

# The Making of a “Happy Warrior”: Narratives of Charles Carrington and Other British Soldiers Who Fought on the Western Front

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## I. Literature/ History: Myth and Counter-Myth

In 1933 Sidney Rogerson showed the differences between propaganda and soldiers’ lives on the Western Front in the preface of his war memoir:

Propaganda, during the war, if it failed to reach the fighting man, found its mark at home; England had no lack of civilian warriors who became increasingly bloodthirsty in proportion as the fighting man’s appetite for battle grew feebler with every leave. But this post-war propaganda, piling corpse on corpse, heaping horror on futility, seems bound to fail from every point of view. In its distortion, the soldier looks in vain for the scenes he knew. (xxix-xxx)

Many soldiers on leave at home became aware of the differences in the views of the war between their own and those of civilians, and as a result became critical of patriotic wartime propaganda. “Blighters,” written by Siegfried Sassoon, a second lieutenant, is a good example of this. The narrator of this poem watches civilians who “grin and cackle” in a music hall, and comments, “I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls” (*Collected Poems* 21). Sassoon brought the Western Front into the Home Front and gave “perfect expression to the feelings of anger and disgust which were then experienced” as another junior officer remarks (Read 66). Rogerson, in addition, regards some of the literary works appearing both at home and abroad between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, such as *Journey’s End* and *All Quiet on*

*the Western Front*, as “post-war propaganda,” in which soldiers’ experiences on the Western Front are represented as futile, piteous, and ironic. Charles Carrington criticises this harshly: “*All Quiet* satisfied the demand of readers in 1929 for dirt about the First World War, during the antimilitarist reaction that broke surface ten or twelve years after the war had ended.” The same author goes on to say, “[T]he enthusiasm of post-war civilians for Herr Remarque’s best-seller was not widely shared by ex-soldiers” (*Subaltern* 15). It is not surprising that soldiers’ view on the war and that of civilians differed widely as a result of the differences of their perspectives during the war. Civilians stereotyped soldiers into two different images, one during the war and one after which Sassoon and Carrington, respectively, tried in vain to refute.

Contrary to Rogerson’s expectations, this “post-war propaganda” still seems to be dominant in Britain today. Samuel Hynes calls it “myth,” and summarises: [A] generation of innocent young men [...] went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them” (*War Imagined* x). He explains the reason why the myth is widely accepted: “Later generations have seized on the myth because it offers a clear and correct moral view of a terrible, destructive episode in history” (*Soldiers’ Tale* 105). From a moral perspective at least, the myth appears beneficial for us at first sight. However, it cuts both ways: Regarding British soldiers’ experiences as completely futile could be viewed as self-indulgent indifference to the sufferings and casualties of civilians in some areas of “occupied” France and Belgium. “Occupied” not merely “invaded,” a fact that British people tend to forget, has been illustrated by some historians (see Field 246, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 45). More importantly, marginalised and suppressed voices never disappear completely; they continue to threaten the authority of the myth, obscurely but aggressively. Once they burst to the surface, the impact of overturning basic assumptions could be a backlash which leads to a counter-myth—just as destroying the old myth of German atrocities largely dismissed civilian victims there from British minds, which became part of today’s myth.

The myth that British soldiers were totally disillusioned with the war is closely

connected with their counter arguments to wartime propaganda, and Sassoon is one of the central figures in both. He appears in literary works such as Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* and Stephen MacDonald's drama *Not about Heroes*. The setting for both works is the Craiglockhart War Hospital, where Sassoon was sent after his issuing of an antiwar statement. It is the period when his indignation against wartime propaganda is at its peak. In both works, his experiences, feelings, and beliefs after that time go unmentioned. The myth was further reinforced by *The Great War and Modern Memory* written by Paul Fussell, a literary critic who served in Europe during the Second World War. "Every War," he insists, "is ironic because every war is worse than expected," adding that he regards the Great War as a "literary war" (7, 155). Richard Holmes, a military historian who challenges the myth, draws our attention to a problem which arises when writing about the war by commenting that "[the Great War] usually enters our minds not as history but as literature" (Holmes xvii). Dan Todman supports this by saying, "Literature was at the heart of my first encounters with the Great War" (153). These historians are sharply opposed to Fussell's opinion. Todman counters that Fussell is "spectacularly ignorant of the military history of the war" (158). According to Gary Sheffield, "his book has distinct drawbacks as history," and his "evidence is a tiny handful of literary sources" (18). It is the dominant influence of his book on public attitude and his underestimation of history rather than his errors per se that become the target of their criticism. Involved in these emotional disputes, we are forced into making decisions—forced to choose between deifying the myth and despising it, between literature and history.

