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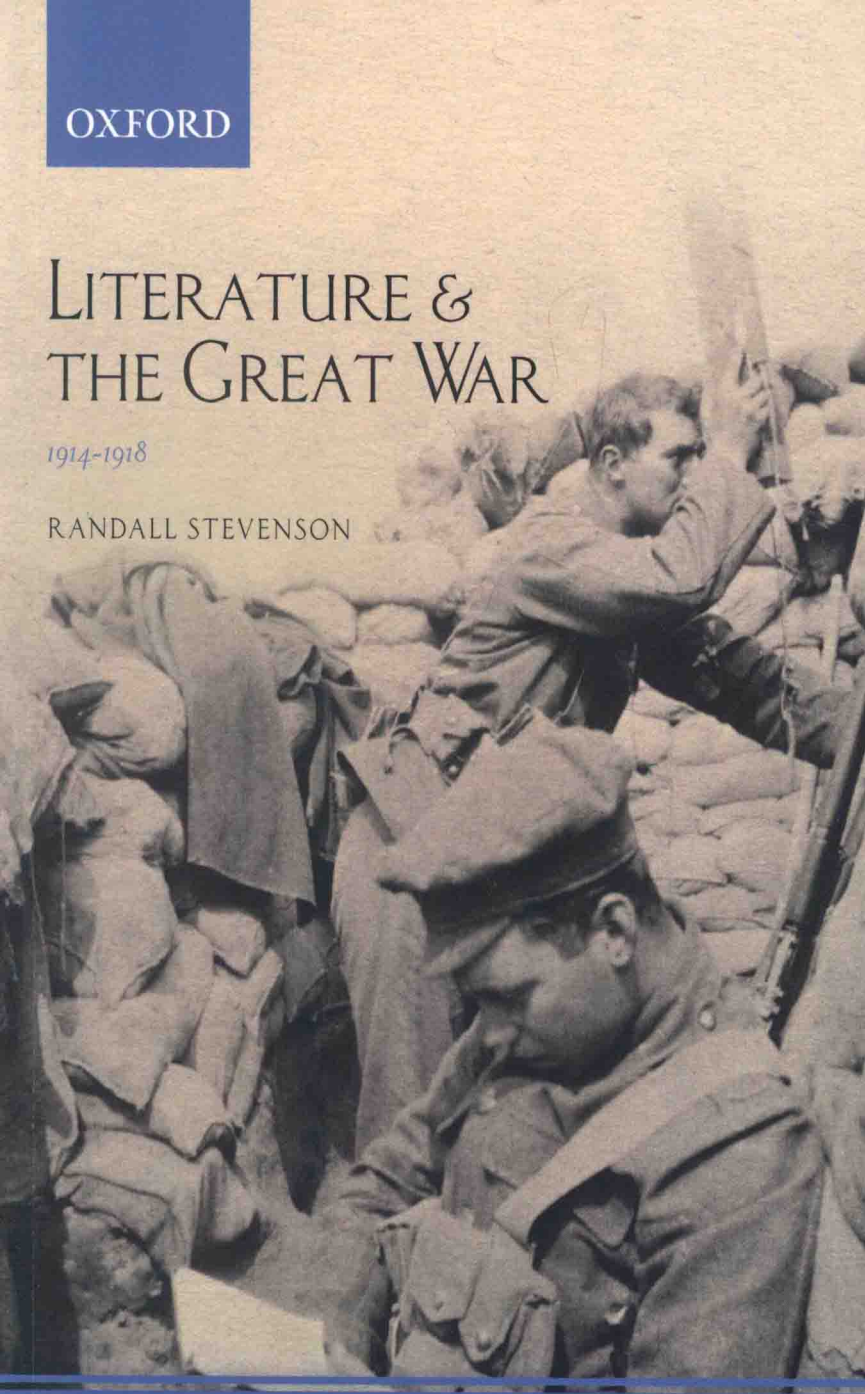
# LITERATURE & THE GREAT WAR

*1914-1918*

RANDALL STEVENSON



OXFORD TEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES

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# SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

*Oxford Textual Perspectives* is a new series of informative and provocative studies focused upon texts (conceived of in the broadest sense of that term) and the technologies, cultures, and communities that produce, inform, and receive them. It provides fresh interpretations of fundamental works, images, and artefacts, and of the vital and challenging issues emerging in English literary studies. By engaging with the contexts and materiality of the text, its production, transmission, and reception history, and by frequently testing and exploring the boundaries of the notions of text and meaning themselves, the volumes in the series question conventional frameworks and provide innovative interpretations of both canonical and less well-known works. These books will offer new perspectives, and challenge familiar ones, both on and through texts and textual communities. While they focus on specific authors, periods, and issues, they nonetheless scan wider horizons, addressing themes and provoking questions that have a more general application to literary studies and cultural history as a whole. Each is designed to be as accessible to the non-specialist reader as it is fresh and rewarding for the specialist, combining an informative orientation in a landscape with detailed analysis of the territory and suggestions for further travel.

