



## Eighty miles a day: how a journey through war torn France prepared a cycling journalist for the task of translating Henri Barbusse's epic novel, 'Le Feu'

by Philip Dutton

2017-11-17 14:41:26



The period 1890-1914 witnessed a huge surge in popularity for the use of

the evolving forms of the bicycle. With the arrival of the modern 'safety bicycle' cycling became a craze, and one that was quickly encouraged by the media and clever marketing. Indeed, the growth of cycling, as a leisure activity and as a practical form of transport, may have influenced the British Army's decision to introduce a number of Cyclist Battalions for the Territorial Force created in 1908. Cycling's popularity spawned specialist journals and articles that fed a growing demand for technical information and touring routes. Foremost among the cycling writers of the pre-1914 era was **William Fitzwater Wray (1868-1938)**.<sup>[1]</sup> An enthusiastic cyclist and gifted communicator, Fitzwater Wray fashioned, under the pen-name 'Kuklos?', countless articles and several books, expounding the many benefits bestowed by the cycling experience. He regularly undertook long-distance trips, and visited France 'a country he loved' many times. Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, Wray discovered that his regular cycling-themed articles were now viewed as irrelevant by news editors more concerned to cover the drama of the fighting. Not to be outdone Wray had the idea whereby he, an ordinary civilian, over the age for enlistment,<sup>[2]</sup> might visit the recent crucial actions on the Marne, and chronicle his experiences for publication. By such process he could provide for the press a first-hand account of the state of France, and the morale of its citizens, once again victims of savage invasion. He would do this by means of a bicycle expedition, and approach the battlefields 'indirectly?', from west to east.

Fitzwater Wray's account of his epic journey<sup>[3]</sup> was initially presented as a series of articles in *The Daily News*. Later, these originally heavily censored pieces were given a new lease of life by publishing them collectively. Linked and expanded by the inclusion of selected amusing anecdotes from earlier trips to France, Wray produced a totally new publication 'one tailored for the wider general public but containing much that his

existing and committed cycling readership would enjoy.

Fitzwater Wray's '*Across France in War Time?*', was published by J M Dent & Sons in October 1916 ' during the later stages of the fighting of the Somme. Despite the grim timing of its arrival much of the book remains an amusing read, made so by the author's frequent displays of eccentricity and boyish enthusiasm. In France his Union Jack cycling pennant is, to his intense annoyance, repeatedly wildly misidentified. He is frequently mistaken for a German spy, on account of the unfamiliar cut of his Norfolk jacket, non-standard breeches and the pronounced curve and capacious bowl of his firmly clenched pipe. And his Touring Club of France (cycling club) membership card seemed a far more effective safe conduct his official pass. Though amusing incidents thread their way through the narrative, there is a more serious aspect to his travel log. As well as detailing the effects of war on the French home front ' including food prices and shortages, changes to working hours, curfews, travel restrictions, spy mania and internal security and the plight of refugees ' he witnessed the destruction wrought in the wake of the German invasion. These experiences profoundly affected him, curing him of his idealistic 'internationalism' and convincing him of the awful necessity of a war of outright victory fought to the bitter end

Following the success of '*Across France in War Time*' its publishers, J M Dent & Sons, commissioned Fitzwater Wray in early 1917 to produce an English translation of Henri Barbusse's sensational anti-war novel '*Le Feu*'. Acknowledging Wray as both a highly competent and relatively inexpensive translator, and one whose writing style was well known to them, they acquired an interpreter entirely suited for the role by virtue of his profoundly democratic outlook, sympathy for and knowledge of France, and his experiences as an eye witness of actual scenes of destruction, the consequences of war, in that country.

Though by 1917 he did not share Barbusse's idealistic socialist faith in the near immediate attainability of an internationalist brotherhood of working men, there is ample evidence in '*Across France*' to indicate that Fitzwater Wray was perfectly suited for the translation work. Intelligent, well-read, and a highly competent and confident writer, he shared to the utmost Barbusse's distress at the destruction of the French countryside, towns and villages by modern industrialised warfare. Wray's appreciation of the delights of the natural world proved invaluable in rendering into English Barbusse's ecstatic visions of tortured masses of humanity in the devastated landscapes of oozing battle zones, and depictions of the ever-changing drama of light and skies. As a vastly experienced traveller Wray too could sympathise with the feelings of soldiers exposed to long and exhausting marches in cutting wind, rain, making the best of inadequate shelter, food, impractical clothing and all the physical discomforts of open air life. Wray shared to the full the soldiers love and dependence on tobacco and tobacco's vital counterpart - the reliable match, and the morale-raising virtues of physical warmth, company and good food and drink.

Though criticised in a more recent translation of the novel[4] for his high-flown, too decorous language, and the artificiality of his French soldiers' dialogue, it may be argued that Wray was conscious of and subject to a wartime censorship and as a creature of his time naturally replicated a proven prose style, in a tone that had, to date, perfectly satisfied his contemporary readers. A number of contemporary reviewers were highly complimentary of the literary quality of his translation.

