'. He cautioned about the winds of fury again in a 1914 meeting with Rhys where the major energies, he said, were not constructive as they did not make for the 'world's commonwealth?', and would therefore, by nature, 'come into conflict sooner or later' (Rhys 1915: ix, viii). The day after war broke out, Tagore who was at Shantiniketan in Kolkata at that time, gave a lecture titled 'Ma ma hingsi' that emphasised the necessity of abstaining from violence and the meaninglessness of war (Bhattacharya 2013: 72).

Tagore was aware of the war enthusiasm that pervaded all spheres in the early years. He referred to it in his poem, *The Trumpet*, 'Ah, the evil day! Come fighters, carrying your flags and singer with your songs?! In a 1915 letter to his friend, Robert Bridges, Tagore wrote, 'I know what this war is to you' Please let Mrs. Bridges accept my heartfelt sympathy and reverence [for one] whose son is fighting for the cause of liberty in one of the greatest wars in the history of mankind (Tagore et al. 1997: 172). Tagore's sense of a 'moral' standing was, at this point, clearly with the Allies. In fact, in 1915 Tagore's relationship with British officials in India was closer than with Indian nationalists like Gandhi and it was in June of the same year that he was honoured with knighthood. The reality in India, however, was that the coming of the First World War presented a political opportunity (rather than militarism) and, like most of the educated middle-class, Tagore found himself at a 'fragile point' between a 'residual loyalty to the empire' and a rising 'nationalist consciousness' (Das 2014).<sup>[4]</sup> Take for instance his 1916 decision to decline an invitation to speak in Vancouver as he disagreed with Canada's immigration laws that discriminated against Indians. In another instance that same year, in a *Modern Review* essay, he wrote of his hope that Bengali youth be taken as volunteers in the British Expeditionary Force. His belief was that 'if we could sacrifice our lives'so I thought?in the same cause with the English soldiers, we should at once become real to them, and claim fairness at their hands ever after' (ScoTs; Featherstone 2013: 180).<sup>[5]</sup>

Tagore's idea of nationalism was distinct in that he rarely separated it from internationalism. In a 1917 letter to Sir William Rothenstein, Tagore wrote, 'some critics have taxed me with having misunderstood the meaning of the word 'nation' 'Certainly it is based on the idea of competition, conflict and conquest and not that of cooperation. In human language, there are very few words that have an absolute meaning' (Tagore et al. 1997: 188). Even as his later poems of 1918 were 'relocated in broader currents of anti-imperialist activism' and his own criticism for British colonial rule in India grew more intense, he continued to dissociate his criticism of the Raj from 'any denigration' of British or Western people and culture (Bhattacharya 2013: 71; Featherstone 2013: 181). Das argues that it this mixing up of war, languages and other histories which are locally more charged than the war that stretch our understanding of the term 'First World War poetry' (Das 2013: 27)

In his book, *Nationalism*, which this article commemorates, Tagore bluntly said, 'Nationalism is a great menace'. He viewed the European war of nations as the 'war of retribution'. He felt that the 'time has come, for the sake of the whole outraged world, Europe should fully know in her own person the terrible absurdity of this thing called the Nation'. For him, 'nation' was just another name for an organisation of politics and commerce, and warned that when it 'becomes all powerful at the cost of harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity'. Ideas of nationalism were rife in India and he lamented that 'this abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India' (Tagore 1917: 133, 58, 22, 24). He further declared at the height of the First World War that 'there is only one history ' the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one' (Quayes 2011). Tagore's ideas on nationalism, however, were not well received in Japan or the USA, where crowds had gathered expecting to listen to a sage-like poet from a mystical land. In his 1916 address at Tokyo Imperial University, notwithstanding his great admiration for its culture and history, Tagore warned Japan to check its rising nationalist tendencies and stay true to its spiritual values. Sections of the Japanese elite, in reaction to his pacifist ideas, were quick to offer a scathing critique of Tagore. Meanwhile, the poet gradually began to see nationalism itself as illegitimate. Responses to Tagore from different quarters of the world in this period are noteworthy.<sup>[6]</sup> In a 1917 letter, GRS Mead, a theosophist and close associate of Annie Besant, wrote to Tagore to say that he did not expect 'the poet of Gitanjali to turn political'. In his philosophy, Bhattacharya argues, 'Tagore was far ahead of his times and he ploughed a lonely furrow' (Tagore et al. 1997: 184; Bhattacharya 2013: 72).<sup>[7]</sup>

