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# **'The land of my dreams' <sup>1</sup>; the Gendered Utopian Dreams and Disenchantment of British Literary Ex-combatants of the Great War.**

## 1. Arguments and background

The last two decades have seen a slow shift in the academic understanding of the impact of the Great War on concepts of gender in interwar Britain. The work of a small group of cultural historians, following in the footsteps of Rosa Maria Bracco, has challenged existing interpretations of the cultural impact of the Great War on concepts of gender. The argument that the wartime advances made by women in Great War in Britain, allied to combatant trauma, resulted in a crisis of masculinity and a related heightening of misogyny, has been questioned by one that challenges the notion of a crisis of masculinity, stresses continuity in gender constructs, and develops a more complex picture of cultural responses to the war.

### *A crisis of masculinity*

The two key texts for the argument stressing the wartime crisis of masculinity are Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), and Eric Leed's *No Man's Land; Combat and Identity in World War I* (1979). These texts were the starting point for much of the work by feminist historians interested in issues of gender and the Great War, for example Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Margaret Higonnet, and Elaine Showalter<sup>2</sup>. Fussell and Leed both addressed the impact of

modern, technological and industrialised war on men whom they argued were culturally unprepared for such an event. Leed developed the idea that men underwent a severe test of their self-image as men, and that combatants felt that they had been pushed to the margins of society. At the same time many women experienced a liberating change in their lives, which was, he claimed, reflected in a boost to female libido<sup>3</sup>. In an attempt to overcome this crisis of masculinity, combatants retreated into a world of men and fighting. Leed characterised this as 'the transition from "society" to community - the community of male combatants<sup>4</sup>. In Leed's view, combatants were rendered impotent by the crisis of masculinity engendered by their estrangement from society, and evidenced by the neurosis of some soldiers and veterans, while at the same time, female potency was heightened<sup>5</sup>. The occurrence of hysterical and neurotic symptoms among some veterans is seen to be particularly important, underpinning much of Leed's analysis.

The first major contribution from a feminist historian came from Sandra Gilbert, whose widely re-published 'Soldier's Heart: literary men, literary women, and the Great War', originally published in 1983, quickly became a key text on the subject<sup>6</sup>. Gilbert followed Leed's analysis of what she termed 'the festival of female sexual liberation' which was, she claimed, matched by the 'sexual gloom' of many combatant men<sup>7</sup>. There was, Gilbert suggested, a direct relationship between the two outcomes of the war. This crisis of masculinity was personified, by Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in the 'figure of the no man'<sup>8</sup>.

However, this argument was built upon a very limited evidential base, drawn from a small number of writers, few of whom were either British or combatants. Gail Braybon and Claire Tylee have also questioned the methodological validity of relying on sources such as wartime propaganda posters and photographs involving the construction of a specific feminine identity that coincided with the needs of a patriarchal state at war<sup>9</sup>.

*The 'double helix' and ex-combatant misogyny*

The collection of essays, *Behind the Lines; gender and the two world wars* (1987), edited by Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonyu Michel, and Margaret Weitz, contained additional insights into the question of gender and the Great War. The volume contained Margaret and Patrice Higonnet's metaphor of the 'double helix', used to illustrate the proposition that the apparent advance of women in many spheres of life during the war was matched by a simultaneous regression in the nature and balance of the binary gender system<sup>10</sup>. In terms of the crisis of masculinity, the editors of *Behind the Lines* argued that an important historical issue was that the changes in the wartime balance between the sexes were redressed by men's post-war re-writing of wartime experience. This re-writing had been undertaken by misogynist veterans of the war who had undergone the crisis-inducing experience of fighting a modern war, particularly on the western front. Elaine Showalter's influential work, *The Female Malady; women, madness and English culture, 1830-1980* (1987), also reinforced this analysis. Showalter, like Gilbert, argued that the use of a variety of acceptable

terms for male hysteria, such as 'shell shock' and 'soldier's heart', helped soften the blow to men conditioned by patriarchal imperatives when they found that they were responding in a 'feminine' fashion to crisis. This experience, she argued, in turn led to heightened misogyny among veterans, which manifested itself in the post-war period in a backlash against the gains women had made during the war.

### *A new analysis*

This interpretation has been challenged by a number of historians. The work of Rosa Maria Bracco was responsible for re-focusing the cultural history of the war onto the 'middlebrow' novel<sup>11</sup>. Arguing for the centrality of 'enduring works of literature and more ephemeral popular fiction [as] an intrinsic part and manifestation of the society of their time'<sup>12</sup>, Bracco focused on best-selling middlebrow novels of the inter-war period which 'served to provide reassuring explanations of the present reality, and to counter-act the disturbing developments of the modern world by re-asserting well-established values and attitudes'<sup>13</sup>. In addition, Bracco began the process of recognising that even when this middlebrow writing appeared to be focused on men's experience of war at the frontline, one of the key concerns of authors was to transcend separate, gendered experience of the war<sup>14</sup>. In her exposition of the inter-war middlebrow novel, Bracco also identified the widespread conviction of novelists that England was essentially a rural conception – a significant point in relation to the writings of ex-combatants<sup>15</sup>.

Joanna Bourke, in her *Dismembering the Male; men's bodies, Britain and the Great War* (1996), also questioned assumptions concerning the impact of the war on masculinity, particularly with regard to constructions of the male body. She argued that it was difficult to sustain the view that men reacted to their war experience by retreating into brutalism, and she also challenged Leed's view that combatants retreated into a liminal world of men. Instead, Bourke argued that many combatants, particularly older men, wished only to return to civilian life characterised by domesticity and femininity.

