

Dad “never said much” but...

Young men and Great War veterans in day-to-day life in inter-war Britain.

Abstract:

This article explores whether, how, and what young men in inter-war Britain heard about the Great War from its veterans. Oral histories are used to enable the first detailed examination of the hitherto largely unexplored topic of the intergenerational transmission of representations of the Great War in inter-war Britain. It shows that although many veterans were reticent about their war experiences, young men heard about Great War experiences from veterans more frequently than has previously been acknowledged. What they heard was heterogeneous, like representations in popular culture, but tended to emphasise positive and rewarding elements of wartime service rather than disillusion. While veterans’ narratives could be fleeting and ephemeral, this examination of their character shows they should be considered an important component of the wider body of representations of the Great War in inter-war popular culture through which young men might ‘know’ about the Great War. As well as examining what young men heard, consideration is given to alternative ways that young men learned about familial service, and to what triggered veterans’ narratives and why some remained silent. Reasons for the trope of the silent veteran are suggested, and its strength in contemporary popular memory is illustrated in discussion of the ‘discomposure’ it could cause some interviewees.

Key words:

First World War

Oral History

Popular Memory

Masculinity

Uncle Fred ‘...wouldn’t talk about the 1914-18 war and I was told strictly never, never to mention it to him....’, Ron Holloway recalled. Nevertheless, Holloway ‘spotted a framed citation on the wall and I read it and I couldn’t believe it’: Fred was shot by a sniper, but travelled a mile to warn others at Headquarters. This explained Fred’s incapacitated right arm. Fred was one of ‘perhaps half a dozen’ Great War veterans Holloway was acquainted with as he grew up in inter-war Britain. It ‘seemed to be the general rule that any chaps of my father’s age with any wartime experience didn’t talk about it, they bottled it, [...] I got the impression that you didn’t ask them anything at all.’ Yet:

occasionally they would say something, like I made a remark to one chap, I said “Cor dear, I do feel hungry” and he looked at me and said “Tha’s never been hungry” and described how he got into a truck [...] when he was being relieved from the trenches, coming back, they picked up all the odd bits and pieces that the troops coming in had thrown on the floor and they ate them [...], and he said “That’s when you’re hungry, when you’ll eat what somebody else has thrown away.”¹

Holloway’s experiences both resonate with and are discordant from the trope of the silent, traumatised warrior veteran, a strong component of the contemporary popular memory of the Great War.² Holloway characterised the veterans he knew as reticent, yet he heard an (unsolicited) experiential narrative from one Great War veteran and an artefact within the domestic space provided an alternative means of learning something about the service of his veteran family member. This article, which provides the first detailed examination of the hitherto largely unexplored topic of the intergenerational transmission of representations of the Great War in inter-war Britain, demonstrates that Holloway’s experience was typical. Although many veterans were reticent about their war experiences, youths in inter-war Britain

¹ Ron Holloway, (Author, 2016.)

² Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2005) 8.

encountered narratives of personal service in the Great War from veterans inside and outside the family more frequently than has previously been acknowledged. By exploring whether, how, and what young men heard about the Great War from its veterans, this article adds veterans' narratives to, and positions veterans' narratives within, the wider body of representations of the Great War in inter-war popular culture through which young men might 'know' about the Great War.

Scholars have emphasised the ubiquity of, and the competition between, representations of the Great War in inter-war popular culture, not only veterans' literary works but also plays, films, Boys' Story Papers, and commemorative ceremonies.³ What young men heard directly from Great War veterans in inter-war Britain remains overlooked, excepting Gary Sheffield's passing suggestion that whilst it 'was a terrible experience [...] it was also for many survivors the most important and rewarding period of their lives, and this perspective was passed on to youngsters.'⁴ This article significantly develops our understanding of what young men heard from Great War veterans in inter-war Britain.

The private, often fleeting, moments when young men heard Great War veterans speak of the war are best-recovered using oral history. Fifty-five oral history interviews with men who grew up in inter-war Britain, mostly born in the 1920s, are

³ Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002); Kelly Boyd, *Manliness and the Boys' Story Paper in Britain: A Cultural History, 1855-1940* (London, 2003); Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (Oxford, 1992); Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*. (London, 1994); Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946*, (Oxford, 1994); Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000*. (London, 2000); Todman, *Great*; Janet S K Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁴ Gary Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme: The Influence of the First World War on British Soldiers' Perceptions and Behaviour in the Second World War' In P. Addison and A. Calder (eds) *A Time To Kill: The Soldier's Experience of the War in the West, 1939-1945* (London, 1997) 29-39, 31.

central to this research. These interviews were conducted for two different projects: between 2010-11 I interviewed thirty-five men who were conscripted into or volunteered for the Army, Navy or RAF during the Second World War; and between 2015-16 I interviewed twenty men who were conscripted as, or opted to be, 'Bevin Boys' from 1943-45. The interviews explored men's attitudes to participation in the Second World War, and deliberately explored young men's engagement with the Great War as they grew up, including whether and what they heard about the Great War from its veterans. The Forces interviewees were first contacted at veterans' events in and around London, and the Bevin Boys were contacted through the Bevin Boys association. Each subsequently received an invitation to be interviewed, which explained my interest in their early lives and Second World War enlistment and experiences. To avoid biasing either recruitment or individuals' narratives, the invitations did not emphasise my interest in exposure to representations of the Great War.⁵ An interviewee's participation was thus contingent upon their desire to talk about their Second World War rather than their feelings about the First. The same is true of the fifty-four Second World War veterans whose oral histories I have examined from the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, amongst whom are some older members of the inter-war generation.⁶ The chance inclusion of references to the Great War makes the archival interviews valuable, but the inability to ask questions to determine the upper limit of interviewees' interactions with Great War veterans means that these archival sources may under-represent how often and how much

⁵ To ensure ethical interviewing practices, this interest was explained part way through the interview, after allowing an 'organic' narrative prior to the introduction of questions about the Great War. Interviewees were able to withdraw from questions about the Great War if they wished.

⁶ My interviewees were born between 1918 and 1927. The archival interviewees were born between 1905 and 1925.

young men heard about the Great War from those who fought it.⁷ Most of my interviewees were born in the Home Counties but amongst them are multiple interviewees from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Northamptonshire, and North Wales, and many of the archival interviewees were from North-East England. There is no reason to suspect that their exposure to veterans' representations of the Great War misrepresents the British experience, but this is not to say that case studies of particular communities might not add greater nuance.⁸

Memory is less problematic than critics of oral history tend to assume. As Lynn Abrams writes, there is 'little evidence [...] people generally misremember events or experiences', things that appear significant at the time, including the meaning, sense and emotion of events, are well remembered, and long-term memory is affected less by age than short-term memory.⁹ Adolescence and young adulthood – the key period here – are the years elderly people remember best.¹⁰ Understanding how popular memory – the dominant public understanding of an event – can shape individuals' narratives is more significant.¹¹ Graham Dawson's concept of Composure is helpful: a narrator seeks to tell stories that enable positive self-

⁷ On using archival interviews, see Joanna Bornat, 'A Second Take: revisiting interviews with a different purpose', *Oral History*. 31:1 (2003) 47-53.

⁸ The Great War's effects varied by region: the regional recruitment of Army regiments meant some battles or campaigns had greater resonance in particular regions (See Geoffrey Moorhouse, *Hell's Foundations: A town, its myths and Gallipoli* (1992)); conversely, regions with high concentrations of men working in essential industry had a different experience; a different picture still might be produced by, for instance, interviewing members of chapel communities in Wales.

