

The Soldiers' Press: Trench Journals in the First World War

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Reviewer: Adrian Bingham

‘World War I is one of the most studied topics of modern scholarship. Is it possible to say something about it that has not yet been said?’ Graham Seal asks the question that must pop into the mind of many a reviewer when picking up a new volume on the First World War (although, curiously, he asks it in the final, rather than the first, paragraph of his monograph, by which time it might be rather too late for the reader). In this centenary year, it is difficult not to feel a little overwhelmed by the flood of material about the Great War, from books and magazine articles to television documentaries and public events. Thanks to the interventions of Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, moreover, the interpretation of the war has become a political battleground. (Gove probably wouldn’t like this book, given Seal’s description in his very first page of the ‘palpable insanity’ that frontline soldiers were forced to endure ‘by forces beyond their control’ (p. ix)). Fortunately, this is the sort of book that can help to shake off First World War fatigue and foster confidence that it is possible to view the conflict in fresh ways. There is, of course, always more to say.

Seal’s topic – the trench journalism of allied nations, found in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines produced by and for troops serving in the front-lines – is by no means unfamiliar. The author suggests, not unreasonably, that the trench press ‘is an immensely rich and relatively under-utilised resource’ (p. 223). It has, nevertheless, been examined in some depth by a number of scholars, including J. G. Fuller, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Alfred Cornbise.⁽¹⁾ It is also part of the popular memory of the war: the *Wipers Times*, edited by Captain F. J. Roberts of the 12th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, has been collected in a number of published editions, and provided the basis for a recent BBC2 drama penned by Ian Hislop and starring Ben Chaplin and Michael Palin.⁽²⁾ The way in which trench journalism used humour as a coping strategy in the face of the grim and unpredictable realities of modern warfare is well known. Nevertheless, this study has several distinctive elements that, when combined, add a new dimension to our understanding of this genre of writing. It is the first full-length comparative study, examining English-language newspapers produced by troops from Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States (and, on occasion, adding insights from French and German publications). It is concerned with all aspects of the production, content and reception of trench journalism, and does not merely use them as a prism to explore specific themes such as morale or national identity. As a Professor of Folklore, Seal reads the material slightly differently to most historians or literary scholars, and is particularly alive to implicit meanings, folkloric traditions, myth and rumour. Most significantly of all, though, the author develops an original and persuasive argument about the

trench journals as a way of communicating not only to fellow soldiers (the 'underculture'), but also to the 'overculture' of military authorities, politicians, the mainstream press and citizens back home.

After a fairly brief introduction, the study begins with an overview of the various types of trench literature, from well-produced, sophisticated and often long-running publications, such as the *London Scottish Regimental Gazette*, or the Australian *Rising Sun*, to rudimentary, hurriedly-compiled and short-lived titles such as *Spit and Polish* (British) or *Bran Mash* (Australian). The famous *Wipers Times* (actually published under a number of different titles) occupied a position in the middle of this spectrum. The different types of content in the trench press are discussed in some detail, both fictional (poetry, short stories, plays and sketches) and non-fictional (editorials, anecdotes, memoirs, obituaries). Much of the material inevitably blurred these simple boundaries, including the ubiquitous rumour columns and pastiches of official texts. Despite the variation of form across the many different titles, there was, however, a remarkable similarity of tone. As Seal notes, 'Humour, satire, parody, cartoon and lampoon were the sanctioned modes. The stoically cheerful and the communal were generally preferred to the personal and the reflective' (p. 8).

Seal proceeds to locate the journalism in the culture of the trenches. The author is a knowledgeable guide to the community of the front-lines, and one of the key strengths of this work is the way in which the texts are connected to both the lived experience of the troops and the oral culture of the trenches. The language and the legends, the songs and the superstitions, are perceptively and clearly discussed. Further chapters examine in detail the role of the trench press as communicators of gossip and rumours, feeding off the intense desire for news and information; its function as a vehicle for complaint, about conditions (mud, lice, inedible food), the mechanical patriotism of the mainstream press, the 'shirkers' back home, and the inadequacies of the 'brass hats'; and its depictions of the warfare itself, from the trench lines and barbed wire to the tanks and seemingly incessant 'whizz bangs'. The final substantive chapter explores the various national, ethnic, gender and class identities revealed by the journalism, noting that, for the most part, they were temporarily subsumed under the most important identity of all: that of the trench soldier.