In 1918, in the light of US involvement in the war, Tagore became keen to go to the US again but his implication in the San-Francisco Hindu-German conspiracy case restricted his entry. Infuriated, Tagore wrote to President Wilson and others but, as the case dragged on, he abandoned his plans and remained in India. In the years that followed, owing to the poor translations of his poetry, the unpopularity of his American lectures attacking nationalism and a changing literary taste during the war, Tagore continued to be marginalised on the world stage. The poet who was received with great adulation during his popular years received such denunciations with 'barely concealed pain' (Tagore et al. 1997: 198-9, 149, xviii). The final curtain, however, came down in 1919 with the *Jalianwalabagh massacre* when General Dyer ordered his soldiers to open fire, killing 379 and wounding 1200 unarmed civilians, and the British imposed martial law in Punjab.<sup>[8]</sup> Tagore, shocked by such colonial excesses, decided to renounce his knighthood. In a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, he wrote, 'the time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings' (Tagore et al. 1997: 223). For the British, this renunciation was symbolic of his now firm anti-colonial stance. Yet, his enduring legacy is in that from his youth until even after the Amritsar tragedy Tagore never gave primacy to politics. Following the end of the war, Tagore would once again return to Europe. To his surprise, he was received with overwhelming warmth in war-torn Germany. He concluded that 'it must be that the nations of the West were looking for some new ideal from the East' (Guha 2012).

In 1921, eight years after he had been awarded the Nobel prize, Tagore gave the customary acceptance speech at the Swedish academy where he laid stress on global cooperation and harmony. In the aftermath of the war, as



former dominions and colonies became nation states, their war contribution was either marginalised or reconfigured while Tagore himself suffered from 'his being made a parochial possession of Bengal' (Das 2013: 26, Guha 2012). In the study of global experiences of the Great War, Tagore's work is valuable not only for his political and social ideas but also as a link between the criticism of war poetry and the broader field of postcolonial studies (Featherstone 2013: 174). In comparing Tagore's popularity within the language group of Bengalis, Jack argues that there is no equivalent, barring perhaps the popularity of Robert Burns in Scotland, a hundred years before. While Tagore may still be seen as a 'purely local phenomenon?', Jack argues that Tagore's message was international (Jack 2011). Although the poet was famous in the West as a spiritualist, the essence of his writings lay in his critical reasoning and in his ideas of the universal man who was free (Sen 2011). In contrast to the western memory of Tagore, he was an artist, philosopher and writer, a well-travelled thinker with progressive ideas, an educationalist, ecologist and critical nationalist. His core ideas- of the need for self-determination and to strengthen the nation from below; the universal man and his commitment to education, first through Shantiniketan and then Viswa-Bharati University- transcended borders. During the war years, Tagore continued to accept invitations to give lectures at universities and public gatherings across the world. While he used these platforms to propagate internationalism and humanism, he directed his earnings towards educational reform initiatives. With Tagore's contributions running into thousands, his political critique during the war was far-reaching. Tagore, like most of his contemporaries of the early twentieth century, witnessed the rise of nationalism in both East and West. He lived through the First World War but he also went on to be a part of the popular struggle for Indian freedom, and he was unique in the ideas he stood for and extraordinary in his abilities to express them. Here, it is valuable to remember that Tagore described his own cultural background as 'a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British?': a complete contrast to those who viewed the world then and the world today as a 'clash of civilisations' (Sen 2011).

