

Survivors of a Kind: Memoirs of the Western Front

Review Number:

728

Publish date:

Saturday, 31 January, 2009

Author:

Brian Bond

ISBN:

9781847250049

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

192pp.

Publisher:

Continuum

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Alisa Miller

Brian Bond's newest book presents an analysis of Western Front memoirs written by British and Commonwealth authors, acting as an analogous volume to *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History*.⁽¹⁾ The study is organised into a series of essays discussing individual authors, which are in turn complemented by comparative thematic chapters. Chapter titles indicate, roughly, the representative roles of the various servicemen selected: for example, Alfred Pollard and John Reith as the 'Fire-eaters'; General F. P. Crozier as 'Martinet, militarist and opponent of war; and Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, somewhat ironically, 'having a "good war"'. Within these general topical divisions one finds a breadth of experiences and opinions, which Bond conveys through a series of well-selected quotations from the memoirs, supplemented by published and unpublished works by the highlighted authors, letters, regimental histories and contemporary biographies.

Robert Graves' 1929 memoir *Goodbye to All That* ⁽²⁾ is addressed in the opening chapter, and is presented as a product of the author's 'mordant contempt for all the conventional values of the time' (p. 3). It serves as a foil to Charles Carrington's *A Subaltern's War* ⁽³⁾, also published in 1929 but written ten years earlier. Carrington's account implicitly rebuts Graves' characterisation of the war as an engine for disillusionment, instead arguing that 1919 and peace provided 'the real moment of disenchantment' (p. 16), the point at which the serving generation lost confidence in the meaning of their collective experience.

These two books offer contrasting, but not necessarily binary archetypes; what links all of the memoirs is a respect for fellow soldiers, particularly those that did not survive the war. While Graves' literary talents serve him well, 'transforming it [his war experience] into his own brilliantly colourful myth' (p. 3), Bond points out that much of the bitterness conveyed by the memoir is tempered by his tangible and 'undoubted

pride in his regiment' (p. 6). He allows the memoirist some latitude, observing that it 'would be unrealistic to expect the persona projected by the Robert Graves of 1929 precisely to reflect his young, immature self at the beginning of the war' (p. 4). This in turn leads to a discussion of Graves' later disputes with Siegfried Sassoon over whether or not Graves' account stood as authentic recollection, as opposed to fictional invention, a question Bond returns to implicitly with all of his selected memoirs. Indeed, the genre's unresolved position, lying somewhere between primary and secondary source, remains an issue throughout the study.

Despite being grouped thematically on the opposite side of the disillusionment divide to Graves, Carrington also clung to the ideal of unit cohesion. For him, war could be terrible, but fighting 'side by side created a sense of being initiated, of a shared inner life'. War was ultimately a 'shared experience' (p. 15) as much as it was a metaphor for personal struggle and transformation. Yet Carrington's sense that he was one of the 'initiated' came at a price; it walled him off from civilians, turning him into an example of a trope consistent to the experiences, to varying degrees, of all of the memoirists included in *Survivors*. He, like Graves, lived long enough to witness the transformation of the war as a political symbol, and he felt that, in the popular memory, the war and its servicemen came to be misrepresented. Yet Bond reports that while Carrington maintained a strong level of disapproval for H. G. Wells' *Mr Britling sees it Through* (4) and Erich Marie Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (5), he 'largely absolved the best-known British trio of memoir writers, Sassoon, Graves and Blunden from criticism' because 'they had shown their true colours in their passionate devotion to their regiment[s]' (p. 26). The sense of loyalty and a common understanding still dictated Carrington's position, traceable throughout his literary career in later accounts of the war, and remained dominant in *A Soldier from the Wars Returning* (6), written many years after its conclusion.

