

‘The Truth About Men in the Front Line’: Imagining the Experience of War in Memoirs of the Western Front

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I have read every word of this book...In it is to be found the truth about men in the Front Line in war... War is as ennobling to the actual combatants as it is degrading to the idle onlooker.

Major-General The Rt. Hon. J.E.B. Seely P.C., C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. (July 1932)¹

Sneer as we twenty-first century sophisticates might at Major-General Seely's bombastic justification of mechanised mass murder, the fact remains that the memoir of Captain Pollard V.C., M.C., D.C.M., (which these words preface) wholeheartedly confirms the analysis of our Right Honourable friend. It is a simple matter, notwithstanding our own lack of combat experience, to scorn the martial triumphalism of a brass hat whose boldest claim is to have occasionally been "*quite* near the enemy"; it is somewhat harder to completely disregard the words of a highly decorated infantryman who saw four years active service in the trenches. Captain Pollard's view of the war as exciting, ennobling and even *fun*, may run counter to the commonly-held perception that it was a degrading, horrifying, innocence-shattering experience, but we cannot simply ignore his view because we find it unpalatable. If we wish to uncover "the truth about men in the Front Line in war" and would know how it *feels* to fight, kill and witness the violent deaths of friend and enemy, our richest resource must surely be the personal accounts of the men who were there.

In considering the memoirs of serving soldiers we would do well to remember that "Shell-hole and trench have a limited horizon...The range of vision extends no further than a bomb-throw". Ernst Jünger's words emphasize that any one person's war experience is going to be (as Blunden has it) "very local, limited, incoherent"² : the Western Front was only one of many theatres of war, many soldiers never saw combat, and even those who did, did so in markedly different locations, conditions and frames of mind. Yet, having noted this limited perspective, Jünger goes on to claim that what is seen from the trench "is seen very distinctly".³ War is personal. It may be the product of social forces, it may be fought across vast areas and plotted on generals' maps, but it is experienced by individuals. Samuel Hynes, an author with his own combat experience to draw on, states that "No man will see much of the battle he's in; and what he does see he will not remember as other men who were there will".⁴ Nevertheless personal accounts, whilst partial, fallible and possibly mendacious, render the view from trench and shell-hole more distinctly than any other form of narrative.⁵

Robert Graves states that "the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities".⁶ This paradox neatly sums up the strengths and weaknesses of war memoirs. They are not simply enumerations of a series of factual events; they are attempts to capture the "truth" of war as experienced by an individual. In pursuit of that truth they frequently employ the techniques of fiction, sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally. Chronologies are restructured, narratives are embellished, elided, compressed or appropriated; and hindsight, contrast and analysis - be it ever so subtly - are introduced. That said (and even if we accept Fussell's contention that memoirs differ from first novels "only by continuous implicit attestations of veracity or appeals to documented historical fact",)⁷ they are still written by men who have *lived* the events and experiences they attempt to give shape to - even if that shape is constructed from invention and factual inaccuracy. Memoirs' falsehoods, as Graves

recognises, usually stem from a desire to render experience more truthfully. We should be aware of this when reading them.

Recognising that the wars narrated in memoirs exist in the imagination brings us to another problem: can any account or analysis of war (be it ever so faithful to factual events) make the reader understand and *feel* the experience of war? The simple answer to this is, I think, no (although I will elaborate on this later.) Blunden emphasises this fear - "*Neither will they [his readers] understand*",⁸ and Guy Sajer unequivocally states "Those who haven't lived through the experience may sympathise as they read...but they certainly will never understand, as one cannot explain the unexplainable".⁹ War is unexplainable because of its particularity, because analogues drawn from outside of the event are insufficient to the task of conveying its otherness. In addition to this, its infinite variety eludes the homogenising tendencies of those, such as Major General Seely, who would draw a simple moral from it by emptying it of its contrasts, contradictions and difference. More sophisticated memoirists recognise that there is no such thing as an ultimate "truth about men in the Front Line in war", or that if there is, it is too vast and too nebulous to be imprisoned within discourses that are *images* of war, not 'the thing itself'.¹⁰ This is as true for the soldier attempting to 'make sense' of his own war, as it is for the reader of war memoirs. It is for this reason that Blunden, employing a metaphor drawn straight from the ravaged landscape of battle, admits he "will be going over the ground again...until that hour when agony's clawed face softens into the smilingness of a young spring day".¹¹ Blunden, Graves, Sassoon, Jünger: throughout their lives each of these intelligent, gifted men went over the ground of his war experience again and again and again.

Let us go over this ground ourselves.

