



## 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 Great War and Prehistoric Memory

by Ross Wilson

2016-08-09 09:23:59

We are used to thinking of the First World War as the moment when society was confronted with the new horrors of industrialised warfare. Indeed, the scholarship of the war has focused in recent years on how far the conflict encouraged the development of the 'modern age'.<sup>[i]</sup> New concepts of art, literature, politics and society are regarded as emerging from the war as societies adjusted to the legacy of bereavement and trauma. However, for many observers, the war was a return to a distant past rather than an embrace of an unknown future.

Historians have noted the reference to classical or medieval motifs in wartime writing but to many the conflict was comparable to a prehistoric age where now extinct animals roamed the Earth. By asserting this vision of the ancient past, a war which wrought death on a previously unimaginable scale, was rendered understandable and meaningful. Far from some confrontation with modernity, the war marked a return to the past.

Visions of a prehistoric landscape dominated the reporting of the battlefields in letters, diaries and memoirs. The British war correspondent William Beech Thomas (1868-1957) described the battlefields of the Somme after the 1916 offensive on the Western Front as a scene of 'primeval slime'.<sup>[ii]</sup> The history of the 12th Bermondsey Battalion detailed how the conditions on the Somme created soldiers who 'bore no resemblance to human beings, haggard, sleepless, filthy, like creatures of the primeval slime'.<sup>[iii]</sup> In his memoirs, the British Army veteran Charles Carrington stated how the war had reduced Flanders to a 'primeval marsh'.<sup>[iv]</sup>

In this environment, it was perhaps inevitable that references to dinosaurs begin to appear as a way of explaining both the terror and the excitement that the war induced. As has been noted by scholars such as Santanu Das and Trudi Tate, allusions to dinosaurs were particularly popular in explaining the use of tanks on the battlefields.<sup>[v]</sup>

From their first introduction in 1916 by the British Army, these armoured vehicles were immediately regarded alongside the dinosaurs which had been excavated, studied and displayed in the museums of Europe and North America since the nineteenth century. Just as visitors to exhibitions were enthralled by the sublime sight of such

creatures, this new military technology was regarded on similar lines.

*'...(the tanks) must have recalled the terrors of prehistoric man when dinosaurs and pterodactyls, assailed his primitive cave dwelling.* [\[vi\]](#)'

The American historian Arthur Riggs (1879-1952) wrote of his experiences with the British Army Tank Corps as a journey back through time where he was confronted with the extinct animals of a primeval Earth. In his description of a scene of a collection of tanks, Riggs was moved to comment:

*'...other tanks rested at various angles...all of them terrible, ludicrous, inspiring ' monsters from some prehistoric age who had gallantly come to help their puny masters (Riggs 1917: 102).* [\[vii\]](#)'

Reporters and commentators for newspapers in the United States and Britain in their explanation of the progress of the war on the Western Front in France and Flanders described the tanks of the battlefields through similar references:

*'After some two hours of progress we came, in that devastated district near the front, to an expanse where many monsters were clumsily cavorting like dinosaurs in primeval slime...* [\[viii\]](#)

*'...the return to earth of ichthyosaurs or dinosaurs spouting bullets from their nostrils could not have been more amazing.* [\[ix\]](#)'

The effect that the tank was regarded as having upon the enemy was also asserted in the same manner so the confrontation with modern warfare was rendered into a presumed brutal and savage past:

*'And the effect upon the morale of the enemy was not, indeed, unlike produced if some prehistoric dinosaur suddenly appeared upon the battlefield'.* [\[x\]](#)

The size, ferocity and capabilities of the tanks were all explained by reference to dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals. The advances made through these machines were described as evidence of the power of the military against the enemy and the inevitability of victory. Indeed, Max Pemberton (1863-1950) writing in the popular British magazine, *War Illustrated*, reported to the public that the new mode of waging war harnessed the power of prehistoric animals which would secure success on the battlefields:

*'Huge saurians and steel pterodactyls which eat houses as elephants eat hay'.* [\[xi\]](#)

The 'steel pterodactyls' referred to within this statement indicates the use of this allusion for other new weapons of the war as the aeroplanes of the Royal Flying Corps were represented through this prehistoric association. Prehistoric references to the weapons, conduct and politics of the war can be noted. Indeed, in the account of the 1st Battalion of the Cambridgeshire Regiment, Brigadier-General E. Riddell and Colonel M. C. Clayton stated that despite 'modern weapons' the war was 'still prehistoric in its conduct'. [\[xii\]](#)

The enemy's weapons were also placed in this context but instead of emphasising the terror and force of the army these references asserted the brutality and savagery of the German Army. For example, in the anonymous poem, 'Death of a Zeppelin?', published in the highly popular anthology in Britain, *The Muse in Arms*, the German Empire's airships were described as 'the man-made Dinosaur that haunts the night'. [\[xiii\]](#)

Away from the battlefields, pacifist groups decried the 'dinosaur' mentality of the countries that waged war upon one another and stated that they would follow the animals into extinction.

