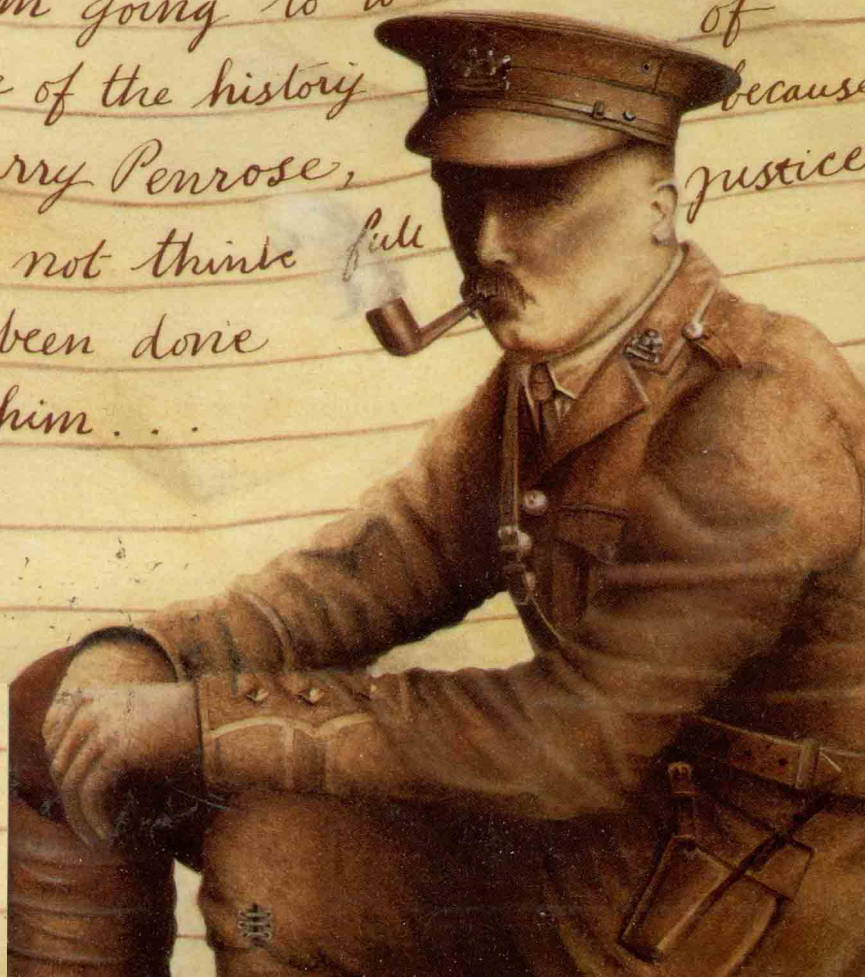


A. P. HERBERT

THE SECRET BATTLE

*I am going to write down
one of the history
Harry Penrose,
to not think full
been done
him . . .*

*of
because
justice*



A. P. HERBER

The Secret Battle



With a Preface by
WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

and an Introduction by
JOHN TERRAINE

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PREFACE

BY WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

THIS story of a valiant heart tested to destruction took rank when it was first published a few months after the Armistice, as one of the most moving of the novels produced by the war. It was at that time a little swept aside by the revulsion of the public mind from anything to do with the awful period just ended. But on re-reading it nine years later it seems to hold its place, and indeed a permanent place, in war literature. It was one of those cries of pain wrung from the fighting troops by the prolonged and measureless torment through which they passed; and like the poems of Siegfried Sassoon should be read in each generation, so that men and women may rest under no illusion about what war means. In 1919 it was first and foremost a chronicle valued for the sober truth of its descriptions and its narration of what might happen to a gallant soldier borne down by stresses incredible to those who have not endured them, and caught in the steel teeth of the military machine.

The tale is founded on fact. Nevertheless, as the writer has been careful to make clear, it is not an authentic account. All the facts on which it rests happened, and many of them happened in combination to a very large number of young men who fought for us or who fought against us, and to those who loved them. But they did not all happen to the same man; or in so far as they fell upon one individual, the emphasis and setting were not the same. It can now be judged from a more detached, and in some respects more exacting, standpoint as a work of art. It is a monument of the agony, not of one but of millions, standing impassive in marble to give its message to all wayfarers who pass it. It speaks to the uninformed, to the unimaginative, to the headstrong, and to the short-memored folk who need a word of warning on their path. It speaks also with that strange

note of consolation, often underlying tragedy, to those who know only too well and can never forget. To a new generation of ardent, virile youth it can do no harm. They will not be deterred by its story from doing their duty by their native land, if ever the need should come. They will face terrors and tortures, if need be, with the simple faith that 'What man has done, man can do'. Nothing but good can come in future years to those older people – if such there be – who contemplate in sluggish acquiescence and airy detachment wars in which they will themselves bear no part. And piercing Complacency with barbed dart, it drives home the bitter invocation:

Pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

The author, who himself passed not unscathed but undaunted through much and some of the worst of what he describes, develops his tale with the measured fatefulness of a Greek tragedy. But here the pathos is all the greater because there is no element of Nemesis. The hero-victim is never anything but modest and dutiful: he always tries his best to do his bit. It is only the cruelty of chance which finally puts his life and his honour in the hands of the two men whose vanity he had offended. He had much to give. He gave it all. But a blind Fate declared it was not enough.

The restraint with which the author bridles his mercilessly gathered argument at every stage enables him to produce the climax in the very lowest key; and the reader is left to bear or express his own feelings as best he may. It is a soldier's tale cut in stone to melt all hearts.

INTRODUCTION

BY JOHN TERRAINE

The Secret Battle was first published in 1919. The Great War of fact was only just over; the great war of fiction, drama, recollection, blame, exculpation, investigation, was just beginning; it has continued for over sixty years. Self-justification was early in the field: Field-Marshal Viscount French of Ypres, chafing at dismissal in 1915, now published his own account of the War's first year, 1914; English translations of General Ludendorff's *My War Memories 1914-1918* and also of General von Falkenhayn's *General Headquarters 1914-1916 and its Critical Decisions* presented the losers' views; for the victors, Field-Marshal Earl Haig's *Despatches* offered the bald record of his tenure of command – all in 1919. Amidst the thunders of these big guns, A. P. Herbert's slim contribution, with its 'astringent and bitter'¹ tone, and couched in terms far different from the preoccupations of the high commanders, may well have been somewhat lost to view. Yet, as Sir Winston Churchill says, its stature did not diminish with passing time; it has 'a permanent place in war literature'.

What is that place? It is a curious one, shared by a number of books by survivors of the First World War. Their contributions (apart from poetry) are of two kinds: reminiscences and novels – but as Correlli Barnett has said, 'the two often come to much the same thing'.² This is where they part company with some of the classics of war literature: with *War and Peace* and *The Red Badge of Courage* for example, or the famous account of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. With all of those, we

¹ Robert Rhodes James, 'Gallipoli', Batsford, 1965, p. 351.

² *A Military Historian's View of the Literature of the Great War*, lecture to the Royal Society of Literature, April 1969.

are firmly in the world of realistic fiction, but these Great War novels step constantly into and out of the fact and fiction worlds. It is like a television documentary which mixes clips of 'actuality' film with activity and dialogue by actors; disconcerting and at times disorienting.

The Secret Battle, I should say, closely resembles but ranks rather below Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (best known by the title of the expurgated version, *Her Privates We*, but re-published with its original text and title in 1977). This is high praise; I said of the reprint of Manning's classic:

There are others – not that many – that partake of this sombre, open-eyed quality, this recognition of the adjective-defeating realities of war, without the dismal grovelling that goes under the name of 'disenchantment'.³

The Secret Battle is one of those few. It partakes of the quality which a German officer and poet attributed in a letter of 1918 to Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (*Under Fire*, 1916):

... the first book which gives expression to the violent feelings which the War has evoked in human beings, as distinct from vicarious emotions. This writer is exempt from vicarious sensations ... That is what is great about the book.⁴

But there are not many who have successfully forced this quality of truth through into their fiction. Henry Williamson achieved it in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*; indeed, A.P. Herbert's Harry Penrose and Williamson's Phillip Maddison are brothers under the skin; they share the same quality of tragic vulnerability. There is a doom upon them.

This is the novelist's prerogative. Like the dramatist, he can invoke the inexorable beat of tragedy, whether with Iphigeneia in the grove at Aulis, or in the fated dug-out in Picardy which marked another *Journey's End*. Life, even in war, does not

³ Review of *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Peter Davies, 1977; *Daily Telegraph*, 30 June 1977.

⁴ Rudolf Binding, *A Fatalist at War*, English translation, Allen & Unwin, 1929, pp. 231–2.

often come to such orderly terminations. One of the best things about *The Secret Battle* is the imprecision of its ending; Herbert allows us to see the doom work out without the benefit of a closing chorus.