In essence, the memoirs that follow amplify and expand upon Graves' and Carrington's examples. Bond presents Guy Chapman's *A Passionate Prodigality* and *A Kind of Survivor* (7) and Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (8) as sensitive, personalised testimonies to the lingering psychological effects of the war, an event that remained the epitome of an 'overwhelming emotional experience' (p. 28) in the lives of the authors. Alfred Pollard and John Reith's less literate contributions highlight the fact that for these men, the war was a welcome shift away from the daily drudgery of unfulfilling jobs and relationships: in Pollard's words, "'At last I was doing something worthwhile'" (p. 46), while Reith was 'frustrated and angry' when he received his 'Blighty' wound in 1915 (p. 56). In a slightly anomalous chapter entitled 'Grandeur and misery: the Guards', Bond employs a synthesis of various memoirs to interrogate the experiences and reputations of the elite British Guards regiments, allowing him to succinctly address the attitudes of men towards their particular units, presenting a more localised, as opposed to nationalised, view of the war, an approach he returns to throughout *Survivors*.

The chapter discussing Frederic Manning's and Frank Richards' memoirs addresses issues of nationality and, in particular, class: Manning's character 'Bourne', the gentleman ranker of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (9), constantly struggles with attempts to make him an officer and Richards, himself a professional soldier before 1914, expresses hostility to 'all British generals and senior staff officers' (p. 86). Siegfried Sassoon and Max Plowman both objected politically to aspects of the First World War, but Bond is careful to point out differences in their practical experiences. Sassoon, while expressing disdain for civilian politics he viewed as instrumental in prolonging the war, at times enjoyed it, whereas Plowman expressed more consistent concern over an experience 'dominated by machines' (p. 108). Still, in their memoirs both writers call attention to the complexities inherent in opposing war while serving or having served as soldiers.

The final three chapters continue to expose the war's inherent contradictions and sometimes surprising continuities. Bond characterises Brigadier-General F. P. Crozier's *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land* (10) as reflective of a regular officer with a 'highly irregular career' (p. 113), an inconsistent man but a highly interesting one with a penchant towards what appears, at times, to be indiscriminate violence, and an officer whose 'very odd mixture of militarism and anti-war attitudes ... fell only just short of outright pacifism' (p. 121). Cecil Lewis' and Billy Bishop's memoirs emphasise both the thrill and the strange sense of remove that characterised flying and aerial combat, as well as its implications for future warfare; Lewis' service in defence of London during the First World War made him particularly conscious of 'the terrible fate likely to

befall urban populations in the next conflict' (p. 143). Finally, discussions of Anthony Eden's *Another World: 1897–1917* (11) and the first volume of Harold Macmillan's *Winds of Change, 1914–1939* (12), like those of Carrington's 1965, Chapman's 1975 and Reith's 1966 memoirs, further highlight the complex nature of the war's 'end' in the minds of servicemen, providing Bond with greater latitude to address the war's legacy as something perpetually shifting, personally and collectively, in the nation's political, military and cultural memory.

Particularly useful throughout the book is Bond's inclusion of the publishing histories of the individual volumes. Alongside his textual summaries he includes information about when and where they were drafted, their relation to the publication of other war volumes (the success of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* serves as a frequent point of comparison), and the reissuing of editions at various points in time to the post-war readership. This approach supports Bond's efforts to present his analysis not as literary criticism, offering the memoirs instead as products of temporal debates over the war's historic and cultural meaning. It also helps to remind the reader that the circumstances governing publication of memoirs were as much commercial as they were sentimental; they provide evidence of the 'pleasure culture of war' (13) that relied on a readership eager for 'authentic' tales from the front. Bond points out that, (with the possible exception of Manning, whose *The Middle Parts of Fortune* was written only after extensive prodding from his publisher Peter Davies (p. 77)) most memoirists who wrote of their war experiences were motivated by monetary as well as moral and artistic concerns. He explains the practicalities of publication: for example, the differences in the financial circumstances of the individual authors, and the disparities in veterans' allowances. His selection of memoirs that proved successful at the time they were published alongside those that have sold well ever since reminds the reader of their continued usefulness to historians like, for instance, Dan Todman, who emphasise the importance of viewing the popular mythology of the war as a product of shifting cultural, social and political forces influenced by the way in which its literature and memory are presented and used in subsequent periods.(14)

