

A Once in a Century Opportunity? Some Personal Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War

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ABSTRACT

In this article Gary Sheffield sets out his opinions on the current commemoration plans and media responses to the centenary of the First World War. He argues that the British government and media are letting slip a golden opportunity to challenge popular perceptions of the conflict. This piece builds upon the author's speech delivered at the Richard Holmes Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the BCMH, King's College London, and the National Army Museum, Chelsea. It was delivered at King's College London on 13 March 2014.

This paper, and the lecture it is based on, is dedicated to the late Professor Richard Holmes. Richard was a very talented scholar who nonetheless wore his learning lightly. In print, in lectures and on battlefield tours, and on the television screen, time after time he proved himself to be an outstandingly good public historian. Richard's death in 2011 deprived him of the opportunity to take a leading role in presenting the history of the First World War over the period of the Centenary to a mass audience. Before beginning my own reflections on the centenary, I would like to say something about Richard's impact on my career.

I arrived as a very junior lecturer at The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1985, to find that the then Dr Richard Holmes was Deputy Head of the War Studies Department. He was kindness personified, taking me under his wing, giving me some very sound advice about the direction of my career, and helping me steer through the politics of the organisation. We stayed in touch after he left Sandhurst and in 1999 we linked up again professionally when I moved to the Joint Services Command and Staff College, and we both taught on the memorable Higher Command and Staff

Course staff rides. I learned a very great deal from Richard, not least the importance of public history. I have been very lucky in the senior colleagues who have helped guide my career. Richard was one of the most important influences in my professional life, and I was deeply honoured to be asked to give a lecture in his memory.

The subject of my lecture and this paper, my reflections on the centenary of the First World War, is doubly appropriate. First, because Richard Holmes was a masterly communicator of history to a lay audience; he believed academics should speak to 'real people' outside the academy. Second, although Richard wrote on a number of historical topics (his PhD was on the French army of the Second Empire, and he published on subjects as diverse as the English Civil War, the American War of Independence, and French counterinsurgency in the 1950s), he had a fascination for the First World War. He once admitted that he was 'haunted' by the conflict.¹ The stands on which Richard led during staff rides to the Somme and Verdun were – even by his very high standards – especially memorable.

Although the two things are not the same, in 2014 media interest and, as far as I can judge, public interest in the First World War is at an all-time high. The centenary of the outbreak of the Great War does seem to have caught the public imagination. Undoubtedly, there is a once in a hundred years opportunity for education about 1914-18, and education is a primary objective of the government's First World War commemoration programme. What follows are a few thoughts on the way we in the UK are commemorating the war, and the state of knowledge and understanding of the First World War outside the academy one hundred years on. My perspective is that of an academic historian of the First World War who has a vocation for public history, and who has, through public lectures and talks to various bodies, appearances on television and radio, the use of social media (primarily Twitter), and high-level engagement with the government, civil service and armed forces, been closely involved with the Centenary commemorations.

For a historian of the First World War like myself, the sudden national fixation on 1914 had been both dazzling and frustrating. It is dazzling, because of the sudden huge interest in my subject, and the opportunities that have opened up, not least in heading the University of Wolverhampton's programme of commemoration. Frustrating, because the response of the government and the media to the Centenary leave much to be desired. I have the sense of a golden opportunity for education about what George F. Kennan called the 'seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century', and Britain's role in it, slipping away.

¹ Richard Holmes, 'Foreword' to Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War – Myths and Realities* (London, Headline, 2001) p.ix

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The last few years has made clear that, despite the efforts of revisionist historians over the last three decades, the 'futility/'lions led by donkeys'" narrative of Britain's involvement in the conflict is very much with us. The ideas that there were no great issues at stake during the First World War, that a million men died for nothing and, in an accompanying myth, the lives of soldiers were routinely thrown away by criminally incompetent generals has been rebutted over and over again, but display remarkable longevity. One of the earliest and most influential statements came in the writings of David Lloyd George, Britain's prime minister in the second half of the war. His war memoirs, published in the 1930s, are a clear example of the literature of disillusionment, and Lloyd George was assisted in their writing by a disenchanted war veteran turned trenchant critic of the generals, Basil Liddell Hart. However this was a minority view in the 1930s. It began to become the dominant narrative after 1945, when the First World War started to be viewed through the lens of the 'good war', the struggle against Hitler. In the 1950s and 1960s a series of popular books, by the likes of Leon Wolff (*In Flanders Fields*, 1959) and Alan Clark (*The Donkeys*, 1961), as well as Joan Littlewood's musical play *Oh! What a Lovely War* (first produced in 1963, and turned into a film by Richard Attenborough in 1969) firmly established the futility/donkeys narrative in the public mind. Although for the most part worthless as history, they were extremely influential.