*Let the smoke of German breakfast fires, yes and the savour of their coffee, rise in these pages, and be kindly mused upon in our neighbouring saps of retrogression.*¹²

Blunden's memoir, typically combining pastoral language with martial, characterises acts of recall as diggings that reconnoitre the land *behind* us. The landscape of war into which they burrow is thus superficially familiar, often surprising or contradictory ("There was a difference prevailing in all things") and ultimately unknowable (saps exist for the purpose of gathering knowledge, but their perspective is as limited as the view from Jünger's trench.) Life on the Western Front was a physical experience, whether it was savouring the odours wafting across No Man's Land, cowering in the midst of a bombardment, or ripping another human being's guts out with the point of a bayonet. The contradictions and breadth of trench life present the memoirist with the problem of how "to select the sights, faces, words, incidents, which characterised the time". Blunden, recognising the impossibility of such a task, realises that "The art is rather to collect them, in their original form of incoherence". This applies equally to attempts to convey in mere language the stench of rotting corpses, the confusion of battle and the experience of killing men or seeing friends die. And it is in describing these experiences, particularly that of killing another man, that many memoirs lapse into circumlocution or silence. Louis Simpson argues this is because "Language seems to falsify physical life and to betray those who have experienced it absolutely - the dead". Fussell refutes this, claiming that the problem is one of social niceties rather than linguistic shortcomings: "What listener wants to be torn and shaken when they don't have to be? We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*".¹³

Fussell is, I think, only partially right. Reticence certainly plays a part in the lacunae common to many memoirs, yet *The Storm of Steel*, showing no evidence of moral fastidiousness, is replete with vivid images of killing, suffering and death - do we really believe that reading these descriptions could be as "nasty" as experiencing them?

*One had the head struck off, and the neck on the trunk was like a great sponge of blood. From the arm stumps of another the broken bones projected, and the uniform was saturated by a large wound in the chest. The entrails of the third poured out from a wound in the belly.*¹⁴

Such prose is typical of Jünger, yet at times, even his formidable descriptive powers are defeated by what he has witnessed and he is left talking of "indescribable carnage".¹⁵ This indescribability stems, not from restraint, but intellectual and imaginative breakdown in the face of Sajer's "unexplainable". Contrary to Fussell's claim, language is, quite simply, unequal to the task.

Sassoon also is capable of verbal shocks:

*I found one of our men dying slowly with a hole in his forehead. His eyes were open and he breathed with a horrible snoring sound...as the day went on, I definitely wanted to kill someone at close quarters.*¹⁶

Vivid enough, we might think, as descriptions of death and the bloodlust engendered by it go, but later Sassoon reveals his mistrust of language, or indeed memory, to fully actualise lived experience:

*Such stories look straightforward enough in print, twelve years later; but their reality remains hidden; even in the minds of old soldiers the harsh horror mellows and recedes.*¹⁷

Yet this mistrust of language, memory and imagination did not stop Sassoon or Graves or Blunden from "going over the ground" of their experiences and - like hundreds of other soldiers who served on the Western Front - attempting to tell the story of their war. The syntactical confusion of the question with which *Undertones of War* opens - "Why should I not write it?" - embodies the foreknowledge of failure and the desire to explain, re-imagine and understand which characterises the best war memoirs.

Hynes argues that every war narrative tells two stories: "the things men do in war" and "things war does to them".¹⁸ In the generally accepted myth of the war¹⁹ the emphasis is firmly on the latter; yet the narratives of Blunden, Graves, Jünger, Pollard and Sassoon all (in varying degrees according to the writer's experiences and conception of war) portray infantrymen as both active and passive agents. In *Fire-Eater, The Memoirs of a V.C.*, Pollard's expressed intention is "to point out a lesson that war taught us - that, as a Nation, we can accomplish anything so long as we work together". Given this, and the gung-ho *Boys Own* tone of his narrative, it is no great surprise that he goes on to provide numerous examples of (British) soldiers (principally himself) as active agents in their own destiny:

Huns barred our passage. One instant they were there; the next they were swept away. I fired my revolver; Snoad got one with his bayonet; the men were shooting and stabbing.

Burgess and Snoad were quite as good as any officers I could have had. With their assistance I knew I should pull through...All the men were quite cheery and I had no misgivings about them making a good show when the time came.

I should have realised the utter foolishness of running as fast as I could into the enemy's territory with only three men to support me. But my blood was up. I felt a thrill only comparable to running through the opposition at Rucker to score a try.

With luck I might bayonet a Hun.