⁹ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2010), Chapter 5, 'Memory', for quote 86.

¹⁰ Douwe Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past* (Cambridge, 2004) 172-174, 193-200.

¹¹ The Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method', in R Johnson, G McLennan, B Schwarz and D Sutton (eds) *Making Histories: Studies in History* (London, 1982) 205-252.

perception and elicit a positive reaction from the audience – providing Composure – but audiences’ reactions are commonly informed by the popular memory, so a narrative that adheres to the popular memory is the most likely to illicit a positive reaction.¹² Consequently, the popular memory suppresses or silences alternative narratives. For instance, Alistair Thomson illustrated that Fred Farrall felt unable to discuss his experiences of the Great War because they opposed the hegemonic narratives of Australian soldiers.¹³ Similarly, Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird found women who served in the Home Guard were often silenced by their absence from cultural representations of the service.¹⁴ Popular memory does not necessarily determine individual narratives, though. Peniston-Bird has shown that, given time and a non-judgemental audience, male Home Guard veterans were able to acknowledge, negotiate and contest the understanding - popularised by *Dad’s Army* - of the force as aged and inept.¹⁵ The popular memory of the Great War intersects with this research at two points: in the 1920s and 1930s it could shape what young men

¹² Dawson, *Soldier*, 22-25.

¹³ Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia', *Oral History* 18:1 (1990) 25-31. See also Vincent Trott: 'Remembering War, Resisting Myth: Veteran Autobiographies and the Great War in the Twenty-first Century', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 6:4, (2013) 328-342.

¹⁴ Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War*, (Manchester, 2007). For popular memory’s silencing effect see also Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004) 65-93.

¹⁵ Corinna Peniston-Bird, "I Wondered Who’d Be the First To Spot That." *Dad’s Army* at War in the Media and in Memory', *Media History* 13:2-3 (2007) 183-202. Kathleen Ryan demonstrates female US Navy veterans using a similar method of negotiation: "I Didn’t Do Anything Important": A Pragmatist Analysis of the Oral History Interview', *Oral History Review* 36:1 (2009) 25-44. Michael Roper suggests examining individuals’ psychic motivations for narration, which can be more influential than popular memory; 'Re-Remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000) 181-204.

heard from veterans and condition young men's expectations about veterans' experiences; in the 2000s it could shape what those 'young men' recalled when interviewed.

The Great War in Popular Memory

In inter-war popular culture, the Great War was represented in traditional terms: redemptive sacrifice, heroic soldiering, and even within a pleasure culture of war as masculine adventure. While some commonly encountered cultural texts featured disillusion and futility, this interpretation of the war was contested in inter-war Britain. As Watson's examination of the war books controversy highlights, many of the now canonical 'disillusioned' texts could be interpreted positively in the 1930s; they featured positive wartime experiences and a broader equivocation about the war.¹⁶ Moreover, many other veteran authors highlighted positive elements of their war experience, including comradeship.¹⁷ Although Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) was probably the most widely read war book,¹⁸ bestseller lists were populated by middlebrow novels that typically connected the Great War with traditional ideals.¹⁹ Texts like *Tell England* could depict the Great War 'in terms of Christian redemptive sacrifice and made use of traditional visions of heroism', to portray the war as horrifying whilst also investing it with essentially

¹⁶ Watson, *Fighting*, 311. See also Brian Bond, 'British Anti-War Writers and their critics', in H. Cecil and P. Liddle (eds) *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, (London, 1996), 810-830. Ambivalence also characterised unpublished interwar memoirs, Jessica Meyer, *Men Of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (UK, 2009), 159.

¹⁷ Watson, *Fighting*, 262-263, 269

¹⁸ Hugh Cecil, 'British War Novelists', in Cecil and Liddle (eds), *Facing*, 801-816, 801-3. Modris Ekstiens has discussed *All Quiet's* publishing success: 'All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15:2 (1980) 345-366.

¹⁹ Bracco, *Merchants*, 2, 11.

positive meanings.²⁰ This tone was mirrored in most cinematic portrayals of the Great War,²¹ and Armistice ceremonies, which encouraged the living, including the young, to understand that they ‘owed a debt of loyalty to the men who had sacrificed their lives for [their] liberty’.²² The horror of war could also be overshadowed. Michael Paris has suggested that 1930s war films were often simple depictions of war as adventure,²³ and were, like the Boys’ Story Papers, part of the pleasure culture of war.²⁴ Military masculinity and military adventure remained staple components of juvenile literature after 1918, and here too the Great War was presented as a just, worthwhile crusade, as well as an adventure that ‘was the crowning experience of [men’s] lives.’²⁵

These competing representations of the Great War in inter-war Britain make postulating how popular memory might have shaped veterans’ narratives difficult. The variety of narrative frameworks circulating in popular culture may have legitimated veterans’ expressions of varied war experiences and attitudes. Jessica Meyer suggests descriptions of fear or the impossibility of romanticised heroism feature more commonly in post-war memoirs than in wartime letters.²⁶ Sharing such experiences may have become easier once texts like *All Quiet* had offered accounts that challenged aspects of pre-war constructions of military masculinity. Equally,

²⁰ Todman, *Great*, 132-3.

²¹ Michael Paris, ‘Enduring Heroes: British Feature Films and the First World War, 1919-1997’, in Michael Paris (ed) *The First World War and Popular Cinema, 1914 to the Present*, (Edinburgh, 1999), 51-73. 60. See also Mark Connelly, *Creating Celluloid War Memorials for the British Empire*, (Chicago, 2015)

²² Todman, *Great*, 132.

²³ Paris, ‘Enduring’, 61.

²⁴ Paris, *Warrior*, 152, 157. See also Boyd, *Manliness*.

²⁵ Michael Paris, *Over the Top: The Great War and Juvenile Literature in Britain* (Connecticut, 2004) 145.

²⁶ Meyer, *Men*, 135.

narratives emphasising comradeship and the existence of Old Comrades' Associations may have legitimated a desire to remember rewarding elements of service.²⁷

Certainly, some veterans wished to do so to mark the Armistice, though this was ultimately marginalised by the sombre tone of public commemorative events.²⁸

Popular memory theory suggests that we should not be surprised to find varied, competing, and ambiguous representations of the war from its veterans in the private sphere in inter-war Britain, though by the mid-1930s the increasing centrality of the 'soldier in the trenches' to popular understandings may have silenced those who served in other spheres.²⁹ Young audiences might also have been primed to receive to disparate narratives, though the centrality of the trench, the primacy of action, the idea that war could have redeeming features, and the 'pleasure culture of war' may have created an expectation of active and adventurous, as well as worthwhile, service.

By the time the interviews were conducted the popular memory of the Great War was entrenched; muddy trenches, incompetent leadership, and Tommy's futile slaughter dominated popular understandings.³⁰ Interviewees who had heard veterans presenting incompatible versions of the war might have opted not to discuss it or may not have even recognized such exchanges as 'talk about the war', meaning interviewees may under-report hearing positive representations of the Great War. Yet the resilience in popular memory of the myth that Great War participants enlisted in a wave of naïve enthusiasm for an adventure that would be 'over by Christmas' may

²⁷ Todman, *Great*, 188-9.

²⁸ Gregory, *Silence*, 64-75.

²⁹ Watson, *Fighting*, 186.

