

11. Mutualism in the trenches: Anarchism, militarism and the lessons of the First World War

Matthew S. Adams

In June 1930, Richard Aldington wrote to Herbert Read asking whether he agreed with ‘this talk that “War book” is dead’. Aldington answered his own question, judging that based on subscriptions for his short story *At All Costs* (1930), there was plenty of life left in the form, adding: ‘I mention this in case the anti War [sic] book stunt has discouraged you from continuing the novel you mentioned to me’.¹ Although Read never completed a novel based on his experiences during the First World War, he would perpetually return to his memories of the conflict, and, in a variety of media, attempt to comprehend the ultimately ambiguous meaning of these experiences to his life. Looking back in 1962, Read admitted that he was no closer to fixing the war in his personal history:

I still do not know whether the thing I stepped on in August, 1914, was a snake’s head or a ladder. Materially it could be thought of as a ladder, for it gave me four years of material security (under the constant threat of death and the daily presence of suffering). Such an ‘ordeal by fire’ no doubt gave me also a self-confidence that would have taken longer to acquire in civil life. But at the end it left me with a pathetic longing for security.²

Read’s equivocation was not an uncommon reaction amongst First World War veterans, and as recent historical examinations have stressed, the multifarious nature of these reactions sits uneasily with the perceived image of the war in popular memory.³

Just as one particular narrative of the war has been dominant in British popular culture, the scholarship on Read has tended to echo the general thrust of this depiction, and reduce the

experience to a familiar triad of ‘blood, mud and futility’.⁴ In one sense, this interpretation sits comfortably with Read’s own narrativisation of the conflict: notably his attempt to trace a direct line between his life as a soldier in a war whose premises he abhorred, and his post-war conversion to an internationalist, and anti-militarist, anarchism.⁵ Yet, as his 1962 conclusion suggested, the reality was more complex. Rather than lessons forged in the heat of battle, the war imparted a number of experiences and sensations that were processed, comprehended, and reimagined in calmer moments. This was an ongoing process, one that occupied Read for the rest of his life, and, as with the literary narrative that continues to exert such power, was refracted through the lens of subsequent events. As one historian has noted:

Recent psychological and neurological studies ... ha[ve] time and again emphasized the social nature of individual remembering and forgetting ... Our ability to store, recall, and reconfigure verbal and nonverbal experiences ... cannot be separated from patterns of perception ... learned from our immediate and wider social environments. The very language and narrative patterns ... we use to express memories, even autobiographical memories, are inseparable from the social standards of plausibility and authenticity.⁶

This frame casts fresh light on Read’s writing about the First World War, and a new way to understand his attempts to make sense of his experiences in the context of his politics. As his political thinking matured against the backdrop of the Spanish Revolution and the post-war decades that seemed to herald ‘the long-expected death of the capitalist system’, Read began to reassess his involvement in the war.⁷ What emerged was an anarchistic reading of his military life that offered a novel model of socialist militarism, one that looked to small-group ‘fidelity’ as an abiding lesson of the war, rather than the power of collectivism.⁸

A world of broken mirrors: Remembering, rethinking and post-war disillusionment

In another letter sent to Read in 1930, Aldington reflected on the difficulties of writing about the war:

But that is the whole trouble with these terrific experiences. They leave one speechless. Imagine trying to convey the feeling of that to chap like Waterlow! It is a highpoint of intensity of experience and emotion which is clear for us, but hidden in the mist for them.⁹

Despite having already produced two collections of poetry, *Images of War: A Book of Poems* (1919) and *War and Love* (1919), and later finding fame with *Death of a Hero* (1929), Aldington's comment implied a threefold difficulty in writing accurately about their wartime experiences. One problem was being rendered 'speechless', and the sheer failure of words to describe the incomprehensible. A related issue, and a pressing concern for both Aldington and Read as they attempted to explore the war in verse and prose, was finding a suitable technique. After reading Read's short work *In Retreat* (1925), Aldington was impressed enough to think about writing First World War prose of his own, but confessed that Read's continued commitment to Imagist detachment set a high benchmark:

I have read your account again and felt like doing a bally weep in consequence [...] Suppose I did a similar thing and called it *The Advance* or *In Advance*, would you mind? I should try to tell it as coolly and truthfully as you did [...] My [...] difficulty is to refrain from giving way to angry emotionalism. I feel convinced we wasted men's lives up to the last hour. Some bloody ass sent out a corporal

and three men to reconnoitre on the night of the 10/11, after we have received orders not to cross the Mons Maubeuge Road, and the poor devil was killed – he had been over three years in the line! Sickening waste.¹⁰

Some years later, Aldington rebuffed Read's criticism of his 'Meditation on a German Grave' and 'At All Costs', stories collected in *Roads to Glory* (1930), that he had failed to maintain emotional distance. 'Your objections [...] are perfectly just', he wrote, 'if you insist on restraint as an absolute rule', but Aldington objected that 'I think we tend to express rather too little feeling than too much.'¹¹