The contrast with "Anthem for Doomed Youth" could hardly be more pronounced. For this memoirist, war is a thrilling test of manhood, analagous to sport, where "indomitable British pluck"²⁰ is destined to triumph and the veteran can write of killing his enemy without any evidence of empathy or shame. War poems tend to succinctly express intense emotions,

ideas or impressions - "glory", "pity", "slaughter", "betrayal". Memoirs, perhaps for the simple reason that they are longer and because they imagine one person's *entire* war, are far more likely to acknowledge its varied nature. This is even true of relatively unsophisticated accounts such as Pollard's. Alongside his enthusiastic descriptions of the thrills of battle and the comedies of trench-life, a more 'Owenesque' tone can be heard:

*Already in eight months our brave battalion of eight hundred had dwindled to less than one hundred...The lines seemed so vast; the trench systems so deep. Every minor attack, successful or unsuccessful, seemed so futile. The only thing that one was certain of was that lives would be lost. Men were falling like ninepins. I could have wept with the maddening impotence of my position.*²¹

A sense of the *puissance* and impotence of the individual co-exists in most soldiers' recollections; the latter is often rooted in an apprehension of the unavoidable nature of death. Courage is no protection against shellfire or snipers. Both lurk unseen, ready to strike at any moment:

*But the question for us is, what about that German ambush?...We cannot avoid the feeling that we are being stalked, and we are equally amazed that in this moonlight we are not riddled with bullets. They had hardly taken over the trenches when a fierce brief bout of shelling fell upon Valley Cottages...among the victims was our kind, witty and fearless Sergeant-Major Daniels.*²²

Blunden may be more inclined than Pollard to talk in terms of "victims", yet in spite of the *Fire-Eater's* confident assertion that "I enjoyed the War" - an assertion his memoir as a whole is at pains to confirm - descriptions of helpless victims of artillery or machine-guns creep into his narrative. The poetry (such as it is) of Pollard's tale may lie in the adventure rather than the pity, but beneath the rousing body of his narrative, the shadow of a more complex war may be glimpsed.

Ernst Jünger is another Front Line combatant who signally fails to be disillusioned or embittered by his experience. He too shows "the things men do in war" and "things war does to them". He describes numerous instances of ineluctable slaughter - "Karg...thought himself in safety. He died an instant, unlooked-for death" - yet, towards the end of his memoir, he can still write the following:

*Even modern battle has its great moments. One hears it said very often and very mistakenly that the infantry battle has degenerated to an uninteresting butchery. On the contrary, to-day more than ever it is the individual that counts...Trench warfare is the bloodiest, wildest, and most brutal of all warfare, yet it too has its men, men whom the call of the hour has raised up...princes of the trenches.*²³

Yet, Jünger recognises the insignificance of man at the same time as affirming the triumph of individual will. He calmly argues that "one's existence is part of an eternal circuit, and that the death of a single individual is no such great matter". He even manages to combine these seemingly contradictory positions in a single image: "Motullo was killed by a shot through the head. Though his brain fell over his face to his chin, his mind was still clear when we took him to the nearest dugout".²⁴ - The detached tone that Jünger adopts here is the stylistic manifestation of his philosophy. He never shrinks from delineating the enormity of the Western Front, yet in spite of the four-year diet of horror served up for our consideration, he, like Pollard, remains enthusiastic about the benefits of war. *The Storm of Steel* ends with an extended paean to these and "the idea of the Fatherland" - it is worth quoting at length.

*And so, strange as it may sound, I learned from this very four years' schooling in force and in all the fantastic extravagance of material warfare that life has no depth of meaning except when it is pledged for an ideal, and that there are ideals in comparison with which the life of an individual and even of a people has no weight...Hardened as scarcely another generation ever was in fire and flame, we could go into life as though from the anvil; into friendship, love, politics, professions, into all that destiny had in store. It is not every generation that is so favoured.*²⁵

This is a remarkable passage for a number of reasons. Consistent with the body of the memoir it portrays men, whole nations even, as both important and inconsequential; soldiers are both (passive) molten objects shaped in the workshop of war and (active) implements of bright steel, equal to the tests of life and the vicissitudes of fortune. Most surprisingly, given the litany of slaughter in the preceding pages, war is portrayed as a salutary force effecting profound change in those lucky enough to participate.

The transfiguring power of war is a theme of all the memoirs here considered, although not all of them view that change in terms as positive as Jünger. No memoirist states unequivocally that war is *always* an ennobling, enriching experience - even Pollard observes that "All the glamour and romance cannot make up for the misery occasioned by the terrible loss of life"²⁶ - but they all recognise its power to transform.

This motif is most explicit in Pollard (perhaps because he lacks the other writers' sophistication or subtlety). Here he is on the changes war works and the lessons it teaches:

I crossed to France a mere boy, my outlook restricted. War was changing me into a man.

I learnt a lesson. Stick bombs cannot be safely handled by troops in the excitement of action...At once I learnt my second lesson...you could lead men anywhere provided you yourself were prepared to go first and show them the way.