³⁰ Ross Wilson's *Cultural Heritage of the Great War in Britain*, (Surrey, 2013) demonstrates the continued resonance of these understandings. Trott's analysis of the reception of recent Great War memoirs highlights that worthwhile sacrifice, not only futility, is present in some popular understandings: 'Remembering War'.

have aided the recall of inter-war narratives of exciting, adventurous, or rewarding service.³¹ A more significant facet of the popular memory in the 2000s was the trope that veterans did not talk about the war. As will be shown, many interviewees were able to contest this, but it could cause ‘discomposure’ and required negotiation. This, too, could have had a silencing effect, particularly on archival interviewees as these interviews were not all conducted with the empathetic style that facilitates contestation, and mentions of familial service usually occurred early in interviews before a rapport had developed.³² Moreover, the popular memory needed only to deter chance mention rather than deflect deliberate questioning. Although these oral histories cannot recover all those occasions when young men heard about the Great War, they nevertheless offer unrivalled insight into what young men in inter-war Britain heard about the Great War from its veterans.

Veterans in day-to-day life

Great War veterans were common and conspicuous in inter-war Britain. Young men watched veterans in Armistice parades, and noticed disabled veterans on the streets ‘selling matches or selling razor blades, whatever they could sell to live off’.³³ Harry Parkes remembered a ‘victim of the First World War’ who begged at Nottingham Cathedral and ‘travelled home by swinging on his hands’, and Jack Pragnell recalled a

³¹ On this myth see Adrian Gregory, ‘British “War Enthusiasm” in 1914: A Reassessment’ in *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18*, ed. G. Braybon, (Oxford, 2003), 67-85.

³² See Corinna Peniston-Bird, “‘All in it together and backs to the wall’: relating patriotism and the People’s War in the 21st Century’, *Oral History*, 40.2 (2012) 69-80, 78.

³³ George Stagg, (Author, 2010). See also Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home. Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939*, (California, 2001).

‘shell-shocked’ man who would do a ‘jerky march’ past his house.³⁴ Moreover, young men often knew that men with significant roles in their lives were veterans; thirty-four of my fifty-five interviewees knew their fathers were veterans, and the vast majority counted ex-servicemen amongst their uncles, elder brothers, friends’ relatives, neighbours, teachers, colleagues, or fathers-in-law. These regular, close interactions did not necessarily ensure that young men heard about the war, though, even though the setting was fitting: John Riggs’ Officer Training Corps master had won a Military Cross on the Western Front but ‘never mentioned it much’.³⁵ Familial wartime experiences could be similarly inexplicit. Ten of my thirty-four interviewees with veteran fathers heard nothing from them in the interwar period about their Great War service. Joseph Drake apparently knew only basic details about his brother’s service and wounds, Brian Folkes had two veteran uncles who did not discuss it, and George Elliot knew his uncle had been decorated by the Belgians in the Great War, but said ‘no member of the family knew what he had received it for, that I can guarantee’.³⁶ The ‘silent veteran’ trope is certainly not without foundation; most young men were not regularly regaled with stories by the veterans they interacted with.

Understanding the silence

Establishing why some veterans were silent about the war in the earshot of young men is difficult at this remove, but the oral histories highlight the importance of acknowledging the variety of possible, and not mutually exclusive, explanations. A desire to move on should not be dismissed; it was explicit in Len Pettet’s experience. Pettet’s father ‘didn’t say much, anything about it at all’ but his mother revealed that

³⁴ Jack Pragnell, (Author, 2010), Harry Parkes, (Author, 2016).

³⁵ John Riggs, 2001, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive 22346. (Hereafter IWM-SA-)

³⁶ Joseph Drake, 2000, IWM-SA-20791, Brian Folkes, (Author, 2016). George Elliot, 1993, IWM-SA-10602.

his father had served in a rifle corps in France before becoming a Prisoner Of War. Petit asked his father about it ‘on one or two occasions but I was given rather negative answers, “That’s all gone by now boy, we’ve got to live for the future and that’s gone”, he didn’t really want to know’.³⁷ Pettet (later) postulated that this was probably because his father’s experiences had been horrific. Trauma undeniably underpinned some veterans’ silence, but this need not be our default assumption.³⁸ It could also result from the perception – arrived at either by comparison with popular memory or by objective assessment – that one’s service was uninteresting; as Dan Todman has reasoned: ‘If Daddy had spent his war shifting packing cases in Le Havre, he might not want to talk about it not because it was horrific but because it seemed humdrum’.³⁹ Veterans may also have struggled to compose a coherent narrative or have been discouraged by the belief that those who had not been there would not understand,⁴⁰ or by the concern they would upset their audience; Michael Roper has shown that soldiers’ wartime letters were shaped by a wish to avoid causing distress.⁴¹ Yet far more prosaic reasons, unrelated to the war, were also important. Fred Pond had little opportunity for conversation with his father, who worked nights as a baker; while Pond knew his father had served he was uncertain about what he had done.⁴²

³⁷ Len Pettet, (Author, 2016).

³⁸ On trauma and silence see Jay Winter, ‘Shell shock, Gallipoli and the Generation of Silence’ in Alexandre Dessingue and Jay Winter (eds) *Beyond Memory: Silence and the Aesthetics of Remembrance* (Abingdon, 2016) 195-208.

³⁹ Todman, *Great*, 10. See also Penny Summerfield, ‘The generation of memory. Gender and the popular memory of the Second World War in Britain’, in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds) *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, (London, 2014), 25-45, 31.

⁴⁰ Todman, *Great*, 9-10.

⁴¹ Michael Roper, ‘Maternal Relations: Moral Manliness and Emotional Survival in Letters Home During the First World War’ in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* ed. by S. Dudink, K. Hagemann and J. Tosh (Manchester, 2004) 295-316.

⁴² Fred Pond, (Author, 2011).

Some veteran fathers died when their children were young.⁴³ Others' fathers seemingly had the opportunity but opted not to discuss their war service.⁴⁴

Conversational conventions could be important; Todman has pointed to the working-class tradition that work stayed at work,⁴⁵ and some young men felt that their parents' pasts simply were not topics of discussion. Dennis Hagger knew his father had become a machine gunner when the horses he worked with in the Royal Horse Guards were killed, when asked if his father had talked about his wartime service Hagger replied, 'No, I don't think he talked about anything to me of his past, I mean he never said much about his time in Australia [where he had emigrated briefly as a young man].'⁴⁶ Another prosaic but nonetheless significant factor worthy of recognition is that veterans were not necessarily silent in the face of persistent questioning. Gordon Waterhouse noted that his father 'wouldn't talk about it unless you approached him and asked these things',⁴⁷ but my interviewees' recollections suggest children did not commonly ask. Although fathers were increasingly involved, and friendly, with their children in interwar Britain,⁴⁸ some fathers did not expect to be questioned or pestered by their children after a day's work.⁴⁹ In other families fathers, rather than children, directed the topics of conversation. Other children, it seems, simply were not

⁴³ Maurice Marriot, (Author, 2010), Samuel Pearson, (Author, 2010).

⁴⁴ Arthur Howard, (Author, 2011); Ted Roberts, (Author, 2010); Derrick Thurgood, (Author, 2010); Alf Wyke, (Author, 2010).

⁴⁵ Dan Todman, "'Sans Peur et Sans Reproche": The Retirement, Death and Mourning of Sir Douglas Haig, 1918-1928' *The Journal Of Military History*, 68(4) (2003), 1083-1106, 1105.

⁴⁶ Dennis Hagger, (Author, 2015)

⁴⁷ Gordon Waterhouse, (Author, 2016). See also Ronald Womack, (Author, 2016).

