



A little known personal journal and a global health catastrophe

by Philip Dutton

2020-05-05 12:34:36

Samuel Pepys Junior and the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic in Great Britain - as reflected in his 'A Last Diary of the Great Warr?'.[\[1\]](#)

The 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918-1919, despite its cost in human lives worldwide, is notable for its near absence from many standard histories of the First World War. The grave uncertainties and human drama of the international conflict of 1914-1918, and the enormous number of its casualties and vast scale of physical destruction have tended to overshadow the unprecedented social disaster represented by the pandemic with its own incalculable death toll[\[2\]](#). The second deadly wave of infection, occurring in the autumn of 1918, around the time of Allied victory, has ensured that the pandemic's existence has been acknowledged rather as a footnote to the man-made calamity it enveloped than a major historical event in its own right. Invaluable assessments of the pandemic's course and impact on societies of course exist but in widely disparate often very specialised forms, which makes the intimate observations of '*one who was there*' all the more important as providing a humane and readily intelligible outline of the social effects of its onset.

During these desperate, deadly and anxiety-filled days of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic some perspective or even solace may perhaps be derived from observations recorded of comparable health disasters long past. Of those associated with Great Britain, Daniel Defoe's '*A Journal of the Plague Year*' and Sam Pepys's plague-related entries in his *Diaries* offer glimpses of how similar, despite our own 21st century advantages in living conditions and health care, were these earlier initial reactions to the arrival of 'the pestilence' and its subsequent management. Concerns with social distancing, fake news, conspiracy theories and quack remedies are by no means new. But more recently, in fact just over 100 years ago, another and much less well known Pepys emerged in time to chronicle the arrival of the first two visitations of what was then commonly called the 'Spanish Flu'. Samuel Pepys Junior 'a wholly fictional but equally gifted 'descendant' of the original Sam Pepys - (and pseudonym for the combined literary talents of Robert Massie Freeman [1866-1949] and Robert Augustus Bennett) - produced three volumes of lively personal commentary covering his experience of the conflict of 1914-18[\[3\]](#) which his publisher was pleased to market as diaries of the '*Great Warr*' (sic). These artful histories are not everybody's cup of tea, retaining as they do the archaic spellings and complex syntax of his distinguished 'forbear'. But, and very importantly, they constitute a sustained and first rate parody of the original Pepys, and like the original, contain much wit, and an abundance of invaluable insights into the minutiae of civilian life. The diary entries open an almost primary source window into those profoundly troubled times - data accumulated from the acute perspective of an upper middle class government official on the British home front. His chronicles include indisputable facts merged with the authentic flavour of the period rooted in the shared anxiety, gossip, rumour, prejudice, and enduring concerns about food rationing and prices

of everyday necessities; the very stuff of human existence in times of prolonged crisis.

The first explicit reference to '*the flue distemper*' comes in his entry for 24 May 1918, no doubt distilled from news reports or gossip, was concerned with estimates of the state of the German Army on the Western Front, which, given the military setbacks endured by the allies that spring, he optimistically rehashes:

The best news of the warr is, by a report out of Paris, the Emperour's army do mutiny for lack of victuall; and, moreover, the whole now mightily stricken with the flue distemper. So this thought to be the reason of their lying long so idle. (p.138)

Earlier, in his journal entry for 4 May 1918, while celebrating a slight ease on the bacon rationing, sinister reference is made to a gruesome-sounding disease observed at home. Though it is not absolutely clear that the infection he refers to as '*the botular sicknesse*', and its growing hold on '*the common people*', is in fact the very the beginning of the pandemic:

The news out of London is my Lord Rhondda^[4] will encrease to each citizen, being of full age, his portion of cured flesh of hoggs; which is, I think, a thing to 'ease the publick discontent, increasing our portion of fatt victuall. However, some I hear say it shall further breed the botular sicknesse; which do now grow mightily upon the common people. (p.129)

No such uncertainty exists in relation to his second reference to the illness 'now clearly spreading on the home front in early summer. The '*flue?*', first linked with the German army, now reappears in an entry for 24 June, which also reveals something of the popular thinking about the disease's origins^[5], how its symptoms were presented, and fears of its rapid spread. Notably, he highlights a now long forgotten conspiracy theory, voiced by an hysterical minority, which held that the influenza illness was nothing less than an appallingly misguided German experiment in biological warfare:

..At our carpentry this day much talked of the new sicknesse that is come upon us, and is named the Spanish flue, the Spaniards first smitten with it, and the king and all his court catcht, they say; whence catching the French, and all the armies a-field, it do jump upon England. So some saying it is carried by the plague of lice among the soldiers, others making it to be sown abroad by the Germans, and their ayr men to carry the seed of it in bottels. However, as to lice, Mr Grainger did mention 4 ladies in our works that be flued, of whom it were a sin to name them for lousy; nor aught do he observe wherein this Spanish sicknesse is other than the old flue, save that in the first seizure many be awhile bereft of their senses, but presently, vomiting mightily, their senses do return. Which troubles me to hear, being that I am so apt to fall into the old flue.(pp.154-55)

