World War One: Misrepresentation of a Conflict
By Dr Dan Todman (published on the BBC website: 2006-06-19)

Is the traditional tale of 'stupid generals, pointless attacks and universal death' a fair representation of a war celebrated in 1918 as a great national deliverance?

Forgotten victory

'Everybody knows' what World War One was like and what it meant. Modern Britons think of the war as a muddy, bloody mess - a futile massacre in which a generation of young men were slaughtered at the behest of asinine generals.

Those who survived barbed wire and machine gun bullets went mad or wrote poetry. Their sacrifice achieved nothing, succeeding only in laying down the foundations for another bloody conflict 20 years later. World War One has become a byword for how awful, stupid and useless war can be.

'The positive meanings ascribed to the war have been all but forgotten'

Yet these modern beliefs bear only a passing resemblance to the ways the war was experienced at the time. During and immediately after the conflict, Britons built a wide range of different meanings out of the war years.

Notwithstanding the enormous casualty lists, in 1918 many Britons thought they had achieved a miraculous deliverance from an evil enemy. They celebrated a remarkable military victory and national survival. For those who had served in the trenches, and for those left at home, the war experience encompassed not only horror, frustration and sorrow, but also triumph, pride, camaraderie and even enjoyment, as well as boredom and apathy.

For most, it was capable of being all these things, often at the same time. We should not make value judgements about how individuals come to understand their wars, but we do need to recognise the variety and ambiguity of that understanding.

Some aspects of how the war is now remembered have been constant. The shock of three-quarters-of-a-million dead men still lingers in British culture. Other aspects - particularly the positive meanings which could be ascribed to the war - have been all but forgotten.

How did we get from there to here?

Mourning and mirth

In the years after the war, Britons commemorated it in print, on stage, in stone and in ceremonies.

Although we now remember the production of a few classic 'war books' in the late 1920s – such as those by Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and Robert Graves – in fact these were just part of an enormous outpouring of writing, much of which described the war in traditional terms of valour and victory.

Different meanings for the war co-existed uneasily. It was widely feared that veterans who wished to celebrate survival, camaraderie and victory would upset bereaved families. The presumed emotional needs of bereaved parents in particular also exercised a powerful social taboo against saying that the war lacked meaning, even for those who were tempted to term it 'futile'.

'What everybody could agree on was what the war had been like - horrible'

What everybody could agree on was what the war had been like - horrible. A sometimes sensationalist emphasis on the horror of war, particularly evident during the late 1920s, could be used both by those who wished to prevent any future conflict, and by those who wanted to stress the heroism of the soldiers who had struggled through.

How the war had been fought remained a subject of controversy, with many wartime debates being carried on in post-war memoirs by leading politicians and generals.

Not least because of his post-war work for veterans' pensions, however, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force Sir Douglas Haig was widely seen as an heroic figure, despite his close association with the bloody struggles of the Somme and Passchendaele.

When he died, in early 1928, the streets of London and Edinburgh were lined with huge crowds of mourners. If the sheer size of such crowds is any measure of grief, the British people cared more about losing Haig than they did about losing Diana, princess of Wales.

A better war

During World War Two, the British motivated themselves with ideas about the preceding conflict.

Sometimes, these ideas were positive. In 1940, World War One was referred to in the same terms as the Armada and the Napoleonic Wars - examples of dogged British persistence and eventual victory.

More often, particularly in later years, it was depicted in strongly negative terms. For example, the victor of El Alamein, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, emphasised that he had learned how not to command as a World War One subaltern, watching his superiors isolate themselves from their men.

This was triply ironic. Montgomery learned his trade as a staff officer on the Western Front in the latter year of World War One. His highly-structured, technology-based approach was recognisably that of 1918. And, at times, the men under his command suffered casualty rates quite as high as those inflicted on the British Expeditionary Force in 1917.

'World War Two was the ultimate 'good war': a morally uncomplicated victory'

British servicemen throughout World War Two used their fathers' experiences of 1914-1918 - or rather, their assumptions about those experiences, based on inter-war stories of horror - as a touchstone of unpleasantness.

By any objective measure, the conditions in which they sometimes fought (in the Burmese jungle, or during the European winter of 1944-1945) were as bad as any in the history of warfare. Nevertheless, they told themselves it could have been worse, they could have been in the trenches.