The ways in which the conflict was regarded as a return to the past not a new era demonstrates how contemporary observers used these allusions to make sense of the anxieties, fears and the excitement of the war. The image of the prehistoric era was evoked to demonstrate the significance of the event. This was a war which was comparable to the great creatures which once dominated the Earth.

Despite the innovations and inventions brought by the war, it was understood not as the advent of the modern age but as comparable to the great ages of prehistory.

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<http://data2.archives.ca/ap/a/a002916-v8.jpg>. Credit: Canada. Dept. of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada.

[i] Fussell, P. (1975), *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Winter, J. (1992), *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: the Great War in European cultural history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[ii] Thomas, W.B. (1917), *With the British on the Somme*, London: Methuen, p.8.

[iii] Aston, J. and Duggan, L.M. (1936) *The History of the 12th (Bermondsey) Battalion East Surrey Regiment*, London: Union Press, p.125.

[iv] Carrington, C. (1965), *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, London: Hutchinson, p.198.

[v] Das, S. (2005), *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press; Tate, T. (1998), *Modernism, History and the First World War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[vi] Anon, (1916a), 'Tanks Proved Their Worth?', *New York Times*, September 17.

[vii] Riggs, A.S. (1917), *With Three Armies On and Behind the Western Front*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, p.102

[viii] Churchill, W. (1918), *A Traveller in War-Time*, New York: The Macmillan Company, p.84.

[ix] Anon, (1916b), 'Secret of Death-Dealing War Autos Closely Guarded by British Officials?', *New York Times*, September 17.

[x] Townsend, R. (1917), 'Tanks' and the 'Hose of Death?', *The World's Work*, 33: 195-207.

[xi] Pemberton, M. (1916), 'The Battle of the Tanks?', *War Illustrated*, October 7: 179, 182.

[xii] Riddell, Brigadier-General E. and Clayton, Colonel M.C., (1934), *The Cambridgeshires, 1914 to 1919*, Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, p.50.

[xiii]

Anon, (1918), *The Muse in Arms*. London: John Murray, p.117.

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# How World War One Changed the Car You Drive Today

by James Allen

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Many things come to mind when discussing World War One ' the stalemate of trench warfare, the horrors of Passchendaele, the poetry of Sassoon and McRae and the massive loss of life on all sides.

It's easy to forget the impact of the young automotive industry during the war, whether it be on the battlefields or the home front. The companies that sell some of today's most popular cars ' Renault, Ford, Citroen, BMW and more ' all took part in the conflict, and not in the ways you might have thought.

In light of the recent centenary of the outbreak of war on 4th August 1914, it's an ideal time to look back on the car firms with the most prominent connections to the First World War.

## Rolls-Royce

As the self-proclaimed maker of the 'best car in the world' in the pre-war years, it was perhaps inevitable that the British military would call upon [Rolls-Royce](#) to provide them with sturdy and dependable motorised transport. As good as the stock Silver Ghost model was ' Rolls-Royce had been producing it for eight years by the outbreak of war ' it did require some beefing up for battlefield life. Armour cladding filled in for the coach-built bodywork on customer cars, and some came with a rotating machine gun turret on the top.

Though used extensively on the Western Front, Rolls-Royce's armoured cars are perhaps most famous for their exploits in the Middle East. The legendary T.E. Lawrence used them extensively in the Arabian campaigns, and famously went on record to say 'a Rolls in the desert is above rubies'.

World War One also played a part in establishing Rolls-Royce as an aero-engine manufacturer. Despite only offering three engines at the time, and even though it was never able to fully keep up with demand, Rolls-Royce's units ended up powering more than half of the aircraft used by the Allies during the war. By the time the Second World War started, its famous Merlin engines would power Spitfires, Hurricanes, Lancaster bombers and countless more aircraft over the skies of Europe and Asia.

