

'A Student in Arms': Donald Hankey and Edwardian Society at War

Review Number: 1617

Publish date: Thursday, 3 July, 2014

Author: Ross Davies

ISBN: 9780754668664

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £65.00

Pages: 270pp.

Publisher: Ashgate

Publisher url: https://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=8914&edition_id=9187

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Stuart Bell

Donald Hankey was – and has remained – one of the most enigmatic personalities to feature in the narrative of the Great War. Primarily known for a volume of essays reflecting on his experiences as *A Student in Arms* in Britain's largely volunteer army, his death on the Somme on 12 October 1916 at the age of 31 led to him being lauded as a 'soldier-saint' in the popular press and public imagination. In those essays, published first under that nom-de-plume in the *The Spectator* magazine and then in a collected volume in 1916, Hankey had written for the general reader from a position within both the army and the Church of England, relating his experience as a combatant in the war to issues of morality and faith. A 'second series' was published posthumously in 1917, which included both a short biographical sketch written by his sister, Hilda, and also 'a fragment of autobiography'.

After school at Rugby and two years at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, Donald Hankey was commissioned in the Royal Garrison Artillery as a second lieutenant and after various home postings was sent to Mauritius in November 1904, where he stayed until ill-health forced his return two years later. After resigning his commission, there followed a few months' residence in Rugby House, a mission to the poor established by his alma mater in East London, while he 'crammed' at Charterhouse for entrance to Oxford. Hankey's aim was ordination in the Church, to which end he spent three years at Corpus Christi College, although his sense of calling was always being challenged by other demands on his energies.

Formative for his personal development had been time spent with the Bermondsey Mission, about which he wrote of 'children dying of consumption in squalid hovels' and finding his Christ who 'stood by my side when I visited the little consumption boys' (p. 56). After a brief visit to Africa, Hankey entered Leeds Clergy school in February 1911 but after two terms he withdrew and returned to Bermondsey as a lay helper 'to try to learn love and service'. Ordination was still in his sights but, with a private income which freed him from the need to earn, he felt that he must learn to live the life of the poor before ministering to them.

Accordingly, in 1912 he sailed steerage to Australia, where he worked on a small farm, without pay. An article, 'From England to Western Australia', was published anonymously in the *Westminster Gazette*. A period back in Bermondsey was to have been followed by a return to Australia in the summer of 1914, but the war intervened. In his eagerness to enlist, Hankey signed up as an ordinary soldier, but his military

experience led to his commissioning within a week. Two periods of service on the Western Front followed; the former ended by injury, the latter by death.

Before the war, few people had heard of Donald Hankey. His 'The Lord of all good life' had attracted some attention with its subtitle, 'a study of the greatness of Jesus and the weakness of his Church', but just 400 copies had been sold in the first four months with sales taking off only when his *A Student in Arms* was published in 1916 (p. 119). In October 1915, *The Spectator* printed the first of the essays which would eventually form his major work, although it was not until the fourth piece in December that he used the new pen-name that would form its title. By January 1916, Hankey was writing articles on a weekly basis. *A Student in Arms* was published in April and became a phenomenon, running to 18 impressions, selling perhaps 200,000 copies in the UK and appearing on the 'New York Times' top-five best-seller list in the USA (p. 187).

The historiography of Donald Hankey is very limited. His activities and writing have ensured brief references in innumerable books on the war, especially those addressing the cultural and religious history of the conflict. However, together they have added little to the contemporary legend. A collection of Hankey's letters was published in 1919, albeit one edited to reinforce the popularity of the author, rather than to aid an understanding of his complex character. A sketchy biography written by Ronald Budd in 1931 does indeed merit the description by Ross Davies as 'little more than an extended fan-letter'. He makes no explicit use of the biography by James Kissane, *Without Parade: The Life and Work of Donald Hankey, a 'Student in Arms'*, published in 2003 during the long gestation period of the current work.

What is remarkable about '*A Student in Arms: Donald Hankey and Edwardian Society at War*' is its source material. The author has brought together for the first time the 'Donald Hankey Collection' assembled from private papers held by three members of the Hankey family and previously largely unknown to scholars. While the various sections are listed in the bibliography, no indication is given of the number of folios in what is clearly a very large collection of letters to and from Hankey, photographs, memoirs, drafts of articles and novels, press cuttings, essays, diaries and journals. This has enabled Davies to 'flesh-out' the well-rehearsed story of Hankey's life, his primary sources offering insights into his subject's thoughts, intentions and motivations as well as the pressures and expectations placed on him. The key correspondence is that between Hankey, his publishers (Andrew Melrose and John St. Loe Strachey) and his de-facto agent, his sister Helen. Together, they reveal something of the complexity of publishing thoughtful and sometimes critical pieces at a time of almost entirely uncritical patriotic fervour, subject to the scrutiny of the censors.

In turn, successive chapters deal with his childhood and education, his time at Woolwich, Mauritius and Oxford and his pre-war writing. Then the focus moves from Australia to the outbreak of war, and the literary history of his articles and books set against a narrative of Hankey's experiences as a combatant. His posthumous adulation followed by the effect on his reputation of the disillusionment of the late 1920s are described, succeeded by a restatement of the way in which the attitudes of the 1960s caused the Great War to be widely misrepresented and misunderstood. As the introduction had noted, post-war perceptions of him were affected by 'guilt by association with a war that later was to be portrayed as senseless as well as monstrous' (p. 5).