⁴⁸ Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle* (Manchester, 2009), 293-4. Tim Fisher shows serving soldiers were interested in their children's day-to-day lives during the First World War; *Fatherhood and the Experience of Working-Class Fathers in Britain, 1900-1939*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, 2004, 166. On friendly fathers, Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain 1914-1960* (Oxford, 2015), 116-118.

⁴⁹ Fisher *Fatherhood*, 194, 215-6; King, *Family*, 103-4, 125.

sufficiently curious about the war; Ken Hay and his brother listened ‘if my Dad chose to tell us something’ and ‘could ask him anything’ but:

on things like the war we just relied on him to tell us and if he didn't tell us I don't think we rationally thought well he doesn't want tell us because it's horrible, we didn't think to ask I don't think, or I didn't, I don't think my brother did either because my brother would have told me, “here, did you know dad said so-and-so”.⁵⁰

Others, like Holloway, whose recollections opened this article, were dissuaded from asking about the war by other family members, who understood or presumed that a relative did not want to discuss it. An estimator, born in 1918, lived with three uncles who ‘had gone through the war and two had been wounded, but they would never tell of their experiences. I was discouraged from ever asking them, and in fact so far as that household was concerned, the last war might never have been fought at all.’⁵¹ Alternatively, family members could assume the role of gatekeeper: Reg Elson’s father had answered his questions about elements of his experiences, yet other family members would not. When Elson was aged about twelve, his father suffered rheumatism as a result of his wartime service. Elson was told ‘it’s because “Dad was wet in the trenches”, things like that, “Dad has rheumatism from the war”, but no more detailed than that and indeed come to think of it if one kept asking one would be told “be quiet, it's none of your business”’.⁵²

Negotiating the silence

As Holloway’s testimony demonstrated, young men might learn information from artefacts in the home. Stanley Brand was given his uncle’s Royal Navy Air Service helmet, ensuring he knew that his uncle had served and creating a tradition of service

⁵⁰ Ken Hay, (Author, 2010).

⁵¹ February 1940 Directive, Respondent 2349, Mass Observation Archive.

⁵² Reg Elson, (Author, 2010).

in Brand's mind.⁵³ Shell casings, a *Poilu's* helmet, and silk postcards sent from the front line ensured other young men were aware of familial service.⁵⁴ Photographs of family members in uniform were the most commonly recalled objects, and could even have a commemorative function: George Stagg remembered a photograph of mother's first husband in uniform that was hung in memoriam.⁵⁵ Medals were more intrinsically informative, indicating not only that people had served, but also where, and whether they had served with particular distinction. Ted Roberts, whose father never spoke about his war service, learned about his service by covertly retrieving his medals from a drawer.⁵⁶ Phil Robinson knew that his father had served 'because of his medals' and when he was school age his interest was piqued because his father 'had a German helmet with a spike on, and erm, what was it, [mimics excited voice] "How many Germans did you kill, Dad?"', he'd never tell you, never tell you'.⁵⁷ Objects could prompt narratives as well as questions, though. When Jim Hayes was shown his father's medals prior to an Armistice parade he was made aware of his father's pride in his service, and remembered when 'I was only a kid, [Dad] brought a German

⁵³ Stanley Brand, 2005, IWM-SA-27347.

⁵⁴ Thurgood, (2010). Ron Meades, (Author, 2010). Nicholas J Saunders considers artefacts and trench art, primarily in relation to the war dead and as triggering feelings of grief, guilt, or relief in 'Apprehending memory: material culture and war, 1919-1939' in John Bourne, Peter Liddle and Ian Whitehead (eds) *The Great World War, 1914-1945* Vol 2 (London, 2001), 476-488, 480. But boys could utilize such objects within the pleasure culture of war, too: Wilf Curtis (Author, 2010) recalled a friend's father had a decommissioned hand grenade from the Great War, 'and my friend one day pulled the pin out and we were waiting for it to explode, but of course it never exploded. Boys being boys...'.
⁵⁵ Stagg, (2010)

⁵⁵ Stagg, (2010)

⁵⁶ Roberts, (Author, 2010).

⁵⁷ Philip Robinson, (Author, 2016).

pistol out, Luger, and he was taking it to pieces and showing me and cleaning it and he said he took it off a German that got killed [...].⁵⁸

While interviewees typically reported that the veterans they knew were reticent about the war, most learned at least basic details about their service, especially veteran fathers. Percy Walder's father had told him 'just the facts': he was in the Army, although Walder was unsure of his role, and was gassed at Ypres.⁵⁹ Deliberate reminiscence was not essential to the acquisition of knowledge, though. Wartime service had intruded upon men's lives and so could emerge from more familiar conversational scripts about travel, careers, and family life. Jack Abbott felt his father wanted to move on from the war and so 'didn't talk much about it'. Still, without asking questions, Abbott 'picked up different pieces about how he was in Italy and [...] Turkey and [...] Egypt', knew he was involved with vehicles, and saw some photographs of his father in uniform.⁶⁰ William Coster knew that his father had started his business 'after he came out of the First World War in 1919.'⁶¹ Stanley Brand heard the familial tale of his parents' introduction, the result of his grandmother inviting home soldiers from the local Army depot in an attempt to marry off her daughters.⁶² While the Great War's destructive capacities enshrined it within many family histories, its end served as a reference point for the resumption or beginning of family life in many more. Perhaps surprisingly, children were designated as memorials to both death and love in connection with the Great War: Harry Gould

⁵⁸ Jim Hayes, (Author, 2010). On objects as triggers to narratives within oral histories, see Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford 2003), 99, and Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Constructive of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1995) 94-5.

⁵⁹ Percy Walder, (Author, 2010).

⁶⁰ Jack Abbott, (Author, 2010).

⁶¹ William Coster, 2006, IWM-SA-28723.

⁶² Stanley Brand, 2005, IWM-SA-27347.

understood that he was named after an uncle killed at Passchendaele, while Denys Owen's name was chosen because it was popular in northern France, where his father had served during the Great War and where his parents subsequently spent their honeymoon.⁶³ Wartime service was also referred to because of its contemporary relevance. Arthur Howard was not the only interviewee to learn of his father's service through his mother's complaints about an unawarded war pension; in Howard's case this was attributed to his father having absconded from hospital while being treated for exposure to gas.⁶⁴

Veterans' bodies could also provide a lasting record of some of their war experiences.⁶⁵ Stuart Underdown's father 'would never talk about it. Erm he was badly knocked up, lost an arm, his left arm, shrapnel in his head, and back, which was there 'til his dying day'.⁶⁶ Similarly, Cyril Price recalled being very conscious of his father's disability, which resulted from his Great War service:

Father was twice wounded, once in the leg and secondly he had a bullet through the front of his helmet that ploughed a rift in the front of his head and came out of the back and er he suffered from the effects of that for the rest of his life [...].⁶⁷

Sustaining wounds seems to have been a common detail for even reticent veterans to narrate, even when they were no longer evident.⁶⁸ When asked if his father spoke

⁶³ Harry Gould, (Author, 2016). Denys Owen, (Author, 2016). Neither had learned more about their relatives' service.

⁶⁴ Howard, (2011); see also Pearson, (2010).

⁶⁵ Michael Roper has explored the effects of being the child of a disabled veteran, but does not discuss whether children heard about how wounds were sustained, in 'Subjectivities in the aftermath: children of disabled soldiers in Britain after the Great War' in Jason Crouthamel and Peter Leese (eds) *Psychological Trauma and the Legacies of the First World War*, (2016) 165-192.

⁶⁶ Stuart Underdown, 2008, IWM-SA-31699.

⁶⁷ Cyril Price, 2006, IWM-SA-28775.

