

Tommy with Book: The Search for Literacy Among the British Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front during the First World War

Dr. John P. Williams, Collin College

Abstract

This study explores the use of literature in assisting soldiers of the British Expeditionary Forces to cope with the ravages of war while serving in the trenches of the Western Front. This endeavor will serve three purposes: first, to examine the source of high literacy rates among the BEF and distinguish these rates by military rank; second, to identify various forms of literature found in the trenches and discuss its impact on morale; and third, to discuss the contribution of family and friends toward sustained literacy on the Western Front. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the ability of the human spirit to endure the mental and physical hardships by using one of the most important vestiges of civilized culture – literature in all its forms.

Keywords

World War I British Expeditionary Forces Trenches Wiper Times Literacy.

The First World War, considered by many to be the mother of all wars, scarred a century and set adrift a generation of the brightest and best from Europe and America. The Great War represented a conflict of unprecedented ferocity that brought to an abrupt end the relative peace and prosperity of the Edwardian era in Great Britain. The absolute shock, immense carnage, utter disillusionment, and fractured faiths associated with this war found their way onto the printed pages of historiographies, anthologies, poetry, and memoirs. These works, numbering in the tens of thousands, further contribute to our understanding of this watershed moment of the twentieth century.

¹ Peter Parker, *The Last Veteran: Harry Patch and the Legacy of War*, (London: The Fourth Estate, 2009), 10.

² John Keegan, *The First World War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 5.

This month, the one hundredth anniversary of the Great War will once again spotlight the epic causes and consequences of this tragic event. The centennial anniversary will also illuminate Great War literature as it relates to the mind and memory that continue to evolve as new and influential critical compositions are produced and studied. Recent examples of this literary criticism include: Paul Fussell's influential analysis, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975); Tim Cross', *The Lost Voices of World I: An International Anthology of Writers, Poets, and Playwrights* (1988); Samuel Hayne's comprehensive, *A War Imagined* (1990); Modris Eksteins' *Rites of Spring: The Birth of the Modern Age*, (2000), and Randall Stevenson's, *Literature and the Great War* (2013).

These scholarly efforts provide fresh perspectives on the Great War by examining how literature helped the common soldier endure harsh, inhumane conditions over extended periods of time. This body of work not only increases our understanding of how literature was used to improve morale, but it also contributes to our knowledge of the manner in which literacy became a common daily occurrence which in the confines of the battlefield. Ultimately, these works contribute to the body of knowledge concerning the First World War by circumventing currently available studies that focus strictly on post-war literature dealing with its cause, course, conclusion, and consequence. This paper is concerned with the way in which British soldiers used literacy to overcome the physical and spiritual desert of The First World War. It will show how men were able to take one of the most important vestiges of their civilian life and use it within a military context as a form of escapism in addition to aiding the reconciliation of their fractured spirits and minds. Ultimately, my study will illustrate how British soldiers used literature to create a sense of solace in the midst of unprecedented chaos.

³ Some five million British subjects went to war between 1914 and 1918, so few families, high or low, were untouched by the slaughter. Brian MacArthur, *For King and Country: Voices from the First World War*, (London: Little, Brown, 2009), 2.

⁴ Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1814*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 85.

⁵ The terms "Tommy" and "Tommy Atkins" have been used as slang vocabulary for British soldiers since well before the First World War. The derivation of the name is disputed, but many agree that Tommy Atkins was indeed a real person. The name Tommy Atkins appeared on certain official forms in the nineteenth century as a stand-in name for the ordinary soldier. This was popularly abbreviated to "Tommy." The name Tommy was immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his "Tommy" poems at the time of the Boer war. (Malcolm Brown, 4 and Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009), 227.

England's noblest sons were ordered to the trenches of Belgium and France by the tens of thousands, to preserve the British order of things which represented stability and responsibility. Raised to revere England and perform their duties, they embraced the British cause and lightheartedly accepted the likelihood of an early death. Yet, somehow in the midst of death and destruction, soldiers of the British Expeditionary Forces (referred to as Tommies) were able to replace the noise, the smoke, the smell of gunpowder, and the rat-tat-tat of rifle and machine gun fire, with the solace of literature in a variety of forms.

Beyond the routine activities of eating and sleeping to pass the time, reading and writing offered an oasis—a respite from the death and destruction—even if only for a few moments. Literature, in the form of books, newspapers, letters,

testament readers, and magazines, transcended other non-combat activities that dominated trench life on the Western Front.

Although many believe that literacy was reserved for the upper class and that reading was an activity merely used to occupy their spare time, the evidence suggests otherwise. There were many literate British soldiers serving on the Western Front—including gentry, urban middle class, schoolteachers, and bank clerks—fighting alongside coal miners, poultry farmers, factory workers, and peasantry. Tucked inside their haversacks were classic anthologies, novels by Jane Austen and others, letters and parcels from home, as well as journals used to record the carnage of war. Each of these prized possessions brought some sense of normalcy to the chaos of their endangered lives.

⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁷ The trenches along the western front (mainly Belgium and France) were filled with millions of soldiers, at the average rate of one soldier per four inches of trench. The freezing trenches of the Western Front left millions of muddy, war-weary soldiers to suffer, bleed, and die under the heaviest hail of explosives that the fully mobilized industries of the Great Nations could deliver. While their officers dined, strategized and slept in palaces and ministries of war far behind the front lines, the soldiers were forced to find solace in the form of a written word. (John Toland, *No Man's Land: 1918, The Last Year of the Great War*, (New York: Doubleday, 1980.1.)

⁸ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 170.

Like the American Civil War (1861-1865), large numbers of literate men fought as common soldiers in the First World War. The high number of literate British soldiers was unprecedented. This achievement resulted from two “liberal” trends powerfully coinciding in England to create a literate society. On one hand, the aristocratic belief in the educational powers of classical and English literature was extremely strong. On the other, the democratic appeal of popular education and “self-improvement” was at its peak. To be educated and literate was not only viewed in humanistic terms, but it was also deemed necessary for those of modest origins to achieve upward mobility in the English class system. Improvements in the literacy rates in England were largely the by-product of the Education Acts of the 1870s. Assisted by the National Home Reading Union, collections of the World’s Classics, and Everyman’s Library, efforts by the British masses to improve their station in life greatly increased. Ultimately, this classless, equalitarian pursuit of literacy laid the foundation for a body of critical readers, writers, and thinkers to occupy both civilian and government strata.

The intersection of aristocratic and democratic forces established an atmosphere of public respect for literature that was unique in modern times. It was this respect for literature that helped nourish and ultimately ratify intellectual and artistic pursuits by those who occupied the many ranks of the BEF.

As a result of classical learning, most of the educated Tommies were poets-at-heart. Whether they studied at Eton, Cambridge, Oxford, or British Common Schools, they shared the rewarding experience of being literate and frequently turned to activities which would enable them to detach from the chaos created by war. Indeed, found in both the haversacks of privates hunkered down in funk-holes as well as the dugouts of many English officers were the Oxford Book of English Verse created by Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1900. In his book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues the Oxford Book presided over the Great War in a way that has never been sufficiently appreciated.

⁹ **Ibid., 170. Though the British authorities officially forbade the keeping of journals, out of fear that they would fall into enemy hands, it was a regulation mostly honored in the breach. Edwin Campion Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory: The World War Dairy of a British Officer*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1981), viii.**

¹⁰ **Fussell, *Great War*, 195.**

¹¹ **Ibid., 197.**

For better or worse, the British interaction with literature was instinctive and unapologetic at all levels, regardless of rank. The soldiers who served in the BEF were ablaze in British literature having benefited from a literacy program that was part of the national past time. These Englishmen, serving in the Great War, were blessed as their literary companions included important philosophical poets dating as far back as the fourteenth century: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Wordsworth, and Tennyson. These hallmarks of English literary history did not belong solely to intellectuals, literary connoisseurs, teachers or critics, but they were also cherished by the British soldiers serving in the trenches of France and Belgium.

With daily life in the trenches of the First World War being nothing short of horrendous, it is hard to imagine that anyone could pen a letter, keep a journal, read a book or debate the merits of poetry in the midst of the sheer chaos. Open latrines, rats, water-borne and lice-borne diseases, knee-deep mud, and rotting bodies everywhere created depressing environmental conditions that made life on the front lines a grim affair. There were very few, if any bunks, which meant the men who were off-duty, had little choice but to lie in the mud. Since dugouts were reserved for officers and NCOs, many were forced to secure cut-outs in the trench and make the best of it. Deployment to the front lines usually lasted seven to ten days with frequent rotations to reserve areas, also called billets, for rest and relaxation. These periods of reprieve allowed fresh troops to take over in addition to providing fresh supplies and new reading material for circulation among the men. Ironically, constant stalemates in the fighting left many BEF with plenty of "free time" on their hands. This so-called "free time" was spent on chores related to trench life: rebuilding and reinforcing the trenches, tending to matters of hygiene, sleeping, eating, and of course matters of literacy.

¹² Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War: 1914-1918*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

¹³ Fussell, *Great War*, 195.

¹⁴ Education in both institutions traditionally espoused the gentlemanly tradition of loyalty, honor, chivalry, Christianity, patriotism, sportsmanship, and leadership. Public-school boys were expected to aspire to be officer material in any war. (Peter Parker, *The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public-School Ethos*. (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1987), 105.)

¹⁵ Fussell, *Great War*, 195-198.

