



## **The French soldier novelist and the British cycling journalist: some notes on 'Le Feu' by Henri Barbusse, and its first English translator, William Fitzwater Wray.**

by **Philip Dutton**

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In our absorption with the many Great War centenary commemorations in the UK it is easy to overlook the magnitude of losses experienced between 1914 and 1918 by our principal ally in that conflict, France. In late August 1914 alone, during the Battle of the Frontiers, the French Army incurred total casualties of well over 200,000[1]. But French forces rallied, and with Allied support, held and then pushed the German invaders away from Paris during the crucial Battle of the Marne in early September. In the ensuing trench warfare of the Western Front French armies resisted further enemy incursions, notably at great cost around Verdun throughout 1916, and, as opportunity allowed, launched their own attacks designed to regain national territory. This was a process of unremitting toil, loss, and misery not helped by unfortunate tactical and strategic decisions that played into the hands of a well organised enemy.

Dismayed by his own personal encounters with these failures a French soldier participant, already an established writer by 1914 and one with clear socialist sympathies, concluded that many of his countrymen had no proper understanding of the conditions at the 'front?', nature of the fighting and the sufferings endured by the troops. He aimed to correct this deficiency by means of writing a novel that told the truth about the war. In the process the author identified, not only the dire circumstances of trench life, but also the existence of two unbridgeable and mutually uncomprehending worlds. That of the soldiers in the battle-zones, and the other quite separate world of civilians at safe remove from the fighting.

### **Henri Barbusse and '*Le Feu*'?**

Henri Barbusse's apocalyptic anti-war novel '*Le Feu*' was creatively based on his over 16 months' active service on the Western Front in a French Infantry regiment, from August 1914, when aged 41, he enlisted in the ranks. Written during a period of convalescence after illness, and while employed in a 'desk job?', his account, severely critical of the conduct of the war and uncompromising in its depiction of the gruesome realities of front line service, first saw print in serialised form in the monthly literary journal '*L'Oeuvre*' during 1916; it was published in book form in December of that year. The English translation of the novel, published as '*Under Fire*', appeared in June 1917. Oddly, given the unambiguously anti-war tone of the work it was largely tolerated by wartime censors on both sides of the Channel. The novel was warmly received in France and its English translation in Great Britain, received approving notices and, it appears, encouraged, in minority intellectual circles at least, a small growth in pacifist anti-war sentiment[2].

Regarded as an honest '*piece of anti-war propaganda*?', and a not much liked one, by Cyril Falls, in his classic

critical appraisal '*War Books*' (1930), '*Le Feu*' remains in print. A remarkable piece of wartime writing in its own right, literary scholars have identified the work as having exerted a powerful influence on a number of poets and writers during the conflict and, later, on that group of post-war authors, whose of 'trench memoirs' and war-based fictional works, published in the late 1920s, were largely fuelled by a spirit of anger about the appalling nature of the conflict, and disillusion with its consequences. A response typified in its most extreme form by Erich Maria Remarque's '*All Quiet on the Western Front*' (1929). Both *All Quiet* and *Le Feu* sold, and continue to sell, exceedingly well.

Understandably focus has remained on the continuing debate on the cultural impact of Barbusse's novel, notably as a forerunner and template of the anti-war, realistic school of 'disenchantment'. But in this concentration of purpose, the identity of the original translator 'William Fitzwater Wray - who first made the work accessible to English readers has been lost sight of [3]. This is a pity as Fitzwater Wray was a fascinating character in his own right, and a good and prolific writer, particularly in his own specialist field 'cycling. And it was a cycling experience in wartime France undertaken by Fitzwater Wray in September 1914 that unwittingly helped prepare him for the task of translating Barbusse's contentious novel.

## **Pedal power**

The period 1890-1914 witnessed a huge surge in popularity for the use of the evolving forms of the bicycle. With the arrival of the modern all-steel frame 'safety bicycle' cycling became a craze, and one that was quickly encouraged by the media and clever marketing. Indeed, the growth of cycling, as a leisure activity and as a practical form of transport, may have influenced the British Army's decision to introduce a number of Cyclist Battalions for the Territorial Force created in 1908.