By the beginning of July many civilians had grasped that close proximity to people, unavoidable especially in crowded cities, posed an increased risk of risk of catching the infection. Thus on 1 July 1918 we are told that Sam Pepys Junior gave his wife sufficient cash for her to use taxis that week rather than public transport, so as to avoid unnecessarily exposing herself to threat of contagion:

...I did giver her 10s to pay for taxi-coaches, charging her that she ride this week in nor buss nor tube, for fear of the flue sicknesse... (p.158)

The disease was then, as now, no respecter of persons, rank or authority and Prime Minister David Lloyd George was severely stricken by influenza during a visit to Manchester in September 1918. At the time Pepys Jr

was much personally discomfited by a recurrence of his sciatica and rheumatics and, being no supporter of the 'Welsh Wizard?', showed a malicious delight at the PM's plight when informed about it by his doctor on 22 September:

...He did mention to my comfort, Lloyd George being likewise taken sick in Manchester, and is pretty bad of it, he hears. But is, it seems no more than the flue distemper, which is a small matter, such as God forbid one should say it of lumbago(p.221).

Of course, the 'flue' was no laughing matter; Lloyd George was seriously ill and Pepys Jr grudgingly records, 8 days later (30 September), that the Prime Minister was '*still sick, it seems*', (p.229) and Bonar Law [\[6\]](#) was acting in his place.

By the third week in October the first of Pepys' relatives had become infected; we are told on 21 October his sister Pal was then '*abed with the flue distemper (which do now grow heavy upon us*' (p.245) and on 23 October that '*The pestilence do wax daily; many dead of it, I hear, and the worst of it is the club of 4 serving wenches by it.*' (p.248) Two days later the disease strikes his own household - or so he then believed. Which forced him and his wife rapidly to relocate to a hotel:

So home, and to find, to my dismay and confusion, that cook is seized by the pestilence; so as I did sit awhile as one astounded, thinking of our victuall, how we may be fed, and my fear of my wife catching the distemper. In fine, I to the Grosvenor inn, where, by God's mercy, did find a fair chamber, which done and my wife dispatched, and our night baggs packed...With which, and our two noses washed with chymickall water, all is done that a man may do, I believe (pp.251-52).

The thorough cleansing of the nasal passages was indeed but one among a host of health and dietary recommendations gaining popularity as a consequence of astute product advertising and influence of the daily press. The routine of regular washing of the nostrils was in fact a nostrum energetically pedalled by the '*News of the World*[\[7\]](#).

Pepys's entry for the 26 October records his concern to get his 'ill', and presumably infectious, cook out of his flat and the property thoroughly sterilised. He also notes the growing practice of drinking of port wine [\[8\]](#)(at least among those who could afford it) as a protection against influenza and also reminds us of the deadly character of the disease itself especially for key workers ' trades people and servants:

...So to the club, where some discourse with Mr Glumby as to our best measures of security against the pestilence. As to which, he hath his physicien's word of a gill or 2 of port wine, drinking it daily, being as good a fortification of a man's body as there is almost...I hear that one of our serving wenches, that did sicken but 2 days since, is dead of the plague, the poor girl; and of some is said that they do die in 12 houres of it taking them. God preserve us! (p.252).

As it turned out, Pepys' cook did not have the influenza, merely what was described as a '*rheum of her head that did trouble her spleen*' (p.252); she was restored to health and the Pepys household returned to their now 'purged' home.

Several days later it was clear that the pandemic was in full and deadly swing, especially in London. The diary entry for 29 October records the dreadful toll and hints at an understanding that this flu was often accompanied by acute symptoms of pneumonia; improbable and rumoured 'causes' for the contagion are also detailed:

...The bill of the pestilence do encrease; in London above 5,000 sick, and 2 or 3 hundred dead this last day or 2. Meeting Mr Chopley, he told me he has the best warrants of Mr Crowe, the undertaker, that it is no true flue sicknesse, but a putrid distemper of the lungs, that is bred of the corpses on the battlefields. But many I hear lay it to our great poverty of our victuall, and so much offal and foul matters as the people must eat.(p.255)

Certainly the poorer classes, and especially city dwellers, engaged in physically demanding work and living in inadequate accommodation would not have had their chances of resisting the disease improved as a consequence of their impoverished diet and crowded working and housing conditions.

