

‘Train Yourself to Defend Your Country’: British Children’s Novels in the First World War

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Frigidly she bowed to him, took her hand from her muff, and with another curt bow presented him with a white feather.

‘Just to remind you,’ said she, ‘that your place is in the trenches and not lolling and flirting over the counter of a London novelty shop.’

With another sarcastic bend of her head she walked out, leaving Harold dumb with anger and amazement, and the white feather, the badge of cowardice, in his hand.¹

Of course Harold, the hero of Tom Bevan’s children’s novel *Doing his ‘Bit’* (1917), in no way deserves the white feather he has been given by the stranger. For when he heard of the outbreak of the First World War, he immediately returned to Britain in order to enlist. In his eagerness to do his ‘bit’ he resembles all the other heroes and heroines of the innumerable children’s war stories which were published in the years of the Great War. These stories tell of the exciting adventures and great deeds of a boy hero or a girl heroine against the background of this conflict.

The following paper, which contains material from my PhD project, is based on an analysis of more than 50 of these novels. They were written for both boys and girls and published in book form as well as in magazines. The aim of these novels was not merely to entertain their audience. They were also an attempt to explain to their readers what the war was about, why Britain was fighting it and, ultimately, to gain their support. That this was their aim can be clearly seen from quotations like the following, which is taken from the preface to Escott Lynn’s novel *In Khaki for the King* (1915):

It is up to you boys of to-day to see that a similar danger never threatens your glorious Empire again. Those of you who have not yet donned khaki, see to it that when you are old enough you train yourselves to defend your homes, your mothers, your sisters, your country, all that you hold dear [...].²

This paper deals with the question of how the novelists under discussion attempted to achieve this aim. Two basic strategies can be distinguished to this end: On the one hand, novelists took up contemporary wartime propaganda, on the other, they also made use of narrative strategies, plots and metaphors that they had already been using in pre-world war novels. Writers had used these methods of presenting war in order to depict it as exciting but harmless, because by these methods, the dark side of war was played down or suppressed. They were now adopted to the same end again, with the result that even the Great War was presented as an exciting adventure, not as the terrible mass slaughter which it undoubtedly was.

The reason why children’s novelists were so eager to justify the Great

War to their audience seems obvious: The First World War was the first 'modern' and 'total' war in which Britain participated.³ It was quite unlike the small, colonial wars of the past century, in which only a small professional army had been involved. Now, the support of the population as a whole was necessary, for Britain needed not only a large army but also munition workers, nurses, mechanics and people to work the land.⁴ So after the outbreak of war, a huge propaganda machine was gradually set up in which government agencies, national newspapers and other institutions were involved.⁵ British novelists and their writings played an important part in this propaganda machine: With their tales of German atrocities and cheerful stories of life at the front they presented the official propaganda in an easily accessible and seemingly innocent way (well-known examples are for instance Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915) or Rudyard Kipling's "Mary Postgate" (1915)).⁶ So immediately after the outbreak of the war, the support of a number of famous writers was secretly secured.⁷

Children were primary targets of war-time propaganda,⁸ for they, too, became involved in the war (for example because their fathers were away). Children's novelists did their 'bit' to gain the support of their readers and depicted heroes and heroines eager to do what was expected of them. The tasks they undertake are numerous, most of the boy heroes join the army or navy and take part in the most exciting battles of the war — for instance at the Somme, Ypres and Gallipoli, all of which are depicted as exciting and successful for the British.⁹ In some cases, girls also join the fighting, though rather against their will, as in the case of Pickles, the heroine of Ethel Kenyon's *Pickles; A Red Cross Heroine* (1916), who gets involved in an aerial combat and succeeds in killing a famous German flying ace.¹⁰ Other heroines carry out more conventional tasks — munitions-making, nursing and knitting — but even these tasks are exciting and rewarding. However small their contribution, they are all shown to help the war effort, as Mary, the heroine of Brenda Girvin's *Munition Mary* (1918), emphasizes: "One more hand! What use was one more worker where so many must be wanted? But every *one* mattered. It was all the ones, and ones, and ones that made up the great total."¹¹

Especially when fighting abroad, some of the characters get into close contact with the German enemy.¹² Because many of the heroes happen to be in Belgium at the outbreak of the war, they witness the German invasion and the many atrocities committed against the civilian population.¹³ These atrocities against 'poor little Belgium' were one of the most important themes in British propaganda, and are also very prominent in children's novels.¹⁴ A very interesting example for this is Escott Lynn's *In Khaki for the King* (1915), which tells the story of Vivian and Oliver. At the outbreak of the war, these two are in Germany, where they find out about the German army's plans of attack — an excellent proof by the way, that it was the Germans who started the war after years of careful plotting.¹⁵ This frequent accusation implied that Germany alone was responsible for the war. Oliver and Vivian

manage to warn the Belgian officials before the Germans arrive and they participate in the first battles of the war. They also witness some of the behaviour of the Germans towards the Belgians:

Meanwhile the soldiers made ready to fire, when, just as they were going to pull the trigger, the woman, with a wild cry, rushed up to one of the prisoners, and threw her arms round him as though she would protect him from the bullets. [...] [T]he half-drunken soldiers raised their rifles and sent in several volleys.

