

The Trenches in British Popular Memory

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This paper examines the role of the popular media in Britain in shaping and informing the memory of the First World War on the Western Front. Through the examination of the various literary representations of the battlefields over the last ninety years, this paper argues for a more complex reading of the popular memory of 'the trenches'. This is an analysis which takes into account the reasons why particular versions of the past are valued above others and the way in which those histories are utilised in the present.

To speak of 'the trenches' of the Western Front is to call to mind a subject that still remains evocative within British cultural life. After the passing of nearly ninety years the trenches still have great resonance. Their mention appears automatically to conjure up an image of mud, waste, atrocious conditions and dejected, suffering soldiers. The legacy in our language in expressions, metaphors and similes also indicates this perspective (Schudson 154). Frequent usage of terms such as 'going over the top', describing argumentative positions as 'entrenched', or respective parties being 'in the trenches', using the 'Somme' or 'Passchendaele' to describe desolated areas, futile wastes, or tragic encounters, further shape and define the popular memory of the trenches as one of horror, pity, and pointless attrition (Sheffield 5). An indication of this apparently ingrained response can be gathered from the public reactions to their confrontation with the physical remains of the trenches. On the 11th of November 2003, reported in various news bulletins across Britain, there emerged details of an archaeological excavation on the former battlefields of the Western Front (Black). Near the Belgian town of Ieper, these excavations had unearthed sections of the front line held by British as well as Allied and German soldiers, discovering human remains, the material of the war, and the trenches and dugouts of the battlefields. The added poignancy of choosing Remembrance Day on which to report this excavation, which had been already ongoing for several months, caused a widespread public response regarding the responsibility and necessity to maintain the memory of the Great War on the Western Front. What was the most

striking feature of these images was that they served only to 'pluck the chords of memory' (Denning, "Mr Bligh" 353). Their effect seemed to serve the purpose of reminding us what we already remembered about the war, seemingly dredged from our collective unconscious. They appear almost to affirm our memory of the trenches; the shape of the corrugated iron supports still observable, the narrow confines traceable, the duckboards still intact, their retrieval from the Flanders soil even leaving traces of mud clinging to the remains. Indeed this image of the muddy trenches seems to be summoned almost instinctively. The memory of the trenches and the mud, horror, brutality, rats and filth does appear as constant, to have stalked every generation since the Armistice. Whilst the emphasis in this memory may have shifted over the last ninety years, the popular memory of the trenches of the Western Front, of the desolation and disillusionment faced by the soldiers who fought there, remains powerful and emotive.

I

In recent years scholars have sought to undermine this popular memory, to dispel the popular myths which are believed to cloud the study of the Western Front and prevent sober and objective assessment (Bond). These studies have tended to follow Hobsbawm's analysis of the 'invention of tradition' (1). Focusing on the manner in which memoirs from literary figures published in the 1920s, novels, film and television programmes from the 1960s on, and the tendency to overly focus on the war poets in the teaching of the war in schools, has skewed the memory of the war in Britain. These revisionist studies have pointed to the wide diversity of experiences of the soldiers in the trenches, the tactical advancements made by the army and the Allies eventual victory as a means to undermine the popular memory of the battlefields in Britain. By their own admissions, however, these attempts have failed; the grip of the memory has proven too hard to shift (Beckett 464). Historians have placed the reasons for this failure on the pervasive nature of the representations of the trenches in popular culture, citing their influence especially as shaping the popular cultural memory of the Western Front in Britain. This assumption, however, rests on the insulting implicit and on occasion explicit suggestion that individuals are 'passive dupes', accepting and vapidly consuming particular memories of the Western Front because they are 'easier' to grasp (Hall, "Notes On" 232). Such a diagnosis is inadequate and takes a complacent response to the power this popular memory holds over contemporary society. The memory of the Western Front in Britain should not be simplistically considered as submissively accepted by the public, but rather chosen for specific reasons. This is not a pursuit or acceptance of a relativist stance, whereby any interpretation of the past has validity, regardless of the evidence which it employs; it is an acknowledgement that the 'myths and memories' have real purpose for the society which uses them (see Denning, "History's Anthropology" 100). Samuel in examining the 'myths we live by' suggested that, 'in dealing with the figures of national myth, one is confronted not by realities which became fictions, but rather by fictions which by dint of their popularity, became realities in their own right' (Samuel xxvii). This is where facts and dates in themselves are unimportant, but gain greater meaning when considered alongside what these facts and dates mean for the people who use them; the choices they make about the past, the stories they wish to tell about themselves. Whilst this popular memory is of course informed by the representations offered through popular culture, echoing Marx's (16) observation that histories are made by individuals, but not under the circumstances of their choosing; the choices made by individuals with these cultural forms remains a significant area of study, the manner in which individuals have appropriated these cultural materials to fashion their own memories and histories. This 'selection' remains unaddressed within the context of the memory of the Western Front in Britain, with military historians quick to dismiss the popular memory as regrettable 'myths', without regarding the processes involved in the production of the popular perceptions of the past. By relying on the notion of the 'invention of tradition',

