Recent Trends in the Historiography of Britain and the First World War: Cultural History, Comparative History, Public History

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Cultural history. Comparative history. Public history. These are the subjects I want to introduce briefly today. They describe some, but by no means all, elements in recent trends in the historiography of the 1914-18 war and of its place in British history. A trend is, after all, the angle of a slope, and not its foundations or its volume. What is left out is considerable, and will be described later on in our conference. But what I want to describe is at least part of the story, and as I hope to show, not an uninteresting part of it.

Given my title, not surprisingly, my remarks are in three parts. I want to show how the study of the First World War has changed as a number of major shifts in historiography have occurred, not only in our area of interest, but throughout the profession. I will describe this shift in two areas. In a nutshell, the first change describes a shift from social history to cultural history. Of course, these two areas of historical study are not hermetically sealed; indeed the two must cohabit for either to be viable. What has changed, though, is the balance between them.

Secondly, there is the question of comparison. I want to discuss this parallel shift in historiography as part of the difficult process of the integration of British history into European history. This linkage, problematic though inevitable, has been mediated, largely though not exclusively, through the emergence of initiatives in comparative history.

Thirdly, I want to talk about public history. This is an essential element in the story of how First World War studies have changed over the last two decades. Public history is the forum we share with non-professionals, with educated people who manifest an intense and vibrant interest in our field. The explosion of interest in First World War studies has profited enormously from this phenomenon, of which publishers and others who facilitate our output are fully aware. I believe this growth area to be largely a linkage of generations, locating professional history in family history, to the benefit of us all.

The upshot of my remarks is entirely positive. This field is booming; a day does not go by without a new article, manuscript, thesis, book appearing

in draft or print. And this torrent of interest is unlikely to abate in the foreseeable future. Why the Great War matters as much as it does is a point with which I want to close my remarks.

1. From Social to Cultural History

One way to characterize the shift of research interest and publication in this field is to summarize (and caricature) social history as the history of defiance and cultural history as the history of consent. This is a wild oversimplification, but like most, it has a grain of truth in it. Another formulation has social history as the study of social stratification, civil society, family life and social movements; cultural history is the study of language, idiom, representations, images. However this distinction is nuanced, these two overlapping areas of study have increasingly diverged in the last 20 years.

This transition, undramatic and with abundant overlap, from an emphasis on social history to an emphasis on cultural history occurred in the Thatcher years, but it cannot be reduced to a simple reflection of contemporary political currents. In the 1960s and 1970s, the history of labour militancy in wartime Britain was a subject of important and enduring scholarship. James Hinton's *The First Shop Stewards Movement* (1974) clearly anticipated a second which, alas, never materialized. Ross McKibbin's *Origins of the Labour Party* (1974) showed what trade union muscle meant, though he was careful to distance himself from claims made by others - including the present speaker - that Clause 4 of the 1918 Labour Party Constitution was a real statement of political will and aspirations, rather than an electoral ploy to graft middle-class socialist sprouts to a pragmatic trade union tree. Royden Harrison and John Saville also provided essays on the Great War in the fashion of l'histoire engagée so attractively set forth in meetings of the *Society for the Study of Labour History*[1] and latterly in Raphael Samuel's *History Workshop.*[2]

'The dignity of defiance' is a phrase I used some time ago to try to capture the essence of what these scholars were after.[3] And in their search, they provided us with powerful and enduring scholarship. Just to take one

[1] A. Briggs/J. Saville (eds) Essays in labour history (1977); Essays in labour history, Vol. 2, 1886-1923 (1971); and Essays in labour history, Vol. 3, 1918-1939 (1977).

[2] R. Samuel (ed.), History Workshop: a collectanea 1967-1991: documents, memoirs, critique and cumulative index to History Workshop journal (Oxford, 1991).

[3] For an early survey of these issues with respect to labour history, see my article 'The dignity of defiance. Some recent writing on British labor history', JMH 58, 1986, 225-31.

instance, Royden Harrison's *Warwick Checklist of Labour Periodicals* is an indispensable guide to grass-roots publications by and on behalf of workingmen.[4] It emerged while he was writing the life of the Webbs, a project which has not, though, seen the light of day. This approach to social history, pioneered by E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Asa Briggs and a score of others who came of age around the Second World War, while remarkable in and of itself, has not weathered well. The reasons are complex. Thompson and Hobsbawm were both in very different ways touched by genius, and such individuals rarely produce a second generation of scholars able or willing to fit into their very distinctive shoes. But as we all know, the source of the weakening of this paradigm was built into its life history. It was a product of the long debate over Marxism which by and large has come to an end.

