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Introduction

Writing the First World War after 1918: Journalism, History and Commemoration

War reporting has a strong claim to be the highest form of journalism. No stories are more important, or more eagerly received, than those describing threats to the lives of citizens and the security of nations; equally, gathering information and interpreting events is never more difficult than in the dangerous and uncertain conditions of war zones, especially when working alongside suspicious and secretive military authorities. Those reporters who triumph over such adversity are admired and often glamorous figures, their reputation burnished by numerous films, books and television programmes. War journalism has inspired a huge academic literature, too, exploring how the state has managed, censored and distorted front-line reporting, and how reporters and media outlets have accepted, subverted or struggled against the restrictions imposed upon them (for some examples of this vast literature, see Knightley (2003), Carruthers (2011), Moorcroft and Taylor (2011)).

The task of describing, explaining and justifying wars does not end when peace is made and arms are laid down, however – indeed, in some respects, it has only just begun. Yet the understandable scholarly preoccupation with war reporting, propaganda and censorship has marginalised the equally important ways in which the media have narrated and analysed wars in the years and decades after their cessation. Nowhere is this gap more obvious than in the literature on the First World War. The centenary of the ”Great War” has prompted a wave of popular and scholarly debates about how the conflict should be commemorated and understood. One of the main strands of these debates is the way in which the war’s meaning has been powerfully and persistently shaped by the various cultural and historical representations created in its aftermath – both the poetry, novels,

plays, films and memoirs produced by participants, and the later narratives, reconstructions and dramatizations written as the war faded into memory. If the literary, cinematic, televisual and historiographical depictions of the First World War have all been scrutinised in considerable detail, however, the role of journalists in describing and interpreting the conflict after 1918 has received relatively little attention. With the exception of a handful of prominent interventions – such as Will Dyson's eerily prescient, and much reprinted, cartoon, "Peace and Future Cannon Fodder", published in London's *Daily Herald* in May 1919, and portraying a child representing the "1940 class" weeping at the terms of recently agreed Versailles peace treaty – the contributions of the print media to the debates about the First World War have been treated as ephemeral and insignificant.

This special issue seeks to redress the balance, demonstrating how print journalism in a range of participant nations, including Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, the United States and Australia, was a powerful and persistent influence on public attitudes to, and memories of, the unprecedented military carnage of 1914-1918. The articles are diverse in style and content, adopting a range of different methodologies and focusing on different types of text. Reading them alongside each other, however, we can perhaps identify five distinct roles played by the print media: producing and narrating histories of the war or its constituent episodes; serialising and reviewing memoirs or fictional accounts written by participants; reporting and framing the rituals and ceremonies of local and national commemoration; providing a platform for various war-related advocacy groups or campaigns, from veterans' associations to early Civil Rights movements; and using the war as a lens through which to interpret future conflicts. This introduction will briefly consider these roles in turn.

As soon as the Armistice was signed in November 1918, newspapers and magazines around the world started to produce instant histories of the conflict, in a variety of formats,

from two-page feature articles, via multi-part serialisations, to stand-alone publications. Thus began the work of selecting, synthesising, and giving shape to the mass of reporting, propaganda and morale-boosting commentary that had been produced over the previous four years. This was an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation, as new facts came to light and fresh perspectives were added by soldiers, military leaders and politicians. This helped to produce what Eleanor O'Keefe in this issue calls a "military memory", which approached the war "through its military components, recalling specific episodes of martial action." These accounts had multiple variations, not just in relation to specific national pressures and preoccupations, but also, as O'Keefe shows with her case studies of the press in Glasgow and Newcastle upon Tyne, in response to civic or regional interests and identities. The British provincial press frequently showcased the heroic actions of local regiments to complement stories of national glory. As Nathan Orgill demonstrates, moreover, a number of high-profile British journalists were involved in this process of history writing in their own right, producing book length accounts of the origins, evolution and impact of the war. Works such as Henry Wickham Steed's *Through Thirty Years* (1924-5), H. W. Wilson's *War Guilt* (1928), and J. A. Spender's *Fifty Years of Europe* (1933) provided accessible and influential narratives that tended to vindicate British policy and emphasize German war guilt; they offered an important counterbalance to scholarly works which, in these years, tended to pursue a revisionist line highlighting impersonal forces and assigning collective responsibility for the outbreak of conflict. Journalistic histories were not always traditional in content and style, however – indeed, their changing tone offers a sensitive guide to the evolution of mainstream perceptions of the war. When the London *Daily Express*'s book department published *The First World War: A Photographic History* in 1933, it had clearly been influenced by the recent wave of anti-heroic writing about the war. An

editorial described the volume as the ”most dreadful book of bloodshed ever printed”, and argued that “There is no glamour left in war after turning these pages” (*Daily Express*, 21 October 1933). If the paper had by no means been won over to the cause of pacifism, its framing of the war was, by then, markedly different to its approach immediately after 1918: ”We have no case to prove. This volume is not intended as a plea for peace nor an apology for war. It is a record of the greatest human upheaval in history... We saw the crucifixion of youth. We realised the triviality of death. We prayed, blasphemed, drank deep, hated and loved” (*Daily Express*, 21 October 1933).