Sir Winston Churchill describes this book as 'one of those cries of pain wrung from the fighting troops by the prolonged and measureless torment through which they passed', and he compares it with the poems of Siegfried Sassoon. I am not so sure. Sassoon's poems, and Wilfred Owen's, Isaac Rosenberg's, and others, are cries of pain indeed; their poetic quality turns the cries into screams. By contrast, *The Secret Battle* is the measured protest of a civilized man at the deeply uncivilized procedures of war – and it is all the more effective because it is measured and not a scream.

In this book the fate of the wretched Harry Penrose is a symbol – the symbol of all those uncivilized procedures. We need to be clear about this: as Churchill says, this narrative 'is not an authentic account'; the truth it contains is symbolic. On the other hand, it is surrounded by truth which is anything but symbolic, which is quite exact, as though photographed with words. That is what makes it, and others like it, so disconcerting. And no part of this one contains such sharp, clear images as its first half, set on Gallipoli in 1915. What Manning does for the Western Front, A. P. Herbert here performs for that always-lost campaign fought within sight of the Plain of Troy.

There was something about Gallipoli, something about the whole forlorn hope of the enterprise from beginning to end, that left a mark on men's souls which no later experience of bloodier fields and more violent scenes of war could ever efface. It was clearly so with A. P. Herbert. The 'smell of the Peninsula', the dust, the flies, the misery of the 'rest-camps', Turkish sniping, the front line with its awful dead decomposing within two hours, the dysentery, the cool breeze of evening, the cobalt sea, the coral dawns – no, indeed, these are not 'vicarious sensations'. These are reported factually, clinically, from deep-felt experience. And it is with these terrible and amazing realities

that Herbert clothes the fiction of Harry Penrose.

Briefly, this is the agonizing story of a young 1914 volunteer, full of gallant intention but also full of searching self-doubt, who stage by stage loses his nerve, until, pushed by a stupid and coarse-fibred commanding officer, he cracks and runs away. He is tried by court-martial, found guilty on the plain evidence, and condemned to death with a recommendation of mercy. But mercy is withheld; he is 'made an example' and shot 'by his own men, by men of D Company'. Herbert's last word, through the mouth of a 'brother-officer', is: 'my friend Harry was shot for cowardice – and he was one of the bravest men I ever knew'. Thus Harry Penrose becomes the symbol of all the uncivilized procedures – all the stupidities, the lack of perception and imagination, the wanton cruelty – which had blighted A. P. Herbert's war, and many others besides.

None of those elements were, of course, in short supply. It was not that horrible things had never happened to British armies before – on the contrary. But they had never happened to an army like this, so the impact was new. The armies of the eighteenth century, the Peninsula, the Crimea, were composed of people considered by the English middle class as expendable: in the ranks, the 'lower orders', and as officers, the sons of the aristocracy and the squires. Both could be easily spared. But in 1914 the middle class itself went to war for the first time, and the British bourgeoisie was tutored in military experience. It had everything to learn.

One thing that it did not understand very well – few men did at that time – was fear, its meanings and workings. The codes of the minor public schools and the grammar schools no doubt helped to fortify men against the onset of fear, but they did virtually nothing to help them understand it. Fear, in that generation, was a crime; the war of the most terrifying shell-fire yet experienced would not admit the existence of shell-shock. I don't suppose that Lieutenant-Colonel Jack of the 2/West Yorkshire Regiment was unique, but I do wonder how many Regular officers there were like him. He noted in his diary in November 1916:

Regimental-Sergeant-Major Kenyon, M.C., having served with the battalion in France since November 1914, was by now exhausted with work and strain. I therefore reported him to Higher Command as worn out, and requested that he be sent home for a change from battles. The curious reply came that there was no such thing as a soldier being 'worn out' and my application was refused. As, however, Kenyon was in the state described I sent him on leave to England with a note to his doctor saying that he needed a good rest. This settled the matter. To have kept him under the circumstances, brave, capable and uncomplaining as he was, would have been unfair to the Battalion, to the warrant-officer, and to myself.⁵

Harry Penrose did not have the good fortune to serve under a Colonel Jack.

So Harry Penrose became Herbert's symbolic war-victim, and very distressing it is to read how that came about. It is not with any desire to diminish the force of the powerful emotion that Herbert expresses that I offer the following (to the best of my knowledge undisputed) facts concerning a well-documented aspect of the First World War; it is simply to underline the symbolic quality of his book.

Between 4 August 1914 and 31 March 1920 (the arbitrary period of documentation) 163,231 trials by General, District or Field General Court-Martial were held on officers, soldiers and civilians serving abroad.

141,146 of these resulted in conviction, 17,025 in acquittal; the remaining verdicts were either quashed or not confirmed.