Literary connections between Hankey and scores of his contemporaries are identified, although the sheer number of them has resulted in the occasional rather perfunctory treatment. To refer to Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy as a 'Kipling emulator' (p. 216) is hardly fair on either writer. Hankey's literary history, detailing both those works which were published as well as the many drafts and fragments which were not, is painstakingly recounted, revealing more of his personal struggles and recurrent sense of low self-esteem. Integrating the carefully-selected primary material is a well-written and well-judged critical analysis of what it reveals about its very complex subject. The significance of the original manuscripts in disclosing both the stark reality of Hankey's part in the conflict and the limitations placed on soldiers' letters home is exemplified in one sentence: ' . . . in Hankey's next letter to Hilda it is possible to discern, beneath the field censor's pencilling-out, the phrase, "My Company no longer exists"' (p. 128).

Commendably, the author avoids the temptation to epitomise Hankey with a well-turned phrase or an allegedly telling anecdote. The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions from the riches of evidence which are presented.

In general, the production of the book is of the high standard which one expects of Ashgate. However, a number of typographical errors have slipped through and the bibliography lists the biography by Kissane before works by authors whose surnames start with 'J'. The wide range of sources which have informed the writing of the book are listed, though there are a few notable omissions: such is the importance of Dan Todman's *The Great War: Myth and Memory* that its absence is surprising. Davies makes extensive use of Alan Wilkinson's *The Church of England in the First World War* which, while it remains the most widely-read and quoted book on its subject, is at times arguably anachronistically critical of the role of the Church. Written before revisionist histories of the war offered a corrective to the polemical attitudes of the 1960s and early 1970s, it does rather privilege its literary sources above other evidence. Albert Marrin's *The Last Crusade*, though written a little earlier, is arguably less partial. Finally, any reference to Robert Graves' description of Anglican chaplains in *Goodbye to All That* needs to be accompanied by a very strong health warning about its veracity – something Graves implicitly admitted in the prologue to the 1960 reprint of his book, in which he wrote 'I wonder how my publishers escaped libel action'. None of the recent work on war-time chaplaincy – highly relevant to the Donald Hankey story – appears to have influenced this biography.

There are two matters about which I would take issue with the author. First, in the introduction, referring to the largely voluntary British army, he writes of 'a war which shook the foundations of their religious beliefs'. It is true that some of the war poets expressed religious doubt in no uncertain terms. Similarly, some combatants wrote of such doubt in their letters or diaries and Donald Hankey and others felt compelled to re-examine and challenge various aspects of Christian teaching. However, there is no evidence of which I am aware that foundation-shaking doubt was a widespread phenomenon. The evidence is that the very gentle decline in support for the churches which dated from around 1905 simply continued, any additional fall being attributable to the loss of life caused by the conflict or the influenza epidemic. From a contemporary perspective, we might expect that death and injury on such a scale would indeed have shaken the foundations of religious belief. That may well be true of the aftermath of Hiroshima and the Holocaust, but we must be very cautious about generalising about the earlier conflict from the writing of a few. As the series editor's preface quite rightly reminds the reader, the First World War was the most popular war that Britain has ever fought (p. ix).

Second, Davies asserts that Hankey's 'mentor, Winnington-Ingram, now bishop of London and chaplain to the Rifle Brigade, began by urging the indiscriminate killing of Germans' (p. 117). This is simply untrue. In a 1915 sermon, he recognised the indiscriminate nature of war, in which 'good' as well as 'bad' Germans must necessarily be killed if the war was to be won. The text of that sermon was maliciously edited in *Arms and the Clergy*, an anti-clerical volume written by George Bedborough in 1934, to state that the bishop preached, 'Kill Germans, to kill them . . .'.⁽¹⁾ That version and a consequently critical assessment were then published in the 1960s, after which it spread virus-like across the literature, leading both popular and academic writers to repeat the same false accusation. In fact, together with the bishop of London, Randall

Davidson, Winnington-Ingram spoke out strongly against reprisals targeted at German civilians, especially in the face of the bombing of London, in the face of calls from the press and many politicians for such action. The issue is not simply one of factual accuracy about a 1915 sermon, but rather that that misquotation has been repeatedly used to give a totally misleading impression of the general position of the Church of England during the war.[\(2\)](#)

A Student in Arms: *Donald Hankey and Edwardian Society at War* breaks new ground as a literary biography of its subject, presenting and analysing a wealth of previously unknown material focussing on Hankey as a writer. It is a little less enlightening when it comes to his Christian faith and there is not the same clear exposition of his theological connections as there is of his literary ones. His critical discussion of creeds and miracles was shared by many other Anglican modernists and the modernist movement was arguably in its most vibrant phase, with many of its leaders in Oxford, at the very time that Handley was at Corpus Christi. There remains work to be done in this area, perhaps informed by HA2/3 in the Hankey Collection – his Oxford theological essays.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent piece of scholarly writing, contributing significantly to our understanding of *A Student in Arms*. While Donald Hankey continues to defy simplistic labelling, Ross Davies' work has made him much less of an enigma.

Notes

1. George Bedborough, *Arms and the Clergy* (London, 1934), p. 64.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The textual history of the mis-quotation of that sermon is described in Stuart Bell, 'Malign or maligned? – Arthur Winnington-Ingram, Bishop of London, in the First World War', *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/ Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte*, 20, 1 (2013), 117–133.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1617>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/72245>