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# “Avarice” and “Evil Doers”: Profiteers, Politicians, and Popular Fiction in the 1920s

*Christine Grandy*

Avarice is as old as human nature. From the earliest times the greed of gain has tempted men to exploit to their own advantage the public need. . . . History is full of records of the attempts that have been made by communities to defend themselves against the activities of these evil doers. (1919 Profiteering Act)

“Well for one thing,” he told her, “the company has been planned and worked out with simply diabolical cleverness. They are inside the law all the time, and they manage to keep there. Their agents are so camouflaged that you can’t tell for whom they are buying. Then they command an immense capital.” (John Wingate to Lady Dredlington, in *The Profiteers* [1921], by E. Phillips Oppenheim)

**I**n 1921, E. Phillips Oppenheim, the best-selling author of numerous thrillers and adventure tales, turned his pen toward the very topic that led David Lloyd George’s Coalition government to produce the 1919 Profiteering Act. Oppenheim’s work is arguably the more readable of the two, yet to the modern reader, the introduction to the Profiteering Act uses surprisingly dramatic language to identify the practice of profiting from a wartime economy as a villainous activity. Together, the 1919 act and the novel reveal the persistence of a relatively new type of villainy that reflects the physical trials of wartime for male soldiers and the economic and social disruption that followed. Low- and middlebrow novels such as Oppenheim’s went further than the act and associated shirking and postwar scarcity, as well as profit making, with the figure of the profiteer. In Oppenheim’s *The Profiteers* (1921), John Wingate, the protagonist, undertakes an investigation into, and orchestrates the eventual punishment of, British and Imperial Granaries (BIG) for inflating the price of grain, describing the profiteers as men of “diabolical cleverness,” commanding “immense capital” with agents working in secrecy. These were businessmen working “inside the law,” yet their immense fortune and the

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confusion surrounding their operations are constructed in a negative light within the novel. Likewise the Profiteering Act, passed as an effort to address the scandal of profits from industry associated with warfare, acknowledged profiteering as the post-World War I crime. Profiteering was thus defined immediately after World War I as a pursuit of wealth that jeopardized the citizens at the heart of the nation. The “evil doers,” “avarice,” and “greed of gain” invoked by the Profiteering Act drew upon an effective language of villainy to demonize those who profited, even while the act itself was largely denounced by the press as ineffectual.

This article examines the intersection of two major themes in 1920s Britain: the scandal around the profiteer that continued beyond 1918, and the contribution of the newly inscribed “best seller” to images of post-World War I villainy. It will demonstrate that public concern with the profiteer did not abate after the war, as Jean-Louis Robert argues in his examination of caricatures of the profiteer in wartime newspapers, but rather continued to flourish in the growing markets of low- and middlebrow novels.<sup>1</sup> The profiteer enjoyed a healthy existence in the single-volume novels that have often been overlooked by cultural, political, and economic historians alike. Indeed, the pursuit of profit and the quest for wealth at the expense of the national good became a central characteristic of fictional villains after World War I. Through examining the predominance of the villainous profiteer in 1920s popular fiction, I will argue that the profiteer should be considered alongside that other iconic figure—the disillusioned ex-soldier—as an expression of the impact of World War I upon British society and culture. The article shows that popular fiction contributed to the cultural rebuilding of popular villains and heroes in post-World War I Britain. Furthermore, the figure of the profiteer expressed and then moderated wider concerns about Britain’s commitment to a faltering capitalist economy and the place of soldier-men as masculine breadwinners within it.

Scholarship on soldiers during and after World War I indicates that prewar notions of the heroic soldier were, if not shattered, then considerably shaken following the war.<sup>2</sup> My study of the profiteer indicates that it was not only visions of heroism that were affected, but also those of its counterpart, villainy. While the heroes of best-selling novels embodied the collective values of a population, the villains in these narratives also signaled those values through their violation of them.<sup>3</sup> Profiteering, as the “unfair” pursuit of profit during wartime, drew on older links between villainy and wealth that have been explored by a number of historians. James Taylor, John McVeagh, Mary Poovey, and Margot Finn, among others, all point to the suspicion toward finance in novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Louis Robert, “The Image of the Profiteer,” *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919*, vol. 1, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge, 1997), 104–32.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; Oxford, 2000); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, 2004); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994); Max Jones, “What Should Historians Do with Heroes? Reflections on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain,” *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (January 2007): 439–54.

centuries, represented by characters whose morality was corrupted by their aspiration to wealth and their proximity to urban centers.<sup>4</sup> The post-World War I villain stemmed from this older tradition but also mobilized a new conception of the businessman villain as more tightly tied to the realm of politics and capable of transgressing against the larger nation.

Villains lurked everywhere in popular fiction of the 1920s as captains of industry and members of parliament. Characters that had encapsulated anxieties about class mobility and unlimited greed in the late nineteenth century now expressed further paranoia about villains taking control of the nation itself and marginalizing the soldier hero in the process. McVeagh notes that from around 1870, the presence of companies and joint-stock ventures was clearly identifiable within literary works through villainous characters.<sup>5</sup> The war, I would argue, amplified the global aspects of big business, granting villainous characters considerably more power to impact the fate of Britain, for better or worse. Those in both business and government are characterized in highly suspicious ways in these novels, indicating the widespread disillusionment with both arenas following the war and particularly during Lloyd George's disastrous Coalition reign. Although the collective fall of politicians and businessmen in the esteem of the British public may have been less dramatic than that of the heroic soldier, it was nevertheless an important diminishment that was articulated in best-selling novels. The ramifications of this diminishment may well have resonated beyond the interwar period, for in their own peculiar way, these novels imagined a government of ordinary heroes—as well as greater state intervention—in the lives of Britons well before the Beveridge report and the 1945 election.

Examining the profiteering villain within the annals of immensely popular low- and middlebrow fiction from the 1920s allows the historian both to make links between the 1920s and 1945 and to move a discussion of World War I's significance beyond the domain of the elite and into a study of the British working and middle classes. Working- and middle-class audiences may have read Robert Graves or Virginia Woolf but were more likely to read the latest novel by E. Phillips Oppenheim, H. C. McNeile, Warwick Deeping, or John Buchan. Historian Billie Melman points out that the term “best seller” did not come into common usage until after World War I.<sup>6</sup> It was only then that the collective changes in paper-making, the printing press, and methods of distribution were fully realized by the publishing industry. These changes were met by a literate working- and middle-class audience that had steadily developed after the 1870 Education Act made

<sup>4</sup> Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge, 2003); John McVeagh, *Tradeful Merchants: The Portrayal of the Capitalist in Literature* (London, 1981); Ronald C. Michie, *Guilty Money: The City of London in Victorian and Edwardian Culture, 1815–1914* (London, 2009); Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2008); Rebecca Stern, *Home Economics: Domestic Fraud in Victorian England* (Columbus, OH, 2008); James Taylor, *Creating Capitalism: Joint Stock Enterprise in British Politics and Culture, 1800–1870* (Woodbridge, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> McVeagh, *Tradeful Merchants*, 149.

<sup>6</sup> Contrary to misuse by many, “best seller” as a term did not exist prior to this period. See Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York, 1988), 46.

schooling mandatory for children under twelve years of age.<sup>7</sup> An expanding working- and middle-class audience could now afford to read the novels that flooded the market at a variety of prices, either purchased at booksellers or borrowed from libraries.<sup>8</sup> The post-World War I boom in book publishing is what prompted the literary critic Q. D. Leavis to publish her study *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), as an effort to understand the sudden development of low- and middle-brow literature. Between often-caustic assessments of these novels, her work provides valuable figures that define “popular” best sellers. According to Leavis, high-brow novels, whose authors included the likes of E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, could expect sales of “a steady three thousand, with greater sales of five, ten, or even fifteen thousand,” while best-selling authors had “a buying public of a quarter or half a million, and in some cases of a million.”<sup>9</sup> A best-selling novel such as *The Middle of the Road* (1923) by Philip Gibbs, a wartime correspondent, went into twenty-two editions in the first two years of its printing.<sup>10</sup> Jessica Meyers has recently examined the wartime figures for novels sold by H. C. McNeile for Hodder & Staunton and documents these figures as smaller than Leavis’s figures from 1932 but still considerably larger than what Leavis notes for highbrow authors.<sup>11</sup> The considerable disparity in sales between works of highbrow authors and those of low- and middlebrow authors indicates their respective significance for the reading public and signals the need for historians to concentrate on this widely consumed medium.