The contentions of Bracco and Bourke received strong additional underpinning in the author's unpublished Oxford DPhil thesis, 'Gender and the Great War; British combatants, masculinity and perceptions of women, 1918-1939' (1998). Building on a comprehensive reading of nearly 200 books by British ex-combatants published during the inter-war period, I argued that these texts showed that British literary ex-combatants' cultural response to the Great War took the traditional form of middlebrow writing, and was predominantly traditional in its reliance on established ideas and tropes. Continuity, not discontinuity, dominated their literary response to the war. In consequence, their perceptions of gender roles in the post-war period were based on traditional models, albeit modified by wartime developments in relations between men and women. Further, the texts reviewed in my thesis indicate that the great majority of British literary ex-combatants found worth and value in the war, lauded the behaviour of volunteer combatants in particular, and stressed the positive outcomes of the

Allied victory. Jessica Meyer subsequently drew on these arguments, noting that 'they [Bracco and Cullen] have discovered an alternative narrative of the war to that of disillusionment and demythification identified in the analysis of more canonical war literature'<sup>16</sup>. Meyer has built upon this work to argue for the 'resilience of the ideal of the soldier as a masculine figure in the era of the First World War'<sup>17</sup>, and to challenge the established feminist and 'disillusioned' schools of history. Similar arguments have recently been put forward by Sue Bruley, who has concluded that, 'we have to recognise that the majority of soldiers supported the war and in probing the mentality of such men avoid the hitherto nihilistic polarities between pro and anti-war stances'<sup>18</sup>.

## 2. The evidence base

This article draws upon a wide range of ex-combatant, middlebrow writing; firstly, to examine the exact nature of the gendered utopian dreams of these literary war veterans, and, secondly, to draw an accurate picture of their 'disenchantment' with elements of the Home Front, and the post-war world that emerged in the 1920s.

Nearly 200 war-themed books, both fiction and non-fiction, were published by British Great War ex-combatants<sup>19</sup> between 1918 and 1939, and these form an important source for the cultural historian of Britain. Two dozen ex-combatant novels are considered in this article. These novels represent typical expositions of literary ex-combatant middlebrow fiction in which strong portraits of an imagined, gendered, England figure prominently, or the issue of 'disenchantment' is

discussed. Within this sample, novels by three particular ex-combatant writers - Wilfrid Ewart, Henry Williamson and C. E. Montague - are examined in some depth in relation to utopian visions of England; while three other ex-combatant novels, by W.L. George, R.H. Mottram, and Richard Aldington, form the focus of the examination of 'disenchantment'. These six literary ex-combatants' novels are both typical of the genre, and represent the most thorough examination of utopian dreams and 'disenchantment'.

An analysis of the military service of the literary ex-combatants shows that the majority were part of the 'Generation of 1914'<sup>20</sup>. Thus, their writing provides a significant insight into the motivations, experiences and expectations of an iconic generation. Of the thirty-six ex-combatant novelists, twenty-seven were Kitchener volunteers, who joined the armed services in 1914 or 1915, two were regular soldiers and five were volunteers with the armed forces of the Dominions. This pattern is replicated in the military service of non-fiction authors: of the thirty-seven authors, twenty-three were Kitchener volunteers, two were New Zealand volunteers in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), and eleven were regular soldiers. Thus, in total, of the seventy-three literary combatants in the sample, eighty-one per cent were volunteers, and sixty-eight per cent (including the Dominion volunteers) were Kitchener volunteers and eighteen per cent were regulars<sup>21</sup>. The most notable exception to this pattern was Richard Aldington, who although he was a volunteer, did not join the army until 1916.



### 3. Utopian visions of England

Many of the volunteers of 1914 and 1915 had seen the war as an opportunity, and a method, whereby England could be renewed. This optimism was, in the event, unfounded, but the idealism of the combatant volunteers was not abandoned. Instead, literary ex-combatants incorporated their experience and understanding of the war into a utopian vision of a revived England. That vision was infused with the ideals of combatant masculinity. Jessica Meyer has argued that the qualities of military masculinity, incorporating virtues of physical strength, resourcefulness, endurance, comradeship and sacrifice, were not eroded by the experience of war. Instead, Meyer highlighted the fact that 'in personal narratives of the war [...] particularly the memoirs of ex-servicemen, the idea of the soldier as an ideal masculine figure remained a powerful one'<sup>22</sup>. Further, these masculine virtues were also seen, by literary ex-combatants, as having a central role to play in the creation of a renewed post-war England.

The majority of British literary ex-combatants were English<sup>23</sup>, and it was upon images of England that their conceptualisation of patriotism chiefly centred. These images were traditional ones, drawing upon myths of England as an essentially rural country with an ancient heritage. Such mythic representations of England focused upon the idea of a supposedly enduring landscape, rather than England as represented by its people. Instead, the embodiment of the English peoples' virtues was to be found in both combatants and in those

women whom the ex-combatants felt had contributed to the war effort. Literary ex-combatant patriotism centred upon traditional images of England as a place more than a people, combined with the ideal of combatant masculinity, allied to images of women whom they felt had also displayed wartime virtues. The interesting aspect of this idea of patriotism is that England is imagined as a place almost empty of people - a promised land yet to find the men and women that would be worthy of it.

A number of ex-combatant novelists made this conception of England central to their representation of the meaning of the war. The novelists who are most notable in this respect are: Richard Aldington, Wilfrid Ewart, W. L. George, C. E. Montague, R. H. Mottram, Henry Williamson, John Brophy, A. S. M. Hutchinson, Albert Kinross, and Hugh Kimber. As they explained what England meant to them, they created an image of England that was remarkably similar in its basic elements. This image was characterised by a stress on England's ancient roots, the essence of the country being found in its rural landscape, and, as a consequence, the view that the true nature of England was pre-industrial and anti-modern.

Some of these ex-combatants were aware that they were building upon previous attempts to define England in a similar fashion. Both Victorian and Romantic ruralist conceptions of England were acknowledged, as were earlier attempts to define the country as a well-ordered Arcadia - particularly in the Elizabethan period. These ex-

combatant novelists were self-consciously attempting to continue that project, but with, they hoped, the added authority of having fought and suffered for their country.

### 3.1 England imagined

#### *Wilfrid Ewart, Way of Revelation*

Wilfrid Ewart, who had been involved with rural life and work before the Great War, made clear connections between the patriotism of the combatant hero of *Way of Revelation* (1921), and the image of England as a rural paradise. In his novel, which was the first major post-war best seller by an ex-combatant, he acknowledged the influence of W. H. Hudson, Richard Jefferies, and Thomas Hardy on his perception of England. In Ewart's novel, the combatant hero, Adrian Knoyle, takes his girlfriend, Rosemary Meynell, to the Chilterns for his last day in England before returning to the front:

He hoped she might share with him that side of nature and life which finds expression and peace in the silence and solitude, the beauty and peace of an autumnal countryside. It was a quality he had found in the writings of Jefferies and Hudson and Hardy; and he spoke to her of them.