*Up to now I had been a boy playing with realities. The rebuff to my proposal of marriage; the experience of my wound; but mostly the knowledge that I could successfully lead men in action had turned me into a man.*²⁷

The moral is simple: war teaches one lessons (such as how to command) and makes a boy into a man. It is interesting that Pollard mentions romantic love (albeit in the form of rejection) as an ingredient in his transformation. Almost the last words of his memoir are a tribute to what he perceives as the power of love: "To [my wife]...I owe the fact that I am a better man to-day than I have ever been in my life before". Love, it would appear, is a transfiguring power more potent even than war. This idea, of course, is hardly new, yet Pollard's hackneyed repetition of it inadvertently provides us with an insight into the ways in which we think of war. Graves latches onto this when he writes that love and war have "much in common: the chief common quality being romanticism".²⁸ Clear-eyed cynic that he is, Graves recognises that, for reader and writer alike, love and war exist not only in fact, but in our imaginations. Similarly, Blunden in a brief, but significant, scene describes a romantic meeting with a young French girl; an encounter which he subsequently goes over the ground of "in many a moment of *escape and fantasy*".²⁹ And Eric Partridge talks of "war which, next to love, has most captured the world's imagination".³⁰ As readers and writers we encounter love and war as imaginative constructs even if they centre on actual events. Because of this it is all too easy to adopt a reductive perspective from which we draw simplistic morals. Pollard appears unaware of this; Blunden, Partridge and Graves nudge us towards this realisation.

The title of the third part of Sassoon's memoirs, *Sherston's Progress*, draws a clear analogy between the experience of war and a transfiguring pilgrimage. Change pervades the trilogy. *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* begins with bucolic evocations of the beauty of a life spent hunting on horseback, and ends in deadlock in a ruined landscape with Sherston

(Sassoon) hunting Germans and determined to die-landscape, movement and emotion have all been transformed. In *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, change begins to work on Sherston's consciousness; it slowly begins to dawn on him that he is but one insignificant person caught up in events beyond anyone's comprehension and that the tragedies of life extend beyond the boundaries of the conflict he is caught up in:

*I am no believer in wild denunciations of the War; I am merely describing my own experiences of it; and in 1917 I was only beginning to learn that life, for the majority of the population, is an unlovely struggle against unfair odds, culminating in a cheap funeral.*³¹

The trilogy ends with Sherston being shipped back to England, a victim of 'friendly' fire. The heroic death he envisaged for himself has become an "ignominious" head-wound inflicted by one of his own sentries. The war has changed him, but not from egoist to idealist or boy to man but from self-deluding romanticism to a more complex unromantic world-view. Stated so baldly it might appear that Sassoon's trilogy has little to say beyond iterating the Myth of the War; careful reading belies this impression. We, unlike Sherston, are never permitted to rest secure in our conclusions; the elaborate structure may enact "the ironic redemption of a shallow fox-hunting man by terrible events",³² but Sassoon admits "I don't think I could see it quite like that at the time. What I am writing now is the result of a bird's-eye view of the past, and the cub-hunting subaltern".³³ The deliberate distance that Sassoon places between himself and his narrator enables him to satirise the ego's indifference to the suffering of others and make a broad moral point about the obscenities of war, whilst illustrating that fun, death, boredom, excitement, camaraderie and egoism are all present on the field of battle.

Undertones of War depicts the transformation of a landscape. The changes wrought by the war on the fields of Picardy and Flanders clash with the pastoral lyricism with which Blunden describes them: "skulls appeared like mushrooms". Nature herself has been murdered: "...one immediately entered the land of despair...mud, and death, and life were much the same thing...cancerous with torn bodies...The whole zone was a corpse and the mud itself was mortified".³⁴ Blunden implies that any change he himself underwent occurred after the War. His account of it closes in spring 1918, when he is ordered to serve "six months' duty at a training centre in England". Fifty miles behind the British lines he looks out of the "tranquillized valley of the Ancre", rejoicing in its (as yet) unravaged beauty. Blunden the narrator knows that in a few weeks the German offensive will have transformed this Eden into another Hell. His younger self is blissfully unaware of this possibility. The movement from Innocence to Knowledge will, for him, occur beyond the confines of his memoir:

*I might have known the war by this time, but I was still too young to know the depth of its ironic cruelty ...No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat.*³⁵

For Graves there is no simple movement from ignorance to enlightenment, or from innocence to experience, disillusionment and embitterment. This, perhaps, is unsurprising from a writer who urbanely makes the outrageous claim that, whilst still young enough to be in a pram, he realised Swinburne-then feted for his poetry, later notorious for his taste for alcohol and de Sade - was "a public menace". This vignette, set almost twenty years before war broke out, contains subtle intimations of the major changes that, according to Graves, the War did bring about. *Goodbye to All That* begins in the male-dominated, authoritarian, *apparently* respectable, *apparently* ordered society of Victorian/ Edwardian England. It ends in the bohemian, hedonistic, de-centred, divided England of the Roaring Twenties. The War is the force that has effected this transformation, both in society and in Graves's lifestyle.