Apart from the issues of emotion and tone, the third factor identified by Aldington dealt with the problem of audience. For those that fought, a feeling of distance from those that remained at home was a common theme in war literature. This was perhaps most discernible in the reflex of misogyny that saw some male writers react with hostility to the apparent gains of women, who apparently prospered while the soldiers suffered.¹² Christopher Nevinson's painting *War Profiteers* (1917) is an expression of this mood, depicting two louche and 'over-dressed young women, perhaps prostitutes', in a sickly blue light, one gazing over her shoulder, the other grinning at the viewer.¹³ Aldington pinpointed Sydney Waterlow as an exemplar of this inability to understand. Waterlow, a member of the Bloomsbury group, sometime literary scholar, and career diplomat, acquired a reputation for aloofness. 'By God! What a bore that man is!', noted Virginia Woolf in a characteristically tart missive to Lytton Strachey, 'no one I've ever met seems [...] more palpably second rate.'¹⁴ T.S. Eliot was also unimpressed. Despite being given some much needed review work by Waterlow while a student, Eliot deemed him, fresh from the Paris Peace Conference, 'very pompous'.¹⁵ Based throughout the war in the Foreign Office, Aldington's mention of Waterlow reinforces the idea that those who did not experience the fighting could never comprehend its effect. Much

later, Read expressed a similar sense of alienation when discussing the genesis of his Imagist aesthetic: 'I think the trauma of war experience had more to do with it than anything else.

Sassoon was finished by the war; Owen would have been. Eliot and Pound did not experience the war (I mean the blood and shit of it).¹⁶ And four years subsequently, writing to Colin Wilson, Read voiced the same feeling that the war had been a uniquely disturbing experience, unintelligible to those who had not fought: 'I grew up in a very different world, and the impact of the First World War (at the age of twenty) was shattering in a way and to a degree that no one can imagine now that everyone is born into a world of broken mirrors'.¹⁷

One solution to the problem of trying to communicate the experience of the war to an uncomprehending audience was to give up. If, in the land of 'business as usual', people remained 'incapable of understanding' then 'why bother ... to tell them?'¹⁸ Even as the war raged, a new poetic voice developed that spoke to those that understood. Siegfried Sassoon's mordant verse, mocking patriotic homilies, and rejecting the romantic valour of figures like Rupert Brooke epitomised this trend.¹⁹ As a self-consciously avant-garde neophyte, Read was drawn to this new tendency, and his exploration of the war in verse in *Naked Warriors* (1919) cleaved to the spirit of disaffection, albeit with a detachment Aldington found disconcerting.²⁰ More revealing, however, is the fact that Read's other 1919 collection, *Eclogues*, assiduously avoided direct engagement with the subject of war. Perhaps unsurprisingly, for the recently demobbed, literary reflection on their ordeal was not a pressing concern, and Read's correspondence in this period demonstrates a resolute desire to realise a successful literary life, rather than come to terms with his recent experiences. 'Congratulations on all your activities', wrote an impressed Aldington, 'we missed a good few years by our absurd capers in Picardy, Artois, Flanders &c., but I believe we learned [...] the importance of a pertinacious production of energy long after all energy has gone!'²¹

While never completely quiet, the deafening ‘silence of the veteran’ in the immediate post-war period brings into stark relief the explosion of literary reflections on the war years that began in the late-1920s.²² For Read, the earlier absence of ‘war books’ was the product of a lack of audience: ‘Young writers who took part in the last war came back with one desire: to tell the truth about war, to expose its horrors, its inhumanity, its indignity [...] [But] [...] there was not a public for war poetry or war stories. Between 1918 and 1928 it was almost impossible to publish anything realistic about the war’.²³

Throughout this period there was a trickle of realistic memoirs, Read added, but it was the publication of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) that broke the levee.²⁴ Contributing an essay to a *festschrift* on Aldington in 1965, Read noted that Remarque’s success had paved the way for Aldington to ‘sail [...] to fame and freedom on this new wave of “war books”’.²⁵ In fact, Read played a decisive role in the publication of Remarque’s book, assisting with the English translation of the work, and corresponding with Remarque to find suitable translations for the book’s idiomatic German. Post-publication, Remarque wrote to Read stating that he was ‘happy that the book is so successful in England’, and adding that he attributed this ‘not least to your activities’. They had clearly already met in person at this stage, as Remarque promised a rematch of the German card game ‘skat’, played frequently by the soldiers in his novel. Evidently with beginner’s luck on his side, Read had been victorious in their first encounter.²⁶ Read’s papers also include an autobiographical sketch sent by Remarque to his British publisher, in which he revealingly discussed his post-war itinerancy, and the ennui that affected his generation:

I wanted quiet and calm and became a teacher in a [...] remote village [...] But after a few months the loneliness became crushing and [...] in quick succession worked as an organist in a madhouse, music teacher, manager of a small factory,

car salesman, technical draughtsman, theatre critic [...] I won a good sum in roulette that allowed me to travel [...] Last year I wrote down, without ever having considered it earlier, the war experiences of me and my comrades. The book was born from reflecting that so many of my comrades, although after all we are still young, nevertheless lead an often joyless, bitter, resigned life without knowing why [...] I [...] found that we all are still suffering from the effects of the war today. The numberless agreements [with this opinion] when the book came out have shown me that this assumption was correct. In my book I wanted to describe three things: the war, the fate of a generation, and loyal comradeship. And this has been the same in all countries. It is my wish that the book may contribute to showing the horror of war in order to promote peace.²⁷

As Remarque's letter shows, the post-war context was crucial in fathoming the war's meaning and significance. The fragility of the German state in these years, and the economic woes that ensured a precarious existence for young veteran like Remarque, all contributed to his feeling of alienation. Moreover, it encouraged writers who had not previously thought about examining their war experiences to reach for their pens, lest the 'horror of war' be repeated.

Both Read and Aldington were subject to the same impelling forces, and rethought their experiences in the light of the tumultuous post-war decades. Yet, prosaic concerns remained. While liking Remarque's book, Aldington was keen to highlight the originality of his own work: 'I suppose they'll say I imitated Remarque [...] but I didn't read him until my own book was in type'.²⁸ Nevertheless, the commercial success of *All Quiet on the Western Front* inevitably inspired imitators, and, as with *All Quiet*, the boundary between fact and fiction in many of these works was unclear. Remarque's book, for instance, while often

confused for a memoir, was a work of fiction, and the extent to which it drew on the author's actual experience generated acrimonious debate.²⁹ For other authors, the financial precariousness of literary life in the inter-war years shaped their work. Robert Graves, who devoted considerable space at the end of *Good-bye to All That* (1929) to detailing the privations of living by the pen, admitted to composing his memoir with an eye to what was most popular with the reading public.³⁰ This literary efflorescence caused Read, also experiencing financial uncertainty, to return to the subject of war, publishing an edition of short stories *Ambush* (1930), and the long poem *The End of the War* (1932).

The cultural 'triumph' of the 'soldier's story' as the prism through which the war is understood has sparked debate over the authenticity of these narratives as means of remembering, but, more fruitfully, has also highlighted the extent to which these acts of remembrance were informed by their post-war contexts.³¹ Viewing Read's intellectual development, and especially his flourishing political philosophy, in similar terms is helpful, illuminating the rather obscure origins of his turn to anarchism. Part of the confusion lies in the fact that Read himself offered an ambiguous account of his political awakening. In the definitive version of his autobiography *The Contrary Experience* (1963), he confessed to a period as a 'true-blue Tory' in his early youth, but suggested that voracious reading of Benjamin Disraeli's novels and familiarisation with 'his two nations of the rich and the poor' fanned a developing social conscience.³² Immersion in the poverty of pre-war Leeds 'penetrated the armour' of his 'inherited prejudices', and Read found intellectual sustenance for this burgeoning conscience in those Victorian anatomists of capitalist atomisation, 'Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris'.³³ Pursuing these threads led Read to Marx, and, more influentially, Kropotkin and Edward Carpenter.³⁴

Given Read's later emphasis on artistic creativity as the 'index' of individual liberty, the account he gives of his early exposure to the aestheticised socialism of Ruskin and Morris

is persuasive.³⁵ Yet, while admitting that his ‘political opinions have varied considerably’, Read also argued that he remained committed to the ‘broad basic principles of socialism’, and noted that his anarchism developed during the war years.³⁶ While consistency was never his strongpoint, Read’s explanation of his politicisation sits uneasily with his rush to the colours; all the more so considering that the outbreak of war found him already in a military camp, driven ‘to some extent’ by his ‘patriotic past’.³⁷ Read explained the paradox of his continuing pacifist internationalism, and his active war service by hinting at the popular ‘myth’³⁸ of war enthusiasm, arguing that the distractions of adventure outweighed his, at that time, diffuse political principles. At the end of his life, Read would boldly date his ‘conversion’ to anarchism to ‘1911 or 1912’, repeating that Carpenter led him to the anarchist triumvirate of ‘Kropotkin, Bakunin and Proudhon’.³⁹ His autobiography paints a slightly different picture, however, with Read observing that his political views had yet to crystallise in wartime, and that he toyed with both a Sorelian syndicalism and Guild Socialism.⁴⁰

Guild socialism, standing, in the words of a contemporary, ‘midway between State Socialism and Syndicalism’ forms a conceivable temporary resting point for a nascent anarchist.⁴¹ Yet, in Read’s first sustained political comment he was openly, if rather vaguely, hostile to anarchism. His two articles for *The Guildsman* offer a broadly minarchist conception of guild socialism, in which the ‘Group Idea’ reconstitutes the relationship between the individual and the state on supposedly novel lines. This, he insisted, does not mean the destruction of the state, which is a ‘mere negative reality of anarchist philosophy’, but a refashioning in which the ‘will of the State to power’ and the ‘will of the individual to resist this power [...] coalesce’. A Saint-Simonian administration of things appears to have been Read’s answer, although he leaves the exact role of the state unclear, concluding that his solution is certainly not ‘an anarchic ideal’, as ‘it postulates an organised society; and anarchy and organisation are mutually exclusive’.⁴²