Bayonets and rifle-butts finished the fearful business, but neither Oliver nor Vivian dared gaze upon the scene. When they again looked out all the victims were dead, even the poor little boy, who had been bayoneted.¹⁶

This rather crude example is just one of many similar descriptions; in Dorothea Moore's *Wanted, an English Girl* (1916), for instance, the heroine finds a dead baby and its mother who have been murdered by the Germans.¹⁷

The Germans, it is quite evident, are described as cruel, brutal and barbarous 'Huns.' They represent "brute force"¹⁸ and are referred to as "the enemy of mankind and civilisation" and the "inhuman foe"¹⁹, whom the British have to defeat in order to bring peace to the world. In accordance with contemporary propaganda, the Kaiser, above all, is made personally responsible for the most terrible deeds committed by the Germans. In Robert Leighton's *Dreadnoughts of the Dogger* (1916), for instance, he orders the sinking of a large ocean liner — an incident similar to the sinking of the *Lusitania*.²⁰

The most serious reproach made against the Germans is probably that their way of fighting is deeply unfair: They wage war against women and children, they use poison gas, and sink merchant ships.²¹ In this, they differ greatly from the British, whose method of warfare is depicted as impeccable. The British soldiers carefully protect women and children, they never attack an unsuspecting or unarmed enemy, and unlike German gas, British gas does not kill, it merely stupefies.²² Whereas the British are careful to follow the rules of "civilised warfare",²³ the Germans claim that there are no such rules. The following speech made by a German officer is taken from Tom Bevan's *Doing his 'Bit'* (1917):

'Herr Lieutenant, there is a proverb in English — 'All's fair in love and war.' You say that, we believe it; that is the difference between you and us. [...] War is a big game — the biggest of all games; and one side must win and the other lose. He wins who uses the most and strongest means to an end; to win you must destroy. [...] That is where you English do not understand what war is. You would play it according to rules like your cricket and football; you would put a belt around a nation as you do around your boxers and say you must not

hit 'below the belt;' you would pad the gloves. Himmel! what folly, what a nation of fools!'²⁴

The German's speech clearly shows that he and his countrymen have no notion of 'playing the game', unlike the British. The ideal of 'playing the game' is of course one which is already well-known from pre-war literature.²⁵ It has its origin in Henry Newbolt's poem "Vitai Lampada" with its famous lines "Play up! Play up! and play the game!"²⁶ Playing the game, i.e. the "unquestioning adherence to the rules",²⁷ became a term frequently used to describe correct and acceptable behaviour — both on the playing field and the battle field. The expression is used for instance in May Wynn's *An English Girl in Serbia* (1916) "'Arrah, the dirst bastes,' cried O'Mara in disgust, 'don't they iver have the laste notion av playin' the game? Shame on them, vid their four to one against a broth av a boy.'"²⁸

There are other ways in which war is linked to sports. The following quotation is taken from Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883). It describes the doctor's reaction to the bombardment by the pirates:

All through the evening they kept thundering away. Ball after ball flew over or fell short, or kicked up the sand in the enclosure; [...] and though one popped in through the roof of the long-house and out again through the floor, we soon got used to that sort of horse-play, and minded it no more than cricket.²⁹

The implications of linking war with sports are obvious: By comparing the unknown to the known, war loses much of its strangeness. It becomes part of the everyday world of the reader, something trivial he or she does not have to fear. Moreover, the novels imply that just like sports, war is regulated by rules. It is therefore quite harmless. The plot of novels such G.A. Henty's *The Dash for Khartoum* (1883) shows this clearly: It depicts a group of boys first as members of a school football team and later in the army. In both activities, the better team invariably wins.³⁰ Of course, this better team usually happens to be the British.

Novelists describing the Great War continued to use the war-sports metaphor, which Robert MacDonald refers to as "the ultimate euphemism".³¹ It was one of several motifs and narrative techniques which they employed in the years before the war, and continued to employ, in order to cut war down to size. For instance, a motive often used in the pre-war novels was that of disguise. It was a means of creating excitement and of giving the hero opportunities for adventure. In Charles Gilson's *The Lost Column* (1909) the hero and his friends are caught in the Boxer rebellion. Gerald, who speaks fluent Chinese, disguises himself as a Boxer in order to be able to reach the European troops.³² Unfortunately, he is recognized by one of the enemies; in the days following Gerald experiences an exciting chase through enemy country. This resembles a game of hide-and-seek in which Gerald always

manages to outwit his opponent. The same motif, which again trivializes war by linking it to child play, is frequently used in novels of the First World War. It occurs, for instance, in John Buchan's *Greenmantle* (1916), where Richard Hannay travels to Germany disguised as a Boer in order to discover who Greenmantle is.³³ He is found out, and in an exciting flight, during which he changes his disguises several times, succeeds in crossing the frontier into safety. His escape is the result of the resourcefulness and cleverness of the typical British hero and is clear proof of British superiority.