Historians have also often overlooked the role of the villain within lowbrow fiction in favor of a concentration on highbrow works. McVeagh, Michie, Finn, and others who have examined literary representations of finance tend to focus on a relatively narrow and elite cadre of writers, without acknowledging the shifting landscape of mass-produced fiction in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> McVeagh, for instance, provides an excellent account of the representations of “traded merchant,” but with a consistent focus on highbrow works from Shakespeare in the sixteenth century to D. H. Lawrence in the 1920s. This examination does not account for the very different lives of fictional villains within the mass culture that emerged after World War I. Juliet John has noted that a new interest in the works of Freud and subconscious reasons for deviance in the early twentieth century made the villain “seem old-fashioned and incredible as a real-life concept and consequently simplistic and straightforward in fiction.”<sup>13</sup> This was true in the works of Virginia Woolf or Evelyn Waugh but was decidedly not the case for the villains

<sup>7</sup> Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (New York, 2002); Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914–1950* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Bailey’s “White Collars, Gray Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited,” *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 3 (July 1999): 273–90.

<sup>9</sup> Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 1932), 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Meyers, “The Tuition of Manhood: ‘Sapper’s’ War Stories and the Literature of War,” *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History*, ed. Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed (London, 2007), 113–28.

<sup>12</sup> Matt Houlbrook’s research into literary con-man Netley Lucas provides a bridge between high and low culture through the role of a real-life villain; Matt Houlbrook, “Fashioning an Ex-Crook: Self, Citizenship, and Criminality in the Work of Netley Lucas” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Social History Society, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2001), 10.

of low- and middlebrow works, who remained simplistic yet were more widely consumed.

Unfortunately for the historian, compiled lists of best-selling novels are particular to the publishing industry of the late twentieth century, and identifying the most popular works of the 1920s is not easy. Leavis identifies best sellers in 1932 based on contemporary records of sales, most of which were destroyed when London's Paternoster Square, an area that Joseph McAleer identifies as the "heart of the publishing industry," was bombed during World War II.<sup>14</sup> I rely on the efforts of historians McAleer, Melman, and Clive Bloom, and contemporaries such as Leavis, who have examined the records available from remaining publishing houses and libraries, as well as trade periodicals. Because of the nature of the sources, McAleer and Bloom tend to identify best sellers by author rather than title, with Melman's study as the notable exception. My approach is to examine best-selling titles indicated by Melman, as well as popular authors identified by McAleer and Bloom, like Oppenheim, whose success with the publisher Hodder & Stoughton was unprecedented.<sup>15</sup>

The novels I look at below are representative of a larger range of twenty works from the 1920s that I have reviewed for commonalities and contrasts between plot and character. I concentrate on thrillers, adventure stories, and human dramas—what Melman would likely call "masculine" novels—and I do not examine romance as a genre. Nor do I look at female villains, whose own contribution to what Susan Kingsley Kent calls "making peace" after the war were considerable, a study I hope to address elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, excellent work has been done on the romance genre, yet studies of male-centric adventure novels and dramas tend to indulge in a nostalgia that detracts from critical analysis.<sup>17</sup> What I offer here is a critical engagement with a number of novels read by ordinary Britons following World War I and written by men whose middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds as journalists, servicemen, and doctors largely mimicked the backgrounds of the men they wrote about.<sup>18</sup> What is immediately apparent in this fiction is the repetitive occurrence of both the profiteering villain and the heroic ex-soldier.

In the following, I examine the post-World War I villain as a noncombatant, as a businessman, and as an influence on government. The collective focus of popular writers on the profiteering villain indicates a growing and negative un-

<sup>14</sup> Joseph McAleer, *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills & Boon* (Oxford, 1999), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Bloom notes that Oppenheim had a ledger to himself at Stodder & Houghton; Clive Bloom, "Introduction" in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One: 1900–1929*, ed. Clive Bloom (London, 1993), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Kent, *Making Peace*.

<sup>17</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford, 2001); Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters, and Writing* (New York, 1998); Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Philip Gibbs, Michael Arlen, and A. S. M. Hutchinson all worked as journalists. Gibbs was an accredited war correspondent during World War I. Most of the authors received some form of education either at a college or, in Deeping's case, during a short stint at the University of Cambridge. All were dependent upon employment, but not that which defined the working class. See entries in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: In Association with the British Academy, from the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 62 vols. (Oxford, 2004).

derstanding of the symbiotic relationship between the state and the economy and the implications for the ordinary soldier. The role of profiteering villains became a seemingly radical expression of this discontent, yet we shall also see that the figure of the villainous profiteer ultimately worked to resituate the hero and the soldier back at the center of the nation and economy within these narratives. The triumph of the hero over the villain actually reaffirmed the worth of capitalism, yet with important modifications that called for a new type of moral economy and a government of heroes and not corrupt politicians and wealthy businessmen.

### THE WEIGHT OF WAR: NONCOMBATANTS

Best-selling novels by authors such as Warwick Deeping, H. C. McNeile, Philip Gibbs, A. S. M. Hutchinson, and others tend to follow a simplistic literary formula. The outset of the novel introduces the protagonist and antagonist, as well as a loyal female love interest before adding a thrilling problem to overcome. This problem is inevitably resolved in favor of the hero. Yet while the structure is familiar and largely justifies Adorno and Horkheimer's writings in the 1940s on the formulaic nature of the "culture industry," the particular execution of each stage and character shifts with the period, making low- and middlebrow culture an excellent expression of contemporary concerns.<sup>19</sup> Here I will address the initial introduction of the villain and one of his most striking traits as someone who did not participate in World War I. We shall see that a stark differentiation between combatant hero and noncombatant villain was both a new and defining feature of the post-World War I literature and was established early on in the introduction of each character.

Historians have noted the centrality of soldiering to visions of the hero in the nineteenth century while also commenting on the strain placed upon that vision after World War I.<sup>20</sup> Accounts by ex-soldiers, such as Robert Graves's biography *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and works by the "soldier poets" Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owens, provided stark images of senseless deaths that dismantled the glory of wartime service. Yet within the realms of popular fiction, war service continued to be the marker of a hero and was, in fact, used much more aggressively to vilify nonparticipants. Military service became shorthand for heroic respectability within popular fiction. Even Graves and Hodge in *The Long Weekend* (1940) acknowledged that after the war "a woman of aristocratic family might now without question marry not only into the merchant class but even in to the laboring class, so long as the man she chose had a good military or naval record."<sup>21</sup> In contrast,

<sup>19</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA, 1947; repr., 2002).

<sup>20</sup> See Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, as well as Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, "Admirals as Heroes: Patriotism and Liberty in Hanoverian England," *Journal of British Studies* 28, no. 3 (July 1989): 201–24, and Glenn R. Wilkinson, *Depictions and Images of War in Edwardian Newspapers, 1899–1914* (New York, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918–1939* (Middlesex, 1940), 10. The centrality of the combatant hero is evident even within exotic novels like E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919; Boston, 1921). In *The Sheik*, the hero Ahmed's revelation that he is an Englishman legitimizes his suitability as Diana Mayo's love interest, yet it is his consistent role as an adept fighter and leader of his men that demonstrates this up to that point.

the villain's reasons for not participating in the war were largely dismissed as something more dishonorable than the cowardice that had prompted the white feather campaigns.<sup>22</sup> In fiction, it was clear that lack of military participation was an early and significant indication of a defining villainous attribute—selfishness at the expense of the nation. The role of the wealthy noncombatant villain in low- and middlebrow fiction indicates that the act of national service was still highly relevant as a way to mark both heroes and villains after the war.