The two most common offences were Absence (37,034) and Drunkenness (35,313)

There were 551 cases of Cowardice.

3,080 death sentences were passed during this period.

346 death sentences were carried out (10.82%).

Of these, 291 were on 'Imperial' (i.e. British) troops, five on Colonial Forces, 31 on Overseas Contingents and 19 on non-combatants (Chinese or Coloured Labour Corps and other followers).

⁵ *General Jack's Diary*, ed. John Terraine, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964, pp. 188-9.

The two most common offences for which the death sentence was carried out were Desertion (266) and Murder (37, including 18 out of the 19 non-combatants).

18 men were executed for Cowardice.

Of the 346 death sentences carried out, three were on officers.

Their offences were Desertion (two) and Murder (one).

No officer was executed for Cowardice.

No officer or soldier suffered death by sentence of Court-Martial at Home during this period.

Total enlistments for the British Empire during this period were 8,654,467.

All these figures are to be found (they have been available since 1922) in an official compilation entitled *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920*, Part XXIII (Discipline). The fate of Harry Penrose is often supposed to have been common; clearly it was the reverse. Yet it is likely that A. P. Herbert's story was prompted by knowledge of a real case, which is tersely recorded in the Admiralty papers in the Public Record Office as follows:

Temporary Sub-Lieutenant Dyett, R.N.R. sentenced to death; sentence carried out on January 5, 1917.

Sub-Lieutenant Edwin Dyett belonged to the 'Nelson' Battalion of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, the division in which A. P. Herbert himself served. Because of the blanket of official secrecy which enfolds all such matters, even after the lapse of all these years, we do not positively know any details of the Dyett case except its tragic end; but we may accept Churchill's estimate that while all the events of Herbert's narrative happened, 'they did not all happen to the same man'. The case was discussed in the House of Commons in February 1918, but as the basis of the discussion was an article in that exemplar of British sensational journalism, Horatio Bottomley's *John Bull*, and the war, of course, was still on, more heat than light was engendered by this occasion. More recent references to the Dyett case, supporting the likelihood of a miscarriage of justice, have

been made in *The Thin Yellow Line* by William Moore, published by Leo Cooper in 1974. Mr Moore concludes that Dyett was one of the two officers who were shot, not for Cowardice, but for Desertion. This may well be so.

Unfortunately, A. P. Herbert's story of Harry Penrose has had some unworthy followers. With so much reality so vividly expressed in his unforgettable book, it is appropriate to set all its truths in their correct perspective.

CONTENTS

Preface by Winston S. Churchill	vii
Introduction by John Terraine	ix
THE SECRET BATTLE	1

THE SECRET BATTLE

I

I AM going to write down some of the history of Harry Penrose, because I do not think full justice has been done to him, and because there must be many other young men of his kind who flung themselves into this war at the beginning of it, and have gone out of it after many sufferings with the unjust and ignorant condemnation of their fellows. At times, it may be, I shall seem to digress into the dreary commonplaces of all war-chronicles, but you will never understand the ruthless progression of Penrose's tragedy without some acquaintance with each chapter of his life in the army.

He joined the battalion only a few days before we left Plymouth for Gallipoli, a shy, intelligent-looking person, with smooth, freckled skin and quick, nervous movements; and although he was at once posted to my company we had not become at all intimate when we steamed at last into Mudros Bay. But he had interested me from the first, and at intervals in the busy routine of a troopship passing without escort through submarine waters I had been watching him and delighting in his keenness and happy disposition.

It was not my first voyage through the Mediterranean, though it was the first I had made in a transport, and I liked to see my own earlier enthusiasm vividly reproduced in him. Cape Spartel and the first glimpse of Africa; Tangiers and Tarifa and all that magical hour's steaming through the narrow waters with the pink and white houses hiding under the hills; Gibraltar Town shimmering and asleep in the noonday sun; Malta and the bumboat women, carozzes swaying through the narrow, chattering streets; cool drinks at cafés in a babel of strange

tongues; all these were to Penrose part of the authentic glamour of the East; and he said so. I might have told him, with the fatuous pomp of wider experience, that they were in truth but a very distant reflection of the genuine East; but I did not. For it was refreshing to see any one so frankly confessing to the sensations of adventure and romance. To other members of the officers' mess the spectacle of Gibraltar from the sea may have been more stimulating than the spectacle of Southend (though this is doubtful); but it is certain that few of them would have admitted the impeachment.