She looked puzzled, then smiled.

"Who are all these funny men ? It's certainly a divine morning."

It was plain that she did not understand. And the words that trembled on his lips were never uttered.<sup>24</sup>

Rosemary's failure to understand Adrian's love of the English countryside, and his feeling for the naturalist-writers, is symbolic of her preference for London life, which Ewart portrays as being decadent, and her eventual failure to prove herself worthy of the combatant hero. Ewart describes Rosemary's England as one of noise, frenetic activity, drug-taking, and all-night parties - the embodiment of urban life, and the antithesis of 'the silence and solitude' of Hudson's and Jefferies' England.

*Henry Williamson, The Dream of Fair Women*

Ewart's acknowledgement of the literary origins of his idealised version of England is echoed in the writings of Henry Williamson. This ex-combatant writer became a fascist in the 1930s, and it has been argued that his fundamental belief was in 'a society orientated around the natural man on the natural earth'<sup>25</sup>. The literary origin of this belief clearly lay in the writings and personality of Richard Jefferies. In Williamson's novel, *The Dream of Fair Women* (1931), his combatant hero, Willie Maddison, carries Jefferies' books around with him, pulling them from his pocket, and reading from them in an attempt to convince others of the validity of such an image of England<sup>26</sup>.

This vision of England as a rural, 'natural' entity derived from earlier literary attempts to construct such an image was also central to the writings of other literary ex-combatants. Edward Thomas, whose war poems largely address the conflict in oblique terms, utilising instead his more familiar rural imagery and terms of reference, was

also influenced by the writings and life of Jefferies. Thomas wrote a popular biography of the naturalist, *Richard Jefferies; his life and work* (1909), and published a number of books that were in the same tradition, including *The Heart of England* (1906), and *The South Country* (1909). Similar interests were central to the writings of other combatants, such as the Gloucester composer and poet, Ivor Gurney, who put much pastoral verse and poetry to music, including work by Edward Thomas and another literary combatant, Edmund Blunden<sup>27</sup>, whose *Undertones of War* (1928) is one of the enduring Great War memoirs. Blunden's own poetry and prose was also infused with images of rural England, and in addition to his scholarly work on pastoral poets such as John Clare, he published popular writing celebrating this vision of England - *The Face of England* (1932) being a good example.

Ex-combatant novelists also delved further into this version of England's history, locating the anti-modern virtues of the country in a traditional celebration of the supposed order and balance of the Tudor period. Here, the stress is on personal, social and national harmony, as symbolised by the image of the Tudor country house. For them, the Tudor, and specifically Elizabethan, manor house represented harmony in a pre-modern, pre-technological, rural England - the very antithesis of the England of 1914-18.

*C.E. Montague, Rough Justice*

C. E. Montague's *Rough Justice* (1926) opens with an extended description of a Tudor house in 'Gistleham' on the Thames. These opening pages touch a number of significant motifs of this variety of English patriotism, as Montague mixes a description of the physical place - the house itself, the Thames, roses, and elm trees - with elements of English history - typified by Agincourt and Elizabeth I. In Montague's dream world of England, 'everything [is] scrolled and emblazoned with ancients', while 'progress seemed to have missed this part of the Thames when she whirled past, a short mile away, along the Great West Road and, later, the Great Western Railway'<sup>28</sup>. It is in this environment, at once both physical and spiritual, that the combatant hero of the novel, Auberon Garth, and his cousin, Molly, later to be a nurse with the Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD), grow up. In Montague's scheme, it is their shared childhood roots in this 'real' England that enable them, and by implication, others like them, to serve in the war, and ensured England's eventual victory.

This attempt to locate English patriotism with reference to a mythic rural world, filled with traditional imagery, and symbolised by the country manor house occurs in a number of other ex-combatant novels. In Albert Kinross' *God and Tony Hewitt* (1925), the combatant hero, Tony Hewitt, finds solace, and a retreat from a frenetic and decadent wartime London, in the peace of his family's estate, which centres on 'Deerhurst' - the symbol of continuity and ageless values<sup>29</sup>. Similarly, Richard Aldington lauded a myth of pre-modern England, and

the values supposedly encapsulated in that myth, in his *All Men Are Enemies* (1933), where the combatant hero, Anthony Clarendon, attempts to rediscover his and his country's roots in the memory of 'Vine House', which is a seventeenth century embodiment of this myth<sup>30</sup>. For Aldington's Anthony Clarendon, his childhood and youth spent at Vine House represents 'nearly twenty years in a harmony so complete that he had breathed it as naturally and unconsciously as pure air'<sup>31</sup>.

Such concrete symbols of this myth of England represented traditional virtues that lay at the heart of these ex-combatant novelists' sense of Englishness. The stress is on virtues that predate the modern, industrial and technological age, as experienced both at the front and amidst the allegedly decadent behaviour of civilians, particularly in London. These ex-combatant novelists chose to adhere to a highly traditional view of England that stressed its age-old, pre-industrial heritage, rather than embracing the modern world that might have contained new possibilities and the options emerging from the disorder of the war<sup>32</sup>.

This myth of England was the basis of ex-combatant novelists' accounts of the idealism that motivated the early, 1914-15, volunteers. Many ex-combatant novels present an overall, explanatory view of the Great War, with the war frequently being sandwiched between accounts of England in the pre and post-war period<sup>33</sup>. In this way, the ex-combatant novelists were able to identify the forces they saw as

being responsible for the war; to stress the idealism of the Kitchener volunteers, their subsequent ordeal and sacrifice at the front; to review the responses of non-combatants, including those of their female contemporaries (which they judged as either being praiseworthy, as in the case of women auxiliaries, or not, as in the case of those women who had failed to volunteer for auxiliary organisations); and to present a utopian vision of what England might have been after war, contrasted with their perception of the actual fate of England in the post-war period.

