

Janet S. K. Watson. *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiv + 333 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83153-6.



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Janet Watson's study of the British at war, 1914-1918, contrasts the lived experiences of men and women as recorded in contemporary, wartime sources with the powerful sense of "disillusionment" that pervaded later accounts of the conflict. As participants, be it as soldiers, nurses, or munitions workers, the British understood their wartime experiences as either "service" or "work." The distinction was largely, but not rigidly, class-based: the social elite considered their dutiful acts of volunteerism as service, while working men and women saw their wartime roles as simply a form of work. Either way, while the conflict raged the British endured and sometimes even enjoyed the war, generally without questioning its purpose or higher direction. Disillusionment, Watson suggests, was born not of the war itself, but from the literature of the interwar years, in particular the accounts of trench warfare by elite, and soon to be canonical, writers such as Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. Other memoirists, men and women, combatants and non-combatants, would then re-interpret their own experiences retrospectively to conform to the "sol-

dier's story" of relentless hardship and danger and of horror at the waste and futility of war.

While chronicling this transition from experience to memory, Watson also charts the multifaceted struggles that were waged within the context of the wider conflict: the "different wars" of her title. The dichotomy between "service" and "work" manifested itself, for example, in tensions between the war-time volunteer, a civilian in arms, and the regular soldier, the career war-worker. The Christmas truce of 1914 is interpreted here as a meeting between members of the same guild (Sir John French's "free-masonry" of professional soldiers), exchanging common courtesies amid an atmosphere of mutual respect. The patriotic, duty-bound volunteers who arrived on the Western Front in 1915 would not, Watson feels, have tolerated such fraternization. Similarly, the simmering discontent in hospital wards between trained nurses and the amateur Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD) arose from the nurses' desire to establish their professional status. As doctors claimed a monopoly on scientific medical knowledge, the presence of VADs reinforced the view

that a nurse required no particularly rigorous training or, for that matter, financial reward.

Most of those doctors were male and the battle lines over gender also figure strongly in Watson's text. The sight of women paramilitaries in khaki was for many contemporaries a mockery of the sacrifice of the soldiers fighting and dying in France and Flanders. The nurse or the VAD was seen as the soldier's true female equivalent, while the "khaki girls" were often vilified both for challenging conceptions of femininity and for undermining notions of masculinity by diluting the connection between wearing khaki and risking death. The contrast between acceptable service in a feminine capacity (healing or nurturing), and the more controversial employment in a paramilitary organization is particularly well-illustrated in the letters of Helen Beale, who left volunteer nursing in early 1918 to join the Women's Royal Naval Service. Having learned of her intentions, the local Red Cross County Director accused her of simply seeking excitement and of being "unpatriotic."

Organizing her study around these three themes of class (service versus work), gender (men and women), and time (experience versus memory) allows Watson to cover a great deal of ground; besides soldiers, nurses, and women paramilitaries she offers insightful discussion of the war work of women doctors, munitions workers, and members of the Women's Land Army. Inevitably, however, it is not the whole story of the British at war. This is, its title notwithstanding, a book about England and the English. Early on, the author declares that, due to "conceptions of national identity" and archival constraints, Wales and Scotland will figure only marginally (p.11). Ireland is not mentioned at all. This is problematic; throughout the text the word "British" is used as if it were synonymous with "English." Furthermore, when talking about the British army, it is difficult to unravel its varying national components. Watson herself provides evidence for this. During her discussions of the character of

Britain's wartime soldiers, the voices we hear most often are those of Ian Hay and his garrulous Scottish volunteers.

Watson's discussion of class in understanding the British soldier is also not without its problems. She asserts that class "has not played a large role in studies of the First World War to date" (p. 3, fn. 6). Yet there is actually quite an extensive literature which, like Watson, seeks to understand the ordinary Tommy as the British working man in arms, bringing to military service both the politics of the factory floor and the leisure activities of working-class culture. John Bourne, David Englander, J. G. Fuller, Gloden Dallas and Douglas Gill have all explored this theme. Yet none figure in Watson's bibliography.[1] There are notable omissions from the bibliography in other areas too. There is a good and engaging account of the war books controversy of the interwar years and the manner in which the powerful literature of disillusionment came to dominate the way the British perceived the war. This, however, has already been well recognized by military historians, such as Brian Bond (*The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History*, 2002), and one would have expected some reference to their work.

These criticisms aside, Watson's grasp of both history and historiography is far sounder than other cultural historians who have ventured to write about the war. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) was the seminal study of this type but that work was marred by factual inaccuracies and its concentration on an unrepresentative group of elite writers who served on the western front. It has long attracted fairly scathing comment from historians.[2] Watson, while emphasizing the significance of Graves and Sassoon in shaping the way the war was remembered, has striven to understand wider popular perceptions of the war. Her archival research has been very thorough, including the privately held Beale family papers, a wonderful source,

skillfully utilized. There is, perhaps, an occasional hint that the author still regards service on the western front as the only valid combat experience. Thus, we are told that Orlo Williams, a "conservative" book reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*, "was a veteran but not of the trenches—he served as a Major in the middle east" (p. 190). Similarly, it is asserted that Rupert Brooke died "never having seen combat" and therefore "symbolized those people who had not experienced the war and therefore could not understand it" (p. 223). In fact, Brooke served with the Royal Naval Division at Antwerp in October 1914. Although his battalion was not strongly attacked, he certainly experienced war's ugliness first-hand and was deeply affected by the plight of the masses of Belgian refugees he encountered.

This is a useful and thought-provoking book. Undergraduates of history and literature should be encouraged to read it both for the light it sheds on the British experience of the First World War and for the way it illustrates the contrast between strictly contemporary evidence and primary sources molded by the retrospection of just a few years. Historians should welcome it for highlighting how perceptions of the war came to be dominated by stories of disillusionment and futility. Scholarship like this will, eventually, undermine the monolithic authority of those stories and the history of the war—multifaceted and complex—will reach a wider audience.

Notes

[1]. John Bourne, "The British Working Man in Arms," in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, ed. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), pp. 336-352. J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). David Englander and Jack Osborne, "Jack, Tommy and Henry Dubb: The Armed Forces and the Working Class," *Historical Journal* 21 (1978): pp. 593-621. Gloden Dallas and Douglas Gill, *The Unknown Army: Mutinies in the*

British Army in World War I (London: Verso, 1985).

[2]. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, "Paul Fussell at War," *War in History* 1 (1994): pp. 63-80.

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