## Renault

Of all the car manufacturers to participate in World War One, Renault was by some margin the most active. Like Rolls-Royce, [Renault](#) did initially contribute to the French war effort by supplying cars to the military.

More impressively, every single Renault taxi cab in Paris was temporarily repurposed as a troop transport in 1914, to help counter the German offensive during the First Battle of the Marne.

As important as the commandeered cabbies were, of even more significance to the war was Renault's FT light tank (shown above). Although no-where near as heavily armed or as imposing as the British heavy tanks, their (relative) speed and the sheer quantity of them made this dinky little device a devastatingly effective asset. Renault produced approximately 3,600 of them, and more than half of the tanks used by the Allies during the war were FTs.

Crucially for the firm's future interests, World War One inadvertently gave Renault the tools it needed to create commercial vehicle off-shoots with. Its first tractor, for example, was heavily based on the FT tank. Renault's various commercial vehicle sub-divisions still exist today, although most have now been separated from the car company.

## **Ford**

Here's a fact for you: despite being one of the most powerful and influential pacifists in the world at the time, even Henry Ford couldn't keep his gargantuan car company out of the Great War for long. Almost as soon as war was declared, the tractors and trucks built in [Ford's](#) British factories were soon being produced almost exclusively for the armed forces. Eventually, even Ford's cars were repurposed into suitable warzone surplus ' once converted into a mobile field ambulance for the Red Cross, the almost-omnipresent Ford Model T soon became just as common a sight on the Western Front.

Ford's contribution to the Allied war effort really kicked up a notch when America officially entered the fray in 1917. However, not all of Ford's products proved successful ' the M1918 light tank, for instance, was so basic compared to the Renault FT that the US Tank Corps cancelled the 15,000 unit contract after a mere 15 examples had been shipped to France.

Despite the focus on military vehicle production, Ford's many plants ' in particular, the factory in Manchester's Trafford Park ' were still primarily geared up for car production. As a result, by the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed and the war at an end, a staggering two out of every five cars on UK roads was a Ford, a vast majority of which being Model Ts.

## **Citroen**

In the early 20th century, [Citroen](#) wasn't a name many would have associated with cars. Whilst the eventual founder Andre Citroen had prior experience in the automotive industry, most would have known him at the time for patenting the double-helical gear pattern, or for operating one of France's largest munitions factories during the war.

As early as 1916 Monsieur Citroen realised that once hostilities eventually ended, his cutting-edge production facility in Paris would suddenly have no practical use.

So, believing the best post-war industrial opportunities would be in mass-producing cars, Andre soon set about drawing up the preliminary plans for the quirky French car company we know today.

In 1919, the first Citroen production car rolled out of the Quai de Javel factory, and the rest, they say, is history.

## **BMW**

Like Citroen, [BMW](#) wasn't around in 1914. In fact, the 'Bavarian Motor Works' wouldn't even exist as a car maker until a decade after the war was over. But it was during the conflict when the roots of BMW started to sprout. It all kicked off in late 1917, when internal disputes at the Rapp aero-engine maker resulted in co-founder Karl Rapp being forced to depart the company which bore his name. Upon Rapp's resignation, the firm was instantly reorganised, restructured and renamed into the 'Bayerische Motorenwerke?', or 'BMW'.

Around about this time, the now-famous BMW badge had also been successfully patented. However, whilst many believe the blue-and-white roundel resembles a rotating aeroplane propeller, and is a reminder of the company's roots in the aviation industry, the colour palette wasn't chosen on reminiscent grounds: it's merely a homage to the Bavarian flag.

## **Ways to remember**

There are several ways to find out more about the Great War and the ways it changed the world, but the [Imperial War Museum's First World War centenary project](#) would be our first stop ' it shows events taking place around the UK over the coming months.

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## **The 'technology of power': Record keeping and British labour, 1917-18**

**by Christopher Phillips**

**2014-04-28 17:00:05**

From debates over the extent to which the tank or the aeroplane contributed to the Allied victory, to the introduction of chemical warfare and the prominence of high-explosive artillery shells, the role of technology in the conduct of the First World War has been a significant aspect of the conflict's historiography. Indeed, for many authors the sheer ubiquity of machines of destruction on both sides of the line demonstrate the inherent 'modernity' of the conflict, and offer ample evidence of the manner in which industrialization underpinned the fighting.