Cycling's popularity spawned numerous specialist journals and articles that fed the pedal-powered appetite for technical information and touring routes. Foremost among the cycling writers of the pre-1914 era was William Fitzwater Wray (1868-1938).[4] A committed and enthusiastic cyclist and gifted communicator, Fitzwater Wray' fashioned, under the pen-name '*Kuklos?*', countless articles and several books, expounding the therapeutic benefits bestowed by the cycling experience. He regularly undertook prodigious journeys, often along routes, roads and tracks by no means smooth or well signposted, and visited France 'a country he loved and much admired ' many times.

Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, Wray discovered, to his alarm, that his regular cycling-themed articles and newspaper '*Notes*' were now viewed as redundant by editors more concerned to place pieces covering the drama of the fighting. Not to be outdone (and rendered penniless by unemployment) Wray mooted a scheme whereby he, an ordinary civilian, over the age for enlistment, [5] might access the recent crucial actions on the Marne, and chronicle his experiences for publication and payment. By such process he could provide for the press a first-hand account of the state of France, and the morale of its citizens, once again victims of savage invasion. He would do this by means of a bicycle expedition, and approach the battlefields, in a fashion that Basil Liddell Hart might surely have approved, 'indirectly' from west to east.

## **A cycling journalist in wartime France**

Fitzwater Wray's account of his epic journey[6] was initially presented as a series of articles in *The Daily News*. Later, with an experienced journalist's nose for business, he sensed that these originally heavily censored pieces

could be given a new lease of life by publishing them collectively. Linked and expanded by the inclusion of selected amusing anecdotes from earlier trips to France, he sought to generate an altogether fresh publication 'one tailored for the wider general public but containing much that his existing and committed cycling readership would enjoy.

The end product, *'Across France in War Time?'*, was published by J M Dent & Sons in October 1916 'during the later stages of the fighting of the Somme. Despite the grim timing of its arrival much of the book remains (perhaps deliberately) an amusing read. In some aspects, it may be seen as not far short of a 'ripping yarn?', a view encouraged by the author's frequent displays of eccentricity and boyish enthusiasm. He attached a Union Jack cycling pennant to his handlebars 'to signal his origins and allegiance' but the flag is repeatedly wildly misidentified or not identified at all. He is frequently mistaken for a German spy, and suspected as being an enemy scout on account of the unfamiliar cut of his Norfolk jacket, non-standard breeches and the pronounced curve and capacious bowl of his pipe. And his Touring Club of France (cycling club) membership card seemed a far more effective safe conduct with the authorities than his official pass.

Though amusing incidents thread their way through the narrative, there is a more serious aspect to his travel log. As well as detailing the effects of war on the French home front 'food prices and shortages, changes to licensing and working hours, curfews, travel restrictions, frequency of military convoys, spy mania and internal security, the plight of refugees, the status of the *'poilu'* and, even then, the public veneration of the French 75 field gun' he witnessed at first hand the destruction wrought in the wake of the German invasion. These experiences profoundly affected him, curing him of his idealistic 'internationalism' and convincing him of the awful necessity of a war of outright victory fought to the bitter end. Key to his opposition to any notion of a premature peace was his empathy for France and its people, violated twice within living memory by catastrophic German invasions. And he is at pains to communicate to his English readership all the ignominies, hardship and suffering that invasion and military occupation brings in its wake.

## **Fitzwater Wray and Barbusse**

Having had *'Across France in War Time'* in print in late 1916, the same publishers, J M Dent & Sons commissioned Fitzwater Wray in early 1917 to produce an English translation of Barbusse's *'Le Feu'*. It is likely that Dent saw in Fitzwater Wray both a highly competent and relatively inexpensive translator, and one whose writing style was well known to them. But, as evidenced by the narrative of *'Across France in War Time?'*, in Wray they acquired an interpreter, entirely suited for the role by virtue of his sympathy for and knowledge of France, and his experiences as an eye witness of actual scenes of destruction, the devastating physical consequences of war, in that country.

Though by 1917 he did not share Barbusse's idealistic socialist faith in the attainability of an internationalist brotherhood of working men, there is ample evidence in *'Across France'* to indicate that Fitzwater Wray was an extremely good fit for the translation work. Cultured, immensely well-read, and a highly competent and confident writer, he shared to the utmost Barbusse's distress at the destruction of the French countryside, towns and villages by modern industrialised warfare. Wray's love of the open air and appreciation of the delights of the natural world proved of enormous value in rendering into English Barbusse's ecstatic visions of doomed masses of humanity in the devastated landscapes of oozing battle zones, the grandeur of daybreak and sunset and the ever-changing drama of light and skies.