Until the late 1970s a rather lonely revisionist furrow was being ploughed by John Terraine and his friend and collaborator, Correlli Barnett, and one or two others. From that point onwards new generations of academic historians provided timely reinforcements. In the 1980 and 1990s an informal school of revisionist historians of the British army in the Great War developed, based around the Imperial War Museum, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the British Commission for Military History and a handful of university departments. The founding in 1980 of the Western Front Association, an organisation that brings together scholarly historians and interested lay-people, now with numerous branches and some 6,000 members, was also significant. The overall result has been a series of scholarly works which have moved on the debate significantly. (It is fair to say that some historians remain outside the broad consensus, and even within it there remains plenty of scope for disagreement and debate). However, the impact of such historical revisionism on the public and media has been limited. The 1989 television series *Blackadder Goes Forth*, a sort of *Oh! What a Lovely War* for the late twentieth century, was particularly influential in reinforcing stereotypes of stupid generals fighting a pointless war. It is significant that when in January 2014 the Conservative cabinet minister Michael Gove intervened in the debate over the teaching of the First World War, he cited

Blackadder.²

The futility/donkeys view underpinned the British government's approach to commemorating the war. The government's advisory panel was light on professional historians but room was found for Sebastian Faulks, author of *Birdsong*, and Pat Barker, writer of the *Regeneration* trilogy. Both of these novelists adhere closely to the traditional narrative. When in October 2012 the Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced the programme of official commemorations it was noticeable that it concentrated on British defeats such Gallipoli and the First Day on the Somme but completely ignored the 'Hundred Days' campaign of 1918, when the forces of the British Empire, with their allies, won the greatest series of military victories in British history. The speech showed little knowledge or understanding of the Great War. For instance, Cameron stated that '200,000 were killed on one day of the Battle of the Somme'. Assuming he meant 1 July 1916, the true figure was actually nearly 20,000, which is of course shocking enough, but for the UK's Prime Minister to have made such a ludicrous mistake in the announcement of the government's plans for the centenary did not promote confidence that they would be underpinned by a rigorous understanding of the history involved. Similarly Cameron's statement that 'To us, today, it seems so inexplicable that countries which had many things binding them together could indulge in such a never-ending slaughter, but they did' suggests that the Prime Minister and his speech writers had a deeply flawed understanding of the nature of the conflict.³ Cameron's speech brought about a highly critical reaction from some historians, including me.⁴ Nonetheless, the government's programme proved too much for some, and initiated a renewed battle for the meaning of the First World War.

In May 2013 a letter from a group of actors, musicians, poets and politicians was published in the *Guardian*, a liberal-left newspaper. It attacked the government's remembrance programme, declaring 'Far from being a "War to end all wars" or a "Victory for democracy" this was a military disaster and a human catastrophe'.⁵ This

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html>, 2 January 2014 (accessed 9 October 2014)

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans>, 11 October 2012 (accessed 22 November 2013)

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/britain-at-war/10037507/Historians-complain-Governments-WW1-commemoration-focuses-on-British-defeats.html>, 5 May 2013, (accessed 22 November 2013)

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/21/remembering-war-to-promote-peace>, 21 May 2013 (accessed 22 November 2013)

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promptly became known in some circles as the "Luvvies' Letter".⁶ Historical research and analysis are highly specialised activities. More than most historical events, the First World War prompts people to go public with views based on emotion, limited knowledge and flawed understanding.

In case anyone thinks that opposition to such views as those laid out in the Luvvies' Letter is the preserve of male, middle-aged professors of military history, let me quote at length from the opinion of Dr Jessica Meyer, who is none of these things:

My main reason for annoyance lies, I think, in two aspects of the letter. The first is the apparent belief that those engaged professionally with and in the arts (as the majority of the signatories are) have a particular authority to speak about the horror of war... I cannot help feeling that some, such as Michael Morpurgo, are using their status as creators of cultural expression which use the war as subject matter to give themselves authority to pronounce on the 'truth' about the war, drawing on the tradition of the First World War canon...

