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BRITISH AND GERMAN MEMOIRS OF  
THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by

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ABSTRACT

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An examination of primary sources written by those who served in the First World War lends unparalleled insight into the experience of the war and the mood of the early twentieth century. The works of British authors Edmund Blunden, Guy Chapman, and Siegfried Sassoon, are examined alongside the accounts by German writers Hans Carossa, Ernst Jünger, and Erich Maria Remarque. The authors share in common five specific points: they express similar initial reactions to the war, later exhibit disappointment with the war, demonstrate sympathy for their enemies, share a sense of strong loyalty and camaraderie with their brothers-in-arms, and feel

disconnected from society at home. Although they are not unanimous in their accounts of the war, the memories they recorded show that the experience of the war was common to both sides of the conflict, and are examples of the larger collective memory of the First World War generation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of the First World War cannot be overstated. The conflict ushered in a wave of worldwide transformation, the effects of which are still felt a century later. The war drastically altered the course of global politics, refined military tactics and strategies, ushered in an age of technological development, gave rise to advances in medicine and psychology, inspired new movements in art and literature, and paved the way for future conflicts through punitive peace treaties. In addition to these wide-ranging political and social changes, the First World War directly affected the lives of everyone who volunteered as well as their families at home. What was supposed to have been a short, sportsmanlike conflict and a proving ground for the manhood of the younger generation became four years of fruitless stalemate and bloody attrition in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The war disappointed those at home and shocked those on the frontlines, ending the idyllic nineteenth century and beginning what many saw as an era of soullessness and mechanized destruction. The monotony, stress, and hardship of the war drastically altered the lives of those who served. Hundreds of published and unpublished personal accounts from the war demonstrate feelings of disillusionment with the original aims of the war, a sense of separation from the rest of society, regret for the vast loss of human life, and uncertainty toward the future of the world.

The historian J.M. Winter termed the prolific output of memoirs, fiction, and poetry based upon firsthand experiences of the First World War as "war literature."<sup>1</sup> Such works were popular, he said, because the topics they discussed were interesting for civilians and other veterans, and because the authors' writing styles were innovative and unusual.<sup>2</sup> War literature was gritty, cynical, and grotesque in its attempt to communicate the indescribable experience of war. Winter explained that each participant nation developed its own unique style for writing war literature.<sup>3</sup> The question remains, however, does a difference in writing style indicate a difference in experience? Did soldiers from different countries describe a similar experience of war in their writings, or were their opinions, trials, and ordeals from 1914 to 1918 vastly different? Did victory or loss affect the experience of the war, or was the experience similar regardless of nationality?

An examination of three British and three German memoirs written by veterans demonstrates that the experience of the First World War was greatly similar on both sides. The realities constructed by these individuals defied assumptions about national differences and showed remarkably similar attitudes toward the war and humanity. This paper will describe the similar themes which emerge from their writings, and show that the ordeals of war did not, in fact, differ greatly for the victors or the losers. The works of British authors Edmund Blunden, Guy Chapman, and Siegfried Sassoon, are examined alongside the accounts of German writers Hans Carossa, Ernst Jünger, and Erich Maria Remarque. The authors demonstrated similar feelings in five major areas: initial reactions to the war, changing attitudes toward the war, relationships with

enemies, devotion to fellow soldiers, and sense of disunity with society at home. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 show the chosen texts and provide relevant biographical information about each author.

Table 1.1 Selected British Authors

Name	Blunden, Edmund	Chapman, Guy	Sassoon, Siegfried
Title of Work	<i>Undertones of War</i>	<i>A Passionate Prodigality</i>	<i>Memoirs of an Infantry Officer</i>
Date of Publication	1928 <sup>4</sup>	1933 <sup>5</sup>	1930 <sup>6</sup>
Age and Years of Service	19-22 from 1915-1918 <sup>7</sup>	26-29 from 1915-1918 <sup>8</sup>	28-31 from 1914-1917 <sup>9</sup>
Occupation during War	11 <sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment <sup>10</sup> , Intelligence Officer	Royal Fusiliers, London Regiment <sup>11</sup> ; Adjutant <sup>12</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Royal Welch Fusiliers; Second Lieutenant
Major Battles	Somme, Ancre Valley, Thiepval <sup>13</sup>	Somme, Arras, Spring Offensive	Somme, Battle of the Scarpe, Arras

Table 1.2 Selected German Authors

Name	Carossa, Hans	Jünger, Ernst	Remarque, Erich Maria
Title of Work	<i>A Roumanian Diary</i>	<i>Storm of Steel</i>	<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>
Age and Years of Service	36-40 from 1914-1918 <sup>14</sup>	19-23 from 1914-1918 <sup>15</sup>	18-20 from 1916-1918 <sup>16</sup>
Date of Publication	1924 <sup>17</sup>	1920 <sup>18</sup>	1929 <sup>19</sup>
Occupation during War	Bavarian Infantry Regiment; Junior Medical Officer	73 <sup>rd</sup> Hanoverian Fusilier Regiment; Lieutenant <sup>20</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup> Guard Division of Hem-Lenglet; Soldier
Major Battles	Somme, Winter Campaign on Eastern Front <sup>21</sup>	Artois, Somme, Ypres <sup>22</sup>	Unknown

