



## Eighty miles a day: how a journey through war torn France prepared a cycling journalist for the task of translating Henri Barbusse's epic novel, 'Le Feu'

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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 '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 specialist journals and articles that fed a growing demand for technical information and touring routes. Foremost among the cycling writers of the pre-1914 era was **William Fitzwater Wray (1868-1938)**.<sup>[1]</sup> An enthusiastic cyclist and gifted communicator, Fitzwater Wray fashioned, under the pen-name 'Kuklos?', countless articles and several books, expounding the many benefits bestowed by the cycling experience. He regularly undertook long-distance trips, and visited France 'a country he loved' many times. Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, Wray discovered that his regular cycling-themed articles were now viewed as irrelevant by news editors more concerned to cover the drama of the fighting. Not to be outdone Wray had the idea whereby he, an ordinary civilian, over the age for enlistment,<sup>[2]</sup> might visit the recent crucial actions on the Marne, and chronicle his experiences for publication. 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 'indirectly?', from west to east.

Fitzwater Wray's account of his epic journey<sup>[3]</sup> was initially presented as a series of articles in *The Daily News*. Later, these originally heavily censored pieces were 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, Wray produced a totally new publication 'one tailored for the wider general public but containing much that his

existing and committed cycling readership would enjoy.

Fitzwater Wray's '*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 an amusing read, made so by the author's frequent displays of eccentricity and boyish enthusiasm. In France his Union Jack cycling pennant is, to his intense annoyance, repeatedly wildly misidentified. He is frequently mistaken for a German spy, on account of the unfamiliar cut of his Norfolk jacket, non-standard breeches and the pronounced curve and capacious bowl of his firmly clenched pipe. And his Touring Club of France (cycling club) membership card seemed a far more effective safe conduct 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 ' including food prices and shortages, changes to working hours, curfews, travel restrictions, spy mania and internal security and the plight of refugees ' he witnessed 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

Following the success of '*Across France in War Time*' its publishers, J M Dent & Sons, commissioned Fitzwater Wray in early 1917 to produce an English translation of Henri Barbusse's sensational anti-war novel '*Le Feu*'. Acknowledging Wray as both a highly competent and relatively inexpensive translator, and one whose writing style was well known to them, they acquired an interpreter entirely suited for the role by virtue of his profoundly democratic outlook, sympathy for and knowledge of France, and his experiences as an eye witness of actual scenes of destruction, the consequences of war, in that country.

Though by 1917 he did not share Barbusse's idealistic socialist faith in the near immediate attainability of an internationalist brotherhood of working men, there is ample evidence in '*Across France*' to indicate that Fitzwater Wray was perfectly suited for the translation work. Intelligent, 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 appreciation of the delights of the natural world proved invaluable in rendering into English Barbusse's ecstatic visions of tortured masses of humanity in the devastated landscapes of oozing battle zones, and depictions of the ever-changing drama of light and skies. As a vastly experienced traveller 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. Wray shared to the full the soldiers love and dependence on tobacco and tobacco's vital counterpart - the reliable match, and the morale-raising virtues of physical warmth, company and good food and drink.

Though criticised in a more recent translation of the novel[4] 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 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 contemporary reviewers were highly complimentary of the literary quality of his translation.

Fitzwater Wray's version of *Le Feu* was superseded in 2003 by a translation by the late Robin Buss,[5] 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[6], who, so beguiled and inspired by its ferocious power, passed on his copy 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?[7] 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.[8]

Despite his fine translation of *Le Feu* and other works by Barbusse<sup>[9]</sup>, Fitzwater Wray's reputation remains, if he is remembered at all, largely that of a specialist writer on cycling and cyclists' matters. An energetic and paradoxical character, he died on the 16 December 1938, whilst undergoing an operation at a London hospital.

A longer article about Fitzwater Wray and Barbusse is also available: See [The French soldier novelist and the British cycling journalist: some notes on 'Le Feu' by Henri Barbusse, and its first English translator, William Fitzwater Wray.](#)

## References

- *Le Feu: Journal d'une escouade*, Henri Barbusse, Paris, 1916
- *Under Fire. The Story of a Squad*, Henri Barbusse, translated by Fitzwater Wray (author of 'Across France in Wartime?'), E P Dutton & Co, New York, 1917
- *Across France in War Time*, W Fitzwater Wray (?Kuklos?), J M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1916
- *Under Fire: the journal of a squad*, Henri Barbusse, translated by W Fitzwater Wray, introduction by Brian Rhys, J M Dent & Sons (Everyman's Library), 1965
- *Under Fire*, Henri Barbusse, translated by Robin Buss, introduction by Jay Winter, Penguin Books, 2003 (Penguin Classics edition 2014)

## Online:

- 'Le Feu' is available online:<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4380>This is the Fitzwater Wray translation
- *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>

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[1] '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?*

[2] 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.

[3] '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.

[4] 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

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

[6]

'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

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

[8] *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)

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

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