

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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Cultural histories of the First World War have proliferated over the past decade, due in large part to the application of two methodological paradigms: that of gender history and the history of memory. Janet Watson's *Fighting Different Wars* brings both methodological concerns together and adds social-class analysis to her study of the disjuncture between the lived experience of the First World War and the way that it came to be remembered. The result is one of the best and most important books on the cultural history of Britain's "Great War" yet produced.

Although the book is arranged into two sections--the first on the experience of the war, and the second on the memory of the war--Watson skillfully weaves the comparative themes of gender and class difference into her narrative. Drawing on the work of recent feminist historians of the conflict, she succeeds in blurring (if not quite collapsing) the distinction "too long maintained in both the scholarly and popular literature between the home front and the combat zone" (p. 5). During the war, Watson argues, social position had a profound impact on how individuals understood

their role in the conflict. Indeed, social class and gender norms helped structure personal experience of the war, regardless of whether the individual served in France or Belgium or worked in London or rural Sussex. Watson develops her thesis by demonstrating the importance of the ideal of service to the nation for many middle- and upper-class men and women, while for most in the working class the war was understood largely through the lens of work.[1] Of course, conceptions of work and of service might both be present, or overlap, in the understanding of particular individuals, but Watson convincingly demonstrates that we can better understand Britain's war-time experience in its totality if we keep these two quite different understandings of war participation in view.

While Watson's productive attention to social class as a variable in cultural perceptions of the war is important, although not without precedent, she also demonstrates the complexities caused by existing gender norms, which sometimes complemented and sometimes conflicted with class expectations. Watson provides a case-study chapter

on the Beale family, whose family records and correspondence are used to excellent effect, to reveal the push and pull of patriotism and of family obligations for upper-middle-class men *and* women. The collective incomprehension of the Beales regarding the motives of their servants, who left them to work in other industries during the war, clearly shows the quite differing conceptions of service and work that framed middle- and working-class perceptions of wartime obligation.

The prevailing dictates of the gender order suggested that regardless of whether men viewed the military as service or as work, putting on a uniform was an unambiguous marker of their masculinity. For women, however, putting on a khaki uniform was highly problematic. Indeed, the only uniform that women could be expected to don without raising some form of social criticism was that of the nurse's gown and cape. But even here Watson demonstrates the potential conflict between the ideal of service and the dictates of work. Female doctors found the military unreceptive to their claims for appropriate status and rank, and despite their extensive training, battled for acceptance in hospitals during the war. Professional nurses, meanwhile, resented the influx of mostly middle-class volunteer women who, inspired by the ideal of service and society's acceptance of women as care-givers, made up the famous nursing Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs). The trained nurses had for decades struggled to bring professional status to their occupation, and viewed the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their professionalism and the social worth of their work. The VADs, with their short-term (usually six-month) stints in hospitals, threatened to undermine the claims of the professional nurses, since the amateurs conceived of their role as a form of service equivalent to that of volunteer men in uniform.

Sheer necessity dictated that women would be drawn into new roles, and official propaganda during the war often equated female volunteer ef-

forts with those of men. But whereas the upper class was able to transfer traditional charitable activity to the support of the war effort, and members of the middle class were accepted as amateur nurses in VADs--since these activities could all be coded as service--the working-class women in munitions factories and those who adopted nontraditional roles (particularly members of paramilitary and auxiliary organizations who wore military-style uniforms), endured criticism from many quarters. Women munitions workers were regularly scorned for their pecuniary motives--especially when leaving domestic service for higher-paid factory jobs--and their wartime contribution was quickly downplayed at war's end; the spectacle of women donning khaki, moreover, caused commentators to anxiously aver that the war was subverting femininity.

Gender norms and social-class expectations not only helped construct the experience of the war, they also helped construct the post-war memory of the conflict. In the second half of the book, Watson concentrates on the war's representation in the interwar years, focusing particularly on why the war came to be seen primarily through the narrative of the disillusioned soldier's story. Here she is concerned to explain why the experience of the British subaltern officers in the French and Belgian trenches took precedence over other combat (and war-supporting) experiences in other theaters of the war, and why the story of pre-war idealism shattered by the horrors of trench warfare, became the predominant narrative of the entire conflict. Her chapter on the "war books" controversy between 1927 and 1931 concentrates largely on the contemporary reviews of the canonical soldier-writers Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, and Siegfried Sassoon, as well as many now lesser-known writers. She finds, as have others before her, that the disillusionment found in these books was neither monolithic nor uncontested, and that it was largely a product of the post-war period rather than of the war years themselves. A detailed comparison of the wartime

diaries and correspondence with the subsequent memoirs of Sassoon and Graves, and of Irene Rathbone and Vera Brittain, allows Watson to chart the growing influence of the trench experience and of the disillusionment narrative in subsequent representations of the war. Whereas all four of these writers prioritized the trench and the disillusionment thesis in their memoirs, their wartime correspondence indicated a far more complex, and less-disillusioned, perception of the war while the conflict actually raged.

