

DEBORAH GORHAM



VERA BRITTAIN

A FIRST LIFE



VERA BRITTAIN

A FEMINIST LIFE

Deborah Gorham

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VERA BRITTAIN



*For my brother
John Gorham
and in loving memory of our sister
Abigail Gorham
(1943-1976)*

Plates

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With the exception of the cover photograph, all the photographs used in this book are from the Vera Brittain Archive, William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. I thank the Vera Brittain Archive for permission to reproduce them. The cover photograph is from the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London, whom I thank for permission to reproduce that photograph.

April 1995

DEBORAH GORHAM
Ottawa, Canada

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1

Introduction

On 27 August 1933, readers of the *Observer's* book page could hardly have missed the large advertisement placed by Victor Gollancz, the most respected and successful progressive British publisher of the interwar decades: 'Tomorrow: *Testament of Youth*: Vera Brittain's autobiographical study of the years 1900–1925'. The advertisement's advance testimonials included one from *The Sunday Times* describing the book as 'likely to make not only a stir on publication but a lasting impression as well', and one from Lady Rhondda, the well-known feminist editor of *Time and Tide*, who said: 'Extraordinarily interesting. I sat up reading it till long past my usual bedtime and have been reading it again all this morning.'¹ On 28 August 1933, Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* was published.

Vera Brittain (1893–1970) made her mark as a writer, as a feminist activist and as a witness for peace and internationalism. She was a prolific writer, publishing some twenty books and thousands of journalistic pieces over her fifty-year career, but her lasting reputation rests with *Testament of Youth*. Brittain, thirty-nine years old when her most successful book was published, had as a young woman interrupted her studies at Oxford to serve in the First World War as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse. In the course of the war she lost her only brother, her fiancé and two close friends.

After the war, she completed her studies and began her career as a writer. In the 1920s she published two novels, *The Dark Tide* (1923) and *Not Without Honour* (1924), and two works of non-fiction, *Women's Work in Modern England* (1928) and *Halcyon, or The Future of Monogamy* (1929). She was also an active journalist. But in 1933 she had not yet achieved major recognition as a writer. With *Testament of Youth*, as she herself put it, she crossed the Rubicon

from obscurity to fame. The book was an overnight success, selling more than 3,000 copies its first day out.² 'Miss Brittain has written a book which stands alone among books written by women about the war',³ wrote the reviewer in *The Sunday Times*, and Lady Rhondda was not the only distinguished reader who found she couldn't put the book down. Virginia Woolf also found herself caught up in Brittain's narrative even though she was repelled by the book and by its author. 'I am reading with extreme greed a book by Vera Britain [*sic*], called *The Testament of Youth* [*sic*] . . . A very good book of its sort. The new sort, the hard anguished sort, that the young write; that I could never write . . . I read & read & read & neglect Turgenev & Miss C. Burnett.'⁴ *Testament of Youth* was widely and favourably reviewed both in Britain and in North America (where it was published by Macmillan & Co. of New York) and it became a lasting best-seller of the 1930s, entering historical memory as the most important English 'Great War' book by a woman.⁵

Testament of Youth was conceived of and written as a book with a moral purpose and a political message. Brittain believed that the First World War had been a catastrophe for which all those in power, on both sides, had been responsible, a catastrophe that had robbed millions of her generation of their lives, and had robbed the survivors of their youth. She wanted her readers to understand how it was that those who had been young in 1914, as she had been, were so easily caught up in support for the war and she hoped that such understanding would create in her readers a determination to ensure that no repetition of the catastrophe would take place.

Testament of Youth is also a manifesto in support of feminism. Brittain's moving account of her journey from Edwardian 'provincial young ladyhood' to the feminist womanhood she achieved in the 1920s is as central to the book as is its narration of her wartime experiences. Over the course of her long career Brittain made many impressive contributions to the cause of feminism but none was more significant than the passionate advocacy of her most successful book.