### 3.2 Gender roles in the Garden of Eden

In their war books, the ex-combatant volunteers chose to transform, rather than abandon, the idealism that inspired them in the early stages of the war. That loyalty to the idealism of 1914-15, combined with their affirmation of combatant masculinity, and fealty to the memory of their dead comrades, had a significant impact upon their gendered imaginings of post-war utopian dreams. They did not wish to construct a new pattern of relations between men and women, rather they sought to reconstruct traditional gendered roles for men and women, albeit within a framework that incorporated the sacrifices and virtues of the front generation as embodied in the ideal of the male and female volunteer. It was because they had originally been inspired by traditional myths of England that their unbroken desire to renew that myth in the post-war period led to the emergence of utopian dreams of England which drew heavily on traditional tropes. Given this approach, the literary ex-combatants were unable to envisage relations between



men and women in anything but, essentially, traditional forms. They had adapted those forms to take account of their understanding of the war but, in wishing to renew their original vision of England, they could not fundamentally re-cast their dreams.

This is most clearly the case in the use of the trope of the Garden of Eden, which occurs in a number of ex-combatant novels. England was imagined as a new Eden, a paradise regained by a new Adam and Eve. It is in the representation of Adam and Eve that we can see the way in which these literary ex-combatants transformed their existing rural vision of England to take account of the war, and their disillusionment with the behaviour of non-combatants. The new Adam in this utopian dream for the post-war world was an ex-combatant, frequently marked by the physical or mental scars of combat; while the new Eve, his helpmate and the future mother of a reborn England, was drawn from the ranks of women who volunteered for war service, typically, and significantly, those who served with the VADs. In this way, these ex-combatant novelists sought to laud the idealism of the early volunteers and their code of combatant manhood, an ideal that was adapted to allow for the psychological as well as the physical shock of modern warfare. In addition, they sought to acknowledge the value of the war service of their female contemporaries, and incorporate it in a utopian dream of ex-combatants and volunteer women in a renewed, and clearly gendered, England.

*Wilfrid Ewart, Way of Revelation*

The final chapter of Wilfrid Ewart's *Way of Revelation* brings together these elements in a post-war scene that is intended to rescue hope from the destruction of the war. In this scene the war-damaged combatant hero, Adrian Knoyle, and his new wife, Faith Daventry, climb a hill in the west of England to watch beacons lit on distant hills celebrating the signing of the peace treaty. In Ewart's scheme, both Adrian and Faith represent the best of English youth. Adrian has endured a long war in which he was wounded and suffered from neurasthenia. He also lost his closest friend, Eric Sinclair, in combat, and his fiancée, Rosemary Meynall, proved to be unworthy of his combatant idealism, being represented by Ewart in a misogynist framework which highlighted Ewart's perceptions of some women's behaviour during the war - women who, allegedly, took advantage of wartime conditions to benefit in social, sexual, and moral terms. However, Faith Daventry is a representative of the familiar literary ex-combatant image of the worthy woman. She has served throughout the war as a VAD, and proved by her actions to be a female counterpart of the combatant comrades, Eric and Adrian. From the beginning of his novel, Ewart made it clear that Faith epitomised English as well as feminine virtue. In consequence, she is deemed, in Ewart's narrative, to be the fitting mate for the returned combatant.

In the final pages of his novel, Ewart brings together his vision of England with the utopian dream of his new Adam, the ex-combatant, and his new Eve, the 'country-bred' ex-VAD. Together they climb the

hill, and look out over a rural, English landscape that has escaped the clutches of the modern world. Their patch of England is 'hardly defiled by the railway, seldom touched by foot of tourist'<sup>34</sup>. Around them is abundant evidence of England's natural beauty, and its historic, feudal roots - a Norman church tower is visible in the distance, the two lovers are standing on the remains of a British hill-fort, and there is in sight 'a fair-sized manor-house of grey Portland stone, with a weathered and lichened roof of chocolate-red'<sup>35</sup>. These are the traditional images associated with the myth of rural England which these literary ex-combatants identified as a focus for their patriotic idealism of 1914. There is also a reference to a generalised sense of religious belief, as the landscape is described as bearing witness to 'the beauties of God's world'<sup>36</sup>. There is no sense of disenchantment here, but a sense of hope renewed in the affirmation of a traditional vision of England.

Within that reaffirmed vision, Adrian and Faith have the roles of the progenitors of the next generation. However, Adrian has been wounded, both physically and mentally, in the war. In this, Ewart recognises the impact of the reality of war on the idealism of 1914. But he does not reject that idealism. Instead he has rewarded his combatant hero with a renewed vision of life in England. Further, Ewart has recognised the contribution and value of women's war service, with Faith being presented as the female counterpart to Adrian. In the war she was a nurse for the combatants, and now that the war is won, she is Adrian's helpmate:

And in the evening of a June day [1919] a man and a woman might have been seen climbing the steep face of a hill remotely situated in a western district of England. Their progress was slow, and it appeared as though one were helping the other, the helper being the woman<sup>37</sup>.

Ewart has not allowed his female character to relinquish her role as the nurse of the combatant now that the war is over, and victory confirmed. Instead, Ewart has incorporated Faith's war service into the patriotic ideal, transformed by the experiences and hardships of the war. But that war service has, in Ewart's vision, only entitled her to continue the supporting role assigned to her by virtue of her gendered place in his utopian vision. She has been given, in Ewart's mind, a vital place in that vision - as a virtuous Englishwoman and fitting counterpart to the combatant hero, as the nurse and support of that hero, and as the mother-to-be of future generations of Englishmen and women. Ewart's 'novel of five years'<sup>38</sup> finishes with the image of Adrian and Faith standing together on the empty hill top, surrounded by 'the scent of wild thyme' and the 'evening [which] folded together hill and sky', watching the peace treaty beacons light up the Mendip and Quantock hills - an image of renewed hope for England<sup>39</sup>.

