



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^[1]. 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?*'^[2] 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/>

----- NOTES -----

[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

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

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^[6] 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 indentified 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
- *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>

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/explorefurther/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 Franois 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.' *LiverpoolDaily 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/>

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

The Poet's Brother, or 'A death in the family': the experience of mourning and commemoration in the Sassoon family

by Philip Dutton

2017-05-30 09:38:09

Introduction

Almost fifty years after his death[1] Siegfried Sassoon continues to exert a powerful influence on British viewpoints of the history of the Great War. As a chronic post-war '*revenant*' he established, especially via his prose reconstructions of his fictionalised and real self, an unbreakable link with that cataclysmic event. But it was his earlier poetic output as a soldier-participant, variously condemning the failures of politics and religion and highly critical of military incompetence, which has proved particularly influential in spreading a, by now, well received orthodoxy. A view of the conflict as one which was as futile as it was inhumane and disastrous. Anger is naturally accepted as a crucial ingredient informing his 'art?', but relatively little reference has been made to the effect of an intimate personal tragedy which, in part, pre-disposed him to this attitude of rage and protest: the impact of the death, just over 100 years ago, of his younger brother, who saw and fully experienced the reality of 'war' well before Siegfried had ever reached the firing line.

The death

At the beginning of November 1915 an official telegram[2] was received by Mrs Theresa Sassoon at her home, 'Weirleigh

?, near Paddock Wood, in Kent. The contents informed her, in the tersest War Office prose, that the youngest of her three sons had been wounded whilst on active service in Gallipoli. Though clearly the cause for distress, the communication contained a glimmer of hope; the extent of the injuries was not stated. In the absence of precise details Theresa may have conjectured at least the possibility of her damaged son's survival. But any such hopes were dashed a mere two days later. Hard on the heels of the first telegram a second had been despatched, dated 3rd November 1915, which informed Mrs Sassoon that Hamo had died on board the hospital ship '*Kildonan Castle*'. This deeply upsetting message also provided brutal details of the nature of Hamo's injuries: '*gunshot wound, left leg, compound fracture & tibia and fibia.*'[\[3\]](#) Hamo had in fact died on the very day that Theresa had learnt he had been wounded.

Hamo

The youngest of the three Sassoon brothers, Hamo was born on 4 August 1887[\[4\]](#). Educated privately then at Marlborough and Clare College, Cambridge, he developed a flair for mathematics and for all things mechanical, creative and scientific. Inclined at first to architecture in the end he opted for civil engineering as a career and, following his degree, worked first for the family firm of Thornycrofts before journeying to Argentina to build breakwaters and bridges in the area of the River Plate with the engineering and construction firm Messrs Walker & Company. Following the outbreak of war in 1914, like hundreds of other British professionals working abroad, he abandoned his career and returned to England to enlist. He joined the Royal Engineers, and obtained his commission in June 1915. He left for Gallipoli with the 1/1st West Riding Field Company on 17 August and landed on the Peninsula in early October, when the campaign to force the Straits and '*knock Turkey out of the war*' was in a state of disastrous inertia following the failure of the Suvla offensives in August. His active service career was very short. On the night of 28th October, during wiring operations in front of the British positions, Hamo was shot in the leg 'an incident that was recorded starkly in the unit's War Diary: '*Casualties: 2/Lt. H Sassoon wounded; 6 sick.*'[\[5\]](#) Though gravely damaged, Hamo managed to crawl back into a frontline trench. After having his wound dressed he was moved back, first to the Field Ambulance (where his wound was deemed to be very serious) then to a Casualty Clearing Station. He was transferred to the '*Kildonan Castle*' on 1st November, and died on board that vessel following the amputation of his leg; he was buried at sea that same evening.

First reactions

The shock of Hamo's death to Theresa Sassoon was intense and only added to her anxieties about Siegfried who was just about to leave England for service on the Western Front with the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Siegfried himself attempted to resolve his feelings about the loss of his brother via poetry but his subsequent effort, dated 18 December 1915, entitled '*Brothers*' displayed, by all accounts, nothing more than a competence in formally restrained and entirely conventional commemoration. [\[6\]](#)

It was only following Sassoon's experience of active service life in France, in the early part of 1916, and the distressing arbitrary loss, in the normal weekly 'wastage' of trench warfare, of his close friend David Thomas (the '*Dick Tiltwood*' of '*Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*'?[\[7\]](#)), that he determined to allow his accumulated grief a physical outlet in vindictive violence (i.e. 'killing Germans?') and channel his writing towards the poetry of angry protest. The death of 'Tommy' (who died on 19th March 1916) was also a means of re-experiencing and acknowledging the death of Hamo, as a chance encounter, a week later, with a Royal Engineers officer (called Sisson) who knew Hamo well and who shared fond reminiscences about him only compounded Siegfried's misery.[\[8\]](#)