Certainly the existence of eligible noncombatants was a highly sensitive subject during the war, and the issue of conscription loomed large for those on the fighting and home fronts. As Nicoletta Gullace has noted, the presence of a large body of eligible men who did not choose to fight for their country tested masculine claims to citizenship based on military service.<sup>23</sup> In the popular fiction of the 1920s such as *Bulldog Drummond* (1919), *Old Pybus* (1928), *Lord Raingo* (1926), as well as other titles not examined here, the fictional noncombatant villain highlighted a group of men who were exempted from service due to their business interests. During the war, provisions did exist for men to be exempted for the purpose of engaging in business vital to the war effort. Documentation of this group is scattered and inconsistent, yet the best sellers of the 1920s indicate that this exemption was noted and frowned upon by a number of authors. Within popular fiction, conducting business and amassing profit is seldom portrayed as working for the “imagined community” of the nation but rather against its collective good. As such, the “work” of capitalists in the war is denigrated as a series of excuses that encompass physical infirmity, criminal impulses, and the greedy pursuit of profit.

Physical infirmities such as the overconsumption associated with obesity and highly symbolic “heart troubles,” were linked early on in the novels *Lord Raingo* and *Bulldog Drummond* to both the moral and masculine deficiencies of the non-combatant villain.<sup>24</sup> A. S. M. Hutchinson's best seller, *If Winter Comes* (1921), articulates the differences between working for profit and working for love of country on the battlefield through the bodies of its hero and villain. The novel features Mark Sabre at the center of a convoluted plot involving the breakdown of his marriage, his enlistment in the war effort, and the drama of his return. The villain who seeks to thwart Sabre is the aptly titled Reverend Sebastian Fortune, who “bore a certain resemblance to a stunted whale.”<sup>25</sup> Fortune's body is described upon his introduction: “He was chiefly abdominal. His legs appeared to begin, without thighs, at his knees, and his face, without neck, at his chest. His face was large, both wide and long, and covered to its lower part with a tough scrub of grey beard.”<sup>26</sup> Fortune sits moored behind his desk in his dealings with Sabre,

<sup>22</sup> Nicoletta Gullace, “White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War,” *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 1997): 178–206.

<sup>23</sup> See Nicoletta Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (New York, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> John Buchan even makes reference to the disturbingly “round” head of its villain Medina in *Three Hostages* (1924). See John Buchan, “The Three Hostages,” in *The Complete Richard Hannay* (1924; London, 1992), 757. On the bodies of men, see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “The Culture of the Abdomen: Obesity and Reducing in Britain, circa 1900–1939,” *Journal of British Studies* 44 (April 2005): 245; Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> A. S. M. Hutchinson, *If Winter Comes* (Toronto, 1921), 53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



and although Fortune himself indicates that his age of sixty-two prevents him from serving as a combatant, the novel's emphasis upon his weight infers other reasons. Fortune's excuses of age and obesity are discounted through Sabre's character who, while not described as a splendid physical specimen, nevertheless overcomes his own heart troubles to join the war effort. When the physical requirements for service fall, Sabre is ecstatically able to put his body into action for his country, while Fortune continues to be defined by the physical and moral weight of his wartime inaction.

The first novel, *Bulldog Drummond* (1919), in the series by H. C. McNeile, or "Sapper," similarly (although more dramatically), establishes the antagonistic relationship between the soldier-hero and the villainous noncombatant. The novel introduces readers to Captain Hugh "Bulldog" Drummond, who would feature in a number of sequels as well as a successful film version of the novel in 1929. Readers are immediately told that Drummond is a recently demobilized man with considerable independent means who inspired loyalty in the men who served under him, such as his servant, Denny. The original story unfolds after Drummond places a newspaper ad describing himself as a demobilized soldier looking for adventure due to boredom. A review in the *Daily Mail* of one of the subsequent books noted, "Bulldog Drummond is one of the popular heroes of modern fiction, and in this breathless story, with its murders, its plots, and its poison that kills as it touches, he is at his best in daring, in resource, and in grim resolution."<sup>27</sup> Daring, resourcefulness, and resolution thus define both Drummond's heroism in and after the war.

In his first outing, when Phyllis (the future Mrs. Drummond) answers his ad, Bulldog Drummond encounters one of the main foes in the novel, Lakington, who is working in conjunction with the principal villain of the series, Carl Peterson. Lakington is an art collector and scientist with a penchant for dabbling with chemicals, as well as a physical infirmity that he claims exempted him from the war. In answer to Lakington's query about Drummond's familiarity with art, Drummond comments, "Just recently I have been rather too busy to pay much attention to art." They then go on to trade wartime credentials, or lack thereof: "Of course, you've been in France," Lakington murmured. "Unfortunately a bad heart kept me on this side of the water. One regrets it in many ways—regrets it immensely."<sup>28</sup>

Here the opposing traits of heroism and villainy are laid out within the first ten pages of the book. Drummond has been active in service and continues to serve the community by aiding a helpless girl. Lakington, on the other hand, has pleaded a poor heart in order to avoid the physical discomfort of war. Lakington's interest in science and art further signals his lack of physical prowess in comparison to Bulldog, who later reminisces about snapping a German's neck with his bare hands.

Novelist Warwick Deeping also offered a negative view of noncombatant profiteers through the prism of physical infirmity. Deeping's first novel, *Sorrell and Son* (1925), heralded him as a best-selling author; it followed the trials of ex-soldier Stephen Sorrell after his demobilization. The opening pages of this novel outline a world turned upside down for soldiers: "the women going to the rich

<sup>27</sup> "Thrilling New 'Sapper' Story," *Daily Mail*, 20 January 1926.

<sup>28</sup> H. C. McNeile, *Bulldog Drummond*, (1920; New York, 1934), 9.

fellows who had stayed at home, the bewilderment, the sense of a bitter wrong.”<sup>29</sup> In the novel, Sorrell’s wife divorces him and marries one of these “rich fellows,” who then leaves her a wealthy widow. Deeping addressed the topic of the non-combatant businessman and profiteer more explicitly in 1928 with the publication of *Old Pybus*. This novel features an ex-soldier, Pybus, and his relationship with his errant sons, Conrad and Probyn. Conrad has made a fortune from shipbuilding during the war, which exempted him from service on the field. Conrad, like Fortune, is a large man, “solid and obvious, all black and white, a heavy man who could not sit comfortably.” He also “possessed one of those heavy white skins which resemble greasy vellum.”<sup>30</sup> Conrad’s role as a noncombatant is mirrored in both the physical and moral repugnancy of his body and his actions during the war. The novel draws comparisons between the nonservice roles of the two flabby sons and the masculinity of the elderly ex-soldier Pybus, who manages to serve the country despite his age. Through Old John Pybus, readers learn the qualities of the upright soldier: “for John Pybus was old English. When there was war there was war, and if his country was involved in it, then it was his—John Pybus’s war.”<sup>31</sup> John Pybus is profoundly devoted to his country, a masculine hero of old, who travels the countryside speaking at recruiting meetings while his sons perspire at their desks.<sup>32</sup>

The best-selling novel *Lord Raingo*, by popular journalist and writer, Arnold Bennett, offers the most sympathetic and interesting vision of the wealthy businessman struggling with his physical shortcomings and moral failings. The novel was published in 1926 and was generally acknowledged as an indictment of Lloyd George’s Coalition government. Raingo is a wealthy businessman who is suddenly given a peerage by his boyhood friend the Prime Minister, before slowly dying from a weak heart. Raingo possesses many of the traits of the stereotypical villain from middle- and lowbrow fiction. He is a wealthy and opportunistic and did not participate in the war. Yet Bennett’s narrative grants the reader access to Raingo’s insecurities around his class status, his weight, and his lack of heroism. One of the important features of Raingo is established in an opening scene when the local doctor examines his heart: “It was the doctor who had come newly to Hoe village two years earlier and had almost immediately afterwards joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and vanished into distant fields of war. . . . And Raingo, in his secret humiliation, admired the fellow, and had a wild, absurd desire to justify his own inactivity to the simpleton.”<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the novel, Raingo mourns his inability to participate in the war while fretting over his weight. Raingo is “ashamed of his girth, which made him too old and unworthy,” until he eventually gives in to infirmity and death.<sup>34</sup> The novel affirms Raingo’s final physical decay while promoting the image of the healthy combatant soldier in the form of Raingo’s son Geoffrey, who had been physically emaciated and emotionally traumatized after being held captive by the Germans. By the story’s end Geoffrey “had apparently grown not only in girth

<sup>29</sup> Warwick Deeping, *Sorrell and Son* (New York, 1925), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Deeping, *Old Pybus* (New York, 1928), 4–5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Lord Raingo* (New York, 1926), 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

but in height. His khaki was tight on him. He had an air of great strength,” while Raingo withers away in his bed.<sup>35</sup> Raingo’s futility in the spheres of politics, business, and soldiering is ultimately addressed by Geoffrey’s capabilities, putting the role of the healthy, fit, soldier at the center of these institutions.