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- humanity as long as I live?'. The Indian Express. 2016. Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/national-anthem-flag-in-theatre-rabindranath-tagore-supreme-court-4406145/>
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## NOTES:

[1] In a letter to W. W. Pearson, 25 October 1917 (Tagore et al. 1997: 185-6).

[2] Owen's admiration for Tagore, however, never translated into 'an engagement with his Indian comrades-in-arms' (Das 2013: 25).

[3] The poem '*The Sunset of the Century*' forms the last chapter of his 1917 book, '*Nationalism*' (Tagore 1917:

157).

[4] India's contributions to the war would later contribute to Montagu's 1917 declaration that promised a 'progressive realisation of responsible self-government' as the future aim

[5] In 1915, special legislation in India for Defense of India against sedition in the context of World War I

[6] Even Gandhi famously commented of Tagore that 'the poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation ' his world of ideas' (Ghosal 2016)

[7] Tagore was ahead of his times even in his understanding of women, their discontents and dilemmas, in patriarchal societies (Jack 2011).

[8] The Rowlatt Bill, passed despite opposition from the Indian members of Imperial Agitation from 30 March 1919, led to the declaration of martial law in Punjab on 10 April 1919.

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## **Poppies, Paris and the power of objects**

**by Matt Leonard**

**2015-11-18 13:45:09**

Only a week ago the remembrance poppy was still in full bloom as millions remembered the lives of millions, and a time when the world was at war. The human experience of the Western Front is now confined to that conflict's material culture, yet its horrors remain ingrained in our minds. The continuing oral testimonies of those who experienced the Second War allow us to 'imagine' that conflict too, although it won't be long until those voices are laid to rest in artefacts and the memories of the memories of others. Despite the remembrance poppy being inextricably linked to those lost in the two World Wars, it stands for all who have died in conflict across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both military and civilian. Yet as those great conflagrations fall further into depths of the past, the poppy becomes harder for younger generations to identify with, in turn making it increasingly difficult for them to 'remember' and identify with the realities of war.

Perhaps this is why, according to recent research conducted by the Royal British Legion, 67% of 18-25 year olds questioned did not know when Armistice Day was, and many who did said they would be surfing the net or using social media during the traditional two minutes silence. To combat this, the Legion enlisted the help of celebrities to remind us of why poppies are worn, and when they should be pinned to lapels. The media, and increasingly social media, was then used to promote this endorsement in the hope that 18-25 year olds would follow their idols in sporting the little red flower, the donations for which are put to such good use by the Legion. But are those in their late teens and early twenties that easily influenced by pop groups, reality television stars and athletes? There was a time when this was the case, but social media has changed the dynamics of fame, as well as how we remember. It has also changed the context in which modern warfare is understood ' something brought into sharp focus last Friday on the streets of Paris.

The events of 1914 irreversibly changed the concept of a battlefield. The industrialisation of war meant that it was no longer possible to adequately define these places ' aeroplanes, submarines, long range artillery and the mass produced machine gun created battle zones, as warfare became a more dynamic entity, as ambiguous as the landscapes on which it was fought. Today the battle zones of modern war are still global, yet the world has seemingly become smaller, constricted by the communications revolution, as the conflicts simultaneously seem further away. Newsreels and newspaper headlines no longer communicate events to us first. Today that is the job of Twitter and Facebook, and although 67% of 18-25 year olds may not know when Armistice Day is, they almost certainly know what occurred in Paris last week.



The hashtag #parisattacks was used in 1.2 million tweets during just 15 minutes on Friday night. The news networks were openly using Twitter for their information and it was impossible to scroll through the messages quick enough as thousands of people relayed the unfolding events in real time. Social media is overwhelmingly the preserve of the younger generation, and although many of these individuals may not have been interested in November 11<sup>th</sup> or the poppy, it did not take long for new symbols of remembrance to appear on the airwaves last week. Within hours Jean Jullien's 'Peace for Paris' symbol was being retweeted by thousands, striking a chord with many. Facebook soon followed suit, allowing users to superimpose a Tricolore over their avatar image, enabling a show of solidarity with those in France's capital.