By the end of the first week of November occurrences of influenza had by no means diminished as evidenced by entry for 9 November. By then, with the end of the war in sight, there was much celebration and crowding in the capital; additional thousands flocked to see the Lord Mayor's show, which included many 'trophies of war' and march pasts by contingents of the Allied forces, including Serbians and Italians. The pressures to loosen the disciplines of social distancing were seen to grow:

...This night to the Court House and to see 'Twelfth Night,' praying we catch not the pestilence; but, come whatt may of it, I cannot keep myself to sit at home evenings, such a tumulte as do now grow in all our minds. (p.267)

The armistice of 11 November brought the fighting to an end on the Western Front; but the battle with the pandemic was far from over; Pepys notes that it had, by 15 November, incapacitated the wife of a close friend (p.275) and, on 18 November (p.277), records that his own wife's cousin had too become a victim and lay 'abed', seriously ill.

No further references to the flu occur in the diary and his final entry, for 31 December 1918, constitutes a personal review of the year. This summary, like a number of sober and serious histories which were later to appear, includes no mention of the pandemic - despite its unprecedented toll of casualties. Pepys Junior instead, avoids depressing tallies of the dead in favour of expressions of profound and enthusiastic delight in victory, and his own and family's survival:

So ends this yeare; the most wonderfull, I believe, that ever was since the world begun; in particular for its at the first bringing the greatest extremity of our gloom and foreboding, yet in the end our greatest joy.(p.308)

Postscript: it is now recognised that the influenza pandemic occurred in three main phases ' in the spring and autumn of 1918 (a particularly virulent strain), returning in the spring 1919. We have no notion of how the diarist's family fared during the New Year, although the figures look grim. Estimates of total fatalities for Great Britain have increased over time^[9]; recent research suggests that over 200,000 of its citizens died of the disease.

Online References

- Free online access to the text of 'The Last Diary of the Great Warr, via the ALA's Internet Archive
 - Part 1 (1916) <https://archive.org/details/wardiary00freerich/>
 - Part 2 (1917) <https://archive.org/details/diaryofgreatwarr00free/>
 - Part 3 (1918) <https://archive.org/details/lastdiaryofgreat00freeuoft/>
- The 'Spanish' Influenza pandemic and its relation to World War I , by Kenneth Kahn <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/?p=2190>
- The Influenza Pandemic of 1918, by Douglas Gill & John Oxford <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/?p=2574>

Published references

- *The First World War on the Home Front*, Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch (in association with the IWM), 2014
- *War Books*, Cyril Falls, Greenhill Books, 1989 (originally published by Peter Davies, 1930)
- *The Influenza Pandemic*, D R Sherman, Purnell's History of the First World War, Volume 7, pp.2973-2978

----- NOTES -----

[1] Free online access to the text available via the ALA's Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/lastdiaryofgreat00freeuoft/page/n8/mode/2up>

[2] Exact figures have never been reliably established; current estimates of fatalities directly linked to the illness, range from 50 to 100 million people.

[3] The third and final volume was published in 1919.

[4] David Alfred Thomas, first Viscount Rhondda (1856-1918) the respected and highly efficient 'Food Controller?', had introduced compulsory rationing early in 1918. He died suddenly, aged 62, on 3 July 1918, not of influenza but heart disease and rheumatic fever.

[5] According to some sources cases of the illness were first reported in Spain; as a neutral Spanish press restrictions were less rigorous than the censorship employed by the belligerents. Strong arguments exist to support theories that the disease may have originated in the USA and France.

[6] Andrew Bonar Law (1858-1923), Conservative politician and Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lloyd George's wartime Coalition Government

[7] 'The First World War on the Home Front?', Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch, 2014, p.295

[8] Other popular preventatives included the consumption of quinine, cinnamon, OXO, Veno's cough mixture, and, as a disinfectant cleaning agent, Jeyes Fluid. (?The First World War on the Home Front?', Terry Charman, Andre Deutsch, 2014, pp. 294-95)

[9]

Terry Charman, late Senior Historian at Imperial War Museums, considered that 'Britain escaped comparatively lightly with 228,000 deaths.' (op. cit., p.293)

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

Armistice 1918: an unenthusiastic response

by Philip Dutton

2018-11-09 16:37:58

Befitting a world-wide conflict that caused unprecedented human and animal casualties, vast material destruction and immeasurable suffering and misery, the ending of the First World War was greeted with displays of uninhibited joy and relief.^[1] Once the news of the 'armistice' had percolated, via rumour and the press, through to the cities, towns and villages of the Allied powers worldwide, enthusiastic celebrations were instant and extensive. Although some contemporary observers have noted a mismatch in the degree of enthusiasm shown in response to the news of peace between service personnel near the battle zones^[2] and those on the civilian home fronts, the overwhelming impression of the visual, reported and anecdotal evidence is that the immediate news of the end of hostilities was widely and fervently embraced.

