

The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century

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Author: David Reynolds

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Reviewer: Jay Winter

This book achieves two aims: to locate the Great War in the history of the 20th century, and to show how, as the 20th century unfolded, our understanding of the meaning and significance of the Great War changed as well. In effect, Reynolds argues that it was the contrast with the Second World War which made the First World War appear to be a futile bloodbath, which is not as it appeared to millions of men and women in Britain and France who believed the war had to be fought and that it had to be fought to the bitter end, which indeed they did. This is what Reynolds means when he says that, as moving as Wilfred Owen's poetry is, we cannot distill history into poetry. I will have more to say about this below, but it is undoubtedly true that we cannot take the war poets as representative of the attitudes of contemporaries about whether the war had to be fought. The intriguing question is why over the course of the 20th century the war poets' view, if there was one, has come to dominate later understandings of the 1914–18 conflict in Britain, and to a certain degree in France.

One clear reason why the First World War loomed large as a Pyrrhic victory, if not an unmitigated disaster, is the scale of casualties, not matched in Britain or France in the Second World War or thereafter. British losses in 1939–45 were a third of those of 1914–18, and 60,000 of those deaths were of civilians killed in the Blitz and after. In the French case, the losses in the Second World War were 200,000 soldiers and 350,000 civilians killed, including those who died in bombing and through deportation to the death camps. Again, Second World War losses were roughly a third of those of 1914–18. When we go further east, the story changes, but the focus of Reynolds' book is clearly Britain and Western Europe, and in that zone of military operations, the Great War was an unparalleled disaster. Everyone who has wandered around villages in Britain and France has seen the way Second World War deaths were tacked on to First World War memorials, as small addenda to the bloodbath of 1914–18. And these war memorials were built mostly in the 1920s, when bereavement was, if not universal, then certainly ubiquitous.

The creation of a myth that the best had been killed and the second-rate were left behind helped further a notion of decline in the immediate post-war years. This is a claim that cannot be proved, but it cannot be disproved either, given the range of comment of men and women who saw in the graveyards in France and Flanders the remains of men who could have led Britain and France better than Chamberlain and Daladier. A demographic excuse for political failure is highly suspect, since politicians made mistakes out of their own

limitations, rather than through the diminution of the cohort out of which political leaders were sought.

Still the point here is that a widely-shared sense that there had been a decline in political leadership, and that what was left was the rule of mediocrity helped usher in a notion that the war had yielded nothing but a downhill slide to a situation no one had dreamt of in 1914. And they were right to believe that the world was worse off in 1934 than it had been in 1914: not only had the Nazis come to power, but the world economic crisis had undermined the economic stability of the democracies of Britain, France and even the United States. It was in the late 1920s and early 1930s that the idea of futility really hit home, and gave to the poetry of Owen not only the power of pity but of clairvoyance. War had not been a moment of glory, but of gore, a vast sea of suffering with no redeeming features.

The peace treaties had produced nothing but chaos. There were those who thought their failure was due to their being too harsh on Germany. Others thought the opposite, that Germany should have been invaded and crushed in 1919. In either case, the guarantor of the peace, the League of Nations, was an empty shell; ideas of a real peace were germinating within it, but they were to emerge only after an even worse war. Reynolds underestimates the power of what we may term the 'Owen view' of the futility of the Great War, well before the Second World War, as the good war, helped turn the First World War into the pointless war.

Reynolds's achievements in this book are many. He is the first distinguished British international historian to write British history in a trans-national framework. Inevitably, the readership of this book will be primarily British, though it has much to offer to other audiences. And it is within British history that we need to judge his view that we cannot distill history into poetry. I take a different view. The poetry is part of the history, not all of it to be sure, but language frames memory, and the language of the war poets, alongside that of trench warfare and shell shock, has entered the vernacular in Britain in remarkable and indelible ways. Think for a moment of an iconic text, written by two veterans of the trenches: *1066 and All That* published in 1930. The last line of the book states emphatically that at the end of the war 'America was thus clearly top nation and history came to a .'. Good fun considering the tendency of school and university syllabi to come to a screeching halt just there. But what if we loosen the metaphor a bit, and talk about history – any history – as coming to a stop during the war. That is, what if the idea of history as a story, backed up by documents, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, suddenly ceased to work. What if 1914–18 required a different kind of story-telling, one in which fabrications tell the truth, and documents lie? What if the way the Great War was fought on the Western Front pushed not only men beyond the limits of human endurance, but history beyond the limits of narrative? If that is so, then the poetry *is* the history, or rather a significant part we ignore at our peril.