Raingo, Fortune, and Lakington were not affected by the physical terrors of trench warfare but nevertheless showed evidence of a moral deformity through their bodies; they were thus outside of normative visions of masculinity erected within popular fiction of the 1920s. Wartime credentials and service within these novels offered cultural shorthand for one’s place within the nation and normative masculinity, a place reserved for the soldier who had seen battle in the flesh and not the villain who had avoided it. Consequently, the role of the villainous non-combatant figure worked to reconstruct the soldier as the true hero of the war and the nation in a period when this figure was most in need of reconstruction.

### SCARCITY, CONSUMPTION, AND FRAUD

Readers were invited to condemn the economic practices along with the physical infirmities of the villainous profiteer in the 1920s. Inflated food prices, the sale of fraudulent war bonds, munitions, and shipbuilding all found their way into the pages of low- and middlebrow fiction through the figure of the villain. Readers were exposed to sometimes-baffling accounts of business practices set in a fictional world. Above all, profiteering villains in the 1920s highlighted the travesty of overconsumption and fraud in a period when citizens were still subject to price inflations and shortages of goods. Charles A. McCurdy, the Liberal MP and Minister of Food Control from 1920 to 1921, who authored the Profiteering Act, likened profiteers to rats in 1919, arguing that “while some of the minor horrors infest the trenches, the profiteer preys on the civilian population home.”<sup>36</sup> The profiteer was presented as sapping the nation’s strength. Thus, the representation of post-World War I wealth in fiction was contrasted against the conditions on the fighting front and the domestic trials of those on the home front during and after the war.

Scarcity of foodstuffs and rising inflation on the home front were characteristics of the latter half of the war and the first years of peacetime. While the British never reached the levels of deprivation experienced by the German population, food distribution became a pressing issue that found the government scrambling to respond. The Ministry of Food itself was not established until the winter of 1917, and rationing was not introduced until January 1918. The rationing that was established did not apply to all food; rather, items like sugar and meat were limited in the face of an anticipated shortage and sometimes as the result of an already existing shortage.<sup>37</sup> Rationing continued until as late as 1921, with milk rationed after the war.<sup>38</sup> These events exposed the government to considerable

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>36</sup> “Fighting the Trusts: The Profiteering Act; Mr. McCurdy’s Warning,” *The Times*, 16 September 1919.

<sup>37</sup> Tea, butter, and margarine were also rationed.

<sup>38</sup> John Stevenson, *British Society, 1914–45* (London, 1984), 72–74.

critique. The *Economic Journal* noted in 1920 that “all the conditions which have made food so dear could have been better handled if in the earlier stages of the War the Government had regarded supplies of food for the civilian population as a matter only second in importance to the supplies of munitions for the armies and the navy.”<sup>39</sup> The tremendous draw upon all aspects of food production by the war effort had simply not been anticipated but certainly was at the outset of World War II.

Food scarcity, which highlighted the state’s, and particularly the Coalition’s, inability to control prices after World War I, resulted in drastic inflation and led to a widespread denunciation of profiteering in the press. Columns comparing prewar prices of goods to postwar prices appeared in papers such as the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, and *The Times*. Inflation commonly stood at 200 percent for some goods. Arthur Conan Doyle was compelled to write two passionate letters to the editor of *The Times* on the topic, stating, “unless something is done quickly, and done thoroughly, to check rising prices in the necessaries of life, there will be violence in this country. Man must live, and these wicked prices are making it a hard matter.”<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, not usually supportive of government intervention in the market, nevertheless continued to highlight the problem of food prices, scolding grocers for price gouging.

Newspapers aimed at the working and middle classes such as the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* dwelt upon businessmen and not only the food merchants. The contention of writers at the *Daily Express* was that profits from the war should be taken for the state either through taxation or through a number of other, sometimes bizarre, schemes. Although the paper approved of the proposed legislation of the Profiteering Act to deal with those selling at inflated prices, it proclaimed, “It is absurd, while doing this, to leave intact those great increases in actual wealth which were the consequence of a way which has impoverished those who did the fighting. Clearly no one should be allowed to make and keep fortunes at the expense of human life and national bankruptcy.”<sup>41</sup> Following the war, a capital levy was widely considered as a means of securing wealth for a debt-ridden economy and implicitly “those who did the fighting.” This levy would have been a one-time tax on existing capital that was amassed during the war. The appeal of this program was fairly widespread among left-leaning newspapers as well as economists such as Sydney Webb. The *Daily Express* declared in October 1919, “The agitation in favor of a tax on war profits is a vital and living movement, which will have to be met fairly and squarely by Ministers. It has gathered an immense force of public opinion behind it, as the letter bag of the *Daily Express* continues to testify, and has reached a point where to ignore the proposal is no longer possible.”<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, the capital levy was a plank in the Labour Party’s manifesto as late as

<sup>39</sup> J. R. Clynes, “Food Control in War and Peace,” *Economic Journal* 30, no. 118 (1920): 147–55.

<sup>40</sup> A. C. Doyle, “Profiteering: Where the Guilt Lies; The Middlemen’s Gains,” *The Times*, 9 July 1919.

<sup>41</sup> “War Profits,” *Daily Express*, 11 October 1919.

<sup>42</sup> Lord Beaverbrook, “Tax War Profits: A Just Method to Meet Our Desperate Needs; More than £1,000,000,000,” *Daily Express*, 21 October 1919.

1923; yet by the mid-1920s the prospect of a levy had been effectively contained through the efforts of the Conservatives.<sup>43</sup>

Although the idea of a capital levy was rejected, the Coalition government attempted to address concerns over wealth by passing the Profiteering Act. The act made efforts to police the prices of food, clothing, and building materials. McCurdy had initially envisioned and spoken of its grand powers of prosecution, saying in 1919, “The Act deals with two kinds of profiteers—the big and the little ones. First the big profiteers who may be found among the trusts and combines and the wholesale trades—then the smaller offenders.” The Profiteering Act itself produced a number of local committees that then reported to a central committee. The act’s existence was only to encompass a six-month period but was extended until 1921. Its foreword engaged in a lively discussion of the practices enacted against forestalling, engrossing, and regrating in the eighteenth-century moral economy only to end with a rather ambivalent statement: “Throughout the whole world drastic measures are being taken to counter a universal evil which appears to be one of the normal concomitants of war. If this be so, perhaps the final remedy rests not with any legislative enactment (though legislation may do much to mitigate the mischief), but with the course of time, and the natural readjustment of economic and moral forces.”

The strong language of evil and avarice at the outset was ultimately mitigated by the government’s ambivalent attitude toward its role as regulator of both businessmen engaged in profit and “moral forces.” Free trade was still seen as the dependable answer by the government.

