



C R M F Cruttwell (1887-1941) - Oxford historian. Participant and chronicler of the Great War

by Philip Dutton

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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*'.

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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

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