The second infuriating aspect of the letter is the dichotomy it sets up between national commemoration and the promotion of international peace and understanding through a focus on its futility and devastation. Such attempts to impose a contemporary political narrative on the commemorations feels like a betrayal of the men who fought... There were certainly plenty of voices calling for international peace both at the start and in the wake of war. Equally there were many who saw the war as a fight for national survival against the threat of Prussian militarism. And there were many who, in fighting for King and Country, were simply fighting to preserve the sanctity of the small part of that nation that they called home. Far more men enlisted in the belief that they were defending democracy, however limited that democracy might seem from a 21st century perspective, than we tend to give them credit for. Many survived the war, just as many did not. Some were disillusioned by their experience; many incorporated it into their life stories and carried on, changed but not destroyed by war. To deny any this is to deny those who gave voice to these sentiments, as a huge number did, the validity of their beliefs and does their memory a huge disservice...⁷

⁶ For cultural figures pronouncing on the history of the Great War, see Gary Sheffield. 'The Centenary of the First World War: An Unpopular View', in *The Historian* No.122 (Summer 20114) pp. 24-25

⁷ Jessica Meyer, 'Possibly an angry post' (blog, <http://armsandthemedicalman.wordpress.com/2013/05/22/possibly-an-angry-post/> 22 May 2013, (accessed www.bjmh.org.uk

The government is very aware of the criticisms of the anti-war lobby, and is rather scared of it. In an extreme form it reflects the futility/donkeys narrative dominant in British society, and politicians do not want to alienate voters. This helps to explain the choice of events that will receive full-scale formal commemoration, as announced by David Cameron in October 2012, discussed above. The historical illiteracy of omitting the Hundred Days is, as Professor Peter Simkins has trenchantly observed, akin to commemorating the Second World War by marking the Fall of Singapore but ignoring D-Day.⁸ To be fair, the government has changed its mind on this. Under pressure from various quarters, agreement has been reached in principle to commemorate the Battle of Amiens (8 August 1918), arguably the turning point on the Western Front.

The government have also been wary about stating why the war was fought. The current debate over the origins of the war is a red herring. There has been widespread media approval of Christopher Clark's 'sleepwalkers' thesis, reinforced in some ways by Margaret MacMillan's book, that the war was 'a tragedy, not a crime' and blame should not be allocated to individuals or states.⁹ However the mainstream historical position, based on 50 years of scholarship, is that on the contrary, Austria-Hungary and Germany bore the lion's share of the responsibility for the outbreak of war. Anyone solely reliant on the mass media for their information might not realise this. The third volume of John Röhl's magisterial biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II, which does not hesitate to allocate blame to Germany, provides a powerful counter to the 'sleepwalkers' idea.¹⁰ The notion of Europe drifting into war fits the current European zeitgeist of failing to face up to uncomfortable truths about the recent past. Not surprisingly, Clark's book has become a best-seller in Germany. However, in my view, the evidence demonstrates Austro-Hungarian and German culpability for the outbreak of the First World War.¹¹

Of course, if no one was to blame for starting the war, the conflict can be seen as

22 November 2013). Dr Meyer is a cultural historian. I am grateful for her permission to reproduce part of her blog.

⁸ www.westernfrontassociation.com/news/newsflash.html?start=65, 24 October 2013, (10 October 2014)

⁹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, Penguin, 2013 [2012]) p.561; Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace* (London, Profile, 2012). For my detailed criticisms of this approach see Gary Sheffield, *A Short History of the First World War* (London, Oneworld, 2014), Chapter 1.

¹⁰ John Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900-1914* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014)

¹¹ For an excellent collection of documents in English translation, see Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013)

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futile: except, no matter who was responsible, Germany took full advantage of the outbreak of hostilities. Berlin waged an aggressive war of conquest, carving out a huge empire, imposing brutal rule on occupied peoples and imperilling both the security of Britain and the Empire and the future of liberal democracy on continental Europe. For Britain the war was both a war of national survival and, in 1918, one of liberation. To take another example of an actor expressing a view on the meaning of the First World War, in 2013 Caroline Quentin spoke about the new production of *Oh! What a Lovely War* being 'a heartbreaking piece about the futility of war'.¹² One wonders what a war would need to be fought about to qualify as *not* being futile in Ms Quentin's book.

The Luvvies' Letter and the like flourish in an environment in which the UK government, the successor of the ones that took Britain into the war in August 1914 and led the country through four and a half years of total war, refuses clearly to state that in 1914-18 the vast majority of the British people supported the war, seeing it as a war of national survival. In a democracy, a total war cannot be waged without the consent of the people. Neither will the government broadcast the fact that the weight of historical evidence and opinion points to the British people of a century ago being right in their views. The government makes the argument that it is not its place to offer interpretations on historical events. This might have some validity but for the fact that this government (like all others) is very keen to put forward historical interpretations when it suits them. The legacy of Margaret Thatcher, another highly controversial historical issue which resurfaced after her death in 2013, is a case in point. Even more pertinent is the way the fiftieth anniversaries of D-Day and VE Day, which fell in 1994 and 1995, were commemorated. The government of the day had no hesitation in placing a particular interpretation (from the British point of view, a very positive one) on those events.