Spiritualism

Meanwhile at home, especially following the return of Hamo's personal effects (see *Appendix*), Theresa, an

isolated figure at the best of times, retreated into a state of morbid introspection and grief. She turned her dead son's room into a shrine and became increasingly drawn to the dubious consolations of Spiritualism, which at the time (and especially after the publication of Sir Arthur Lodge's *'Raymond: or life and death'* in 1916) enjoyed something of a boom as countless numbers of bereft parents sought to make sense of the sudden and painful loss of their loved ones. A loss made more difficult to bear in many instances by the absence of a grave at which to mourn. Theresa's commitment to psychic communication with her dead son deeply depressed Siegfried and indirectly became the cause of a much later, post-war, rift between himself and his fellow ex-Royal Welch Fusilier and war poet friend, Robert Graves. This occurred in late 1929, on the publication of Graves' autobiography, *'Good Bye to All That'*. This notorious work included a remarkable though unattributed description of his stay with Sassoon at 'Weirleigh' during the late summer of 1916 during which Graves claimed to have experienced a particularly uncomfortable and sleepless first night, being several times disturbed by unaccountably diabolic shrieks and loud bumps.^[9] It would appear that he had been allocated a bedroom near Hamo's old room, which had been so carefully preserved by Theresa and fitted out with her son's old kit. Graves's lively description of his temporary accommodation (barely disguised as that of the home of an anonymous *'First Battalion friend'*?) also depicted a mother besotted by grief and clearly obsessed with making contact with the spirit of her dead soldier son. This breach of decorum and caricature of his mother (who by 1929 was fragile and unwell) so upset Siegfried that he confronted Graves's publisher, Jonathan Cape, with a view to getting the offending passages removed; it also was the cause of a falling-out between Sassoon and Graves that lasted many years.^[10] By then of course Siegfried may have forgotten how personally distasteful he found his mother's wartime refuge in spiritualism; certainly his diary entry for 23 January 1917 pulled no punches, as he fixes upon on what he sees as a weakness among many women, including his mother, who try to forget the horrors of war by 'clinging to the dead'.^[11]

Marlborough College and John Bain

Hamo's loss was also felt and acknowledged outside the family ' notably by his old school, Marlborough College, of which he was one of 749^[12] old boys and staff who were killed between 1914 and 1918. After the war a large sum of money was collected to build a Memorial Hall, while during its course a ritual was established to pay individual tributes to the school's war dead by publishing poems celebrating their characters, virtues and sacrifice.^[13] John Bain, former form master of the Army Class was the most prolific author of these.^[14] In the June 1917 edition of *'The Marlburian'* Bain included a poem in memory of Hamo Sassoon.^[15]

Prior to its publication, Siegfried was sent a draft of Bain's tribute and a critical appraisal of the poem was included in his reply (dated 12 May 1917) which now forms part of the Sassoon papers in the IWM's Department of Documents.^[16] It is in this letter, far more than in the conventional lines of his poem *'Brothers?'*, that Siegfried conveyed not only a deeply affectionate character study of his late brother but a far more accessible and humane sense of love and sorrow for the loss of a single life amidst the vast impersonal destructiveness of the Great War.

In his letter he acknowledges that the poem touched him deeply, and comments on how well it captures Hamo's essential nature. He suggests his brother would have liked the idea of being buried at sea, and offers a couple of suggestions for how the poem could be changed to reflect this.

John Bain absorbed these suggestions but the final lines of his poem were definitely his own:

O rest you well, young mountaineer,
Tombed by the lonely, wine-dark sea!

Commemorations to Hamo crop up at odd times in Siegfried's continual prose re-workings of his own life; very

notably a reference to his brother's death comes, entirely out of context, in the first volume of his 'real' autobiography, *The Old Century* (published 1938), when musing on a blissful Norfolk summer holiday in the 1890s, Sassoon ramblingly transports his readers into the future and allows himself an opportunity to express his continuing anger for Hamo's untimely death (and all the injustices of the war) after chancing upon (in 1937) a memorial inscription on the lych-gate at Edington Church, commemorating a soldier 'who went down in the torpedoed Transport Royal Edward in the Aegean Sea, 13th August 1915.'[\[17\]](#). The lych-gate becomes for him yet another portal to the past and thoughts of Hamo being mortally wounded on Gallipoli, stirred by the coincidental reference to drowning in the Aegean, re-awaken all the old anger about *'The donkeys who made the Great War?'*[\[18\]](#)

Resting places

Hamo Sassoon was lost in a campaign little regarded in this country and one seemingly doomed to failure. His quiet exit within the context of a classic military tragedy was in huge contrast to the dramatic upheavals marking the service life of Siegfried. Hamo's death, from which his mother never really recovered, at first contributed to his brother's powerful urge for vengeful action, manifested in displays of foolhardy daring in the trenches, and fuelled the ironic protests of his intimidating verse. Their contrasting lives and war experiences are in a sense mirrored by the physical memorials commemorating their deaths. Siegfried, having trod a complex and often unhappy path to self-acceptance, spiritual reconciliation[\[19\]](#) and personal peace, died, an aged and respected figure, on 1 September 1967. He lies buried, amidst the great and the good, in the quintessentially English churchyard at Mells in Somerset. Dying young, virtually unknown, and unobtrusively buried at sea, Hamo's name, together with those of over 21,000 other combatants with no known grave, is recorded simply on the *Helles Memorial to the Missing*, a gaunt 30 metre-high obelisk, at the windblown southernmost tip of the far off Gallipoli peninsula.