Symbols of memory are contested objects, and just as many discuss the rights and wrongs of wearing a poppy, the appropriate angle of a reverential bow in front of the Cenotaph, and whether or not the little red paper flower still has a place in modern society, so too have these new symbols of remembrance become contested, not over the course of a century, but over the course of a day. On Saturday morning social media was alive with people claiming that the display of an Eiffel Tower peace sign, or a superimposed Tricolore was inappropriate, as it memorialised violent events in Paris at the expense of those in Lebanon and Garissa, Mosul and Aleppo, Homs and Ukraine. The point was valid and echoed the sentiments of Sassoon, McCrae and others, as well as today's incarnation of the Western Front, all of which surround the remembrance poppy in controversy. The desire for lives of the lost in other parts of the world to be heard above the cacophony of gunfire on the boulevards of Paris is understandable, so it is perhaps surprising that the remembrance poppy, or *le Beluet*, has not yet appeared in connection with the Paris attacks. That new symbols are required reflects the way modern warfare has become distanced from those in the West, even as it is increasingly played out closer to home.

That the terrible events in Paris were prioritised over similar attacks elsewhere in the world is a symptom of the Western gaze, aided by the proliferation of social media in the developed world where seemingly everyone has a mobile phone and access to Twitter and Facebook. Should one want to, it is easy to find out about events in Africa or the Middle east, but in an age when the horrors of war are communicated via the fast moving platform of social media, events so far away are quickly forgotten, lost in their seeming ubiquity. So too is the reality that despite the President of France saying his country is now at war, France, and much of the world is already at war, and has been for some time.

1914 and 1915 saw the Battles of the Marne and Mons, poisonous gas unleashed around Ypres, the Battle of Loos, the Battles of the Artois and the disaster at Gallipoli as the world plunged headlong into the Great War. A century later, in 2014 and 2015, the world is still on fire, yet it took a catastrophe in Paris for many to realise. The past two years have seen intense fighting in Ukraine, waged by soldiers wearing no insignia on their uniforms, two passenger planes blown out of the sky, the destruction of large swathes of Syria, gas attacks on civilians, devastating bombings in Africa and the Middle East, the offices of Charlie Hebdo attacked, aid workers beheaded on YouTube, drone attacks, remote assassinations, relentless bombing campaigns on IS strongholds, at least six terror plots foiled in the UK this year alone, and almost as many in France. Arguments have erupted in the last few days as to whether more violence should be applied to those who do not share the West's values, whether suicide bombers should be shot on sight by security forces, and if mass immigration, in large part caused by the continuing world at war, is endangering the lives of those who only experience this ongoing global conflict through social media and nightly news broadcasts.

Warfare since 1914 has created a sensorial No Man's Land, a place where events are distanced from reality by the lack of visceral contact with it. The never-ending casualty lists in the Great War's newspapers, the legion of walking wounded in society, and the dogfights above British streets brought home the horrors of the two World Wars, directly imprinting the sounds and sights on those that witnessed them. Today the delivery methods have changed, desensitising us to the realities of industrial conflict. Another bombing in the Middle East fades into the clutter of online noise and opinions on foreign policy in a manner that the same violence in a European capital cannot. Paris could be London or Madrid or Berlin, whereas many Europeans would not even know

where Garissa is, or how to find Beirut on a map. Events like those of Friday night take place with increasing regularity in far off places, but in the twentieth-first century, unlike in the one that preceded it, the sound of this gunfire is not heard in Western Europe and the blood of the innocent does not stain our streets. Until it is, and it does.