Historians have written at length about this shift in the portrayal of the war in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as authors increasingly challenged what Paul Fussell famously called the “high diction” of war: the official patriotic language of “honour”, “glory” and “sacrifice” (Fussell 1975). They have paid far less attention to the role of newspapers and periodicals in mediating this shift, by serialising, reviewing and publicising key works. The most famous war novel of all, Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* [*All Quiet on the Western Front*] was serialised in the Berlin *Vossische Zeitung* from 10 November to 9 December 1928 and was, as Thomas Schneider shows in his article, carefully marketed by the Ullstein publishing house as the testimony of an ordinary soldier expressing the disillusionment of millions of veterans. The book’s international acclaim also owed much to its prominence in the pages of newspapers. In Britain, it was serialized in the *Sunday Express* in autumn 1929, and was quickly deemed internally “a winner and the best single thing for circulation that the *Sunday Express* has ever done” (Russell to Whelan, 8 Sept. 1929, H/64, Beaverbrook Papers, House of Lords Record Office, London); due to its success, other “debunking” novels were also serialized. Just as significantly, though, press reviewers were very influential in shaping how these war novels, plays and poetry were interpreted by a broader public. As

Schneider argues, notions of "authenticity" owed much to the assumptions and expectations of press critics; only those creative works which conformed to these pre-existing ideas were deemed to convey the "truth" about the war experience. Ullstein's initial triumph in framing *Im Westen nichts Neues* as a monument to the disillusionment with war and the despair at the destruction of civilized values was soon overturned by a politically inspired critical backlash, and a Nazi party campaign against both the book and film.

Charlotte Purkis provides another telling example of the media's power to bestow legitimacy and credibility on certain works, and deny it to others. She shows that the phenomenal success of R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (1928/1929), on both sides of the Atlantic, can be explained by the way its realistic depiction matched contemporary notions of "authenticity", while also retaining sufficient ambiguity that it could be read in multiple ways and thereby respond flexibly to the "mood of doubt concerning the war". The critics repeatedly described the play in terms of its accuracy in evoking the atmosphere of the trenches. "For ten years we have demanded the truth about the War," declared the novelist Hugh Walpole in *The Morning Post*, "… Here in this play, 'Journey's End', it is at last recovered." Sherriff, as a male combatant and hero, was deemed a credible narrator, and his play was presented as a means of exploring and sharing emotions and memories of the war. The critical approbation of *Journey's End*, and its reinforcement of notions of "authenticity", Purkis suggests, made it far harder for Verona Pilcher's play *The Searcher* (1929/1930) to be appreciated. The *Searcher*'s avant-garde style, its setting behind the lines, and its authorship by an American woman lacking Sherriff's heroic credentials, led to it being dismissed or marginalised: it was seen as "too serious, wearisome and incomprehensible". By comparing the reception of these two plays, and showing how certain productions were anointed as

"representative memorials of collective experience", Purkis demonstrates how the press powerfully reinforced particular understandings of the war.

The print media played a third key role in reporting and framing the commemorations that were a major part of the war's legacy. In the victorious nations, armistice celebrations and what Graham Seal has called the "rituals of nostalgia" were lavishly covered by the print media as solemn moments of national unity and reflection. These were supplemented, as O'Keefe shows, by local press reporting of additional forms of public remembrance based around particular regiments. These symbolic moments featured prominently, too, in the publications specifically aimed at veterans. Jane Chapman notes the centrality of Anzac Day to *Aussie: The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, with the publication not only recording its invented rituals in considerable detail, but also arguing in 1920 that it should be named "Australia Day" – thus making Anzacs synonymous with Australians. In Ireland, as Mark O'Brien demonstrates, the situation was far more complex and divisive because of the contested and changing relationship with the British state, and the coverage of the Armistice Day commemorations became enmeshed in wider struggles for political and cultural power. Over 140,000 Irishmen served in the British Army during the war, but the country the survivors returned to in 1918 was very different than it had been in 1914, and within four years it had become an independent member of the British Commonwealth. For papers such as the *Irish Times*, the voice of Southern unionism, commemoration of the dead was an important and necessary part of accepting Ireland's complicated history, and expressing loyalty to the British Empire was not seen as inconsistent with supporting the Irish Free State. The *Irish Independent*, representing conservative Catholic Ireland, rewrote the war as a fight for the freedom of small nations, including Ireland, and the commemorations for dead servicemen were interpreted in this light. The *Irish Press*, by contrast, advocated

complete political, economic and cultural separation from Britain, and portrayed the Armistice Day rituals, with their prominent displays of the Union Jack, as provocative celebrations of imperialism which obscured the real interests of ex-servicemen in pushing for total independence. When the anti-Treaty side came to power in 1932, this last narrative became dominant, and annual commemorations became far smaller and less prominent. The print media, by holding these ongoing debates about the meaning of the war, became a central arena for the forging of a modern Irish identity after the split from Britain.