studies do not explain why this memory is chosen, the reasons behind its appeal, and its development by those who use it (Samuel xxix). The memory of the trenches of the Western Front in Britain should be considered therefore as a cultural choice; as a method of creating a useful and tactical memory for the society which honours it.

II

The audience reception of the cultural forms which have represented the trenches over the last nine decades must therefore be considered if the popular memory is to be understood and examined. In this manner the term ‘popular memory’ is used as it reveals how memory is communicated through cultural forms, using Gramscian and Foucauldian theories, it describes how memory can be taken up and utilised by some groups but not others. Memory therefore represents a tool to heal, blame and legitimate as it forms an important part of political and social struggles (Lambek and Antze vii). This paper’s aim is to challenge received methods of analysing cultural forms by highlighting how it is the reception of film, television, memoirs and novels by those who consume these cultural forms, rather than the cultural forms themselves which have shaped the popular memory. Popular culture is of course inevitably influenced by the wider societal context during its production, as equally, the reception of this material, the ways they are read, valued, dismissed or preferred is also an indication of the attitudes of society (Bourdieu). It is these readings and interpretations in the representation of the trenches which are crucial in this assessment as they are considered to provide the means by which a wider public discourse of the war has emerged.

What this study aims to draw attention to therefore is the tactics employed in the creation of the preferred readings of the past. The concept of the ‘preferred readings’ reflects the subtle devices involved in the reception of cultural forms across society, where some meanings are preferred and others closed off (Fiske 65). Whilst Marx (“Grundrisse” 92) revealed that consumption and production were locked in a recursive cycle perpetuating the conditions of society, its beliefs, its structures, this hegemony cannot be regarded as a totality (Gramsci 181-182). Indeed, de Certeau (1984) has highlighted the performance of ‘oppositional tactics’, or ‘ways of operating’ which occur within the conditions of everyday life, which are intended not to overturn the dominant element in society, but to improve the condition of the individual or group. ‘These “ways of operating” constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organised by techniques of sociocultural production’ (de Certeau xiv). It is the use of tactics or ‘ways of operating’ in the formation of the ‘preferred reading’ of the representations of the trenches which will form the basis of this study. Inevitably these tactics will be influenced by the shifting desires and wants in society, corresponding to generational and cultural changes, but nevertheless these tactics provide an alternative means by which the popular memory of the Western Front can be examined.

III

To reveal the way in which the popular memory of the trenches has been chosen and selected by its consumers, a reassessment is required of the three memoirs which are so often cited as marking the genesis of the popular memory of the trenches and battlefields of the Western Front, the memoirs of Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) and Robert Graves (1895-1985). This will involve the reiteration of a long-established claim regarding these memoirs, but distinctively this will be from a new perspective. Using this approach to the popular memory this paper will then study the growth in war literature since the early 1990s and examine why the memory of the trenches was rearticulated in a particular manner at this time. The memoirs of Blunden, Sassoon and Graves have drawn much attention since their publication during the post-war ‘war books boom.’ All three were authors

and poets who served on the Western Front and who published poetry and memoirs of their experiences on the battlefields. These works are often claimed to be indictments of the generals of the British army, critiques of the tragic waste of war and testaments to the 'lost generation' of Britain. Conversely, critics of the popular memory of the war have re-examined the content of these works and have highlighted both their bias in terms of class perspective and their ambiguous position with regard to the pursuit of the war and the author's own experiences of wartime. It is in this assessment that the contradiction of this critical position is revealed and the deficiencies of the study of the popular memory exposed.