In January of this year 'Je Suis Charlie' became a symbol of remembrance in Europe. Ten months later the Eiffel Tower and the Facebook Tricolore took its place. The next attack, and their will be a next, and a next, and a next, will undoubtedly produce similarly powerful symbols, all of which will be contested. Amongst these new artefacts of remembrance the red paper poppy, along with the blue cornflower, will continue to bloom around November each year as we remember the two major, and countless minor, wars of the last century that dominate our understanding of modern conflict. Yet in reality the type of warfare born on the killing fields of France and Belgium in 1914 has never ended, never left us, and perhaps never will. Over the coming days and weeks many will continue to sport the Tricolore on their Facebook page, or change their Twitter image to Jullien's Eiffel Tower, and as a consequence perhaps next November the 18-25 year olds will stop surfing the net for two minutes, pause and think. They may even pin a poppy to their lapels and remember all who have had their lives destroyed by the continuing existence of industrialised conflict, not just over the last century, but today, yesterday and last week, in a world that is still very much at war.

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## **A Snap-Shot of WWI in 140 Signs - One Year On**

**by Mechthild Herzog**

**2015-03-10 17:56:33**

Battles rage on all over Europe. In Northern France, soldiers build 'living rooms' and 'tea parlours' in trenches, as the front lines cease to move in any direction for weeks at a time. Russian and Austro-Hungarian troops chase each other over the Carpathians. The British navy starts a military move on the Ottoman Empire at the Dardanelles 'being hampered less by the Turkish defence, but rather by bad weather. And in German kitchens, women try to make schnitzel out of potatoes?

Just over a year ago, the project [@RealTimeWW1](#) started to tweet about these kind of historical events and developments related to the Great War of 1914-1918. Masters students in European Contemporary History at the University of Luxembourg made it their task to give an impression of both general changes and personal stories that happened exactly 100 years ago (see more at: <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/teaching/every-day-another-history/>) Currently, the number of followers has climbed to almost 9000, with new people joining every day. However, this success story has not been without its challenges. For example, the database where future tweets are saved and then sent at a determined day and hour, has sometimes incurred a few mistakes which went unnoticed by the supervisory team. In one instance, a student tweeted about how a general, with a seemingly

German name, promised his troops to be in Berlin at Christmas 1914. In actual fact, the general was Russian which lead to a whole new set of connotations and meant that corrections were needed!

There are also a number of temptations associated with the project which those involved have to be mindful of. One of the biggest being the temptation to tweet something only to attract a high numbers of clicks, re-tweets and new followers, positioning the content as second priority. Another temptation that strongly goes against the real-time principle of the project is to explain why a particular event is of key relevance: be it a final battle at one front, the highest number of casualties in the entire war or the last election that happens until the truce of 1918. The main idea behind @RealTimeWW1 is to offer its followers an impression of how people perceived the everyday life of war exactly 100 years ago. Events that are seen as crucial for the further development of the war today may for the people in 1915 just have been another war headline in the newspaper, just another battle that is lost or just some land that is given up but will surely be conquered again soon. Only it won't.

However, although problems can arise ' both technical and content-focused-none of them fundamentally endanger the project. After all, it is and remains an experiment: a work in progress led by students rather than professionals. The project evolves in exciting new ways constantly informed by its contact with the public ' including the dialogues that start with the discussion over a mistake.

This on-going work has led to some tangible outcomes already. The abovementioned database is now able to safely store and send, pictures, which was not possible in the beginning and the number of tweets contributed by the students has risen. The supervisory team has established a daily routine of controlling and filling potential gaps. Thus, not only is there a frequent flow of WW1 news ' the project has also achieved a balanced representation of fronts, countries and groups of people in the stories that are told: a mix of politics, economics and culture, of everyday life at the front and at home, of decision-makers and 'simple folks'.

The interaction with followers is very enriching. A constant exchange with the project's public has developed, though obviously all connected to the war events and developments. People ask for clarification, post additional information, draw lines to today's world, in which some developments seem to be so very similar to the situation 100 years ago e.g. the Ukraine crisis has been mentioned several times and the Cholera epidemic of 1914 has sometimes been compared to the Ebola outbreak.

While this exchange has mostly been with non-academics, there has also been significant interest among the academic community surrounding the project's Digital Humanities background, the pedagogy of teaching with such a format and, the benefits and limitations of publishing on a scientific level in social media with a mere 140 signs. To maintain and increase this exchange is one aim of the coming years ' next to the simple, but ever challenging ambition of continuing to tell the stories of the people living in times of the Great War in real time, only 100 years later.