It is the very lack of detailed examination of the memoirs of former soldiers who regard their war experiences as worthwhile even after the myth became dominant that has contributed to the perpetuation of the above disputes. These memoirs are marginalised in the myth, whereas critics who try to destroy the myth tend to regard their narratives as those which convey what the memoirists actually felt during the war. Embarking on the said examination, we encounter a problem, namely, some soldiers' tendency to generalise about other soldiers, and about their own experiences and feelings, which makes it difficult to understand soldiers as individuals. The purpose of this paper is therefore to consider these points by comparing Carrington's narratives with Sassoon's and other British soldiers'.

## II. Carrington/ Blunden: (In)coherent Narratives

John Masefield states, “What it was like on the day of battle cannot be imagined by those who were not there” (91). Certainly, only soldiers seem to be qualified to talk about battles, especially about their own feelings towards them, but their situation limits them, a fact that some soldiers are aware of. For instance, “It did not occur to me that anything else was happening on Allenby’s Army Front except my own little show,” says Sassoon (*Memoirs* 445). According to Carrington, “No one in front can tell what is happening a mile to right or left” in a battle (*Soldier* 118). What is more, F. P. Crozier insists that a soldier “cannot and must not look outside his narrow blinkers” (231). They experienced the war within such a narrow range that they could not share experiences and feelings with other soldiers, let alone understand the war as a whole.

Edmund Blunden, nevertheless, generalises about soldiers’ experiences and feelings adroitly in *Undertones of War*: “At the moment of midnight, December 31, 1917,” he describes,

I stood with some acquaintances in a camp finely overlooking the whole Ypres battlefield [...]. We [...] stared out across the snowy miles to the line of casual flares, still rising and floating and dropping. Their writing on the night was as the earliest scribbling of children, meaningless; they answered none of the questions with which a watcher’s eyes were painfully wide [...]. All agreed that 1917 had been a sad offender. All observed that 1918 did not look promising at its birth, or commissioned ‘to solve this dark enigma scrawled in blood.’ (184)

He emphasises what *he* thought was shared with everyone by repeating the subject “all.” He considers that “all,” including himself, could not resolve the “dark enigma.” It is, however, ambiguous that who and how many he means by “all.” Possibly he implicates just himself and “some acquaintances.” Even in such a case, by selecting the word “acquaintances,” rather than “friends” or “comrades,” he seems to intimate that even via mere acquaintance, he is certain enough to be able to generalise and that it is natural for others to feel the way he did as long as they were soldiers. More significantly, while he uses the word “all,” he does not describe an individual soldier engaged in battle, but only “meaningless” flare trails observed from a camp with a

fine view of the Ypres battlefield. Ypres is well known as the place where the first gas attack took place and where fierce battles were repeatedly fought with little gain. These "meaningless" trails associated with the name "Ypres" could represent the wasteful and tragic characteristics of the Western Front battlefields, of which a detailed description is not given.

It was difficult for a soldier to see the war beyond his own narrow outlook; in addition, Blunden wrote this memoir in Tokyo, where only a little literature on the conflict was available. Accordingly, he confesses, "I know that the experience to be sketched in it is very local, limited, incoherent; that it is almost useless" (xi). He cannot find coherent meaning in the circumstances surrounding him, and says, "The art is rather to collect them, in their original form of incoherence" (141). Yet it is this "incoherence" and narrowness that make his narrative cogent and that he uses to his own advantage. No soldier can see the war as a whole, and this unknown is what every soldier shares. Blunden seems to persuade his readers to consider that all soldiers regarded the war as nonsense at that time because they all fought for what they could not understand.

