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"They Had No Choice:" Images of Equines in the Great War

1. Historical Background

Equines in warfare conjure images of cavalry chargers at speed. Warhorses, however, primarily were workhorses – pack and draft animals – that provided transport, traction, and, above all, mobility for all three military arms – infantry, artillery, and cavalry. As in previous European conflicts, equines were the main source of energy in the Great War: a minority served as cavalry chargers and troop mounts, but the majority transported supplies and munitions to battle; hauled guns and their accouterments in battle; and carried the wounded and dead from battle. Horses and mules enabled the War and affected its outcome. As Field Marshall Douglas Haig observed: "if in March 1918 the equine force of Germany had been on the same scale and as efficient as the British equine force," then Germany would have broken through the British and French lines and likely changed the outcome of the war (qtd. in Winton 2013, 353).

When British military planners at the turn of the last century stared down the barrel of a conflict of unknown scale, scope, or duration, they resolved not to repeat the debacle of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 – a "tragic waste of animals" in which over 370,000 of 670,000 British equines perished – to cite Graham Winton's exhaustive study "Theirs Not to Reason Why:" Horsing the British Army 1875-1925.¹ Planners anticipated that motorized transportation and traction would play a significant role in the coming conflict, but they also knew that victory would depend on equines. The War Office strengthened both the Remount Service and Army Veterinary Service, introduced private horse and motor vehicle subsidy schemes, and created policies for the impressment of equines and motor vehicles alike.² Its survey of the national herd in 1912 found some 590,000 horses suitable (though not necessarily available) for military service – an insufficient number that also included fewer light horses "of the hunter type" and more heavy draft horses than were needed.

The prewar British military, in short, faced the daunting challenge of preparing for initial mobilization and ongoing supplying and resupplying of equines in unprecedented numbers, to potentially multiple and far-flung theaters of operation, for an unknown period of time. Almost immediately on declaration of war, the peacetime establishment of 20,000 equines, for example, would have to balloon to an initial wartime establishment of 160,000. Unlike continental armies with state breeding programs, moreover, the British army depended on the civilian market – domestic and foreign – for its equine force.³ Over the duration of the conflict, in Winton's account-

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1 Winton (2013, 118). "Essentially a 'horse war,'” Winton reminds us, the Anglo-Boer War “swallowed horses as a modern army swallows petrol” (94).
2 Winton observes that the Remount Service and Army Veterinary Service (both established in the 1880s) "were totally unprepared and unsuited for the responsibilities expected of them" in 1899, contributing to the equine wastage of the Anglo-Boer War (2013, 58).
3 Sir Walter Gilbey concluded from the British system of individual free enterprise that "we may therefore dismiss once for all any idea of a Government Horse-breeding establishment in the United Kingdom as impracticable and undesirable" (Gilbey 1913, 17). Spencer Borden concurrently urged the United States to develop a governmental breeding program, noting that "Great Britain alone [among the European nations] has been negligent in this matter, and has suffered the penalty” (Borden 1912, 1).
The Remount Service purchased approximately 1,250,000 horses, 470,000 in the United Kingdom and approximately 780,000 from abroad – over 700,000 of the latter from North America.

The overall scale of equine loss boggles the mind and darkens the spirit. In the end, wartime ‘wastage’ of British equines alone (loss by death, sickness, disposal, or other causes) totaled some 530,000 animals. (France, Germany, and Austria lost half of the 6,000,000 equines they collectively fielded.) The British numbers would have been much worse had the Army not established seventy veterinary hospitals, most of them abroad, admitting some 725,000 horses and curing 530,000 of them. At the end of hostilities on 11 November 1918, however, the British army held 896,000 animals, a number greatly exceeding the needed postwar establishment. As a result, in Winton’s words, "some 791,696 animals [...] had to be quickly disposed of, as humanely as possible" (Winton 2013, 34). Hundreds of thousands were euthanized, slaughtered for meat, or sold – most to productive lives in agriculture or transport, but many into what amounted to bondage.

2. Graphic and Photographic Images

Equines had been integral and essential to the prewar domestic and working lives of countless civilians – rural and urban, agricultural and industrial – and their wartime roles and fates went neither unnoticed nor unrepresented. Ubiquitous before, during, and after the war, reports and depictions of equines ranged from dispassionate accounts of them in official records as expensive but ultimately expendable resources to more passionate and far more variegated portrayals of them in other media and genres. Recruitment and solicitation posters, for example, depicted equines consistently as courageous and, pathetically, ‘dumb’ comrades in arms, while photographs treated them ambiguously as both valued living beings and valuable sources of labor; paintings and memorial essays portrayed them romantically as heroes, while literary works used them expressively as metaphors for human ‘wastage.’

