

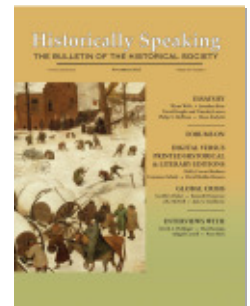


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Popular History and Myth-Making: The Role and Responsibility of First World War Historians in the Centenary Commemorations 2014-2018

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What Tribble fails to grasp is that most of us in academe are actual human beings. We have struggles. We have foibles. Some of us need to let off steam. Most of us need to find a sense of community. And blogging can help provide that. It can, in ways that are obvious or not so obvious, help us do our jobs.

In my own case, the depressive phases of the mood disorder have often produced feelings that result in distorted thoughts about the quality of my work—“this is horrible, that sucks,” and so on. For a long time, blogging was the best way I found to rescue me from that. Most of my posts were, in one way or another, drafts of work in progress. The blog essentially accelerated the point at which my writing gets the intervention of actual as opposed to notional readers. It replaced my demon-like internal notional readers, who reflect that distorted thinking, with living, breathing readers who were, by and large, supportive and who therefore spurred me on toward a more regular pace of production.

Although it is now seven years old, Tribble’s rant still reflects the majority view within the profession. Yet signs abound that this prejudice is changing. A number of professional organizations now have blogs of their own. In addition, the Society for Military History, the flagship organization of my own specialization, has a very active Facebook group in which its 476 members—about 25 % of the total membership—trade insights, debate historical subjects, and share information about job opportunities.⁹

I do not think that this prejudice against social media will ever change into the sort of respect that results in tenure, promotion, or merit raises. And I do not think it should. Peer review has its place.

What I am looking for—sometimes even longing for—is simply a sense of validation, an acknowledgement that my blog, for instance, is a legitimate endeavor. Validation, to me at least, is as important a currency as the more traditional types of academic reward.

Fortunately, that validation is at last beginning to materialize. In 2011 the Society for Military History created an ad hoc Social Media Committee whose job was to determine how such media could further enhance the visibility of the organization. In addition to its Facebook group, the committee recommended the revamping of the SMH’s already excellent website, the creation of a group blog, and a permanent committee charged with maintaining the Facebook group and creating a Twitter account as well. The executive board of the organization recently approved these recommendations and agreed to create a fellowship to support the efforts of a graduate student charged with maintaining the Twitter feed. The name of that fellowship: “The Mark Grimsley SMH Fellowship in Social Media,” an honor bestowed for having been “a leading pioneer in social media and academic blogging.”¹⁰ My conclusion: life can be an uphill pull. But it can also be sweet.

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warhistorian.org/wordpress.

¹ Bruce Catton, *Prefaces to History* (Doubleday, 1970), 96-97.

² “Origins—Welcome to Origins” <http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/origins/> (Accessed October 5, 2012).

³ “AHA Considering Popular History Magazine,” *American Historical Association Newsletter* (September 1981): 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chad Berry, Patrick Ettinger, Dot McCullough, and Meg Meneghel, “History from the Bottom Up: On Reproducing Professional Culture in Graduate Education,” *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 939-943.

⁶ James M. McPherson, “What’s the Matter with History?” in McPherson, *Drawn With the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 253.

⁷ Ivan Tribble, “Bloggers Need Not Apply,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 8, 2005. <http://chronicle.com/article/Bloggers-Need-Not-Apply/45022/> (Accessed October 5, 2012).

⁸ Ivan Tribble, “They Shoot Messengers, Don’t They?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 2, 2005, <http://chronicle.com/article/They-Shoot-Messengers-Dont/45052/> (Accessed October 5, 2012).

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Society.for.Military.History/> (Accessed October 5, 2012).

¹⁰ “Grimsley Fellowship,” <http://smh-hq.org/socialmedia/grimsleyfellowship.html> (Accessed October 5, 2012).