A lesser known but alternative view on the war at that time comes to us from *Soldier from the Wars Returning* (1965) written by Carrington: "Everyone was talking a great deal about war aims in the early months of 1918. We soldiers never had the slightest doubt about our war aims" (221). This opinion corresponds to Harold Macmillan's, as illustrated in a letter to his mother: "If any one at home thinks or talks of peace, you can truthfully say that the army is weary enough of war but prepared to fight for another 50 years if necessary, until the final object is attained" (83). "We" and "the army," quoted above, tell us that Carrington and Macmillan sincerely believed that they spoke on behalf of, and generalised about, the whole British Expeditionary Force and seem to ignore soldiers whose views on the war were different. As a matter of fact, however, Carrington admits that there were some soldiers who did not believe in the war aims: "What the self-pitying school had to say was that they were miserable because they were misfits in the Army, the reason being that they could not share the social enthusiasm which made other men almost welcome hardships" (*Soldier* 265). He differentiates soldiers from civilians to resolve the discrepancy: "It was the civilians, not the soldiers, who had indulged their fancies in the romance of war; the civilians, not the soldiers, were

disillusioned by such expositions as this [*Under Fire*]” (223). He creates a dichotomy between the soldiers and the civilians, and then supports the case of the soldiers. Volunteers and conscripts were citizen-soldiers who lived as civilians, temporarily served in the army, fought the war, and returned to civilian life, which blurs the distinction between soldiers and civilians. Carrington criticises those whose opinion conflicts with his, and regards them as civilians even though they were soldiers. Excluding those “misfits” from the category of soldiery, he preserves his notion of purity on the Western Front.

Seemingly, Sassoon, a well-known “antiwar poet,” belongs to the “self-pitying school”; however, Carrington approves of him as an “exceptionally brave man and no defeatist” (*Subaltern* 14). Although Sassoon’s antiwar sentiment seems evident, in some cases he expressed his yearning for battle, and even justified the war aims after the war (*Journey* 57). He is so ambivalent about the war that Robert Graves describes him as a man who “varied between happy warrior and bitter pacifist” (275). Suggesting that another soldier, who tends to be regarded as a pacifist, has the same view could be of considerable assistance to Carrington. He seems to lay emphasis on Sassoon’s “happy warrior” part to co-opt him.

Blunden applies the term “all” to a small number of soldiers at the beginning, and then increases the number. It is the lack of perspective that holds all the soldiers together. Carrington, on the other hand, eliminates those whose opinion is unacceptable to him and tries to draw more soldiers into his group, which is distinct from Blunden’s writing style. After the war, Carrington became a professional historian, which probably urges him to give a comprehensive, panoramic, and coherent narrative.

### III. Carrington/ Sassoon: Who is “Everyone”?

In actual fact, Sassoon and Carrington share certain similarities in that both felt compelled to advocate comradeship. In July 1917 Sassoon issued a seemingly coherent statement called “A Soldier’s Declaration,” in which he defied the military authority regarding the war as a “war of aggression and conquest” (*Memoirs* 496). The main purpose of this statement was the act of its publication rather than its contents, which were essentially political and remotely relevant to his experience as “a soldier.” Reflecting on that time, he writes in *Siegfried’s Journey* (1945): “While

at the front I was able to identify myself with my battalion. But, once I was back in England, I had to do something to relieve my state of mental tension" (55). His isolation seems to have driven him to this rebellion, namely that he felt he had to do something for his comrades on the front to maintain identification with them. What is more, he asserts in this "Declaration": "I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers" (*Memoirs* 496). He generalised about other soldiers assuming that they were of the same mind-set. In consequence, he was sent to a hospital and ironically became further isolated from the soldiers on the Western Front.