As autobiography *Testament of Youth* is a notable achievement. Brittain broke new ground with this book, redefining the genre of autobiography in a way that allowed her to combine personal narrative with historical and political analysis. This was an audacious project. Dominant Victorian and Edwardian assumptions about biography and autobiography sanctioned the telling of life stories only in the case of individuals who were widely recognized as having contributed to public life. Brittain was not such a person, not an individual who 'ought' to have been writing an autobiography. She was a

relatively young, relatively obscure writer. Moreover, as a woman, it took courage to assert that her life was important. As one literary acquaintance put it in 1932 when he heard she was working on an autobiography: 'I shouldn't have thought that anything in your life was worth recording.'⁶

But as she conceived of the project, it was precisely because of her youth, her obscurity and her sex that she asserted that her life story was worth telling. As she says in the book's Foreword, her intention was to write 'history in terms of personal life', and while she might be a minor figure, the period through which she had grown to maturity, with its upheaval of the Great War, 'history's greatest disaster', was a crucial turning-point in history.

After the war, Brittain studied history at Oxford because she hoped that history would provide her with an understanding of why the war had occurred. In 1921, as a new Oxford graduate, Brittain had found herself torn between the claims of scholarship and the claims of fiction. As she wrote ruefully to her friend Winifred Holtby: 'Why is it that all my university mentors want me to do research . . . at the expense of fiction, and my literary mentors fiction at the expense of History?' 'How is one to reconcile the two ideals?' Brittain asked Holtby. 'Can both of them be true at once, and each at different times matter more than the other?'⁷

Brittain's youthful faith in an 'ideal of creativity' and in the accessibility of 'historical truth' reflects an ingenuous enthusiasm. At the same time, it prefigures her lasting achievements. As I argue in this study, Brittain did make an important and original contribution to the integration of imaginative and political writing. She did indeed 'reconcile the two ideals' of creativity on the one hand and 'historical truth' on the other. And as I have sought in this book to illuminate her experience and to explore her contributions as writer and activist, I have been influenced and inspired by Brittain's own belief in the value of writing 'history in terms of personal life'.



My first reading of *Testament of Youth* was one of the intellectual milestones of my early adolescence. As a child I had read all the time, and like many bookish girls I found in fiction a liberation from the limitations of my own place, time and sex. When I read *Treasure Island*, I became a boy who imagined he was Jack Hawkins. But such naive androgyny becomes more difficult in adolescence. And that is why *Testament of Youth* was so important to me. *Testament of*

Youth was a book about an exciting and inspiring actual woman, not a fictional character. Vera Brittain was for me a feminist exemplar, a girl who defies the voices which tell her that she will never achieve anything of importance because she is female, and who goes on to become a woman who is able to use her talents and achieve genuine autonomy.

Thirty years later, when as a university teacher of history I began the project of which this book is the outcome I had not only re-read *Testament of Youth* many times, I had read Brittain's other works of autobiography, her fiction, and the commentary on her life and work that was just beginning to appear, and I could situate her as an important interwar British feminist, as an anti-war activist and as a working woman writer. I knew that she would be an exciting subject for research.

Visiting the rich Vera Brittain Archive at McMaster University for the first time was another landmark in my own relationship with Brittain.⁸ Reading her wartime letters evoked the freshness of my earliest responses to *Testament of Youth*. It was intensely touching to find, along with the letter her fiancé Roland Leighton sent to Brittain from Flanders on 25 April 1915, the 'Violets from Plug Street Wood', faded but still recognizable, mentioned in the letter.⁹

That dip into the Brittain papers corresponded precisely with my original response to *Testament of Youth*. But it was equally intriguing to find evidence that conflicted with my earliest interpretations of the persona Brittain had created there. The vehemence with which Brittain had broken with her family tradition had appealed strongly to me as a young reader. But the voluminous correspondence between Brittain and her mother, with its minute descriptions of her Oxford experiences, reveals not only that this was a close mother-daughter relationship, but reflects Brittain's continued dependence on the amenities of her upper-middle-class family. She even sent her laundry and mending home: 'Please be careful about the buttons on the blouse. . . . Will you please tell whoever the housemaid is now to mend the two camisoles if they are mendable; I simply cannot sew them up any longer & there is nothing here to patch them up with.'¹⁰ Clearly, my earliest perceptions of the young woman who leaves 'provincial young ladyhood' behind forever in 1914 did not correspond entirely with reality.

