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# The Great War: A Literary Perspective

HENRY G. GOLE

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**H**istorian Raymond Sontag's book about the interwar period from 1919 to 1939 has a graphic title, *A Broken World* (1971). In the preface to his book, Sontag tells us he borrowed his title from Gabriel Marcel's play of 1933, *Le monde cassé*, a play in which Marcel's heroine seems to say we live in an age when the values that once gave meaning to life no longer animate us. Analysis of the literature produced by those who participated in the First World War and those who have carefully studied it suggests that the war was one of those historical events that affected human consciousness profoundly. The literature on World War I is vast, and selection of what is purported to be the essence of the experience risks distortion—despite one's best intentions. The works cited in this essay were selected for no reason other than that they got it right in reflecting prewar moods, the experience of war, and expectations for life after the war.

## *Embarking on the Great Adventure*

Barbara Tuchman sets the prewar scene nicely in *The Proud Tower* (1966) by reflecting the self-satisfied mood of the middle class, the cultural pessimism of intellectuals, the twilight of the aristocracy, the emerging mobilization of the masses that found intellectuals and workers in an alliance under socialism, and the lunatic fringe of radicals prepared to destroy themselves and the existing order in bomb blasts.

Eyewitnesses report in memoirs, diaries, novels, and histories a remarkably similar response to the announcement of war in August 1914. As the regular forces moved out, reservists reported to mobilization centers, and the trains rolled in accordance with carefully worked-out timetables. The scene was almost identical in Europe's capitals: crowds filled the streets and bands played. Young girls gave kisses and flowers to young soldiers; veterans shared schnapps with departing heroes; photographs were snapped to record the joyous event; the young men went off to a war that promised to be brief, decisive, and—of course—victorious. Gordon Craig's *Germany, 1866-1945* (1978) effectively mirrors the mood of the waifs on their way to death: while still on the train to the front, a German lieutenant wrote in a letter, "War is like Christmas!" He was killed within weeks.

The outpouring of superheated nationalism found expression in jingoistic cries in Paris and Berlin, and even the phlegmatic British, accustomed to regular troop departures to police the Empire, serenaded the old sweats of the regular army as they embarked for the trip to the Continent. Despite the shock of modern warfare that awaited the troops, enthusiasm for the war did not fade quickly. It was not until 1916 that the British found it necessary to resort to conscription. War Secretary Kitchener's "New Army" of volunteers was planned to augment the regulars with a force of 100,000 men, but it was oversubscribed as millions of Brits reported for service. In France middle-aged men—and even very old intellectuals—volunteered to serve as ordinary soldiers. Erich Maria Remarque, in a memorable scene from *All Quiet On The Western Front* (1929), describes the nationalistic *Gymnasium* teacher encouraging his 17- and 18-year-old pupils to do their duty to the *Vaterland* by immediately enlisting as ordinary soldiers.

How does one begin to explain the festive reception to war described in virtually all the literature of the time? Certainly part of the answer lies in the fact that the war experienced was not the war expected. War is always filled with surprises, but the sharp contrast between the euphoria of August and the later fatalism of front soldiers invites analysis.

In *Redemption By War* (1982), Roland N. Stromberg describes the alienation of the artist and the intellectual in the decades before 1914, an alienation caused by the widespread neglect of things of the mind that seemed to accompany mass production, industrialization, and social fragmentation. It seemed to creative and sensitive people that technological

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progress was bought at the price of some inner core of values whose loss was lamented. The philistinism meant, for example, that Germany's search for a place in the sun would turn the land of thinkers and poets away from philosophy, art, and religion. Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1900) reflects this concern, and Hermann Hesse's *Unterm Rad* (Under the Wheel; 1906) suggests that the new age crushed sensitive souls as boors prospered. Franz Kafka's protagonists confront faceless bigness that denies individuality; Max Weber's sociology characterizes impersonal bureaucratic behavior that regards people as parts of a big machine. The artist and the intellectual reacted to soulless modernism by turning inward, thus demonstrating estrangement from the external world and a tendency to make art or energy or revolution ends in themselves. The literature in the years before the war abounds with phrases suggesting the unconnectedness of a beautiful "inner life" with ugly external life. D. H. Lawrence summed up the mood in 1912: "The last years have been years of demolition." Stromberg's thesis is that alienated intellectuals were ready for the drastic "redemption by war."