As a vastly experienced traveller (he called himself a 'vagabond?') Wray too could sympathise with the feelings of soldiers exposed to long and exhausting marches in cutting wind, rain, making the best of inadequate shelter, food, impractical clothing and all the physical discomforts of open air life. His chapter headed *'Of Burdens'* (Chapter XIV), reflects the seasoned wanderer's appreciation of the importance of a judicious selection of kit,

and how too heavy a load can exhaust the bearer physically and spiritually. Wray shared to the full the soldiers love and dependence on tobacco in its various forms (and tobacco's vital counterpart ' the good and reliable match), and the morale-raising virtues of warmth, company and good food and drink. Like Barbusse, Fitzwater Wray, despite his upbringing[7], had no trust in organised formal religion ' and saw 'redemption' and moral progress perfectly attainable by the exercise of human reason, justice, and compassion.

Though criticised in a more recent translation of the novel[8] for his high-flown, too decorous language, and the artificiality of his French soldiers' dialogue, it may be argued that Wray was conscious of and subject to a wartime censorship (however lax it may have been applied) and as a creature of his time naturally replicated a proven prose style, in a tone that had, to date, perfectly satisfied his contemporary readers. A number of reviewers were highly complimentary of the literary quality of his translation[9] and it should be noted it was not until 1929 that a specialist publisher was willing to risk putting into print (in a strictly limited edition) the true reality of the obscenity-filled dialogue of the common infantryman.[10] Finally, though impossible to prove, the fact that Barbusse's mother hailed from Yorkshire, (Wray spent much of the early part of his life in the Bradford area) may further have increased his sympathy for *Le Feu's* creator.

## Legacy

Fitzwater Wray's version of *Le Feu* was superseded in 2003 by a translation by the late Robin Buss,[11] which based on a formidable knowledge of the French language and historical context of the novel, offers the modern reader text more immediately accessible than the version provided by the Fitzwater Wray 'original'. This was perhaps inevitable, but it should not be forgotten that Wray's translation was the one devoured by Siegfried Sassoon[12], who, so beguiled and inspired by its ferocious power, passed on his copy of the novel to Wilfred Owen when both were patients at Craiglockhart Hospital in the late summer of 1917. *Under Fire* set Owen 'alight as no other war book had done?[13] and notably formed one the selection of works he was reading in that most formative period of his short life, in Scarborough in December 1917.[14]

Despite his fine translation of *Le Feu* and other works by Barbusse[15] Fitzwater Wray's reputation remains, if he is remembered at all, largely that of a specialist writer on cycling and cyclists' matters, and also as a very entertaining public lecturer ' in which he made use of lantern slides created from his excellent collection of 'travel photographs.?[16] An energetic and paradoxical character, he died on the 16 December 1938, whilst undergoing an operation at a London hospital.

### Sources:

- *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade*, Henri Barbusse, Paris, 1916
- *Across France in War Time*, W Fitzwater Wray (?Kuklos?), J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916. Available at:<https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/cycling/id/4012/rec/1>
- *Under Fire. The Story of a Squad*, Henri Barbusse, translated by Fitzwater Wray (author of 'Across France in Wartime?'), E P Dutton & Co, New York, 1917
- *Under Fire: the journal of a squad*, Henri Barbusse, translated by W Fitzwater Wray, introduction by Brian Rhys, J M Dent & Sons (Everyman's Library), 1965
- *Under Fire*, Henri Barbusse, translated by Robin Buss, introduction by Jay Winter, Penguin Books, 2003 (Penguin Classics edition 2014)
- *Le Feu and the Crisis of Social Realism*, Jonathan King, in *The First World War in Fiction*, edited by Holger Klein, Macmillan Press, 1976, pp.43-52
- *Owen the Poet*, Dominic Hibberd, Macmillan Press, 1986

## Web Sources:

- 'Le Feu' is available online:<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4380>
- *Across France in War Time* by W Fitzwater Wray can be found via University of Warwick Digital Collections <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/cycling/id/4012/rec/1>

Sites relating to Fitzwater Wray:

- The Gentle Art of Cycling: Kuklos and the Bradford Jackdaw (University of Bradford Special Collections): <https://specialcollectionsbradford.wordpress.com/2015/04/27/the-gentle-art-of-cycling-kuklos-and-the-bradford-jackdaw/>
- William Fitzwater Wray ('Kuklos'). Lantern slides (University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre): <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/digital/nca/tours/kuklos/>