*C.E. Montague, Rough Justice*

Other ex-combatant novelists also used similar gendered images as fundamentally important elements in their vision of England renewed by the fealty of the combatants to their and their comrades'

early idealism. In C. E. Montague's *Rough Justice*, the traditional images of the true essence of England that characterise the early, pre-war section of his novel are reinforced at the end of the book. In the novel, Montague examines various aspects of the war, presenting a series of unpleasant characters who, through mean-spiritedness, materialism, class-hatred, and wrong-headed revolutionary sentiment, all fail England. However, the values that Montague claimed inspired and sustained the Kitchener volunteers, and which he also presented in his famous non-fiction account of his war service, *Disenchantment* (1922), are rescued by the behaviour of his fictional combatant hero, Auberon Garth, and his cousin, Molly. The final two chapters of *Rough Justice* have Auberon and Molly returned to his Elizabethan house and land in March, 1919. Auberon has lost an arm in the war, and Molly, having served as a VAD during the war, is on leave from welfare work with British troops in occupied Cologne. Together they walk through the orchard, spending 'a long time among the big apple trees'<sup>40</sup>, and talking about their future. Auberon says that he is going to set up a brick-making business that will employ ex-combatants to make bricks for houses for returning soldiers. The next day they walk down to their childhood haunts by the River Thames, declare their love for one another, and make love by the river:

She returned with a sort of humble fervour the mighty hug of the Adam-like lover whose whole and unwasted estate of passion was still his to bring to a bride. So the two unconscious emblems of all that had saved England in war and had now to save her in

peace stood enlaced, each of them freed at last from every care  
but the fear of not being worthy of the other<sup>41</sup>.

Montague finishes his novel, therefore, with a vision of England renewed and saved by the volunteer idealism that is typified by Auberon, 'the Adam-like lover', and Molly, who is, by extension, Auberon's Eve.

*Henry Williamson, The Dream of Fair Women*

In Henry Williamson's *The Dream of Fair Women*, the same trope of Eve in the Garden of Eden is utilised. The key female character in the novel, Evelyn Fairfax, is known by a number of other Christian names, including 'Eve'. She, too, has been a wartime VAD, and has a succession of relationships with partly neurasthenic ex-officers. Willie Maddison, the combatant hero of the book attempts to write a manifesto for England in the post-war world entitled, *The Policy of Reconstruction*, which argues for a return to natural-living, libertarian education, and a rejection of modern materialism. Maddison's project is an ecological utopia of the type which found favour among right-wing critics of industrial capitalism in the inter-war period. But Maddison is also obsessed with Evelyn, whom he feels could be his soul-mate in his proposed utopia. Williamson has his character feel that such a woman, yet another VAD helpmate, should be central to Maddison's own, and the nation's, renewal: 'He [Maddison] was living his own reconstruction, since he had met Evelyn ! Heart-ache was really rib-ache, or the ache of the scar whence the rib had been taken'<sup>42</sup>. Later,

Maddison is transported by a vision he has of himself and Eve in rural England<sup>43</sup>. It is a vision of Maddison's natural, English paradise where Eve is invested with other semi-religious qualities, as she appears to take on aspects of the Virgin Mary whom Maddison desires to adore. She is not an autonomous individual in Maddison's vision, but merely an integral part of his ex-combatant's dream of renewal in the post-war world. Yet Williamson perhaps realised the futility of this vision, as Evelyn eventually proves unwilling to be manipulated by Maddison, who finally drowns, like Shelley - the archetypal Romantic radical - with his manifesto for renewal destroyed.

The novels of Ewart, Montague and Williamson were not the only expressions of the dream of a renewed England. In Hugh Kimber's *Prelude to Calvary* (1933), Albert Kinross' *God and Tony Hewitt* (1925), J. B. Morton's *The Barber of Putney* (1919), A. S. M. Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes* (1921), G. S. Godwin's *Why Stay We Here ?* (1930), and George Blake's *Returned Empty* (1931), post-war renewal is also linked to the union of worthy men and women, their fertility, and acceptance of traditional gendered roles, often constructed with reference to Garden of Eden imagery<sup>44</sup>.

The analysis presented above shows that the writings of the literary ex-combatants were characterized by gendered utopian visions of an England renewed and imbued with the spirit of the 1914 volunteers. This vision was of masculinity reaffirmed and traditional gendered images of womanhood reasserted. However, the idealism,

wartime experience and sacrifices of the literary ex-combatants and their volunteer comrades, both male and female, also informed and adapted those traditional gender roles. Contrary to earlier interpretations, the literary ex-combatants did not retreat into a male-only world of combat, neither did they suggest a heightened, and generalised misogyny. Instead, they drew upon the volunteer ethos, be it of the male combatant or the female auxiliary, to imagine a post-war England renewed, restored to its true 'natural', anti-modern self. It was this utopian vision that the male and female ex-volunteers, playing traditionalist gendered roles, were to inherit in the literary world of the ex-combatants. But these utopian dreams remained just that, as the post-war period quickly gave way to an England that, in the minds of the literary ex-combatants, enhanced their disenchantment with the non-combatant and non-volunteer world that they had begun to experience during the war.

#### 4. Disenchantment

An analysis of the war writings of literary ex-combatants shows that there was a strong sense of disenchantment, particularly in texts published in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This was a period marked by the onset of the Great Depression and the failure of the 1929-31 Labour government. Exceptionally, C. E. Montague's memoir, *Disenchantment*, a paradigm for this sense of disillusion, was published in 1922, shortly after the collapse of the brief post-war boom. Literary ex-combatants attempted to make a generalised critique of the world that had emerged from the Great War. Their critique focused on



post-war reality, as they saw it, as opposed to utopian dreams of England renewed.

Disenchantment in ex-combatant writing is not disenchantment with their own efforts or idealism, which they had dreamed of reasserting in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, but with the England that they felt had emerged during and after the war. Ex-combatant writers identified wartime civilian attitudes and failings as the source of the failure of England to renew itself in the post-war period. While it is difficult to classify the nature of this critique, it can be said that it is, broadly speaking, a right-wing one - attacking profiteers, trades unionism, materialism, modernity and mass society<sup>45</sup>. In addition to outlining their objections to post-war England, these literary ex-combatants also identified the people and attitudes that they held responsible for destroying their dreams of national renewal.

