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"The War is a Sitting Target:"
The Theatre Workshop's Oh What a Lovely War (1963)

Although the focus of this essay will be on a play premiered in the 1960s, it may prove instructive to first revisit an earlier cultural moment, the tenth anniversary of the Armistice in 1928. This anniversary provided a powerful impulse to take stock of what the war had meant, not only for the benefit of members of the war generation, but also, increasingly, for an audience of men and women who were too young to have been entangled in the war themselves, or even to actually remember much about it, while still living in its shadow. December of 1928 saw the first performance of one of the best-known plays about the First World War, R.C. Sherriff's Journey's End, starring 21-year-old Laurence Olivier as Captain Stanhope. A former cricketing hero, Stanhope, after three years of war, has become a cynical infantry officer, whose drinking dramatises the stresses of life in the trenches: a life in which the prospect of imminent death almost pales before the reality of interminable boredom. A few weeks earlier, in November 1928, Edmund Blunden's Undertones of War and, in English translation, Arnold Zweig's The Case of Sergeant Grischa had been published. Together with the reprint of Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front in March 1929 (Onions 1990, 49-51), Blunden's war memoir, Zweig's novel, and Sherriff's play marked the beginning of what is usually called "the War Books Boom," which resulted in a narrowing down of the popular definition of the culturally legitimate war experience to the soldier's tale, or the "great casualty myth" (Korte et al. 2005, 149).

In this canonical commemorative narrative, the trenches of the Western Front became the most prominent British lieu de mémoire of World War I. The protagonists in these works are predominantly subaltern infantry officers, who have often been educated at public schools and, when war is declared on 4 August 1914, immediately enlist. According to Samuel Hynes, their tale contains the following stock ingredients:

[...] the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant, patriotic women; the growing sympathy for men on the other side, betrayed in the same way and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped. (Hynes 1990, 439)

It should perhaps be stressed that all, or most, of these traits can be found in texts written without the same homogeneously anti-heroic inflection. The question, then, is

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1 "The War is a Sitting Target" is taken from a review of Oh What a Lovely War entitled "Group Panorama of the Kaiser's War." In: The Times, 20 March 1963 (review by "our dramatic critic" of Oh What a Lovely War). In full, the quotation reads: "This approach is unlikely to send audiences storming out of the theatre: the war is a sitting target for anyone who wants to deliver a bludgeoning social criticism."
why a large number of war texts from the late 1920s and early 1930s did employ the soldier's tale format, and subscribed to its ideological message.

An explanation frequently proposed is that authors like Richard Aldington (in *Death of a Hero: A Novel*, 1929), Robert Graves (in *Good-Bye to All That: An Autobiography*, also 1929), or Siegfried Sassoon (in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 1930) needed time to overcome the trauma of their own combat experience, and to find a language in which to organise, comprehend, and convey it (Korte et al. 2005, 37; 185). Interestingly, several of these authors are known to have started fictionalising their war experiences either during the war itself (Graves), or in its immediate aftermath (Aldington), and to have abandoned these projects, but the impetus to return to them in the late 1920s may have originated as much in shrewd calculations of the exigencies of the publishing business as in psychological needs. In May 1929, Aldington sent a telegram to his American publisher Covici Friede: "Referring great success Journey's End and German War novels. Urge earliest full publication Death of a Hero to take advantage of public mood. Large scale English war novel might go big now" (qtd. in MacCallum-Stewart).