Some individuals, such as Andrew Murrison MP, deserve credit for making public statements supportive of the view that the war was a struggle for national survival. There is a consensus that the centenary years should be about commemoration, not triumphalism. The outbreak of the war in 1914 is absolutely nothing to celebrate. The centenary of 1918 is, however, a different matter. In January 2014 Helen Grant, the Tory minister with responsibility for commemorating the centenary, sent out mixed messages, stating 1918 'was an absolutely vital victory' but 'we won't be celebrating that fact'.¹³ The successes of the British armed forces and the British nation-in-arms should be celebrated, but not in a triumphalist fashion – I agree with Ms Grant on that much. 'Celebration' in the sense of public acknowledgment of a

¹² *Evening Standard*, 22 October 2013; <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/oh-what-a-lovely-voice-caroline-quentin-starts-training-for-musical-8896715.html>, 22 October 2013 (accessed 14 October 2014)

¹³ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/458507/ww1-victory-should-not-be-celebrated-with-dancing-in-the-street-MP-Helen-Grant-says> 7 February 2014 (accessed 9 October 2014)

job well done, a great national achievement, would be wholly appropriate. The UK government thought it fitting to celebrate the victory of 1945. It is equally fitting to celebrate that of 1918.

Overall, the government, by failing to provide clear and decisive leadership on this issue, is missing a unique opportunity educate the population that the war was fought over major issues, that it was not meaningless, and a million men did not die for nothing. This is nothing short of an abdication of responsibility. To adapt Jessica Meyer's point, allowing the imposition by default of a contemporary political narrative on the commemorations feels like a betrayal of the men who fought, died, survived, and were victorious.

Turning to the media; newspapers, the BBC, and to a lesser extent other broadcasters, have embraced the First World War with a vengeance. It has certainly given various military historians a public platform and what are in historiographical terms old ideas have suddenly become current. Niall Ferguson's views: that he considers it a catastrophe that Britain did not stay out of the war, and that the world would have been better off with a Europe conquered by a 'benign' German state, were first put forward in the mid-1990s, but they became front-page news in the *Guardian* in January 2014.¹⁴ Even more surprisingly, *The Times* gave me half a page to explain why I think his views are profoundly wrong. Views of various sorts have appeared across the press. The *Guardian* seems particularly keen on publishing pieces that depict the war as futile, although they published an article of mine that argued the opposite. As a life-long *Guardian* reader, it was an interesting experience being attacked in my daily newspaper of choice as a warmonger, and worse. The wider point is, however, that in spite of Michael Gove's ill-informed attack in January on 'left wing historians' for belittling Britain's war effort for the most part the centenary commemorations have not been a party political football. Andrew Murrison, a Conservative, and Dan Jarvis, his Labour Shadow, co-operate closely and have both been at pains to avoid politicising the centenary. Neither can historians be neatly divided up by political allegiance. Sir Richard Evans, a leftist who has emerged as a forthright spokesman for the 'futility' view of the war, has found himself occupying common ground with Niall Ferguson and (posthumously) with Alan Clark, both very much of the right, while those who believe it was right for Britain to fight in the war include historians whose politics straddle the spectrum from left to right via apolitical.

The response of the BBC to the centenary has been to go into overdrive, with 2,500 hours of programmes plus a major website. The comments that follow are quite critical, so let me preface them by saying that the BBC has produced a great deal of

¹⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/30/britain-first-world-war-biggest-error-niall-ferguson>, 30 January 2014 (accessed 15 October 2014)

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very good, high quality programming and internet material, and I have every reason to believe that there is a lot more to come. This in my view justifies paying the licence fee. But I have some major reservations. For a start, there is too much coverage of the First World War, and it started too early. There is a real possibility that people will simply become bored with the war by the end of 2014, let alone by 2018.

The flagship BBC TV series: 'Britain's Great War', fronted by Jeremy Paxman, displayed a number of strengths, but also many weaknesses. Appearing at primetime on BBC1, the programme had enormous reach, and as one reviewer wrote that Paxman's 'inclusion as presenter says "serious" and it says "knowledgeable"'.¹⁵ This can be seen as the BBC marking a great national event and fulfilling its mandate to educate. An alternative view is that the series was rather lightweight. While it certainly did not pander to the 'futility' view, and broadly reflects current scholarship, some of the analysis in the programmes was superficial. Overall, 'Britain's Great War' was marred by some poor editorial decisions on inclusion or exclusion of material. The omission of the Battle of Jutland, and the concentration on the first day of the Battle of the Somme to the exclusion of the rest of this four month campaign were perhaps the most egregious examples. Moreover Paxman, who may be looked on as authoritative by a mass audience, is a journalist not a historian, and in a well-publicised comment at a literary festival revealed that his knowledge of Britain in the First World War has some surprising and rudimentary gaps.¹⁶ The series would have had more credibility with a reputable historian presenting the series – and how well Richard Holmes would have fulfilled that role – or failing that, an actor reading a script. Using Paxman as front man is a facet of the BBC's obsession with celebrity, and this was compounded by the failure to feature a single scholarly historian on screen, although other people (such as another celebrity, the *Downton Abbey* scriptwriter Julian Fellowes) did appear.