James Joll, the distinguished British historian, offers yet another partial explanation for the ease with which Europe tripped or slipped into war in his *1914: The Unspoken Assumptions* (1968). Joll contends that there are unspoken assumptions abroad in any age, assumptions that the historian must discover and bear in mind as he attempts to understand specific events. They are not to be found in archives. All of us are naturally affected by the spirit of the age, especially in our formative years, in ways as automatic as taking a breath. Joll suggests that World War I leadership was probably less influenced by the intellectual currents of 1900 to 1914 than by Darwin and Nietzsche. Perhaps, he speculates, the idea of social Darwinism influenced men in a way that predisposed them to a trial of strength. States, statesmen, soldiers, and certain unspoken assumptions were at work. That these things mattered is probable, but precisely how much they mattered is at best an educated estimate.

Joll joins Stromberg in noting how Europe seemed to welcome the escape from the dull and ordinary of everyday life and the plunge into a great adventure, an experience expected to elevate and purify a generation of Europeans. Something great and wonderful was expected. Further, involvement in war allowed societies temporarily to evade disruptive domestic issues. National values thrust aside class values. Of course, class tensions would return as the war ceased to be a great adventure and took on the character of a grinding man-killer promising no profit and deserving an end. In Germany the ruling Social Democrats experienced schism and defection; in France the mutinies of 1917 were widespread and not unrelated to class feelings; in Britain strikes broke out on the home front during the war; in Russia two revolutions took place; in Italy defeatism reigned. But as war broke out the tensions were shelved. The unspoken assumption was that Europe would be better for the war.

### *The Intrusion of Reality*

The enthusiasm of 1914 was made easier by the prevailing notion that the war would be short and decisive. The apparent lessons of Prussian successes in 1866 and 1870 were learned by professional European soldiers; the lessons of the American Civil War and the Russian wars with Turkey in the 1870s and with Japan in 1904-1905 were noted, but they did not animate military thought in Europe. Technical improvements in weapons—the high rate of fire of rifles, machine guns, and artillery—clearly favored defense over offense. This fact would make a mockery of romantic pre-1914 notions of war. Verve, dash, and glamor were early victims of the material war fought from the continuous line of dugouts extending from the Channel to the Alps. Visions of brave hussars charging over green fields had little to do with the reality of millions of men hiding in holes in the ground from the lethal effects of modern weapons. The former servants of industrial Europe became the targets of the industrial machine they had served, making an ironic joke of the idea that soldiers had escaped routine labor for the romance of war. If audacity was expected of war in 1914, endurance proved to be the more essential quality of a soldier in trench warfare.

It has often been observed that military leadership could not have been further off the mark than it was in 1914. A retired banker in Warsaw, Ivan S. Bloch, had it right in *The Future of War* (1899), predicting what would happen in the next great European War. He attached greater value to the effects of improved weapons and the use of fortifications favoring defense, while professional soldiers, emulating the German General Staff, stressed an offensive that would produce victory through careful planning, thorough supervision, swift mobilization, and meticulous timetables to get mass armies to the decisive point at the critical time. Further, they assumed that this epicenter of civilization would conduct war with the clinical efficiency of European science and the nobility of European culture. The French preached the virtue of attack, audacity, the offensive spirit—“the spirit of the bayonet”; the British maintained a professional army too small for sustained combat on the Continent; the Russians were forced to rely upon sheer mass because they were too slow in implementing the reforms dictated by the lessons learned in 1904-1905; the Germans invested their hope in the Schlieffen Plan, a roll of the dice designed to knock the French out of the war quickly before tending to the Russians. Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August* (1962) captures the massive sweep of the plan, but the human dimension comes through most clearly in Walter Bloem’s little-known memoir called *The Advance From Mons: 1914* (1930).