By 1921 most of the local profiteering committees had ceased to function by their own volition. Regardless of McCurdy’s earlier claims, the act’s foreword (also penned by McCurdy) admitted that its provisions “can hardly be said to deal with profiteering at all, in the popular sense of the word, but are intended to create new machinery for the purpose of acting as a bureau of information and statistics.”<sup>44</sup> The main purpose of the act, as some historians have noted, was to allow the government the appearance of maintaining economic fairness, while at the same time protecting free trade.<sup>45</sup> The chairman’s report in 1920 by McCurdy outlined the act’s tense balancing act between businesses and the consumer: “I hope and believe that [the report] will be found to contain a practical solution to the problem of how the consumer may be protected and the profiteer eliminated without any injurious or harassing consequences to the trades concerned. The solutions consists [sic] in enlisting the voluntary cooperation of the traders themselves.” In 1920, the Labour representatives on the Liverpool Anti-Profiteering Committee wrote in a public letter of resignation, “the Profiteering Act is so phrased and drafted as to make useful action impossible, as the Act penalizes small shopkeepers and allows the wholesaler and manufacturer to go scot free. We have, therefore, decided

<sup>43</sup> On the capital levy see M. J. Daunton, “How to Pay for the War: State, Society and Taxation in Britain, 1917–24,” *English Historical Review* 111, no. 443 (September 1996): 882–919.

<sup>44</sup> *The Profiteering Act, 1919, Fully Annotated* (London, 1919), vii.

<sup>45</sup> M. J. Daunton, “How to Pay for the War”; N. Rollings, “Whitehall and the Control of Prices and Profits in a Major War, 1919–1939”; Patricia MacLachlan and Frank Trentmann, “Civilizing Markets: Traditions of Consumer Politics in Twentieth-Century Britain, Japan and the United States,” *Markets in Historical Contexts: Ideas and Politics in the Modern World*, ed. Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann (Cambridge, 2004), 170–201.

that we cannot afford to waste any more time over the matter and hereby withdraw our names from the local committee formed under the Act.”<sup>46</sup> From the outset, the act was vague about punishment and avenues for prosecution. Further amendments continued to make it less effective, such as two in the spring of 1920 that indicated that the Board of Trade would pursue fair price “agreements” with trade with the understanding that the trade “should not be liable to any proceedings under the Profiteering Act” and that names under investigation should remain private.<sup>47</sup> The Profiteering Act passed into obscurity until it was revived as the Goods and Services Act in 1941. Under this new act, local committees again reported to a central committee but were empowered and encouraged to fix prices on goods and food, ushering in large-scale rationing. The original 1919 act included that measure, but it was neither exercised nor encouraged.

References to the Profiteering Act itself do not exist in the fiction of the 1920s, indicating either that the authors and public were not familiar with the actual act or that it was indeed widely dismissed as useless by them, but authors did not hesitate to offer up their opinions on profiteering and the government’s involvement, or lack thereof. Through the profiteer, the goal of making profit was demonized by Deeping, Oppenheim, and Gibbs and cast not as the triumph of individual labor but rather as a deed that directly impacted utilitarian notions of the collective good. The occasionally positive depiction of the successful businessman and financier that was evident in the late nineteenth century (as argued by Michie, Finn, and McVeagh) was, for a period, abandoned in favor of outright criticism.<sup>48</sup> The wealth that villains possessed in popular fiction of the 1920s was wealth that had been gained at the expense of others, and often at the expense of the heroic ex-soldier as symbolic of the nation.

Nowhere were the evils of profiteering businessmen more passionately denounced than in Oppenheim’s novel *The Profiteers* (1921). The hero of this novel, Wingate, was an American with a British mother who had served for both countries. He was brought to Britain to investigate British and Imperial Grains (BIG), headed up by the villain Phipps and his accomplice Lord Dredlington, on the charge of profiteering. The hero and villain are described by Wingate’s sidekick, Roger Kendrick, at the outset of the story: “Wingate has sentiment and Phipps has none; conscience of which Phipps hasn’t a shred, and a sense of honour with which Phipps was certainly never troubled . . . [Wingate] has nerves of steel and the grit of a hero. Did I tell you, by the by, that he went into the war as a private and came out a brigadier?”<sup>49</sup>

The story remains conspicuously silent on Phipps’s role in the army, if any, yet Wingate’s heroic attributes are clearly laid out in his excellent war service, his sense of honor, his conscience, and his “nerves of steel.”

The novel notes that Phipps’s crime was not actually a crime in Britain, perhaps a nod to the Profiteering Act. Phipps’s and BIG’s crime was essentially the engrossing of grain; buying up large amounts of grain for resale at higher prices after

<sup>46</sup> “Profiteering Act ‘Useless’: Labour Members Resign at Liverpool,” *The Times*, 4 March 1920.

<sup>47</sup> “Profiteering Act to be Retained: Fair Price Agreement,” *The Times*, 23 April 1920, and “Profiteering Bill through Committee,” *The Times*, 13 May 1920.

<sup>48</sup> M. C. Finn, “The Character of Credit”; J. McVeagh, “Tradeable Merchants.”

<sup>49</sup> E. Phillips Oppenheim, *The Profiteers* (Boston, 1921), 8.

demand had increased. This practice is repeatedly condemned through conversations between Kendrick and his old flame, Lady Dredlington, now unhappily married to Phipps's partner: "I hate the principle of gambling in commodities that are necessary for the poor," she answered. "I don't pretend to be a philanthropist, or charitable, or anything of that sort. I am wrapped up in my own life and its unhappiness. At the same time, I would never receive as a friend any one who had indulged in that sort of speculation."<sup>50</sup>

The novel repeatedly stresses that BIG's immense profits come at the expense of ordinary Britons. Published in 1921, the novel does not anticipate the considerable impact that inflation would have on the savings of the middle classes by 1923, and Kendrick and Lady Dredlington are portrayed as the valiant yet untouched members of the upper middle and upper classes working in defense of those less fortunate. In contrast, the profiteering BIG cares little for class distinctions in its business practice. Oppenheim emphasizes the unfeeling nature of BIG in the narrative through the hero, Wingate: "Your operations in the course of a few months have raised to a ridiculous price the staple food of the poorer classes, at a time when distress and suffering are already amongst them."<sup>51</sup> The immoral aspects of BIG business and the actions of Phipps and Lord Dredlington are portrayed as shocking and shameful throughout *The Profiteers*, while Wingate's role is to reestablish a version of the moral economy while falling short of overturning the existing system. Wingate's position as a member of the upper middle classes makes him a relatively unthreatening figure in this endeavor, and he is clearly tasked with the responsibility of punishing an acknowledged wrong in post-World War I Britain. The immoral actions of Phipps and Dredlington are painted in stark terms as literally snatching food from the mouths of the poor.

Conrad and Probyn Pybus in Deeping's *Old Pybus* are also guilty of amassing wealth with little thought to those around them. Old Pybus ultimately undertakes their recruitment. When Pybus visits his oldest son, Probyn, he is "a little sheepish" and reveals that his father-in-law had produced some money in order to make him "indispensable" in the eyes of the government because of his work in the wool industry. Conrad, on the other hand, is not so sheepish: "unearthed somewhere near Fenchurch Street," he proves "less explanatory than his brother. He was busy, arrogantly and perspiringly busy. Ships—you old fool—ships and more ships! He did not call this meddling old fire-eater a fool, but implied it. Besides he was a careful fellow; he was out to make money." In response to this Pybus "called them shirkers, gunshies, opportunists. Such burs stick even to sleek jackets."<sup>52</sup> Pybus, in reaction to Probyn's wartime profiteering and Conrad's shirking of duty, dismisses them from his life. Both characters are condemned through the sympathetic character of Pybus as interested only in making money. Profit making did not contribute to the war effort, which is defined in the novel through the battlefield. Conrad's betrayal of Old Pybus, the soldier figure, and his commitment to moneymaking are consequently marked as immoral and a form of fraud.