POPULAR HISTORY AND MYTH-MAKING: THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF FIRST WORLD WAR HISTORIANS IN THE CENTENARY COMMEMORATIONS, 2014-2018

Catriona Pennell

In Britain there is a specific national perception of the First World War. This is evident from a number of sources—observation of the media, an analysis of the First World War as it appears in the National Curriculum (the post-1988 nationwide curriculum for primary and secondary state schools in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland), and discussion with colleagues and students. At the start of each academic year, I ask those students who have opted to study my First World War history module to write down the words and phrases they most

associate with the First World War. This year (2011-2012) the majority chose “trenches” (42%),

Of all the images, it is perhaps “the trenches” that is most often used as shorthand by modern Britons for stupidity, blind obedience, failures of leadership, appalling physical conditions, and deadlock.

closely followed by “death” (23%). While unscientific, my survey provides a certain impression of how these undergraduates understand the First

World War. Their ideas about the war reflect the views of the wider British public. It is perceived by many as a tragic disaster, fought mainly in the muddled, rat-filled, and lice-ridden trenches of the Western Front by young, innocent “Tom-mies” led by imbecile generals who willfully sacrificed their men for a cause that would, with the outbreak of the Second World War, prove to be utterly pointless. Overall, there is a general awareness that the war was a uniquely terrible experience. This angry, emotional response to the First World War was captured by the

Guardian journalist George Monbiot on November 11, 2008, when he described the war as “an act of social cannibalism, in which statesmen and generals on both sides murdered their own offspring.”¹ Of all the images, it is perhaps “the trenches” that is most often used as shorthand by modern Britons for stupidity, blind obedience, failures of leadership, appalling physical conditions, and deadlock.²

This image of the war did not appear from nowhere. For those who study the history of the First World War, it has become a matter of orthodoxy to pinpoint the 1960s as the key moment for the formation of the modern myth of the war. Fifty years after the war, it is suggested, Britons recast it to fit a set of contemporary concerns ranging from nuclear war to cultural radicalism. However, research by Dan Todman has illustrated that myths about the war developed in a far more gradual process. The war was represented from the moment it broke out—and in a variety of ways. Yet by the 1970s many of the different views had died out or been hushed, as a set of myths that depict the First World War in purely negative terms achieved universal dominance.³ That the war continues to play a part in British culture is not surprising. It was a unique event in British history: the mass mobilization of the population to fight a land war against a great power opponent on the European mainland. The effort required affected the life of every Briton at the time, most traumatically through the deaths of 750,000 men. Even if in 2012 no veterans or witnesses exist who experienced it firsthand, many people have grown up with its echoes resounding in their ears.⁴ The approaching centenaries will serve to make such echoes more audible.

The portrayal of the war in this narrow way is perhaps most evident in books, television shows, and movies set against the backdrop of the First World War. Recent examples in British and American media include: the television series *Downton Abbey* (first broadcast in the UK in September 2010, January 2011 in the U.S.); Steven Spielberg’s *War Horse* (released in 2011 and based on the 1982 children’s novel by Michael Morpurgo), and, of course, *Blackadder Goes Forth* (the BBC comedy series first broadcast in 1989, but still incredibly popular, being voted in 2000 as number nine in the *100 Great Television Moments* broadcast on UK television). In literature, Pat Barker’s trilogy *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995) essentially recreated for a modern readership the story of the breakdowns of the

war poets Sassoon and Owen and their treatment by the psychologist W.H. Rivers at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh. In *Birdsong* (1993) Sebastian Faulks imaginatively explored an extreme view of the slaughter on the Somme on July 1, 1916, and the intense experience of the tunnellers’ war. This was adapted for British television and broadcast on the BBC in January 2012, to wide acclaim.

These engaging and dramatic stories are united by the fact that they are *fictional*. Yet, more often than not, they are interpreted as historical fact to

portrayed as having conspicuously failed to comprehend the plight of their men in pursuing unrealistic visions of a decisive breakthrough.⁷ When books and movies also depict the war in this way, people are more likely to believe that this is “how the war was” because that is what they were taught at school. Furthermore, popular media are often used as teaching tools. *Blackadder Goes Forth* is commonly employed as a primary source for the study of the First World War. One teacher said on a History Teacher’s Discussion Forum, “Whenever

teaching WW1 to Year 9 students, I’d consistently use the final *Blackadder* episode—found it always hit exactly the right spot with Year 9s, illustrating the futility of war.”⁸ The use of *Blackadder Goes Forth* as anything more than an entertaining window onto a much more complex subject is extremely concerning. It is an enjoyable and entertaining series, but it is not historical evidence of trench conditions, strategy, officer/men relations, or troop morale. In addition, *Blackadder Goes Forth* is the fourth series in this historical



Soldiers on the battlefield, from the BBC’s *Birdsong* (2012).