+++++

Postscript

July 2010 marked the dedication of the Spiritualists' first memorial to members that have served in the UK armed forces, which was unveiled at the National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire. Proposed and funded by the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU), it followed a number of unsuccessful attempts to have Spiritualists represented at the Cenotaph and Remembrance Day parade and the SNU's determination to create a lasting memorial to all Spiritualists who have served and continue to serve.[\[20\]](#)

APPENDIX

National Archives file FO 917/1767 includes a list of Hamo's personal effects 'as presented by the Committee of Adjustment Malta, 10 November 1915'. The items (listed as articles 'of sentimental value' and presumably returned, with other items of kit, to his mother) were:

2 pipes; 1 safety razor in case; 2 pocket books; 1 leather case; 1 compass; 1 whistle; 2 leather straps; 2 stars; 3 RE buttons; 1 silver tobacco box; 1 purse containing 4d; 1 cheque book; 1 wrist watch.

SOURCES

Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, catalogue number Documents.1610: letters from Siegfried Sassoon to John Bain, former master at Marlborough College, held by the IWM's,

National Archives document reference: WO 95/4309, War Diary of the 1/1 West Riding Field Company Royal Engineers (later became 455 Field Coy RE), 29th Division, Feb 1915 - Feb 1916

National Archives document reference WO 339/45966, Hamo Sassoon's service papers (includes copies of the 2 telegrams sent to his mother

National Archives document reference FO 917/1767, re. the estate of Hamo Sassoon; includes list of personal effects.

The Marlburian, Vol LII, No.775, 21 June 1917, pp. 89-90

Goodbye to All That, Robert Graves, Jonathan Cape, 1929, pp. 289-90

?*Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918?*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber & Faber, 1983.

?*The Sassoons?*, Stanley Jackson, Heinemann, London, 1968, pp. 133 and 160

?*Siegfried Sassoon. The Making of a War Poet. A biography 1886-1918?*, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Duckworth & Co, 1998

The Great War and the Missing Muse. The Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, Patrick J Quinn, Susquehanna University Press, (Associated University Presses), 1994

?*Siegfried Sassoon and the Art of Autobiography?*, thesis submitted for the Degree of Bachelor of Letters in the University of Oxford by Hilary B Reid, 1970

?*Siegfried Sassoon?*, John Stuart Roberts, Richard Cohen Books, London, 1999.

?*The Old Century and Seven More Years?*, Siegfried Sassoon, Faber & Faber, 1938, pp. 92-93; pp. 125-127; p. 252.

?*Robert Graves ' His Life and Work?*, Robert Seymour Smith, Paladin, 1982.

?*Two Fusiliers: the First World War friendship of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon?*, Martin Taylor (Imperial War Museum Review No7, c.1992)

?*Siegfried Sassoon. The Making of a War Poet. (A Biography 1886-1918?*, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Duckworth, 1998

'*Spiritualists commemorated*', in 'The Legion Magazine', Royal British Legion, September 2010, p.14

FOOTNOTES

[1] 1st September 1967

[2] Copy held by the National Archives, under WO 339/45966

[3]

Copy held by the National Archives under WO 339/45966

[4] Siegfried Sassoon. *The Making of a War Poet. A Biography* (1886-1918), Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Duckworth, 1998, p.38. The birth date, '4 August 1887' is also confirmed by the Marlborough College 'Roll of Honour'. The year of birth given for Hamo's entry in De Ruvigny's 'Roll of Honour' (Part 2, p.269) is '1888'.

[5] WO 95/4309: War Diary of the 1/1 West Riding Field Company Royal Engineers, 29th Division, Feb 1915 - Feb 1916; held by the National Archives

[6] Published in the *Saturday Review* 26 Feb 1916; later re-titled '*To my Brother?*'

[7] *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*, Siegfried Sassoon, Faber & Faber, 1929 illustrated edition, pp287-88

[8] *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber & Faber, 1983, p46

[9] *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves, Jonathan Cape, 1929, pp. 289-90

[10] *The Great War and the Missing Muse?*, Patrick J Quinn, Susquehanna University Press, 1994, pp 25-6

[11] *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, op cit., p. 125 Digital image at <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09852-00001-00008/66>

[12] <http://archive.marlboroughcollege.org/>

[13] Letter to author from Dr T E Rogers, Archivist, Marlborough College, 23 January 2004. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Dr Rogers for his generous assistance.

[14] John Bain, scholar of Winchester and New College Oxford; taught at Marlborough from 1879-1913, with a short absence from 1883-6. He died in 1929. (Letter from Dr T E Rogers, *ibid*)

[15] 'The Marlburian?', Vol LII, No. 775, 21 June 1917, pp. 89-90

[16] Letters from SS to John Bain, former master at Marlborough College, held by the IWM's Department of Documents, Catalogue number: Documents.1610

[17] *The Old Century and seven more years?*, Siegfried Sassoon, Faber and Faber, 1938, pp. 125-126

[18] *Ibid*, p.127

[19] He was received into the Catholic Church at Downside Abbey on 14 August 1957

[20] 'The Legion?', journal of the Royal British Legion, September 2010, p.14

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

C R M F Cruttwell (1887-1941) - Oxford historian. Participant and

chronicler of the Great War

by Philip Dutton

2017-04-05 15:43:33

Charles Robert Mowbray Fraser Cruttwell was an Oxford historian and academic. During the war, he served in Belgium and France until he was declared unfit for general service, and recommended for light duties at home. After the war, he returned to academic life and published a number of books, most notably ['A History of the Great War 1914-1918'](#). This post offers an introduction to Cruttwell and his work.