More importantly, the depiction of the war in the soldier's tale was shaped as much by the domestic and international insecurities of the post-war decade as it was by the trauma of the war. In fact, it could be argued that, if collective trauma is not created by events in and by themselves (however horrific) but is a socially mediated attribution, a claim which is sometimes made retrospectively by what Jeffrey C. Alexander calls "carrier groups," then it may have been only in the late 1920s that the Great War became a British cultural trauma in the first place. At a time of rising unemployment, many war veterans would have felt that Britain had not become the "country fit for heroes" which had been promised to them by politicians, while the rise of fascist movements abroad led to widespread fears that the Great War might not, after all, have been the "war to end all wars." Writing from the perspective of 1928, when *The Last Post*, the fourth volume of his tetralogy *Parade's End* was published, Ford Madox Ford has Marie Léonie, the French wife of Mark Tietjens, reflect on her husband's response to the Armistice, and specifically to the Allies' decision not to invade Germany:

> He had said that it was the worst dis-service you could do to your foes not to let them know that remorseless consequences followed determined actions. To interfere in order to show fellows that if they did what they wanted they need not of necessity take what they got for it was in effect to commit a sin against God. If the Germans did not experience that in the sight of the world there was an end of Europe and the world. What was to hinder endless recurrences of what had happened near a place called Gemmenich on the 4th of August, 1914, at six o'clock in the morning? There was nothing to hinder it. Any other state from the smallest to the largest might [...]. (Ford 1966, 774)

In other words, it may have been in the late 1920s, rather than during the war or in the immediate post-war year that, as Alexander puts it, "the collectivity's identity, its stability in terms of meaning, not action" – the meaning consensually ascribed to the
war – was threatened. "It is the meanings which provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves" (Alexander 2004, 10). Be that as it may, by the late 1930s – and not least under the threat of another world war – the idea of a generation of young men deceived, betrayed, and abandoned by their elders had become firmly lodged in British minds as a generally accepted interpretation of recent British history.

Just over two decades later, the early 1960s saw preparations for another series of commemorative activities, a "creeping barrage" (Danchev 1991, 270) of fiftieth anniversaries marking, respectively, the beginning of the war, some of its battles (Gallipoli, the Somme, or Passchendaele), and finally, the Armistice. These anniversaries coincided with the fading away of the war generation: most veterans were by then in their late sixties and seventies, though a few of these veterans would linger on into the 21st century, compelled, like other last survivors, to memorialize their vanished cohort. Like the voices of Holocaust survivors recorded in Steven Spielberg's video testimony project, veterans' voices would eventually come to be regarded as the authentic, that is, unmediated, contributions to the archive of their lost generation.

As was the case in 1928, texts written in the 1960s that revisited the Great War imaginatively, but also histories, responded to the concerns of their own decade. For authors writing in this decade, the Second World War seemed to have been fought for more idealistic motives than the First, while its main events, for instance the Battle of Britain or D-Day, could still be celebrated as victories. By contrast, the aims for which millions died in the First World War seemed much less clearly defined, or definable, and the military events of the conflict which had lodged themselves most firmly in the public imagination were, like the first day of the Battle of the Somme, catastrophic failures rather than successes. Furthermore, the Cold War threatened to escalate into full-scale nuclear war with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the same year in which the number of US military advisors in Vietnam was increased from 700 to 12,000. It was also in 1962 that Coventry Cathedral was re-consecrated, and Benjamin Britten's War Requiem was first performed there on 30 May (Hennegan 2011; Stout 2005, 210-227). Britten, who had been approached in 1958 with the suggestion that he compose something for the occasion, had chosen nine poems by Wilfred Owen and interspersed them among sections of the Latin mass for the dead, a re-contextualisation of World War I poetry which is obvious in hindsight, but which was rather less so at the time. Edmund Blunden's The Poems of Wilfred Owen of 1931 had been reissued a few times in the 1930s, but C. Day-Lewis's edition of his Collected Poems would only be published in 1962, and the centrality of Owen's poems to what would emerge as the canon of British First World War poetry was yet to be asserted, for instance in anthologies such as Brian Gardner's Up the Line to Death of 1964, and I.M. Parsons's Men Who March Away of 1965, the former, in particular, for many years a set text in British secondary schools (Haughton 2007).