Not so, and by way of utter contrast, was the response of GHQ Poona in India in November 1918. There, if the personal memory and eloquent prose of one who was present are to be believed, the military authorities calmly, and with great restraint, played down the welcome news of peace, which had filtered through to the place via local newspapers by the 12th November.

Here and there regrettable signs of spontaneous boisterousness did bubble up. Some common soldiers, territorials and the like, had cheered and sung patriotic songs in the cinema, and others had attempted to form an impromptu procession. But the official eye had looked askance on these manifestations of joy and they had petered out.^[3]

GOC Poona reacted to this epic day by 'soldiering on' and patriotically instructing all temporary RAMC officers still resident, to attend mule-saddling classes. An order which bewildered the medical officers but proved the source of great hilarity amongst combatant officers to whom, of course, it did not apply.

In fact the high degree of post-armistice lethargy displayed in Poona' stimulated noisy correspondence on the subject, and reasons for it, in the 'Times of India'. The press spotlight once focused, had its effects and no sooner than the 27 November (16 days after 'the guns fell quiet') 'a monster procession' was organised involving children, of all nationalities and faiths, marching in columns of four and waving little flags, and finally brought to a close by 'a not too costly display of fireworks'.

The source for this bizarre picture of peace tardily and reluctantly celebrated is a remarkable personal account of First World War service: 'Memoirs of a Camp Follower' (1934), by Philip Gosse^[4]. It is a gentle, compassionate and at times delightfully humorous take on active service life and front line experience. Gosse was a brave and resourceful RAMC doctor but the unassuming story he tells lays greater emphasis on his interest in observing wildlife on all the fronts he served rather than recording the details of his (often harrowing) medical work and narrow escapes. He was a great friend of the zoologist Oldfield Thomas who worked at the Natural History Museum in London, and sent a large number of specimens, including a wide variety of small

mammals, expertly stuffed[5], from the battlefields back to the curators in South Kensington.

And, if Poona in November 1918 disappointed Gosse by its reluctance to celebrate the arrival of peace, only three months previously it provided him with an instance of inspiring optimism and hope. While working at the King George Hospital in the late summer of 1918 he was in charge of a ward of seriously ill soldiers - all suffering from 'Spanish influenza' - and came across a patient who was clearly dying. This soldier was a Private in an unspecified Somerset Territorial unit, who in civil life had been a porter on the Great Western Railway and whose home was Stogumber. Gosse was familiar with the stretch of line from Taunton to Dunster, and, knowing the man's civil profession, and at something of a loss, recited the names of the railway stations on the line in the hope that it might revive his patient's spirits or at least soothe him in his last moments. The effect was remarkable in changing for the better the Territorial's physical and mental state, and the performance was therefore regularly repeated. The man eventually recovered and Gosse was convinced the recitation of the familiar place names - '*Norton Fitzwarren, Bishops Lydeard, Stogursey, Williton, Blue Anchor, Dunster, Minehead*' - had contributed significantly to his soldier's survival.[6]

We do not know, Gosse does not tell us, but how fitting it would have been for the fully recovered unknown Somerset Territorial to have witnessed Poona's belated Peace procession and that modest display of fireworks.

Online References

- Full online access to '*Memoirs of a Camp Follower*' (with some OCR errors) is available: https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.528065/2015.528065.Memoirs-Of_djvu.txt
- Summary biography of Philip Gosse available via online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (requires reader's card number for institutional access):<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37475>

-----NOTES -----

[1] The visual evidence is there for all to see, e.g.: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/armistice-day-1918-in-pictures> (content may be in copyright - please check rights before re-use)

[2] See '*A Passionate Prodigality?*', Guy Chapman, Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd, 1933, pp.335-336

[3] '*Memoirs of a Camp-Follower?*', Philip Gosse, Longman, Green & Co, 1934, p.282

[4] Later re-published during the Second World War as '*A Naturalist Goes to War?*', Penguin Books, 1942. The origins of '*Memoirs of a Camp Follower*' may be discerned in the three short 'chapters' of '*Rest Billets?*', Philip Gosse (illustrated by Sylvia Gosse), Dulau & Co, 1927

[5] Gosse was inspired to assist Thomas by another medical officer, Captain Charles McKerrow, while serving with 69th Field Ambulance in France in September 1915, whom Gosse observed '*attentively skinning a field vole*' in order to make a fur muff for his young daughter's doll. See '*Memoirs of a Camp-Follower?*', p.3.

[6] *Memoirs of a Camp-Follower?*, p.270-272

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

Wilfred Owen: The '60s Poet

by Harry Ricketts

2018-10-16 09:31:22

With the centenary of the first Armistice Day ' and the centenary of Wilfred Owen's death a week earlier ' rushing towards us, it is worth remembering that Owen's pre-eminence as *the* WWI poet and his 'Dulce et Decorum Est' as *the* WWI poem, are both relatively recent phenomena; in fact, they date from the 1960s.