National and local newspapers, whatever their particular allegiances, sought to appeal to broad audiences, and the war was only one of many subjects that they addressed. Other titles examined in this special issue were designed to represent specific constituencies, and the war remained central to their purpose. Sally Carlton and Jane Chapman both explore veterans' publications, which were particularly important in helping to define, and defend, particular interpretations of the war for those who had served. Carlton shows that despite the often very different views espoused by the various veterans' organisations in France, their newspapers developed a "singularly consistent" narrative of the war experience. She argues that this narrative "sought to justify the fighting and death, shift blame and guilt off the individual, and above all idolise the dead". Central to it was a notion of sacrifice as "selfless, patriotic behaviour": "dying for France" helped to give meaning to the slaughter. Equally important to these publications was the valorisation of unity and fraternity – for many veterans the only real positive experience of the war. The *Aussie*, too, offered a powerful articulation of "digger" culture, seeking to keep alive feelings of community through memory and nostalgia. It also made, Chapman argues, an "ambitious bid for its soldier values to become shared national values", although this became increasingly difficult as the post-war economic situation worsened and it was forced to gloss over deeper issues

of national tension by scapegoating “profiteers” and “lazy workers”. The Black press discussed by Allissa Richardson in her innovative examination of early forms of “networked journalism” was, of course, very different from these veterans’ publications, but it too took an important inspiration from the war. Having served the United States during the First World War, many African-American felt a deep bitterness and anger on their return when they found the Jim Crow system of institutionalized racism to be as powerful as ever, and, moreover, to learn of the violence and harassment directed towards black men in uniform. Richardson shows how the Pullman porters, workings on the railroads of the United States, “aggregated, wrote, and distributed news in an incredibly sophisticated system of networked journalism that kept the black press in tune with the black working class and its needs after the Great War.”

The debates about the meanings and legacies of the First World War were at their most intense in the two decades after its cessation in 1918; the outbreak of a second global war inevitably turned attention away to explaining another descent into bloodshed. Yet such was the potency of the First World War as an experience, and as a model of modern, industrialised conflict, that it provided an almost inescapable framework for assessing and understanding later wars. Carlton argues that later generations of veteran-journalists found it difficult to frame their wartime service in substantially different ways from the post-First World War newspapers, partly because the narrative developed after 1918 continued to resonate with soldiers and helped them to come to terms with their traumas. Tim Luckhurst shows, too, how the attitudes and policies of the 1914-18 period helped to structure responses during the Second World War. In his case study of the treatment of conscientious objectors, there are many echoes between the two conflicts, not least in the prejudice that religious belief was the only genuine grounds for objection, and the “suspicion that

conscience was a cloak for cowardice". This is not to deny the existence of notable shifts in thinking between the two wars – the tone of hostility to "conchies" was certainly moderated by the 1940s, for example – but patterns of thinking laid down in the First World War remained resilient, even when the nature of the fighting was very different. Indeed, when the press emphasised contrasts with 1914-1918, it often reflected a desire to "learn the lessons" of the earlier war. Well aware that the military leaders of the First World War had been vilified in recent years for their incompetence, a *Daily Express* editorial emphasised in September 1939 that Viscount Gort, head of the British Expeditionary Force, was a different breed – no "donkey" but "a fighting man", nicknamed "Tiger" and holder of the Victoria Cross: "Much will be asked of British troops in the days to come. They will know that their commander asks nothing that he would not do himself" (*Daily Express*, 4 September 1939). This would not be a case of a young generation sent to their death by the "old men" behind the front-lines.

The case studies in this special issue showcase a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, and it is impossible, and inappropriate, to offer generalizations and overarching conclusions. Beyond demonstrating the important roles of journalism in shaping the public understanding of the First World War after 1918 – and hopefully stimulating new research in this area – it is worth noting, though, that this special issue reinforces other recent work complicating the narrative that there was a decisive turn of opinion against the First World War by the late 1920s (for a recent example, see Reynolds (2013)). While that sense of disillusionment is certainly evident in some of the articles, others highlight the persistence of patriotic language, the continued resonance of the notion of meaningful "sacrifice", and the ongoing appetite for tales of heroism on the front-lines. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given the centrality of such frames in war reporting itself, but we need more

scholarship which situates journalism from the front-lines in a longer-term context, examining in detail both how it is informed by pre-war debates, and how its images and representations spill over into peacetime. War reporters may continue to grab the headlines, but we must not let them obscure the significance of other, less dramatic, forms of writing about conflict.

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