Even Graves's literary style has been moulded by the war; it cannot appeal to the certainties which governed Edwardian language and life. Indeed the possibility that those certainties ever *really* existed is called into doubt; pre-War England becomes infected by the arch, sardonic tones in which it is described. The world has changed from a sane, ordered (English) place to a mad, chaotic, incomprehensible one - a place Graves contemplates with the eyes of an outsider. Sincerity is replaced by sardony, reason by insanity, certainty by uncertainty and order by confusion. Men kill themselves to avoid battle (pages 89, 200), or through their own stupidity (84), or murder their NCO's (94), or gas their own troops (128), or are killed trying to rescue a dying comrade who does not want their help (132-3). Meanwhile, Mothers cheerfully wish their sons could die twice (191); Sassoon - "Mad-Jack" to his friends - one of the few sane men left, is committed to a mental institution(216); and Graves, wounded at High Wood, is reported dead and has to write to *The Times* to revoke his own obituary notice (182-188). The amazing thing is that these events are not literary inventions but documented facts, woven into the horrifying farce of Graves's narrative. The War has destroyed language, lives, order and sense. Even after it is over, the terms in which the world may be conceived and described have been irretrievably corrupted. The world is mad and stories that defy reason (such as preternaturally cynical babies) suddenly appear quite plausible. The company orders for the battle of Loos are read off by Captain Thomas to Graves, The Actor, and the other company officers, in an atmosphere of burgeoning farce; the objectives are ridiculously optimistic: even death has been transformed into a joke.

When Thomas had reached this point, The Actor's shoulders were shaking with laughter.

What's up?" asked Thomas irritably.

The Actor giggled: "Who in God's name is responsible for this little effort?" "Don't know", Thomas said. "Probably Paul the Pimp...this is what they call a 'subsidiary attack'. There will be no troops in support. We've just got to go over and keep the enemy busy while the folk on our right do the real work...Personally I don't give a damn either way. We'll get killed whatever happens". We all laughed.³⁶

The fact that men are prepared to laugh at the prospect of their imminent deaths shows how fundamentally changed they are by active service. Jünger, laid up in hospital but hoping to return to the Front, blandly remarks "I amused myself...by counting the number of times I had been hit"; Blunden talks of his colleagues' "laconic fatalism".³⁷ Yet even laconic fatalism has its limits, as Graves recognises:

One can joke with a badly-wounded man and congratulate him on being out of it. One can disregard a dead man. But even a miner can't make a joke that sounds like a joke over a man who takes three hours to die, after the top part of his head has been taken off by a bullet fired at twenty yards' range.³⁸

Fatalism is not always tinged with humour. Sherston's young friend, the symbolically named Allgood, has "an expression of veiled melancholy on his face, as if he were inwardly warned that he would never see his home in Wiltshire again". Two months later, Sassoon/Sherston discovers Allgood has been killed, and claims "it seemed to me that I had expected it".³⁹ This passage might be seen as portentous or sentimental - I do not believe it to be either. Rather it seems to me to be a moving tribute to the thousands of young men (amongst whom some of Sassoon's friends would have numbered) who went to their deaths with little complaint. It is all the more effective for its brevity. The foreboding imbued in those few lines is an indication of the large number of combatants who were, in effect, foredoomed by the inconceivably high casualty rates on the Western Front.

Death is never very far away in the Front Line and out of this fact grows fatalism in all its manifestations: humourous, fearful and resigned. We have already seen how Pollard, Blunden and Jünger all emphasise the impotence of the individual in the face of death. Karg and Sergeant-Major Daniels are killed without warning. Blunden, describing the trench-parapets as "thin" and "treacherous", relates how "one afternoon a sentry of ours was hit in the head and killed while he stood quite out of observation". Security is an illusion, safety a snare. At le Touret farm, old and rusty grenades, seemingly innocuous because of their antiquity, are left to lie in the mud, where they bring death to some curious, sauntering Tommy. "This", Blunden tells us, "was a characteristic of the war - that long talon reaching for its victim at its pleasure". Death lies in wait, or falls from the sky: "that evening...a shell...killed Naylor...Another shell...robbed us instantly of Sergeant Clifford". It is perpetually present: Jünger speaks of "living four years under the shadow of death" and how, in battle, "Death lay in ambush...in every shell hole, merciless, and making one merciless in turn". Sassoon, resting before the Battle of the Somme, talks of "death...lying in wait for the troops next week".⁴⁰

Death is not only constantly present but strangely capricious and the apprehension of this leads to the proliferation of superstition. Graves relates numerous stories of deaths foretold and ghostly figures. Three officers, David Thomas among them, die: apparently because of the unlucky words of an adjutant. Only Graves survives to recount this evidence of a maleficent fate. He and Blunden both see phantom spies and relate near-identical incidents of explosives falling out of the sky, landing at their feet and failing to detonate. Wounds are frequently described as "unlucky", "freakish" and "bizarre". A small Scotsman is shot in the throat whilst standing talking with Pollard, who, because he can find no answer to "what caused the Hun sniper to select the little Scot...instead of" him, comes to believe that he is destined to survive the war. Jünger, shot by an unseen sniper, stops to talk to an acquaintance.