*W.L. George, Blind Alley*

Literary ex-combatants characterised the post-war world as being dominated by the interests of profiteers, trades unionists, and the mentality of 'business as usual' - the very same characteristics of the wartime home front that they had also identified and condemned. They felt that the war had led to an enhanced materialism among large sections of society, and that unwelcome elements of modernity had made inroads into national life. W. L. George, in his novel, *Blind Alley* (1918), presented some possible post-war futures. Sir Hugh Oakley, the central character in the novel, who represents traditional English

virtues of tolerance, fair-play, and paternalistic benevolence, is used by George as a device to examine the causes, outcome, and value of the war. Sir Hugh fears that once the war is over, wartime controls will remain, and that England will find itself delivered into the hands of bureaucratic socialists who will stifle individualism<sup>46</sup>. This is not the sort of world that Sir Hugh Oakley wishes to see emerge from the war, neither is it the world that his combatant son, Stephen, wants. In fact Stephen Oakley's experiences have led him to a position of militaristic hatred for the home front world, a hatred he gives vent to in a letter he sends from the front to his father: 'I hope to have a hand in blowing it up when this job's done'<sup>47</sup>. Sir Hugh himself is depressed by the people who seem to dominate England - 'generals, financiers, politicians'<sup>48</sup>. Through his character of Sir Hugh, W. L. George condemned the materialism and viciousness of the 'generals, financiers and politicians', but celebrated the idealism of the volunteer, which he crowned by having Sir Hugh join the French Foreign Legion to fight on the western front.

*R.H. Mottram, Europa's Beast*

In R. H. Mottram's *Europa's Beast* (1930), Geoffrey Skene (the combatant hero of Mottram's earlier *Spanish Farm Trilogy* (1924-1927)) has returned home to 'Easthampton' (a fictionalised Norwich). Having lost his old job as diocesan architect, he has found a new post as chief architect on the council's 'homes for heroes' scheme of new public housing. However, Skene's attempts to design good-quality homes for ex-combatants are thwarted both by trades union

obstructionism, and by local business interests on the council who have little sympathy for the plight of ex-servicemen. Similarly abandoned ex-servicemen appear in A. H. Gibbs's *Labels* (1926), in which the ex-VAD heroine, Madge Wickens, is outraged by the plight of unemployed and disabled ex-servicemen in her village. She wonders if 'every village in England is full of them, full of cripples who are beginning to regret that they ever fought?'<sup>49</sup>.

The theme of abandoned ex-servicemen, greedy businessmen, politicians, newspaper barons, profiteers, striking or wage-hungry war workers, and complacent civilians also occurs in George Blake's *Paper Money* (1928), *Returned Empty* (1931), and *The Valiant Heart* (1939), A. S. M. Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes*, Richard Aldington's *Women Must Work* (1934), Wilfrid Ewart's *Way of Revelation*, C. E. Montague's *Rough Justice*, John Brophy's *The Bitter End*, Ian Hay's *The Lucky Number* (1923), and *The Willing Horse* (1921), George Godwin's *Why Stay We Here ?*, Charles Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), Hugh Kimber's *Prelude to Calvary*, Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* (1930), F. A. Viogt's *Combed Out* (1920), and A. H. Gibbs' *Chances* (1930)<sup>50</sup>. These literary ex-combatants felt that while they had been fighting for victory, and hoping that out of their struggles might come a renewed and idealistic England, civilians had been preparing a post-war world in their own, self-serving image. This is the cause of literary ex-combatant disenchantment, and their explanation of the gap between ex-combatant dreams and reality both during and after the Great War.

*Richard Aldington, All Men Are Enemies*

These themes were generalised in a number of ex-combatant books to include attacks on modernity and materialism<sup>51</sup>. Richard Aldington was typically scathing in his attack upon aspects of post-war England that he felt confirmed the sense that the war had exacerbated unfortunate aspects of modern, mass society. In *All Men Are Enemies* he argued that the post-war world was characterised by a trend to greater concentration in industry and business, and a concomitant decline in the fortunes and opportunities open to individuals. Aldington lauded an individualism that he identified with an anachronistic form of Toryism, struggling in vain against oligopolistic business and trades unionism - standard bearers of the modern world. The character of 'old Henry Scrope of New Court'<sup>52</sup> is the chief representative of dying, traditional values, inhabiting a Tudor and eighteenth century country house. But the combatant hero of the book, Tony Clarendon, also finds them in the person of an independent carpenter, bemused by the post-war world of 1919: 'It struck him that the carpenter was the natural complement to old Scrope, equally doomed to extinction as a type - jerry-built furniture would soon obliterate him and his little trade'<sup>53</sup>.

Aldington goes further in his condemnation of the world which he saw as having emerged from the war, with a generalised attack on the Americanisation of Europe, something that, in his view, was evidenced by his belief in the increased influence and presence of homosexuals, lesbians, and Jews<sup>54</sup>.

The anti-semitic aspects of Aldington's attack on the post-war world are echoed in Gordon Stowell's *History of Button Hill* (1929), George Blake's *Paper Money*<sup>55</sup>, and in A. H. Gibbs's bitter memoir, *The Grey Wave* (1920). In Gibbs's account of his war service with the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers, and the Royal Field Artillery, which concludes with a fierce attack on the home front, the presence of Jews in south coast resorts is linked to profiteering, by Jews and non-Jews, civilian safety, and decadence<sup>56</sup>. This type of anti-semitism is unusual in literary ex-combatant writing, but the sense of outrage at the sort of England that Gibbs felt had emerged from the Great War is not. In this England of literary ex-combatant disenchantment, they felt that the hopes and priorities of the front generation, both ex-combatants and women volunteers, had been ignored.