Bloem, a teacher in civilian life, provides an eyewitness account of the Schlieffen Plan in action from his perspective as a German infantry company commander at the very tip of one of the bold arrows staff officers draw on maps. Painstaking plans and technical language are reduced to

universally understood human conditions as fatigue becomes exhaustion in a series of combats later called the Battle of the Marne. Several themes emerge in this account of the opening days and weeks of the war, themes repeated in other accounts of both the war of movement that characterized the early stage of the war, and the war in the trenches that was the experience of most participants from the winter of 1914 to the autumn of 1918. Among the themes one sees repeatedly in Bloem and in the other firsthand accounts of the war are these:

- Fatigue, the discovery that war is work.
- The affection that used to be called camaraderie—but has recently been christened “bonding”—that grows among men sharing hard and dangerous experiences.
- A deep sense of responsibility on the part of leaders that finds its reciprocal in the trust soldiers invested in combat leaders—but not in “the staff,” that collection of bumbling despised by combat soldiers of all armies who are always convinced that “the staff” is living well, out of touch with front-line reality, and more dangerous than the enemy.
- Evidence the enemy is everywhere but one does not see him.
- The shock of combat, usually characterized by brief violence and intense fire that are fickle in their choice of victims. (The duration of fire changes later in the war when artillery bombardment often lasts for hours and even, before a major assault, for days, but fickleness remains a constant).

Bloem is wounded at the Marne and concludes his book with an account of his feelings as he is transported back to Germany on a hospital train. His thoughts—and this, too, is typical of the war literature—remain with the company rather than focusing on anticipated comfort in the bosom of friends and family at home.

Marc Bloch, the great French historian, joined his regiment as a sergeant of the reserve on 4 August 1914, and on 10 August his regiment moved to the front to put Bloch in Bloem’s path. When the German plan for swift decision failed, the contending sides in the West attempted to outflank one another and failed again as the temporary strong points evolved into the trench systems in depth that we usually associate with World War I. There, with very little movement of the front lines, European youth bled for four years; the epicenter of civilization sent it into a meat grinder that ate it slowly by attrition or rapidly during foolish assaults.

Bloch, a sensitive scholar and teacher already embarked upon his academic career, recorded his impressions in crisp and clear prose in *Memoirs of War, 1914-1915* (1969) in a way that may be regarded now as naive and old-fashioned. His observations focus on the brotherhood of the trenches. He admires without reservation the simple soldiers who doggedly did their jobs, trusting in their leaders. In Bloch we find not a tender and impressionable youth, a subaltern fresh from a *Lycée, Gymnasium*, or

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public school, but a man whose critical faculty has been universally acclaimed, a man who served in the ranks and whose demonstrated capacity as a combat soldier earned him promotion to senior sergeant and ultimately captain in the French army. His judgments about conditions in combat show remarkable similarity to those of German and British observers. Indeed, similarities in the reaction to combat in 1914-1918 dwarf differences in the various national armies, thus suggesting a truly European experience and reaction to that experience.

Bloch joins his British allies and German foes in registering surprise that the professional military authorities were so totally unprepared for a war of material. The training was wrong; the materials required—wire and stakes for barriers, timber for bunkers—were in short supply; communications were inadequate; soldiers died too often as a result of errors by leaders; the staff was out of touch with the front. Patriotism mattered far less than camaraderie, a point confirmed decades later by Americans S. L. A. Marshall in *Men Against Fire* (1947) and Charles Moskos in *The American Enlisted Man* (1970), both of whom assert that individual heroism in combat is usually a factor of primary group loyalty rather than attachment to the idea of Fatherland, an abstraction called by various names.

Further, a feeling emerged that peacetime existence was incomplete, while war heightened the consciousness of "individuals who are ordinarily only half aware of their existence." Bloch, the privileged scholar, formed close attachments with comrades who were semiliterates, men with whom he would have had only the most tangential relationship in normal times as they prepared his meals or repaired his shoes. The various classes in European society discovered one another and something beyond themselves.