The Great War was an industrialised war. It was dominated by machinery and high explosives, and became characterized by mass armies, battles of attrition and high casualties. The Western Front was and is still seen as the ultimate symbol of this war, which was quite unlike the heroic and picturesque little wars that had been depicted in pre-wartime writings — especially in children's novels. "It was technology that had made the war different [...] The guns of the artillery were bigger [...]; gas changed the odds on infantry attacks; machine guns made massed assaults impossibly costly in lives."³⁴ It has frequently been claimed that especially in the years after 1916 (the year the battles of Verdun and the Somme took place) a process of disenchantment set in.³⁵ Instead of being perceived as an exciting adventure, war was now seen as terrible and futile. This was largely due to the nature of the war on the Western Front, which was static trench warfare with little movement or change and little room for individual heroism. "War has never been looked at in the same way since. It was no longer about personal fulfilment or honour or even heroism. It was about survival."³⁶ The new attitude towards war found its most famous expression in the writings of the war poets, the so-called 'literature of disenchantment' among whose writers figure Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves.³⁷ In recent years, this view of a general and far-reaching disillusionment was increasingly questioned, for example by Rosa Maria Bracco, who has examined works by so called 'middlebrow writers'.³⁸ Rather than stressing the futility of the war, these writers continued to emphasize the justice and righteousness of the British cause.

Children's literature displays no signs of disillusionment with war, either. While this is perhaps less surprising (for a disenchanted war literature in the vein of Sassoon might have been considered rather unsuitable for children), the fact that the Great War is depicted as only marginally different from, for example, the colonial wars of the Victorian era, is perhaps rather more so. In fact, children's writers seem to take great pains to play down what was perceived as the special and different nature of this war. The most obvious result of this attempt is that few of the children's novels are set on the Western Front. In spite of the fact that this was the most important theatre of war, which needed more soldiers and produced more casualties than any other front, many of the novels do not describe it. This is clearly shown by titles such as *How We Baffled the Germans: The Exciting Adventures of Two Boys In South-West Africa*; *Frank Forrester: A Story of the Dardanelles* and

*The Submarine Hunters: A Story of Naval Patrol Work in the Great War.*³⁹ War in these places seems very traditional compared to that on the Western Front. It is a war of movement and action which leaves room for exciting cavalry charges and decisive action. One of the officers in Brereton's *On the Road to Bagdad* (1916) exclaims after an attack: "'If that's war — the sort of war we're likely to have in Mesopotamia — then the more of it we have the merrier.'"⁴⁰ In these theatres of war, British soldiers faced well-known enemies, such as the Arabs, the Turks and the Boers. These are often shown to fight with rather traditional weapons, for instance lances and knives, so the war described is not at all like the anonymous mechanized nightmare of the Western Front. Rather, it resembles the heroic wars depicted in Victorian and Edwardian children's novels. Why writers should have preferred to describe this kind of warfare to their audience is obvious: It was much easier to keep the support and even enthusiasm for such a war than it would have been for the kind of warfare described by the 'literature of disillusionment', which consisted of inaction and boredom and in which soldiers were victims and heroism was impossible.⁴¹

Ultimately, even those novels set on the Western Front therefore attempt to give the impression that things have not really changed. The heroes of novels such as Lynn's *Oliver Hastings, V.C.* (1916) or Westerman's *The Dispatch-Riders* (1915) usually spend very little time in the trenches. They often serve in the cavalry or as dispatch-riders, so their war is a very mobile and active one. Those heroes who are members of the infantry, too, are very often absent from the trenches, for they spend a lot of time looking for German spies. All heroes and heroines are very successful in this war: They capture German trenches single-handedly, they save the lives of famous generals, and stop German offensives all on their own. For this, they get richly rewarded with numerous *M.C.s* and *V.C.s*.⁴² These, and the fact that no great injuries ever happen to them nor their friends are probably the most obvious ways by which the novels suggest that even the First World War was an exciting, rewarding and basically harmless affair.