During his lifetime, Owen published only a handful of poems, none of them the ones that have become iconic. A small collection appeared soon after the war (*Poems*, 1920, reprinted 1921), edited by his friend Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell, and made some small impact, but by then few wanted to read poems about the war. It is true that W. H. Auden and his friends Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and C. Day-Lewis adopted Owen as one of their poetic ancestors and exemplars in the late 1920s and through the 1930s, and wrote poems in dialogue with his. Two obvious instances are Spender's 1937 Spanish Civil War poem 'Ultima Ratio Regum' ('the boy lying dead under the olive trees / Was too young and too silly / To have been notable ' / He was a better target for a kiss?) and Auden's 1938 sonnet-sequence 'In Time of War' with its Owen-resonant line: 'We learn to pity and rebel'. And Edmund Blunden edited a considerably more inclusive volume of Owen's poems in 1931. But, again, this attention, though admiring, hardly converted him and his work into household names.

It was the turbulent 1960s which effected that. A number of factors came together, feeding each other and precipitating the decades-dead Owen into his pre-eminent position, now seemingly unassailable. On the wider front, Alan Clark and A. J. P. Taylor wrote revisionist, popular histories of World War I: *The Donkeys* (1961) and *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (1963). (The title of Clark's book, *The Donkeys*, played on a favourite commonplace about the rank-and-file troops: 'lions led by donkeys'.) These offered a demythologising view of the war, shifting sympathy towards the plight of the ordinary soldier and castigating the Higher Command as high-handed and ludicrously incompetent. This was a view underpinned at the time by Joan Littlewood's sharp musical farce *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963) and later hilariously reinforced by the final 'Blackadder' series *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989).

More portentously, in 1964, BBC2 gave the epic stamp to 'The Great War?', as it was still sometimes known, by running a 26-episode documentary with much original footage. With the Vietnam War and other insurrections producing shock waves of protest round the world, with (among many others) Philip Larkin in 'MCMXIV' (ie 1914) lamenting 'Never such innocence again?', with Roger McGough explaining 'Why patriots are a bit nuts in the head?', with Bob Dylan singing the finger-pointing 'Masters of War' and Donovan mourning the 'Universal Soldier?', the *Zeitgeist* for Owen as 'the national poet of pity' (Hibberd 2002, 142) had arrived.

And his arrival was abrupt and, however belated, apparently inevitable and ubiquitous. Benjamin Britten constructed *War Requiem* (1962) around nine of Owen's poems. C. Day-Lewis edited an enlarged and annotated *Collected Poems* (1963). His work was given a dominant presence in two highly influential and widely taught anthologies of WWI poetry: Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918* (1964) and Ian Parsons's *Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War* (1965). Indeed, Parsons gave Owen pride of place with thirteen poems and highlighted his work's enduring significance in his introduction. In 1967, John Bell and Owen's brother, Harold, brought out a *Collected Letters*, and the biographies and fictionalised accounts, such as Pat Barker's brilliant *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-1995), were to follow.

The claim for Owen as, in essence, a poet of the '60s, might seem initially quirky, but is, I think, in its own terms, unanswerable. Of course, his war poems had always (so viscerally) dramatised World War I as a kind of

hellish cockpit, with the imagined reader a pitying spectator watching, often in appalled close-up, the actions of unwilling victims subject to irresistible human, mechanical, chemical and political forces. The poems had always been that. But it was the 1960s which allowed that vision to achieve its full horror and pity.

Works Cited

Hibberd, Dominic. *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*. London: Phoenix, 2002.

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)

The smaller picture: 'In Retreat' - Herbert Read and the 2nd Green Howards during the German March Offensive 1918

by Philip Dutton

2018-03-20 13:30:25

PRELUDE *'The enemy is rather threatening for the moment.'*

Wednesday 20 March 1918 (BEF GHQ, France): much concerned for the welfare of his wife and recently-arrived third child 'a much longed for son (born 15 March), Sir Douglas Haig penned a solicitous letter to Lady Haig. Acknowledging the strong likelihood of an imminent German offensive on the southern sector of the British held front Sir Douglas regretfully explained that his planned visit to England would be better delayed until the following week - "*The enemy is rather threatening for the moment.*"^[1] But keen to maintain his wife's health and morale, the fifty-seven year old Field Marshal arranged for his cook to make some soup for her and organised for it to be sent to her by King's Messenger. The next day, while this sustaining broth was in transit, the awaited German offensive was indeed launched following a terrific early morning bombardment of British positions; a bombardment which *'in grandeur of scale, of awe, and of destruction surpassed any other in the World War'*^[2]. The German March Offensive had begun.