Carrington's feelings toward his men on the Home Front were somewhat similar to Sassoon's: He states, "So obsessed was I with the sense of unity among front-line soldiers that I resented the barrier between officer and man" (*Soldier* 219). Additionally, he expresses what he felt behind the lines in the early part of 1918: "[I] secretly longed to escape from the world of subalterns and 'flappers' into the life of cockney London, where I could associate with my true friends [...] as equals" (220). He went so far as to disguise himself as a private soldier on leave, and went drinking with labourers in the East End, which satisfied his feelings of camaraderie to a certain degree, albeit he could not return to the front until the armistice. Even though the actions of both Sassoon and Carrington were founded in their feelings of comradeship, their acts were totally different in that Carrington abased himself to have a good time with his "true friends," while Sassoon raised a rebellion against the military authority "on behalf of soldiers."

A poem written by Sassoon in 1919 gives us a clue to understanding their differences:

"Everyone Sang"

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;  
And I was filled with such delight  
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,  
Winging wildly across the white  
Orchards and dark-green fields; on—on—and out of sight.  
Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
And beauty came like the setting sun:

My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
 Drifted away ... O, but Everyone  
 Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.  
 (*Collected Poems* 124)

Although both merge together at the end, there are at least two perspectives in counterpoint throughout the poem: that of “everyone” and that of “birds.” The narrator “I” yearns to identify with the “birds.” He does not belong to “everyone,” nor does he sing the song with them, which makes “everyone” in this poem highly ambiguous. He remains aloof from “everyone,” and looks down at them from above; subsequently, he makes an effort to have them rise to great heights.

Carrington gives an intriguing comment on this poem: “The reader of his verse is almost surprised when the spark of genius flashes out in fellow-feeling, as in the poem about the column breaking into song on the march, to me the supreme revelation of the soldier’s life” (*Soldier* 266). Never referring to the unleashed “birds” or the narrator, Carrington interprets “everyone” as “the soldier” who, controlling his fear, is going to the front with firm resolve. He understands the poem through “everyone,” and ignores the image of the “birds,” the significance of which does not seem to matter to him. There is a similarity between his attitudes towards the “birds” and that towards Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force. Carrington considered him to be “trusted, and that put an end to discussion” during the war, though he admits that he can pinpoint Haig’s faults after he has acquired sufficient information “to consider him as a human being” (*Soldier* 107). Carrington’s indifference towards the “birds” and Haig suggests his incurious attitude towards anything or anyone beyond his knowledge. What he was most interested in during the war was his men, not the British Government or other officers.

Both Sassoon and Carrington cared a great deal for their men and felt discontented with the military hierarchy. For Carrington, the military caste was problematic because it alienated him from his juniors. He *secretly* overstepped the boundary between his own middle class background and military position, and lower working classes. On the other hand, Sassoon, with the will to reform society, considers that his seniors bring hardship to him and his juniors. As a spokesman for



his men, he *openly* defies the military authority. Sassoon attaches little importance to the difference between him and the *lower* ranks. Conversely, for Carrington the difference between him and the higher ranks are of little importance. This difference is one of the causes of the divergent accounts.

Discourses on "Everyone Sang" also provide a good example of the advantages and disadvantages of generalisation. Carrington considers this poem to be about marching soldiers, and Graves regards this as one to celebrate the armistice. Mocking it, he changes "everyone" into "everybody," and says, "'everybody' did not include me" (278). Sassoon, however, denies such interpretations: "The singing that would 'never be done'," he explains,

was the Social Revolution which I believed to be at hand [...]. I merely thought of it as the sunlight of Liberty spreading across the landscape and Everyone being obliged to admit that the opinions of the *Daily Herald* were, at any rate, worthy of their serious consideration. Most of my arguments in favour of it were denunciations of the Rich, supported by extremely imperfect acquaintance with the Poor. (*Journey* 141-42)

