



Publishers, Readers and The Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918

by Vincent Trott.

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The centennial of the Great War has prompted several reexaminations of a conflict that featured many “firsts” in the history of warfare: among others, aerial combat as well as fighting on land and at sea, the first systematic use of chemical weapons, and the introduction of modern medicine in field hospitals. According to historian Vincent Trott (Open Univ.), World War I was also the last literary war. Soldiers from Britain’s upper classes brought to the trenches their literary education, while many others had attended the Workingmen’s Institute for the working class and the poor. Many carried a copy of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.¹ Although publications devoted to the American Civil War and World War II outnumber those resulting from World War I, the memoirs, diaries, letters, poems, and novels about the war of 1914–18 have exerted a lasting influence on the culture and politics of the major belligerents, especially Great Britain. Scholarly studies of the literature of the war have tended to concentrate on authors’ experiences as participants or observers.² Trott’s salutary contribution in the book under review is to explore in depth the roles of publishers and readers in creating the “collective memory” of the First World War (9).

In the immediate postwar years, commercial editors thought the reading public would be sick to death of contemplating the horrors of the war. But the success of Ernest Raymond’s 1922 book *Tell England: A Study in a Generation*, recounting the author’s experience during the Gallipoli campaign (1915–16), gave publishers cause to think again. By 1929, there was abundant evidence that readers wanted to understand what had happened: that year’s bestsellers included Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Aldington’s *Death of A Hero*, and Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Trott notes, however, that publishers were careful to publicize their war-related offerings so as to dissemble their disturbing content. Raymond’s book jacket bore a drawing of a flower and a blurb promising “a great romance of glorious youth” (25). The cover of Graves’s book bore a soft-focus portrait of the author and no image of the war. Remarque’s classic novel was graced only by its title in block letters.

The following year, editor Douglas Jerrod’s anthology of *Great Short Stories of the War* was meant to provide a corrective to the previous year’s bestselling depictions of the war as an egregious diplomatic mistake, badly compounded by incompetent generals. Jerrod, a veteran and author of the pamphlet “The Lie about the War” (1930), was a self-proclaimed conservative.

1. See Max Hasting’s review of Samuel Hynes, *On War and Writing* (Chicago: Univ. Pr, 2018), *NYRB* 65.8 (10 May 2018) 14–18.

2. See esp. Paul Fussell’s seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1975) and Hynes, *ibid*.

Rejecting what had become known as “disillusioned war literature,” he intended to rectify the public’s apparent consensus that the war was an exercise in bloody futility (47).

The events and publications of the 1930s undermined any such revisionism. For example, in 1933 Vera Brittain’s memoir, *Testament of Youth*, quickly became a bestseller. It described her service as a wartime volunteer nurse and the loss of her fiancé, her brother, and several male friends in the war and her consequent turn to pacifism. Together with Aldington’s *Death of A Hero*, the memoir “advanced the mythology of the First World War, presenting the conflict as a futile and wasteful betrayal of youthful idealism. Both texts, moreover, played an integral role in constructing the narrative of the ‘lost generation’” (116–17). Trott describes the publicity for Brittain’s book, published by Victor Gollancz, as an overt political act intended to criticize the conduct of the First World War and make an argument against any future wars. Gollancz, a noted leftist polemicist in the 1930s, hoped Brittain’s memoir would inspire antiwar organizing efforts. To that end, he used modern marketing techniques, including full-page ads in magazines and newspapers, endorsements by established writers, and radio commentaries to thrust *Testament* into the nation’s consciousness: “as a future war began to surface, Brittain struck a nerve, helping to foster an antiwar attitude among a younger generation of readers” (117). Trott maintains that antiwar literature encouraged a strong isolationist sentiment in England between 1935 and 1939.

Antiwar novels fell out of favor during the Second World War as publishers capitalized on patriotic works. The approach of the fiftieth anniversary of World War I witnessed a strong renewed interest in (and reprinting of) the works of Graves, poet Wilfred Owen, and Brittain. Though Trott asserts that these works ignited renewed debate about the nature of war, he fails to place them in the political context of the Cold War, the antinuclear movement, or Second Wave feminism.³ The feminist press Virago reissued *Testament of Youth* because its author was a woman and her book broached themes associated with women’s issues of the 1960s.

Eighty years on, new fiction about the Great War has become popular again. Trott attributes this resurgence in particular to the success of Sebastian Faulk’s 1993 novel, *Birdsong*, and Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* Trilogy.⁴ Trott argues that, by including contemporary themes of gender, class, and sexuality, Barker’s works appealed to a wider audience than earlier, more traditional books about warfare.

As the war’s centennial neared, the BBC adapted *Birdsong* for television in 2012 and *Testament of Youth* was made into a film in 2014.⁵ Trott notes that some military and diplomatic historians have challenged the idea of the Great War as a mistake, but cautions that surveys have “revealed limited knowledge of the war among the British public, and particularly among younger generations: thirty-one percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year olds for instance, could not name Germany as one of Britain’s enemies” (204–5). Thus, “disillusion war literature” will likely continue to shape the collective memory of the First World War more than any purely historical grasp of its meaning.

3. See Patricia Waugh, “The Historical Context of Post-War British Literature,” in *The Post-War British Literature Handbook*, ed. Katherine Cockin and Jago Morrison (NY: Continuum, 2010) 35–56.

4. Viz., *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1994), and the 1995 Booker Prize-winning *Ghost Road*.

5. Dir. James Kent. See review by Elizabeth Foster at *MiWSR* 2015-088.