It is unfortunate that in his framing of the memoirs Bond chooses not to engage directly with historians like Todman (*The Great War, Myth and Memory* is listed in the bibliography, but it is not discussed) who have recently contributed a great deal of nuance to the study of the cultural history of the First World War. Bond's references to secondary sources emphasise the canon of controversial military histories, including Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (15), as well as more recent standard texts, for example Robin Prior's and Trevor Wilson's *The Somme* (16) and Gary Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory*.(17) His discussion of literary studies of the war centres on Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined* (18), Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (19) and Hugh Cecil's *The Flower of Battle* (21), which Bond cites in his introduction as a direct precursor to *Survivors* (p. xiii). The analysis of individual texts and authors, as well as the societal themes and conditions important to providing a thorough context, would benefit from the more recent work undertaken by cultural historians such as Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert in their *Capital Cities at War* series (21), Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (22) and Adrian Gregory's *The Silence of Memory* (23), and in particular Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau's and John Fuller's studies of the writings of servicemen in France and Britain.(24)

It is also problematic from a theoretical standpoint that there are occasional sections in the study in which it is difficult to tell whether Bond is offering his own opinion about an event or about a particular author's experience of it, or whether he is summarising the text or view of the author he is discussing. This may be explained by Bond's stated intention to employ 'particular books to illustrate specific themes' of the war (p. xiv), thus allowing them, to an extent, to speak for themselves, but it can be confusing. Finally, at times one wishes for more links between the various presented authors. Bond tends to imply reoccurring themes as opposed to stating them outright. Yet this can also be viewed as a virtue, as he leaves room for the reader to make his or her own connections; his assessments avoid heavy-handedness, rendering the book an ideal starting point for students who wish to make their own further inquiries.

What is most useful about this study is that it collects analysis of a sampling of memoirs that, although familiar to historians of the period, are often overlooked in favour of more canonical works. While the

examples offered by Graves, Blunden, Sassoon, Henri Barbusse and Ernst Jünger remain widely available to lecturers and their students, the works of many of the authors discussed in *Survivors* have not been reissued for years, and as a result remain comparatively obscure. This is unfortunate, and Bond works to correct the problem, demonstrating the ‘tremendous variety of war memoirs in...their style of presentation and in their authors’ attitudes to the war’ (p. xiii). In presenting the writings of individuals like Carrington, Reith, Richards, Crozier, Bishop, Lewis, Eden and Macmillan as a compendium, complete with information regarding their drafting and publication, Bond contributes to a broader academic effort, working to present the First World War as comprising a complex and fluid experience for the servicemen who survived to write about it.

Notes

1. Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London, 1929).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Charles Carrington, *A Subaltern's War* (1929).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. H. G. Wells, *Mr Britling sees it Through* (London, 1916).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (London, 1929).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning* (London, 1965).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality* (London, 1933); *A Kind of Survivor* (London, 1975).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London, 1928).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Frederic Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (London, 1929).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. F. P. Crozier, *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land* (London, 1930).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Anthony Eden, *Another World: 1897–1917* (London, 1976).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change, 1914–1939* (London, 1966)[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London, 2000), p. 82.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Dan Todman, *The Great War, Myth and Memory* (London, 2005), pp. 222–3.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London, 1961).[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (London, 2005).[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory* (London, 2001).[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London, 1990).[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975).[Back to \(19\)](#)
20. Hugh Cecil, *The Flower of Battle* (London, 1995).[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919* (Cambridge, 1997); *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919. Vol. 2, A Cultural History*, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(21\)](#)
22. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge, 1995).[Back to \(22\)](#)
23. Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994).[Back to \(23\)](#)
24. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914–1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France During the First World War* (Providence, RI, 1992); John Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Forces, 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1988).[Back to \(24\)](#)

Other reviews:

oxford journals

<http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXV/513/480.full> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/728>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3705>

[2] <http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXV/513/480.full>