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MEMOIRS

#### 2.1 British Publications

British veterans of the First World War began publishing their works as early as 1917; the earliest known example is Donald A. Hankey's *A Student in Arms*.<sup>23</sup> However, the majority of British memoirs was published toward the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s. These accounts were vastly popular because of their subject matter and their style.<sup>24</sup> The most famous accounts were written by soldiers already known for their war poetry and prose, such as the famous authors Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Edmund Blunden. An abundance of personal accounts were written during the war, but most of these have never been published, and are retained only in the records of historical societies and private collections. However, thanks to the efforts of the British government, various historians, and the soldiers' descendants, dozens of personal diaries have been transcribed from the original documents and are now available online.<sup>25</sup> A renewed interest in World War I has led to the publication of many new books, such as Max Arthur's *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (2002), a compilation of stories transcribed from taped interviews with soldiers of the First World War, Richard Van Emden's *Britain's Last Tommies* (2005), a collection of accounts of 270 of Britain's last living veterans, and Peter Liddle's *Captured Memories* (2010), an anthology of interviews with those who experienced the war. Additionally, Pen and

Sword Books has released several new biographies on the war's most famous writers, including Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, and Siegfried Sassoon.<sup>26</sup> Although no British war diary has ever been made into a film, British author Pat Barker was inspired by the writings of Graves, Owen, and Sassoon, and based her 1991 book *Regeneration* upon their post-war reflections.<sup>27</sup> In 1998, the book was adapted for film and released in the United Kingdom as *Regeneration* and as *Behind the Lines* in the United States, grossing only \$19,273 in the U.S. and £206,246 in the U.K.,<sup>28</sup> and receiving poor reviews.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2 German Publications

German memoirs from the First World War appeared as early as 1916, such as Manfred von Richthofen's *Der rote Kampfflieger (The Red Battle Flier)*<sup>30</sup> yet the majority of works were written toward the late 1920s and into the 1930s. Many war-glorifying accounts were also reprinted during the 1930s and 1940s for propaganda purposes. The most well-known war diaries were written by famous soldiers and aviators, for example Manfred von Richthofen's 1917 autobiography *Der rote Kampfflieger (The Red Battle Flier)* and Ernst Jünger's 1920 *In Stahlgewittern (Storm of Steel)*. Yet Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues (All Quiet on the Western Front)* based on his experiences as a soldier in the First World War is by far the most popular work. It was reprinted in fourteen different editions in English in 1929 alone, and is required reading for most American high schools.<sup>31</sup> Several memoirs such as Ernst Rosenhainer's *Forward, March!* and Walter Bloem's *Advance from Mons, 1914* have been published in English after 2000. A variety of recent books based upon the

memoirs of German soldiers have also been published, such as Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann's *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letter and Eyewitness Accounts* (2010), an account of life during the war based upon 200 primary documents including letters, photographs, journals, and newspapers, as well as new editions of Remarque's novel and classics such as Herbert Sulzbach's *Zwei lebende Mauern* (published in English as *With the German Guns*.) In contrast to the British film *Regeneration*, a few German memoirs have been adapted for film. The earliest is the 1931 film *Berge in Flammen (Mountains in Flames)* based upon Luis' Trenker's novel of the same name.<sup>32</sup> Several films inspired by the life and autobiography of Manfred von Richthofen have also been produced, including *Der blaue Max* (The Blue Max, 1966), *Manfred von Richthofen - Der rote Baron (Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, 1971)*, and *Der rote Baron (The Red Baron, 2008)*. Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues (All Quiet on the Western Front)* was first taken to the silver screen in 1930, and won two Oscars and several additional awards.<sup>33</sup> The television series *Hallmark Hall of Fame* adapted the book for television in 1979.<sup>34</sup> Recently, producers Ian Stokell and Lesley Paterson have developed a new screenplay based upon the novel and plan to begin filming a remake starring Daniel Radcliffe in 2012.<sup>35</sup>

## CHAPTER 3

### THE AUTHORS

#### 3.1 The British Authors' Style

Although they express similar opinions, the authors examined in this paper differ from one another in their writing styles. The British authors tend to be reserved, with a focus on facts over feelings. Their works divert attention away from their battle experiences and onto reflections of home, verbose descriptions of day-to-day occurrences, and the details of their own individual occupations. Sassoon frequently writes about his friendships with other officers and his time spent on convalescent leave, while Blunden spends time reflecting on the logistics of moving from place to place along the front, and Chapman devotes many pages to describing his clerical work as adjutant. The British authors write about incidents at the front with restraint, and express their reactions to violence with restraint.

#### 3.2 Descriptions of Gore and Violence

Gore is downplayed in British accounts, and it is assumed that the readers will fill in the details. There are only a few short, graphic descriptions of battle in each British novel, in contrast with the abundance of specifics provided by Remarque and Jünger and Carossa's elaborate details. Sassoon's account of one battle is typical of British reserve:

"... I saw, arranged by the roadside, about fifty of the British dead... There was much battle gear lying about and some dead horses. There

were rags and shreds of clothing, boots riddled and torn, and when we came to the old German front-line, a sour pervasive stench which differed from anything my nostrils had known before... I wanted to be able to say that I had seen 'the horrors of war' and here they were, nearly three days old."<sup>36</sup>

The British veterans may seem slightly impersonal when contrasted with the Germans who do not shy away from descriptions of violence and death, but instead bluntly describe incidents at the front. This excerpt from one of Remarque's many graphic descriptions of battle is a good example of the German authors' style:

"We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off, they stagger on their splintered stumps into the next shell-hole; a lance-corporal crawls a mile and a half dragging his smashed knee after him; another goes to the dressing station and over his clasped hands bulge his intestines; we see men without mouths, without jaws, without faces; we find one man who has held the artery of his arm in his teeth for two hours in order not to bleed to death..."<sup>37</sup>

### 3.3 The German Authors' Style

The German accounts are marked by brevity and rich emotion, devoting more focus to their feelings and the life-altering events of the war, rather than on specific details of their daily lives. Remarque focuses on the theme of personal loss and disillusionment, while Jünger is occupied with descriptions of his own personal successes and tragedies in battle, and Carossa describes his inner struggle to cope with the stress and suffering of war in terms of his own dreams and nightmares and through quotations from his friend Glavina's poems.