The large and well-studied canon of Great War recruitment posters, more rhetorical than mimetic in intent, essentially trafficked in variants of one inspirational story: the military wants and needs men of strong mettle and in large numbers to ensure victory in its righteous conflict. Not all recruitment posters featured equines, of course, but many posters used images of them liberally and with latitude and, frequently, as visual and thematic focal points. The images varied widely in style of representation, depending on the specific rhetorical purpose. Posters might employ an exaggerated modern aesthetic to represent equines as embodiments of potency, or an embellished antiquarian style to represent them as icons of righteousness (a mounted St. George, ironically, served as subject for both England and Germany). In more naturalistic though still highly romantic depictions, horses proffered friendship, stiffened morale, or incarnated spirituality. 4

These posters were using equines, of course, to attract human – and generally male – recruits. Needless to say, horses figured prominently in recruitment posters for cavalry and horse artillery, where both the visual and verbal rhetoric accentuated an aggressive manliness (Image 1), as well as in recruitment posters for the Woman’s Land Army, where the rhetoric emphasized agrarian domesticity and productivity. Equines (and canines) also served to appeal more generally to duty and patriotism, as

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4 For classic and recent studies of Great War posters, see, for example, Hardie and Sabin (1920 [rpt. 2016]) and Ormiston (2013).
well as to guilt and shame – in the latter case, for example, one poster depicted a mounted trooper with the pronominally ambiguous caption, "He's Ready to Fight, Are You?" Directly anticipating current military recruitment strategies, finally, posters linked service with equines to the acquisition of marketable knowledge and skills for specialized trades or professions – particularly that of farriery – and, therefore, to the promise of a postwar livelihood.

While army and other military posters used ethos to recruit personnel, Blue Cross Fund posters used pathos to solicit funds for equine care. These posters also subtly equated equines and humans. One poster represents a terrified horse going down, for example, behind abstracted spears of light that signify a shell blast, that shield the blast's effects on the horse's lower body from the viewer, and that symbolize the possibility of surviving those effects with equine medical care. A second poster depicts a horse gone down, badly wounded from shelling and needing urgent medical help – an image that creates a visual correlative for the verbally expressed need to help "wounded" horses with "immediate" donations (Image 2). Since the tack, or saddlery, on both horses identifies them as mounts rather than pack or draft animals, the posters also tacitly draw attention to their absent riders – wounded or killed, by implication, by the same shell blasts. Equines hold the manifest visual focus, in short, while the equivalence of equines and humans holds the latent narrative focus.

Two other posters underscore the same theme of equivalence. A Blue Cross Fund poster features a horse whose tack – labeled "I Have done my Bit!" – identifies him as a war veteran, once presumably wounded and saved and now performing productive civilian service. Soliciting funds to help his "comrades," wounded equine veterans, share his salvation, the poster tacitly makes an appeal to help yet other comrades,

5 The ambiguity is almost surely intentional. A similar poster depicts a canine in a Red Cross harness with the unambiguous caption, "Even a Dog Enlists – Why Not You?"
6 Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WWI Posters, [LC-USZC4-11027].
wounded human veterans, to share it as well. Finally, a Red Star Fund poster – captioned "Help the Horse to Save the Soldier" over Fortunino Matania’s well known illustration "Good—bye, Old Man" – depicts a distraught soldier comforting his dying horse. The caption asks us to help horses to save soldiers, while the image asks us to help soldiers to save horses, an ambiguity underscored by the use of "man" to refer to horse. Bearing witness to the mutual valor and dependence of horse and man, the poster also, intentionally or not, points to their shared status as cannon fodder.

If the corpus of recruitment posters with equine imagery tells essentially one story, the extensive photographic record of equines in the Great War tells, or can be made to tell, two coexistent but competing stories. The first story, redolent with sentimentality, portrays equines as familial figures that, as recruits in the Expeditionary Force, shared fellowship with humans in both the garrison and the field, while also sharing and satisfying their instinctual need for safety in a herd (Image 3). Fed well and guarded against shelling and gas (photographs capture both equine and canine recruits wearing gas masks), equines are shown receiving attentive veterinary care near the front and, when needed, capable transport for more advanced care and recuperation in hospitals in the rear. They appear as courageous and skilled mounts, and versatile and tireless workers, who adapt to harsh circumstances and face tough obstacles.

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7 Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WWI Posters, [LC-USZC4-11251].
8 See Butler (2011) for many photographs reflecting these two stories.
Unloaded in England by gangplank or often by sling, equines were herded onto railcars both to and from Remount Depots, were embarked and disembarked for the Channel crossing, and then were transported by train to the Western Front. Once there, and the best human intentions for their care and safety notwithstanding, these horses and mules endured brutal working conditions in the mud and mire and, in countless cases, suffered privation, violent death, and mass burial.