SUMMARY

Written in 1919 but not published until 1925, Herbert Read's short memoir 'In Retreat' tells the story of the 2nd Green Howards during the German 1918 Spring Offensive. Despite its brevity the account is rich in the type of detail missing from many of the official unit war diaries of the period. Though a small picture of a huge event it would be hard to find a better account of what the infantry of Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army went through during those last days in March 1918.

1918 - a year in the shadows?

In terms of public awareness the date '21 March 2018' may well trigger more ideas of the spring equinox than the centenary of the opening day of a cataclysmic battle on the Western Front. Fixated on the tragedies of the

Somme in 1916, and, to a lesser degree, the dismal slog towards Passchendaele in 1917, the start of the 1918 German Spring Offensive gets short shrift, even though this monumental battle represented the greatest possible danger to the Allied cause in the west since the German invasion of Belgium and France in August 1914.[\[3\]](#)

The German March 1918 Offensive

The Kaiser's Battle (*Kaiserschlacht*?) was planned as the decisive battle of the war and the scale and complexity its organization and execution, virtually defy description. The size of the battlefield, numbers of troops involved, and the tumultuous progress of the fighting impose the heaviest of burdens on the chronicler seeking to establish an accurate and coherent narrative. Seventeen years were to pass before the British Official account of the March fighting saw print.[\[4\]](#) Its arrival in 1935 was met with considerable interest.

Herbert Read's 'Time & Tide' Review of the Official History

In February 1935 the political journal *Time and Tide* included a review of the British official version of the German offensive. Entitled *History and Reality?*, the article was written by the editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, a highly respected literary figure, poet, art theorist and pacifist, who was particularly qualified to comment as he had been a by no means disinterested bystander in the events depicted. **Herbert Edward Read** (1893-1968) served with distinction on the Western Front during the First World War. Commissioned into the Green Howards[\[5\]](#) in 1915, he was awarded the MC in 1917 and the DSO the following year. In March 1918, as acting Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion of the Green Howards (2/Green Howards), then occupying defensive positions opposite St Quentin, Read had the misfortune to be deeply implicated in the anxieties, chaos and destruction of the March Offensive, but the very good fortune to survive it. This was for him an unforgettable experience and one that compelled him to write an account of his ordeal, which, though completed by 1919 as *In Retreat?*, was not published until 1925. Read's participation in the great battle inevitably informed his responses to Edmonds' narrative. Acknowledging both his personal and literary involvement in the battle, Read mused on the differing 'truths' offered by the 'scientific historian' (Edmonds) and the experience-based 'poetic truths?', offered by the 'artist' (Read himself). Taking, by way of example, Edmonds', necessarily summary, treatment of the activities of the 2/Green Howards, and scrutinising the professional historian's use of the tasteful conventions of military historical phraseology, Read came down emphatically on the side of poetic truth: *'History is ...an aggregation of facts which excludes feeling, excludes humanity, excludes truth. The only truth is in poetry?'*[\[6\]](#) So saying, Read's admiration for the Official History was high, and he commended Edmonds' *'scientific account of objective forces and events?'*[\[7\]](#), and his consummate skills of concision and clarity. Having vigorously flown the flag for the poetic sensibility Read, despite quibbles on Edmonds' treatment of artillery co-operation and the performance of the Royal Flying Corps, gave an emphatic 'thumbs up' for *'1918? Volume I.*[\[8\]](#)

In Retreat 'origins

If Edmonds' History of the March Offensive constituted an attempt to render a comprehensible version of the 'bigger picture?', Herbert Read's treatment of those days is, understandably, more narrowly focused. The origins of his memoir may be traced to early April 1918, when Read, enjoying a temporary reprieve from the crisis wrote a letter to his fianc in Leeds: *'I think the experiences of the last ten days have had a rather deep effect on me...I saw humanity very naked and life more precious and more pitiful?'*[\[9\]](#). Earlier in the same letter he intimated that he was unwilling to let her hear the details of that *'raging hell... until I have written a book about it.'*[\[10\]](#) Read duly began, in the spring of 1919[\[11\]](#), a prose account of his part in the 'retirement?', which was finished that same year. Publication proved something of a problem and the work did not see print until 1925, when Leonard and Virginia Woolf issued *In Retreat* under the imprint of the Hogarth Press. A self-consciously literary outlet for what was essentially a highly specific military reminiscence written by a poet and (at the time) museum curator[\[12\]](#), *In Retreat* was well received, and later merited positive comments (and indeed a single

'asterisk' emblematic of merit) in Cyril Falls' *War Books* (1930).[\[13\]](#)

?In Retreat? ' 'a transcript of experience?'[\[14\]](#)

Less than 50 pages in length[\[15\]](#), *In Retreat* is rich in intimate detail. Read combines a record of his personal sensations with a series of vivid, documentary-like, pictures of the actions involving the 2/Green Howards between 21 and 29 March 1918. The bare outline of his story is as follows: the battalion, in reserve on 20 March, was rushed up to the 'Battle Zone' on the morning 21 March, there to repel a series of mass German infantry assaults. Following an injury to Battalion's Commanding Officer in the early afternoon of the 22nd, Read assumed effective leadership (up until 26th March) of the battalion and, though repeatedly near-surrounded by the advancing enemy, co-ordinated with cool military professionalism a series of withdrawals. The much depleted and exhausted battalion, denied rest, is engaged in more defensive fighting before its eventual relief from the line.