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Notes

1. Tom Bevan, *Doing his 'Bit': A Story of the Great War* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1917), 52.
2. Escott Lynn, *In Khaki for the King: A Tale of the Great War* (London: E.P. Dutton, 1915), v.
3. Ian Strachan, "Introduction," in: *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Ian Strachan (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 1–8.
4. Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1965), *passim*.
5. The propaganda effort is described in: Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Word: Literature as Propaganda 1914–18 and After* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987); and Cate Haste, *Keep the Home Fires*

- Burning: Propaganda in the First World War* (London: Allan Lane, 1977).
6. Ian Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand: Being the Unofficial Chronicle of a Unit of 'K (I)'* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1918 [1915]); Rudyard Kipling, "Mary Postgate," in: *Rudyard Kipling: War Stories and Poems*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 235–49.
7. Buitenhuis, 14.
8. Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane, "Kinder und Jugendliche," in: *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld/Gerd Krumeich/Irina Renz (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 135–141.
9. See e.g. Frederick S. Brereton, *Under Haig in Flanders: A Story of Vimy, Messines and Ypres* (London: Blackie, 1917); Escott Lynn, *Oliver Hastings, V.C.: A Realistic Story of the Great War* (London: W.&R. Chambers, 1916); Herbert Strang, *Frank Forrester: A Story of the Dardanelles* (London: Henry Frowde, 1915).
10. Ethel Kenyon, *Pickles; A Red Cross Heroine* (London/Glasgow: Colliers' Clear-Type P., 1916), Chapters III–IV.
11. Brenda Girvin, *Munition Mary* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 43.
12. Enemies of other nationalities are much less important in the novels.
13. E.g. Percy F.C. Westerman's *The Dispatch-Riders: The Adventure of Two British Motor-Cyclists in the Great War* (London: Blackie, 1915).
14. Cf. John Horne/Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 2001).
15. A frequent claim; cf. Charles Gilson, *Submarine U93: A Tale of the Great War, of German Spies and Submarines, of Naval Warfare and all Manner of Adventure* (London: 'The Boy's Own Paper' Office, 1916), 15f.
16. Lynn, 124.
17. Dorothea Moore, *Wanted, an English Girl: The Adventures of an English Schoolgirl in Germany* (London: S.W. Partridge and Co., 1916), 382.
18. Herbert Strang, *A Hero of Liège: A Story of the Great War* (London: Henry Frowde/Hodder & Stoughton, 1914), 111.
19. Rowland Walker, *Oscar Darnby, V.C.: A Tale of the Great European War* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1916), 99 and 109.
20. Robert Leighton, *Dreadnoughts of the Dogger: A Story of War on the North Sea* (London/Melbourne: Ward, Lock & Co., 1916), 261.
21. E.g. Moore, Ch. XVII; Nellie Pollock, *More Belgian Playmates: Heroes Small — Heroes Tall: A Second Story of the Great European War* (London: Gay & Hancock, 1915), *passim*.
22. Tom Bevan, *With Haig at the Front: A Story of the Great Fight* (London: Collins' Clear-Type P, 1916), 150.
23. Pollock, 150.
24. Bevan, 175.
25. Cf. e.g. Robert MacDonald, "A Poetics of War: Militarist Discourse in the British Empire, 1880-1918," *Mosaic* 23.3 1990, 17-35.
26. Henry Newbolt, "Vitai Lampada," in: *The Island Race* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1995 [1898]), 81f.

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- 27.Cecil D. Eby, *The Road to Armageddon: The Martial Spirit in English Popular Literature 1870- 1914* (Durham: Duke UP, 1987), 87.
- 28.May Wynne, *An English Girl in Serbia: The Story of a Great Adventure* (London: Collins' Clear-Type P., 1916), 67.
- 29.Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Manchester: World International Publishing, 1989 [1883]), 101.
- 30.George Alfred Henty, *The Dash for Khartoum: A Tale of the Nile Expedition* (Mill Hall: Preston/Speed Publications, 2000 [1891]).
- 31.MacDonald, *passim*.
- 32.Charles Gilson, *The Lost Column: A Story of the Boxer Rebellion in China* (London: Henry Frowde/Hodder & Stoughton, 1909).
- 33.John Buchan, *Greenmantle* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1942 [1916]).
- 34.Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 56.
- 35.Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: OUP, 1975).
- 36.John M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 235.
37. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990): *passim*.
- 38.Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1993).
- 39.Eric Wood, *How We Baffled the Germans: The Exciting Adventures of Two Boys In South-West Africa* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1917); Strang, Frank Forrester; Percy F.C. Westerman, *The Submarine Hunters: A Story of Naval Patrol Work in the Great War* (London/Glasgow: Blackie, 1918).
- 40.Brereton, 75.
- 41.John Onions, *English Fiction and Drama of the Great War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 50–6.
- 42.For example: Brereton, *Under Haig in Flanders*; Lynn, *Oliver Hastings, V.C.*; May Baldwin, *Irene to the Rescue: The Story of an English Girl's Fight for the Right* (London: Chambers, 1916).