Ultimately, because the war came to be written about in the 1920s and 1930s by talented and sensitive upper- and middle-class authors, who tended to see participation in the war as service, the whole conflict came to be cast as a narrative based on idealistic volunteers like themselves. The shattering of the volunteer's idealism in the mud and wire of Flanders was a projection back onto the war experience of post-war feelings of disillusionment. And because the "disillusionist" school's writing was the most effective in the battle of the "war books" in the early 1930s, subsequent writing about the war became largely trapped within the parameters of this narrative. Even those individuals whose own experience of the war was vastly different, ended up molding their own narratives along lines that continued to privilege the trench disillusionment thesis. Watson indicates that perhaps it would be better to see the rise of disillusionment about the war not in terms of a chronological transition but in terms of a generational one. There was not one moment when alienation and irony replaced idealism and earnestness in people's perceptions of the war--the focus of many literary accounts trying to determine the relationship of the war to the rise of the modernist aesthetic[2]--as the generation that lived through the war did not necessarily lose their patriotic idealism, sense of service, or appreciation of their participation as necessary work, at all. Rather because a few eloquent authors "articulated a powerful story of disillusionment, this

became the dominant historical view of the war" embraced by subsequent generations (p. 308).

All in all, this is an extremely fine book, balancing, as it does, original primary research with the recasting of existing scholarship. Of course, there are elements of its approach and interpretation that will spark debate. Take for instance, the broad and loosely defined categories of social class: I wondered about regional and occupational differences in attitudes towards work and service. Were highly skilled workers (who tended to be protected from conscription) just as likely as casual laborers to see the war in terms of work? Were lower-middle-class men and women without public school educations more or less likely to perceive their participation as service? Was there an urban/rural divide in attitudes? And what about the mass of Irish volunteers--surely a problematic group? These sorts of questions might usefully be followed up by subsequent scholars working within Watson's overall framework.

For me, however, the biggest unresolved issues in this book are the privileged place accorded written accounts of the war's memory, and the apparently fixed meaning of these texts once they became "canonical". Here Watson follows an established tradition in the cultural history of Britain's Great War, but one which has been, and I would argue, continually needs to be, challenged. Cultural historians of the Great War, like literary critics, have tended to be fixated by the written word, but there are many kinds of texts that encoded and recoded memory of the conflict, as Jay Winter--building on Pierre Nora's scholarship on France--pointed out a decade ago.[3] Photographs, film, visual art, drama, statuary, material culture, museums, rituals, pilgrimages, landscapes, *et al.* were all possible texts/sites for the interpretation and re-interpretation of the war's meaning. Watson mentions physical monuments and the rituals of Armistice Day (and their historians) in passing, but I wonder if, for many people, the accumulated impression of standing in reverence before icons

of the "Million Dead" year after year did not have as much an impact on the construction of the war's memory as did reading the "war books." To be sure, the meaning of the monuments and rituals changed over time, just like the meaning of other sites/texts of memory. Indeed, I think Watson perhaps underestimates the degree to which the war experience was actually reformulated in memory after the 1930s. The experience of the Second World War, the loss of empire in the post-war years, and the rise of a multi-cultural society in the 1970s, for example, all imprinted new shades of meaning about the war for subsequent generations. In short, the memory of the war has its own history that needs to be further explored.

But these critical observations are not meant to detract from Watson's particular achievement in *Fighting Different Wars* which, I hasten to reassert, is formidable. Between two covers, she has provided British cultural historians with a salutary model of scholarly method and practice that should inspire many imitators and provoke fruitful new research.

Notes

[1]. Watson builds here on Nicoletta Gullace on service, *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and on Deborah Thom on work, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

[2]. The classic example is Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[3]. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Pierre Nora's pioneering "sites of memory" project was first published in seven volumes in French as *Les Lieux de Memoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).

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