Among the many 1960s reassessments of the First World War the combined effect of which was to perpetuate, albeit with slight shifts in emphasis, the impression made on the public by the soldier's tale, four have been identified by Alex Danchev as seminal: first, A.J.P. Taylor's 1961 television lecture series, followed by his hugely popular illustrated history The First World War (1963) and his English History 1914-1945 (1965), each of them asserting, over and over again, that "the war had a damning
simplicity: it was senseless” (Danchev 1991, 270). Second, in a "generally debunking decade," there was John Terraine's "bunking" commitment to the rehabilitation of Haig (in Douglas Haig, 1963, and The Great War, 1965), an enterprise which, whatever its long-term impact may have been on First World War historiography, failed to change the public image of "Butcher Haig." The unpopularity of the "bunking" point of view can also be traced in the public response to the third project listed by Danchev, the landmark 26-part BBC documentary The Great War of 1964. Although Terraine and other military historians, notably Corelli Barnett, were involved in the documentary as advisers, and although it was to some extent intended to promote a revisionist view of beneficent British generalship and of the unavoidability of high casualty rates, it appears to have reinforced the image of war as a futile waste of life – not least in the case of the Passchendaele episode (entitled "Surely We Have Perished") because of voice-over extracts from poems by Owen and Sassoon. Remarking on the BBC's Audience Research Reports for the series, yet another revisionist military historian, Gary Sheffield, states that "[the] public reaction to The Great War suggests that programmes do not have to carry an explicitly anti-war message in order to build up negative images in viewers' minds: all they need to show is scenes of carnage. It may be the case that the viewers' responses simply reflect their existing impression of the war" (Sheffield 1996, 67).

The fourth and final cultural enterprise of the early 1960s that Danchev mentions is Oh What a Lovely War, first performed by the Theatre Workshop on 19 March 1963 at the Stratford East Theatre Royal and transferred to the West End in June of that year. In what Nadine Holdsworth has called a "confluence" (Holdsworth 2011, 70) of subject, form, and historical moment, this play perfectly encapsulates, as the drama critic of The Times believes, "the view of the 1914-18 War as a criminally wasteful adventure in which the stoic courage of the common soldier was equalled only by the sanctimonious incompetence of their commanders and the blind jingoism of the civilians" (Times 20 March 1963). By 1963, he continues, this view had become all too "familiar." In its turn, Oh What a Lovely War would eventually, as Holdsworth has argued, be "embedded in historiography as each new generation often has their understanding of the First World War supplemented by study of the play" (Holdsworth 2006, 113).

Inspired by a BBC radio broadcast, Charles Chilton's A Long, Long Trail of 21 February 1962, which purported to tell the history of the war from the perspective of the ordinary soldier, interspersed with popular songs of the period, Joan Littlewood and her partner Gerry Raffles had initially commissioned Chilton and another author to write a play based on Chilton's material, but then decided to take matters into their own hands. Littlewood provided a rough structure of key events, quotes, and production ideas, many of them derived from documentary material including histories, biographies, and political analyses, and, as in Chilton's radio broadcast,

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3 On the reassessment of the First World War in the 1960s see also Bond (2002); Corrigan (2003); Sheffield (1996); Todman (2005). It is, perhaps, no coincidence that all four of these historians figure prominently among the critics of Pat Barker's Regeneration trilogy.

4 Among the sources usually cited are Leon Woolf's In Flanders Fields (1959), Alan Clark's The Donkeys (1961), and Barbara Tuchman's The Guns of August (1962). The original production also had a military advisor, Raymond Fletcher.
popular music. However, there was considerable input by other Theatre Workshop members and a great deal of ex tempore improvisation so that the printed versions of the play are, at best, scripts.\(^5\)