Within these generalizations, each author has a particular style and tone according to his own unique experience of the war. Sassoon's book was well-written, owing to his literary training as a poet, and described his own personal journey from a cocky young officer in 1916 to a disillusioned veteran in 1918. Blunden's style was also



poetic, frequently seasoned with descriptions of nature and wildlife. Similar to Sassoon, Chapman described his transition from a less-than-enthusiastic recruit to a worn veteran who felt isolated from civilians at home, and reflected on his younger self during the war with the distance and wisdom of age. Remarque's novel was primarily focused on how the war permanently changed those who served in it and the ways in which it created a vast gulf between soldiers and the rest of society. Carossa's work was characterized by pathos and emotive descriptions of his reactions to the war, and he frequently quotes his friend Glavina's mystical and heroic poems. Jünger's style is gritty, and full of adventure, while his detailed descriptions of grisly scenes in battle evoked sympathy for those who participated and great admiration for their bravery.

## CHAPTER 4

### INITIAL REACTIONS TO THE WAR

#### 4.1 Youthful Idealism

The chosen British and German authors shared similar initial reactions to the war, and their sentiments toward the war are evidence of the mixed feelings of both societies. Sassoon and Jünger aspired to heroism and shared a cocky enthusiasm for war, viewing the conflict as a proving ground for themselves. After the death of his brother<sup>38</sup>, Sassoon accepted his own death as a possible outcome of the war and begged to participate in nighttime raids against German trenches.<sup>39</sup> Though he was not suicidal, he saw death as inevitable. Early on he was somewhat oblivious to the realities of war, and receiving his Military Cross just before the Battle of the Somme in 1916 only "increased [his] blindness to the bloodstained future."<sup>40</sup> He was so delighted that he seemed not to have given the approaching battle a second thought, despite the ominous implications of military communiqués.<sup>41</sup> Jünger exhibited an early youthful ignorance of war in much the same way, describing it as, "manly, as action, a merry dueling party on flowered, blood-bedewed meadows."<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.2. War as a Crucible for a Generation

By contrast, Carossa viewed the war as a crucible for the present generation, training for an unknown but higher calling, a spiritually refining experience for its participants, and as preparation for "nobler toil and more essential danger."<sup>43</sup> Remarque

expressed a similar idea in that he saw the war as something which changed those who participated, though his view was that the war permanently altered soldiers, severing the connection between them and civilians at home, abruptly ending childhood, and preventing them from every fully connecting with the society of their parents.<sup>44</sup> His characters' parents and teachers urged them to enlist and described them as the "Iron Youth," the strong new generation which would carry Germany to victory. These sentiments are similar to Carossa's belief that the war would refine the present generation, though Remarque presented these ideas ironically and with cynicism, claiming instead that war obliterated youthful innocence.

#### 4.3 Inevitable Participation

While the other authors described a measure of early eagerness for the war, Chapman and Blunden were reluctant to participate altogether. They saw past propaganda and promises of adventure and fame, but ultimately surrendered to the inevitability of participating in the war, viewing the global conflict as a machine which pulled in all the young men of their generation sooner or later. Chapman explained that he had "no romantic illusions," and "was very much afraid."<sup>45</sup> "I concluded that it was easiest to meet a fate already beginning to overawe," he wrote, "as an integral figure in the battalion I had been born into."<sup>46</sup> Despite his reluctance, he accepted what Remarque described as "the common fate of our generation," the fact that all able young men of the era were drawn into the war and forever changed by it.<sup>47</sup> Blunden described his fears likewise: "There was something about France in those days which looked to me, despite all journalistic enchanters, to be dangerous."<sup>48</sup> Echoing Chapman and

Remarque's ideas of fate and inevitability, he wrote that "the war was a jealous war and along-lasting," and would certainly reclaim even those who escaped it briefly as casualties.<sup>49</sup> The authors' initial feelings towards the war were examples of the larger mixture of enthusiasm, skepticism, and acceptance of the war within Britain and Germany.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WAR

#### 5.1 The Unavoidability of Death

The selected authors also exhibit changing attitudes toward the war. After the initial stalemate was broken and widespread destruction became sickeningly routine and began to take a toll on their minds and hearts, most of the authors felt that death was unavoidable and fate was omnipotent. Though they shared an initial enthusiasm toward the war, Jünger and Sassoon greatly differed from one another in their reactions to the changing nature of the war. Overall, Jünger held fast to his original optimism, never indicating that he felt his own death was imminent, even after several life-threatening wounds to the head and chest. By contrast, Sassoon never seemed to believe that he would see the end of the war, and his reckless assaults on German trenches stemmed from his idea that "Sooner or later I should probably get killed too."<sup>50</sup> Carossa shared Sassoon's belief that since death was unavoidable, the sacrifice of one's life should count for something: "I feel that not one of us is fated to a long life--let us acknowledge it, then! Let us consciously and joyfully offer ourselves in sacrifice to the unknown spirit of the future, before some wretched chance overtakes us and dooms us to a meaningless death!"<sup>51</sup> Contrastingly, Chapman and Remarque described futility as the only possible result of imminent death. On their way to the front, Remarque's characters pass a hundred newly-hewn coffins intended to house their own remains after

the impending offensive. Having previously emphasized that a difference can only be made if one survives the war and does something "that it's worth having lain here in the muck for,"<sup>52</sup> Remarque made no further comment, and his silence emphasized that death is not a noble sacrifice for a meaningful cause.<sup>53</sup> Chapman's feelings precisely mirrored Remarque's, strongly emphasizing the pointlessness of death and the soldiers' powerlessness to change their fates:

"Your life and your death are nothing to these fields-- nothing, no more than it is to the man planning the next attack at G.H.Q. You are not even a pawn. Your death will not prevent future wars, will not make the world safe for your children."<sup>54</sup>

### 5.2 The Omnipotence of Fate

The authors described being drawn into the war as though on the conveyor belt of a machine called Fate which endlessly and dispassionately churned out death and destruction. For Sassoon, the war was a "machine... in the haphazard control of whatever powers manipulated the British Expeditionary Force,"<sup>55</sup> a "place where a man of strong spirit might know himself utterly powerless against death and destruction."<sup>56</sup> Blunden echoed Sassoon's description of the war as "a vast machine of violence,"<sup>57</sup> and Chapman, too, utilized the same metaphor, saying, "death was mechanical" and "the war would go on without end."<sup>58</sup> Carossa also described soldiers advancing toward the front as being "drawn along spokes of the same wheel towards a devouring and invisible axle."<sup>59</sup>

### 5.3 Disillusionment and Sense of Futility

The authors expressed attitudes of disillusionment with the aims of the war and disappointment in its effects. Jünger expressed the sentiments of all six authors when

he wrote in June of 1918, "I felt that the purpose with which I had gone out to fight had been used up, and no longer held. The war posed new, deeper puzzles."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, this was his sole admission of discouragement, owing to the fact that he never lost faith in the strength of the German troops. While Jünger asserted that "no soldier should be permitted to say the word 'peace'"<sup>61</sup>, Remarque and Carossa expressed feelings of pessimism and pointlessness. Remarque wrote, "It must be all lies and of no account when the culture of a thousand years could not prevent this stream of blood being poured out..."<sup>62</sup> He continued bitterly, "Every man knows that we are losing the war... Still the campaign goes on-- the dying goes on."<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Carossa questioned, "[Is there] any tactical advantage to be gained in sacrificing German lives for the sake of such a miserable heap of stones... why not let the Roumanians keep it, in God's name?"

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#### 5.4 Unrest and Criticism

In addition to personal disillusionment, the authors describe unrest among the soldiers, though on both sides they continued to fight. Carossa wrote:

"An infinite weariness descended upon us. Some of the men could not hold in their rage and despondency. 'Give us whole boots, at any rate,' one growled, 'if you want us to fight.'--'You're fools if you go on any further. I'm going to stay here,' another yelled. but the officers paid no attention to these mutinous shouts... they knew that the shouters would keep on going."<sup>65</sup>

Even Jünger admitted as much, describing how a soldier merely shrugged with indifference when asked for directions. He stated sadly that during times of idleness "the erosion of the war ethos showed itself most nakedly."<sup>66</sup> Such disillusionment was not restricted to the Germans, who suffered more shortages of food, supplies, and

manpower, but pervaded as well among the British, who after years of struggle and ultimate victory over the Triple Alliance, hardly felt themselves to be champions. Chapman and Blunden describe instances of self-inflicted wounds among the troops, offering sympathy for those who wished to escape a futile death.<sup>67</sup> All three authors eventually became overtly critical of the war. Chapman wrote:

The last flickers of our early credulous idealism had died in the Arras battles. The men, though docile, willing, and biddable, were tired beyond hope... they were no longer decoyed by the vociferous patriotism of the newspapers. They no longer believed in the purity of politicians or the sacrifices of profiteers. They were as fed up with England as they were with France and Belgium, 'fed up, f--- up, and far from home'!...<sup>68</sup>

Blunden even openly criticized the war in front of a visiting general one evening, calling it "useless and inhuman."<sup>69</sup> Sassoon wrote sardonically, "Somehow the newspaper men always kept the horrifying realities of the War out of their articles, for it was unpatriotic to be bitter, and the dead were assumed to be gloriously happy."<sup>70</sup> Like Blunden, Sassoon too expressed open disapproval. In an act of social bravery, for which he was later punished by being accused of shell-shock and sent to a mental hospital, Sassoon published the following scathing criticism of the war for which he had originally been so enthusiastic:

"I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I



believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize."<sup>71</sup>

Chapman and Blunden's works illustrate that they would likely have agreed with Sassoon's sentiments, and no doubt Remarque and Carossa would have voiced some measure of support for his denunciation of the war.