the exclusion of more nuanced and complex stories of the war experience. As Stephen Badsey has written: “It is doubtful if any British play, film or television dramatisation of the Western Front since perhaps 1950 has depicted something that was actually a commonplace of the war: a competent officer bravely and successfully leading his troops.”⁹ Many of the reviews by British journalists of the film of *War Horse* describe it as a historical depiction of what it was *actually* like to fight in the First World War, ignoring the multitude of inaccuracies and degree of artistic licence taken to make a compelling and emotional drama. In actual fact, the film tells us very little about the war. It probably tells us more about how British people feel about the war nowadays, through the prism of how they feel about horses. On a 2009 art-related blog a discussion focused on John Singer Sargent’s 1918 painting “Two Soldiers,” a product of his wartime commission to capture the cooperation between British and American forces. One commentator questioned the painting’s accuracy: “This is a bit colourful, I have read a book called *Birdsong* which tells the story of the trenches, it says there wasn’t a blade of grass or tree left in sight.”¹⁰ Why is a fictional depiction, published in 1993, being interpreted as “more accurate” than a wartime painting from 1918?

In British schools the curriculum tends to reinforce stereotypes of the Western Front as a theatre of unrelieved terror, deprivation, and disillusionment, lacking all “meaning.” Generals are

portrayed as having conspicuously failed to comprehend the plight of their men in pursuing unrealistic visions of a decisive breakthrough.⁷ When books and movies also depict the war in this way, people are more likely to believe that this is “how the war was” because that is what they were taught at school. Furthermore, popular media are often used as teaching tools. *Blackadder Goes Forth* is commonly employed as a primary source for the study of the First World War. One teacher said on a History Teacher’s Discussion Forum, “Whenever

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History teachers are not alone in their propagation of certain myths about the war in British schools. According to Ian Beckett, “the popular images of the Great War endure in part because of the way in which so many British schoolchildren are introduced to the war through a highly selective reading of a profoundly misleading *literary* legacy.”⁹ English teachers, therefore, have as much to answer for in terms of the enduring popular image of the Great War. Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves stand as representatives of the 5.7 million men who passed through the British Army between 1914 and 1918.¹⁰ The incessant focus on the war poets has skewed the memory of the war in Britain, boiling it down to the experiences of a handful of white, middle-class, literary “truth-speakers.” When it comes to the way the First World War is taught, there appears to be an implicit assumption that pupils should have a fixed canon of topics, which are exclusive, ethnocentric, and gender-biased. The closest to any “global” context the First World War comes to in British classrooms is an occasional discussion of America’s entry in 1917, tagged on at the end as if to meet the “world” criterion of a “world war.” A straw poll of some of the stan-

dard texts used at key stages 3 and 4 of the National Curriculum reveal a dominant focus on the Western Front from an English perspective. An average British school pupil's impression of a four-and-a-half-year conflict that stretched across the globe is that it took place on July 1, 1916, in a trench in France, seen through the eyes of a man called Wilfred Owen.

For over twenty years academics have challenged the myths and misrepresentations of the war; revisionist studies have pointed to the varying reactions of populations to the outbreak of war, the fact that the war was not understood by contemporaries to be “over by Christmas,” the wide diversity of experiences of soldiers, the tactical advancements made by the British army, and the Allies’ eventual victory in an effort to undermine the popular memory of the war in Britain. Professional historians appear to have arrived at a point where the war can be studied, according to Brian Bond, “simply as history without polemic intent or apologies.”¹¹

Yet these attempts have largely failed to loosen the grip of popular memory.¹² Academic historians are battling an “uphill struggle” to reach a British public brought up on “the war poets” and abetted by newspapers and television programs that tend to go on “plucking the chords of memory,” reminding audiences of what they already know about the war and reinforcing the standard images of horror, slaughter, and futility.¹³ Ian Beckett and Gary Sheffield have written critically about the way in which the First World War is taught in British schools, noting how very little revisionist history has filtered into recommended textbooks.¹⁴ Whereas the academic image of the Great War has been transformed over the past two decades, the British public are still stuck in the mud of July 1, 1916.