⁶⁸ For example, Alfred Cox, 2001, IWM-SA-22167. George Forster, n.d., IWM-SA-2824.

fondly of the services, Des Radwell replied ‘Dad was wounded twice badly in the First World War, through the leg and through the mouth [...] I believe he had a pretty hard war, but he never used to say too much about it at all’.⁶⁹ Unless wounds had been sustained in particularly heroic fashion they were unlikely to be perceived as a particularly positive representation of war experience.⁷⁰ Like objects, veterans’ wounds might illustrate service and its effects, but the extent to which they provided information about an individual’s experience was determined by what was said about them. Indeed, wounds could prompt more expansive narratives about the incident in which they were sustained.

Breaking the silence

Frank Webster’s father’s missing arm required explanation. When Webster was old enough to understand, his father explained how he was wounded, providing an insight into his experiences. His father had been at Passchendaele:

[T]hey were being shelled, me father thought “Oh dear, there’s some poor devil’s legs sticking out of the ground,” and he was near that, and said that the stench wasn’t very pleasant so he crawled away to get somewhere else, and then he laid on his left side, and then another shell came over and apparently a little distance away of course, the legs disappeared but of course they caught him on the right arm and the right hip, and erm, he er, he was attended to and the [Medical Officer], whoever, said that I doubt whether this chap will reach the casualty clearing station alive, because he’s lost so much blood [...].

A blood transfusion ‘kept him going, [...] and apparently his arm turned gangrenous and he was happy enough for it to be removed.’⁷¹ Wounds might also prompt children to ask questions. Elson recalled that his father ‘didn’t go on about the First World War’ but he ‘had been shot in the arm, we used to look as children and say “Dad,

⁶⁹ Des Radwell, 2005, IWM-SA-28531. See also Folkes, (2016).

⁷⁰ Veterans’ wounds disturbed some children: Roper, ‘Subjectivities’, 173

⁷¹ Frank Webster, (Author, 2011).

what's that?"', where the bone had been taken out there was kind of a big circle...'.

This prompted a detailed explanation.

He told us he was detailed to gather in wounded and was with some stretcher bearers when he bent down and the next thing he knew his arm was slung around here and he was terrified because he thought his arm had gone and he couldn't feel anything, what happened was the bullet had entered his arm just above his left elbow and swung his arm over and it had caught on [...] his braces so he's going around thinking he's lost an arm.

That the incident was ultimately presented as humorous rather than horrific is notable; it made the narrative more acceptable for a young audience, increased the chances of a positive response, and could serve as a coping strategy. Elson commented that his father more often told them funny anecdotes.⁷² Gordon Waterhouse's father had been a sergeant in the 'Kings Liverpool', and was wounded twice – indeed, Gordon 'could actually put [his] fist in the side of [his father's] back where he got wounded with shrapnel'.⁷³ Gordon heard about his service on the Western Front:

I can remember him telling us [Gordon and a friend] stories about when they were in the trenches in France and the battle of Ypres and all that, and they'd have their fixed bayonets and they'd put, for pastime I suppose, bully beef on the end, and put it on the parapet and the rats would come and take it, [...] and he said he stood for weeks and weeks in water, with the puttees round their legs, and then he told us about when they got this thing to go over the top, when they went over, and he got wounded, I think it was in Delville wood, I remember him saying, and he was in hospital, but one of the chaps that carried him back, pulled him back out of the thing, he actually lived [...] quite near where my father lived, and I can always remember [...] when my father had a few shillings or anything, he'd give it to him and he always used to say "Thank you very much Albert" and it was only because he had saved his life actually....

Gordon Waterhouse characterised his father as reluctant to talk about the war, yet he appears to have been a willing narrator given an interested audience and would answer questions, even those asked by one of Gordon's friends, who 'used to love

⁷² Elson, (2010).

⁷³ Waterhouse, (2016).

talking about the war'. His service in Ireland appears to have been his preferred topic: 'he told us stories about all that, what happened when he was there'. He discussed the IRA threat and going in civilian clothes to hear Michael Collins speak, and stumbling upon an armed bank robbery when in uniform: 'all of a sudden there's two hands touch them on their shoulders and they said "If you move you are next", he said, and they just froze and when they got up afterwards there was nobody there, so he always told us that tale. "If you move, you're next."'

Regularly hearing extended narratives about the Great War from one of its veterans was unusual. The oral histories make clear, however, that, even without wounds or wartime objects as prompts, many young men did occasionally hear fragments of wartime narratives from usually reticent veterans. These were varied in terms of content and emotional effect. Thirteen of my thirty-four interviewees with veteran fathers heard deliberate, but normally singular or irregular, reflections about their fathers' experiences. Some heard tales from more than one veteran. George Stagg heard tales from two uncles, his neighbours, and a colleague, as well hearing from his mother about the wartime death of her first husband.⁷⁴ Wilf Curtis, who also heard from multiple veterans as he was growing up, said 'The only thing that I knew about [the Great War] was stories that people who had served in the war had told us about it'.

Curtis's father had 'quite a soft job', driving 'the Colonel around [...] he was very, very lucky, so he never went to France, so he told me about his trips in the staff cars and things like that, but he didn't speak *a lot* about the war'. Aged around 11, Wilf heard from a friend's father about France: 'he never told us much about the

⁷⁴ Stagg, (2010).

actual fighting, talking more about how they had to struggle to live [...] in trenches.’ Wilf ‘just listened to the tales he was telling us, I was too young to ask any sensible questions’.⁷⁵ Others also received an insight into trench living conditions. As a child, Stagg’s veteran neighbours spoke about ‘what they had to go through, their rations and things, and how they used to eat with the cats and shaving in the morning if they were lucky, and things like that, in the trench and when it rained’.⁷⁶ As a child, camping on the village green, Jack Pragnell received a similar brief insight into trench life when he saw a stranger drinking from a water tank: ‘there was a slug in the water, and we said “Ergh, look at that!” and he said “Ah, that’s nothing compared to what we drank in the trenches.”’⁷⁷ That such details were shared with youngsters suggests that they were perceived as appropriate narratives for children to hear: devoid of the violence of war, they were perceived as unlikely to upset children (or their parents), perhaps because trench conditions were frequently depicted in popular culture.⁷⁸ Nevertheless such tales, and the response to Holloway’s complaints of hunger, could fulfil a didactic function. Veterans illustrated a model of stoic masculinity by emphasising to young men how much harder life could be and how much softer they were than the previous generation, while legitimising their veteran status by highlighting their trench experience.

Others heard more detailed narratives of events in the line. Frank Webster heard a ‘frightening’ story from a neighbour-cum-family friend about an instance when ‘a colleague got shot in the head or something and I think he went to bandage

⁷⁵ Curtis, (2010).

⁷⁶ Stagg, (2010). See also Don Browne, (Author, 2010).

⁷⁷ Pragnell, (2010).