The rise of the 'drama-documentary' has been a feature of television over the last few years. This can take the form of dramatisation of events within the context of a conventional 'talking head and film clip' documentary, or a programme that consists solely of a dramatisation. Anyone who acted as a historical adviser to a conventional television documentary will know that the final script is the result of a series of compromises, and will have suffered the frustration of having their advice ignored because factual accuracy does not fit in with what the TV people want to do. Dr Adrian Gregory, of Pembroke College Oxford, has tweeted about his experience

¹⁵ *The Independent*, 28 January 2014; <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/britains-great-war-bbc1-tv-review-memories-from-the-home-front-humanise-paxmans-war-story-9088991.html>, 28 January 2014, (accessed 10 October 2014)

¹⁶ *Daily Mail*, 9 October 2013, p.17

on *Great Britain's Great War*, and it is about par for the course.¹⁷ The trade-off between historical accuracy and the nature of television as a medium of entertainment is particularly acute in the case of 'pure' drama-docs. Bjorn Rose, an ex-Army officer now working as a history teacher, having brought a party of schoolboys to the set to act as extras, found himself very unexpectedly working as a historical adviser on the 'Mons' episode of *Our World War*. This BBC series, broadcast in August 2014, sought to repeat the success of *Our War*, a 'fly-on-the-wall' series of documentaries on the British army in Afghanistan, in which Captain Rose's platoon had featured.

He had some success in pointing out obvious errors - he persuaded the art department not to dress the set portraying Nimy bridge in 1914 with Brodie steel helmets, which were not introduced until a year later and only became general issue in 1916 - but otherwise was bemused by the lack of attention to historical detail and willingness to perpetuate blatant inaccuracies and anachronisms. In particular, Rose contested the statement at the end of the programme that the British army had been 'humiliated' at Mons. To put the best possible interpretation on this view, it is highly debatable. Some historians, myself included, would describe it as nonsense. Needless to say, Bjorn Rose lost the argument.¹⁸

That Professor David Reynolds' series *The Long Shadow* was screened is evidence that the BBC is prepared to take risks on giving a heavyweight historian a series which deals with a serious topic in a serious way, albeit on BBC2 rather than BBC1. The series looks at the legacy of the First World War across a range of issues, and is something of a model in conveying deep scholarship in an accessible fashion. It would have served the cause of education much better, and done something to repair the tattered reputation of the BBC as a broadcaster of serious documentaries on mainstream television, if *The Long Shadow* had been the flagship series for 2014 rather than *Britain's Great War*.

Does any of it - the re-hashing of stale arguments by newspapers, dumbed-down and inaccurate television programmes, and the ambivalent and grudging response of the British government - really matter? I think it does. The Great War Centenary years offer a once-in-a-century opportunity for education, and to move serious debate beyond a narrow circle of historians. The interest and enthusiasm I have witnessed among local history groups, civic societies, in schools, colleges and universities, and the myriad of exhibitions and publications telling the story of the impact of the First World War on local communities has been truly inspiring.¹⁹ My hope is that at the

¹⁷ See @AdrianGregory20's Twitter timeline.

¹⁸ Information given by Bjorn Rose, 6 October 2014.

¹⁹ At the risk of being invidious I have been particularly impressed by the First World War exhibition at the Manx Museum <http://www.manxnationalheritage.im/news/new-exhibition-to-mark-100th->

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end of the centenary period the people of Britain will have a more mature, reflective and less strident view of the Great War; one less encumbered by myths, half-truths prejudice. We should not allow this opportunity to slip through our hands.

[anniversary-of-the-first-world-war/](#) and the accompanying book: Matthew Richardson, *This Terrible Ordeal: Manx Letters, Diaries and Memories of the Great War* (Douglas, Manx National Heritage, 2013), and by Martin Hayes and Emma White (eds.), *Great War Britain: West Sussex Remembering 1914-18* (Stroud, The History Press, 2014). I provided a foreword to the latter.

www.bjmh.org.uk