## ----- FOOTNOTES -----

[1] 'No fewer than 80,000 French soldiers were killed between 22 and 25 August, *The French Army Between Tradition and Modernity. Weaponry, Tactics and Soldiers, 1914-18*, by Professor Dr Francois Cochet, in *The World War I Companion*, edited by Matthias Strohn, Osprey Publishing, 2013, p.94. A total figure for French war losses of '1,385,300' (killed and missing), is offered by *The World War I Databook?*, John Ellis & Michael Cox, Aurum Press, 2001, p.269

[2] 'In June of 1917, the Garsington pacifist circle suggested that Sassoon write something akin to Barbusse's *Under Fire*, but they eventually agreed that a statement of protest together with a refusal to serve would do just as well.' *The Great War and the Missing Muse: the early writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon?*, Patrick J Quinn, Susquehanna University Press 1994, p.186

[3] The translator's unusual name did not help here. Early on *The Sphere*, 1 March 1919, mangled it into 'W. Fitzgerald Wray?'; and in a footnote to Jonathan King's *Le Feu and the Crisis of Social Realism* (in *The First World War in Fiction*, edited by Holger Klein, Macmillan, 1976) he becomes 'W. Fitzwalter Wray'.

[4] 'I was (and shall be to the end) a Journalist of the Road, my mission being the service of all who travel on wheels upon the King's Highway, service of both guidance and entertainment.' *Across France in War-Time*, W Fitzwater Wray, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916, p.5. Before his career as journalist took off, Wray had trained and worked as a lithographic artist illustrating newspapers. A draughtsman of some quality, over 30 of his drawings were included in *Across France in War-Time?*

[5] Over age for enlistment Fitzwater Wray volunteered for and served as a Special Constable throughout the war, see Chapter VIII (*Night Thoughts by an Extra Special Constable*) in *The Kuklos Paper?*, Fitzwater Wray, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1927, pp.57-59.

[6] 'As certified by his cyclometer?, he clocked up 520 miles on his heavy Raleigh 'tourer?', an excellent machine made heavier by his carefully packed panniers and the souvenirs ' including a French 75mm shell case ' he collected on the way. He averaged over 80 miles a day.

[7] The son of a Methodist Minister he abandoned his Christian beliefs whilst at boarding school.

[8]

Fitzwater Wray's 'high-flown rhetoric' is particularly taken to task by Jay Winter in his Introduction to the Penguin Modern Classic (2016) edition of *Under Fire*, translated by the late Robin Buss, pp.xv-xviii

[9] 'In *Under Fire*? Henri Barbusse pictures the scenes and incidents of life at the front with the ruthless fidelity of a Zola? He has been fortunate in his translator, and thanks very largely to his literary skill and imagination, the story should enjoy as great a vogue in this country as it has had in France.' *Liverpool Daily Post*, Wed 29 August 1917. 'The Book of the War as War Is. I have recently read a book, wonderfully translated from the French of Henri Barbusse, by a writer who calls himself Fitzwater Wray, which I should like to see circulated everywhere in the humblest homes? but especially in the greatest...' *The Tatler*?, 10 October 1917 (Richard King)

[10] *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Frederic Manning, The Piazza Press, issued by Peter Davies, London, 1929

[11] *Under Fire*, by Henri Barbusse, translated by Robin Buss, with an introduction by Jay Winter, Penguin Books, 2003.

[12] 'Barbusse's French is beyond me, but the translation is good enough to show the truth and greatness of his book?' *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 1983, p.184. Barbusse's prose so impressed Sassoon that he included a moving paragraph from *Le Feu* (in its original French) as an epigraph for his '*Counter Attack and Other Poems*?', published by William Heinemann, London, June 1918

[13] Quoted in *Out of Battle. The Poetry of the Great War*, Jon Silkin, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.208

[14] *Le Feu* appears in a list of eighteen 'Books read at Scarborough, Dec 1917'. *Wilfred Owen. Collected Letters*, edited by Harold Owen and John Bell, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.520 (f.n.3)

[15] These are: *Nous Autres* (tales), 1914, translated as *We Others*, Dent, 1918; *Clart* (a novel), 1919, translated as *Light*, Dent, 1919,

[16] His surviving glass plate slides are held by the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.  
<https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explore/further/digital/nca/tours/kuklos/>

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