



Over the wall ...

Alan Maley reflects on
the 'war to end all wars'.

August 2014 marks the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. In the four years of conflict, over 16 million people were killed and 21 million were wounded. Nothing on this scale had ever been seen before. A whole generation of young men was wiped out, societies were transformed, the map of Europe was redrawn, and the seeds of the next war were sown in the vindictive treaties of Versailles and Aix-la-Chapelle. Things would never be the same again. So it is hardly surprising that, a hundred years on, this tragic event continues to fascinate historians, writers and the general public alike.

Rather than reviewing just a few books, I shall be suggesting a number of publications dealing with various aspects of the Great War. All of these offer compelling reading, some may provide rich inputs for teaching.

Origins of the war

There is still wide disagreement about the origins of the war. Some historians attribute responsibility to the deliberate policies of this or that country. Others see it as the inevitable result of a lack of foresight, nationalistic ambitions and

bungled political decisions. Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* is in the latter camp, and offers a splendid account of the long drift to war. For a more succinct, highly readable account, try Michael Howard's 'very short introduction' to the war. Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* is an earlier but still useful guide to the way events unfolded after the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand in Sarajevo – the event that set the ball rolling.

Poetry of the trenches

The utter horror of trench warfare on the Western Front ignited an explosion of literary creativity, much of it aimed at the hypocritical political classes who sent their youth to almost certain death in the name of patriotism. As Rudyard Kipling bitterly wrote:

*'If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.'*

Poets of the war, such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg, among many others, brought about a radical change in the way poetry was written, and their work is justly celebrated in collections such as George Walter's *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*.

Novels and short stories

There were also many novels and short stories (eg Barbara Korte's Penguin anthology) written about the war, including William Faulkner's *A Fable*, based on a mutiny in the French army, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which focused on the Italian front in the Alps, and the neglected masterpiece trilogy *Parade's End* by Ford Madox Ford. There were also some well-known titles from French and German writers, such as Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire (Le Feu)* and Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front (Im Westen Nichts Neues)*, both of which give a gruesome account of trench warfare and the pathos and futility of it all. And the war has continued to inspire writers up to the present. Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* captured the popular imagination, especially in its stage and film form. Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* was an intensely moving blend of a love story with the underground war experiences of sappers (soldiers who do engineering work, such as digging trenches and repairing bridges). And Pat Barker's trilogy *Regeneration* (made into the film *Behind the Lines*) has been widely praised for its frank and graphic depiction of the brutality of the war, including some of its sexual aspects.

Diaries and journalism

Unsurprisingly, the war generated a rich harvest of diaries, letters and popular journalism. *The Wipers Times* was a newspaper published by soldiers themselves in Ypres (Wipers) between 1916 and 1918. Most of it was made up of mildly disrespectful items, expressed in a somewhat schoolboyish humour. Making a joke of the intolerable conditions was perhaps one way of surviving them. Joshua Levine's *Forgotten Voices of the Somme* brings together a wealth of memoirs from men of all ranks who fought on the Somme in 1916. The war was also an historical turning point for women all over Europe. With the men away fighting, they took over jobs hitherto closed to them, and proved their right to be considered as equals. Joyce Marlow's *Virago Book of Women and the Great War* contains fascinating material from diaries, letters, newspapers and memoirs from across the whole continent. Kate Adie's *Fighting on the Home Front* focuses more on the situation in the UK.

Memoirs

There were also some iconic full-length memoirs. Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, sets the war in the context of his young life – before, during and following the war – and has interesting insights into resistance to the war, particularly by his close friend Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon's own semi-fictional *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* also documents the inside story of an officer from the landed classes trying to come to terms with the brutal reality of the war. Vera Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth* documents the irreparable loss of her fiancé and her determination to overcome this through practical, and political, action. Seen from the German side of the war is Ernst Junger's classic memoir, *Storm of Steel*. Junger was in the thick of the conflict for the duration of the war and spares no gory detail of the fighting. Unlike his British counterparts, however, he seems never to have questioned the necessity of the war. He was a soldier and proud to be one.