In the cold spring of 1915, not long after the arrival of the men of 1/4th Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in France[1], their presence in that country was, somewhat surprisingly (at least to English ears), aggressively questioned by a local priest. In place of the more customary speech of welcome the cleric regaled its astonished Officers with a diatribe in which he loudly declared that the war in which they were now involved was primarily the consequence of the selfish, economically motivated, British desire to defeat Germany and 'take over' her markets. Understandably nonplussed by this partial version of events (and one that ignored the many selfless attitudes that had motivated the 'Terriers' to serve overseas) a Second Lieutenant (in civil life a history lecturer at Oxford University) was summoned to refute the disaffected cleric. Although this confrontation was not recorded in the Battalion War Diary (and understandably so) we have it on good authority the Lieutenant emphatically rebutted the priest's argument, and countered powerfully with the thesis that 'the French Army had not been defeated but had 'run away' and that we had arrived to bolster its morale.'^[2] The words were spoken by Lt C R M F Cruttwell and the context represented a conjunction of his roles as participant in and interpreter of an historical event that would claim his attention for the rest of his life.

Cruttwell ' a short biography

The son of the former headmaster of Malvern, Canon C T Cruttwell and his wife Annie Maud (daughter of the Conservative MP Sir John Mowbray), **Charles Robert Mowbray Fraser Cruttwell** was born on 23 May 1887. He attended Rugby School and was a contemporary of Geoffrey Keynes and Rupert Brooke, the future poet, whom he knew.[3] In 1906 he won a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford where he worked diligently and with great success 'winning first classes in Classical Moderations and Greats and a First in History. In November 1911 he became a Fellow of All Souls and took up History tutorial work at Hertford College. Following the outbreak of war he was gazetted, as a rather elderly subaltern (aged 27), to the 1/4th Battalion, The Royal Berkshire Regiment, a Territorial Force battalion in which his brother, George, was already serving as an officer (a factor very probably influencing his choice of unit). He served in France and Flanders from 31st March 1915, with notable stays early on in or near Ploegsteert Wood and, later, from July 1915, further south, in the Somme area, near Hbuterne, in trenches formerly occupied by the French - opposite the German-held fortified village of Gommecourt. His trench service (during which he received various mentions in the Battalion War Diary for patrols in No Man's Land) resulted in him developing myalgia and exacerbating his constitutional pre-disposition to rheumatics. On leave in early 1916, and following a medical board in late January, he was declared unfit for general service, and recommended for light duties at home. Between January 1916 and August 1917 (during which period his condition fluctuated) he was regularly re-assessed by medical boards; he eventually (August 1917) took up an instructor's role with 4th Officer Cadet Battalion, Oxford. His intellectual gifts were not ignored and in April 1918 he was sent to assist H W V Temperley in the Intelligence Department of the War Office (M.I.E.2), where he remained until demobilization.[4] He returned to Hertford College in 1919 and the following year was appointed Dean. In these immediate post-war years he helped in the production of the '*History of the Peace Conference*' (writing the section on Alsace-Lorraine) and he also wrote an excellent short war history of his battalion, '*The War Service of the 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment (T.F.)*' published in

1922.[5]

His history teaching liberally embraced historical geography and political science, and although possessing a gruff exterior and an ex-soldier's capacity for picturesque language, was more admired and respected by his students than his most famous pupil's - Evelyn Waugh - infamous caricature appreciations of him might convey. [6] He also became deeply and conscientiously involved with the administration of the University. He was appointed Principal of Hertford in 1930. But almost certainly the physical strains and emotional stresses of his war service took their insidious toll. Over time, aspects of his character and behaviour - displays of irritability, eccentricity and impatience - suggest that the long shadow of the trenches increasingly darkened his mood, especially so during the late 1930s. It is not impossible that he may have experienced some sort of delayed reaction to his wartime experiences, at the very least a form of nervous exhaustion ' a variant of what we now might call 'PTS' disorder ' a condition that is more willingly and openly acknowledged today. Ill-health forced him to resign as the Head of his College in 1939 and the tragic (and personally distressing) last months of his life were spent in the recently opened Burden Neurological Institute, Stapleton, near Bristol[7]. He died in obscurity at the age of 53, on 15 March 1941. Although a likely long-distance casualty of the conflict, many positive aspects of his communal war experiences on the Western Front informed the writing of his epic history, notably his breadth of vision and sympathy for ordinary soldiers and citizens caught up in its tumultuous events.