Even Carl Peterson—Bulldog Drummond's nemesis and Lakington's superior—a man of a number of skills and seemingly prompted by a personal hatred

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

of England, is ultimately motivated by the pursuit of profit. At the outset of *Bulldog Drummond*, Peterson makes it clear that he wishes to destroy Britain's economy by working with Lakingtonn as well as Bolshevik union agitators. Yet behind this lies the ultimate goal of acquiring money only for himself. This aim causes him to involve himself, throughout the series, not only in Bolshevik plots, but in the theft of recipes for the chemical production of diamonds and the production of a poison to wipe out hundreds of people. Peterson hopes to bribe the government with his possession of these weapons. To this end, Peterson uses ten different disguises across four books before perishing in *The Final Count* (1926), a death that caused the *Daily Mail* to comment, "Drummond's hated enemy at last pays the price of his infamy and dies from the poison with which he had killed so many," but to further remark that "Bulldog Drummond is at his greatest throughout, and we are sorry to think that his long duel with Carl Peterson is at an end."<sup>53</sup> Yet Peterson had to be vanquished, and at the end of each novel, his plan to humble Britain is defeated by Drummond and a host of army friends, his servant, and ordinary local men such as policemen or postmen.

McNeile's series continually exhibits skepticism about the role of the businessman and promotes the virtues of the ordinary working- and middle-class soldier and citizen. The disguises that Peterson takes on involve him masquerading as citizens such as a scientist and a wealthy Australian. It is only through this latter role as a wealthy businessman launching a fleet of passenger Zeppelins that Peterson can exert the negative power he wishes to. Not coincidentally, this is when Drummond undoes Peterson's largest performance and Peterson perishes. Peterson's masquerade as the Australian businessman is significant both for the scale of his impersonation and the immense power he is able to wield through the role. As this suggests, the figure of the businessman was granted twin attributes of power and danger within the cultural landscape of 1920s fiction. The distrust for the businessman is palpably and consistently conveyed in McNeile's novels through the businessman's association with profit-driven villains, like Peterson.

While the scale of wrongdoing could vary, villains in popular narratives had the same goal in mind: amassing wealth at any expense. What is striking about these villains of the 1920s is that the way they execute their crimes is out of all proportion to their real economic goals. Carl Peterson's exploits are breathtaking in their complexity, as he uses unstable fanatics and commandeers country home after country home to house his disguises, flesh-eating acids, and tarantulas. The sheer scale of wrongdoing in the pursuit of profit that was repeatedly presented to audiences highlights the disconnect between how profiteering was envisioned by the Board of Trade and by authors of the best sellers. The act, while using the language of villainy, was unable to speak to McCurdy's "big profiteers," mainly because it targeted the middleman grocer. Local districts echoed this sentiment when they reported to the Board of Trade in 1920 on why they had suspended their local tribunal sessions. One district, Wood Green, reported of its activities: "Suspended till question of profiteering is dealt with in a manner less irritating to small tradesmen and directed more to profiteering on a large scale. Will reconsider Amending Act," while Lambeth local tribunal noted that it "serves no useful purpose." Southport also reported that it shut down "in view of limited powers

<sup>53</sup> "Thrilling New 'Sapper' Story" *Daily Mail*, 20 January 1926, 14.



given in Act.”<sup>54</sup> The act did not address those businessmen whose relatively new hordes of wealth had been bought at the expense of the collective good and who had been vividly brought to life in both description and deeds within best-selling novels. Instead, profiteers largely remained in the realm of fantastical fiction.

The detailed accounting of the misdeeds of profiteering offered up in best sellers of the 1920s indicates that profiteering was not simply a war-time crime but was an area of concern well after the war had ended, and even after the crisis in inflation had largely passed. The level of complexity exhibited in these novels in regard to the activities of companies like BIG illustrates that best-selling authors believed that readers did have some knowledge of the levels of scarcity and deprivation outlined in a scheme such as the one by BIG or were reading papers that considered ideas like the capital levy. Villains of the best sellers thus anticipated and sought to reflect the social experiences of ordinary Britons. Further, the role of the profiteer as a villain who was ultimately vanquished by the soldier indicated that the soldier’s work was portrayed as not yet done, and the new battlefield in the best sellers of the 1920s was the market.

### PERFORMING POLITICS: THE DUBIOUS ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The ineffectiveness of the Profiteering Act was widely attributed to the government’s lenient attitude toward business both during and after World War I. In September of 1919, *The Times* reported on a protest the day before by organized labor against profiteering in Hyde Park. The paper described the protest as being of “large attendance” and included the text of resolutions passed by the protestors, which stated, “This demonstration condemns the latitude allowed to profiteers and views with dismay the certainty of further rises in the cost of necessities. It urges the Government to free itself from the influence of the trusts and to make the fullest possible use of the cooperative movement.”<sup>55</sup> The organizers of the protest, and *The Times* by proxy, which reprinted the resolutions in full, noted the government’s inaction and seeming corruption by the profiteers. In the same article *The Times* pointed out that “discharged soldiers, some of whom have unsuccessfully tried to get shops, have been allowed to have stalls in Romford Market for the sale of garden produce, fish, &c.,” thereby drawing a connection between the disadvantaged soldier unable to open a real shop and a Coalition government corrupted by the large trusts that the protestors identified. The general cynicism evidenced within popular fiction of the 1920s was part of this larger polarization that produced what Graves called the “Two Britains” from the war: “the Fighting Forces, meaning literally the soldiers and sailors who had fought, as opposed to garrison and line-of-communication troops, and the Rest, including the government.”<sup>56</sup> Government as “the Rest” was an increasingly opaque body working against the soldier, and politicians thus began to take on fraudulent and dubious tones within the best sellers of the 1920s.

<sup>54</sup> Board of Trade Profiteering Act Department files BT 68/69 (1920).

<sup>55</sup> “Profiteering Act: Traders Uneasy and Public Hopeful. Street Markets,” *The Times*, 22 September 1919.

<sup>56</sup> Graves, *The Long Weekend*, 10.

What is notable about the low- and middlebrow fiction of the 1920s is that the controversial and loaded topic of government and wealth was one that largely exonerated the aristocracy. The upper classes were portrayed, for the most part, with a careful and often dotting respect within popular fiction, as though they were rare unicorns out of their time and place, and just as ineffectual. In Michael Arlen's best seller *The Green Hat* (1924), the narrator speaks in hushed terms about the contrast between the novel's aristocratic and tragic heroine and the real British politician Horatio Bottomley, a former member of parliament (1906–12 and 1918–22) and editor of the weekly magazine *John Bull*, who called for enlistment in the war and then was jailed in 1922 for selling fraudulent war bonds.<sup>57</sup> Arlen's middle-class narrator commented on the aristocracy: "I could somehow 'cope with' my time and generation, while they were of the breed destined to failure. I was of the race that is surviving the England of Horatio Bottomley, the England of lies, vulgarity, and unclean savagery; while they of the imperious nerves had failed, they had died that slow white death which is reserved for privilege in defeat."<sup>58</sup>

This novel, like the others under discussion here, emphasized that it was not "old" wealth, but rather "new" wealth that was the source of "lies" and "unclean savagery." Bottomley's schemes to make money while he actively recruited for the war justified postwar cynicism about profit and politics. His indictment for fraud also spoke to an emphasis upon performance and class anxiety within these novels in regards to politicians. In the landscape of post-World War I fiction, the villain could be a businessman or even a politician. The villain consequently performed a variety of positions, and the potential for fraud lurked everywhere.

Although Bottomley was indicted for his activities, the government's ambivalence toward profiteers was further highlighted in 1922 by the "honors scandal." As Kenneth Morgan has noted, Lloyd George engaged in a practice that had been quite common to preceding governments: the sale of honors for party contributions.<sup>59</sup> His Coalition government pursued this course rather more enthusiastically than previous governments, which eventually resulted in a general inquiry. Matters came to a head after the controversial South African diamond mine magnate Sir Joseph Robinson was granted a peerage. Robinson had been successfully prosecuted after the war for numerous illegal business transactions in relation to his diamond mines, resulting in a fine of almost half a million pounds.<sup>60</sup> The outcry over his peerage resulted in its withdrawal. Morgan argues that the controversy over the affair was motivated by Conservative efforts to oust Lloyd George and by general concerns about the lengths Lloyd George would go to hold on to power.<sup>61</sup> Yet the extent of public objection is more easily accommodated when one takes into account the presence of the villainous profiteer in popular fiction and the press. The honors scandal presented a real-life example of the cozy relationship imagined between government and the profiteer. Little came of the

<sup>57</sup> A. J. A. Morris, "Bottomley, Horatio William (1860–1933)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Arlen, *The Green Hat: A Romance for a Few People* (London, 1924), 15.