¹⁶ Fussell, *Great War*, 200.

The solace men found in reading during lulls in the fighting created a dire need of reading material. In those days, the postal service was so efficient, that books, magazines, and other forms of literature sent from home were as common at the front lines as parcels from Fortnum's and Mason's. Mail, post, and parcel came very quickly and in abundance. It was possible to ask for new reading material and receive it within days. The camaraderie of war promoted the sharing of books and other items amongst those serving in the trenches. Another source of reading material for British troops in the trenches was a form of the spoils of war. Lt. Edmund Blunden explains in his *Undertones of War* (1928), troops would often take books from abandoned houses in billeted areas. In Blunden's estimation, the acquisition of these books represented rescue missions, of sorts, as he and his brethren reasoned that their efforts saved the classic literature from certain death.

By far, the leading source of literature would have been family members and friends who sent parcels stocked with books, magazines, letters, food stuffs, and bare essentials. Additional means for acquiring reading materials came through the efforts of the British government who saw the value of reading material in raising morale. The British government allocated funds to the BEF to provide a War Library for troops, in addition to various societies being established in England to provide reading materials for those stationed overseas.

By 1917, over eight million letters were going to and from the Western Front each week. The conditions under which letters were produced were often terrifying and utterly incompatible with clear thought and orderly writing. In an effort to communicate in some fashion, Tommies turned to literature and poetry that was artistic as well as conciliatory in nature. Letters home were abundant with words alive with the presence of Keats, Shelley, Hardy, Tennyson, and Wordsworth.

¹⁷ **Ibid.,196.**

¹⁸ **Vincent Sherry, *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45-46.**

¹⁹ **Fussell, *Great War*, 198.**

²⁰ **The reliance on parcels from home favored those who served on the Western Front, as opposed to other such foreign fields as Salonika, Italy, or the Middle East. Ibid., 200.**

Yet Fussell argues that historians would be mistaken if they relied on letters for factual testimony about the war. Many could not bring themselves to write what was utterly incomprehensible. Any attempt to be truthful was redacted by censorship. Officers were routinely striking out the horrors by having soldiers rewrite their letters several times in order to pass censorship rules. In many cases, a Tommy would have to write his letter three or four times before it was deemed acceptable to be sent home. One positive aspect of this repeated drafting was that it often allowed the Tommy to express all of his mental and emotional turmoil on paper and then let it go.

The British army was class-driven in 1914-1918, so university-educated officers preferred more "advanced" selections of literature including Shakespeare as well as books like Palgrave's Golden Treasury of English Verse and the Oxford Book of English Verse. From Milton's Paradise Lost, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Herbert Read's "The Happy Warrior," Hardy's "What of the Faith and Fire within Us?" to Kipling's "If"—these literary efforts found their way into many conversations amongst the BEF along with tales of sex and drinking.

Although the Oxford Book of English Verse was considered to be the most popular, other genres of literature were also sought by the troops. Books that promoted humor and satire about army life, or even life in general, were quite popular. In addition, the demand for science fiction by H.G. Wells, romance novels by Jane Austen and adventure novels by John Buchan was also high. Nat Gould's horse racing novels, known as yellow backs, were heavily favored since they were short and affordable. Captain R.W. Campbell's Private Spud Tamson novel would also bring relief.

As wartime institutions, these forms of literature served as a means of escape and offered British soldiers books that could be read during off-duty hours with little or no effort. These reading habits led some to seek out books that were gaudy adventures and short in nature. So Tommies would, in turn, share these books with their comrades or use them to roll papers for cigarettes. For some, books which contained pictures and illustrations were entertainment enough to take their mind off the war.

²¹ Malcom Brown, *Tommy Goes to War*, (London: J.M. Dean & Sons, 1999), 53.

²² Fussell, *Great War*, 201.

British Tommies did not limit their reading to fiction and non-fiction genres. They also carried large quantities of religious materials, such as pocket testaments and Bibles, in their haversacks to and from the front lines. According to Eric Blunden, in *Undertones of War* (1928), to help soldiers come to terms with their spiritual lives, officers would often distribute pocket Testaments bound in green suede prior to being stationed on the front lines. For many Tommies, this little spiritual treasure, filled with colored pictures and scripture, offered solace when faced with the brutality and carnage of war on a daily basis. Others kept the Testaments in their breast pockets—even though it went unread, it remained close to their heart. The use of the Bible as a source of spiritual solace and solitude is best described by John Keegan in his book, *The First World War* (2000). According to Keegan, during the Battle of the Somme, many of the British wounded lay in no man's land for over three days. Some four weeks later after British forces were able to advance into no man's land, they came across the fallen that had climbed into shell holes, wrapped themselves in waterproof sheets, taken out their Bibles and died.