Cruttwell's 'History of the Great War 1914-1918' (OUP, 1934)

Writing in 1972 about the origins of his own single volume history of the First World War, '*Great Britain and the War of 1914-1918?*', **Sir Llewellyn Woodward** made clear his motivation: '*I have written it because, with one exception, the war histories which I have read do not answer the questions I would put to them. The exception is C R M F Cruttwell's 'History of the Great War?', written over thirty years ago, and covering all the battle-fronts?I think it the most profound study of any war in modern times.?*

On its publication in 1934 positive endorsements for Cruttwell's history came thick and fast - notably from the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Spectator* and the '*Manchester Guardian*'. All were agreed on the work's essential fine qualities: its excellent and clearly crafted concision (655 pages including appendices and index for the 1936 second edition) and supreme readability, a consequence of the writer's mastery of his sources and literary skill. But not all authorities were unanimous in their praise ' the review of the Royal United Services Institution was notably critical, and while admitting the history was 'entertaining?', more loudly proclaimed its dissatisfactions centring on: the view that the author had not consulted an adequate number of authoritative foreign sources; that the account of the Battle of Jutland was 'tendentious' and, perhaps more damningly, the writing was considered of poor quality. In contrast, the *Naval Review* ' although critical of Cruttwell's overall underplaying of the importance of the war at sea, regarded his account of the Battle of Jutland as admirable: '*His descriptions of actual fighting at sea are complete, skilful and readable. In particular, his description of the Battle of Jutland is well-balanced and impartial??*'[8] and fulsome praise was heaped on Cruttwell's descriptive powers, and his brilliant summary character analyses of the War's principal military and political leaders. In the final paragraph the naval reviewer commended the work '*for those who wish to gain a clear but not too detailed idea of the general course of the war, and of the relations of the different parts of it to one another, the book should be invaluable*'. [9]

From the outset Cruttwell never claimed that his history was fully comprehensive ' no single volume could ever be so ' and in his Preface he gracefully acknowledged its omissions: '*it deals neither with its causes remote or immediate, nor with the so-called settlement which followed?no account is given of the campaigns in Africa, of the civil war and foreign interventions in Russia after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, or of the Irish rebellion, while the internal history of the belligerent countries is very summarily and imperfectly sketched*'. [10] Nor is it flawless [11]. At times, the tone is high-handed and sardonic. Notably, his depictions of certain national

stereotypes fall short of civility. His portrait of the Rumanian officer class in Bucharest in 1916, when that country entered the war in support of the Allies, was subject to a particularly ironic, if at times amusing, scrutiny. But in its claim to present " *the general reader with an accurate, intelligible and interesting account of the greatest conflict between civilized states?*" [12] Cruttwell was, overall, entirely successful.

This success was based on the descriptive power of his narratives; his lively critical awareness and the insights derived from his own personal experiences of war.

Cruttwell's narratives are lucid, dramatic and memorable. If his unit history was a close-up record of a Territorial Battalion at war displaying all the limited horizons of its trench-bound context, his 'Great War' history was stupendous in the breadth and range of its vision, and sometime reads like an epic novel. His appreciation of geography and topography served him well, positively informing his comments and analysis of strategic decisions and the actual fighting. The topographical contextualisation, for example, of the Gallipoli campaign and the battles for Verdun are supremely well done. [13]. His language is engagingly literary - picturesque or even poetic - as enemies 'prowl?', 'lurk' and 'scowl?'; or disturbingly evocative, e.g. in his appreciation of German motives at Verdun: '*A break-through was not necessary; if the battle were kept alive with limited resources, the French forces would bleed to death*'. [14] The text is liberally sprinkled with Classical and pre-20th century quotations, historical references and comparisons so as to illuminate fully the range of human fallibilities exposed by the press of events. It is also enlivened with subjective, summary character studies (pen-pictures) of the principal political and military participants. These are, variously, entertaining and insightful and at times humorous or moving. Haig is granted a respectful paragraph of twenty lines (168 words) in which criticism, sympathy and admiration are expressed in equal measure; his final judgement reading: *??Haig grew with disappointment and disaster, until he stood out in the last four months of the war as a very great general.?* [15] Evocative descriptions also enhance discussions of grand strategy, diplomacy, perspectives of the rival global powers and help make sense of the complexities of ever-changing international relations and peace negotiations.

Analysis and critical awareness

Although highly praised for its descriptive qualities Cruttwell's history includes analysis and, where appropriate and evidential, striking criticisms; structural and procedural failures were ruthlessly delineated. Many of these may have a modern ring for the contemporary reader. In his discussion of the Battle of Loos (September 1915) he highlights failures in British Army Staff methods and preparations: '*The Higher Staffs studied maps and not the ground; they could not believe, sitting in their studies or workshops that the mass of destruction which they had assembled would prove less annihilating in practice than in theory.*' [16] Command and control failures at sea and on land are logged, including the delicate problem as when 'to cut losses'. Citing events at Loos, his comments were uncompromising: '*The battle should now have stopped dead. Nothing, however, in warfare demands more moral courage on the part of a commander than cutting his losses. Time after time, British, French and German generals fell through lack of will to stop, into the protracted futility of a wasting struggle.*' [17] Neither does he hold back in connection with the bloody failure on the first day of the Battle of the Somme (1 July 1916), succinctly identifying three key reasons for the disaster: the failure of the British bombardment; the ill-conceived hour of assault; and '*the simultaneity of the attack in practically equal strength on the whole front?*' [18] and, concurring with the conclusions of the Official History, '*that the methods prescribed by the directing staff made any considerable success impossible.*' [19] His comments on the military debacle in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) in connection with General Sir John Nixon's reckless late summer 1915 advance towards Baghdad, spearheaded by the flamboyant Charles Townshend, carry a poignancy born of more recent events in that region. Quoting Oliver Cromwell's maxim '*No man goes so far as he who knows not whither he is going?*' [20], he sadly concludes '*The advance on Baghdad is perhaps the most remarkable example of an enormous military risk being taken, after full deliberation, for no definite or concrete military advantage.*' [21]