*We had scarcely been talking for a minute when a shell struck the cross-roads where but for this chance encounter I should probably have been at that moment.*⁴¹

It was noted above that Guy Sajer describes war as "unexplainable". Superstitious beliefs are a refuge against that inexplicability: like gallows humour, callousness, or bravado they are a defence against the capriciousness of fate and the ubiquity of death. But the protection offered by these strategies was illusory; the only reasonably certain way to elude death's "long talon" was to be sent home and easiest way to get sent home was to be seriously wounded. To receive a "Blighty" or a "cushy one" was to have one's death-sentence commuted to life.

To get a cushy one is all that the old hands think of...They look forward to a battle because that gives them more chances of a cushy one in the legs or arms than trench warfare. In trench warfare the proportion of head wounds is much greater...I had cannily worked it out...My best way of lasting through to the end of the war would be to get wounded.

"Who's for a Blighty one to-night?" was the stock joke (if such a well-worn wish could be called a joke).

That the desire for a Blighty was no laughing matter is illustrated by Sassoon two pages later:

*Among them was a grey-haired lance-corporal who had one of his feet almost blown off...he said: "Thank God Almighty for this; I've been waiting eighteen months for it, and now I can go home".*⁴²

It seems obscene that healthy men would wish serious injury upon themselves; that so many memoirs tell us they did is a firm indication of how terrible life on the Western Front could be. It is further evidence of the war's otherness and the extent to which it changes people. This sense of war's difference permeates every memoir and nowhere is the savour of strangeness stronger than in the descriptions of soldiers' attitudes (narrators included) towards the dead and the dying. Blunden, whose memoir is, perhaps, more attuned to suffering than any other, often exhibits unexpected *sang-froid*:

*Poor Corporal Mills...died later. But (at this cost) Kapp's patrol had been remarkable.
So we lost men.
I found a pair of boots, still containing someone's feet.
Outside, men were killed from time to time.⁴³*

These measured tones are typical of the way in which the dead are described; fear, horror and sympathy are often strangely absent. Each of these memoirs contains innumerable examples of hands accidentally plunged into rotting cadavers, trenches propped up with body parts and fields strewn with corpses. They give us an insight into soldiers' attitudes to death - here is a selection of them.

Pollard:

In June 1915...when I saw Hun corpses killed by our shellfire I was full of pity...Now...I looked at a trench full of corpses without any sensation whatever. Neither pity nor fear that I might soon be one myself, nor anger against their killers. Nothing stirred me. I was just a machine...

Sassoon:

*...I noticed an English soldier lying by the road with a horribly smashed head; soon such sights would be too frequent to attract attention, but this first one was perceptibly unpleasant...I still maintain that an ordinary human being has a right to be momentarily horrified by a mangled body seen on an afternoon walk. And the dead were the dead; this was no time to be pitying them or asking silly questions about their outraged lives. Such sights must be taken for granted...
...there is nothing remarkable about a dead body in a European War, or a squashed beetle in a cellar.⁴⁴*

Jünger:

*We looked at all these dead with dislocated limbs, distorted faces, and the hideous colours of decay as though we walked in a dream through a garden full of strange plants, and we could not realise at first what we had all round us. But finally we were so accustomed to the horrible that if we came on a dead body anywhere on a fire-step or in a ditch we gave it no more than a passing thought and recognised it as we would a stone or a tree...
...I felt the look of horror in the eyes of a new recruit, a seminarist, who was gazing at me. Looking along the channel of his thoughts I had a shock when I realised for the first time how callous the war had made me. One got to regarding men as mere matter.⁴⁵*

I have quoted at this length to illustrate the extent to which war memoirs document the assimilation of the abnormal. Death - which is at first pitiable, grotesque, repellent, fascinating and *other* - rapidly becomes all too unremarkable. This, of course, is not always the case, particularly when the carnage is beyond normative trench standards, or the deceased is a friend or relative. Pollard is distraught at the death of his only brother; Sassoon becomes

murderously suicidal when David Thomas is killed, whilst Graves feels "empty and lost". Blunden stares with "dreadful fixity" at the "isolated horror" of the unrecognisable remains of a dead corporal (p.67.) Yet corpses in their more quotidian forms become a part of the background, even if death reserves the right to occasionally horrify.

It is clear from these memoirs that war has the power to change men (even the meek and mild Blunden) to such an extent that - from a peacetime perspective and perhaps only for short periods - they become "callous", de-sensitised, "machine"-like, inhuman. As Sassoon implies, they cease to be "normal human-being[s]". That anyone can change to this extent, even temporarily, is deeply disturbing; it strongly suggests that identity is contingent and fragmentary rather than stable and given. Men being changed in this manner does not have a place in the Myth of the War. Yet it is there in descriptions of the memoirists' attitudes to the dead and even more so in the fact that all of them, whether they openly admit it or not, must have killed men. Their frequent failure to admit this may be due to the materialities of modern warfare (it was possible to kill men one could not even see) but, as was previously noted, a sense of shame was probably a contributory factor in their reticence.