The first weeks of war experienced by amateur soldiers Bloem and Bloch were shared by a German lieutenant, a professional soldier to whom combat was also a new experience but whose book differs from the general literature of the Great War. Erwin Rommel's account, *Attacks* (1937), is less the record of a once-in-a-lifetime adventure than a journal of lessons used later in the practice of his trade. It is a series of diary entries apparently jotted down in moments of relative quiet following combat actions. At a later date Rommel analyzed his diary entries and added short observations that answer the question, What did that experience mean to a student and practitioner of war?

Rommel led a charmed life, enjoying what German soldiers call *Soldatenglück* (soldiers' luck). As a junior leader in the infantry on the Western Front during the war of movement, on the Eastern Front, and later in the Alps fighting Italians, Rommel was often in close combat. What distinguished him from civilians turned soldier was his absorption in the professional challenges of war. From time to time he reflects on men killed or wounded and shows the same respect for his soldiers as individuals expressed by Bloem and Bloch, but his typical behavior is rapid analysis of the situation facing him, swift action, consolidation, and focus on the next task. Rommel's account of his experiences during the 1914-1918 war is of interest to those who study his record during the 1939-1945 war.

### *From the Madness—the Quiet and the Storm*

Hate, propaganda, and even war news were abundant on the home front, but neither Bloem, Bloch, nor Rommel showed personal animosity toward the enemy, nor did any of the participants discussed in this essay. The enemy is generally regarded as a victim "just like us," and one finds far more biting remarks about "the staff" directing the bloody madness—especially during the war in the trenches—than hate of the fellow on the other side of no-man's-land. Few soldiers had time to post colored pins on maps to indicate the progress of the war, and few showed interest in events beyond those affecting the regiment. Moreover, pins and maps were a caricature of the hard life in the trenches, an unreality suited to the general fiction that seemed to characterize the civilian appreciation of events at the front during the war.

Perhaps no participant in the Great War painted a picture so broadly disseminated and long-lasting as the version presented by Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet On The Western Front*. Remarque's best-known book has become World War One in the public mind. Overwhelmingly pacifistic, the book shrieks "never again"; nothing could be worth the wholesale manslaughter of war as it was fought in the second decade of the 20th century. The horror of war, the camaraderie of frontline soldiers, the estrangement of combatants from those who did not share in the trench experience, the waste, futility, and mindlessness of it all—these impressions are indelibly carved in the mind of the reader. The impressions suggest that veterans can never fit into life away from the trenches, nor can they tell non-veterans why that is so.

Remarque's novels about German veterans, *The Road Back* (1931) and *Three Comrades* (1937), pick up at least this one theme of *All Quiet*: on leave from the trenches the young soldiers find themselves incapable of dispelling the mistaken notion of war held by those who remained at home. The truth was simply too stark and painful to relate. So it is after the war. Because the veterans prefer not to shock well-meaning friends and beloved



families, Remarque's veterans conclude that they simply do not fit. Most of them went to war directly from school, unprepared for civilian trades and professions. They returned to a Germany in turmoil, a place where nothing was the same, nothing had held still. Social, political, and economic disorder prevailed, and those best prepared to deal with the new conditions are depicted as unsavory: profiteers who measure human worth in material, and men who would not have been good comrades in the trenches.

Remarque's powerful naturalistic prose in *All Quiet* has shaped our picture of life in the trenches as no other single book has. The impasse on the Western Front finally proved mass frontal assaults to be a purposeless waste of life. Attacks by hundreds of thousands of men, supported by preparatory fires of millions of artillery rounds, produced tens of thousands of casualties—but not only among the defending force. The latter almost always found enough survivors to man the machine guns that slaughtered the attackers in their dense formations, struggling close-in with barbed wire and mud, totally exposed. Even “success” by the assaulting forces would place them in a position vulnerable to enemy artillery fire, while their supporting artillery could neither move forward over the torn-up terrain nor reach the enemy artillery with counter-fires. A sense of being at the scene of a mass assault gone wrong is created in John Keegan's *The Face Of Battle* (1976), especially in the section called, “The Somme, July 1, 1916.” The German solution became to avoid mass assaults.

Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* (1929) provides us a striking contrast to Remarque's pacifism, but he too is convinced that the front experience permanently separated the front soldier from the others. Jünger was one of the most highly decorated German soldiers of the Great War and one of the most often wounded. His combat record was so impressive that he was hand-picked to organize and lead elite troops whose mission was to infiltrate enemy front lines using techniques requiring extraordinarily brave and tough men. The infiltration teams, called *Sturm* (Storm)—or *Kampfgruppen* (Assault groups), relied on stealth to penetrate enemy lines, followed by shock action with individual weapons. The idea was to cause confusion and disorganization among defenders that would create openings for exploitation. Jünger led such assault teams and claimed to love it!

After the war Jünger observed the same chaos described by Remarque but came to different conclusions. Passive acceptance of the alienation of the veteran was not in Jünger's nature. He was convinced that a new man was born in the trenches, a man who would lead. Breast-beating and lamentations about unhappy circumstances simply would not do. The decisiveness of the assault team leader, his courage and leadership, had a new objective: veterans led by such men would reshape the political world. It is this mode of thought that is captured so well in Robert G. Waite's *The Vanguard of Nazism* (1952), a book about the adventurous souls whose

answer to profound problems was movement and action. The collection of bold men who comprised the *Freikorps* (Free Corps) and veterans' associations organized along military lines consisted of veterans, boys who hadn't had their war, nationalists shamed by the Treaty of Versailles, royalists longing for the good old days of Wilhelmine Germany, those who had nowhere else to go, and those disenchanted with Germany's experiment with democracy. These men craved leadership, clear objectives, and a way out of Germany's many problems. Germany had not been prepared for the republic thrust upon it. Paramilitary action in the streets passed for political activity.

### ***British School Boys and Literary Lights***

The British public school boys produced in their memoirs and novels a unique version of the war they fought as subalterns in the trenches. It was unique because the high literary style abounding in poetic references stands in sharp contrast to the naturalistic writing of Remarque, the emotional patriotism of Marc Bloch, the fevered intensity of Jünger, and the cool professional analysis of Rommel. The detached, almost bemused tone of the young British officers is remarkable on several counts. Their youth could have resulted in a shrill reaction to the unfairness of it all; their class could have inclined them to be shocked as the products of a privileged society confronted the appalling troglodyte existence of life in caves, mud, and offal; their education could have caused severe recoil at the pure mindlessness of the war; their strong individualism and unmartial cast of mind could have rebelled at the brutish prospect of joining a herd going over the top to almost certain death or maiming; their political influence could have won them cushy posts out of harm's way. None of these things happened. The public school boys volunteered to serve in the trenches, and their minds remained with the battalion even while they were on leave in elegant surroundings. They fought well, earning the respect of their soldiers and of their leaders. It was their class that bled disproportionately, but it was their successor generation that declared itself unwilling to fight for king and country. And they wrote beautifully of the ugly. Wet, miserable, exhausted, and tense, they wrote about the war in a manner one would expect of an art critic examining an interesting canvas, sherry in hand. Where were these attractive and puzzling creatures formed?

A sense of *noblesse oblige* is the beginning of an answer, but that only leads to the question of how such a deeply held and unquestioning sense of responsibility was cultivated in British society. The cryptic response "on Eton's playing fields" is shorthand for a fuller treatment provided in Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Company* (1899). The English "public" school is, of course, a private school, a boarding school for those classes able to pay the considerable costs of sending their sons away for a dozen

years or so. Completion of the right school was the entry fee to the caste that ruled Britain, but, more relevant to our inquiry, the public school played a key role in socializing those who ran the Empire—or fought its wars. Kipling's novel is a pure joy to read, and provides an arresting insight to how boys were formed at the public school. Learning to be "the right sort," a British gentleman, was at least as important as learning Latin, history, and math. What appeared to be stoicism was a resolution not to let the home side down, to do what was expected of a gentleman, and—above all—to do what one's peers expected one to do. The British gentleman officer was not impressive in his tactical or technical competence. Rather vague in specific military expertise, he often read poetry or mused in a sunny field when he was supposed to be doing a course in the rear area. But he died well. Many British officers declined to carry weapons, but Tommy knew that his officer would lead the way even if armed with but a riding crop.