The personal element

Cruttwell experienced the war intimately, at the 'sharp end?', and his own personal trials filter through into his history in a clearly expressed compassion for the ordinary soldier and profound sympathy for civilian participants. His knowledge and experience of front line conditions gives authenticity and flavour to his accounts of conditions, operations and battles. Familiarity with the fighting zone allows his accounts of tactics, weaponry and battlefield innovation to be understood even by the non specialist[22]. His sympathy for the common man bearing arms is variously expressed in the text and as footnotes: the personal consequences of concentrated artillery bombardment was communicated by his description of Russian infantry in the wake of the German breakthrough in Galicia in May 1915: '*masses of ragged, demented figures ran out to meet them with uplifted arms, their faces distorted into the horrible and staring vacuity of shell-shock.*'[23] He also brings home the full horror of the individual and random casualties incurred day to day by trench garrisons: '*The extent to which a human body can be mangled by the splinters of a bomb or shell, without being deprived of consciousness, must be seen to be believed.*'[24] The plight of civilians in wartime was not ignored: describing the flight of the Serbian Army towards Albania in November 1915, he relates: '*In their train followed a great concourse of the population, escaping the savagery of the Bulgars and Austrians. The words 'Pray that your flight be not in winter' can never have been more appropriate.*'[25] Cruttwell also generously acknowledged the countless displays of courage, both at sea and on land, displayed by the enemy. If we are in any doubt about the sincerity directed to the 'ordinary participants' (and surely reflecting his own experiences) Cruttwell reminds us in his 'Epilogue?': '*Yet while the war could not be won by the fighting men alone, nothing in history is more astonishing than the endurance, patience, and good humour so generally shown by the great masses of hastily trained civilians from all the great countries engaged.*' He ends his history in true scholarly style and also hopefully ' despite Hitler's recent accession to power in Germany - with a quote from Sophocles: '*Many are the marvels?and nothing is more marvellous than man.*'[26]

Postscript

C R M F Cruttwell and Evelyn Waugh

On the morning of Thursday, 15th December 1921[27] a precocious and sophisticated public schoolboy received two important letters from the University of Oxford; one announced that he had won the 100 Hertford College Scholarship; the other, from that College's Vice-Principal, congratulated him on this achievement. The recipient of the letters was, the future novelist, Evelyn Waugh, and the writer of the congratulatory message was the historian and Dean of Hertford, C R M F Cruttwell, who, with a sharp eye for talent, praised Waugh's English style as employed in his recent entrance examination papers.

This was the first contact between two characters, who, when required to interact clearly did not 'get on?; in fact their short relationship (1922-1924) was characterised by an incurable '*mutual dislike*'. [28] As far as it is possible to attribute attitudes to the complex developing personality represented by the youthful Waugh, it would seem that Cruttwell, already a distinguished historian and his tutor at Hertford, had merely the misfortune to have participated in the recent war, and thus fell foul of Waugh's youthful and faddish obsession with what he perceived to be that event's unimportance and folly. Too young to have served, Waugh missed the war (in which his older brother, Alec, had done relatively 'well?)[29] and, too self-consciously urbane to express guilt or regret, resolutely cultivated an enduring attitude of denigration towards it and those who he regarded as its mud-stained survivors. In the process he fuelled an unpleasant and continuing persecution of his tutor which is easy

to exaggerate but served neither of them well.

Systematically defamed during his pupil's time at Oxford, the name '*Cruttwell*' was subsequently exploited by Waugh, the successful young novelist, being applied to a number of his more unpleasant fictional characters; it even mutated into a grotesque synonym for eccentric incompetence and deviousness. Waugh's mischievousness might, in the light of his prodigious talent, be forgiven but surely it is time to redress the balance and look again at Cruttwell the man, the soldier and academic historian with a view to rehabilitating his name from distorting fictions and accord him due respect as the author of the magisterial '*A History of the Great War*'.