*Elaine Treharne* and *Greg Walker*

# PREFACE

Early in 2010, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission reinterred the bodies of 250 British and Australian soldiers, twenty miles or so south of Ypres, close to France's border with Belgium. Their remains had been discovered the previous year, still in mass burial pits, dug hastily for the thousands of casualties of the Battle of Fromelles, fought one summer evening in 1916, during the Somme campaign. Their discovery is typical of ways the dead and the debris of the battles of 1914–18 continue to resurface nearly a century later, in the fields of France and Flanders, and in other war zones around the world. The Great War, in general, likewise refuses to remain buried in the past. Armistice days, poppies, war memorials in every town and village in Europe—perhaps above all, the writing the conflict produced—have kept the Great War firmly present in the mind and memory of later decades. Yet it has been remembered variously. Its lengthening shadow has been repeatedly reshaped, as Chapter 4 considers, by the changing cultural landscapes across which it has fallen. Great War literature has likewise been variously evaluated, with views continuing to evolve since influential critical studies began to be published late in the twentieth century. Assessments have moved on even since Samuel Hynes's comprehensive *A War Imagined* appeared in 1990, and more extensively since Paul Fussell published a still more influential analysis, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in 1975.

Had Fussell been writing thirty years or so later, he might have considered 'The Great War and *Post*modern Memory' as a title. Early pages of his study quote a letter Henry James wrote on 5 August 1914, the day after the beginning of the war. James reflects that 'the plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness . . . is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering'. Thomas Hardy also reflects on the demise of 'bettering' in a poem about the war's ending, in the signing of the armistice on 11 November 1918. By that date, Hardy considers, 'old hopes that earth was bettering slowly, | Were dead and

damned'.[1] The end of a long age of supposed 'bettering' became a central interest of postmodern criticism late in the twentieth century. Much of it envisaged the Second World War terminating faiths in progress, modernity, and rational systems of thought which had been sustained ever since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Yet in the lengthening perspectives of the twenty-first century, the faltering of these faiths seems readily retraceable, much as Hardy and James suggest, to origins in the Great War.

A new century offers further evidence for this extension of Fussell's views. *The Great War and Modern Memory* concludes with reference to Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). It is naturally a more recent Pynchon novel, *Against the Day* (2006), which now seems to offer more to understanding of the Great War. In particular, *Against the Day* envisages technology and supposed progress contributing, by the early twentieth century, not to 'bettering' but instead to world-wide foreclosure, mechanization, and loss of opportunity, culminating in the irreversible destruction of 1914–18. One of Pynchon's characters straightforwardly concludes that 'the world came to an end in 1914', and that its inhabitants have 'been in Hell ever since that terrible August'.[2] As he suggests, if the Great War refuses to remain buried in the past, it is because the shock, disillusion, and fractured faiths of that first, fundamental modern crisis have so long continued to shape the world in the present, from 1914 all the way to a postmodern age.

Commentators on *The Great War and Modern Memory* have suggested revisions of other kinds, sometimes complaining that Fussell concentrates too much on poetry, and on the Western Front, and too exclusively on writing by educated, usually middle-class officers—invariably, of course, male. Drawing on the many studies appearing in the intervening years, Samuel Hynes offers a broader view in *A War Imagined*, assessing women authors as well as literature from other war zones and from the Home Front. Hynes also warns against narrowing of another sort—the steady settling of memories into what he describes as a 'collective narrative' or simplified 'Myth of the War'.[3] Since he wrote, this tendency has been

[1] Henry James, Letter of 4/5 August 1914 to Howard Sturgis, *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock (London: Macmillan, 1920), II: 398; Thomas Hardy, '"And There Was a Great Calm"', *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (1976; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1991), 589.

[2] Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 1077.

[3] See Chapter 4, p. 195.

criticized more fiercely by another generation of commentators. For these revisionist historians, collective narratives have tended less towards myth than simple misrepresentation, obscuring historical realities in unrestrained regret and in complacent convictions about the Great War's futility and mismanagement. Chapter 4 suggests that their views are more likely to qualify than replace the general conclusions Hynes outlines. In this way, though, they can be genuinely useful, contributing to reconsideration of long-held views of the war, and to recognition of a fuller range of perspectives in the literature it produced—a recognition also encouraged by new anthologies of Great War poetry appearing early in the twenty-first century.[4] Reconsideration and recognition of this kind are main aims of the present study, intended to reappraise Great War literature in the light of all the evolving ideas mentioned above. It also seeks to diversify these still further, in two principal ways. The first of these involves fuller consideration of Great War narrative than criticism often offers, much of it finding poetry more rewarding. This preference may well be justifiable, but it is worth exploring further. Difficulties the Great War imposed on narrative writers, considered in Chapter 2, usefully indicate its effects on contemporary imagination more generally, and may also help account for the particular strengths of poetry, assessed in Chapter 3.