Blunden can only ever refer to himself as a killer in the most euphemistic phrases - "for once a little hate was possible", "reflection and...sympathy...were soon obliterated by the day's work". Sassoon never unequivocally admits to killing anyone but, on several occasions, he candidly describes his desire to kill. His descriptions of battle orders and bayonet training (an experience Blunden relates with less humour and greater distaste) leave us in no doubt as to what his job entails: "The object...was to...capture prisoners, bomb dug-outs and kill Germans". He and Graves try and reformulate their roles by telling themselves that it is better to be in France where "our function would not be to kill Germans, *though that might happen*, but to make things easier for the men under our command". Yet Graves, provides us with strong hints as to their actual behaviour:

...I had never seen such a fire-eater as he [Sassoon] - the number of Germans whom I killed...could scarcely be compared with his wholesale slaughter...he varied between happy warrior and bitter pacifist...I was both more consistent and less heroic than Siegfried.⁴⁶

Furthermore, whilst silent on the subject of the men he himself killed, Graves provides several instances of his comrades in action. He tells how men gleefully relate murdering prisoners - "No good Fritzes but dead 'uns" - and how his comrades revenge themselves on some German's who have been particularly troublesome: "The crew offered to surrender, but our men had sworn for months to get them". He orders a sergeant to shoot a German taking a bath, because he dislikes the idea of killing a naked man, but admits it was the only time "I...refrained from shooting a German I saw".

Pollard admits to personally killing men on several occasions. He never expresses any remorse, yet interestingly he places a certain distance between himself in the heat of battle and himself as a human being recounting his experiences. Several times he refers to himself as a "machine" or "another person".

I began to experience that curious sense of detachment to which I have alluded before... Something outside myself seemed to tell me what to do...My blood was now thoroughly up.

Then the curious feeling came to me which I have described before that I was no longer acting under my own volition. Something outside myself, greater than I, seemed to take charge of me.⁴⁷

Although he cheers when he kills "another Hun" and can write "I thoroughly enjoyed going into action and was never happier than when there was something doing", Pollard

clearly feels he temporarily became *someone else* under the pressure of war. Sassoon subtly alludes to this feeling when, in a raid, he remarks "I must have picked up a bomb on the way, for I had one in my hand" - hand, and the person who picked up the bomb, have become distanced from Sassoon.⁴⁸

Jünger seems to have less of a problem with homicidal rage. He admits to feeling "the overpowering desire to kill" and "the uncontrollable need to shoot" on more than one occasion. He describes massacres as the natural - if regrettable - corollary of men's natural instincts. It is not that men become something completely different, they simply revert to their primary states; the id runs wild:

A man cannot change his feelings again during the last rush with a veil of blood before his eyes. He does not want to take prisoners but to kill. He has no scruples left; only the spell of primeval instinct remains.

But Jünger is not simply a psychopath. He finds those who later boast of such atrocities "repulsive" and, given the 'right' circumstances, he is perfectly capable of human feeling, which may even be empathy.

*I had shot him through the head. It is a strange feeling to look into the eyes of a man whom you have killed with your own hands.*⁴⁹

Jünger, like Pollard and occasionally Sassoon, portrays himself as a "fire-eater", a "happy-warrior"; yet at the same time, as was previously noted, his memoir is a testament to the horror and obscenity of war. In spite of the terrors he inflicts and suffers his account contains comradeship, excitement and laughter. His recollection of "pleasant hours" spent playing cards and drinking coffee remind one of Blunden's gentle description of the savour of coffee and the smoke breakfast fires wafting across No Man's Land. These two men, in spite of their vastly differing perspectives, can recall moments of peace and poetry within their war, just as they can ones of terror and horror; this is true of all the memoirists here considered. They may possess widely differing views on the morality and enjoyability of war but their memoirs refuse to be straightforward condemnations or celebrations of the experience. Because of this, and because any personal account is inevitably "very local, limited [and] incoherent", we, like Blunden, should resist the urge to reductively "characterise the time" and instead respect the view from the trench in its "original form of [sharply focused] incoherence".

The deadlock on the Western Front is a paradigm of modern war as we imagine it: complete ineluctable destruction, the annihilation of men for a few worthless yards of mud. This is the truth given to us by the Myth of the War. The danger in referring to the popular conception of the war as a "myth" is that the word has been so debased it has become synonymous with untruth. We forget that, since humans first began to tell stories, myths and legends have expressed what matters to us most deeply. Perhaps the most important truth about the war *is* that hundreds of thousands of people died, often in the most awful conditions, but it is, nevertheless, not the *only* "truth about the war", or even of the war on the Western Front. Moments of relaxation, moments of unimaginable noise and horror; fun and excitement and terror and death - all were part of a war that actually happened and that we can find between the pages of the memoirs of the men who were there. If we wish to come to a better understanding of that war, they are a vital resource.