The photographs telling these competing stories share two critical features. First, photographs of soldiers often picture only men, but those of equines almost always picture them with men. Whether men are cast as comrades, bosses, or, in effect, 'engineers' to mechanized equines, the photographs emphasize the relationship of men and horses. Second, photographs of equines represent them doing and suffering the same things that men do, or equivalents of those things. Whether the photographs are portraying equines as bold warriors and tireless workers, or as victims of mass conscription, destruction, and 'wastage,' they imply the equivalence of horses and men. Overall, the photographs invariably reflect a human point of view, but variably represent the shared human and equine experience as one of subject and subject, subject and object, or object and object.

In addition to graphic and photographic art, finally, the Great War also inspired a large yield of fine art. A Concise Catalogue of Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture of the First World War 1914-1918, for example, lists over 5,000 pieces in the Imperial War Museum alone. Great War art includes all relevant genres and subjects – panoramic battle scenes, studies of equines at work, equestrian portraits – and represents many styles. Battle scenes can be realistic and grim, such as Richard Caton Woodville's Captain Francis Grenfell at Audregnies, or impressionistic and vibrant, such as Alfred Munnings's Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron. Studies of equines tend to be stylized, whether toward the martial, like Harold Power's Bringing Up the Guns (Image 4), or the arcadian, like Lucy Kemp-Welch's Ladies' Army Remount Depot, Russley Park, Wiltshire. Equestrian portraits are idealized, as in all wars: Jan van Chelminski's portraits of Foch, Haig, Joffre, and Pershing prove no exception.10

10 See Fairley (2016) for a recent and very well illustrated discussion of the scores of artists commissioned by England, the Empire countries, and the United States.
3. Literary Images

Turning to the written word, one genre of Great War writing – exemplified by Captain Sidney Galtrey's *The Horse and the War* (1918) and D.S. Tamblyn's *The Horse in War* (1932) – unabashedly depicts equines as heroes. Galtrey's wartime tribute to "the hundreds of thousands of horses and mules that have been gallantly aiding the Empire's Cause" is an apologia for the military that also, and with obvious sincerity, asks readers to "perhaps spare a grateful thought for the horses and mules which in their thousands made our salvation possible" (Galtrey 1918, 13, 98). Tamblyn's post-war valedictory to "the list of dumb animals who cannot speak for themselves" is more obviously a eulogy, cataloging instances of equine heroism and suffering and employing 'dumbness' as its leitmotif and its *raison d'être*: Tamblyn will speak now for those who could not speak then (Tamblyn 1932, 21). It concludes with nearly fifty pages of portraits and biographies of "famous Canadian war horses" that accord them the dignity of individualism without the indignity of anthropomorphism.

Excepting countless divisional histories and personal memoirs, mainly pertaining to cavalry, imaginative literature of the Great War paid equines scant attention. Siegfried Sassoon's semi-autobiographical fictional trilogy, *The Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937), however, notably extended a venerable equestrian literary tradition that treats the chase – hunting on horseback – as essential training for warfare. Modern anglophone contributors to the tradition include, among many others, Lewis Ed-
ward Nolan, whose *Cavalry: History and Tactics* (1853) argued that military horses and riders benefit as much from the chase as from dressage, and E.A.H. Alderson, whose *Pink and Scarlet, or Hunting as a School for Soldiering* (1900) offered an adroit treatise on its titular subject written, as pointedly noted in its Preface, aboard the "S.S. 'Malta,' En route to South Africa, October 1899" (Alderson, 1900, viii).

The first volume of Sassoon's trilogy, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), tracks its protagonist Sherston from idyllic boyhood in rural England to grim manhood on the Western Front, from initiation into fox hunting to initiation into warfare. (A horseman who declines a commission in the Remount Service and resigns one "in my own Yeomanry," Sherston enlists, from a sense of duty, in the infantry). In a pivotal symbolic moment, Sherston transfers ownership of Cockbird, his thoroughbred hunter from home, to a squadron commander, knowing that "I had lost him" (Sassoon 1964, 224). Though "happy," nonetheless, when leading his platoon in the rear, and "happier still" when "canter[ing] about the open country by myself" on a borrowed mare (255), Sherston becomes miserable at the front. In the final scene, he climbs from his company headquarters dug-out -- "a morose cramped little scene, loathsome to live in as it is hateful to remember" (272) -- to stand watch, trading a reverie of the hunt for the view across no man's land.