At Malta some of us spent an evening ashore, and sat for a little in a tawdry, riotous little café, where two poor singing women strove vainly to make themselves heard above the pandemonium of clinked glasses and bawled orders; there we met many officers newly returned from the landing at Cape Helles, some of them with slight bodily wounds, but all of them with grievous injury staring out of their eyes. Those of them who would speak at all were voluble with anecdotes of horror and blood. Most of our own party had not yet lost the light-hearted mood in which men went to the war in those days; the 'picnic' illusion of war was not yet dispelled; also, individually, no doubt, we had that curious confidence of the unblooded soldier that none of these strange, terrible things could ever actually happen to *us*; we should for ever hang upon the pleasant fringes of war, sailing in strange seas, and drinking in strange towns, but never definitely entangled in the more crude and distasteful circumstances of battle. And if there were any of us with a secret consciousness that we deceived ourselves, to-night was no time to tear away the veil. Let there be lights and laughter and wine; to-morrow, if need be, let us be told how the wounded had drowned in the wired shallows, and reckon the toll of that unforgettable exploit and the terrors that were still at work. And so we would not be dragooned into seriousness by these messengers from the Peninsula; but rather, with no injury to their feelings, laughed at their croakings and continued to drink.

But Harry Penrose was different. He was all eagerness to

hear every detail, hideous and heroic.

There was one officer present, from the 29th Division, a man about forty, with a tanned, melancholy face and great solemn eyes, which, for all the horrors he related, seemed to have something yet more horrible hidden in their depths. Him Harry plied with questions, his reveller's mood flung impatiently aside; and the man seemed ready to tell him things, though from his occasional reservations and sorrowful smile I knew that he was pitying Harry for his youth, his eagerness, and his ignorance.

Around us were the curses of overworked waiters, and the babble of loud conversations, and the smell of spilt beer; there were two officers uproariously drunk, and in the distance pathetic snatches of songs were heard from the struggling singer on the dais. We were in one of the first outposts of the Empire, and halfway to one of her greatest adventures. And this excited youth at my side was the only one of all that throng who was ready to hear the truth of it, and to speak of death. I lay emphasis on this incident, because it well illustrates his attitude towards the war at that time (which too many have now forgotten), and because I then first found the image which alone reflects the many curiosities of his personality.

He was like an imaginative, inquisitive child; a child that cherishes a secret gallery of pictures in its mind, and must continually be feeding this storehouse with new pictures of the unknown; that is not content with a vague outline of something that is to come, a dentist, or a visit, or a doll, but will not rest till the experience is safely put away in its place, a clear, uncompromising picture, to be taken down and played with at will.

Moreover, he had the fearlessness of a child – but I shall come to that later.

And so we came to Mudros, threading a placid way between the deceitful Aegean Islands. Harry loved them because they wore so green and inviting an aspect, and again I did not deceive him and tell him how parched and austere, how barren of comfortable grass and shade he would find them on closer acquaintance. We steamed into Mudros Bay at the end of an

unbelievable sunset; in the great harbour were gathered regiments of ships – battleship, cruiser, tramp, transport, and trawler, and as the sun sank into the western hills, the masts and the rigging of all of them were radiant with its last rays, while all their decks and hulls lay already in the soft blue dusk. There is something extraordinarily soothing in the almost imperceptible motion of a big steamer gliding at slow speed to her anchorage; as I leaned over the rail of the boat-deck and heard the tiny bugle-calls float across from the French or English warships, and watched the miniature crews at work upon their decks, I became aware that Penrose was similarly engaged close at hand, and it seemed to me an opportunity to learn something of the history of this strange young man.

Beginning with his delight in the voyage and all the marvelous romance of our surroundings, I led him on to speak of himself. Both his parents had died when he was a boy at school. They had left him enough to go to Oxford upon (without the help of the Exhibition he had won), and he had but just completed his second year there when the war broke out. For some mysterious reason he had immediately enlisted instead of applying for a commission, like his friends. I gathered – though not from anything he directly said – that he had had a hard time in the ranks. The majority of his companions in training had come down from the north with the first draft of Tynesiders; and though, God knows, the Tynesider as a fighting man has been unsurpassed in this war, they were a wild, rough crowd before they became soldiers, and I can understand that for a high-strung, sensitive boy of his type the intimate daily round of eating, talking, and sleeping with them, must have made large demands on his patriotism and grit. But he said it did him good; and it was only the pestering of his guardian and relations that after six months forced him to take a commission. He had a curious lack of confidence in his fitness to be an officer – a feeling which is deplorably absent in hundreds not half as fit as he was; but from what I had seen of his handling of his platoon on the voyage (and the men are difficult after a week or two at sea) I was able to assure him that he need have