It is in his discussion of the role of the trench press in reflecting and shaping a sense of identity and community that Seal is most thought-provoking. 'Being part of an identifiable complex of values, attitudes, speech, verse, prose, art and suffering,' he notes, 'gave trench troops a status beyond the dehumanising of official military numbers and the new anonymity of mass death' (p. 218). But he makes clear that we should not expect from these publications unmediated access to the 'reality' of trench. They provided 'a very particular, select and often ameliorated version of the trench experience' (p. 3). To take just one example, the journals did not partake in the swearing and crudity that marked the oral culture of the trenches, but generally retained the 'decency' that conventionally marked the public sphere. The written jokes about German General von Kluck, for examples, restrained themselves from punning on his name in the manner of countless trench songs and ditties. ('Why did the Kaiser count his chickens before they were hatched? Is it because he heard Von Kluck?' asked the *Inchkeith Lyre* rather tamely. A trench song to the tune of 'Brighton Camp' was considerable more direct: 'we don't give a fuck for old Von Kluck and all his fucking army' (p. 50)). One of the reasons why such coarseness was avoided was because these publications were not just directed at fellow soldiers, but also at an important secondary audience: the military authorities and the people back home. The trench press served as 'a message from the inferno to those who seemed to be the trench soldiers' only chance of salvation', and therefore operated as an 'instrument of agency for its creators and readers'. The humour, satire and cynicism was not solely about coping with the inhumanity and uncertainty: it was a means by which soldiers could 'stake a position of their own'. In this way they were able to negotiate consent. 'They agreed to die, but on their own terms' (p. 217).

The twin notions of negotiating consent and communicating to a broader audience are productive and distinctive ways of exploring this material. Scholars have often noted the bitterness of the trench press in their treatment of mainstream newspapers; soldiers recoiled from the mainstream platitudes about honour and glory, and resented the gaps and silences in the reports of trench warfare. At the same time, Seal notes, 'the trench journals were almost sycophantically grateful when they were acknowledged in newspapers' (p. 128); this was not so much about the desire for personal recognition, but more because 'it was a sign to the

denizens of the trench that a salvo had hit home' (p. 129). People back home were listening. It is a shame that the author did not pursue this insight a little further into the archives. The tight focus on trench life and trench publications means the ways in which this secondary readership read and understood the writings from the front are underdeveloped. It would be valuable to see some more evidence about the official and mainstream reception of, and response to, the black humour and cynicism of the trenches. How conscious, moreover, were trench writers of this other audience? How far can we push the notion of negotiating consent?

Although Seal has clear analytical themes, he is also keen to let the material speak for itself. We get a real taste of the richness of the journalism in the lengthy extracts (often over a page) and numerous illustrations that pepper the book, especially in the second half. Some of the extracts, it might be said, deserve more commentary, and on occasion interesting points or references are not taken further. The focus on trench journalism as a coherent cultural system means that although this is a comparative study, the differences in the output of different nations are not usually drawn out – and where variations are noted, such as the British preoccupation with class, they are not fully fleshed out. Seal himself has little time for the contemporary scholarly preoccupation with matters of identity: 'Study of the trench press,' he concludes, 'offers no startling new discoveries or profound insights into questions of identity as pertained at that time and place' (p. 214). Potentially fruitful conceptual connections are not pursued. At the end of the first chapter, for example, Seal maps onto his distinction between 'overculture' and 'underculture' James Scott's categories of 'public transcripts' and 'hidden transcripts'. This tantalising glimpse of a way of theorising these discourses of power is not then developed any further.

The Soldiers' Press does not supersede the older work on trench journalism, but it provides the most comprehensive and detailed overview thus far of a fascinating genre. In its analysis of the negotiation of consent and communication to secondary audiences, it offers new avenues for scholars in the field to explore. And for those whose interest was piqued by the *Wipers Times* televised drama, or the associated press articles, this is an excellent, if expensive, place to start.

Notes

1. J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–18* (Oxford, 1991); S. Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914–1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France During the First World War*, trans. H. McPhail (Providence, RI, 1992); A. Cornbise, *Ranks and Columns: Armed Forces Newspapers in American Wars* (Westport, CT, 1993). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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2. For the most recent edition, see *The Wipers Times: The Famous First World War Trench Newspaper*, ed. C. Westthorp (London, 2013); *The Wipers Times*, dir. Andy de Emmony, broadcast BBC2, 11 September 2013. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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