⁷⁸ By 1921 book reviewers considered tales of trench conditions all-too-familiar: Watson, *Fighting*, 189.

him and all his brains came out somehow.’⁷⁹ Brian Spragg heard ‘bits and pieces’ about his father’s service, including

how terrible it was at Passchendaele, [...], he said whole wagons, some horses would disappear in the mud and flood [...] and he did tell me that he was stuck for two days in a shell hole in no man's land wounded before he was brought out, but he never went on to sort of explain things to me a great deal probably until after the Second World War.⁸⁰

Tom Knowlton heard a similar story as his veteran colleagues discussed their service. Although they rarely talked about combat, one spoke about being ‘in the fighting area somewhere [...] looked for a hole to get into and saw a crater, jumped in, and there were two dead Germans there you see, I remember him telling me that’.⁸¹ Cash’s father ‘never really spoke much at all’ about the Great War, but ‘occasionally my dad would reminisce’. He once told Cash and his brother about being a courier, and having ‘to find his way in the dark and so on and so forth’, and about guiding an officer:

[A]s they went along the route Dad said that some of the landmarks had been blown away with shells and so on and he came to a point where he just didn't know where to go and this young officer lost his temper with him and brandished his revolver and said “If you don't take me, I will shoot you”, you know, well fortunately my dad managed to find a reasonable landmark which he made for and then he got this man where he wanted to go but he used to make a joke of it and say that was the nearest he came to anything happening to him sort of thing but none of my uncles sat down and talked about the war as such and my dad never did, it was just, with my brother and I, just an

⁷⁹ Webster, (2011).

⁸⁰ Brian Spragg, (Author, 2010). Spragg received fuller explanations when the pair could trade wartime experiences.

⁸¹ Tom Knowlton, (Author, 2010). Todman and Jessica Hammet have shown that veteran members of the Home Guard and Civil Defence respectively would discuss their Great War service when serving during the Second World War: Todman, *Great*, 188-9; Hammet, ‘It’s in the Blood, isn’t it? The Contested Status of First World War Veterans in Second World War Civil Defence’, *Cultural and Social History*, (2017), 15. My research suggests that young men were, however, commonly excluded from such conversations.

occasional thing and we didn't pump him [because we were not that interested or knowledgeable].⁸²

Hay heard mention of similar issues in 'some horrific tales' about his future-father-in-law's time as a runner in the Post Office Rifles, and learned he had been wounded twice, once being shot through both arms. These 'horrific' tales were, however, mixed with some more positive tales about his time in Syria in charge of some horses and Indian drivers.⁸³

It seems that more graphic recollections of front-line experience were more often heard by young adults, while children heard about trench conditions. Graphic representations may have simply been considered inappropriate for children, but age also influenced the intergenerational dynamic. While childhood was associated with innocence and play, as sons approached working age their fathers commonly sought to prepare them for the wider world and teach them about manliness,⁸⁴ and treated them more like 'pals'.⁸⁵ Either of these shifts may have enabled or prompted more revealing narrations. What both groups of narratives communicated about the experience of war or masculinity was, however, potentially equivocal. From such descriptions, trench conditions could be imagined as unbearable, or a test of stoicism and grit. Stories of life-or-death runs through featureless trench networks, or taking cover from artillery fire in shell craters could sit comfortably within juvenile adventure fiction, but would not be out of place in *All Quiet on the Western Front*.⁸⁶

⁸² George Cash, (Author, 2010).

⁸³ Hay, (2010).

⁸⁴ Fisher, *Fatherhood*, 228-9.

⁸⁵ King, *Family*, 116-8.

⁸⁶ E. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929, and the 1930 film adaptation directed by Lewis Millstone.

Some narratives were more clearly disillusioned. Thomas Leask's father served in the Dardanelles, and his battalion took heavy casualties. He spoke little of his experiences, but when he did he angrily expressed his disdain for senior commanders and the

dreadful waste of life, I remember him telling me quite clearly when they first got to Gallipoli they could actually walk ashore and they could have taken the whole peninsula, but [...] they had to wait until the powers that be were ready to invade and by that time of course the Turks backed by the Germans were ready for them, and so it was a disaster [...].⁸⁷

Edward Kirby's father came close to the stereotypical disillusioned veteran. He suffered from neurasthenia, 'wanted to get back into normal civilian life', and was 'rather scornful' of Edward's veteran uncle who wore his medals and attended veterans events. Kirby said he 'never never spoke about the war, I only remember one thing he told me':

[S]o the trenches they were in, they were in them for a long time, and the dead were left there for a long time, and he remembered, this is the one thing that he spoke about to do with the horror, he never spoke about the horrors of the war, but there was a corpse, a man, with his head [hanging] over the parapet with his mouth open, and he watched this corpse turn into a skeleton, they were long enough for this body to decompose but nobody moved it and he had to walk past it every day and er he came back, that couldn't have been the only corpse he saw, but it was the awful position, the mouth open and the teeth showing, er [...].⁸⁸

Kirby was not alone in understanding his father had not enjoyed his wartime service. Pragnell's father had been a regular in the Royal Engineers and, while he passed on the Morse code and French he had learnt, Pragnell understood that he 'detested war, he'd see the bad side of it.' He 'didn't tell us a lot about the trenches or about the war

⁸⁷ Thomas Leask, 2001, IWM-SA-21602.

⁸⁸ Kirby, 1995, IWM-SA-16084.

but he'd tell us more when we got him talking now and again, more about the Boer war and when he was in India in the cavalry which was a much nicer thing.'⁸⁹

Opting to talk about the 'much nicer thing', or to avoid some topics, seems to have been more common than discussing disillusion. Pragnell, and Phil Robinson - whose father 'would never tell' how many Germans he killed - were not alone in their awareness of silences and selectivity in what veterans would recount. Silences could themselves cause interest;⁹⁰ Thomas Chilton's father passed on tales about Thomas's uncle's time in the Navy, but 'the tales he would *not* tell me about was when he was in the trenches, he would not speak about it, he used to say "It was tough son" but [...] across the bridge of his nose he had [...] a piece of shrapnel [that] he carried [...] until he died.'⁹¹ Although his response, 'It was tough son', served to refuse an extended narrative, in combination with the shrapnel, Chilton took away the impression that his father's trench experience had been unpleasant. Chilton's questions were repeatedly rebuffed, but with war looming in 1938 Chilton 'could finally get him to talk sometimes, not about what he went through, but about what happened in the First World War, why they went to war and all this sort of business'. Chilton's father was happiest to talk about the Great War indirectly. When he was eighteen George Stagg worked on a delivery lorry with Bill Palmer. Palmer exercised a different kind of selectivity. Stagg learned Palmer was a 'First World War hero' who won the Military Medal while driving for the Army Service Corp, and heard a detailed narrative about this incident, and other elements of his service, but Palmer refused to discuss more unpleasant memories. Stagg recalled:

⁸⁹ Pragnell, (2010).

⁹⁰ For Ted Hughes' fascination due to his father's silence see Winter, 'Shell shock', 204-207.

⁹¹ Thomas Chilton, 2005 IWM-SA-27345.

he used to tell me about the runs he used to make, from different regiments, 'cause he was driving a solid wheel truck, what used to carry ammo and food and everything, [...] and he was going from one place to another and [came] under heavy machine gun fire, very heavy, in fact Bill had a finger and he could waggle it about, [the bone was detached] and what had happened was that he had to go to this other area or this headquarters and he said he went through this lane down there and he came under heavy machine gun fire and a bullet hit the column of the steering wheel, and bounced and hit his hand and it was pouring with blood and he still [...] drove on and he won the MM for that, he showed me that medal, [...].

JM: and did you ever ask Bill questions about the First World War to try and find out more, were you interested in knowing more?

GS: Well yeah, whenever he was, but I sorta considered his feelings at times just in case he didn't want to talk about it

JM: Right. So where there times when you wanted to ask something more?

GS: Well I asked him and you know he'd say oh you don't want to know nothing about that

JM: Do you remember what kind of things he'd say that to?

GS: Well, different times I asked him about if he'd carried any wounded fellas about like, and he says well you don't wanna know nothing about that, 'cause I think he used to not only carry ammo and stuff like that, he used to use it as ambulance as well if it was required [...].