The appetite for reading material was so strong that several units turned to self-published magazines to fill the void. The best-known British trench magazine was *The Wipers Times* produced by a duo of British soldiers who sought to infuse laughter through the power of print. Historians like Fussell credit *The Wipers Times* for being a literary phenomenon during what has often been described as a "literary war."

What makes *The Wipers Times* most notable is that it was produced by a unit not known for being highly educated and well-connected. In fact, the unit consisted mostly of former miners, not career soldiers. Admirers and critics alike noted that its pages were filled with a remarkable style of wit, humor, and hilarious invention. To its credit, *The Wipers Times* was produced without a hint of vulgarity. Another popular magazine in the British trenches was

²³ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928). 81.

²⁴ John Ellis, *Eye - Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1991), 138.

²⁵ Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War: 1914-1918*, (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 14.

²⁶ Fussell, *Great War*, 210.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

War Illustrated, which targeted working-class men and promoted war propaganda about the German atrocities—both true and fabricated. The War Illustrated included articles written by H.G. Wells and Winston Churchill and had a circulation of 750,000 at its peak. Produced by The Daily Telegraph, it was largely a sensationalistic and patriotic publication, which in time was rebuked by readers in the trenches do to its over-dramaticized stories about German troops.

The Great War cast a long shadow over the twentieth-century. As Randall Stevenson reminds us in his book *Literature and the Great War*, World War One refuses to remain buried in the past. Scholastic events such as this one being held at the University of London contribute significantly to putting the Great War in perspective in relation to other events of the twentieth-century. While it is important to study the First World War based on economic, political, and military forces before, during, and after the war, there also exist other legacies as well. There exists a cultural legacy to the First World War, which includes literacy and all forms of literature found in the trenches on the Western Front.

The staggering statistical accounts of material, manpower, and casualties of the First World War often overshadow the memory and plight of the individuals who served in the trenches of Belgium and France. Efforts to put the Great War in perspective rarely deviate from topics such as the evolution and use of modern weaponry and industrial advancements, the advent of trench warfare as a military strategy, and the ineptitude of both Allied and Axis political and military leadership.

²⁸ Abebooks, “Trench Literature – Reading in World War I”, July 1, 2014, <http://www.abebooks.com/books/world-war-soldiers-reading-kipling/trench-literature.shtml>. Blunden, *Undertones*, 4.

²⁹ Fussell, *Great War*, 196.

³⁰ <http://www.abebooks.com/books/world-war-soldiers-reading-kipling/trench-literature.shtml>.

³¹ <http://www.abebooks.com/books/world-war-soldiers-reading-kipling/trench-literature.shtml>.

³² Ellis, 140.

³³ Blunden, 4.

Moreover, rarely do these scholarly efforts include in-depth analysis of how combatants utilized creative ways related to literacy to help defuse their disillusionment with the inglorious conditions of war and its aftermath. By examining these efforts we find that Paul Fussell's dictum that "the Great War was a literary war" holds true.

In conclusion, this paper was not meant to be a comprehensive study of literacy and literature in the trenches of the First World War on a grand scale. It was written to illuminate one aspect of civilian life used within a military context to combat the ravages of war over an extended period of time. It was also written to inspire other studies of how French, German, Russian, and American forces relied on literacy in their own theaters of operation. And ultimately, it was written to help historians and scholars better understand and appreciate the role literacy played during the Great War as a matter of mental and spiritual survival by those fighting in the trenches of France and Belgium.

Works Cited

- 1) Blunden, Edmund. *Undertones of War*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928
- 2) Brown, Malcom. *Tommy Goes To War*, London: J.M. Dean & Sons, 1999.
- 3) -----, *The Wipers Times: The Complete Series of the Famous Wartime Trench Newspaper*, London: Little Books, Limited, 2013.
- 4) Cross, Tim. *The Lost Voices of World I: An International Anthology of Writers, Poets, and Playwrights* (1988).
- 5) Peter Doyle, *The British Soldier of the First World War*, Oxford
- 6) Shire Publishing Ltd., 2008
- 7) "Trench Literature – Reading in World War I." Richard Davies,
- 8) Udo Goellmann & Sara Melendre, accessed June 14, 2014, Abebooks, <http://www.abebooks.com/books/world-war-soldiers-reading-kipling/trench-literature.shtml>
- 9) Ellis, John. *Eye - Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (1991).
- 10) Eksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.
- 11) Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009.
- 12) Keegan, John. *First World War*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998.
- 13) Parker, Peter, *The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public-School*
- 14) Ethos. London: Constable and Company Limited, 1987.
- 15) Sherry, Vincent. *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- 16) Stevenson, Randall. *Literature and the Great War: 1914-1918*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- 17) Toland, John. *No Man's Land: 1918, The Last Year of the Great War*, 1980.
- 18) Wohl, Robert *The Generation of 1814*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.