His narrative includes many valuable historical insights into the nature of the battle. These include: descriptions of the local British defences and initial success in repelling the enemy onslaughts in the Roupy sector; the intensity and accuracy of German artillery bombardments; enemy infantry infiltration tactics; the shortcomings of British artillery (see **Appendix 1**) and the disorienting effects of fog, mist and smoke upon the defenders. Importantly, he highlighted the British failure to complete an effective third line of defensive trenches ' the Reserve or 'Green Line' - and the negative impact this had on British morale[\[16\]](#). The memoir reads at times like a military report, with its spare clarity and precisely timed messages (carried by heroic 'runners?') punctuating the chaotic course of days and nights where sleep was not an option and food and water scarcely available.

The record of actuality is complemented by Read's scrupulous depiction of his own sensations during the battle. The accumulations of anxiety in the anticipation of the expected German attack; admissions of despair and exhaustion as disappointments mount and defeat and extinction loom. Also, contrastingly, moments of acute elation: following the repulse of an attack, or the discovery of French infantry reinforcements arriving in support. Discernible throughout is Read's competence as an officer and a very humane one at that. His concern for his men shines through[\[17\]](#). If Read took pride in his military career in the post-war years it was surely as much due to his having earned the respect of the 'other ranks' in the battalion as to the official awards that formally marked his gallant service.

Conclusion

Although Edmond's *'1918'* Volume I and Read's *'In Retreat?'* could not be more different, - the authors, unlikely as it sounds, shared some things in common. Both experienced at first hand disastrous headlong military retreats ' Edmonds as a Divisional Staff Officer on the Western Front after the Battle of Mons in August 1914[\[18\]](#), and Read as a temporary infantry battalion commander in March 1918. Both were writers of the highest quality ' valuing detachment, analysis and clarity of expression. And both ' the much older and brilliantly academic Regular Edmonds, and youthful 'imagist' poet and literary-theorist, temporary officer Read - shared the highest sense of professionalism as soldiers.

Widely disparate as they are the two works offer complementary truths: the fact-based objectivity of the military historian and the experience-charged response of the artist/writer. Read's short account, though specifically recording the trials experienced by the 2/Green Howards includes observations of general conditions, tribulations and, on occasion, minor triumphs, that were almost certainly shared by other infantry units of Fifth Army. Read's 'small window' opens on to a narrow view of a tiny portion of the huge landscape of the March 1918 battle front. But the wealth of data it supplies and the humanity with which writer conveys his and his unit's ordeal helps make more intelligible, from the British perspective at least, the vastly complicated story of the German Spring Offensive - that hugely significant, yet relatively ignored, event in the history of the Great

War, the centenary of which we commemorate this year.

APPENDIX 1

Read makes reference in *'In Retreat'* to five instances of, what we would now call 'friendly fire'. Undoubtedly there were cases of British 'shorts' causing havoc during the retreat ' but in the chaos of a rapidly moving series of actions such accidents, were inevitable. Read's eager attribution of blame to his own side may well be based on 'experience' but his ready identification of the origins of the incoming fire also perhaps reflects inherent prejudices of the infantryman towards the gunners. The difficulties for the latter were legion and the prevalence of thick fog and heavy smoke only added to the problems of registration and observation. There may well be some truth in A G MacDonell's wry definition of the function of the artillery subaltern in the latter part of the Great War: '*... a young artillery gentleman had to be attached to each battalion headquarters in the Line, whose duty it was to point out the fundamental difference between east-bound and west-bound projectiles and thus soothe the fighting troops into feeling a partial, at any rate, security.*'[\[19\]](#)