An intractable problem in this kind of field is the separation of the effects of war from the effects of mere time. Would Britain have declined to the position of a second-rank power off the coast of a united Europe anyway? I am not one to practice counter-factual history, since we can never specify all the variables in the equation of the counter example. But my guess is that the Great War turned a slow glacial movement of decline into a rapid, wrenching one, and – again a bit at odds with Reynolds's interpretation – made the loss of empire inevitable. I agree entirely that the empire was alive and well in the inter-war years, but its economic foundations were not, and given the added economic price Britain paid for victory in 1939–45, the loss of empire was a function of the combined effects of the two world wars on Britain's economic power, and consequently her strategic position.

Reynolds is particularly effective in showing the vast variety of artistic expression the war precipitated. He once again goes well beyond the borders of Britain in his chapter entitled (with a touch of Duhamel's irony) 'Civilization', but his most powerful discussion is on British commemorative practices. He even leaves the last word in the book to Winston Churchill that the graveyards in France in coming centuries will still 'excite the wonder and reverence of a future age' and will tell of 'the common purpose pursued by a great nation in the remote past' (p. 435). Is that what they meant in 1925 or in 1935; is that what they mean today, at the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War? Perhaps they will invite reverence, but wonder? That is a word too far, and so is the notion of a 'common purpose'. Yes, these men died for victory, but was the price so

high that the word ‘victory’ came very rapidly to have a taste as of ashes to it?

Ashes floated by the gaze of T. S. Eliot, as he stood as a fire-watcher in Bloomsbury during the Blitz. And the outbreak of the Second World War certainly deepened the notion that the Great War had been futile. ‘Never again’ was the watchword of many veterans of the inter-war years, particularly in France, and never had lasted 20 short years. Indeed, ‘never’ was blown to pieces by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, reducing further the period of peace to 12 years. All those men died to give the world a respite of 12 years before starting on the road to war again? And after the Spanish Civil War, everyone knew that air power would exponentially increase the number of civilian victims of aerial bombardment, not to mention the strategic effects of air power opening the way for the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Holocaust. To be sure, it is only relatively recently that we have placed the Armenian genocide in the centre of the narrative of the Great War, but this event inspired Raphael Lemkin to invent the term ‘genocide’ in 1942 to link the Ottoman Turkish crime with the Nazis. To a degree, the Second World War was the First World War darkened still, through crimes and cruelty that the Kaiser’s army did not and would not perpetrate. But the atrocities of 1914 had happened, with the full knowledge of the German general staff, who knew that *Schrecklichkeit* was the way war had to be waged. The German army in Russia in 1941 took that one step further, and we all know the consequences.

I would slightly revise the caption in the last illustration in Reynolds’s book. It is a fine photo of men in Cambridge in October 1939 marching off to war, ‘paying wary respect to the men who marched away in 1914 – never to return’. In fact that statue is of a soldier (the model was a Christ’s undergraduate) returning home victoriously (with an olive wreath on his gun) after the armistice. The irony in the encounter is that his victory had evaporated, and had to be won yet again.

For these reasons, I tend to see the evolution of popular ideas about the Great War as an exercise in futility as coming earlier in the century than does Reynolds. This book is masterly history, written by one of our finest historians. I admire his analysis of later developments, and of the memory boom in which we are engaged now. In Britain and France, Churchill’s words ‘common purpose’ are no longer used. The word ‘celebration’ is conspicuously outside of the acceptable lexicon of remembrance. Commemoration today starts and ends with the Lost Generation. It is to the men who did not have a chance of dying one at a time that our thoughts still return. That is what is haunting about the archipelago of cemeteries beautifully maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The war poets knew this instinctively. And theirs is the history we rightly carry with us. Ted Hughes grew up in the ‘long shadow’ of the Great War. He quipped that, as a youngster, he came to see the Great War as a human disaster around whose neck someone placed a victory medal. The medal has faded away, and today we see the Great War for the catastrophe that it was.

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