Comparing Read's autobiographical statements concerning his political conversion, and his political writings during wartime, demonstrate the necessity of treating his mature reflection on the growth of his political thought with caution. Tellingly, Read frequently intertwined the narratives of his intellectual development and war experiences in his writing, to the point of including in his autobiography a series of letters dwelling on his rigorously improving course of wartime reading. The fact that these processes occurred concurrently explains this fusion, but it also served an important rhetorical device in this autobiographical writing. Self-consciously intellectual, and fixated on the literary life as revealed in his correspondence with Aldington, Read presented his war experiences and growing intellectual sophistication as fundamentally climacteric periods of his life. The weaving together of these narratives reveals a lot about his sense of self, but their form also highlights the importance of contextual analysis in understanding the presentation of these memories. As one commentator has observed:

Autobiographical memories are constructed [...] This does not mean that they are either accurate or inaccurate, but they are not encoded, stored, and retrieved as wholes but rather are created at retrieval using components like [...] narrative, imagery, emotion.⁴³

That there is a tendency for 'the inevitable infiltrations of the fictionalizing process' in life-writing similarly demonstrates the value of thinking about Read's acts of remembrance contextually.⁴⁴ Rather than his war experiences bequeathing a defined political position, both his understanding of these experiences, and his perception of their significance to his life, were manifest in an ongoing process of rethinking and reimagining. This conversation with the past bore the imprint of the present, and just as the true nature of the war seemed to dawn

on writers like Remarque and Graves in the turbulent 1930s, the war's relationship to Read's personal and political philosophy began to make sense in this period too. As ongoing strife in Europe belied the failures of Versailles, and alternative political models were in vogue, the war's lessons became clearer, and more urgent.

Militarism and mutualism

For British socialists militarism has been both a source of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, there was an enduring attachment to a 'voluntarist conception of military service rooted in liberal ideas of limited government', that exercised an important influence in the pre-war decades.⁴⁵ Given liberalism's enduring magnetism for British socialists, seen most obviously in the varied membership of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the hegemony of this resistance to militarism had well-defined roots, and stood in contrast to the model of service as citizenship in the French Jacobinist-socialist tradition.⁴⁶ Just as conflicting views on militarism characterised the broader history of socialism, however, not every socialist in Britain opposed the idea of learning something from military organisation. As Kropotkin had wearily observed during the height of Britain's imperial adventuring, jingoism and popular patriotism were seductive forces. While Kropotkin lamented the vitiating effects of this on popular radicalism, other socialists saw maintenance of the empire as essential to the future health of Britain. 'When England is at war', wrote Robert Blatchford, reacting bellicosely to the Second Boer War, 'I'm English. I have no politics and no party. I am English.'⁴⁷

As tensions heightened in Europe in the lead up to the First World War, these voices became shriller. Blatchford led the charge. Debating the issue of impending war with Upton Sinclair, he conceded that while 'capitalists and militarists' caused war, to hope for the international fraternity of the working class to prevent it was unrealistic. There is, he concluded, only one way to prevent the coming war: 'stopping the growth of German naval

power.’⁴⁸ In a series of articles in the *Daily Mail*, Blatchford further prophesied impending attack by Germany, insisting that defensive preparations must begin in earnest.⁴⁹ ‘Arm or surrender; fight for the Empire or lose it’, he insisted.⁵⁰

While Blatchford’s position can be seen as a reaction to the exigencies of European politics in the pre-war years, militarism had deeper roots in British socialism. In the spirit of British exceptionalism, Henry Hyndman, founder of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), had similarly argued that, in spite of its faults, Britain was a country of unique liberties worth protecting.⁵¹ Examining this position in 1907, in his pamphlet *Social-Democracy and the Armed Nation*, Harry Quelch observed that although social democrats were fundamentally opposed to militarism, in the present international climate this was unrealistic. Instead, he proposed a ‘National Citizen force’ to replace the standing army, empowering people to actively protect their own individual freedoms.⁵² Acting on this belief, the SDF’s single M.P., Will Thorne, proposed a ‘citizen army bill to the Commons’ in 1908.⁵³

Heightened sensitivity to the ‘German menace’ pushed many socialists to rethink the importance of the military in light of the perceived vulnerability of unique British values. Beyond the practicalities of waging war, however, militarist models attracted several thinkers because they offered a practical mode of organisation that could also achieve meaningful social change. In increasingly complex societies, if there were two values essential to those dreaming of reordering the present and then administering the future, it was discipline and organisation. Given also that a language of efficiency had captivated utopian thinkers from Plato to Fourier, military analogies were often seductive, even for political theorists with an otherwise anti-statist edge. S.G. Hobson, for instance, looked admiringly at the construction of the Panama Canal, an operation managed by the US military after French attempts to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans foundered, and incorporated a language of ‘regimentation’ into his guild socialism.⁵⁴ The politically nomadic H.G. Wells, who had

devised a war-game for children with the humourist Jerome K. Jerome,⁵⁵ similarly frequently adopted a militarised language of efficiency and organisation in his social speculations. Indeed, like Blatchford and Quelch, while abhorring war and proposing that in a socialist world it would cease to be a problem, Wells stated that a ‘Socialist State’ would nevertheless possess awesome organisational power if conflict threatened:

Here will be a State organized for collective action as never a State has been organized before, a State in which every man and woman will be a willing and conscious citizen saturated with the spirit of service, in which scientific service will be at a maximum of vigour and efficiency. What individualist or autocratic militarism will stand a chance against it? [...] Universal military service, given the need for it, is innate in the Socialist idea.⁵⁶

A corollary of this fixation on organisation and efficiency was a pervasive image of industrial productivity transformed through an appeal to militaristic methods. As most utopian thinkers had theorised during times of productive scarcity, abundance was often a pressing concern, as their hopes for a pacific society rested on the absence of conflicts over resources. Efficiency is a common theme in Edward Bellamy’s influential *Looking Backward*, for instance, with his ‘industrial army’ offering the narrator an awe-inspiring lesson in the ‘prodigiously multiplied efficiency which perfect organization can give to labor’.⁵⁷ With wages equalised, Bellamy’s utopia also adopts a militarised system of ranks and insignia as a spur to individual initiative. Workers wear a ‘metallic badge’ made of different material depending on rank, and ‘rank in the [industrial] army constitutes the only mode of social distinction’.⁵⁸

Resistance to the inflexibility of utopian thinking was a characteristically liberal preoccupation in the mid-twentieth century. As many of the leading anatomists of the utopian mentality had fled experiments in social engineering in the countries of their birth, this antipathy had clear historical and biographical roots. Yet while Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Leszek Kolakowski, inveighed against the barbarities committed in the name of renewal in the twentieth century, anarchism as a political tradition had developed a similar critique significantly earlier.⁵⁹ Given that anarchists have often been intemperate painters of utopian fancies, this is perhaps surprising, but at the heart of the utopian project of a figure like Kropotkin was a commitment to malleability that addressed the issues identified by these liberal critics.⁶⁰ One discernible trend in this anti-utopian utopianism was the ridiculing of the militarist language and motifs regularly adopted by utopian schemers. Reviewing Bellamy's book in four articles in *La Révolte*, for example, Kropotkin noted its popularity in the Anglophone world, 'd'un livre qui est immensément lu en ce moment aux Etats-Unis, en Angleterre, en Australie', and added that it had even led 'le grand précurseur de Darwin', A.R. Wallace to 'déclaré dans la presse que ce livre lui avait démontré la possibilité du Socialisme'. Kropotkin concluded that its success was explained by the 'pâr ce côté *construtif* (sic) du livre', which appeased 'la masse des travailleurs' tired of merely critical works, and praised the short shrift Bellamy gave to the wage system.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Kropotkin was concerned that Bellamy's book contained 'beaucoup de préjugés autoritaires', and complained of his 'l'armée industrielle': 'On se croirait dans une armée de Bismarck.'⁶² For Kropotkin, seizing on this military language became a way of criticising the authoritarianism of a number of competing political traditions. In an article on Herbert Spencer, he noted that while Spencer's panacea was a weakly theorised contractualism, this still stood in noble contrast to the 'military utopias of German socialism' currently ascendant.⁶³ While aimed at Marxism, Kropotkin challenged communal experiments in similar terms, denouncing their

tendency to banish 'mankind...[to]...communistic monasteries or barracks.'⁶⁴ More broadly, when discussing the constructive power of free initiative, he offered a counter image: 'The theorists – for whom the soldier's uniform and the barrack mess-table are civilization's last word – would like no doubt to start a regime of National Kitchens and 'Spartan Broth'. They would point out the advantages gained ... the economy in fuel and food, if such huge kitchens were established'.⁶⁵ The language of military efficiency that Kropotkin recognised in various strains of socialism was, for him, antipathetic to meaningful social freedom.

As it was a growing familiarity with Kropotkin's political theory that encouraged Read's turn to anarchism, it could be expected that Read would similarly repudiate this martial language and turn away from military models. While in his immediate post-war political writing this is the case, as Read, rather disingenuously, described both 'hating' the war and being 'unmoved by the general enthusiasm for the Allied cause', later in life he united his wartime experiences and his political philosophy.⁶⁶ The result was an idiosyncratic account of trench warfare seen through the lens of his anarchism, a politicised reading of the trench experience that jettisoned its associations with militaristic elitism. Where Benito Mussolini gloried in the 'trenchocracy ... the aristocracy of the trenches', who could see what 'the blinkered and the idiot do not see', Read saw the promise of real democracy.⁶⁷