*Oh What a Lovely War* is indebted to the methodologies of Bertolt Brecht’s and Erwin Piscator’s documentary theatre. According to Derek Paget, the play provides insight into all four purposes of documentary theatre, namely, "reassessments of the past," "celebrations of the past," "investigations into ‘topical’ events and issues," and "explanations, in a didactic sense, of social, historical, and political phenomena" (Paget 1990, 69). At the same time, *Oh What a Lovely War* is rooted in working-class popular entertainments such as the music hall, the variety, or the concert party. These different traditions result in a contrapuntal arrangement of, on the one hand, jolly or humorous songs, Chaplinesque slapstick and Pierrot show nostalgia (Paget 2004, 404), and on the other hand, documentary material shown, respectively, on a projection screen (photographs, recruitment posters and so on) and on a ticker-tape news panel (facts and figures). Another juxtaposition is that between the relatively light mood of Act I, which covers the beginning of the war up to the Christmas Truce of 1914, with which the act closes, and the increasingly sombre atmosphere of the second act, with its decidedly un-revisionist depiction of Field Marshal Douglas Haig. This second act, although ostensibly encompassing the remaining four years of the war, does not close with the Armistice (let alone with a celebration of the Allied victory), but with a scene of French soldiers going into battle "like lambs to the slaughter." This is followed by another set of French and English songs ("Chansonne de Craonne," "I Don’t Want To Be a Soldier," "And When They Ask Us," and "Oh It’s a Lovely War"). The ticker-tape news panel, meanwhile, flashes "THE WAR TO END WARS… KILLED TEN MILLION… WOUNDED TWENTY-ONE MILLION… MISSING SEVEN MILLION," and the final sequence of photographic images on the projection screen culminates in a slide of "A long line of Tommies walking away from the camera, following the direction of a trench" (Theatre Workshop 2006, 86-88).

*Oh What a Lovely War* consists of a kaleidoscopic arrangement of scenes which, taken together, reflect the impact of the war on the Western Front and the home front, and on a number of different social groups: Allied and German soldiers, officers and privates, upper and lower classes, men and women. Although the war is initially presented as a war between nations – in a circus parade of characters in (parodic) national dress\(^6\) – allegiances shift as the play progresses, and unexpected commonalities emerge across the friend and foe divide: thus, a French officer and his German counterpart, on opposite sides of the stage, describe the horrors of the battlefield in letters. At the other end of the emotional scale from these officers’ "quiet sincerity," English

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5 There are two Methuen editions of the play, one from 1965 and one from 2000, both authorised by Littlewood and the latter reissued in 2006 with commentary and notes by Steve Lewis: Theatre Workshop, *Oh What a Lovely War* (Theatre Workshop 2006). The most marked discrepancies between the two versions are in the drill sergeant’s scene and in the scene in which Sir John French visits his French and Belgian opposite numbers. Both versions differ considerably from Richard Attenborough’s *Oh! What a Lovely War* film of 1969 (not only because of the exclamation mark in Attenborough’s title).

6 "France wears an officer’s cap, a sexy woman either side of him; Germany, a helmet and leather belt; beside him, Austria, a girl with two yellow plaits hanging from her hat. Ireland leads the British group, wearing a green wrap-over skirt. She jigs along. Great Britain, wearing a sun helmet, rides on a man’s back. A character in a turban holds a square, tasselled sunshade over them. Two Russians, wearing fur hats, dance along" (Theatre Workshop 2006, 3).
and German housewives (the latter in German) discuss a ghoulish newspaper item about bodies being melted for glycerin and share rumours of yet another "big push" (Theatre Workshop 2006, 16; 68-69). Similarly poised between the moving and the grotesque, the Christmas Truce of 1914 with which Act I closes is contrasted with an August the Twelfth grouse-shooting party of British, French, German and American munitions manufacturers and their Swiss banker at the beginning of Act II. At the same time, and concomitantly, rifts between groups on the Allied side deepen along class and ideological lines: for instance in the differential treatment extended to wounded working-class privates and wounded officers upon their arrival at Waterloo Station. Then there are pacifists and warmongers, as when Mrs Pankhurst, trying to read out a letter by George Bernard Shaw, is heckled by a crowd (Theatre Workshop 2006, 26-28; 64-67). Another barrier that is represented as nearly insurmountable is that between battle and home fronts, with the wounded soldiers’ scene one of the very few points of contact between the two worlds. Even in this scene the home front business of women vendors selling flowers, newspapers, and sweets continues as usual, in the face of the suffering of soldiers.