Fitzwater Wray's version of *Le Feu* was superseded in 2003 by a translation by the late Robin Buss,[5] which based on a formidable knowledge of the French language and historical context of the novel, offers the modern reader text more immediately accessible than the version provided by the Fitzwater Wray 'original'. This was perhaps inevitable, but it should not be forgotten that Wray's translation was the one devoured by Siegfried Sassoon[6], who, so beguiled and inspired by its ferocious power, passed on his copy to Wilfred Owen when both were patients at Craiglockhart Hospital in the late summer of 1917. *Under Fire* set Owen "alight as no other war book had done?[7] and notably formed one the selection of works he was reading in that most formative period of his short life, in Scarborough in December 1917.[8]

Despite his fine translation of *Le Feu* and other works by Barbusse<sup>[9]</sup>, Fitzwater Wray's reputation remains, if he is remembered at all, largely that of a specialist writer on cycling and cyclists' matters. An energetic and paradoxical character, he died on the 16 December 1938, whilst undergoing an operation at a London hospital.

A longer article about Fitzwater Wray and Barbusse 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
- *Across France in War Time*, W Fitzwater Wray (?Kuklos?), J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916
- *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
- *Across France in War Time* by W Fitzwater Wray can be found via University of Warwick Digital Collections <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/cycling/id/4012/rec/1>

-----NOTES -----

[1] 'I was (and shall be to the end) a Journalist of the Road, my mission being the service of all who travel on wheels upon the King's Highway, service of both guidance and entertainment.' *Across France in War-Time*, W Fitzwater Wray, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916, p.5. Before his career as journalist took off, Wray had trained and worked as a lithographic artist illustrating newspapers. A draughtsman of some quality, over 30 of his drawings were included in *'Across France in War-Time'*

[2] Over age for enlistment Fitzwater Wray volunteered for and served as a Special Constable throughout the war, see Chapter VIII (*Night Thoughts by an Extra Special Constable*) in *The Kuklos Paper?*, Fitzwater Wray, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1927, pp.57-59.

[3] 'As certified by his cyclometer?', he clocked up 520 miles on his heavy Raleigh 'tourer?', an excellent machine made heavier by his carefully packed panniers and the souvenirs ' including a French 75mm shell case ' he collected on the way. He averaged over 80 miles a day.

[4] Fitzwater Wray's 'high-flown rhetoric' is particularly taken to task by Jay Winter in his Introduction to the Penguin Modern Classic (2016) edition of *Under Fire*, translated by the late Robin Buss, pp.xv-xviii

[5] *Under Fire*, by Henri Barbusse, translated by Robin Buss, with an introduction by Jay Winter, Penguin Books, 2003.

[6]

'Barbusse's French is beyond me, but the translation is good enough to show the truth and greatness of his book?' *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 1983, p.184. Barbusse's prose so impressed Sassoon that he included a moving paragraph from *Le Feu* (in its original French) as an epigraph for his '*Counter Attack and Other Poems*', published by William Heinemann, London, June 1918

[7] Quoted in *Out of Battle. The Poetry of the Great War*, Jon Silkin, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.208

[8] *Le Feu* appears in a list of eighteen 'Books read at Scarborough, Dec 1917'. *Wilfred Owen. Collected Letters*, edited by Harold Owen and John Bell, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.520 (f.n.3)

[9] These are: *Nous Autres* (tales), 1914, translated as *We Others*, Dent, 1918; *Clart* (a novel), 1919, translated as *Light*, Dent, 1919.

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## **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.**

by Philip Dutton

**2017-10-26 14:39:55**

In our absorption with the many Great War centenary commemorations in the UK it is easy to overlook the magnitude of losses experienced between 1914 and 1918 by our principal ally in that conflict, France. In late August 1914 alone, during the Battle of the Frontiers, the French Army incurred total casualties of well over 200,000[1]. But French forces rallied, and with Allied support, held and then pushed the German invaders away from Paris during the crucial Battle of the Marne in early September. In the ensuing trench warfare of the Western Front French armies resisted further enemy incursions, notably at great cost around Verdun throughout 1916, 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 clear socialist sympathies, concluded that many of his countrymen had no proper understanding of the conditions at the 'front?', nature of the fighting and the sufferings endured by the troops. He aimed to correct this deficiency by means of writing a novel that told the truth about the war. In the process the author identified, not only the dire circumstances of trench life, but also the existence of two unbridgeable and mutually uncomprehending worlds. That of the soldiers in the battle-zones, and the other quite separate world of civilians at safe remove from the fighting.