Rethinking this period of his life, Read began by offering a narrative made familiar in accounts of the broadening of the franchise in 1918, that living and fighting with 'miners and agricultural workers from the North of England' instilled in him a 'belief in the common man'.⁶⁸ He added that their shared experiences confirmed the inappropriateness of abstractions like 'bravery or courage', and that 'fatalism' was a better word, with a spirit of 'solidarity' emerging amongst the soldiers that had 'nothing to do with the conventional 'esprit de corps'.⁶⁹ Qualifying this assertion, Read drew on Joseph Conrad to suggest that

‘fidelity’ was a better description of the fellowship that formed under fire, and tied this concept to his anarchism:

Fidelity is the word I need to describe the simple idea ... revealed to me in the First World War – the fidelity of one man to another, in circumstances of common danger, the fidelity of all men in group to one another and to the group as a whole. I read, either during the war or shortly afterwards, Kropotkin’s great book *Mutual Aid*, and there [...] found this simple idea enshrined in a philosophy of society.⁷⁰

Extending this idea, Read noted the paradox that he came to understand the power of fidelity while engaged ‘in the beastly business of killing other men’, and observed that, for this reason, it was clearly not a ‘moral idea’ for it was obvious that the ‘enemy’ possessed the same spirit. Rather than inherently moral, he argued that fidelity was a ‘social virtue’, and was thereby ‘inculcated, not by precept, but by example and habit’. The bonds of reciprocity and mutual support that made life in combat endurable could similarly underpin a society organised horizontally, but in neither situation would they exist without conscious nurturing.⁷¹

Read’s stress on the cultivation of fidelity as a prerequisite for a new social order may seem to echo the emphasis on discipline in many militarist models of socialism, but there is an important distinction in the degree to which he presented variety as a social good in itself. First, it is important to note that he pointedly rejected the notion that his lesson in fidelity was a case of ‘esprit de corps’, and rather saw fidelity as a ‘social bond’ not isolated to military groups.⁷² Read’s case is therefore instructive, for while offering paeans to the joys of brotherhood in the trenches was a theme in even the bitterest war literature, no other thinker

incorporated this idea into a libertarian worldview. On the question of difference, Read argued that the failure to recognise the value of diversity was at the root of ‘the mistakes of every political thinker from Aristotle to Rousseau’, and drew a distinction between the assumed ‘uniformity’ of individuals for these theorists, and anarchists’ recognition of ‘the uniqueness of the person’.⁷³ For Read then, mutual aid exists to ‘the extent that the person seeks sympathy [...] among his fellows’, and amounts to a ‘functional’ rather than social contract: ‘the authority of the contract only extends to the fulfilling of a specific function’.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, the importance that Read attached to education was a clear attempt to secure both diversity, and a degree of social solidarity, while eschewing conventionally hierarchical relationships. Education, then, offered a more positive space for the cultivation of fidelity than the ‘common danger’ in which Read had apparently learnt its importance.⁷⁵

Although presented as a result of immediate experience, it is clear that this anarchistic reading of his time in the trenches was a product of distance from the event. Read read his developed political position back into his youthful self, to offer a unique formulation of his wartime experiences filtered through his mature politics. Given that his contemporary political writing explored a libertarian version of guild socialism that actively rejected the feasibility of anarchism, it is clear that it is necessary to treat Read’s comments on his political conversion with caution. The war’s failure to solve Europe’s geopolitical tensions became obvious in the late-1920s, as fresh economic uncertainty demonstrated that despite the carnage, it was not ‘the war that will end war’.⁷⁶ Read’s politics developed against this backdrop, and as literary memoirists began to see the war in what they believed to be a definitive perspective and reached for clean paper, his inchoate political views began to crystallise. As the war began to assume relative fixity in European history, Read’s politics also began to become a more defined feature of his intellectual project. The originality of Read’s approach resides in the fact that while other poets and prose writers exposed the

horrors of fighting, they tended to ally this with political quiescence. The chief British keepers of this wartime memory, of whom Graves and Sassoon are the most prominent, but Aldington is also an important representative, pondered the chasm between combatants and civilians, and raged impotently at the representatives of the Victorian values that led them to the trenches, but generally avoided direct political engagement. While other writers reacted with sullen anger, Read was unique in uniting his wartime experiences with a libertarian vision. While an *anarchisant* writer like George Orwell would use his participation in the Home Guard to theorise a more democratic and classless volunteer force, no other thinker used combat experience to consider a hopeful vision of future social organisation that stressed the productive capacities of mutual aid.⁷⁷

Conclusion

That is just the way with Memory; nothing that she brings to us is complete [...]
God be thanked that [...] the ever-lengthening chain of memory has only pleasant
links, and that the bitterness and sorrow of to-day are smiled at on the morrow [...]
For everything looms pleasant through the softening haze of time.⁷⁸

For a commentator like Paul Fussell, Jerome's anodyne musing on memory would be seen as the product of a time ultimately destroyed by the First World War. Yet later Jerome may have wished to revise his position. Motivated by an abhorrence of 'German militarism', and hatred for the 'offizieren' he saw during his time in Germany, 'swaggering three and four abreast along the pavements [...] insolent, conceited, over-bearing', Jerome was keen to do his part when war broke out.⁷⁹ Too old for service in the British army, he found France 'less encumbered [...] by hide-bound regulations' and enlisted as an ambulance driver, being

particularly impressed by the especially designed uniform.⁸⁰ But the western front stripped the war of any lingering romance:

I came back cured of any sneaking regard I may have ever had for war. The illustrations in the newspapers, depicting all the fun of the trenches, had lost for me their interest. Compared with modern soldiering, a street scavenger's job is an exhilarating occupation, a rat-catcher's work more in keeping with the instincts of a gentleman.⁸¹

Whether these experiences put Jerome off scrabbling about the floor with Wells and his toy soldiers is unclear. Nevertheless, Jerome's case further adds to the picture of a post-war disillusionment that nurtured silence. Cured of his anti-German feeling, Jerome campaigned for a just-peace at Versailles, and like Read, the agreement reached in the Hall of Mirrors encouraged a turning away from politics, and a turning away from the past. For young men like Read and Aldington, the pressing concern was to make good the lost years, and carve out the literary careers they dreamt of in their dugouts, not exorcise haunting memories.

Yet, Jerome's comments on memory are not without value. As the writers and intellectuals that fought the war returned to their past with a fresh gaze, it was true that these memories were inevitably incomplete, even if they did not loom pleasant. As Modris Eksteins has noted in his discussion of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque's book 'is more a comment on the postwar mind, on the postwar view of war, than an attempt to reconstruct the reality of the trench experience.'⁸² Remarque's autobiographical comment corroborates this reading, and it is a position shared by the British writers that looked back to the war in the late-1920s. Read continued to look back throughout his life, but his memories of the conflict were shaped by his growing political conscience – a reawakening of the passion for social

change dampened in the wake of Versailles. While there has been a tendency to posit a direct line between Read's experience of the First World War and his subsequent commitment to anarchism, it is important to note the role of the present in moulding his view of the past. Perpetually returning to the war in his writing in an attempt to finally understand experiences that defied comprehension, Read continually reimagined these experiences afresh, drawing clear biographical and political lessons that were, in fact, shaped by distance. Writing to Read from Paris, a young Henry Miller correctly guessed the defining importance of this Sisyphean task in typically candid terms: 'What I wonder about you is – did you really die through the war experience? Or did you come out merely mutilated?'⁸³

Notes

1 'Richard Aldington to Herbert Read: 24th June 1930', *Herbert Read Papers, McPherson Library, University of Victoria, RD-HR-79* [Hereafter denoted as *HRP*].

2 Herbert Read, *The Cult of Sincerity* (London: Faber, 1968), p. 54.

3 Janet S.K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 185-261; Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 153-186

4 David Taylor, 'Blood, Mud and Futility? Patrick MacGill and the Experience of the Great War', *European Review of History*, 13:2 (June, 2006), 229-250. For Read, see: David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); Carissa Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition: Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward* (New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 33-4; Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: HarperPerennial, 1993), pp. 587-588.

-
- 5 See, for example: Herbert Read, *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics* (London, 1954), 110-111.
- 6 Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory*, 14:2 (May, 2002), 179-197 (185).
- 7 Richard Overy, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (New York: Viking, 2009), 50.
- 8 Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, 40.
- 9 'Richard Aldington to Herbert Read: [No date] November 1925' in *HRA*, HR-RA-33
- 10 'Richard Aldington to Herbert Read: 2nd October 1925' in *HRA*, HR-RA-27
- 11 'Richard Aldington to Herbert Read: 15th September 1930' in *HRA*, HR-RA-82.
- 12 Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War', *Signs*, 8:3 (Spring, 1983), 422-450.
- 13 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 197-8.
- 14 'Virginia Woolf to Lytton Strachey: 22nd October 1915', *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume II*, ed., Nigel Nicolson (London: Mariner, 1976), 67-68 (67).
- 15 'T.S. Eliot to His Mother: 22nd February 1920' in *The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume I*, ed., Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1988), 368-369 (368). See also: 'T.S. Eliot to Bertrand Russell: 11th October 1915' in *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, 119-120.
- 16 'Herbert Read to Francis Berry: 10th April 1953', *HRUV*: 61/20/9.
- 17 'Herbert Read to Colin Wilson: 25th June 1957', *HRUVI*: HR/CW-3 Eud-01.
- 18 Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1979), 95.

19 Wohl, *Generation of 1914*, 95, 89-92.

20 Read later argued that Aldington moved away from this poetic style. See: Herbert Read, 'Sir Herbert Read' in *Richard Aldington: An Intimate Portrait*, ed. Alister Kersham (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 122-133

21 'Richard Aldington to Herbert Read: 16th October 1925' in *HRA*, HR-RA-28.

22 Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), 192

23 Herbert Read, *A Coat of Many Colours: Occasional Essays* (London: Faber, 1947), 72-3.

24 Read, *Coat of Many Colours*, 73.

25 Read, 'Read' in *Richard Aldington*, 129.

26 'Erich Maria Remarque to Herbert Read: 18th May 1929' in *HRA*, HR-EMR-8. I am indebted to Timo Schaefer for providing the translations of these letters.