My survey of public school boys at war includes a lesser-known author, Donald Hankey, whose *A Student In Arms* (1917) brings Christian idealism to the trenches. Qualified for a commission, he volunteered to serve as a private despite a Sandhurst and Oxford education. When war erupted he was working as a lay Christian with workingmen's clubs in London. *A Student In Arms* is a collection of his essays from the front which had been published in newspapers, most of them in *The Spectator*. His admiration of the ordinary soldier enduring hardships and doing his duty under the worst circumstances pervades the essays. Infantry experience convinced him the old class system was finished in Britain, because the soldiers had discovered qualities and deficiencies in comrades without regard to pedigree. He seemed convinced that the working classes mobilized for war could be demobilized from the army, but that a new and lasting political awareness would be a by-product of the war experience. Hankey's intelligence and soldierly qualities resulted in promotion to sergeant, and he died an officer in the summer of 1916. One suspects that his voice would have counted for something after the war, had he survived it. His book, one of the first by a man of the trenches, was enormously popular in Britain, and it went through at least 14 printings in the United States during the war.

Before turning to some of the stars of British World War I literature—Graves, Sassoon, and Blunden—we should accord special

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attention to Charles Carrington's *Soldier From The War Returning* (1965), written 50 years after the war and 35 years after his early pseudonymous account of his wartime experiences, *A Subaltern's War* (by "Charles Edmonds"; 1930). He shows remarkable stubbornness in reacting to the reaction against the war. He debunks the idea that his generation was converted to pacifism by its wartime experience; he denies the notion that the British army was led by "donkeys" and sings the praises of the much-maligned Field Marshal Douglas Haig; he contends that disillusionment and disenchantment with European civilization were not the prevalent postwar moods of his generation; he is fiercely proud that his generation did the right thing; and he served again in World War II, this time as a staff officer.

Carrington here caps his attitude about service in the Great War: "For once in life the plain practical issue coincided with the moral issue." His admiration of the British soldier is unstinting, and he treasures the camaraderie of the war years. Carrington contends that Remarque could not have been a frontline soldier and probably wrote to ride the wave of pacifism and to make money. Graves, Blunden, Sassoon, and Jünger are praised as the real articles. Carrington's stance is unchanged 50 years after the event: World War I was necessary, about as well-managed as one could expect, and those who did their bit in 1914-1918 regret it not one whit.

Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves were far less certain about the wisdom of the leadership, the purposes of the war, and its effect on European civilization. Sassoon, in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), shows himself to be one of the enormously gifted young English gentlemen who wrote of the war and his feelings about it with great sensitivity and in lucid prose. He combined perfectly a sense of being there with ruminations about the war, England, and his private feelings. A real hero, winner of the Military Cross, he brings a puppy-like enthusiasm to war, the public school boy's approach to games. His recklessness in no-man's-land, often alone, wins the admiration of his soldiers, his peers, and his leaders. While on leave he is anxious to get back to his battalion; in the trenches he longs to be back in England. He writes scathingly of profiteers at home, and initially endures without comment the totally out-of-touch jingoism mouthed by friends and neighbors. Sassoon, supremely articulate, cannot bring himself to reveal the dreary and ugly reality of the trenches to his loving aunt and admiring neighbor, a retired officer too old for service. Sassoon tires of puffed-up newspaper accounts that add a dimension of glamor to a place where it simply doesn't exist. In the course of the war, Sassoon increasingly sees himself and his comrades as cogs in a machine out of control. He speculates about war aims, has a change of heart about the war, and provides his superiors with a seemingly insoluble problem when he publishes a statement saying that the war should be ended. The establishment is confronted with an upper-class hero, an ideal young officer, who, at a time when the French army is in mutiny and the Russians are in revolution, digs in his heels,

associates with pacifists, and wins support from his Parliamentary representative, who shares Sassoon's views. A court martial is out of the question. Resolution and face-saving result when the army decides to treat him as a shell-shock victim. He completes his "honorable service" and goes on to distinguish himself as a man of letters.