However, industrialization wasn't simply restricted to the churning out of 'instruments of death', and the role of technology was by no means limited to that of increasing the amount of firepower available to the troops. Less well known, but equally important to the functionality and effectiveness of the armies of the First World War were a series of inventions and innovations which have passed into general use and - for many decades in fact - have appeared as mundane 'tools' for those in the office. The role of telecommunications in the First World War is currently the focus of a collaborative project between the University of Leeds and the Museum of the History of Science called [Innovating in Combat](#), however the technology which I am concerned with in this post is an

even more mundane item of office equipment than even the humble telephone. Yet, in the context of the labour supply, it was to prove the foundation of an entirely new system of administration and one which, although it would be hyperbole to suggest it was a 'war winner', played a key role in improving the efficiency of the British war effort in the final two years of the conflict.

The Battle of the Somme illustrated to the BEF's senior commanders the importance of manual labour - frequently referred to as 'unskilled' work - to the conduct of operations on the Western Front. Before an offensive could take place many miles of roads were required to be built, railway lines laid, ammunition dumps constructed, water pipes buried alongside numerous other labour-intensive processes. Prior to the Somme, such tasks devolved in the main upon infantry soldiers at 'rest'; an inefficient use of their time (as it reduced the available time for training the volunteers to become better fighting soldiers and left them physically exhausted) and, with the soldiers largely disinterested in the tasks, it led to poor quality work which frequently required substantial improvement at a later date. The Labour Corps, established in January 1917 to coordinate the provision and allocation of unskilled labour across the Western Front, was set up to ensure that the battles of 1917 and beyond would not require the use of infantry on 'non-combatant' duties in such vast numbers again.

By the Armistice, the Labour Corps consisted of some 389,000 men. The numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. Not only did the Corps contain British soldiers too old or infirm for front line duties, but dominion troops, captured Germans and, in increasing numbers as the scale of the war continued to grow, from places as far afield as China, India, Egypt and even Fiji. Each had their own national characteristics - stereotypically recorded in contemporary accounts - their own languages and customs, each requiring different types of supervision to ensure the most effective use of the manpower. The men with the responsibility for discharging that duty were invariably drawn from the same locations, but from a wide range of professions. The Indian Labour Corps, for example, arrived in France with officers drawn from the Indian Army, the Indian civil service, from government offices and even from among the plantations. Some had significant military experience, some had none at all. Others even had little to no experience of commanding bodies of men.

Ascertaining what such men would be capable of and therefore ensuring the right combination of officers and men involved the creation of a 'database' at the Labour Corps' HQ, consisting of a card index generated from recording the particulars of every officer despatched for duty with the Corps. Upon arrival, officers were asked to fill in a form stating their education, their possession of any relevant civil or military qualifications, and their knowledge of any foreign languages. In addition, an interview was conducted with the officers in which they could make personal requests for service within particular units, for example if a close friend or relative was employed by a specific unit, or in order to gain experience in work that could be used as the foundation for a post-war career.

This information - all of which was recorded on standardized forms to simplify the process of cataloguing (as administrators would know exactly where to look on each form for the required information) - was then added to a card index. The cards were constantly updated as new arrivals entered the labour pool and those wounded or selected for other duties were removed. The system gave the Corps' directors an accurate, efficient, centralized record of the available manpower and resources, which could be cross-indexed to allow for the identification of suitable officers for every vacancy within the Corps with arose. The senior officers of the Labour Corps did not have to rely upon memory - or a lengthy 'recruitment' process - to ensure the most suitable pairing of officer to unit, instead the card index allowed for the selection of officers based upon a comprehensive overview of the available talent.

The result was a more intelligent, systematic allocation of staff within the Labour Directorate over the second half of the war, the importance of which was emphasized in the post-war report of the Controller of Labour,

Brigadier-General Edmund Wace:

"The skill of a Labour unit, especially Coloured or PoW Units, depends largely on the skill of its officers and NCOs. The Labour Directorate, by a careful compilation of the technical qualifications of labour officers, were able to do much to give to Labour Companies officers with the best qualifications".

(The National Archives, WO 107/37 Report on the Work of Labour with the BEF during the War, p. 7)

And underpinning the whole process' The humble, ubiquitous (until the advent of computerized databases) card index.

