



[World War One Centenary : Continuations and Beginnings \(University of Oxford / JISC\)](#)

Of historians and politicians - cross-post

by Jessica Meyer

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Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, has decided that the best way to start off the centenary years of the First World War is through [an article in the Daily Mail](#) which attacks the 'myths' of the war and the 'left-wing academics' who he accuses of being 'all too happy to feed those myths by attacking Britain's role in the conflict'. The response has been predictably excitable, with various blog posts from a variety of researchers into the history of the First World War springing up over the weekend (a fair representation can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), as well as several articles in the print media and from the BBC giving the views of everyone from [Tristram Hunt](#) to [Margaret Macmillan](#) to [Tony Robinson](#).

For me, however, one of the most interesting interventions was one of the earliest, a discussion between Sir Richard Evans (held up by Gove as the prime example of a 'left-wing academic' intent on discrediting British national pride) and Gary Sheffield (cited by Gove as a historian engaging in 'proper study' for his work on Douglas Haig) on [the World At One on Radio 4](#). These men had been invited to contribute because they were named in Gove's article, but what emerged most clearly from the debate was the difference of perspective offered by two different types of historical approach, the internationalist analysis which allowed Sir Richard to make an argument about Russia's lack of democracy, and the national (but by no means nationalist) military history that informs Gary's views on why the British Army (as an entity) fought the way it did. These differing approaches expose the many-layered complexity of trying to understand the historic realities of why British men fought in the First World War.

From my perspective as a social and cultural historian, however, there was an important methodological perspective that was missing from this discussion, namely that of the personal or individual history. This is an explicable, but nonetheless interesting omission, given that personal and family histories are the most common way into a discussion of First World War history for the non-specialist. This is evidenced by the rash of 'my grandfather told me' tweets in response to the discussion of Gove's article, as well as longer, more thoughtful discussions of individual motivations from researchers such as [John Lewis-Stempel](#) and [David Underdown](#). In my own work, there are plenty of examples of men with equally complex motivations for enlisting initially, as well as those whose ideas about what they, personally, were fighting for changed over the course of their service.

My current favourite example of this is David Randle McMaster, whose papers I read at the National Army Museum last year. McMaster was a bank clerk who enlisted in the RAMC in August 1914 and served with 24th and 2/1st Wessex Field Ambulances throughout the war. McMaster's motivations for enlisting were both patriotic and self-interested. From the outset, he expressed his belief in the necessity of defending the country from invasion and his personal willingness to do so. The son of a Congregationalist draper, he was clearly

aspirational and initially enquired about enlisting as an officer, something that, without a medical degree, he was unable to do in the RAMC, the unit he favoured because its non-combatant status could be squared with his religious qualms about killing and violence. Later, in 1917, McMaster contemplated transferring to a combatant unit in order to attain the social status of officer. He only decided against doing so when it became clear that he would only be offered a commission in an artillery regiment, rather than an infantry regiment which he viewed as having higher social status. It is clear from the letters to his parents in which he discusses this decision at length that, in the two and a half years since his enlistment, McMaster's belief in the justness of the cause he was fighting for had not been eroded. If anything, it had been enhanced by his experiences under fire (as a stretcher bearer he came under fire and in contact with the extremes of what bullets and shrapnel could inflict on the human body on numerous occasions) to the point where he was willing to compromise the religious teachings with which he had been raised.

Yet McMaster cannot be defined as simply a patriotic jingoist either. At no point does he claim to be fighting for 'democracy' as an abstract ideal. Rather, like so many others, he declared himself to be fighting in defense of home and freedom, in his case embodied in the figure of his mother. The values he is fighting for aren't those of politicians but far more concrete ideas about a very particular way of life and the freedoms, from conscription, for example, that it offered. From a 21st-century perspective, these freedoms may appear severely limited, being hedged about by restrictions of class, gender, race and social convention but they nonetheless had value and were deemed worth fighting for by many in 1914.

Why is the personal history of an individual like David Randle McMaster significant? Partly because he fits part of a pattern with other men, mostly of similar social background and education, who were willing both to enlist and to continue fighting because of a belief in what they were fighting for grounded in an individual and concrete reality, rather than a series of abstractions. And partly because he is not necessarily representative of all the 5 million British men who served, many of whom enlisted, for instance, because of a desire for glory, because they needed the work, or because, as Regular soldiers, it was their work. Nor is he representative of men who were conscripted, who fought because they had to, rather than because they either wanted to or were misled about what they were fighting for. The reasons that men enlisted and served were multiple, complex and contingent upon their personal circumstances and should not be simplified into narratives of either patriotism (as presented by Gove) or 'lions led by donkeys' (as suggested by Hunt).

So individual stories are important, giving a much-needed nuance to arguments about why the war was fought. At the same time, individual stories cannot stand alone as representative of every experience. They need the context of the broader picture for their significance beyond the personal interest of their descendants to be properly evaluated. The benefits of this can be seen in such excellent social histories as Adrian Gregory's *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* and Catriona Pennell's *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*, both of which locate individual experience clearly in the contexts of geography, class and change over time. The letters of David Randle McMaster help explain why concepts of 'democracy' could still be used to justify a nation fighting a war as an ally of imperial Russia and why Haig could remain an enormously popular figure among servicemen (and later veterans), while a knowledge of the structure of the British military helps to contextualise his attitude towards different regiments.

Taking all three perspectives, the international, the national and the personal, together we may be able to start to understand the immensely complex and often contradictory period of history that is the First World War. What has been encouraging in the past year of working with educators from outside of academe is the extent to which there is a willingness, even an eagerness, to engage with this narrative complexity rather than resort to the crude caricatures that seem to be informing the political debate. On one level, Gove and Hunt, from their oppositional perspectives, have done a huge disservice to the centenary commemorations by their insistence on reducing the debate to a question of party politics and attempting to divide those researching the subject into camps that fit

with their stereotyped ideas. But at least in creating the debate they have made some space for more nuanced discussion among educators and the much maligned Great British Public, a discussion many on both sides seem to want to engage in.

Finally, a brief thought on the word 'myth' which has been bandied about pretty freely in a lot of these discussions. Both sides seem to take the word to mean something equivalent to 'fiction' or even 'a lie'. Yet, as Samuel Hynes points out, a myth is an imaginative version of reality, not a false one, a version that has come to be accepted as true over time. (*A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, The Bodley Head, 1990, ix). So the myths may be challenged, but they are worth studying too, for what they tell us about the historic societies in which they were developed and came to represent truth. Even if that does mean showing Blackadder Goes Forth in the classroom.

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