## CHAPTER 6

### RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENEMY

#### 6.1 Fraternization and Friendship

The British and German authors frequently discussed their relationships with their enemies. They described instances of fraternization and friendship among the troops, expressions of hostility and desires for retribution, and feelings of guilt and regret. Blunden and Jünger both recorded instances of outright fraternization between the troops and their enemies. In Givenchy, France in 1916 Blunden described one morning where a German officer stood up on the parapet of his trench, asked the British if they had any biscuits to share for breakfast, and encouraged them to leave their lines for a friendly chat. The British lieutenant on duty at the time saw nothing wrong with this genuine offer and a brief meeting of the two forces followed. This was, of course, highly frowned upon by the senior officers in Blunden's battalion.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, in 1915 Jünger described Christmastime as a time of lively and friendly exchange and socialization between the Germans and the British.<sup>73</sup> Chapman also describes a casual "truce" between the Germans and the French in his sector, where rifles were fired only to make sure they were still in good working order.<sup>74</sup> Remarque's novel includes a moving gesture of peace and friendship. Recognizing that the Russian prisoners of war he was in charge of guarding are no different than himself, Remarque's character Paul Bäumer kindly gave away all of his cigarettes to his former enemies,

who bow to him graciously. The red glow from the cigarettes reminds Paul of "little windows in dark village cottages saying that behind them are rooms full of peace."<sup>75</sup> Similar warm gestures of kindness to prisoners of war were also present in Blunden, and Jünger. Blunden described how kindly German prisoners were treated and Jünger assured his readers that , "Whenever prisoners fell into my hands... I felt responsibility for their safety, and would always do everything in my power for them."<sup>76</sup> Out of the six authors, Carossa recorded the most instances of compassion and friendship toward his enemies, largely owing to his vocation as a medical officer. After one particularly harsh battle, his medical aid hut was packed to capacity with German wounded, so the unfortunate Romanian casualties had to lie outside in the cold until they could be tended to. A Hungarian captain felt so badly for these men that he took it upon himself to arrange transportation for them to the hospital further from the front. He wrote of another particularly poignant instance of sympathy where he discovered a group of Romanians digging trenches not out of reach of the German artillery, yet he could not bring himself to mention it to anyone. "As long as I did not betray them their security was real-- a strange predicament for a man who is no soldier and lives in standing peace with himself."<sup>77</sup>

## 6.2 Hostility and Retribution

Despite these examples of friendliness and compassion, the authors also recorded attitudes of anger, hostility, and desires for revenge. Sassoon and Jünger both dealt extensively with these themes in their memoirs. Sassoon, whose brother was killed by the Germans<sup>78</sup>, had something of a score to settle throughout the early years of

his war service. He frequently volunteered for raids against the German lines, motivated by a bitter acceptance that he would likely die in the war, so his service should count for something. He described an instance where he was so possessed by anger that he rushed alone across No Man's Land with a handful of grenades to "settle [the] sniper" who had shot his friend.<sup>79</sup> Fortunately, the Germans had already vacated the trench, and Sassoon was left alone with his rage. He was so upset by this ordeal that he even disregarded a direct order to leave the front, and instead stayed in the trenches all night long. He wrote, "I continued to expend energy which was a result of strained nerves... as the day went on, I definitely wanted to kill someone at close quarters."<sup>80</sup> "Though," he wrote, "the discovery of a dead or wounded enemy might have cause a revival of humane emotion."<sup>81</sup> It was clear that he did not necessarily want to cut short the lives of innocent people, yet he struggled with his desire for revenge and his own peaceful nature throughout the war.<sup>82</sup> As Sassoon's feelings of disillusionment with the war grew, he frequently wrote sardonically about the German-haters in England and France. His growing bitterness was best expressed after he attended a church service in France: "The preacher, I inferred, had been reminding us that we ought to love one another and be like little children. 'Jesu' had said so, and He had died to save us (but not to save the Germans or the Austrians or any of that lot.)"<sup>83</sup> Jünger, too, described hostility toward his enemies, though his aggression was not motivated by a desire for personal vengeance. "I would always try to seek him out in combat and kill him," Jünger said, "and I expected nothing else from him. But never did I entertain mean thoughts of him."<sup>84</sup> He described attitudes of "sportsmanlike enthusiasm"<sup>85</sup> during

battle and cheers not unlike those one might hear at a football match during artillery bombardments against the British lines or exchanges of rifle fire:

Often you can hear the enemy working on his wire entanglements. Then you empty your magazine in his direction. Not only because those are the standing instructions, but also because you feel some pleasure as you do it. Let them feel the pressure for a change. who knows, perhaps you even managed to hit one of them.; We too go unspooling wire most nights and take a lot of casualties. Then we curse those mean British bastards.<sup>86</sup>

Blunden, too, described a similar instance of retribution, where the British troops proceeded to "Give him three for every one" after the Germans fired a particularly harsh round of deadly mortars into the shattered British lines.<sup>87</sup> Chapman included a particularly distressing account. Soldiers from his battalion accepted the surrender of a German officer and a few other soldiers, yet shot them point blank as they approached.<sup>88</sup> Overall, none of the instances of retribution or aggression expressed by these authors was motivated by an overt hatred for their enemies. Remarque expressed it best: "That is what you are here for... War is war."<sup>89</sup>

### 6.3 Guilt and Regret

Closely related to these expressions of vengeance and hostility were many examples of regret and guilt. All six authors were preoccupied with describing the corpses of their enemies, and were especially disturbed by the bodies of young boys. "What a shame to have to shoot at such people!" Jünger wrote, expressing the feelings of all.<sup>90</sup> Remarque, Sassoon, and Jünger each described deep remorse. Sassoon in

particular felt so much regret over the accidental death of a young German soldier that he became preoccupied with respectfully tending to his body:

As I stepped over one of the Germans an impulse made me lift him up from the miserable ditch. Propped against the bank, his blond face was undisfigured, except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and mouth with my coat sleeve. He'd evidently been killed while digging, for his tunic was knotted loosely about his shoulders. He didn't look to be more than eighteen. Hoisting him a little higher, I thought what a gentle face he had and remembered that this was the first time I'd ever touched one of our enemies with my hands. Perhaps I had some dim sense of the futility which has put an end to this good-looking youth. Anyhow I hadn't expected the Battle of the Somme to be quite like this...<sup>91</sup>

Sassoon's guilt over the death of such a young boy seemed to have made him almost mad with anguish. Remarque also described a disturbing instance where his character Paul Bäumer nearly became insane after being trapped in the same shell hole with the body of a Frenchman he killed in hand-to-hand combat. Indeed, it was one of the most moving points of his novel, for Paul was so disturbed by his act that he talked to the corpse throughout the night, promised to send money to the man's family, and to adopt the man's occupation as his own. Paul's guilt was so great that he even felt undeserving of his own life:

Comrade, I did not want to kill you... But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth an appropriate response... Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony-- Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy?... Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up-- take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now.<sup>92</sup>

Jünger recorded a similar depressing instance of remorse.

[There] lay my British soldier, little more than a boy, who had been hit on the temple. He lay there, looking quite relaxed. I forced myself to look closely at him. It wasn't a case of 'you or me' any more. I often thought back on him; and more with the passing of the years. The state, which relieves us of our responsibility, cannot take away our remorse; and we must exercise it. Sorrow, regret, pursued me deep into my dreams.<sup>93</sup>

Through these examples of guilt and regret at the deaths of their enemies, it is easy to discern that these six authors held no particular hatred for those they fought, and often questioned why it was necessary to kill men who were in essence just like themselves.

## CHAPTER 7

### DEVOTION TO FELLOW SOLDIERS

#### 7.1 Loyalty to Superiors

The chosen authors all expressed the theme of loyalty toward their fellow soldiers throughout their war diaries. Loyalty to superiors is particularly evident in Jünger, Carossa, Chapman, and Sassoon. Jünger, a lieutenant, wrote warmly of the admiration he felt from the men who served under him. While he was away recuperating from wounds, soldiers in Jünger's platoon looked forward to his return, recognizing him as a fair commander and an honorable friend.<sup>94</sup> "I had a following based not only on rank, but also on character," he explained.<sup>95</sup> Sassoon wrote that his battalion was likewise in low spirits while their colonel was away on convalescent leave, and that they anxiously awaited for his return as he was thought to be irreplaceable.<sup>96</sup> Carossa noted that officers earned their troops' admiration. He wrote: "His shabby faded cape stiff with the tallow droppings of countless dug-outs and plastered with mud from all corners of France and Flanders is much more honourable in our eyes than the brand-new magnificence of the station Commandant."<sup>97</sup> Officers earned their troops' respect by commanding with fairness and understanding. Recognizing that his men were in desperate need of diversion and noting the shortage of food at the front, Jünger refused to punish two of his soldiers for fishing, though it was strictly forbidden. An anonymous soldier daily left him a large fish out of gratitude.<sup>98</sup> Such admiration



continued for many officers even after their deaths. Chapman describes how his battalion was in poor spirits after their commander was killed and that many of the soldiers carried his portrait into battle "as a kind of amulet."<sup>99</sup> Such relationships between commanders and their troops made the hardships of war more bearable for all, and were evidence that the trials of war bonded together men and officers alike.

## 7.2 Brotherhood

The idea of brotherhood is also present throughout both the British and German memoirs. Brotherhood, for these authors, is a relationship which went deeper than blood, breeding, or birthplace. It was a "more complete communion with one another than even lovers have,"<sup>100</sup> wrote Remarque, an unspoken understanding, admiration, and loyalty shared by men who had shared and lived through the pain and terror of mechanized warfare, and through it became a class of their own, a generation of men who knew only one another and who were forever changed by the war. Jünger, Remarque, and Sassoon all mentioned in particular that this sense of brotherhood was what truly made the war bearable. Jünger describes the casual hours he spent resting, eating, and playing cards with his fellow officers. "Such congenial hours," he wrote, "made up for other days of blood, filth, and work."<sup>101</sup> Sassoon echoed his feelings: "The war was too big an event for one to stand alone in... there was nothing left to believe in except the "Battalion spirit."<sup>102</sup> Remarque wrote that "Esprit de corps... developed into the finest thing that arose out of the war-- comradeship."<sup>103</sup> This sense of brotherhood motivated and inspired these men throughout the toughest of times. "I was rewarded by an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of

the human spirit-- that spirit which could stand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all the failures," Sassoon said of his comrades. The authors wrote that this deep sense of union was continually refined throughout the war. "Over four years," Jünger wrote, "the fire smelted an ever purer, ever bolder warrior-hood." Blunden wrote that those who had fought in the Somme together formed the heart of the battalion<sup>104</sup> and Chapman described his battalion as "a homogeneous unit" wherein "each man shares the emotions of the whole."<sup>105</sup> Carossa wrote, "We suddenly felt more strongly knitted together in brother hood... The experiences we had shared for so many months... had become part and parcel of our inner selves, that they could not be discarded without real loss."<sup>106</sup> This bond of loyalty even extended to dissolve the individual entirely, making him an integral part of an ironclad battalion. "First we are soldiers and afterwards... individual men as well," Remarque explained.<sup>107</sup> Marching in formation was a particularly strong expression of this union. Blunden wrote, "Of all the treasured romances of the world, is there anything to make the blood sing itself along, to brighten the eye, to fill the ear with unheard melodies, like a marching battalion in which one's own body is going?"<sup>108</sup> Chapman echoed him: "The column acquires a rhythm of its own, an intrinsic life, so that each man shares the emotions of the whole... this body of men had become so much part of me that its disintegration would tear away something I cared for more dearly than I could believe. I was it, and it was I."<sup>109</sup> All six authors recalled that the sense of being a member of a body larger than themselves, of being united with other soldiers by loyalty and shared experiences, as the best thing to come out of the war years because it

made daily hardship and tragedy bearable, and because it united them in eternal brotherhood with all those who served.