### **Henri Barbusse and 'Le Feu'?**

Henri Barbusse's apocalyptic anti-war novel '*Le Feu*' was creatively based on his over 16 months' active service

on the Western Front in a French Infantry regiment, from August 1914, when aged 41, he enlisted in the ranks. Written during a period of convalescence after illness, and while employed in a 'desk job?', his account, severely critical of the conduct of the war and uncompromising in its depiction of the gruesome realities of front line service, first saw print in serialised form in the monthly literary journal '*L'Oeuvre*' during 1916; 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. Oddly, given the unambiguously anti-war tone of the work it was largely tolerated by wartime censors on both sides of the Channel. The novel was warmly received in France and its English translation in Great Britain, received approving notices and, it appears, encouraged, in minority intellectual circles at least, a small growth in pacifist anti-war sentiment[2].

Regarded as an honest '*piece of anti-war propaganda*', and a not much liked one, 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 [3]. 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.

## Pedal power

The period 1890-1914 witnessed a huge surge in popularity for the use of the evolving forms of the bicycle. With the arrival of the modern all-steel frame 'safety bicycle' cycling became a craze, and one that was quickly encouraged by the media and clever marketing. Indeed, the growth of cycling, as a leisure activity and as a practical form of transport, may have influenced the British Army's decision to introduce a number of Cyclist Battalions for the Territorial Force created in 1908.

Cycling's popularity spawned numerous specialist journals and articles that fed the pedal-powered appetite for technical information and touring routes. Foremost among the cycling writers of the pre-1914 era was William Fitzwater Wray (1868-1938).[4] A committed and enthusiastic cyclist and gifted communicator, Fitzwater Wray' fashioned, under the pen-name '*Kuklos*', countless articles and several books, expounding the therapeutic benefits bestowed by the cycling experience. He regularly undertook prodigious journeys, often along routes, roads and tracks by no means smooth or well signposted, and visited France 'a country he loved and much admired ' many times.

Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, Wray discovered, to his alarm, that his regular cycling-themed articles and newspaper '*Notes*' were now viewed as redundant by editors more concerned to place pieces covering the drama of the fighting. Not to be outdone (and rendered penniless by unemployment) Wray mooted a scheme whereby he, an ordinary civilian, over the age for enlistment, [5] might access the recent crucial

actions on the Marne, and chronicle his experiences for publication and payment. By such process he could provide for the press a first-hand account of the state of France, and the morale of its citizens, once again victims of savage invasion. He would do this by means of a bicycle expedition, and approach the battlefields, in a fashion that Basil Liddell Hart might surely have approved, 'indirectly' from west to east.

## **A cycling journalist in wartime France**

Fitzwater Wray's account of his epic journey<sup>[6]</sup> was initially presented as a series of articles in *The Daily News*. Later, with an experienced journalist's nose for business, he sensed that these originally heavily censored pieces could be given a new lease of life by publishing them collectively. Linked and expanded by the inclusion of selected amusing anecdotes from earlier trips to France, he sought to generate an altogether fresh publication 'one tailored for the wider general public but containing much that his existing and committed cycling readership would enjoy.

The end product, '*Across France in War Time?*', was published by J M Dent & Sons in October 1916 'during the later stages of the fighting of the Somme. Despite the grim timing of its arrival much of the book remains (perhaps deliberately) an amusing read. In some aspects, it may be seen as not far short of a 'ripping yarn?', a view encouraged by the author's frequent displays of eccentricity and boyish enthusiasm. He attached a Union Jack cycling pennant to his handlebars 'to signal his origins and allegiance' but the flag is repeatedly wildly misidentified or not identified at all. He is frequently mistaken for a German spy, and suspected as being an enemy scout on account of the unfamiliar cut of his Norfolk jacket, non-standard breeches and the pronounced curve and capacious bowl of his pipe. And his Touring Club of France (cycling club) membership card seemed a far more effective safe conduct with the authorities than his official pass.

Though amusing incidents thread their way through the narrative, there is a more serious aspect to his travel log. As well as detailing the effects of war on the French home front 'food prices and shortages, changes to licensing and working hours, curfews, travel restrictions, frequency of military convoys, spy mania and internal security, the plight of refugees, the status of the '*poilu*' and, even then, the public veneration of the French 75 field gun' he witnessed at first hand the destruction wrought in the wake of the German invasion. These experiences profoundly affected him, curing him of his idealistic 'internationalism' and convincing him of the awful necessity of a war of outright victory fought to the bitter end. Key to his opposition to any notion of a premature peace was his empathy for France and its people, violated twice within living memory by catastrophic German invasions. And he is at pains to communicate to his English readership all the ignominies, hardship and suffering that invasion and military occupation brings in its wake.

## **Fitzwater Wray and Barbusse**

Having had '*Across France in War Time*' in print in late 1916, the same publishers, J M Dent & Sons commissioned Fitzwater Wray in early 1917 to produce an English translation of Barbusse's '*Le Feu*'. It is likely that Dent saw in Fitzwater Wray both a highly competent and relatively inexpensive translator, and one whose writing style was well known to them. But, as evidenced by the narrative of '*Across France in War Time?*', in Wray they acquired an interpreter, entirely suited for the role by virtue of his sympathy for and knowledge of France, and his experiences as an eye witness of actual scenes of destruction, the devastating physical consequences of war, in that country.