In planning for a post-war world, the British were strongly influenced by the memory of the slump and unemployment which had followed World War One. The cry of 'never again', so striking at the time, was less about avoiding future war than avoiding the supposed failures of the 1920s.

In describing the new world for which they hoped they were fighting, the British increasingly came to rely on a version of World War One which emphasised disappointment and futility.

Finally, of course, World War Two provided an example of the ultimate 'good war': a morally uncomplicated victory against a clearly evil enemy, in which British losses were relatively light. From 1945 onwards, it would function as a yardstick against which to measure World War One.

'Oh What a Lovely War'

As the 50th anniversaries of World War One approached in the 1960s, public interest boomed. A new wave of books, plays, films and documentaries were produced by those born between the wars, who had grown up fascinated with a conflict they had been too young to experience.

Notable amongst these were Alan Clark's critique 'The Donkeys', Theatre Workshop's musical 'Oh What a Lovely War' (directed by Joan Littlewood), AJP Taylor's book 'World War One: An Illustrated History', and the BBC TV series 'The Great War'.

None of these really represented a new departure in the study of the war. With access to most government files still restricted under the so-called 'Fifty Year Rule', they relied on those sources produced between the wars and continued their controversies.

With nearly all the key participants dead, however, along with the bereaved parents whose emotions had been so important in the 1920s and 1930s, newer writers could express themselves more stridently and viciously.

'These were opinions about a controversial issue, rather than facts'

Both Clark (for financial reasons) and Littlewood and Taylor (for political reasons), emphasised - often inaccurately - the incompetence of British generals and the futility of war. Many in the original audience took these views with a pinch of salt. There was sufficient residual knowledge about the war to know that these were opinions about a controversial issue, rather than facts.

Despite Littlewood's extreme left-wing political standpoint, it was the nostalgia evoked by a 'musical entertainment' that used soldiers' songs which ensured the success of 'Oh What a Lovely War'.

The BBC's 'The Great War' took a more moderate viewpoint, although its images and music also emphasised horror and tragedy. It was an extremely popular series, reaching enormous audiences, becoming 'event' television and bringing the war into British homes.

Televisual interest in the war sparked a wave of veterans' reminiscences. Two million veterans of the war were still alive in Britain in the early 1960s. As they came to the end of their lives, they were stimulated to rehearse their memories both publicly and privately.

This period confirmed the war in British family folklore, laying the groundwork for its rediscovery by family historians in later years.

Blackadder and Baldrick

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the modern mythology of World War One became firmly established. In a society increasingly distant from the experience of war, 1914-1918 became more important as a symbol for tragedy and suffering than as a triumph or as a complicated and ambiguous event.

For a younger generation of Britons, the first encounter with the Great War often came either in the pages of Taylor's history, or through a Bank Holiday television repeat of the 1969 film of 'Oh What a Lovely War'.

Having grown up with the version of the war popular since the 1940s, younger audiences often took these works as factual. At school, many came to the war through English lessons, where a small group of war poets were taught in an historical vacuum.

'The self-reinforcing power of these myths gives them tremendous power'

Sassoon and Wilfred Owen could be used to evoke an emotional reaction against war which engaged students and satisfied teachers, but which utterly misrepresented the feelings of most Britons who lived through the war years.

The extent to which this mythology was shared made it an attractive setting for television series and historical novels. Many jokes in the 1989 BBC TV series 'Blackadder Goes Forth' relied on the audience understanding that the war meant stupid generals, pointless attacks and universal death.

Similarly, authors such as Sebastian Faulks could rely on an emotional tenor of tragedy created by a wartime setting. Although works like Faulks' 'Birdsong' are fiction, audiences often believed that they communicated 'deeper truths' about the war, because they reflected their own misconceptions.

The self-reinforcing power of these myths gives them tremendous power. Since the 1980s, a boom in carefully conducted archival investigation has done much to uncover the war's complexity: how it was fought and won by the British army on the Western Front, how domestic support and dissent were encouraged and managed, and how the war was remembered.

Yet this academic research has had almost no impact on popular understanding. This should not be a cause for despair or disdain. Societies have always misrepresented the past in an attempt to understand the present.

The misuse of World War One at least ensures that it remains in the public consciousness, and that those who fought are, however inaccurately, remembered. It remains to be seen how long that memory will last beyond the hundredth anniversaries in 2014-2018.