Whilst commentators have stressed that these memoirs have shaped the popular memory of the pity and futility of the trenches, they also imply that their authors had no such intention to make this point (Sheffield 10). This leaves the revealing but unexamined conclusion that it was the audience of these memoirs which read into the narrative their own desired version of events, what they wanted to remember of the trenches of the Western Front. It is through the selection and filtering of these works in the act of reading which formulated a popular memory of the trenches. It must also be stated that these memoirs, published between 1928 and 1936, entered into an already established discourse of the war, as other memoirs and novels had emerged on the market. The most influential of these was, of course, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and publishers and authors alike noted with interest the widespread popularity of a work which focused on scenes of quite intense terror and disgust (TLS 485). Indeed, this particular discourse of the trenches is so dominant, that throughout the popular novels of the war on the Western Front, which were written in the late 1920s and 1930s, these themes of the trenches, mud, horror, brutality and the devastation of the landscape are constantly reiterated. The memoirs of Blunden, Sassoon and Graves, were written in the context of this resurgence of interest in the war on the Western Front, and thereby reflect the type and manner of memory which was wanted by their consumers; and invariably it was the horror and brutality of the battlefields which drew most attention.

This is especially true of Graves whose war memoirs, *Goodbye To All That*, published in 1929, which makes frequent reference to the repulsive, gory scenes in the trenches of the Western Front. He describes a stretch of trench as stinking 'with a gas-blood-lyddite-latrine smell' (Graves 205). And recalls with almost relish decomposing bodies near the trench lines, 'after the first day or two the bodies swelled up and stank...The ones that we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell until the wall of the stomach collapsed, either naturally or punctured by a bullet; a disgusting smell would float across' (211). The soldiers deaths in the lines are also vividly recounted by Graves; 'at my feet was the cap he had worn, splashed with his brains' (155). Soldiers in the trenches were disillusioned with the 'old lie' of the politicians at home and the generals behind the lines; 'there was no patriotism in the trenches. It was too remote a sentiment, and rejected as fit only for civilians' (240). Graves was criticised for this tendency to dwell on these limited aspects by Sassoon ("Memoirs" 152); 'he seemed to want the war to be even uglier than it really was. His mind loathed and then attached itself to rank smells and squalid details.' Sassoon himself in his own recollections, published collectively as, *The complete memoirs of George Sherston*, would nevertheless describe the front as; 'the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon. And I saw it, as I see it now – a dreadful place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented' ("Memoirs" 216-217). Sassoon's semi-autobiographical account can be read to reveal a world of unrelenting terror and a grotesque landscape. 'I had to flatten myself against a wall of wet ditch, for someone was being carried down on a stretcher. An extra stretcher-bearer walking behind told me it was Corporal Price of 'C' Company. "A rifle-grenade got him...looks as if he's a goner..." His face was only a blur of white in the gloom' ("The Complete" 271). The trenches were described like a scene from a nightmare. 'In some places it was only a foot deep, and already men were being wounded and killed by sniping'