Marxisant approaches to the history of the First World War are still visible, but in their place there has emerged another set of concerns the origins of which are elsewhere. I refer to the wave of cultural history, some of it French in origin, some American, some related to the Birmingham school of cultural studies. Whatever the origins, the outcomes have spread so widely as to enable us to speculate on whether they threaten to engulf the discipline. Whatever the threat, in its wake, a new generation of scholars have produced much of importance for the study of Britain in the First World War, and in the twentieth century as a whole.

The nature of the 'paradigm shift' became apparent to me in the course of preparing a project I was involved with over the last few years, a project to produce an eight-part television history of the Great War. This was broadcast weekly on the BBC between November and December 1996, and with much greater fuss and acclaim in the United States on the Public Broadcasting System on four consecutive evenings between 10 and 13 November 1996.

The approach of the television series was that of cultural history. Why did it happen? Because it could command the cash needed for such an enterprise: about six million dollars. The proposal which we got funded through the National Endowment of the Humanities in the United States and the BBC was self-consciously and provocatively different from other visual accounts of the Great War. Like other studies, the narrative line was the war itself. The chronological flow of the conflict, the clash of wills, armed forces and imperial power from 1914 to 1918, were followed throughout, in a rough chronological format. But in every episode, it was the cultural context

[4] R. Harrison, Warwick guide to British labour periodicals (Hassocks, 1977).

of the waging of war which was emphasized and visualized. We were commissioned to present cultural history, and that is precisely what we did, reaching an estimated audience of five million household in the United States, perhaps three million in the United Kingdom. We 'sold' cultural history, both to the sponsors and to the audiences, as the exploration of the hopes and dreams, the ideas and aspirations, the exhilaration and the despair, both of those remote from power and those who led them. Cultural history, we insisted, is the story of the way they made sense of the war and its consequences. It is the study of how people in the past - the well-known and the ordinary - conducted a search for meaning.

The cash came because the cultural history of the Great War has advanced so far and so fluently. We were able to adopt a cultural history approach precisely because of what has happened in the world of scholarship since the pioneering 24-part 1964 BBC production 'The Great War', written by the military historians John Terraine and Corelli Barnett. Incidentally, and not surprisingly, they hated the recent series. Why? In part because it was cultural history and not military history isolated from the notions and presuppositions of those men and women, civilians and soldiers, who lived through the catastrophe of the war. Particularly irksome to Corelli Barnett and others was that the narrator was a women, Dame Judy Dench.

As if that were not iconoclastic enough, we baldly stated that until recent years military history and cultural history have lived in majestic isolation, each on its separate peak. That was no longer necessary or desirable. Precisely because of the work of a new generation of scholars, in Europe and North America, as well as the collection and exploitation of new archival and film sources, we could break new ground, and to tell stories simply not known or appreciated by the historians of the 1960s. In the 1964 series there was no voice of an African soldier; no footage on shell shock; no female narrator; no voices of sculptors and painters; no women in uniform; no discussion of children, or famine, or a dozen other topics we placed at the heart of the matter.

We had no hesitation in proclaiming that what marked out our enterprise was its emphasis on the cultural dimension of the conflict. The claim we made was that the 1914-18 war was the Great War in large part because of its cultural consequences. Whereas diplomacy, strategy, political conflict, social mobilization and military events had long been a staple of historical presentations of the war, they had never been presented to the general public as cultural phenomena, as having been encoded within rich and complex images, languages and cultural forms.

Others came before us. We were able to do this in part because of the earlier success of a pioneering and remarkable television history, this time on the United States Civil War. Ken Burns had transformed documentary film-making by showing that still photography could engage a wide public for an extended period of time. He also used wonderful collections of letters, of a level of literacy and poignancy which was astonishing and possibly unparalleled. We tried to follow the same line, but perhaps without the element of nostalgia that Burns introduced into his narrative.