Establishing why veterans avoided discussing unpleasant aspects of service is difficult at this remove; self-protection from traumatic memories, maintaining a stoic appearance, or a sense that such narrations were unsuitable for adolescent audiences, could all have played a part. It is also plausible that, perhaps in an attempt to achieve composure, men's difficult experiences were related with the emphasis placed upon the "silver lining"; George Cash heard that his father-in-law had been gassed, but 'he used to climb over the [hospital] wall and go and meet Emily who he eventually married [so] even that was something romantic that had happened.'⁹² Ironically, however, this selectivity may have reinforced the cultural tendency that continued to construct military masculinity in positive terms. Certainly what Palmer was happy to share with Stagg could be told in heroic, exciting, adventurous tones, particularly given the award of the Military Medal.

⁹² Cash, (2010).

Positive aspects of military service appear to have been shared more commonly than negative ones. Some young men heard about the novelty of veterans' experiences. James Mann's father mainly spoke about France as a country, promising to take him to visit,⁹³ Richard Griffiths heard about his father's experiences learning to fly,⁹⁴ and John Riggs' uncle recounted the famous artists he served with in the Artists' Rifles.⁹⁵ A number of young men heard tales that they took to communicate their father's pride. Mr Sweetland's father 'used to tell us he was one of the Royal Engineers who probably laid the French railway lines as they were more or less up to the present day',⁹⁶ William Coster heard a detailed account of the places his father had served and how he had received 'a smashed finger', and knew he 'was always very proud of being a sergeant in the RASC'.⁹⁷ Richard Todd heard a detailed narrative of his father's service in a medical role; he had 'a fairly active and good, if you can use the word good, erm, certainly active First World War, got a good Military Cross, [...] because of him I think my thinking as a boy was pretty militaristic'.⁹⁸ Others heard apparently exciting tales. As a child William Jalland's father 'used to tell me about being at Shoeburyness [in the Royal Artillery] and the shooting down of a Zeppelin at Potter's Bar and er, I suppose that was the reason that I started getting interested.'⁹⁹ Jack Thomas had heard a heroic version of his father's experiences, which certainly were unusual. Thomas understood his father to be one of only two private soldiers to escape from a Prisoner Of War camp in Germany. He was

⁹³ James Mann, 1998, IWM-SA-18513.

⁹⁴ Richard Griffiths, 2007, IWM-SA-29574.

⁹⁵ Riggs, 2001, IWM-SA-22346.

⁹⁶ Mr Sweetland, 1988, IWM-SA-10452.

⁹⁷ William Coster, 2006, IWM-SA-28723.

⁹⁸ Richard Todd, 2006. IWM-SA-29069.

⁹⁹ William Jalland, 1991 IWM-SA-11944. Curtis (2010) also heard colleagues telling a story in the adventure frame.

subsequently posted to the Intelligence Corps, where he won a medal for his involvement in the arrest of two German spies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Thomas recalled that as children he and his friends perceived war as ‘adventure more than anything else.’¹⁰⁰ Watson has argued that the adventurous soldier was a valid identity at the time,¹⁰¹ and some aspects of popular culture presented war as adventure. Certainly young men’s interpretations of narratives as such are clear in a number of the descriptions of narrative transmission above. Jim Hayes’ veteran father was unusual in that he was known to like talking about the war; Hayes remarked that he had been ‘all ears [...] give me the worst [...].’ He heard ‘a lot about the trenches’, about his father’s hatred of trench rats and about ‘snipers getting a couple of his pals and dropping down in the trenches, they had to think what to do for them and all that’. Hayes father also told him about an occasion when his unit had to retreat hastily:

[F]or four days and four nights they galloped and galloped and galloped, stopped for a drop of water and all that but the Germans was 20 minutes behind them all the time and I thought what a nerve test and that was, and I didn't like that much but other than that I was all for going in the war if there was a war, you know, it wasn't frightening to me.

Hayes tone suggests that he placed his father’s narratives within a ‘war as adventure’ framework as a youth, and despite his unease and recognition that war could be a test of nerve, he was not deterred from envisaging his own service.

Pride and enjoyment appear to have dominated the understandings of others who heard ambivalent narratives of veteran’s service. George Icton’s father

was a driver for the engineers [...] he used to have to get the stuff up to the back trenches and they were manhandled through the trenches to the front line, and so I had had a fairly vivid account of the war from my father, and also from a lot of his comrades because erm, with having a farm my mother and father seldom took holidays together so I went with my father [...] to visit his

¹⁰⁰ Jack Thomas, 2005, IWM-SA-27342.

¹⁰¹ Watson, *Fighting*, 50-51.

old war comrades, so yes I had heard this discussed, and again, for all they did mention some bad times of the war, most of their memories were happy, erm joyful, erm, I don't think I was let into all of their secrets but er, as a young boy, big ears, I heard quite a lot.¹⁰²

Mr Parkhouse knew his father had become an officer in the RASC, before volunteering for the Royal Flying Corps. Although Parkhouse knew that he had been 'badly shot up on three occasions' and ultimately returned to the infantry diagnosed temperamentally unfit to fly, Parkhouse understood his father was proud of having flown artillery observation sorties during 1918, and 'very proud of the fact he was a member of Kitchener's Army'.¹⁰³ Similarly, Elson, whose father had narrated his being wounded with black humour, would 'occasionally talk about a buddy lost' but Elson understood his father was 'very proud of his old regiment', and he had more commonly told his children humorous anecdotes. Ultimately, Elson felt that the Great War 'was romanticized in young men's minds[...]'.¹⁰⁴

Pride, although not romance, could even be taken from objectively horrific narratives. Ron Womack's father became a POW in France after the Germans overran his trench. He did not volunteer information about this experience, but when Ron was aged about 10 he asked his father, who provided frightening accounts of the abuse and starvation he had suffered at the hands of the 'Prussians' while being used as forced labour in railway marshalling yards, and about a friendship he developed with an 'Anglo-Saxon German' who had worked in England prior to the war, who would sneak him food. Ron understood that his father's experiences were frightening and horrific - they were difficult to interpret another way - and he later discouraged Ron from joining military youth organisations. When asked whether hearing about this had

¹⁰² George Icton, 1989, IWM-SA-11938.

¹⁰³ Rupert Parkhouse, 1995, IWM-SA-15476.

¹⁰⁴ Elson, (2010).

given ‘any particular impression or feeling about the First World War as a youngster’, Ron responded ‘I think like most children of my age we were proud of our fathers having fought in the war, fought against the Germans...’¹⁰⁵

As these examples illustrate, despite the selectivity that some veterans exercised, many young men heard representations that revealed that military participation could be dangerous, challenging, and unpleasant, but this did not invalidate expressions of duty and pride in service. Narratives could be presented within the frame of adventure or rewarding endeavour, and young men could also interpret them as such, but challenge and sacrifice could be accommodated within, and even bolster, conceptions of military service as a test of masculinity or adventure. Veterans’ narratives were not necessarily understood in cultural isolation, and the presence of representations of war as adventure, rewarding endeavour or redemptive sacrifice might well have encouraged similar interpretations.

Conclusion

When discussing what they had heard from veterans, interviewees’ often characterised them as reticent and began discussion with phrases like ‘he never said much’. This phrase, however, belied a striking variety of experiences; discussion often revealed that the interviewee actually had heard about wartime experience, and sometimes extensive or significant narratives. Phillip Foster’s case is an illustrative example. Foster knew his father had been responsible for clearing up RAMC field operating theatres, but felt ‘I never really got very much, he’d tell the odd story but he never said very much’.¹⁰⁶ Despite this assertion, ‘one of his stories’ – phrasing which

¹⁰⁵ Womack, (2016).

