Civvies: Middle-class men on the English Home Front, 1914–18

In an article for *The Times* Magazine published earlier this year, the novelist Sebastian Faulks characterized relations between soldiers of the First World War (whose monolithic perspective he takes on in the article) and British civilians thus: ‘When you return home, on leave, wounded or, with luck, demobilised in 1918, you will find that people have little idea of what you have endured, and not much interest in it either. They have their lives to get on with; and they urge you to do likewise’.(1) The rest, according to Faulks, was veteran silence.

This is the mythic narrative of the cultural impact of the war as a dividing line, not only between past and present, as so seminally argued by Paul Fusell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), but also between soldier and civilian, the ‘armchair generals’ and the ‘men who were there’ or, in Wilfred Owen’s beautiful and devastating accusation, ‘the old man and the young’. (2) This myth has dominated much of the British narrative of war memory over the past century, with the idea that jingoistic old men (and all women) sent young men to die in unimaginable slaughter which they callously ignored or could not comprehend, leaving veterans silenced by trauma and ignorance, continuing to shape representations of the war today.(3)

While this narrative of the war and its emotional aftermath often seems to dominate popular representations of the war and its memory, recent historical analysis has complicated the picture considerably. Social and cultural historians such as Helen McCartney and Joanna Bourke, for instance, have demonstrated the ways in which, far from being separated from their civilian identities by their experiences of war, British servicemen remained deeply rooted in these identities and sought to swiftly return to them at the end of the war.(4) From
the civilian perspective, Adrian Gregory and Susan Grayzel have shown how deeply and directly the war impacted on British civil society in ways that forced continuing connections between civilians and soldiers even as they complicated any parallel myths of national unity in the face of total war. Such connections might be contested and strained, but they remained a powerful social force throughout the war.

It is into this historiographic debate that Laura Ugolini’s new volume Civvies: Middle-class Men on the English Home Front, 1914–18 makes an important intervention.

Using the letters and wartime diaries, many of them written as self-conscious records of a historically important event, of middle-class men who did not, for a variety of reasons, serve with the armed forces, Ugolini explores the impact of the war on a variety of aspects of civil life. In the first three chapters she traces men’s responses to the war as it unfolded chronologically, emphasising the ways in which their lives not only changed over time but were expected to change during a period of such perceived historic import. Two chapters are dedicated to the key issue of service in wartime for civilian men, while the final three chapters explore thematically the impact of the war on significant aspects of their lives, including work, consumption and leisure and family relations. Through the analysis of these themes in terms of both social and gender relations, she argues that the important social divisions that civilian middle-class men perceived and wrote about were less those of age and gender than those of class. Quite simply, middle-class civilian men felt increasingly threatened as the war continued by what they perceived as the growing power of the working class.

This is not an entirely new argument. Adrian Gregory, whose The Last Great War is an important reference point for this book, makes a similar argument about the social divisions created by the war, particularly as it dragged on into its third and fourth years. Where Ugolini’s argument is original is in the social and gender perspective that her selection of source material allows her to explore. By giving space to the voices of a small group of civilians who are too often ignored because of their perceived privilege within the historical record, she sheds an intriguing light on the extent to which the war did, in fact, form a powerful moment of social dislocation. As she notes, ‘Edwardian middle-class men as a whole ... can be described as prosperous, well-educated and most importantly, powerful, especially if compared to the bulk of the working-class population or, indeed, women’ (p. 3). Yet she also points out that ‘we know more about women’s experiences on the home front than about men’s, and we know more about working-class than middle-class men’ (p. 3). And we certainly know more about the experiences of soldiers during the war than we do about those of male civilians. If, a centenary on from the war, the young men who fought are being given a voice, often an increasingly complex and contradictory one as more archives are uncovered and explored, then the ‘old men’ (although not all of the civilians examined by Ugolini were old) should be allowed a similarly nuanced right of reply. This, first and foremost, is what this volume does.

There are dangers to the cultural approach of this volume, which relies heavily on the personal writings of middle-class civilian men and their self-representation. For one thing, the available source material is far smaller than for soldiers of this period, although it is encouraging that two of the great national archives of material related to the war, the Imperial War Museum in London and the Liddle Collection held at the University of Leeds, are both well represented in the bibliography. Yet despite the author’s best attempts at providing a range of voices from within the parameters of her remit, some individuals do come to dominate. In particular, the unpublished diaries of Arthur Clark, which are clearly far more extensive than the published version which was discussed by Jeremy Paxman in Britain’s Great War (6), often appears as the dominant voice of middle-class male experience. There is also what appears to be a geographical bias, even for a book explicitly about England, with the South East of the country far better represented than any other region, although without a clearer demographic analysis of the source materials used, it can be a bit hard to track the representativeness of the men examined across the book’s combination of chronological and thematic arguments. Such a bias is certainly not limited to this work or, indeed, this form of analysis, but given the focus here on social dislocation, it does raise questions about how social and economic variations across the nation impacted upon middle-class civilians as a class of men.