Though by 1917 he did not share Barbusse's idealistic socialist faith in the attainability of an internationalist brotherhood of working men, there is ample evidence in '*Across France*' to indicate that Fitzwater Wray was an

extremely good fit for the translation work. Cultured, immensely well-read, and a highly competent and confident writer, he shared to the utmost Barbusse's distress at the destruction of the French countryside, towns and villages by modern industrialised warfare. Wray's love of the open air and appreciation of the delights of the natural world proved of enormous value in rendering into English Barbusse's ecstatic visions of doomed masses of humanity in the devastated landscapes of oozing battle zones, the grandeur of daybreak and sunset and the ever-changing drama of light and skies.

As a vastly experienced traveller (he called himself a 'vagabond?') Wray too could sympathise with the feelings of soldiers exposed to long and exhausting marches in cutting wind, rain, making the best of inadequate shelter, food, impractical clothing and all the physical discomforts of open air life. His chapter headed '*Of Burdens*' (Chapter XIV), reflects the seasoned wanderer's appreciation of the importance of a judicious selection of kit, and how too heavy a load can exhaust the bearer physically and spiritually. Wray shared to the full the soldiers love and dependence on tobacco in its various forms (and tobacco's vital counterpart 'the good and reliable match), and the morale-raising virtues of warmth, company and good food and drink. Like Barbusse, Fitzwater Wray, despite his upbringing[7], had no trust in organised formal religion 'and saw 'redemption' and moral progress perfectly attainable by the exercise of human reason, justice, and compassion.

Though criticised in a more recent translation of the novel[8] for his high-flown, too decorous language, and the artificiality of his French soldiers' dialogue, it may be argued that Wray was conscious of and subject to a wartime censorship (however lax it may have been applied) and as a creature of his time naturally replicated a proven prose style, in a tone that had, to date, perfectly satisfied his contemporary readers. A number of reviewers were highly complimentary of the literary quality of his translation[9] and it should be noted it was not until 1929 that a specialist publisher was willing to risk putting into print (in a strictly limited edition) the true reality of the obscenity-filled dialogue of the common infantryman.[10] Finally, though impossible to prove, the fact that Barbusse's mother hailed from Yorkshire, (Wray spent much of the early part of his life in the Bradford area) may further have increased his sympathy for *Le Feu's* creator.

## Legacy

Fitzwater Wray's version of *Le Feu* was superseded in 2003 by a translation by the late Robin Buss,[11] which based on a formidable knowledge of the French language and historical context of the novel, offers the modern reader text more immediately accessible than the version provided by the Fitzwater Wray 'original'. This was perhaps inevitable, but it should not be forgotten that Wray's translation was the one devoured by Siegfried Sassoon[12], who, so beguiled and inspired by its ferocious power, passed on his copy of the novel to Wilfred Owen when both were patients at Craiglockhart Hospital in the late summer of 1917. *Under Fire* set Owen "alight as no other war book had done?[13] and notably formed one the selection of works he was reading in that most formative period of his short life, in Scarborough in December 1917.[14]

Despite his fine translation of *Le Feu* and other works by Barbusse[15] Fitzwater Wray's reputation remains, if he is remembered at all, largely that of a specialist writer on cycling and cyclists' matters, and also as a very entertaining public lecturer 'in which he made use of lantern slides created from his excellent collection of 'travel photographs.'[16] An energetic and paradoxical character, he died on the 16 December 1938, whilst undergoing an operation at a London hospital.

### Sources:

- *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade*, Henri Barbusse, Paris, 1916

- *Across France in War Time*, W Fitzwater Wray (?Kuklos?), J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916. Available at:<https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/cycling/id/4012/rec/1>
- *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)
- *Le Feu and the Crisis of Social Realism*, Jonathan King, in *The First World War in Fiction*, edited by Holger Klein, Macmillan Press, 1976, pp.43-52
- *Owen the Poet*, Dominic Hibberd, Macmillan Press, 1986

### Web Sources:

- 'Le Feu' is available online:<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4380>
- *Across France in War Time* by W Fitzwater Wray can be found via University of Warwick Digital Collections <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/cycling/id/4012/rec/1>

### Sites relating to Fitzwater Wray:

- The Gentle Art of Cycling: Kuklos and the Bradford Jackdaw (University of Bradford Special Collections): <https://specialcollectionsbradford.wordpress.com/2015/04/27/the-gentle-art-of-cycling-kuklos-and-the-bradford-jackdaw/>
- William Fitzwater Wray ('Kuklos'). Lantern slides (University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre): <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explore/further/digital/nca/tours/kuklos/>