The interpretations on which we drew to create the series 'The Great War and the shaping of the twentieth century' came directly from what I would like to call the new cultural history of the war. It broadcast its approaches and findings to a wide audience, some of whom will join our profession over time, others will share an abiding passion for the subject. But cultural history is here to stay. Its historiography has yet to be written, but when that happens, it will mark a shift of generational interest. This too has had contemporary political sources, many of them from the other side of the ocean.

One of the most powerful stimuli to a new generation of historical thinking on the First World War has been the Vietnam War. In large part as an echo of that war, there appeared a rich historical literature which enables us to inform this project with new interpretations. The dimension specifically governing this literature is the sense of the war as a cultural phenomenon, for soldiers and statesmen as much as for artists and audiences. Scholars such as Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), John Keegan, in *The Face of Battle* (1976), and Eric Leed in *No Man's Land* (1979), altered the historical landscape of the war. Fussell's book was consciously written as the reaction of a veteran of World War II to (and against) the Vietnam War.

These scholars (alongside others) redefined the Great War as an event which transformed language, shifted radically the boundaries between the public and private realms, obliterated the distinction between civilian and military targets, occasioned witch hunts for internal enemies, challenged gender divisions, and opened a new phase in the history of race and empire. In more recent years, Modris Eksteins in *Rites of Spring*[5] and Samuel Hynes in *A War Imagined*[6] explored the shadow of the war in astonishing and seminal works of art, as well as in more mundane features of cultural life.

[5] M. Eksteins, Rites of spring: the Great War and the birth of the modern age (1989).

[6] S. Hynes, A war imagined: the First World War and English culture (1990).

In Europe there has appeared a similarly rich literature of the cultural history of the war. Jean-Jacques Becker[7] and Marc Ferro[8] have opened new avenues of research on popular opinion in France and Russia, and George Mosse[9] and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau[10] have explored the war's brutalizing effects on civilians and soldiers alike. Antoine Prost has enriched our understanding both of veterans' movements and commemorative events.[11]

The work of these people, among others, has created 'the new cultural history' of the war.[12] It is based on the assumption that to understand the Great War, and its enduring repercussions, we must jettison outworn distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' culture, and between both and the political, economic and military history of the day. In the 1914-18 conflict, all were mobilized; all were transformed.

It was that story we were able to tell because of this efflorescence of international scholarship. But there are other currents in contemporary historical writing which we have tried to respect and reflect in this experiment in public history. These voices have their own logic and their own trajectory. To a degree women's history has taken over some of the momentum of working-class history, though without the Whiggery of 'the rise of labour' school of historical reverie. The work of Gail Braybon,[13] Deborah Thom and Laura Lee Downs[14] has been instrumental here. Forthcoming studies by Susan Grayzel[15] on British and French feminism and and Sharon Kobrin Watson[16] on gender and class during the war show the vitality of scholarship in this field. They are matched by fascinating

[7] J.-J. Becker/S. Berstein, Victoire et frustrations, 1914-1929 (Paris, 1990).

[8] M. Ferro, The Great War 1914-1918 (1987).

[9] G. Mosse, Fallen soldiers: reshaping the memory of the World Wars (New York, 1990).

[10] S. Audoin-Rouzeau, La guerre des enfants, 1914-1918: essai d'histoire culturelle (Paris, 1993).

[11] A. Prost, Les anciens combattants et la société française 1914-1939 3 Vols (Paris, 1977).

[12] Guerres et cultures (Paris, 1994). (Edited and with contributions by J.M. Winter, J.-J. Becker, A. Becker, S. Audoin-Rouzeau, G. Krumeich).

[13] G. Braybon, Women workers in the First World War: the British experience (1981).

[14] L. Lee Downs, Manufacturing inequality: gender division in the French and British metalworking industries, 1914-1939 (Ithaca, 1995).

[15] S. Grayzel, 'Women, culture, and modern war: gender and identity in Britain and France, 1914-1918'.

[16] S. Kobrin Watson, 'Active service: gender, glass and British representation of the Great War', developed out of her Stanford PhD dissertation.

comparative work by Ute Daniel[17] and Elisabeth Domansky[18] on Germany and by Patrice and Margaret Higgonet[19] on European and American themes. One interesting work, half-way between social history and cultural history, reflecting the best of both, is the study of family allowances in Britain and France in the war period and after by Susan Pedersen.[20] All have engaged in debates over gender and feminist themes, and moved into areas which raise all the issues of language, idiom, representation, and agency imbedded in the cultural history of the war.