Songs

Songs were an important part of the Great War legacy. They range from the sentimental (*Take me back to dear old Blighty*), to the bawdy (*Mademoiselle from Armentieres*), to the critical (*You were with the wenchies, while we were in the trenches*), to irreverent comments on

authority (*Fred Karno's Army*), to 'grin-and-bear-it' forced cheerfulness, (*Pack up your troubles in your old kitbag*). Many of these songs were incorporated into the gloriously irreverent and subversive stage show and film, *Oh What a Lovely War!* (See the website references below for songs and films about the war.) Many of the songs appropriated existing tunes, especially hymn tunes, which adds a little more malicious relish to them. But there is no doubt that these songs had a big impact on maintaining morale among men living in intolerable conditions, and whose life expectancy was close to zero.

Art

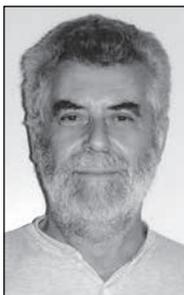
The war also produced some notable works of art in all the countries involved. Artists like Otto Dix, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash, Felix Vallotton and Oskar Kokoschka were prominent among these (see the website references). And the 'propaganda war' generated the genre of the recruitment poster and the war cartoon.



It is all too easy to become almost pruriently fascinated by the war, especially with the distancing effect of time. And there is always the danger of romanticising the utter horror. A useful antidote is to view the Imperial War Museum's documentary film, *1916: The Battle of the Somme*. Another might be to dwell on these words from A P Herbert's poem:

*'Nor will I now forget
The filth and stench of war,
The corpses on the parapet,
The maggots on the floor.'*

In this article, I have drawn on material gathered for a one-day, pre-conference event of the Literature, Media and Cultural Studies SIG on *The Pity of War: In Text, Film and Song* at the IATEFL Harrogate Conference in April 2014. This is a collaborative event with David A Hill. This is to acknowledge his contribution.



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers.

yelamoo@yahoo.co.uk

Books:

- Adie, K *Fighting on the Home Front* Hodder & Stoughton 2013
- Barbusse, H *Under Fire (Le Feu)* Penguin 2003
- Barker, P *Regeneration* Penguin 1991
- Brittain, V *Testament of Youth* Virago 2004
- Clark, C *The Sleepwalkers* Penguin 2012
- Faulkner, W *A Fable* Random House 2011
- Faulks, S *Birdsong* Vintage 1993
- Ford, F Madox *Parade's End* BBC Books 2012
- Graves, R *Goodbye to All That* Penguin 1960
- Hemingway, E *A Farewell to Arms* Vintage 2013
- Howard, M *The First World War: A Very Short Introduction* OUP 2002
- Imperial War Museum *The Battle of the Somme (1916/2005)*
- Junger, E *Storm of Steel (Stahlgewittern)* Penguin 2003
- Korte, B (Ed) *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories* Penguin 2007
- Levine, J (Ed) *Forgotten Voices of the Somme* Ebury Press 2008
- Marlow, J (Ed) *The Virago Book of Women and the Great War* Virago 1998
- Morpurgo, M *War Horse* Egmont 1982
- Remarque, E M *All Quiet on the Western Front (Im Westen Nichts Neues)* Vintage 1929
- Sassoon, S *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* Penguin 1958
- Tuchman, B *The Guns of August* Ballantine Books 1994
- Walter, G (Ed) *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* Penguin 2007
- Westhorp, C (Ed) *The Wipers Times* Conway 2013

Selected websites:

- www.libcom.org/library/mutinies-dave-lamb-solidarity
(On mutinies)
- www.firstworldwar.com
(Multimedia history – a very rich site)
- www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FFW.htm
(Comprehensive coverage of all aspects of the war)
- www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FFWart.htm
(Deals with artists of WW1)
- www.world-war-pictures.com/british-war-posters.htm
(Posters from WW1)
- www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-people/48-brothers-arms/372-songs-war.html
(Songs from WW1)
- www.imdb.com/list/LSK3DsEHYsA/?ref_=tr_yls_3
(List of WW1 films)