### ----- FOOTNOTES -----

[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. A total figure for French war losses of '1,385,300' (killed and missing), is offered by *The World War I Databook?*, John Ellis & Michael Cox, Aurum Press, 2001, p.269

[2] 'In June of 1917, the Garsington pacifist circle suggested that Sassoon write something akin to Barbusse's *Under Fire*, but they eventually agreed that a statement of protest'together with a refusal to serve would do just as well.' *The Great War and the Missing Muse: the early writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon?*, Patrick J Quinn, Susquehanna University Press 1994, p.186

[3] The translator's unusual name did not help here. Early on *The Sphere*, 1 March 1919, mangled it into 'W. Fitzgerald Wray?'; and in a footnote to Jonathan King's *Le Feu and the Crisis of Social Realism* (in *The First World War in Fiction*, edited by Holger Klein, Macmillan, 1976) he becomes 'W. Fitzwalter Wray'.

[4] 'I was (and shall be to the end) a Journalist of the Road, my mission being the service of all who travel on wheels upon the King's Highway, service of both guidance and entertainment.' *Across France in War-Time*, W Fitzwater Wray, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916, p.5. Before his career as journalist took off, Wray had



trained and worked as a lithographic artist illustrating newspapers. A draughtsman of some quality, over 30 of his drawings were included in '*Across France in War-Time?*

[5] Over age for enlistment Fitzwater Wray volunteered for and served as a Special Constable throughout the war, see Chapter VIII (*Night Thoughts by an Extra Special Constable*) in *The Kuklos Paper?*, Fitzwater Wray, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1927, pp.57-59.

[6] 'As certified by his cyclometer?', he clocked up 520 miles on his heavy Raleigh 'tourer?', an excellent machine made heavier by his carefully packed panniers and the souvenirs ' including a French 75mm shell case ' he collected on the way. He averaged over 80 miles a day.

[7] The son of a Methodist Minister he abandoned his Christian beliefs whilst at boarding school.

[8] Fitzwater Wray's 'high-flown rhetoric' is particularly taken to task by Jay Winter in his Introduction to the Penguin Modern Classic (2016) edition of *Under Fire*, translated by the late Robin Buss, pp.xv-xviii

[9] 'In *Under Fire?* Henri Barbusse pictures the scenes and incidents of life at the front with the ruthless fidelity of a Zola?He has been fortunate in his translator, and thanks very largely to his literary skill and imagination, the story should enjoy as great a vogue in this country as it has had in France.' *Liverpool Daily Post*, Wed 29 August 1917. 'The Book of the War as War Is. I have recently read a book, wonderfully translated from the French of Henri Barbusse, by a writer who calls himself Fitzwater Wray, which I should like to see circulated everywhere in the humblest homes?but especially in the greatest...'*The Tatler?*, 10 October 1917 (Richard King)

[10] *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Frederic Manning, The Piazza Press, issued by Peter Davies, London, 1929

[11] *Under Fire*, by Henri Barbusse, translated by Robin Buss, with an introduction by Jay Winter, Penguin Books, 2003.

[12] 'Barbusse's French is beyond me, but the translation is good enough to show the truth and greatness of his book?' *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 1983, p.184. Barbusse's prose so impressed Sassoon that he included a moving paragraph from *Le Feu* (in its original French) as an epigraph for his '*Counter Attack and Other Poems?*, published by William Heinemann, London, June 1918

[13] Quoted in *Out of Battle. The Poetry of the Great War*, Jon Silkin, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.208

[14] *Le Feu* appears in a list of eighteen 'Books read at Scarborough, Dec 1917'. *Wilfred Owen. Collected Letters*, edited by Harold Owen and John Bell, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.520 (f.n.3)

[15] These are: *Nous Autres* (tales), 1914, translated as *We Others*, Dent, 1918; *Clart* (a novel), 1919, translated as *Light*, Dent, 1919,

[16] His surviving glass plate slides are held by the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.  
<https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/digital/nca/tours/kuklos/>

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# The Oxford Vigilance Committee Report of November 1916 and fears over declining moral values in the city

by Stephen Barker

2016-04-20 09:27:27

In 1888, an *Oxford Vigilance Committee* was formed to monitor and support the enforcement of the recently passed *Criminal Law Amendment Act* of 1885. The Act made further provision for the *Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other related purposes*. In November 1916, the committee was reformed in response to concerns about falling moral standards. Self-appointed 'women patrols', working in pairs and wearing armbands, patrolled the streets to record and deter acts of immorality, though having no official status or powers of arrest. The committee commissioned a report which ran to four pages and was based partially on the patrols' findings. The Report was divided into four sections- *Facts, Results, Causes and Remedies*-which are discussed in more detail here.

## Facts

A distinction was drawn between those who practised prostitution as a '*...permanent social disease*' and what were described as '*...temporary outbreaks of immorality...*' caused by the unusual conditions created by the war. The latter phenomenon was of greater concern to the committee. A further distinction was drawn between those women of 'bad character' arriving in the city, and serving soldiers' wives who encouraged members of the military into their homes for '*immoral purposes*'. *?Drunkenness and unfaithfulness?* were also considered to be underlying problems.