Difficulties the war imposed on drama left it the least successful of the three main literary genres, or at any rate one often passed over in later assessments. In September 1914, the playwright and novelist Gilbert Cannan was already asking 'with London striving to become a military camp and, in its effort, turning into one vast music-hall, where shall the drama rear its head?'[5] Some answers to his question did emerge as the war went on. The Old Vic continued to present seasons of innovatively staged Shakespearean and classic drama. But censorship, public opinion, and the preference for light entertainment Cannan mentions—also an irritant to George Bernard Shaw[6]—created difficulties still greater than those encountered by poetry or narrative in

[4] Vivien Noakes (ed.), *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (Stroud: Sutton, 2006); Dominic Hibberd and John Onions (eds), *The Winter of the World: Poems of the First World War* (London: Constable, 2008).

[5] Gilbert Cannan, 'The Drama: A Note in War Time', *Poetry and Drama* (September 1914), 2(7), 307–8.

[6] See 'Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall', his introduction to *Heartbreak House* (1919).

**FIG 1** The Royal Flying Corps Kite and Balloon Section Concert Party (the 'Tonics') rehearse *Cinderella*, in January 1918, amid the ruins of Bapaume.



presenting any genuine account of the war. Plays attempting to do so, such as Miles Malleson's *'D' Company* and *Black 'Ell* (1916), were regularly banned. Other forms of theatre, including those presented in actual military camps, did continue to thrive. Around the Western Front, and in other combat zones, theatrical and concert companies were widely employed to entertain the soldiers, who regularly put on shows of their own during rest periods away from the front line (Fig. 1). This activity, and those war plays that were produced, deserve fuller critical attention, as commentators such as Heinz Kosok have argued. But such attention is inevitably limited in a study of the *literature* of the Great War—mostly of written or published material, and of work, in Kosok's definition, 'with at least a limited degree of literary aspirations'.[7]

[7] Heinz Kosok, *The Theatre of War: The First World War in British and Irish Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 198.

Dramatic literature is considered at appropriate points throughout, but war plays, with regret, are denied a separate chapter to themselves.

This leaves more scope for another aim—a second aspect of the broadening of critical perspectives mentioned above. Most studies of Great War literature concentrate, obviously, on writing by combatants or former combatants, or by direct witnesses of the conflict, or of life on the Home Front. Some also discuss this writing's relations with modernist initiatives gathering pace in the 1920s, or with the evolution of literature in later decades. A few consider its relations with the work of an older, established generation of authors—writers such as Arnold Bennett, or Robert Bridges, in many cases drawn into producing propaganda during the war, as Chapter 1 describes. It is more unusual to find critical studies which assess all three of these areas. *Literature and the Great War* attempts to do so, tracing war writing's reciprocal relations with broader developments in the literature and culture of its time, and with the changing expectations of readers, as these evolved during and after the war.

This broad approach facilitates exploration of a central interest throughout—in ways the Great War's challenges to established systems of thought particularly focused on language and representation. Concerned in August 1914 about the failure of 'bettering', Henry James went on to worry early the following year that the war had also 'overstrained' and 'weakened' any resources available to represent it.[8] As he suggests, if the Great War did not end the world—as Pynchon's character feared—it radically challenged the ways words could be related to it. Chapter 1 outlines the sharp divisions it opened up between public and private discourse, between official accounts of events and eyewitnesses' views of them, and between the outlooks of established writers and those of a younger, emerging generation of solider-authors. The new and almost unimaginably violent experience of the war also profoundly challenged the capacities of conventional literary forms, and ultimately of language itself, to represent the life and death of the times. Though such challenges particularly confronted war authors, shifts in something as fundamental as the role or surety of language also remained influential on the innovative, modernist writing emerging alongside their work in the 1920s.

[8] See Chapter 1, p. 49.

Analysis of these challenges naturally focuses mostly on published fiction, poetry, autobiography, and memoir. But in assessing the encounter of words with a violent world, there is good reason to examine more immediate, unrevised forms of writing in diaries, letters, and journals. Where possible, reference is made to published, generally available material of this kind, though there is obviously much to be learned from writing *not* suited or intended for publication in any form, and examples of this are incorporated where appropriate. In general, the focus is on writing in English, especially on British and occasionally on US literature. Reference is also made to non-Anglophone authors for comparison or contrast, or in instances—such as Henri Barbusse's work, or Erich Maria Remarque's—where this was strongly influential on the British context.