### 5. Conclusions

Contrary to earlier interpretations by, for example, Leed, Gilbert and Gubar, the literary ex-combatants were not disenchanted with the experience of fighting the war, nor did they argue that it had been an unnecessary and fruitless exercise. Instead, as this analysis has shown, the consistent theme in all these accounts of literary ex-combatant disenchantment is the betrayal of their ideal of England renewed. The literary ex-combatants argued that they had begun to detect the betrayal of their idealism during the war years, when non-combatants failed to live up to the standards that the ex-combatants held as central to any renewal of England. Those standards were

embodied, for men, in the ideal of combatant masculinity which built upon traditional images of manhood, but was modified by combat experience to include such elements as a stress upon the value of combatant comradeship, and the acceptance of neurasthenic strain as part of the experience of modern warfare. The literary ex-combatants also lauded the behaviour of those women who had, like themselves, volunteered for service in the war, either as nursing or military auxiliaries. These ideals of worthy manhood and womanhood formed the human element in their vision of England renewed after the war. It was a myth of an ancient and essentially rural England, with clearly defined gender roles, but those roles did not reflect misogynistic hatred of women. Their vision was a development of the myth of England that had inspired them in 1914-15, and was encapsulated in the trope of the Garden of Eden. In their new Eden, which they dreamt of as England renewed, the ex-combatant 'Adam' would be aided and supported by the ex-auxiliary 'Eve'. This was a reworking by the literary ex-combatants of traditional gendered roles for men and women. The new elements in those gendered roles were the supposedly heightened idealism and worth encapsulated in the persons of both men and women volunteers. Yet despite the actual return to traditional gendered roles in the post-war period, the literary ex-combatants nonetheless felt disenchanting, for a mere return to gendered 'norms' was not enough. They felt that their vision of England was a vision that demanded an acknowledgement of the sacrifices and idealism of the front generation, made by both men and women, and the acceptance of their greater claim, by virtue of their sacrifice and victory, to establish the shape of

the post-war world. But they believed that this had not happened and, instead, they were left with a sense of betrayal. As a result of that betrayal, the literary ex-combatants re-dedicated themselves to the England that they had been inspired by - the England of combatants, female auxiliaries, and the memory of the dead. They did not abandon their idealism, rather they wrote of their gendered understanding of the war, and presented their utopian vision of a renewed England, characterised by the trope of the Garden of Eden. But many literary ex-combatants believed that, for them, there was no Eden. Instead there was a sense in which, with the failure of the idealism of 1914-15 to renew England, Adam and Eve had, once again, been expelled from the Garden of Eden, almost before they had entered it.

## NOTES.

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<sup>1</sup> From the popular, sentimental, wartime song, 'There's a long, long trail', written by Stoddard King in 1913.

<sup>2</sup> S. Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart; literary men, literary women, and the Great War', *Signs*, 8, (1983), pp. 422-450. S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *No Man's Land; the place of the woman writer in the twentieth century, volume 2, Sexchanges*, (London, 1989), pp. 258-323. M. Higonnet, J. Jenson, S. Michel, M. Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines; gender and the two world wars*, (London, 1987). E. Showalter, *The Female Malady; women, madness and English culture, 1830-1980*, (London, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> E. Leed, *No Man's Land; combat and identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979), p.8 ff, and p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., *No Man's Land*, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., *No Man's Land*, pp. 183-4.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart', a slightly amended version of the article appeared in M. Higonnet, J. Jenson, S. Michel, M. Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines; gender and the two world wars*, (London, 1987); and in an extended form in, S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *No Man's Land; the place of the woman writer in the twentieth century, volume 2, Sexchanges*, (London, 1989), pp. 258-323.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *Sexchanges*, p. 290, and Gilbert, *Behind the Lines*, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *Sexchanges*, p. xii.

<sup>9</sup> G. Braybon, 'Winners or Losers; women's role in the war story', in G. Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History and the Great War; Historians and the Impact of 1914-18*, (New York, 2003). G. Braybon, 'Women and the War', in S. Constantine, M.W. Kirby, and M. B. Rose (eds.), *The First World War in British History* (London, 1995). C. Tylee, *The Great*



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*War and Women's Consciousness; images of militarism in women's writings, 1914-1964*, (London, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Higonet et al, *Behind the Lines*, pp.31-47.

<sup>11</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, 'British middlebrow writers and the First World War, 1919-1939', unpublished Cambridge PhD thesis (1989); *Betwixt and Between; Middlebrow Fiction and English Society in the Twenties and Thirties* (1990); *Merchants of Hope; middlebrow writers of the First World War* (1993),

<sup>12</sup> R.M. Bracco, *Betwixt and Between; Middlebrow Fiction and English Society in the Twenties and Thirties*, (Melbourne, 1990), p.1.

<sup>13</sup> Bracco, *Betwixt and Between*, p.6. Bracco contrasted the small sales of 'literature' of the period, typically amounting to around 3,000, to the best-selling status of much middlebrow fiction, selling 'at least 50,000 copies, with an average sale of 100,000' for a first printing, with some titles reaching sales of over a million once cheaper editions appeared (Bracco, *Betwixt and Between*, p.5).

<sup>14</sup> Bracco, 'British middlebrow writers of the First World War', p.117.

<sup>15</sup> Bracco, *Betwixt and Between*, p.25.

<sup>16</sup> J. Meyer, 'The Tuition of Manhood: "Sapper's" War Stories and the Literature of War', in M. Hammond and S. Towheed, *Publishing in the First World War: essays in book history*, (London, 2007), pp.115.

<sup>17</sup> J. Meyer, 'The Miraculous Survival of Tommy Atkins: Continuity and Discontinuity in British Masculinity after the First World War', *Bridges*, vol. 12, nos: 1/2, 2005, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> S. Bruley, 'The Love of an Unknown Soldier: A Story of Mystery, Myth and Masculinity in World War I', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 19, 4, p. 460.

<sup>19</sup> Although several thousand books about the war were published from 1918 to 1939, the number of books published by men who had actually experienced combat was much less. In all, some 194 books, both fiction and non-fiction, were published by ex-

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combatants in the period between the world wars. Non-fiction, i.e. war memoirs, published diaries, letters, and biographies, accounted for 101 of the total, while ex-combatants published 93 novels whose central theme was the Great War. S. M. Cullen, 'Gender and the Great War; British combatants, masculinity and perceptions of women, 1918-1939', unpublished Oxford University DPhil thesis, 1998, p. iii.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Wohl's *The Generation of 1914*, (London, 1980), encapsulated the view of the 1914/15 volunteers as occupying a notable, almost unique, place in modern history, and the evidence of British Great War veterans' writing appears to add further support to Wohl's argument.