The forthcoming centenary of the war stretching across 2014 to 2018 offers a unique window of opportunity to try and close this gap between popular understanding of the war and the latest academic scholarship. There are signs that permit cautious optimism. For example, in February 2012, I was lucky enough to be one of twelve historians selected to “pitch” their ideas to a room full of BBC producers and program commissioners, all keen to hear the latest research and how that might translate into compelling broadcasting. It was extremely encouraging to see the national broadcasting body discussing their coverage of the centenary with active historians. In 2011 Dr. Andrew Murrison, MP for South West Wiltshire, was appointed Special Representative for Centenary Commemorations by Prime Minister David Cameron. Following his appointment, he indicated in an interview the types of centenary plans that the government would support:

A tapestry of very local, very grassroots commemorations that will be drawn together in some sort of national framework and I think the appetite in this country is

for projects based in communities and looking at this conflict at a very human level. Already there are lots of small-scale projects that commemorate the lives and contributions of people that were participants in the Great War. . . . I think . . . our unique British contribution to this will be. . . . to encourage and develop some of that work and to draw it altogether nationally in some archive that will be easily accessible. . . . I think [that] would be very much in keeping with what people would like to

I am keen to get involved in a way that is more productive than simply wading in, shaking my finger, and saying “you’re wrong.”

see and that is an interpretation of these extraordinary events in a very human context.

When probed about “the larger scale,” he revealed that Britain planned “an international effort and obviously each individual country is going to have its own take on events of 1914-1918 but there will be, of course, international commemorations of the outbreak of the Great War and the battles during those four years, leading up to, of course, the peace of 1918, which we will celebrate in 2018.”¹⁵

But I remain only cautiously optimistic. What Murrison is suggesting is notable for its conservatism; he is talking of *local* projects, a *national* commemoration (in the singular, as if there was one national story), and 2018 as a moment to celebrate *peace* rather than acknowledging that peace was only achieved by the British army (in coalition) being victorious. These ideas are not dissimilar to the way commemorations have been approached in previous anniversaries. More importantly, the focus remains overtly Anglocentric. The “international” he refers to is something of a token gesture, perhaps nothing more than a nod across the Channel on November 11, 2018, to President Hollande of France.

As an academic historian of the First World War, what is my role in British commemorations of the centenary? I am keen to get involved in a way that is more productive than simply wading in, shaking my finger, and saying “you’re wrong.” I am genuinely interested in ensuring that a topic I feel passionately about engages the public. However, “getting involved” is not necessarily that easy. At a national level, the BBC and the government do not operate an “open door” policy; I cannot bend Andrew Murrison’s ear whenever I want to. The pathways to getting involved are not signposted (or necessarily open to all) nor is there a map to guide the uninitiated. In addition, there is always a risk of dilution when academic research is disseminated to

the public; how can it be accessible while retaining rigor and accuracy? Finally, there is an inherent responsibility that comes with “getting involved.” I need to be sensitive to the myths that surround the war, even if I do not subscribe to them, because they mean something to people. We cannot dispel and deconstruct myths without offering to rebuild and reconstruct something in their place. In other words, people cannot be left with nothing.

While I cannot offer definitive answers, I do have ideas that may help lessen the gulf between academic and popular understandings of the First World War:

Academic monographs need to be cheaper. They are currently inhibitive expensive and thus off-putting to the general public. Academics need to work with publishers, in advance, to find ways in which research can be published in a format that is affordable to many.

Research should be used to generate publicly accessible discussion. Academics need to make use of their university press office and publisher, as well as taking the initiative to contact television and radio programmers themselves, to ensure that their research is on the radars of those who can assist in public dissemination.

Start at a local level and work up. An opinion piece in a local newspaper at a timely moment, such as November 11 (in the UK) or Memorial Day (in the U.S.), can be an important stepping stone in the journey to a far-reaching regional or national broadcast.

Make imaginative use of the web. Contribute to sites—or better still create your own—that encourage interaction between academics, amateur historians, and the general public. Make links with “Wikimedians” who can show you how to edit, update and correct current Wikipedia pages, the first stop for an uninitiated public in their quest for knowledge about the First World War.

Host and/or attend conferences/symposiums that are not exclusively attended by academics. Ideas and discussions need to take place among academics, teachers, community organizers, curators, archivists, librarians, and a whole host of stakeholders. The First World War is not the sole territory of the academic historian, and settings that promote dialogue and exchange should be supported and encouraged.

Speak at nonacademic events. Literary festivals, cultural events, and your local history society offer excellent opportunities to reach a wide but engaged audience.