<sup>59</sup> K. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979), 339–42.

<sup>60</sup> D. M. Cregier, "Robinson, Sir Joseph Benjamin, First Baronet (1840–1929)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, 339–42.

scandal, yet it was an important contributing factor to the public's negative view of the Lloyd George government and the subsequent 1923 election, which temporarily abandoned any association with big business in favor of the Labour Party.

The government's uneasiness about the prosecution of profiteering businessmen immediately after the war did not reflect the cozy relationship that the honors scandal indicated, but rather a tenuous relationship as the outbreak of war severely tested an industrial economy dependent upon a laissez-faire approach. Both businessmen and government officials had been slow to realize the implications of a war: businessmen in regards to the uninterrupted regular movement of goods and capital, and government in its contrasting role as a wartime regulator of goods and prices. From the outset the government had advocated a "business as usual" approach, yet this stance was increasingly difficult to maintain as much of Britain's market was based on supplying goods to Germany and other enemy countries.<sup>62</sup> National rhetoric and popular opinion could not tolerate open trading with the enemy. Instead, the state was forced to intervene in business to an unprecedented extent, in order to feed and supply both the fighting front and the home front.<sup>63</sup> While government interference and rationing in particular was popular with the general population at the time and would be again during World War II, the government was quick to abandon this role.<sup>64</sup> It seemed paramount in the government's actions that the economy be left to restabilize itself, and this approach was reflected in the ineffectiveness of the Profiteering Act and the dismissal of the capital levy. The capital that was threatened by the levy and the Profiteering Act was ultimately seen as necessary to mobilize an economy dependent upon the free movement of that money from industries, such as munitions, that had realized a profit during the war.

The high price of food items, the unemployment of returning soldiers, and the continued presence of profiteering continued to be represented in popular novels of the 1920s. The big trusts that McCurdy had envisioned were punished in fiction if not in the real world. In Oppenheim's *The Profiteers* it is made clear in an exchange between the hero Wingate and the American, Kendrick, that the government is unwilling and unable to prosecute BIG because of its commitment to free market conditions: "You've got no indication of the Government's attitude, I suppose?" Wingate asked. "I don't suppose they have one," Kendrick answered, "upon that or any other subject. Of course, if all the wheat that's being stored in the country under the auspices of the B & I stood in their own name, the matter would appear in a different light, but they've been infernally clever with all these subsidiary companies."<sup>65</sup>

Kendrick's role as a sympathetic outsider is used throughout the novel to high-

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Broadberry and Peter Howlett, "The United Kingdom during World War I: Business as Usual?" in *The Economics of World War I*, ed. Stephen Broadberry (Cambridge, 2005), 206–35; John McDermott, "'A Needless Sacrifice': British Businessmen and Business as Usual in the First World War," *Albion* 21, no. 2 (1989): 263–82.

<sup>63</sup> See "Businessmen, Industrialists, and Bankers: How Was the Economic War Waged?" in Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Emmanuelle Cronier, "The Street," in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919*, vol. 2, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge, 2007), 57–104.

<sup>65</sup> Oppenheim, *The Profiteers*, 32.

light the failings of the government, thus justifying the need for action outside of the usual avenues of the police. The government's complicity in the swindling of its people is directly due to its lack of interference in the economy. Phipps and Dredlinton, as the profiteering villains, are aware of the government's inability to act and amuse themselves with thinking of its paralysis:

"Did you see the questions that were asked in the House yesterday?" Phipps leaned back in his chair and laughed quietly. "Questions? Yes! Who cares about them? Believe me, Dredlinton, our Government has one golden rule. It never interferes with private enterprise. I don't know whether you realize it, but since the war there is more elasticity about trading methods than there was before. The worst that could happen to us might be that they appointed a commission to investigate our business methods. Well, they'd find it uncommonly hard to get at the bottom of them, and by the time they were in a position to make a report, the whole thing would be over."<sup>66</sup>

This assessment of profiteering in a fictional landscape could easily mimic critiques of the practice in the press. What results is Wingate's singular condemnation of BIG's activities and his pursuit of an illegal scheme of kidnapping and intimidation that results in Lord Dredlinton dying of a heart attack. The justification for this approach is made clear in the following exchange between the villain and hero: Phipps says, "You know perfectly well that as long as the principles of barter exist, there must be a loser and a gainer." "The ordinary principles of barter," Wingate contended, "do not apply to material from which the people's food is made. I speak to you as man to man. You have started an enterprise of which I and others declare ourselves the avowed enemies."<sup>67</sup>

Wingate ultimately reasserts a type of moral, and indeed masculine, economy that punishes the profiteers and stabilizes the price of grain in Britain as a result. Lord Dredlinton's death is ruled to be from natural causes by the aptly named Inspector Shields, who witnesses Dredlinton tied up and collapsed on a table. The justification for Shields's rather dubious ruling is put forth in the final scene of the novel as Inspector Shields and Wingate face each other over the man's dead body: "The two men heard distinctly [a newspaper boy's] hoarse cry: 'Great fall of wheat in every market! Cheap bread next week!' The eyes of the two men met. There was almost a smile upon Shields' thin lips as he turned towards the door."<sup>68</sup> Wingate has done what the government is clearly unable to do, punish the profiteers and protect the interests of the British people. In every other way, Wingate as the hero stands out as the epitome of traditional English institutions. He is an ex-soldier, middle class in his outlook and tastes, who works with the approval of other institutions of Englishness such as the police even as he condemns his government's inactions in one particular area. In Oppenheim's novel, the immoral economy that the profiteers embody is put to rights.

Bennett's *Lord Raingo*, while less sensational in comparison to Oppenheim's work, also portrays government officials as unable to bring about real change during the war and for the people. Raingo provides us with an example of the human cost of political performance when he is given a peerage in a manner that

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 280.

clearly echoes the honors scandal. Yet again Raingo is not a typical profiteer; instead he “behaved nobly in the matter of subscriptions to British war loans. . . . He turned down all Swetnam’s clever proposals for making an honest penny out of the necessities of war. He could, for example, have amassed millions by manipulating shipping interests—and did not.”<sup>69</sup> Yet Raingo does capitalize upon the war by becoming Minister of Records and gaining a peerage but is then reminded throughout the novel of his own futility within the government and the war.

While Raingo attempts to exude the authority and confidence befitting a government minister, the internal dialogue that Bennett provides reveals that Raingo feels giddy and “girlish” with excitement at the thought of being called “Lord Raingo.” This striking example of class mobility encompasses his ultimate performance. Initially Raingo is motivated by the thought of doing good for his country within his posting: “He could put the whole of himself into the Ministry of Records, whether as a peer or only as commoner. He would work for the country at war as nobody had worked.” Although still not a combatant, he can now fight from the seat of government. Yet this excitement quickly gives way as he realizes the “circus menagerie” of government.<sup>70</sup> His entrance into the Ministry of Records on the first day is a calculated and successful piece of theater, and he goes on intentionally to mislead his advisors and the Prime Minister in an effort to maintain power. As the novel progresses, encounters with a poor woman impregnated by her soldier lover and his own son returned from imprisonment make him realize the futility of the game of politics: “This was the meaning of war. The meaning of war was within her. . . . One man fast in the arid routine of a prison camp; the other in a trench under fire. . . . And he Samuel Raingo was making the war into politics and intrigue.”<sup>71</sup>

Raingo can no longer pretend to inhabit his role as a politician when faced with the realities of the physical costs of the war. By the end of the novel Raingo is emotionally, politically, and physically aware of his uselessness, and he is bound to his bed awaiting his death, Geoffrey by his deathbed as the person who will persevere. Politics is ultimately condemned in the novel as little more than the game of a foolish old man, while the real future of the country is entrusted to active combatants like Geoffrey, whose political alignment remains uncertain.