¹⁰⁶ Philip Foster, (Author, 2016).

implies that his father told, and retold, stories - detailed clearing up after an amputation:

... this fella had supposedly died and had been taken into the mortuary and my father came across this leg, he said, and thought "Well I'd better put that with this chap" so he tucked this leg under his arm and went down to the mortuary tent and [...] suddenly the fella sat up and said "Can I have a drink of water" [...] He says "I shot out of that tent and then I came to my senses and went back in and organized him being taken out of there, so I don't really know what happened to him but if ever a bloke deserved to survive then he did", but only very small, he didn't talk about it much, but he must have had hundred of equivalent sort of experiences.

Like many other interviewees who had heard extensive narratives from veterans, Foster positioned his experience within the popular memory before contesting it. That the trope of the silent veteran regularly caused this 'discomposure' demonstrates its strength in contemporary popular memory. This strength is partly explained by the reticence exhibited by many veterans who only spoke about the war occasionally, but Foster's testimony points to another factor: he perceived that he must only have heard a fraction of the possible stories.

Nevertheless, this article has shown that young men in inter-war Britain heard about Great War experiences from veterans in their day-to-day lives more frequently than has been previously acknowledged. Although most veterans appear to have been reticent, a significant proportion of young men heard occasional, detailed recollections of aspects of their service. Most were not regularly regaled with war stories; more often their knowledge was gleaned from singular or irregular insights. What triggered these narratives is not always clear, but was certainly varied: sometimes they were solicited by young men's questions; sometimes something war-related, such as wounds or wartime objects, triggered narratives (or young men's questions); and sometimes triggers were indirect, such as discussion of parents' work,

travel, or relationships, or young men's complaints about comparatively trivial matters.

Girls were probably as likely as boys to hear veterans' narratives when they occurred in contexts unrelated to 'war talk', or were prompted by observation of wounds or artefacts in the domestic space, but gender may have influenced more intentional acts of war-story telling. Veterans may have spoken more often or in more depth to boys, encouraged by the pleasure culture of war to perceive boys as more interested in hearing about their war experiences. Indeed, they may have been; Jim Hayes' sister would object when Jim asked his veteran father about the Great War: "Don't start him off again!"¹⁰⁷ Yet this exchange illustrates that some girls were exposed to veterans' narratives, a fact confirmed by other personal testimony. Roper relates the experience of a girl who heard about the challenges of trench life,¹⁰⁸ and Ruth Armstrong recalled her veteran father 'told me nice stories.' He reserved the 'nasty stories' for her mother; 'I was outside the door one day and I overheard him telling her about the things that he saw, and what the Germans had done. They had no idea I was listening.'¹⁰⁹ Some girls were knowingly told about the 'nasty' elements of war, though; a young woman born in 1921 recalled hearing 'ghastly stories' from her veteran uncle.¹¹⁰ In so far as so few accounts can be suggestive, girls' and boys' experiences as children do not appear to have been starkly different: 'nice' stories and

¹⁰⁷ Hayes, (2010).

¹⁰⁸ Roper, *Secret*, 294.

¹⁰⁹ Ruth Armstrong, in Richard Van Emden and Stephen Humphreys, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An oral history of life in Britain during the First World War* (2004), 305.

¹¹⁰ February 1940 Directive, Respondent 2038, Mass Observation Archive. Jessica Meyer refers to C C Miller's 1938 memoir, 'A letter from India to my Daughters in England' (IWM 83/3/1). Miller could not be characterized as protecting his daughters from the potentially distressing aspects of modern warfare; *Men*, 137-141.

stories of trench life; veterans exercising selectivity; and some ‘ghastly’ stories. Gender might have been more influential from adolescence onwards, when fathers typically started treating young men and young women differently.¹¹¹ Research on women’s subjective experiences is required to better understand how the sexes exposure to veterans’ representations of the Great War compared.

Like representations of the Great War in inter-war popular culture, veterans’ narratives were heterogeneous. Veterans expressed not only a wide variety of attitudes, but also of *experiences*. Trenches, shell holes, and being wounded – culturally available images of the Great War – were components of many narratives, but some spoke about more banal activities absent from representations in popular culture. Moreover, some who had served as drivers, engineers, in medical facilities or in Britain were not silenced by the increasing dominance of the trench soldier in popular understandings of the war. Narrating experiences that diverged from the popular memory might have been easier within a family environment.¹¹² Families were not an appropriate audience for narratives of killing or committing violence, though, just as Meyer observed in wartime letters and post-war memoirs.¹¹³ While this no doubt partially reflects the fact that many veterans did not have direct engagement with enemy troops, this silence perhaps speaks to the incommunicability of violence, and the difficulty of comfortably accommodating tales of such violence within the domestic sphere. Although suffering horrific or traumatic incidents was certainly recounted, it seems young men more often heard about camaraderie or

¹¹¹ Fisher, *Fatherhood*, 224-225.

¹¹² Thomas McKay, *A multi-generational oral history study considering English collective memory of the Second World War and Holocaust*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2012, 75-76, 139-140.

¹¹³ Meyer, *Men*, 141.

humorous incidents, or narratives that illustrated stoicism or heroism. The selectivity veterans exercised tended to deny young men access to more negative narratives, and equivocal narratives outnumbered the clearly disillusioned. When exposed to such representations, young men seem to have taken away affirmative rather than disillusioned elements, such as pride in service, as has been suggested in relation to ambivalent Great War literature. These findings sit comfortably alongside Todman's suggestion that when veterans were together they were keen to recollect positive elements of their war experience,¹¹⁴ and with Paris's suggestion that veterans selecting literature for children selected 'a heroic and justified representation of the war'.¹¹⁵ This article also adds substantial support and depth to Sheffield's suggestion that it was the rewarding elements of Great War service that were passed on to young men.¹¹⁶

It is by no means clear that veterans' narratives were intended to have a didactic function, or that young men interpreted them as such. Nevertheless, what young men heard from veterans encouraged an understanding of war as a duty to accept, a challenge to overcome, or even an adventure to be had, more often than as a futile endeavour to denounce. Those who heard about challenging aspects of the war, such as being wounded or falling into shell-holes, may have better understood the potential for war to be horrific, but that understanding served to amplify, rather than lessen, the stoicism and bravery of the veterans they had heard from. Veterans' narratives were also uniquely positioned to shape young men's understandings of war and masculinity, coming from older men, and often those who younger men respected, sought to emulate, and might expect to learn about manliness from. While

¹¹⁴ Todman, 'Sans peur', 1105; *Great*, 188-9.

¹¹⁵ Paris, *Over*, 158

¹¹⁶ Sheffield, 'Shadow', 31

this may not have been intended by the narrator or perceived by the audience, veterans' narratives of the Great War affirmed particular masculine traits. Stoicism, even in the face of fear or injury, and pride in service, duty, and camaraderie were all common themes, and sacrifice and gallant heroism were present too. Veterans' narratives typically offered little that would decouple war and masculinity. Instead, war remained a theatre in which young men could perform masculinity, as the previous generation had. In this respect what young men most commonly heard from veterans was similar in tone to the representations in popular culture through which young men might otherwise 'know' about the Great War, but the unmediated, and often familial, nature of veterans' narratives may have given them greater significance. They should therefore, however fleeting and ephemeral, be considered an important component of the body of representations of the Great War encountered by young men in inter-war Britain.

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