To listen to a podcast by Mechthild Herzog about the project (with supporting slides), visit:  
<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/bringing-ww1-history-present-twitter>

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# Pen and Sword Pt. IV: Yeats Refuses to Declare

by Nick Milne

2014-10-20 06:29:06

[**N.B.** This is the fourth in a series of posts about the history of British propaganda efforts during the First World War -- [the inaugural post can be read here](#). The main focus of the series will be on the literary side of things, but possibly with sidelights on other related topics as necessary.]

During the course of reading a marvelous new volume just out this year from the Bodleian Library -- [From Downing Street to the Trenches: First-Hand Accounts from the Great War, 1914-1916](#) -- I was thrilled to discover something that sheds another sliver of light upon the matter of the [Authors' Declaration](#) of 1914.

It comes in the form of a letter to the eminent classicist [Sir Gilbert Murray](#) from the influential Irish poet **W.B. Yeats**. I think it is a mark of the direction in which history has unfolded that Yeats should need no contextualizing hyperlink while Murray surely does, but in their time it was Murray who was the titan and Yeats still the rising star. In this letter, we discover that Yeats had been asked by Murray to endorse the *Authors' Declaration* with his signature -- but Yeats refused.

Here is the text of that letter, dated 15 September 1914:

Dear Murray,

No. I am sorry, but No. I long for the defeat of the Germans but your manifesto reads like an extract from the newspapers, and newspapers are liars. What have we novelists, poets, whatever we are, to do with them?

First: I don't know whether England or Germany brought on this war, and you don't. Diplomatic documents published in the White Book deal with matters of form. The question is whether Germany has as England believes been arming for years to wage war on England, or whether as Germany believes, England has surrounded her with hostile alliances waiting their moment to attack, through which she had to force her way at the first likely moment. That knowledge will be kept by secret diplomacy for a good many years to come.

Second: I cannot see who this document is going to influence. It has every sign of its origin 'drawn up

to include as many people as possible' that is to say to be something which nobody will wholeheartedly believe, and which looks all its insincerity. If a manifesto is to move anybody the man who made it must at least believe in it. I would gladly join with you if you would get up a declaration against secret diplomacy when the time comes, or get up a manifesto demanding some responsible investigation of German outrages. The present campaign may result in reprisals that will make this war more shameful than that of the Balkans.

There should be no anonymous charges, and when the war is over the whole question of atrocities by whatever nation committed should be sifted out by the Hague or some other tribunal. It doesn't seem possible to doubt the atrocities in many cases, but one hopes that investigation would prove that great numbers of German commanders and soldiers have behaved with humanity. I gather from stray allusions in the Press that the Germans are carrying on an atrocity campaign not only against the Belgians but against the French and English.

Yours sincerely

WB Yeats.

There is much in this that will already seem familiar to the anti-propagandist reader of the modern age -- the skepticism of newspaper accounts, the condemnation of 'secret diplomacy', the dismissal of the *Declaration's* power on account of its seeming banality. Yeats, in this letter, is very much a man ahead of his time.

Still, it is possible to be too much ahead of one's time. Modern scholarship -- in volumes like John Horne and Alan Kramer's *German Atrocities 1914* (2001), Jeff Lipkes' *Rehearsals* (2007), and Alan Kramer's *Dynamic of Destruction* (2007) -- has shown that the vicious destruction of Belgium was all too real an event, and Yeats would have stood upon firm ground in condemning it if his qualms about the manifesto in question had been less fervent.

This is not a rarity, though. Many at the time were suspicious of claims focused on German atrocities in Belgium, believing them to be likely propaganda inventions. This notion was further cemented in the years following the war, with volumes like Irene Cooper Willis' *England's Holy War* (1928) and Arthur Ponsonby's *Falsehood in War-Time* (1928) insisting that such claims were the fatuous inventions of Allied propagandists. History has proven otherwise, but this only lends further flavour to Yeats' contemporary refusal.

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