There are other areas where greater location of the material in demographic analysis might similarly have
added greater depth. The age range of the men examined, for instance, is not entirely clear, although the perspectives of men such as both Clark, who was too old for military service, and George Wilkinson, who was of military age but working in a reserved occupation as an industrial chemist, are discussed. The question of age is important to Ugolini’s thesis. The representations and self-representations of middle-class men as civil volunteers demonstrate clearly the role age played in defining appropriate wartime masculinities and there are aspects of this analysis which it would be interesting to see pursued further. The importance of age to popular representations of the Volunteer Training Corps, for example, could usefully be explored in relation to the later cultural representations of old men discussed by Samuel Hynes in his analysis of the war’s impact on British culture.

Another, related, point that might benefit from further exploration is the question of family relations, explored in detail in chapter eight. This section provides significant new perspective on the gendering of relationships between soldiers and their families through its examination of letters written by civilian fathers to their soldier sons. Michael Roper has recently investigated communications between mothers and sons during the war, arguing that ‘The subjective impression that mothers formed a key link between young men and their families is supported by the larger patterns of correspondence’, with almost half the letters from unmarried men to families in the Imperial War Museum being addressed to mothers.(7) Ugolini’s identification of sources which give insight into the role of fathers as emotional supports and practical advisors to their sons in war time adds to our understanding of gender relations within the family and further comparative analysis would deepen and nuance of a fascinating perspective on gender history that encompasses men and women, civilian and soldier.

Similarly, more direct comparison with the views held by middle-class women on the changing nature of social relations in Britain would have added depth to the specifically gendered analysis of the book. There are clearly elements of the discussion, particularly relating to war service, which apply explicitly to men and for which a civilian male perspective provides new insight in its own right. However, given the powerful arguments that Ugolini makes about the impact of war on class relationships, the inclusion of comparative comments on women’s writings around the topics of consumption and living standards in particular would allow a clearer argument to be made about how many of the anxieties and concerns raised by the war and identified here were gender as much as class specific.

What the book does achieve extremely successfully is to identify two clear themes in the perspectives of middle-class male civilians during the war. The first, as already noted, is the anxiety over perceived social dislocations created by the war, which served as a reemphasis for these privileged commentators of their vision of the war as a momentous, world-changing historical event. This argument provides clear sociological underpinnings to the textual analysis, even as it challenges the case made by critics such as Samuel Hynes that such views were most clearly expressed through artistic media.

Equally importantly, Ugolini clearly identifies the overwhelming importance of the domestic to British masculine identities of the era. While working lives and the public role of civilian men form key elements of the discussion, it is the analysis of these men’s changing roles as paterfamilias and domestic providers that provide many of the most significant insights into the exploration of middle-class male civilians as gendered actors in wartime. This analysis fills an important gap in the current literature on masculine domesticity in this period by historians such as Bourke, John Tosh and myself which work around the subject of civilian domesticity during the war without addressing it directly.(8) By identifying the centrality of the home to civilian wartime masculinities, Ugolini helps connect pre-war, post-war and military identities in a powerful way.

There is, of course, still much work to be done around British masculinities in the era of the First World War, as the questions that this book raises about age and gender specificity highlight. But Ugolini has done a service to historians of gender of this period in providing a thoughtful introduction to a collection of important voices in a manner that sheds new light on old debates. Ignored or dismissed for too long as the voices of a privileged world destroyed by war, middle-class male civilians have finally been given the opportunity to speak as a demographic group in their own right, and the story they have to tell can only
further our historical understanding of the era. In these centenary years, when the myths of social division and cultural silencing are once again being rehearsed on many far-reaching platforms, Ugolini’s analysis could not be more timely.

Notes

3. For a fuller analysis of this myth and its place in British culture, see Samuel Hynes, A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture (New York, NY, 1990), pp. 383–404. Back to (3)
5. Adrian Gregory, The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War (Cambridge, 2008); Susan Grayzel, At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz (Cambridge, 2012). Back to (5)
8. Bourke, Dismembering the Male; John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England (New Haven, CT, 1999); Jessica Meyer, Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain (Basingstoke, 2009). Back to (8)

‘the author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further’

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