<sup>21</sup> For a list of British literary volunteers, 1914-15, see, Cullen, 'Gender and the Great War', p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> J. Meyer, 'The Miraculous Survival of Tommy Atkins: Continuity and Discontinuity in British Masculinity After the First World War', in *Bridges*, vol. 12, nos: 1/2, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Cullen, 'Gender and the Great War', p.360 ff. The most prolific Scottish ex-combatant writer, George Blake, has received little attention for his Great War fiction. For an introduction to Blake's war fiction, see, S.M.Cullen, 'The Great War Fiction of George Blake', in *Cencrastus*, issue 67, pp. 38-42.

<sup>24</sup> W. Ewart, *Way of Revelation* (Gloucester, 1986 edition), pp. 207-8.

<sup>25</sup> A. Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century; a history* (London, 1989), p.150.

<sup>26</sup> H. Williamson, *The Dream of Fair Women* (London, 1933 edition), pp. 59 and 70.

<sup>27</sup> M. Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford, 1990 edition), pp. 213-4.

<sup>28</sup> C. E. Montague, *Rough Justice* (London, 1969 edition), p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> A. Kinross, *God and Tony Hewitt* (London, 1925), pp. 98-109.

<sup>30</sup> R. Aldington, *All Men are Enemies* (London, 1933), pp. 4-9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> For example, see, R. Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London, 1984 edition), pp. 84-6, pp. 99-101; W. L. George, *Blind Alley* (London, 1918), pp. 266-268; Montague, *Rough*

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*Justice*, p.184; R. H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* (Harmondsworth, 1979 edition), pp. 42-3 and p. 166; Williamson, *Dream of Fair Women*, p. 208ff; J. Brophy, *The Bitter End* (London, 1928), pp.124-6; A. S. M. Hutchinson, *If Winter Comes* (London, 1921), p.191, p. 215, pp. 317-8; H. Kimber, *Prelude to Calvary* (London, 1933), p. 2 and p.170; Aldington, *All Men*, p. 37 and p.153.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Aldington, *All Men*; A. Bertram, *The Sword Falls* (London, 1929); G. Frankau, *The Dangerous Years* (London, 1937); R. H. Mottram, *The English Miss* (London, 1928); G. Stowell, *The History of Button Hill* (London, 1929).

<sup>34</sup> Ewart, *Way of Revelation*, p. 531.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 531-3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, *Way*, p. 530.

<sup>38</sup> This is the subtitle of Ewart's novel.

<sup>39</sup> Ewart, *Way*, p. 534

<sup>40</sup> Montague, *Rough Justice*, p. 376.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>42</sup> Williamson, *Dream of Fair Women*, p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.369.

<sup>44</sup> H. Kimber, *Prelude to Calvary* (London, 1933), pp. 113-25; Kinross, *God and Tony Hewitt*, pp. 276-80; J. B. Morton, *The Barber of Putney* (London, 1919), pp. 330-4; Hutchinson, *If Winter Comes*, p. 191, p. 215, pp. 317-8; G. S. Godwin, *Why Stay We Here ?* (London, 1930), pp. 241-3; G. Blake, *Returned Empty* (London, 1931), pp. 151-6.

<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to assign conventional labels of 'right-wing' or 'left-wing' to veterans of the Great War. Those veterans who became politically active in the post-war period frequently attempted, as a result of their combatant experiences, to synthesise elements from various parts of the political spectrum. See, for example, D. S. White, *Lost*

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*Comrades; socialists of the front generation, 1918-1945* (London, 1992), on this tendency.

<sup>46</sup> George, *Blind Alley*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>49</sup> A. H. Gibbs, *Labels* (London, 1926), p.103.

<sup>50</sup> Blake, *Returned Empty*, pp. 165-6, and p. 288; G. Blake, *Paper Money* (London, 1928), p. 55 and p. 78; G. Blake, *The Valiant Heart* (London, 1939), pp. 255-62 and p. 348ff; Hutchinson, *If Winter Comes*, p. 285; R. Aldington, *Women Must Work* (London, 1934), the character of Francis Leigh, p. 244ff; Ewart, *Way of Revelation*, p.158, p. 284; Montague, *Rough Justice*, pp. 300-1; Brophy, *Bitter End*, p. 51, p.124, p. 128, p. 175; I. Hay, *The Lucky Number* (London, 1928), p. 183; I. Hay, *The Willing Horse* (London, 1921), p. 152; Godwin, *Why Stay We Here ?*, p. 274; C. Y. Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed* (London, 1930), pp. 152-5; Kimber, *Prelude to Calvary*, the character of Mr. Fanstone, p. 6ff; F. Manning, *Her Privates We* (London, 1930), pp. 273-85; F. A. Voigt, *Combed Out* (London, 1920), pp. 77-79; A. H. Gibbs, *Chances*, (London, 1930), p. 191 and p. 274.

<sup>51</sup> V. Bartlett, *No Man's Land* (London, 1930), p.142; Williamson, *Dream of Fair Women*, p. 47; Kimber, *Prelude to Calvary*, pp. 174-175; Aldington, *All Men are Enemies*, p.153, p. 203, pp. 298-9; G. Frankau, *Three Englishmen; a romance of married lives* (London, 1935), p. 364; G. Stowell, *The History of Button Hill* (London, 1929), part VII.

<sup>52</sup> Aldington, *All Men are Enemies*, p. 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 298-9. Aldington is the only combatant novelist to attack homosexuals and lesbians in his writing. See also, R. Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London, 1984 edition), p. 30 and p. 244; and R. Aldington, *The Colonel's Daughter* (London, 1986 edition), pp. 308-10.

<sup>55</sup> Stowell, *Button Hill*, pp. 373-404; Blake, *Paper Money*, p. 149.

<sup>56</sup> A. H. Gibbs, *The Grey Wave* (London, 1920), pp. 265-266.