REFERENCES

- *'In Retreat'*, Herbert Read, Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1925
- *'The Green Howards in the Great War, 1914-1919'*, H C Wylly, Green Howards, Richmond, 1926
- *'Military Operations France and Belgium 1918: [Vol I] The German March Offensive and its Preliminaries'*, Brigadier-General Sir J E Edmonds, Macmillan, 1935.
- *'Annals of Innocence and Experience'*, Herbert Read, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1946
- *'Herbert Read'*, Francis Berry, published for the British Council and the National Book League by Longmans, Green & Co, 1961 (Writers and Their Work: No 45)
- *'English Poetry of the First World War'*, John H Johnston, Princeton University Press, 1964
- *'Heroes Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War'*, Bernard Bergonzi, Constable, 1965
- *'The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1918: the First Day of the German Spring Offensive'*, Martin Middlebrook, Penguin Books, 1983
- *'The Last Modern. A life of Herbert Read'*, James King, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990
- *'In Retreat and The Raid'*, Herbert Read (introduction by John Onions), Imperial War Museum Arts and Literature Series Number 4, 1991
- *'The Flower of Battle. British Fiction Writers of the First World War'*, Hugh Cecil, Secker & Warburg, 1995
- *'Naked Warriors'*, Herbert Read, Imperial War Museum, 2003 (Originally published by Art & Letters, 1919)
- *'Herbert Read. All That was Left Them: writings on war'*, edited by Benedict Read (introduced by James Read), The Orage Press, 2014
- *'History and Reality'*, by Herbert Read, originally published in *'Time and Tide'*, 9 February 1935 (re-printed in *Herbert Read. All That was Left Them: Writings on War*, edited by Benedict Read (introduced by James Read), The Orage Press, 2014, pp.207-211
- *'Richard Aldington. Poet, Soldier and Lover 1911-1929'*, Vivien Whelpton, The Lutterworth Press, 2014

ONLINE

- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, *'Read, Sir Herbert Edward (1893-1968)'*, by Tanya Harrod.

Published online and in print: 23 September 2004<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/35695> Accessed 10-Jan-2018. (Access requires personal / institutional library card number or subscription)

- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 'Edmonds, Sir James Edward (1861-1956); entry by Cyril Falls, revised by H C G Matthews, published online 23 Sept 2004.<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32972> Accessed 12-Jan 2018. (Access requires personal / institutional library card number or subscription)

----- NOTES -----

[1] *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig?*, edited by Robert Blake, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1952, p.294

[2] *History of the First World War*, Basil Liddell Hart, Cassell & Co Ltd, 1970, p.493

[3] '21 March 1918 was one of the great turning points of the First World War and, in the number of men involved, was probably the greatest battle of that war.' *The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1918: the First Day of the German Spring Offensive*, Martin Middlebrook, Penguin Books, 1983, p.9

[4] *Military Operations. France and Belgium 1918: [Vol I]. The German March Offensive and its Preliminaries*, Brigadier-General Sir J E Edmonds, Macmillan, 1935.

[5] The Green Howards (Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment)

[6] *Time and Tide*, 9 February 1935 (Quoted in *Herbert Read. All That was Left of Them*, edited by Benedict Read, The Orage Press, 2014, p.209)

[7] 'Ibid, p.210. The praise for Edmonds was in marked contrast to Read's reaction to Liddell Hart's *The Real War* (1930), which he condemned as a 'shoddy piece of rhetoric' in the July the 1930 issue of *Criterion*. See ' *The Real War?: Liddell Hart, Cruttwell and Falls?*, Hew Strachan in *The First World War and British Military History*, edited by Brian Bond, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1991, p.46

[8] The military operations of 1918 ultimately required four additional volumes of official histories ' making a grand total of five. 'Put together these make a work substantially longer than the Bible?; see *The Imperial War Museum Book of 1918: Year of Victory*, Malcolm Brown, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1998, p.xxix.

[9] *Extracts from a War Diary*, Herbert Read, entry for 1 April 1918, quoted in *Herbert Read. All That was Left of Them*, edited by Benedict Read, The Orage Press, 2014, p.136.

[10] Ibid, p.135

[11] *In Retreat*, Herbert Read, The Hogarth Press, 1925, p.7

[12] Since 1922 Read had been Assistant Curator in the Department of Ceramics and Glass in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

[13] *War Books. An Annotated Bibliography of Books about the Great War*, Cyril Falls, (new edition introduced by R J Wyatt, Greenhill Books, 1989, p.226-27. (Originally published in 1930; the single asterisk denoted, in Fall's categorization, 'a good book'.

[14] *In Retreat*, Herbert Read, The Hogarth Press, 1925, p.8

[15]

In its original 1925 edition *In Retreat* comprises 44 numbered pages (including Introduction and Appendix; if the map of 'The Route of our Retreat' is included the total would be 46 pages.

[16] 'We found an empty mockery and I was in despair??.', *In Retreat*, op.cit, p,23

[17] One instance stands out: entrenched before the village of Esmery-Hallon, on 23 March, he distributes sustenance (Army biscuits and red wine) in almost sacramental fashion to his famished men. *In Retreat*, op cit., p.29.

[18] As a senior Staff Officer (GS01) of the 4th Division of the British Expeditionary Force.

[19] *England Their England*, A G MacDonell, Folio Society edition, London, 1987, p.4. (Originally published by MacMillan & Company in 1933). My thanks to Chris McCarthy for pointing me towards this reference

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 Cruttwell

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](#)