Other scholars have come to the subject of the Great War from other viewpoints. Some have followed Leed and the American literary scholar Elaine Showalter, by focusing on medical history in general and on shell shock in particular. Interest in this field has been stoked by the very successful trilogy of Pat Barker, starting with *Regeneration* (1991), the story of W.H.R. Rivers and Wilfred Owen, and following these figures and other fictional ones through two other novels, *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995), which won the Booker prize for fiction last year. Parallel developments inform the innovative work of Joanna Bourke in gender studies, in particular her disturbing book *Dismembering the Male*.[21] An interest in both gender and commemoration informs the forthcoming study of death and dying in Britain by Tom Laqueur.

Here too the writing of British history has benefited from our French and American neighbours. The Annales school, in both its official and unofficial forms, has sponsored many elements in cultural history with a bearing on our subject. Foucault's pioneering work on the history of asylums has been influential too; perhaps even more so have American writings on the concept of 'trauma'. In 1980 the American medical profession included in its list of medical conditions those ailments clustering under the title 'post traumatic stress disorder'. Here is another sequel of the Vietnam war, and an echo of the First World War. Trauma studies today concentrate on other themes - child abuse and urban crime - but they also focus on war, and

[17] U. Daniel, War from within: German women in the First World War (Oxford, 1997).

[18] E. Domansky, 'Der Erste Weltkrieg', in L. Niethammer et al. (eds), Bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland. Historische Einblicke, Fragen, Perspektiven (Frankfurt/M., 1990), 285-319.

[19] M. Randolph Higonnet et al. (eds), Behind the lines: gender and the two world wars (New Haven, 1987).

[20] S. Pedersen, Family, dependence, and the origins of the welfare state: Britain and France, 1914-1945 (Cambridge, 1993).

[21] J. Bourke, Dismembering the male: men's bodies, Britain and the Great War (Chicago, 1996).

almost always come back to the Great War, where so many of the terms and images we take for granted about the violence of our century were born.

American scholars have led the way in another sense. Through the journal *Representations*, based at Berkeley, they have fostered dozens of innovative works of scholarship on what the French like to call l'imaginaire. Here a note of caution may be in order, for the reaction against materialism in our profession occasionally shades into an idealism in which there is no reality, only language and images. What has been called 'the linguistic turn' in historical study can go too far. Even with such a cautionary note, we must recognize the significance and strength of this kind of interdisciplinary collaboration for work on the cultural history of wartime Britain.

In effect, these rivulets have converged, without a master hand or landscape architect intending them to do so. Today they form a very broad stream of opinion among younger historians working on both sides of the Atlantic, in Britain and on the continent who adopt the approaches of cultural history in addressing problems related to the history of the Great War and on its British dimension.

2. Comparative History

A second development in historiography is linked to the first, but has its own dynamic and special origins. Cultural history is by definition comparative. Its categories have never been national in scope or content, or rigidly confined to one discipline. Now it appears that the impetus to the creation of a subject which does not yet exist - comparative European history - arises out of the logic of European political and monetary integration. Let us not fool ourselves: it is coming, whatever current politicians pretend. And so is a kind of history which locates British developments alongside and within continental ones.

Let me provide some instances of inspiration and imitation. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau produced a fine history of trench journals in France some ten years ago.[22] A year or two after John Fuller followed the same path in his study of British trench journals.[23] Antoine Prost[24] and Annette Becker[25] have

[22] S. Audoin-Rouzeau, 14-18: Les combattants des tranchées: à travers leurs journaux (Paris, 1986).

[23] J.G. Fuller, Popular culture and Troop Morale among British and Dominion Forces in the First World War (Oxford, 1990).

[24] See his article 'Les monuments aux morts', in P. Nora (ed.), Les lieux de mémoire (Paris, 1986).

done pioneering work on war memorials, and now there is a whole library of publications on the subject. One important book which comes to mind is Adrian Gregory's *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (1994).

These studies draw from each other but present national evidence in the light of the neighbours' findings. Here the comparative approach is implicit and reflective. But there are other ways in which direct comparisons are under way. I have participated in a project in which a dozen scholars from Britain, France and Germany have tried to compare the urban dimension of the war in London, Paris and Berlin. The first volume of this effort has just come out, under the title *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (1997). Do not hold your breath for the second volume; it will take years to get off the ground.