Interestingly, the report mentions men only in relation to generating demand for prostitution and their need for greater education 'creating the impression that they played a comparatively passive role in matters of morality compared to women. By contrast and implication, women were seen as its main custodians. Of most concern to the committee was the behaviour of young girls:

*?Quite young girls (12-15) loiter about...whose dress and frivolous, not to say impertinent behaviour show that they are deliberately laying themselves out to attract men.?*

The report listed examples of immoral behaviour reported by women patrols. It acknowledged that not all cases were necessarily of an immoral nature, but that there was enough evidence to suggest that:

*'...there is a considerable amount of immorality as well as of foolishness going on among the younger Oxford girls. This is probably the most serious part of the whole problem.?*

## Results

The report described a very small rise in cases of illegitimacy in Oxford and surrounding villages, though it made clear that the degree of illegitimacy was no indication of immorality owing to the prevalence of abortion and 'forced' marriages.

*?Feeble-mindedness?*, though not defined in the report, was judged to result in an increased prevalence of

Venereal Disease, prostitution and immorality. In addition, an examination of 848 wartime marriage and birth certificates was used to indicate that the birth of a first child had *often* (my emphasis) taken place in the first few months of marriage and that the resulting hasty nuptials led only to long unhappy relationships. No figures were given to support these increased incidences however.

## Causes

The report distinguished between *permanent* and *temporary* causes of immorality, though it was particularly with the latter that the committee was concerned. Of these, drinking and prostitution were closely linked. So too were *'new economic freedoms'* enjoyed by women, connected in the minds of the committee with family breakdown. Literature and other entertainments which *'stimulate sexual ideas'* were considered to be damaging. A significant *'temporary'* cause was judged to be *'War Fever'*, defined as:

*'...a state of mind of which everyone is more or less conscious, half-excitement and half melancholy, in which the ordinary interests and standards of life are obscured, and a kind of recklessness drives one to extremes of vice, almost as easily as extremes of virtue.'*

It was alleged that this mood was created by the presence in the city of 2-3,000 soldiers living away from home and the *'normal restrictions in their lives'*. The darkening of the streets of Oxford under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act was also identified as a cause of immorality.

## Remedies

Solutions to the causes of immorality were presented under two headings: *Negative or Curative* and *Positive or Preventative*. The latter were considered to represent the better approach towards a long term solution to immorality.

### *Negative or Curative Remedies*

The report gave a number of suggestions which included:

- the presence of an Assistant Provost Marshal to direct the work of the Military Police
- boosting the powers of women patrols
- an increased use of Special Constables from the Oxford Constabulary
- additional street lighting to expose unsociable activity
- deporting women convicted of immoral acts out of the city
- greater patrolling of parks, rivers and towpaths.

### *Positive or Preventative*

This centred on the provision of counter attractions 'clubs, concerts, dances and refreshment places. Efforts in this direction during 1915 had proved disappointing however' *'They find the streets more attractive...'* It was believed that the only permanent solution lay in moral and educational instruction for both men and women. The report concluded with one final reason for action to be taken in Oxford:

*'It contains a colony of some sixty Indian students who are ready at all times, but particularly just now, to form and disseminate bad impressions of English life, especially with regard to women.'*

American students were also believed to be gaining a poor impression of Oxford. By implication Britons were expected to live up to high standards of behaviour, setting an example to members of the Empire and a youthful and impressionable democracy.

This report demands further interpretation and analysis in terms of the wider context of the study of Britain's social morality during the First World War and more specifically in comparison with analyses of Vigilance Committees, women patrols and social demographics in other parts of the UK.

## **References:**

The report was made available courtesy of The Oxford History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council. It can be viewed as part of the [Oxford at War collection](#).

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# **“Wyndham's War”: One Man's Account of Living in Ruhleben Internment Camp**

**by Derek Richards**

**2014-09-25 17:31:11**

My father, Wyndham Richards, was teaching in an elementary school in Cardiff in July 1914. As soon as the summer term ended, he took a train to Berlin in order to undergo a month's cramming course in German. When war broke out eleven days later, his four weeks turned into a nightmare four years. What he did, and how he survived, is told in the detailed diaries that he kept during his incarceration, firstly in Ruhleben, which was a Trotting Racecourse, then in a Berlin prison, and finally in a Military Camp for troublesome escapers. These diaries, which were found in the family house thirteen years after Wyndham's death in March 1966, have been interpreted and transcribed, and then published on July 24th 2014, exactly 100 years after the originals sortie into Berlin.