Marketed as a tool for maintaining order within large-scale enterprises, entered into British business in the late nineteenth century having originally been developed (as an offshoot of the library cataloguing systems) as part of the ongoing movement towards 'systematic management'. The BEF during the First World War, therefore, was not just at the forefront when it came to designing and manufacturing new weapons of war. It was also taking advantage of the most modern, contemporary solutions from the industrial world to coordinate, monitor and keep track on the work and whereabouts of the multitude of officers required to ensure the most efficient use of arguably some of its most adaptable and vital resources: the men and women who provided the foundations for the rest of the army.

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## Putting the 'citizens' back into the 'citizen army'

by Christopher Phillips

2014-02-17 19:45:11

Now that the dust appears to have settled, I'd like to revisit Michael Gove and his comments regarding the First World War made at the start of the year. But rather than get into the ins and outs and rights and lefts of the comments made by the Education Secretary, more important is the fact that what Gove said ' and doubtless the manner in which he said it ' triggered off a wave of ripostes, retorts and responses from a whole host of commentators, and based on a wildly varied level of historical research and basic knowledge. Whether you agree or not with Michael Gove, it seems that everyone has an opinion on the First World War. There are two that I would like to pick out just briefly: the first was my colleague Jessica Meyer's response on her excellent [blog](#), which you should all read, based upon in depth exploration of historical documents and illustrating the nuance and complexity of the subject from the point of view of a historian.

The second is none of those things. It was written by the TV critic of the *Guardian*, Stuart Jeffries, as a direct response to Gove's criticisms of *Blackadder*. The [article](#) in question, which received near-universal praise in the reader comments posted below the line, contains one section in particular which bears repeating:

"most of us accept the argument that the carnage of the Somme was in part due to the revisionist historical dictum that our troops were lions led by donkeys ' that the flower of British youth died in the mud of Flanders and the Somme, and in the seas off Jutland, because of leadership issues that make RBS and G4S seem beacons of *managerial competence*."

It's the final part of this sentence which most interested me. The idea, seemingly hard-wired into the popular imagination of the First World War in Britain, is that the war was managed, or directed, or commanded, by an insular, out-of-touch, arrogant, upper-class elite, entirely unfamiliar with the requirements of a modern fighting force and hopelessly incapable of facing up to the implications of industrialised warfare. It was an idea promoted most vociferously by the wartime Prime Minister David Lloyd George in the aftermath of the war ' with the twin aims of promoting his own role as the 'man who won the war?', and to denigrate the senior commanders with whom his relations had, at best, been fractious, and at worst downright poisonous. If we take the comments of Stuart Jeffries as a litmus test, it's fair to say he succeeded.

But what has happened to the debate since the *War Memoirs* in the 1930s has gone even further than Lloyd George intended. The 'lions and donkeys' school of thought, which achieved undoubted superiority in the 1960s, served to effectively reduce the wartime relationship of civilian and military to the binary: the 'donkeys' were the military, the ignorant, insular, stubborn buffoons, barely worthy of the epithet of 'professional' soldiery; the 'lions' were the brave civilians, Kitchener's volunteers and ' after the volunteers had been massacred on the killing fields of the Somme ' the conscripts who suffered at Passchendaele. These civilians were the duped, or, alternatively, the unthinking, unquestioning drones, sent to their deaths in pointless, mindless offensives.

Such an outlook has allowed for two things to happen simultaneously. We have been able to commemorate those men who fought as heroes whilst simultaneously absolving 'the public' of any responsibility for the conduct of the war. It allows us to ignore the difficult question as to why the fighting took on the character that it did. As has been pointed out by John Bourne, if Haig was the unthinking, cavalry-obsessed simpleton that history has portrayed, how on earth did he command an army of two million men, utilising the most thoroughly modern equipment and relying on an all-arms mixture of man, horse and machine - of science, technology, communications alongside brute force' Surely, had Haig been incapable of adaptation, the army he commanded would have remained at least in structure if not in size a remnant of the Victorian army he knew and had spent his entire career in?

My research over the past few years has sought to redress this imbalance, by placing the people who fought the war at the heart of the story, not as mindless, unthinking pawns on a giant chess board controlled by the likes of Haig and Ludendorff, but as men and women who made active choices and whose contributions were not merely reduced to those of 'cannon fodder'. This was not a war fought by an insular, out-of-touch Army, far removed from the society it was employed to fight for ' both geographically and characteristically ' it was in fact a war fought by the British people and utilizing all of the skills required to operate a vast, global economy in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

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