27 'Erich Maria Remarque: 5th February 1929' in *HRA*, HR-EMR-3 Encl.01.

28 'Richard Aldington to Herbert Read: 27th November 1930' in *HRA*, HR-RA-85.

29 Modris Eksteins, 'All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15:2 (Apr., 1980), 345-366 (351).

30 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 1975), 204. Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 303-343.

31 Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 217.

32 Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience: Autobiographies* (London: Faber, 1963), 155, 199.

33 *Ibid.*, 200.

34 *Ibid.*, 201.

35 Herbert Read, *To Hell With Culture!* (London, 1962), xxviii.

36 Read, *Contrary Experience*, 202

37 *Ibid.*, 209.

38 'I use that phrase...to mean not the falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved, and has come to be accept as true'. Hynes, *A War Imagined*, ix.

39 Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, 76.

40 Read, *Contrary Experience*, 217.

41 H. Reynard, 'The Guild Socialists', *The Economic Journal* 30:119 (Sep., 1920), 321-330 (321).

42 Herbert Read, 'The World and the Guild Idea – I. The Natural Basis', *The Guildsman: a Journal of Social and Industrial Emancipation*, 5 (April, 1917), 6.

43 David C. Rubin, 'Introduction', *Remembering our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 1-15 (4).

44 Antonina Harbus, 'Exposure to life-writing as an impact on autobiographical memory', *Memory Studies*, 4:2 (2011), 206-220 (212).

45 Kevin Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism: Socialists, Communists and Conscription in France and Britain, 1900-1940', *Past and Present*, 202:1 (2009), 207-244 (218).

46 Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939* (Oxford: Wiley, 1982), 78-81; Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism', 218.

47 Blatchford quoted in Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895-1914* (London: Harvard, 1960), 218.

48 Upton Sinclair and Robert Blatchford, *Socialism & War: a Manifesto Against It* (London: Clarion, 1909), 12.

49 Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 101.

-
- 50 Robert Blatchford, *Germany and England: The War that was Foretold* (New York: Edward J. Clode, 1914), 46.
- 51 Paul Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 112.
- 52 Harry Quelch, *Social-Democracy and the Armed Nation* (London: Twentieth Century Press, 1907), 15.
- 53 Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack*, 112.
- 54 Kevin Morgan, 'British Guild Socialists and the Exemplar of the Panama Canal', *History of Political Thought*, XXVIII: 1 (Spring, 2007), 120-157 (137).
- 55 H.G. Wells, *Little Wars: A Game for Boys* (London: Frank Palmer, 1913), 11.
- 56 H.G. Wells, *New Worlds for Old: A Plain Account of Modern Socialism* (London: Constable, 1912), 342.
- 57 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (New York: Modern Library, [1888] 1917), 146.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 99, 100.
- 59 See: Matthew S. Adams, *Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism: Between Reason and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015)
- 60 Ruth Kinna. 'Anarchism and the Politics of Utopia', ed. Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester: MUP, 2009), 221-240.
- 61 Peter Kropotkin, 'Le Vingtième Siècle', *La Révolte* (30th November 1889), 1.
- 62 Kropotkin, 'Le Vingtième Siècle', 1; Peter Kropotkin, 'Le Vingtième Siècle II', *La Révolte* (14th December 1889), 1.
- 63 P. Kropotkin, 'Co-Operation: A Reply to Herbert Spencer', *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism* (Dec., 1896), 1.

64 Peter Kropotkin, ‘Anarchism’, from *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *The Conquest of Bread & Other Writings*, ed. Marshall Shatz (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 233-247 (239).

65 P. Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1907), 79.

66 Read, *Anarchy and Order*, 110.

67 Benito Mussolini, ‘Trenchocracy’, *Fascism*, ed. Roger Griffin (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 28-29 (28). I am indebted to Carl Levy for this point.

68 Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, 40.

69 *Ibid.*, 41.

70 *Ibid.*, 41.

71 *Ibid.*, 41.

72 *Ibid.*, 41.

73 Read, *Coat of Many Colours*, 133.

74 *Ibid.*, 133.

75 Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, 41. On Read’s educational ideas, see: Matthew S. Adams, ‘Art, Education, and Revolution: Herbert Read and the Reorientation of British Anarchism’, *History of European Ideas*, 39:5, 709-728.

76 H.G. Wells, *The War that Will End War* (New York: F&C Palmer, 1914).

77 George Orwell, ‘Home Guard Lessons for the Future [1944]’, *The Complete Works of George Orwell: Volume Sixteen*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Secker, 1998), 431-432.

78 Jerome K. Jerome, *The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* (Chicago: H.Holt [1886] 1900), 158, 160, 159.

79 Jerome K. Jerome, *My Life and Times* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1926), 282.

80 Jerome, *My Life*, 286.

81 *Ibid.*, 302.

82 Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Anchor, 2000), 282.

83 'Henry Miller to Herbert Read: No date, circa 1935' *HRP*, HR-HM-9.