The structure of the project is interesting for our theme in two ways. Firstly, the initial volume, begun in 1988, started as social history. It analyses military participation and losses, and chronicles the differing trajectories of labour, income, and consumption. It is the material history of the social relations of the waging of war. Volume two, yet to be done, is the cultural history of that process, understood as the ways contemporaries made sense of the pressures under which they lived and tried collectively to do something about them. It will focus on family, quartier, and social movements, and turn to the question of consent as a product of agency, not necessity.

The second feature of this project of possible interest to our discussion is its unconventional nature as a collective project. Our profession suffers from a surfeit of individualism. This project goes against the grain. Its starting point is the assumption that it is impossible for any one individual to handle the complexities of comparison alone. The archives are too vast, languages unevenly mastered, and life is short. Team work is the only way forward, and by placing one team in each city, we were able to use the work of each as a stimulus and support of the others. Discoveries in one city - police files, voluntary organization records, hospital archives - suggested lines of inquiry in others. Of course dead ends proliferated, but that is true in all corners of our profession.

Alongside the conceptual justification of comparative history is a more practical logic. The comparative approach has material advantages, which may explain in part its growth in the relatively recent past. In the last decade, all British universities I know anything about have gone into the 'tourist

[25] A. Becker, Les monuments aux morts: patrimoine et memoire de la grande (Paris, 1988).

trade' for itinerant students. Hamlet has indeed come back, this time as a European student migrant present in many of our classrooms.

Today's Hamlets matter more than in the past because of the financial pressures under which we all operate. Bringing British history to Europeans and locating it within European history in general is an option turning more and more into a necessity. The irony here is that the first time when Britain went into Europe in a very big way was after the declaration of war in 1914. Who can be surprised that our subject is the ideal one for comparative history, since what Corelli Barnett called the 'audit of war' is precisely that: a comparative test of national efforts in an international crucible.

3. Public History and Family History

Cultural history. Comparative history. Public history. I now come to the third element in my all too brief survey of historiographical trends in the study of Britain and the Great War. The financial imperatives of university work, and its concomitant in the scarcity of university posts, have pushed us in another, unconventional direction. That is towards accepting - very reluctantly in some quarters - the need to address a non-professional and non-apprenticed public. I take this as an entirely salutary turn of affairs, but many of my colleagues treat it as the coming of the barbarians.

Let them come, is my riposte, and we shall see who is barbaric and who is not. The reason why it matters in our field is that there is a thriving scholarly community, whose work is reflected in a broad industry, in publishing, in tourism, in museums, on the stage, in film, which attracts literally millions of people to our subject. Why is this so? One reason is that the iconic character of the war is firmly rooted in family history. The people I teach now are the grandchildren of people who were in their time children during or immediately after the war. It was the huge event of their early lives, and now they are passing away. In that curious and delightful symmetry of generations which bonds grandparents and grandchildren in a way neither is bonded to the middle generation, there is something about the war and its catastrophic character which moved from grandparents to grandchildren and thereby entered the lives of millions of students today, removed as they are from the events themselves. They learned of these things as family history, and that is what gives First World War studies and tours and museums and television series their audiences.

I have had a hand in setting up the Historial de la grande guerre at Péronne on the Somme, the first fully comparative museum of the war. It was the idea of Max Lejeune, minister of defense at the time of Suez, with a

political fiefdom on the Somme. In his latter and declining years, he put his weight (and the pocketbook of the Département de la Somme) behind the project to create a museum, so he could leave a monument to his father, an ancien combattant of the 1914-18 war who had returned to his home, and maltreated his son. That son in his old age wanted to forgive his father, and built a museum to do so. Such are the contours of family memories and mythologies. They are among the strongest impulses to the study of the history of the Great War around us today.

Who knows what will happen when these young people grow to maturity and have children of a different frame of mind. Perhaps the current vogue will fade; perhaps not. But even if it does, it will have come after one of the most extraordinary periods of scholarly production in our field. The turn from social history to cultural history, unintentionally but palpably there, has (as the economists say) shifted to the right the demand curve for our subject, the history of the Great War. Who can complain about the arbitration of the market when the outcome has enriched our discipline to such an evident extent and opened doors to the next generation of scholars, many of whom (I hope) are sitting here today?