+++++

Sources:

- National Archives, Document reference WO 374/17060 (War Office: Officers' Services, First World War, personal files (alphabetical). CRUTTWELL, Capt C R M F.)
- '*Personal Recollections of G.H.W. Cruttwell pre 1914 - 1916. Dedicated to the 4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment.*' Reference C22, copy held by, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds LS2 9JT
- '*The War Service of the 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment*', Charles Robert Mowbray Fraser Cruttwell, Valde Books, 2009 (Originally published in the '*Berkshire Chronicle*' in 1920 and then by Basil Blackwell, Oxford in 1922)
- '*The Royal Berkshire Regiment in the First World War, 1st/4th Battalion (History and War Diary)*', The Rifles Wardrobe and Museum Trust, 2011
- '*Naval Review*, May 1935, VOL. XXIII. No. 2., pp 398-401 (critical review by 'H.G.T.' of Cruttwell's history)
- '*Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 80, 1935, pp 456-7
- '*Great Britain and the War of 1914-1918*', Sir Llewellyn Woodward, Methuen & Co, 1972, p.xi
- '*The Myriad Faces of War?*', Trevor Wilson, Polity Press, 1986
- '*War Books: An Annotated Bibliography of Books about the Great War?*', Cyril Falls, Greenhill Books, 1989. (Originally published in 1930)
- '*Early Historical Responses to the Great War: Fortescue, Conan Doyle and Buchan?*', by Keith Grieves (in '*The First World War and British Military History*', edited by Brian Bond, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp.15-39
- '*The Real War': Liddell Hart, Cruttwell, and Falls*', by Hew Strachan (in '*The First World War and British Military History*', edited by Brian Bond, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp.41-67). A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Sir Hew Strachan's excellent essay.
- '*Testament of Youth*', Vera Brittain, Fontana Paperbacks, 1979, pp.486-488. ('*Testament of Youth*' was originally published by Victor Gollancz Ltd in 1933)
- '*Best of Friends: a life of enriching friendships?*', Alan Thornhill, Marshall Pickering, 1986, pp.75-86
- '*Sketches from the history of psychiatry. The Burdens-pioneers in mental health?*
- J Jangar, Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist, Stoke Park Hospital, Stapleton in the '*Psychiatric Bulletin* (1989), 13, pp.52-55.

Online:

- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, "Cruttwell, Charles Robert Mowbray Fraser (1887-1941), entry by Geoffrey Ellis <http://www.oxforddnb.com/articles/32/32655-article.html> Accessed 23-Mar-2011 (requires subscription)
- The War Service of the 1/4 Royal Berkshire Regiment (T.F.), by Charles Robert Mowbray Fraser Cruttwell <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22028/22028-h.htm>
- <http://oldshirburnian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WAUGH-Alexander-Raban.pdf> Accessed 27-Jan-2016

NOTES:

- [1] The unit, a Territorial Force Battalion had sailed from Folkestone on the evening of 30 March and landed at Boulogne in the early morning of the 31st.
- [2] 'Personal Recollections of G H W Cruttwell pre 1914-1916. Dedicated to the 4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment'. The theme of Britain as 'perfidious Albion?', in the war for its own ends, was widespread in France early on; Jerome K Jerome, serving in a volunteer ambulance unit also remarks on it: 'The general opinion of the average poilu, he recorded, was that 'the English had started the war to capture German trade, and had dragged France into it'. There was no persuading them of their mistake'. (Quoted in 'The Guardian?', editorial, 4 August 2014, p.24)
- [3] Cruttwell is mentioned in letter, written by Brooke to Geoffrey Keynes, dated 3 Feb 1906: 'Last week I dined with H.A.J. & sat next to Cruttwell. We conversed?amicably about A. Beardsley, whom Crutters disliked. I said that I adored Beardsley because he caricatured Humanity, & I was amused by caricatures of Humanity. As I spoke I beamed on him, but he did not grasp the insult: he was merely impressed, & bit his nails in wonder and perplexity'. *The Letters of Rupert Brooke?*, chosen and edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Faber and Faber, 1967, p.39.
- [4] He officially relinquished his commission '*on account of ill health contracted on active service [on] 17th April 1919*' and retained the rank of Captain (see Service Record medical notes held by the National Archives, ref WO 374/17060. These papers do not include any reference to Cruttwell ever being wounded during his period of active service)
- [5] Still available today as a reprint '*The War Service of the 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment (T.F.)?*, by C R M F Cruttwell, Valde Books, 2009' -and online '<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22028/22028-h/22028-h.htm>
- [6] See *Postscript*; also, Vera Brittain's account of Cruttwell as lecturer and tutor in '*Testament of Youth?*', Fontana Paperbacks, 1979, pp. 486-488
- [7] The Burden Neurological Institute is notable for the first use of the new psychosurgical 'therapies' 'leucotomies and ECT (Electro Convulsive Therapy) - in Great Britain for the treatment of mental illness.
- [8] Naval Review May 1935, VOL. XXIII. No. 2, p.397
- [9] Ibid p.401
- [10] 'A History of the Great War?', C R M F Cruttwell, Oxford, 1936 (2nd edition), pp.vii-viii.
- [11] For example, on page 275 of his history Cruttwell incorrectly names Grandcourt as being captured by the Royal Naval Division (RND) on 14 November 1916 - during the Battle of the Ancre; the actual village captured by the RND, and scene of much heroic fighting, was Beaucourt. Again a proof reading error results in an incorrect chapter reference being quoted for the Somme offensive of 1916, see Index p.640.