The integration between the public and the private, the 'personal' and the 'political' has been a major goal of a generation of feminist scholars. Vera Brittain offers an unusually promising opportunity to study the connection between the public and the private life of a

woman who was a public figure, not least because she herself perceived the importance of that connection. Defending the frankness of *Testament of Youth*, Brittain wrote: 'I don't believe we are entitled to keep to ourselves any jot or tittle of experience the knowledge of which can in any way assist our fellow mortals . . . [experience] belongs to the collective effort of humanity.'¹¹

But what is 'experience'? Brittain herself believed that she could present it to us through the medium of autobiographical narrative. Can we know the truth about Brittain's experience from reading what she tells us about it? And have we found error when we find discrepancies in tone or in fact between the public narrative of the published works of autobiography and the narrative the historian can piece together from the private papers and other evidence? Recent feminist post-structuralist criticism suggests that we must be sceptical about the relationship between 'truth' and linear narrative. As Nancy K. Miller points out, the critical reader must learn to distinguish 'life from art, nature from imitation, autobiography from fiction' and the distinctions are by no means as obvious as they may at first appear.¹² Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck emphasize that the assumption that 'autobiography is a transparency through which we perceive the life, unmediated and undistorted' is based on a corresponding assumption that 'reifies a unified, transcendent self'.¹³ Both assumptions, they say, are flawed.

The insight that we are always in the process of constructing a self is a valuable one to remember in an analysis of Vera Brittain. Her project was not merely to construct herself – as we all do – but to use her creative energies to construct a written narrative through which she would present that self to others. Brittain's main purpose was 'writing her own life'¹⁴ not only in her works of autobiography, but also in her fiction and in her informal daily writing of diaries and letters. I examine all these categories of text as evocations of the self. For example, attempting what Nancy K. Miller has called a 'double reading of the autobiography with the fiction', I analyse the autobiographical content of Brittain's fiction.¹⁵ She was often able in her novels to reveal nuances that remain concealed in the explicitly autobiographical texts.

In creating the narrative which follows, my intention has been to explore the contrasts between the public narrative and the private sources, between for example the portrait of the independent young woman who went off to Oxford and cut her ties with her past, and the young woman who wrote many letters home to 'Dearest mother', sending along with some of them blouses to be laundered and cami-

soles to be mended. I do not seek to be an omniscient narrator, nor do I point to such discrepancies for the purpose of labelling them errors or omissions. Instead, my intention is to understand why Brittain needed to show one self to herself, in her 'Reflective Record', another in letters, and yet another in accounts constructed for publication.

But I should also emphasise that while I am centrally concerned with analysing the textual evidence for Brittain's multifaceted selves, I also believe that the traditional purpose of biography – the illumination of personality – is still a valid enterprise. Historical biography continues to engage readers because it offers us intimate knowledge of another personality and another period, and that knowledge allows us to know ourselves and our own period better. As Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom put it in their introduction to *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*, 'it is reassuring to look into a human face . . . [t]he impersonality, fragmentation, and alienation of the postmodern world seem less overwhelming as we follow the vicissitudes of a real person – a brother or sister creature from whom we grasp vicarious validation of our own lives.' Like Bell and Yalom, I reclaim the 'mimetic relationship between literature and life'. Like them, I believe that 'the autobiographical "I," however fugitive, partial, and unreliable, is indeed the privileged textual double of a real person, as well as a self-evident textual construct.'¹⁶

As a public figure, Brittain was an active advocate for peace and social justice as well as for feminism, but it is with her struggles and achievements as a feminist that this book is primarily concerned. In her private and public life she was representative of the group of educated middle-class women who brought to fruition the goals of Victorian bourgeois feminism in the years following the First World War. Although she was the daughter of a conventional Edwardian family, Brittain discovered the women's movement while she was still a schoolgirl. Throughout her adult life she was sustained by feminist convictions and driven by a fierce desire to achieve personal autonomy. Not only did she achieve such autonomy and build a successful career, she combined the career with marriage and motherhood. She is indeed a fit subject through which to explore both the achievements and the vicissitudes of British feminism in the first half of the twentieth century.

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The scope of this book derives from the chronology of Brittain's life up to the publication in 1940 of *Testament of Friendship* and from