## **How the camp came about**

When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4th 1914, all of the British civilians living in Germany were, in the first instance, allowed to remain free as long as they registered each week at a designated Police station. However, on November 6th, everything changed. British civilians residing in Germany were rounded up and interned as an act of retaliation for the British action against German nationals in the U.K. No preparations had been made and the designated destination for the British civilians was a racecourse, with three grandstands and a series of horseboxes. The prisoners were marched in and placed six-to-a-box, until all the boxes were full, and

the haylofts were filled up. There were men of all ages and backgrounds, as no-one had expected war, if it came, to have any effect on the civilian population. There was nothing for the prisoners except straw and a blanket each; the motley crew had to face a bitterly cold winter together.

Yet within days, a football tournament had been arranged and played, and after nine months, the prisoners had so organised themselves that they were able to persuade the German guards to withdraw from the camp, leaving the prisoners to run themselves. Moreover, they had football leagues, cricket leagues, a thriving school, a busy theatre, an orchestra of 70 musicians, an excellent camp magazine, a post office and a parcel post office, a police force - in fact they had a complete community - a British colony in the middle of Berlin.

### **Looking to escape**

But they were not free. Wyndham's diaries show all the frustrations caused by this loss of freedom, together with his own determination to escape. For well over two years, he worked in the Parcel Post Office, which at its peak was handling over 1,000 incoming parcels each day, and he was relentless in his pursuit of knowledge, attending classes in German, French and Spanish on a regular basis. His diaries only give hints about escaping. It was not until April 2014, when a note in his 1919 diary led to the discovery of two articles Wyndham wrote in the local newspaper on his repatriation in November 1918, that it was possible to find out how he got out of the camp. Of course, he later often left the camp regularly as a trustee, but the gentlemanly code of conduct operating at that time prevented any thought of escape arising on those occasions. His adventures after his final escape in October 1917, including his spell in the 'Dark cells' of the stadtvogtei in Berlin and his shocked arrival at Havelberg Military Camp, are all fully described.

### **Camp life**

There are many aspects of life in the camp that are covered in "Wyndham's War". For example:

*?British horse trainers were released because the Kaiser's horses need attention... A dangerous fire that broke out in July 1917 was extinguished by the prisoners while some of the guards did a bit of looting... A Ruhleben branch of the Royal Horticultural Society was set up... The first Christmas saw a production of 'The Messiah' with full orchestra and chorus... The Camp had international footballers and Davis Cup tennis players... Prisoners delivering parcels found some very obliging ladies in Berlin... Some people dropped out of escape plans because they were busy in a play.....?*

The diaries also address fascinating questions such as: How did prisoners get enough food, when Germany was starving? Who were the guards? Why were there so many German-speakers locked up in Ruhleben? How did they achieve such high standards in their schooling, music and theatre? How did many of the Ruhlebenites escape and how did they eventually get home? How did prisoners get any money to spend? and What happened in Germany in November 1918? There are just so many.

The diaries are, almost certainly the only ones of Ruhleben inmates that have been published. There are some unpublished diaries in the Liddle Collection in Leeds University Library, and many discussions have been held with Peter Liddle who has done a remarkable job in collecting memorabilia and recollections of the First World War veterans. Much of Wyndham's text was written in German script and much is actually in German. Some is

unreadable and some unintelligible. But if it has been readable, it has been printed, warts and all.

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## Chasing Lettow-Vorbeck -- A Forgotten Catastrophe?

by Nick Milne

2013-07-31 18:12:32

For those of you who have never read the articles at [Cracked.com](#), I can't say I would heartily recommend the experience. While they're of some value, sometimes, in bringing to popular attention subjects and people that might otherwise languish in obscurity, the quality of the treatment accorded such things is often unserious and always very, very uneven. This is doubly true of their articles on historical matters, and trebly true for military historical ones. The tendency is towards flash and sensation and the "badass" -- all well and good, I guess, but it is not worth the steep cost of nuance that every single article seems so cheerfully to pay.

One article that's been making the rounds for a while is this one -- [Five Soldiers Who Kicked Ass in the Face of Death \(and Logic\)](#). The article has been viewed some 875,000 times.

If you scroll down to the bottom of the first page, you'll see that no. 3 on their list is the German general [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck](#) (1870-1964), a legitimately remarkable character who served with distinction in the German East African campaign of World War One, and largely refused to serve with any distinction at all under the Third Reich. His dislike of Hitler was well-known and cost him much of his reputation in Germany, at the time.

It's the East African Campaign with which we are most concerned, here, and specifically with the hopelessly rosy view of it that the linked article paints. Remember, this has been read over 800,000 times, and likely constitutes the first and only exposure of many of its readers to the person of Lettow-Vorbeck and to the East African Campaign.