Get involved in education. Popular perceptions about the First World War are most likely to be revised by recasting the way the war is taught in schools. This might be done through digitization

projects, blogs that speak to the teaching community, podcasts for educational websites, workshops at your local school, or working with those involved in policy initiatives and curriculum planning.

Start with the stories. On one point, Murrison is right; it is the human aspect that will engage a nonacademic audience. As historians, all of our work is based, at its very essence, on human stories. What are they, how can we bring them to life, and how can we use them to offer more complex and nuanced views of the war?

The centenary of the First World War offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for historians and an interested public to engage with some of the latest research on the war. The centenary moment cannot be allowed to degenerate into national navel-gazing and myth propagation. Instead, it is a chance to explore, reflect, and analyze in ways that have not been done before. Alternative understandings that challenge stale and out-of-date understandings of a futile war should be showcased in a space where members of the public, young and old, are tuning into the war and its history through a variety of mediums. I believe that First World War scholars have a role and responsibility in the forthcoming centenary. If we use some of the suggestions outlined above, and more besides, we might see long-held myths and assumptions fall

away, to be replaced by some of the latest, nuanced interpretations of the war. That would be a centenary to remember.

Catriona Pennell is a lecturer in history at the University of Exeter. Her research, to date, has focused on the social and cultural experience of the First World War in Britain and Ireland. She is the author of A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland (Oxford University Press, 2012). Her latest project compares the front-line and home front experiences of the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) divisions on the Somme. She is also the co-editor of a new website, www.irelandww1.org, which aims to link the work and initiatives of academics and community groups in the context of the forthcoming centenary.

¹ George Monbiot, "Lest We Forget," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2008. See www.monbiot.com/2008/11/11/lest-we-forget/ [Last accessed June 22, 2012].

² Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War, Myths and Realities* (Headline, 2001), 3.

³ Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (Hambledon Continuum, 2005), 221–22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵ Stephen Badsey, "Blackadder Goes Forth and the 'Two Western Fronts' Debate," in Graham Roberts and Philip M. Taylor, eds., *The Historian, Television and Television History* (University of Luton Press, 2001).

⁶ "Soldiers," Arts for Art's Sake blog. See <http://picturepost.blog.co.uk/2009/10/10/soldiers-7135687/> [Last accessed August 7, 2012].

⁷ Ian Beckett, "The Military Historian and the Popular Image of the Western Front, 1914–1918," *The Historian: The Magazine of the Historical Association* 53 (Spring 1997): 11.

⁸ www.schoolhistory.co.uk/forum/index.php?showtopic=9700 [Last accessed April 26, 2012].

⁹ Ian Beckett, *The Great War: 1914–1918*, 2nd ed. (Longman, 2007), 597.

¹⁰ Beckett, "The Military Historian and the Popular Image of the Western Front," 11.

¹¹ Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75.

¹² Beckett, *Great War*, 464.

¹³ Bond, *Unquiet Western Front*, 100.

¹⁴ Beckett, "The Military Historian and the Popular Image of the Western Front"; Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.

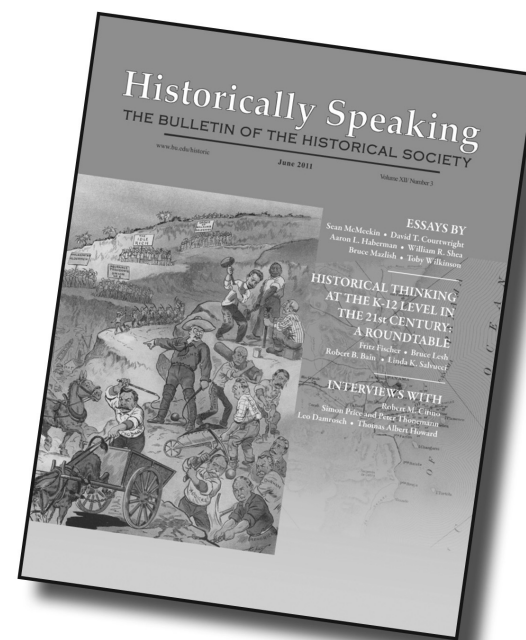
¹⁵ Dr. Andrew Murrison MP discusses the UK's centenary plans, Centenary News, November 10, 2011. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTODyUTGnGA [Last accessed April 24, 2012].

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