Sassoon's friend Robert Graves, while recognizing the insanity of which he is part and sympathizing with Sassoon, waits until after the war before saying *Goodbye To All That* (1929). Graves, whose literary career is probably the most illustrious of the public school boys, was also a capable infantry officer during the war. Home after the war, he is unable to fit in. While his feelings of lasting estrangement from his society are certainly personal, at the intellectual level he is convinced that European civilization has committed suicide. The "all that" of his title can be presumed to mean a civilization gone wrong. After the war he retreated to a Spanish island in the Mediterranean, writing and building his literary reputation. Graves never rejected his homeland; he simply dropped out, anticipating the 1960s and 1970s by half a century. Ironically, his son, an infantry officer in World War II, died a hero's death in Burma—caught up, one supposes, in all that.

Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928) is first-rate literature. It, too, is the antithesis of Remarque's naturalism. In Blunden's book the war is muted, serving mainly as backdrop for internal musings and literary reflections. All this cerebral exercise is done while Blunden's body is in uniform and in danger. A continuing theme in the memoirs and novels is, again, admiration for the simple drones who do their best under stress and discomfort. So it is with Blunden; so it is with the public school boys.

### *Values Changed, But Life Goes On*

Eric Leed's essay, "Class and Disillusionment In World War I," and his book *No Man's Land* (1979) demonstrate how the Great War affected the class system, thus contributing an important element to the character and meaning of modernity. Like Stromberg, Leed establishes the early mood in Europe, receptive to war as a solution to the certain something that was wrong with European civilization. He then portrays the shock of discovery attendant upon the war experience itself: war wasn't at all what was expected. His most interesting and original contribution to an already vast Great War literature is his focus on the realization by participants that war was not an escape from an impersonal industrialized system and petty daily concerns; it was infinitely worse. The dissatisfaction with being a mere cog in a machine was in no way assuaged by suddenly finding oneself the target of all the munitions that a modern state is capable of producing. Fear and death had been anticipated, but what Leed calls "the proletarianization" of war was not. War was not an escape from mind-deadening work; war was the most dispiriting kind of work, sheer drudgery

in the most abject circumstances—driving stakes, stringing barbed wire, digging trenches, carrying supplies and wounded men, constant bumping and falling. The most primitive kind of work was done, usually at night, in all weather conditions. And all of this was done while an unseen enemy rained death upon soldiers in a most arbitrary manner, making survival almost entirely a matter of chance.

Being an insignificant object in the process, according to Leed, stunned all soldiers but particularly those of the middle class, who in peace had felt themselves to be largely in control of their fates. The ordinary soldier, normally a worker, was already conditioned to be a dehumanized part of the industrial machine. In contrast with other writers surveyed here, Leed contends that the soldier-worker tended to regard volunteers—officers or fellow soldiers—with suspicion, because workers couldn't understand volunteering for death, a senseless and frivolous act. But Leed himself provides numerous examples of bonds of affection being formed across class lines. Leed concludes that it was impossible for the prewar class system to continue. War provided neither a remedy to alienation nor an escape from routine tasks, but it did accelerate the process of social leveling.

One senses that the world was a different place after the Great War, that the event was a watershed; but to prove that proposition by demonstrating a shift in values requires the sensitivity of the poet more than the exactitude of the accountant. That which gives value to life is more than statistics can tell.

Then too, it is misleading to attribute to all the qualities of a few. Those who write memoirs and novels are generally more sensitive and intellectual than the masses who returned home after the war to support mum and the kids. Certainly some joined Graves in saying goodbye to all that. Certainly communism and fascism attracted others. However, English poet Louis MacNeice probably spoke for the majority of the returning veterans, those who did not compose music, paint pictures, or write books:

All we want is a bank balance  
and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

But he went on:

It's no go, my honey love, it's no go, my poppet,  
Work your hands from day to day, the winds  
will blow the profit.

The [hour] glass is falling hour by hour, the  
glass will fall forever,  
but if you break the bloody glass, you  
won't hold up the weather.

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