### 7.3 Reluctance to Leave Comrades

So profound was this sense of brotherly union that many of the authors expressed regret over having to leave their comrades even to recuperate from wounds. Sassoon wrote that he "felt perversely indignant at the 'cushiness' of [his] convalescent existence,"<sup>110</sup> and even volunteered to serve overseas again when he could have been posted safely in England. Blunden also wrote of his sense of obligation to his fellow soldiers, saying, "I... felt as usual the injustice of my own temporary escape while others who had seen and suffered more went on in the mud and muck."<sup>111</sup> Carossa described an injured man who begged to be given an easier job so that he would not be sent home. "[He] appears to cling to the half a dozen faces he knows, as if they were all that he had left in the world."<sup>112</sup> Remarque, too, writes of this reluctance to leave one's comrades, "What may happen before I get back? Shall I meet these fellows again?"<sup>113</sup> Carossa is ordered to stay at a position of relative safety during a battle, yet he writes, "I would rather stay with the battalion."<sup>114</sup> Indeed, this sense of brotherhood goes beyond mere loyalty and into the realm of duty and obligation. None of these authors want to escape the common fates of their brothers for a "cushy" ticket home or a few weeks rest-- they prefer to toil, fight, and die in the battalions that were so much a part of them.

## CHAPTER 8

### DISUNION WITH SOCIETY

#### 8.1 Distance between Civilians and Soldiers

The final theme expressed in these memoirs is the sense of disconnection from society at home. This theme was especially prevalent in the writings of Sassoon, Remarque, and Chapman. The authors emphasized the inability of civilians and soldiers to understand one another's experiences, and that those at home frequently held naive views of the war and of their armies' successes. Communication between soldiers and civilians at home was often strained as their struggles, desires, and attitudes toward the war were not the same. News and letters from home seemed to the soldiers as though they were written in another lifetime or on another planet. Jünger described the disunity: "It's a strange feeling to read news from home, and their peacetime anxieties."<sup>115</sup> In Remarque's novel, Paul Bäumer's experiences on home leave emphasized the differences between life at the front and the world of civilians.

"They have worries, aims, desires, that I cannot comprehend... When I see them here, in their rooms, in their offices, about their occupations, I feel an irresistible attraction to it... but it also repels me... how can they do it, while out at the front the splinters are whining over the shell-holes... They are different men here, men I cannot properly understand, whom I envy and despise."<sup>116</sup>

Paul's interactions with civilians also demonstrated their naïveté regarding the progress of the war. He described how an older acquaintance believed that victory would be easily accomplished. This acquaintance patronizingly told Paul that though his

experiences of individual battles were valid and honorable, he did not, in fact, know anything about the larger picture--the political aims, and the army's actual progress--and so his interpretations of the war were not as accurate as those at home who had access to news of the conflict as a whole. Blunden also wrote that civilians were ignorant of the true nature of the war: "During my leave I remember... the illusion that the British Army beyond Ypres was going from success to success...the civilian population realized nothing of our state."<sup>117</sup>

### 8.2 Inability to Communicate War Experiences

This inability to understand one another was most profoundly evidenced by the authors' frustration when friends and family questioned them about their experiences at the front. In Remarque's book Paul's father questioned him about his experiences in battle. "He does not know," Remarque wrote, "that a man cannot talk of such things... it is too dangerous to put these things into words."<sup>118</sup> Chapman wrote likewise, "It was-- I think it still is-- impossible to make those who had no experience of this war, understand it, as it must be understood, through all the senses."<sup>119</sup> "We were the survivors;" Sassoon said, "Few among us would ever tell the truth to our friends and relations in England. We were carrying something in our heads which belonged to us alone, and to those we had left behind us in battle."<sup>120</sup> He continued, "My attitude toward civilians implied that they couldn't understand and that it was no earthly use trying to explain things to them."<sup>121</sup> According to these authors, British and German soldiers alike could never describe the horrors they had seen, because trauma they experienced could only be dealt with personally and words alone were not enough to

describe the full picture of all they had seen. There was no point in talking with civilians about the war, as only other soldiers who shared these experiences would ever understand what the war was truly like.