Within these fields, chapters that follow assess most of the literary texts that deal directly and influentially with the Great War. They also show how influentially the Great War dealt with text—with language and its representation of the world—and with what effects for literary form and imagination at the time and later. These aims are particularly appropriate to the Oxford Textual Perspectives series, and I'm very grateful to Greg Walker for his invitation to write for it, and for his generous, thoughtful support throughout the writing. In Oxford University Press, Jacqueline Baker, Ariane Petit, Rachel Platt, and Charles Lauder, Jr, looked after the project encouragingly and efficiently throughout. I'm also grateful to many others, from the 1990s and beyond. I'm fortunate to work in an English Literature department as clever, collaborative, and supportive as the University of Edinburgh's, and particularly indebted to several of its members: to Sarah Carpenter, Paul Crosthwaite, Simon Malpas, and Andrew Taylor, and to Jonathan Wild, whose knowledge of the period and sustained encouragement greatly enhanced the project overall. For information, advice, and help with particular aspects, I'm also grateful to David Denby, Nina Engelhardt, Pam King, Rick Rylance, Roger Savage, Anna Stevenson, and Elaine Treharne. Some of the material of Chapter 1 previously appeared in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* (2006), and I'm grateful to Edinburgh University Press, and to my fellow editor of that volume, Brian McHale, for permission to redeploy this here.

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# Unspeakable War

A *Times* correspondent describes as follows a scene on the Western Front, early on a summer morning, looking out over the rivers Somme and Ancre and the ruined church at Albert:

> The night mists still hung heavy, and the herbage was soaking with dew... immediately within view was the valley of the Ancre, and the town of Albert... It was a lovely summer morning, the sun, still low, shining directly in our faces... Albert was almost hidden in mist, except that the church tower, with the wonderful spectacle of the leaning figure of the Virgin, stood clear above the white bank below and gleamed golden in the sun...
>
> A beautiful summer day, with promise of great heat... The sky above is clear blue, flecked with dazzling white islands of cloud.

That summery scene soon darkened. It was the morning of 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. A huge artillery bombardment abruptly ceased, and at 7.30am the British infantry struggled out of their trenches, shouldering heavy packs as they clambered over the top. Around four hours later, 60,000 of them were casualties, nearly 20,000 killed outright. The wounded could be heard crying out, in the No Man's Land between the trenches, for days afterwards.

This was the worst day's loss in British military history, and the worst endured by any army during the Great War. Losses continued on an almost equivalent scale in the weeks that followed. By the time the Somme offensive petered out, late in 1916, it had left more than a million casualties overall, 420,000 of them on the British side. Many were men who had volunteered enthusiastically at the very start of the war, on 4 August 1914, or responded to the call for more troops—for a 'first hundred thousand'—made a few days later by the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener. In his poem 'MCMXIV' (1964), Phillip Larkin looks back on the huge crowds that turned up outside recruiting offices, familiar from contemporary photographs of 'long uneven lines' of men, 'grinning as if it were all | An August Bank Holiday lark'.[1] Recruits responding to Kitchener had gradually formed a replacement for the Regular Army. The core of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), strengthened by Reservists and Territorials, this army had been beaten back from Mons to the Marne, along with its French allies, by the German offensive in the late summer and autumn of 1914. Its numbers were depleted further by the brief counter-offensive which followed, then by the settling of the conflict into the attrition and stalemate, throughout many months of trench warfare, which the Battle of the Somme was confidently expected to end.

When the long uneven lines of Kitchener's new army were destroyed by German artillery and machine guns on the Somme, something more seemed to have been lost than life, manpower, or the expectation of military breakthrough. For R. H. Mottram, in his *Spanish Farm* novel sequence (1924–7), the Somme destroyed 'perhaps the greatest voluntary army of history', and one that could not be replaced in the same way.[2] For some time even before the Somme, it had been clear that volunteers alone would never be enough to replace the loss of life on the Western Front, and in other failed initiatives such as the attack on the Turks in Gallipoli throughout 1915. The Military Service Act became law, in its final form, five weeks before the Battle of the Somme, obliging all men under the age of 41 to serve unless specifically exempt. Over three million men were eventually conscripted in this way, helping to form another, third, British army. This endured further slaughter on the Western Front, particularly at Passchendaele in 1917, survived the

[1] Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 28.
[2] R. H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* (New York: The Dial Press, 1927), 257.