- [12] A History of the Great War?, C R M F Cruttwell, Oxford, 1936 (2nd edition), p.vii
- [13] In this respect it is of note that Cruttwell campaigned vigorously (and ultimately successfully) for an honours school of Geography to be established at Oxford.
- [14] A History of the Great War?, C R M F Cruttwell, Oxford, 1936 (2nd edition), p.240. The imagery of a France being bled to death at Verdun was vividly employed in a 1916 German satirical medal by Walther Eberbach, 'Verdundie Weltblutpumpe'. See IWM MED 733: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/8421>
- [15] Ibid. p.169.
- [16] Ibid. p.164
- [17] Ibid. p.168
- [18] Ibid. p.267
- [19] Ibid. p.268
- [20] Ibid. p.342
- [21] Ibid. p.344
- [22] His 'technical' descriptions of tactical innovation and new weaponry avoid jargon; e.g. his vivid description of the German barbed wire defences on the Somme has a beautiful simplicity: 'The belts were at least 20-30 yards deep, **the barbs as thick as a man's thumb**, and posts of iron.' (A History of the Great War?, C R M F Cruttwell, Oxford, 1936 (2nd edition), p.264)
- [23] Ibid. p.176
- [24] Ibid. p.153
- [25] Ibid. p.233
- [26] Ibid. p.629
- [27] 'The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh?', edited by Michael Davie, Penguin edition, 1979, pp. 152-153
- [28] 'A Little Learning?', Evelyn Waugh, 1964, p.175
- [29] Commissioned into the Dorset Regiment in August 1917, he was later attached to the 23rd Machine Gun Company. He was taken prisoner near Arras in March 1918, during the German 'Spring Offensive' and wrote a lively and memorable account of his confinement: 'The Prisoners of Mainz?', Chapman & Hall, 1919

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

African Soldiers in World War One: Uprising within a Global Conflict

by Josephine Niala

2016-10-26 12:52:40

'We should remember the world as well as the war: all those involved, all the contributions, all the experiences, all the trauma, and the lasting legacy.'

- Taken from the 2013 British Council report on WW1.

In 2013 when the British Council carried out a UK survey about the First World War, only 21% of people thought that there was any African involvement in the war. Yet one million people died in East Africa alone during WW1.

When reflecting on a war, the focus is often on those who were involved in combat and yet because of the situation in East Africa at the time, many more people were directly affected by the war than the soldiers. This

was mainly due to the logistics of the war. There were no roads and the railway was still in its infancy meaning that supplies had to be transported long distances across British East Africa. For this reason, porters became just as critical as soldiers. The Carrier Corps carried the necessary supplies on their backs and heads across what is now Kenya. Although there is not much by the way of living memory of these porters, their mark is still noted by the market in the eastern part of Nairobi that is named after them: Kariokor.

As the war went on, women and children were also forcibly put to work. They received little or no pay and were trapped in a situation where they were looked down on by the British troops and despised by the villagers' people whose harvests were plundered to literally feed the war.

There is a trail of names across the country which offer clues as to the events that took place during the Great War, including in Taveta which was then the border between the two colonial powers: Germany and Britain. For example, Salaita (derived from slaughter where 253 soldiers were killed) is one such hill. It was here in Taita, Taveta that the war was truly international. People who came from what would now be 21 nationalities lived, worked and fought alongside each other forming the Carrier Corps, Kings African Rifles and British Allied Forces. One South African labourer reported that the most remarkable part of his war time experience was 'to see the different kinds of human races from all parts of the world'.[\[1\]](#)

Aside from the war, what many of the people in Taveta at the time had in common was the colonial oppression that they were facing. WW1 gave them a different lens through which to view colonialism. This was a fact not lost on the British. 'If a 'coloured' man was trained to raise arms against another European, what guarantee was there, so the racial thinking went, that he would not one day attack his own white master?' [\[2\]](#)

Indeed, there are at least two African uprisings that took place during WW1. The East African Campaign started in what is now Tanzania and Kenya but then went on to spread as far as what is now Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In different places across this area, some African people began to see the war as a chance to fight for their own liberation. These uprisings were not coordinated across the continent but took place in disparate contexts with the First World War as the background trigger. The Chilembe Uprising took place in January 1915 and although unsuccessful is celebrated annually on the 15th of January in Malawi as the beginning of the Malawi Independence struggle.

In Kenya, Mekatilili wa Menza was a Giriama woman who has in recent times been commemorated with a statue and gardens as a national heroine. What is clear is that between 1913-1915, she led the Giriama people in a sustained uprising against British colonial forces. Her reasons were complex. The Giriama had a sophisticated socio-economic structure and she like many Giriama leaders was keen that it along with their culture should not be undermined. She was particularly concerned with the issue of labour. Mekatilili was completely opposed to the exploitation of young Giriama men by the British and it can be argued that the Giriama's sustained resistance is part of the reason porters had to be brought in from different ethnic groups much further inland. The British colonial push on African labour is likely not have escalated in the same way if it were not for the First World War.

Following the war, many leaders from around the world such as Gandhi were deeply disappointed that the efforts of their countrymen were not internationally recognised. If anything, colonial brutality increased around the world. The legacy of the war, however, remained and the connections between previously disparate people lingered. It may not have been until after the Second World War that the struggle for independence finally bore fruits for many Africans. That said, it was the First World War that unexpectedly brought people in the same

place and may have planted the seeds allowing different groups of people to see each other as potential countrymen.

[1] - See more at: <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/colonial-troops#sthash.1491Aq9A.dpuf>

[2] Ibid

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)