I began this essay by arguing that all memoirs were partial, fallible and even mendacious and that, because they exist as discourse rather than lived experience, they can never bring us to a full understanding of the experience of war on the Western Front. Yet it is for this very reason that the imaginary wars recounted in memoirs are so important: with all

their contradictions, partialities, fallibilities and mendacities they expand our imaginative conception of war and, in so doing, narrow the unbridgeable gap between literature and life.

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1. From preface to: Captain A.O. Pollard, *Fire-Eater The Memoirs of a V.C.* (London, 1932), p.11.
 2. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London, 1982), p.7.
 3. Ernst Jünger, *Copse 125: A Chronicle from the Trench Warfare of 1918* (London, 1941), pp.263-4.
 4. Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* (London, 1998), p.14.
 5. For reasons of length, this article focuses on memoirs. Other forms of (equally valuable) personal narrative such as letters, diaries and reportage are usually written closer in time to the events they narrate and tend not to be as overtly reflective, selective or structured.
 6. Robert Graves, *But It Still Goes On* (New York, 1931), p.33. cited in Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, p.16.
 7. Paul Fussell, *The Great War And Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975), p.310. See also p.104, & p.204.
 8. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.7.
 9. Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (London, 1971), p.68. cited in Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* p.2.
 10. For further discussion of history's status as discourse see Hayden White, *'The Historical Text As Literary Artifact'*, *The Writing of History, Literary Form & Historical Understanding*, (ed.) R. Canary & H. Kozicki (Wisconsin, 1978), p.52.
 11. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.8.
 12. *ibid.*, p.182.
 13. Paul Fussell, *The Great War And Modern Memory*, p.170.
 14. Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel*, (London, 1941), p.135.
 15. *ibid.*, p.234.
 16. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London, 1997), p.60.
 17. *ibid.*, p.170.
 18. Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, p.3.
 19. The Myth of the War (as conceived by Hynes) consists of betrayal, slaughter, disillusionment and embitterment. In an effort to avoid a lengthy digression concerning its origins and continued existence, I can do no better than quote his own words: "The Myth...[is] not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it...The Myth is not the War entire: it is a tale that confirms a set of attitudes, an idea of what the war was and what it meant...This story has been told in many ways: in histories of the war, in fictions and memoirs, in poems, in plays, in paintings, in films; but its essential elements remain the same...it remains the accepted interpretation of the war". - Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London, 1990), pp.ix-x.
 20. A.O. Pollard, *Fire-Eater*, p.180, p.184, p.220 - the result of his "utter foolishness" is the repulsion of an enemy attack, the capture of their lines, the rallying of his comrades, and a V.C. for Pollard -, p.82, p.59.
 21. *ibid.*, p.68, p.185.
 22. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, pp.160-61, p.171.
 23. Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel*, p.235.
 24. *ibid.*, p.58, p.144, p.231.
 25. *ibid.*, pp.316-317. See also p.254.
 26. A.O. Pollard, *Fire-Eater*, p.14.
 27. *ibid.*, p.49, p.116, p.127 & p.273.
 28. Robert Graves, *But It Still Goes On*, p.38. cited in Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Story*, p.279.
 29. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, pp.189-90.
 30. Eric Partridge, R.H. Mottram & John Easton, *Three Personal Records of War* (London, 1929), p.280. Cited in Hynes, p.29.
 31. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p.139.
 32. Paul Fussell, *The Great War And Modern Memory*, p.102.
 33. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p.92.
 34. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.25 & pp.130-131.
 35. *ibid.*, pp.240-242.
 36. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London, 1960), p.122. See also p.180.
 37. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.224; Ernst Junger, *The Storm of Steel*, p.314.
 38. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.98.
 39. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer*, p.8.
 40. Blunden, *Undertones...*, p.75, p.22 & p.210. Junger, *Storm of Steel*, p.4, pp.109-10. Sassoon, *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer*, p.35.

41. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, pp.100-102, pp.161-4 & p.96. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.97 & pp.228-9. A.O. Pollard, *Fire-Eater*, p118. Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel*, p.115.
42. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.95 & p.111. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p.18 & pp.20-21. c.f. p.25.
43. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.31, p.35, p.71, p.172.
44. E.O. Pollard, *Fire-Eater*, p.173. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer*, p.138, p.148, p.150.
45. Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel*, p.23, p.294.
46. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, p.73, p.86, p.199. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer*, pp.5-6, p.18, p.60. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.112, p.154, p.161, p.192, p.226.
47. A.O. Pollard, *Fire-Eater*, p.118 & p.219. c.f. p.180, p.187, p.200.
48. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer*, p.156.
49. Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel*, p.255, p.258, pp.262-3, p.265.