The play contains a large number of roles which are shared out among its cast: four women and eleven men in the original Theatre Royal production, five women and fourteen men after the play had transferred to the West End. Hence, every actor takes on several parts which tend to be un-individuated: "First Englishwoman," "One of the Soldiers," "Frenchman" and so on. Or rather, to be precise, the company of actors plays a troupe of Pierrots, and these Pierrots, directed by an MC, take on multiple roles in a performance of "the ever-popular War Game!" (Theatre Workshop 2006, 3). In conjunction with the episodic structure of the play and the framing device of the "play-within-the-play," this lack of character individuation precludes audience identification with any one character. Spectators are presumably expected to side with some of the collective entities that these characters represent, with the wounded privates against their officers in the Waterloo scenes, or with the frontline soldiers against the generals in their headquarters behind the lines. In these respects, as in many others, Oh What a Lovely War shows its indebtedness to the Brechtian concept of ‘alienation.’

The projection screen and the ticker-tape news panel serve the same purpose of detaching the audience emotionally from individual characters. It is with these conveyors of documentary material, of 'fact,' that what might be called the prerogative of interpretation rests, so that, no matter what happens on stage, the audience is drawn back to the actuality of the war. Photographs, in particular, by backgrounding the presence of the medium and the process of mediation, convey a powerful impression of what cannot be articulated by verbal accounts or statistics: mass slaughter.

A few individual characters do stand out from among the mass of first, second, and third soldiers: these are the generals, who have names and personalities, and who take up a considerable amount of stage time and action. In Act I, they are Field Marshals Sir John French and Sir Henry Wilson and their French and Belgian counterparts Generals Lanrezac and de Moranneville,7 while in Act II the focus shifts to Sir Douglas Haig, who is first introduced in the context of a party taking place on the

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7 This scene (Theatre Workshop 2006, 21-25), in which the British generals’ arrogant insularity is lampooned, is in fact based on the account given by Barbara Tuchman in her The Guns of August of 1962, and quotes some of the dialogue given there verbatim (Theatre Workshop 2006, notes 107-11).
night before his appointment to the post of Commander-in-Chief in December 1915. The next scene involving Haig shows him on the eve of the Battle of the Somme, and on its first day. The first slide projected onto the screen in this scene ("Slide 40: A map of Ypres and its surrounding district, showing Kitchener’s Wood, Hill 60, Passchendaele") already prefigures later battles – notably the Third Battle of Ypres which began on 31 July 1917, and is the setting for the third Haig scene of the play: this implies, of course, that one bloodbath is much the same as any other, with no discernible learning curve in terms of military tactics. The two battle scenes, or sequences of vignettes, resemble one another in their juxtapositions of different voices; thus, for example, soldiers sing "There is a long, long trail a-winding," voiced-over by Haig, who spouts phrases which, although they may not always be attributable to him personally, are symptomatic of the kind of language he and other commanders did in fact employ in their Orders of the Day:

Complete victory… the destruction of German militarism… victory march on Berlin… slow deliberate fire is being maintained on the enemy positions… at this moment my men are advancing across no man’s land in full pack, dressing from left to right; the men are forbidden under pain of court-martial to take cover in any shell hole or dug-out… their magnificent morale will cause the enemy to flee in confusion… the attack will be driven home with the bayonet… I feel that every step I take is guided by the divine will. (Theatre Workshop 2006, 59-60)