### 8.3 Reluctance to Return Home

The authors described an unwillingness to return home because of the lack of connection they felt to previous lives and to society. Remarque wrote that young soldiers like his character Paul had no lives to return to after the war, that the war destroyed them entirely and left them unable to reintegrate into society. The war uprooted them from childhood, and interrupted their transition to adulthood, preventing them from establishing identities, careers, and families of their own. They had no lives to return to, as they were now too old and too worldly-wise to return to their world of schoolbooks and games. The war changed them so drastically that civilian goals and desires were no longer comprehensible, that these aims in themselves were even ridiculous after what they experienced at the front.<sup>122</sup> The British authors wrote that the distance they felt from society was also due to the fact that England had changed. Blunden witnessed a decline in patriotism<sup>123</sup> and Sassoon emphasized a vast differences of experiences between soldiers and civilians.<sup>124</sup> Chapman wrote that England had become corrupt, a place where people drank too much and profited off the war.<sup>125</sup> He and most of the soldiers in his battalion had no desire to return home at all, as England was "an island we did not know."<sup>126</sup> Indeed, he declined to return home after the war, and volunteered instead for the Army of Occupation in Germany. "England had vanished over the horizon of the mind," he wrote.<sup>127</sup> This reluctance to return home was

evidence of the fact that the war altered all those who fought in it, and that its effects reached far beyond the battlefield and influenced the societies of Britain and Germany.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

The five themes shared in common by these six British and German authors demonstrate that the experience of the First World War was a transnational phenomena, regardless of whether they were on the winning or the losing side of the conflict. their experiences and reactions to the war were remarkably similar. The authors described similar initial reactions to the war, and later their early enthusiasm developed into a sense of shock and disbelief at the widespread and seemingly endless destruction, tragedy, and death. The British and German authors recorded similar feelings of disillusionment with the original aims of the war, recognized no inherent differences between themselves and those they fought, and questioned why mankind resorted to war in the first place. They shared the same feelings of loyalty and comradeship with those who fought alongside them, and ultimately felt themselves so connected to their battalions that their own identities and goals became secondary. The British and German authors shared in common a sense that they themselves had been altered permanently by the war, and that the societies of their home countries were not the same as they were when they left. Despite the fact that the British soldiers went home as victors and their foes returned to a discouraged and exhausted Germany, the ordeals and trials affected both soldiers similarly, proving that the First World War was a profoundly life-altering experience for all who served.



APPENDIX A

ENDNOTES

## Endnotes

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Brenna L. Witt is a first-generation college student from Palmer, Texas. She completed her Associate's Degree at Navarro College in Corsicana, Texas in just one year, and transferred to the University of Texas at Arlington in summer of 2007. She has a double major in History and Russian Studies, and also a minor in German Studies. She is a member of the Honors College at UT Arlington, and has a 4.0 GPA in all subjects pertaining to her majors and minor. Miss Witt has received many departmental awards for academic performance, and has also been recognized by six different honorary societies. She studied abroad for six weeks in summer of 2008 with the Department of Modern Languages and traveled throughout western Russia. In spring of 2010, she was presented with the University Scholar Award recognizing the top 1% of all students, and the All "A" Honor Roll Award, given only to the top .05% of the entire student body. Miss Witt also received the Phi Alpha Theta Kenneth R. Philip Undergraduate Merit Award in fall of 2009 for her essay "Through the Eyes of Soldiers: Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and the Experience of World War I." She has done extensive translation work in both Russian and German, and is primarily interested in the cultural history of Germany during the First World War. Miss Witt aspires to work for the United States government or military in a linguistics-related field and hopes to complete a doctorate in history and later teach at the university level.

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- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 79.
- <sup>42</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 5.
- <sup>43</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930.): 19.
- <sup>44</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 13, 20, 87-88, 160.
- <sup>45</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 13.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>47</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 87.
- <sup>48</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War. (Oxford: Kemp Hall Press, 1928.): 1.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.
- <sup>50</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 122.
- <sup>51</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 17.
- <sup>52</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 87.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>54</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 122.
- <sup>55</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 167.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.
- <sup>57</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 73.
- <sup>58</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 259.
- <sup>59</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 115.
- <sup>60</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 260.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.
- <sup>62</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 263.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.
- <sup>64</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 67.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>66</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 194.
- <sup>67</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 104;  
Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 158.
- <sup>68</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 179.
- <sup>69</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 198.
- <sup>70</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 120.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.
- <sup>72</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 79-80.
- <sup>73</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 56-59.

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- <sup>74</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 41.
- <sup>75</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 194.
- <sup>76</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 58.
- <sup>77</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 61.
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- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 94.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 92.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., 25.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 179.
- <sup>84</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 58.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., 48.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., 45.
- <sup>87</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 69.
- <sup>88</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 99.
- <sup>89</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 228-229.
- <sup>90</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 83.
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- <sup>92</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 223.
- <sup>93</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 241.
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid., 63.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid., 89.
- <sup>96</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 185-186.
- <sup>97</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 13.
- <sup>98</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 204.
- <sup>99</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 69.
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- <sup>101</sup> Jünger, Ernst. Storm of Steel, 63.
- <sup>102</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 202.
- <sup>103</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 26.
- <sup>104</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 178.
- <sup>105</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 119, 275.
- <sup>106</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 44.
- <sup>107</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 272.
- <sup>108</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 148.
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- <sup>110</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 268.

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- <sup>111</sup> Ibid., 252.
- <sup>112</sup> Carossa, Hans. A Roumanian Diary, 137.
- <sup>113</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 152.
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- <sup>116</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 168-169.
- <sup>117</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 223, 227.
- <sup>118</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 165.
- <sup>119</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 138.
- <sup>120</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 241.
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid., 244.
- <sup>122</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front, 13, 20, 87-88, 160.
- <sup>123</sup> Blunden, Edmund. Undertones of War, 223.
- <sup>124</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 244.
- <sup>125</sup> Chapman, Guy. A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography, 82, 138-139.
- <sup>126</sup> Ibid., 281.
- <sup>127</sup> Ibid., 281.