*Fox-Hunting Man* rests on a juxtaposition of the openness, lightness, joy in natural beauty, and kinetic mobility of the rural chase with the claustrophobia, darkness, devastation of nature, and static deadlock of trench warfare. The antithesis of trench combat, Sassoon implies, fox hunting could prepare no one for this War.\footnote{Fox-Hunting Man, however, also advances a subterranean counter-theme too subtle to unpack here: namely, that hunting in fact did prepare one for some aspects of the Great War.} The historic conflation of hunting and soldiering rings anachronistic and false, and not least because military leaders lack the integrity imputed to hunt masters early in the volume. Cavalry officers, who formed the Army leadership cadre, not only had deluded themselves into anticipating an "Open War" -- cavalry operations on open terrain -- but also had sustained the delusion despite its costs. Thus, at the opening of the second volume, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1932), Sherston finds himself at the Fourth Army School in 1916, still engaged in "blank-cartridged skirmishing in a land of field-day make-believe" (286).

Identifying a cynical "exploitation of courage" as "the essential tragedy of the War" (Sassoon 1928, 230), Sassoon resembles Ernest Hemingway and the latter's treatment of wartime human agents and human and equine victims. In "An Introduction by the Author," added to the 1930 edition of *In Our Time* (1925) and subsequently retitled "The Quay at Smyrna," Hemingway deployed his signature conjunction of flat prose and violent event to recall the slaughter visited on equines, most likely mules, during an evacuation in the Greco-Turkish War: "they just broke their forelegs and dumped them into the shallow water" (Hemingway 1930, 12). Hemingway not only used this incident as the governing metaphor for the Great War in *In Our Time*, but he also reused it twice in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) -- his massive "introduction to the modern Spanish bullfight" (Hemingway 1932, 519).

Hemingway advances the powerful thesis that the bullfight "is not a sport in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word [...] Rather, it is a tragedy" played out by bull and man, ending in "certain death for the animal:" the matador may be wounded or killed, that is, but the bull always will be wounded and killed (Hemingway 1932, 16). Hemingway already had accounted for the third player in this ritual, the horse, with the jaw-dropping comment that "the death of the horse tends to be comic while that of the
bull is tragic" (6). The death of the horse, Hemingway proposes, is not tragic because it is not inevitable, but neither is it comic because it is violent and final. It tends toward comedy, rather, through "the strange and burlesque visceral accidents which occur" (7). Using "visceral" literally, Hemingway means the moment when the guts of a gored horse spew into the ring and sometimes spray spectators. Neither tragic nor comic, these "visceral accidents" instead represent a "burlesque of tragedy" (7).

"At the first bullfight I ever went to I expected to be horrified and perhaps sickened by what I had been told would happen to the horse" (1). In this terse opening sentence, Hemingway introduces both the subject of the horse's wounding or death and the theme of the spectator's witnessing it. That theme develops two ideas. First, aficionados (like Hemingway) recognize equine wounding or death as secondary to the tragedy, but also as inherent in it and unavoidable in its performance; as a spectator, Hemingway cannot claim honestly to be horrified or sickened, but, instead, must accept his complicity. Second, government officials and fight promoters, who mandate the use of the "peto" – a kind of "quilted mattress" – to protect the horse's abdomen, have caused fewer horses to be killed, but nearly all horses to be badly wounded; as designers of something "to allow the horses to suffer while their suffering is spared the spectator" (12), they dishonor the ritual and cause the spectator to dishonor himself.

The larger meaning behind the thesis and themes of Death in the Afternoon rests on this premise: "The only place where you could see life and death, i.e., violent death now that the wars were over, was in the bull ring" (2). That insight, together with the dissociation of war from sport and the association of it with tragedy, generates a sustained metaphor for the Great War. Some generals and ranking officers may suffer wounding or death, but many other combatants, men and horses, will suffer them. Civilian "spectators" who supported the War must accept their complicity in its carnage. Government officials and war profiteers, moreover, who deployed the "petos" of patriotism and propaganda to spare civilians from "seeing" the effects of violence, effectively robbed that suffering of its meaning (or, more grimly, hid its meaninglessness). Civilians who cheered martial victory, as a result, dishonor themselves. Ultimately, the ritual of violent death in the bullfight serves as metaphor – but can serve only as metaphor – for "life and death, i.e., violent death" as suffered in the War.

Sassoon had cautioned in Infantry Officer that "those who expect a universalization of the Great War must look for it elsewhere. Here they will only find an attempt to show its effect on a somewhat solitary-minded young man" (Sassoon 1964, 291). Sharing Sassoon's distaste for universal abstractions, Hemingway rejected them in In Our Time as lacking truth (especially in "Big Two Hearted River," his rejoinder to Eliot's Waste Land), and repudiated them in Farewell to Arms as lacking the "dignity" of names and numbers. In Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway may risk such abstraction with his use of the bullfight as metaphor for the War and horses as metaphor for men in the War, but he also accords those horses their concrete dignity as animals maimed and killed in ritual and real tragedies where their role was secondary, their fate inherent, and their witnesses without honor. More than metaphors, horses are metonymies for men who also "had no choice."

16 I borrow the phrase and my title from an inscription on the Animals in War Memorial in Hyde Park (David Backhouse, 2004).
Works Cited


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