Episodes set in GHQ – Haig conferring with his generals (who do dare to question his decisions) – are contrasted with the experiences of front-line soldiers: thus, three Irish soldiers "danc[ing] an advance based on the jig, 'The Irish Washerwoman' played on the pipes" find themselves completely isolated from other troops, and are shelled by their own artillery (Theatre Workshop 2006, 8). This suggests that Haig – not least because of his conviction that his every step is "guided by the divine will" – is pathologically out of touch with the "reality" of war as lived by the common soldier. This impression is reinforced throughout by ticker tape announcements of catastrophic losses – "JULY 1… SOMME… BRITISH LOSS 60,000 MEN ON THE FIRST DAY" – and by a series of slides depicting soldiers from both sides. In one of these slides, two captured Germans are shown "between two Tommies. One of the Germans is being given a drink of water by one of the Tommies." However, these soldiers have been abandoned by their compatriots back home, who greet the ticker tape casualty figures with "a roar of approval which melts into [the] singing" of "Rule Britannia" (Theatre Workshop 2006, 67; 78). Common soldiers bear their burdens bravely, and uncomplainingly; unlike their generals, they do know what the war is "really" like, and express this knowledge in their songs, sometimes irreverently – "I'd rather stay in England./In merry, merry England./And fornicate my bleeding life away" –, sometimes poignantly – "If you want the old battalion, we know where they are,/They're hanging on the old barbed wire" (Theatre Workshop 2006, 87; 71). Ultimately, though, they

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8 This episode is presumably based on the battalions of Royal Irish Rifles, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, and Royal Irish Fusiliers, which, on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, did manage to break through the German defences, but because the divisions to their right and left failed to make progress, they had to abandon their hard-won positions.
remain passive, not so much lions led by donkeys\(^9\) than lambs led to slaughter. In the play's 'confluence' of subject, form, and historical moment, this message is conveyed, paradoxically, by lionising the donkeys: as generals (and to a lesser extent, politicians and war profiteers) are given more scope for action on stage, this insinuates that their real-life counterparts had more scope for action historically, and could have decided to conduct the war differently had they wanted to, or might even have lobbied for peace negotiations. As Bernard Levin in his review of *Oh What a Lovely War* for *The Daily Mail* puts it succinctly: "The villain of the piece, for instance, squarely and without reservations, is Haig. Quite right too: he was" (qtd. in Theatre Workshop 2006, lxvi).

Thus, at mid-point between the First World War itself and yet another "creeping barrage" of anniversaries commemorating, from 2014 to 2018, its centenary (or centenaries), "bunking" revisionist military historians insist on the war's justness, and attempt to exonerate those who conducted it, while the popular view of the war is one of useless conflict, disaster, and a wasteland of mud populated by shell-shocked soldiers. It is, surely, a tribute to the powerful impact of *Oh What a Lovely War* that, in January 2014, the then Education Secretary Michael Gove should have singled out the play as one of the "fictional prism[s] of dramas" through which the myth of the Great War as "misbegotten shambles" had been perpetuated. In an article for *The Daily Mail*, Gove goes on to attack "Left-wing academics" for continuing to feed this myth, and to praise Gary Sheffield for his re-assessment of Douglas Haig. In the light of these comments, the revival of the play in its original home on 3 February 2014, could hardly have been more timely. And yet, it is not only because of its creative intervention in a debate about the First World War that the play is important: it is because it offers a way of thinking about all wars. Hence, in 2013, the Theatre Royal invited schools around Britain to explore what war meant to them in the 21st century. The best eight of these projects were shown as curtain-raiser during the 2014 run of *Oh What a Lovely War*.

**Works Cited**


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\(^9\) For the history of the phrase "lions [that is, brave soldiers] led by donkeys [incompetent and indifferent generals]" see Wikipedia. 11 March 2017. It is, of course, the source of the title of Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, which has already been mentioned as one of the intertexts of *Oh What a Lovely War*. 

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