(“The Complete” 342). Inevitably, the trenches whilst filled with horror also provided space to muse on the disillusionment and dismay induced by the experience of the front lines. ‘Back in the main trench, I stood on the firestep to watch the sky whitening. Sad and stricken the country emerged. I could see the ruined village below the hill and leafless trees...down in the craters the dead water took a dull gleam from the sky. I stared at the tangles of wire and the leaning posts and there seemed no sort of comfort left in life’ (“The Complete” 281). The proximity of the living and the dead is a recurring feature in these memoirs; Sassoon, Blunden and Graves describe the closeness of the unburied corpses of Allied and German soldiers to the trenches, and even in the trenches themselves. ‘The whole region of Festubert, being marshy and un-drainable, smelt ill enough, but this trench was peculiar in that way. I cared little to stop in the soft drying mud at the bottom of it; I saw old uniforms and a great many bones, like broken bird cages’ (Blunden 15). The trenches became a labyrinth of filth, mud and the dead. ‘When we have passed the last muddy pool and detailed truck we came into a maze of trenches, disjointed indeed; once plainly of nice-architecture and decoration, now a muddle of torn wire-netting and twisted rails, of discarded signboards, of foul soaked holes and huge humps’ (Blunden 118). The ubiquitous mud is a theme of fascination, monotony and disgust in the memoirs; ‘men of the next battalion were found in mud up to the armpits, and their fate was not spoken of, those who found them could not get them out. The whole zone was a corpse and the mud itself was mortified’ (Blunden 138).

The public’s appetite for this type of ‘war literature’ and this image of the Western Front is represented by the quantity of work published in Britain after the mid-1920s (Bracco 14). In-fact the idea of the war book as a specific genre began to emerge after 1929, as authors depicting the Western Front became, ‘as well recognised a category as the disparaging biography, the “thriller”, or the “fantasy”’ (Brophy viii). What is significant to note with the memoirs of Blunden, Graves and Sassoon as well as the literature published during the ‘war books boom’ of the late 1920s and early 1930s was the way in which the consumers of this literature were reading and interpreting these works and forming a distinct memory of the trenches of the Western Front. Although of course impossible to gauge the response of every reader to the literature published at the time, an indication of the acceptance and manner of reading can be gained from the high sales figures and the reviews (TLS). From these sources it can be observed that the reading was focused on the interpretation of the literature as being representative of the wider army, as with the rise of this literature, of memoirs and fiction there emerged the belief that the voices of the ordinary soldiers were being heard. Eksteins (290) has also noted how all the successful war books of this period were written from the point of view of the individual, but read as indicative of the wider collective. The reading of these memoirs, shifting the narrative perspective, provided the means by which a wider appreciation of the British army on the Western Front could be fostered by the readers of these works. Instead of reading the narrative as an account of one man, it began to be read as of an account of the millions who had served (Tomlinson 410). Drawing a distinct division with the detached accounts by the historians of the period such as Edmonds and Liddell Hart, and what could be called the ‘official’ narrative of the war, the Western Front was read and remembered through these oppositional tactics (Read 766). Although critics of the popular memory of the war point to the predominance of the perspective of upper class officers in these works, this neglects the way in which readers tactically expanded this narrow first-person perspective to interpret for themselves what the war was like for the soldiers. The tactics employed in reading are purposeful, and the reasons for this reading and interpretation must be observed in its contemporary context. As international tensions increased during the 1930s, with especial regard to the threat of re-armament, this literature was consistently read as highlighting the slaughter of war and the threat of militarism. Its reception was heightened by an understanding of the work which focused on both the vivid descriptions of the horror of

the front, and the oblique criticism of the military and political command, a perspective heightened by the growing popularity of pacifism in Britain in the 1920s, and a sense that another war would bring even heavier numbers of fatalities (Cecil 8). Although the memoirs of Blunden, Sassoon and Graves have long been cited as influencing and shaping anti-war sentiment in the public perception of the trenches, this has always taken the perspective that popular sentiments are dictated to, rather than dictating themselves. This subtle but distinctive shift in assessing popular memory, emphasises that to locate the significance of cultural forms in the shaping of the memory of the past, we should begin to look at how the works are and have been received, rather than solely examining the works themselves.

IV

Considered therefore as a choice, a specific selection by an audience, rather than wholly generated by the cultural forms themselves, we can begin to consider the Western Front over the last ninety years as a symbolic resource (Korte). Though critics have pointed to the re-articulation of the popular memory of the trenches since the cessation of hostilities as being influenced by concerns of their time, notably the anti-authoritarianism of the 1960s, this dismisses all too readily *why* the trenches are evoked. Whilst the popular memory is so summarily described as regrettable ‘myths’, the reasons for the importance and uses of these myths for those who possess them are neglected.