The first claim of substance is true enough: Lettow-Vorbeck was ordered by the colonial governor Heinrich Schnee to maintain neutrality in East Africa as far as was possible, and to refrain from prosecuting a campaign there. There were broader military concerns about tying up too many resources in a theatre that would inevitably be a "sideshow" to the war at large, but more than that the civil authorities were worried that war in East Africa would have a serious and negative impact on the local economy. Lettow-Vorbeck defied these orders in a bid to keep the Allied forces there locked down for as long as possible, and over the course of four long years he led

them on a merry chase through jungles, down rivers, up cliffs and into thin air. By the time the war was over, very little of Lettow-Vorbeck's ragtag army remained -- but it had not been defeated. He formally surrendered on November 25th, 1918, waiting only for confirmation of the Armistice to reach him.

That does sound pretty amazing -- so what's the problem?

There are a few things worth noting, here, and a lot could be said in contrast to the article's account of the Battle of Tanga. It makes it sound as though Lettow-Vorbeck's forces triumphed out of some sort of unorthodox brilliance or unusual competence (outnumbered eight to one, and they still won! Wow!), but there was a great deal of luck and folly involved. That might be worth talking about in a later post, but Tanga is only tangential to what I wish to address.

Of the rest of LV's campaign I also have little to say except as a thumbnail sketch. The article doesn't go into much more detail about it than I already provided earlier in the post, apart from pausing to note that he cobbled together artillery out of guns salvaged from a sunken ship. This is admittedly pretty cool. LV and his forces spent the next four years racing around through the jungle, one step ahead of their enemies, pausing only to conduct lightning strikes against their much larger pursuers when and where they were least expected. It does have the air of romance to it, and I completely understand why people are so happy to read about this. As guerrilla campaigns go, it ranks very high on the list of successes.

But it came at a price. A terrible, often unspoken price.

The nature of the terrain over which this war was fought made transport extremely difficult. Trucks were right out, as were boats, planes, any large number of horses or mules -- even airships, though heaven knows they tried. LV's army had no lines of provision, no access to resupply, no home base, and no possibility of evacuation. Attempts to resupply him from the air or by sea were thwarted by a strict British blockade and by Belgian troops holding much of the shoreline. LV and his army were on their own.

Except, of course, that they really weren't.

I mentioned above that transport was difficult, but all of their existing provisions, weapons, tents, medical supplies, tools, and artillery had to be moved around somehow. It had to be carried on human backs -- specifically, on native East African backs. These porters were culled from every village and town that could be found as the armies made their way through the region now comprising Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. Many

went willingly, enticed by the promise of pay and adventure, or in the hopes of currying favour with the colonizers; many were pressed into service, or were functionally left with no choice after their homes were destroyed in the running battles between LV's men and his British, Belgian, Portuguese and South African pursuers (the latter notably under the command of Britain's former Boer War antagonist, Jan Smuts). Those pursuers needed porters too, and rather more of them than LV's dwindling army did; most were formally employed in the Carrier Corps, with its members drawn largely from neighbouring Kenya. In all, it is estimated that between 500,000 and 700,000 East African porters were used between the two armies.

So, what were the consequences of this?

Catastrophe. Black, bloody catastrophe of the most callous sort imaginable.

In the course of conducting his war of dubious necessity -- Lettow-Vorbeck had been ordered to avoid doing this, remember -- the combined German and Allied armies in the East African campaign **worked between 200,000 and 400,000 native porters to death**. They died in unthinkable numbers, killed off by malnutrition, exhaustion, disease, accident, combat, reprisal and even execution for "desertion". Both armies routinely attempted to gain the upper hand by attacking the other's baggage trains, and it was the porters who bore the brunt of these attacks.

Did it end there? Of course it didn't.

Apart from this massive wave of human depletion, one of the effects of having hundreds of thousands of men stamping around through a jungle for four years is that a lot of supplies were consumed. LV and his army had no possibility of resupply, so they only survived by stripping the jungle bare of edible plant and animal life, when they could, and by regularly looting East African villages and towns that they passed. For the Allied armies the situation was somewhat better, given the existence of a supply train, but it was very long and often unreliable. In any event, it is impossible for the multi-annual passage of so many people through a region this small to not have a dramatic impact.

The despoliation undertaken by these armies during their jaunt left the region in a state of famine. The food had all been eaten; rivers and streams were corrupted, wells were drained. Agriculture collapsed in many areas owing to all of the able-bodied men having been carried off as porters, and this absence would also have severe demographic consequences in the generations to come. Cramped conditions in hastily-constructed prison camps for captured porters and Askaris eventually saw [the Spanish flu](#) cut through them like a scythe. Taken all together, this resulted in **the post-war death over the next several years of another estimated 300,000 people** -- this, too, a direct consequence of Lettow-Vorbeck's refusal to stomach the possibility of surrender and the Allied refusal to give up the pursuit.



So, to conclude, yes -- it's all very cool, I guess, but perhaps only up to a point. In the end, the main accomplishment of either army was to ensure that its opposite number accomplished virtually nothing, but in war this is not necessarily an achievement to be lightly dismissed. Lettow-Vorbeck's successes are certainly worthy of recognition -- even of respect -- but they and the campaign of which they were a part should not be divorced from their often unacknowledged human cost.

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