Bennett’s portrayal of Raingo exercised a degree of believable restraint, but McNeile did not subscribe to such restraint. Bennett provides a critique of Lloyd George’s coalition, while McNeile manages to critique *both* profiteering and the emergent Labour Party. Carl Peterson’s stated aim, outlined in the first pages of the series, is to “humble that cursed country [Britain] to the dirt” through the introduction of Bolshevism. He does this through a vague plan that aligns Bolshevik fanatics with politicians sympathetic to the communist cause. McNeile is notable for inferring that it is the relatively new Labour Party that is culpable in the poor state of Britain. The extent of Peterson’s plan and the role of government in it are revealed when Drummond and the American detective aiding him discover a ledger of names of people Peterson has aligned with the Bolshevik cause. The American comments to Bulldog when looking at the list, “This blighter is a Mem-

<sup>69</sup> Bennett, *Lord Raingo*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

ber of Parliament. What's he getting four payments of a thousand pounds for? . . . But isn't he some pot in one of your big trade unions?" to which Drummond responds: "Heaven knows . . . I only saw the blighter once, and then his shirt was dirty."<sup>72</sup> McNeile's work is particularly convoluted and notable in its targeting of both profiteering and organized labor as issues plaguing Britain's economy. More than anything McNeile displays a blanket distrust of companies headed by a few powerful people or political fanatics. The one thing McNeile is clear on is that men like Bulldog Drummond, a soldier largely uninterested in politics or business, are the men to restore British society. It is Drummond's rousing speech to Peterson at the end of the novel, stating that "Not by revolutions and direct action will you make this island of ours right," but rather, "Evolution is our only chance, not revolution; but you, and others like you, stand to gain more by the latter," that clearly marks the difference between the conservative traditional soldier and the villain who is willing to promote a revolution to gain profit.<sup>73</sup>

Where McNeile's work is typical of other examples provided here is that the seemingly radical aims of a hero pursuing vigilante justice are resolved not in favor of a socialist economy but rather by resituating the soldier-hero back at the traditional center of British society and a capitalist economy. The hero himself thus functioned in a largely conservative way by affirming institutions of Britishness, such as the military or the police, as well as a government purged of its "bad apples." This was the "conventional wisdom" that Ross McKibbin argues kept the conservatives in power for the majority of the interwar period.<sup>74</sup> Bolshevism and profiteering were both painted by McNeile as antidemocratic, yet McNeile offered no clear alternative to them, except a renewed commitment to the figure of the soldier as the one best positioned to protect the social and economic interests of the nation. The popularity of mass fiction and its critiques of government and business did little substantially to threaten the existence of current political parties, particularly the Conservative Party, which largely escaped the scandals of profiteering and the honors sale, as well as the misfortune of being in power after the American stock market crash. The Conservatives were thus able to separate their own commitment to finance from the worst of the profiteering scandal. Popular novels then subsequently only affirmed the worth of a hero who would have likely voted Conservative himself in a period when, as McKibbin notes, the Conservatives had effectively branded themselves as the national party, in no small part through a heavy proportion of MPs who had been in the armed forces.<sup>75</sup> The Conservative mobilization of militarism and national tradition was not out of keeping with depictions of the hero in best sellers, even as readers simultaneously consumed representations of a moral economy with greater government presence.

<sup>72</sup> McNeile, *Bulldog Drummond*, 233.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>74</sup> Ross McKibbin, "Class and Conventional Wisdom in Interwar Britain," in *Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 259–93.

<sup>75</sup> McKibbin notes that about 57 percent of Conservative MPs had been "in the armed forces, the civil service, or the professions" ("Class and Conventional Wisdom in Interwar Britain," 268).

## CONCLUSION

The possibility that concerns about profiteering and politicians would entirely abate in the 1920s diminished with the 1929 stock market crash in the United States and the political and economic crisis that followed in Britain. The economic conditions of the winter of 1930–31 necessitated the creation of another Coalition government. Britain had, up to this point, been recovering somewhat from the economic repercussions of the war, yet this recovery was piecemeal and largely limited to the middling classes who were affected more by inflation than by post-World War I unemployment. This limited recovery was nevertheless reflected in the works of some authors such as Phillip Gibbs, who partially exonerated the profiteer in his 1926 novel, *Young Anarchy*. Gibbs's novel was a departure from his earlier flirtation with Bolshevism in *Middle of the Road*, where his ex-soldier hero Bertram freely considers the appeals of socialism while railing against those he sees pitted against the soldier and blames the war on "the Profiteers, the Old Men who ordered the massacre, the politicians who spoilt the Peace, the painted flappers."<sup>76</sup> Instead, *Young Anarchy* provided a stinging account of the 1926 general strike. Gibbs ultimately portrays the Oxford hero's hard-hearted, conservative father, Tony Southlands, in a grudgingly sympathetic manner. Gibbs's narrator reflects at one point upon Southlands: "During the war I thought of him as one of our profiteers, making lots of money out of the massacre of youth. And yet as I looked at him now I could not help acknowledging that it was men of his type who had built up the prosperity of England and men of his character whom we needed most, perhaps, to get us out of the trough of business depression into which we had fallen."<sup>77</sup>

This is a significant shift in the portrayal of the profiteer. As memories of the war faded but economic depression lived on, the role of businessmen in relation to the nation became more positive. Gibbs thus attempted to rescue the profiteering businessman from his reputation and resituate him as a hero rather than a villain.

Yet even while Gibbs made a tenuous peace with the profiteers, other authors were not so quick to do so, and the money-hungry profiteer remained a staple villain for many best-selling authors, at times being strongly linked to the politics and business of fascism in the 1930s. Popular fiction throughout the 1920s argued that business conducted in a free-market capitalist economy did not always signal economic benefits for the greater good but could rather mean the concentration of wealth in the hands of a dastardly few and even extreme political unrest. The lone actions of the hero against the villainous businessman, or in the face of the government's inaction, signaled a crisis after World War I, even while the hero simultaneously attempted to reknit the fabric of that society through his own type of moral economy. This survey of villains within popular novels from the 1920s indicates, above all, that villains could exist in the hallowed halls of business and government. Just as criminals acted out of scale in these novels, so were audiences encouraged to perceive villainy out of scale when they saw it lurking in places of

<sup>76</sup> Philip Gibbs, *The Middle of the Road* (New York, 1923), 48.

<sup>77</sup> Philip Gibbs, *Young Anarchy* (New York, 1926), 203–4.

immense power. The singular mission of the veteran soldier-hero revealed both the problem of profiteering and politics after the war, as well as the solution. When the 1919 Profiteering Act rallied against the “avarice” and the “activities of evil doers,” it likely did not advocate vigilance against wealthy businessmen and corrupt politicians. Yet this is arguably what resulted within popular fiction in the 1920s and probably motivated the hasty and largely unanimous passing of the second Profiteering Act at the outset of World War II as the Goods and Services Bill.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the pessimism that Steven Fielding identifies as the root of Labour’s sweep to victory in 1945 could be traced back to the 1920s and a growing commitment to the idea that the ordinary man, or soldier, could govern just as well.<sup>79</sup> An important lesson that neither businessmen nor politicians could be entirely trusted to their own devices was taught within the fictional landscape of 1920s Britain.

<sup>78</sup> “Control of Prices: New Powers against Profiteering; House of Commons,” *The Times*, 20 June 1941. *The Times* noted that this was not contested, nor was “the principle” of the bill.

<sup>79</sup> Steven Fielding, “What Did ‘the People’ Want? The Meaning of the 1945 General Election,” *Historical Journal* 35, no. 3 (September 1992): 623–39.