Even as film and television programmes since the 1960s are claimed to have influenced and shaped the popular memory, these claims fail to consider the reasons for the portrayal of the trenches as derived from the audience itself: as ‘the meanings of popular culture exist only in their circulation’ (Fiske, “Reading” 4). The audience of these representations should not be considered as passive participants, but capable of making choices and decisions concerning their acceptance or rejection of forms of representation (Fiske, “Television” 19). The popular memory of the trenches of the Western Front, although altering with generational and societal changes, is nevertheless one which is chosen to be accepted, although this choice can be utilised and exploited by producers, it remains a conscious choice of its audience. ‘For a cultural commodity to be popular...it must be able to meet the various interests of the people amongst whom it is popular as well as the interests of its producers’ (Fiske, “Television” 310). Using the memory of the trenches to engage in current debates regarding society, politics and war over the last ninety years reveals the manner in which society has altered and the challenges and difficulties it perceives.

V

It was the 1990s which witnessed a large-scale revival of war literature, at least comparable to the original ‘war books boom’, and associated with the interest generated by the commemorations of the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice (Korte). These novels are regarded as perpetuating the image of the trenches and battlefields of the Western Front which emerged during the memoirs and novels of the interwar years. Certainly, the bestsellers of the 1990s, including Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy and Faulk’s *Birdsong* display the tendency to dwell on the horrors of the Western Front. This can also be observed in a number of novels which have emerged during the last decade. Set in the immediate aftermath of the war in Switzerland for example, Edric’s novel *In Desolate Heaven*, the Western Front becomes a nightmarish vision which haunts the soldiers who were there and who survived it. Hartnett’s novel *Brother to Dragons* also uses disturbing images of the trenches of the Western Front in a shocking and disturbing manner. In a parody of a letter informing a relative of a soldier’s death, the death-scene in the trenches is recounted where a soldier, ‘attempting, as part of his company’s second wave, to climb out of a support trench, he had not acted “bravely” but mechanically, his mind having already vacated a body anaesthetised on Navy issue rum; nor,

being hit by a piece of shell casing that tore the face away from the skull could be said to have died “gallantly” (324).

The popularity of these works of fiction and their perceived role as ‘shaping the memory of the war’ for a new generation, has ensured that critics of the popular memory of the war highlight the flaws and anachronisms of these novels. This again neglects the pivotal role that the reading of this material possesses. The representation of the Western Front as a horrific, desolate, and pitiful wasteland, evoking poignancy and sadness continues not merely through the volition of the authors, or the reliance on standard descriptions, but through the tastes and beliefs of those consuming this work. This reiterates Rorty’s (10) assertion that truth is only ‘what it is better for us to believe.’ Whilst others have commented on the nature of this literature merely evoking the images and descriptions of the 1920s and 1930s, what is an original and striking feature of these novels of the 1990s, is a recasting of the soldiers as victims of the war. The image of the soldiers suffering in the trenches is an especially interesting feature of this revived war literature. This is especially prevalent in Barker’s first novel in her *Regeneration* trilogy, set mostly in the Craiglockhart Hospital where soldiers received treatment for the effects of shellshock and the trauma they experienced in conflict. Shellshock forms for Barker and indeed also for Saunders in her novel *Night Shall Overtake Us*, a new means for representing the suffering of the soldier. Shellshock and its treatment has itself recently become a topic of interest for social historians, who have stressed the varied means of therapy and the wider acceptance of the condition in society (Leese). Represented in the novels however it serves as a means to add a new sense of pathos to the soldier in the trenches (Korte 124). If we employ the same perspective in the tactics of reading, the effect of this interpretation of these novels upon the political and social situation of the period can be observed. Indeed, the idea of soldiers suffering in the trenches gained widespread social currency in Britain at the end of the twentieth century.

VI

Shellshock as an affliction of the trenches became a feature of the public debates during 1998 regarding pardons for the soldiers executed by the British army during the Great War, as it has been frequently asserted by some commentators that soldiers suffering from this condition were executed by the army. The weight of public opinion aroused by this claim intensified as the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice drew near. After much procrastination, though the Government refused to grant the pardons, it nevertheless recognised that the soldiers should be considered alongside their comrades as ‘victims of the war’ (Corns and Hughes-Wilson 352). It is this notion of this victim-hood that provides a telling indication of the nature of the re-articulation of the memory of the trenches in the 1990s and its effect. The eightieth anniversary of the Armistice in 1998 and the debates concerning the pardons for executed soldiers proved to be a platform for the wider expression of the notion of victim-hood, as a public voicing of pain and outrage concerning the war in the trenches of the Western Front emerged through and within the popular media (Stummer 12). This marked an occasion when popular sentiment demanded that the soldiers of the Western Front be remembered as victims of the war (Moriarty 653).

Although historical discourse had long represented the soldiers’ perspective, especially since the advent of oral history in the 1960s, commentators have noted that it was the eightieth anniversary of the cessation of hostilities which was the first occasion when these feelings of victim-hood were expressed on such a wide scale (Smith *et al* 87). Novick through his work on the Holocaust has suggested that this association with suffering reflects the wider cultural shifts which occurred in the late twentieth century, which has placed the notion of ‘passive suffering’ and ‘vicarious victim-hood’ as a desirable and advantageous quality (5). To state association with those in the past who have suffered is often commented

upon as being a key tactic in struggles for representation and identity (Kleinman *et al* xi). If the construction of identity is regarded as an ongoing discourse, utilising the memory of the past to articulate current desires and needs, then the memory of the suffering soldiers in the trenches on the Western Front can be seen to be used as a resource to state a distinctive identity concurrent with the prevailing societal context (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 222). Following these ideas, as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland achieved the promise of some form of independence with the referendums on devolution in 1997, and the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, and with the ever-present debates regarding wider European integration, the concept of the British soldier suffering in the trenches can be seen as a means for sections of the population to coalesce around a single issue, as seemingly well-established national boundaries appeared to be crumbling. The catharsis witnessed with the commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice, and the debates concerning the issue of shellshock can be interpreted therefore as an expression of national identity. As Lyn MacDonald stated at the time, 'people are interested because they *care*, people *care* about this...People realise it is relevant to our country now' (qtd. in Stummer 16).

VII

By realising that the popular memory of the trenches of the Western Front is specifically chosen by its audience, that the trenches form a symbolic resource for society to draw upon to express concerns and fears, and that this feature is itself valuable and worthy of study, a greater regard for the popular memory of the Western Front can be formed. Too often critics have lamented the apparently easier representations chosen by the public, citing television series such as *Blackadder*, novels such as Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, and films such as *Oh! What a lovely war*, as providing inaccurate impressions of the battlefields which are vapidly consumed by a credulous public. To reject this position enables a perspective which can begin to assess the motivations behind the articulations of the popular memory of the trenches, and value them as significant contributions to the study of the Great War and society. This is of particular contemporary concern as increasingly the popular memory of the trenches is invoked as a means of criticising the recent war in Iraq. The revivals of *Journey's End* and *Oh! What a Lovely War* on the West End and touring productions around Britain, as well as the re-release of the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* in the last three years have all played against the backdrop of the Iraq War; allowing the audiences to draw parallels with the slaughter of a war of attrition, the tragic farce of a war without meaning, and a critique of a government's policies which instigated the conflict. The actions of the British government in directing the war in Iraq are thereby interpreted through the lens of the popular memory of the Western Front. This can be seen with the highly unpopular decision to move British soldiers into Baghdad in November 2004. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair's assurance that 'they would be home by Christmas', led many to draw parallels with the First World War ninety years previously. Volunteers for the army in 1914 were also assured that the conflict which lasted over four years and resulted in the deaths of over 700,000 British soldiers would be, 'over by Christmas' (Norton-Taylor).

Critics of the popular memory have underestimated the value of the memory of the trenches of the Western Front in the representation of current concerns; failing to recognise that to an extent every generation will return to the trenches as it seeks to utilise a powerful memory as a vehicle to express itself. Until the place of this popular memory is acknowledged, there can be no chance of expanding it, or gaining a wider public reappraisal of the war.

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