The poem was written in April and in the previous month Sassoon became the literary editor of the *Daily Herald*, a socialist paper. The "bird" in the poem represents the *Daily Herald*, which enlightens "everyone" on socialism. He appears to believe that once having noticed the opinions of the *Daily Herald*, "everyone" should concur with them as he did. He views lower class people not as individuals, but rather, as a mass of people whose singing voice is "wordless." Not surprisingly, he could not get along with "the poor" and was to abandon socialism. According to George Orwell, a middle-class socialist is "vastly more at home with a member of his own class [...] than with a member of the working class," which holds true for Sassoon (135). In "Absolution," written before experiencing the front line, Sassoon glorified the war, saying "fighting for our freedom, we are free" (*Collected Poems* 11). The image of liberation brought by something unknown to him and to the world is common to "Everyone Sang," which seems to lead Carrington to misread the poem. Besides, Sassoon's attitude towards the poor in this poem resembles that towards soldiers in "A Soldier's Declaration." He fought against Germany in "Absolution,"

against civilians and the military authority in “A Soldier’s Declaration,” and against the rich in “Everyone Sang,” attempting to represent British people, soldiers, and the poor respectively.

It is ironic but suggestive that “Everyone Sang,” which glorifies socialism, is acclaimed by Carrington, who seems antipathetic to that belief. Making a certain group an abstract object gives rise to diverse interpretations. It easily absorbs other groups that have common aspects, and become increasingly universal. On the other hand, experiences, feelings, and beliefs of the other constituent members are obscured once an abstraction becomes dominant. A further important point is that an original group itself and its relation with an abstract notion become less significant.

#### IV. Carrington/ Rank-and-File Soldiers: Diverse Narratives

According to Carrington, soldiers “never had the slightest doubt” about the war aims, while Sassoon points out “political errors” in “A Soldier’s Declaration” (*Memoirs* 496). However, there were also privates and non-commissioned officers who did not have such strong political beliefs as the following examples demonstrate. After the war, George Coward still found military service attractive not because he was a “patriotic ‘bloke,’” but because it was the “one and only way for a young lad, of poor circumstances, to see the world for free and all found” (10, 167). In the words of a conscript, “I wasn’t at all patriotic. I went and did what was asked of me and no more” (Patch 59). Edward Roe confesses, “I felt an infinitive longing to be out of it, out of this useless slaughter, misery and tragedy. I feel that way that I would sign peace on almost any terms” (68). This is similar to Sassoon’s “Declaration,” but Roe’s words, written in his diary on the front, were a direct result from what he had experienced and felt in a trench, probably without political beliefs. On the other hand, Sassoon composed his statement on the Home Front, intending to deliver it, with the help of pacifist friends such as Ottoline Morrell and Bertrand Russell. John Jackson asserts, “I had always been confident that I’d see it[the war] through somehow or other” (144). His belief did not decline throughout the war: “Just as in a game of football, which is ended only when the final whistle blows, we fought on to the last minute” (224). His narrative is unusually coherent indeed, but nevertheless it has little relation to political beliefs. To take one more

example, a regular soldier remembers the day when Britain entered the war: "Events outside the army hardly concerned us at all. International affairs were beyond the professional soldier" (Lucy 73). Unlike Sassoon or Carrington, these rank-and-file soldiers—whose views on their own experiences differ from one another—did not approve or disapprove of the British war objectives. They merely had little interest in them because it is beyond soldiers' duty to consider war aims or see the war with political perspectives. For them, the principal aim is to survive rather than to win the war. Their sense of comradeship frequently made them identify with other soldiers, sometimes with the enemy, but seldom with their nation. British war aims were, after all, outside their "narrow blinkers." Thus they hardly ever judged the war aims or expressed their own views on them.

In addition to the above, most of the narratives of private soldiers gain less publicity, compared with those of officers. It was, in fact, only in the twenty-first century that some of the memoirs and diaries from which I quoted above were first published. Beauvoir De Lisle, a general officer, asserts, "No sport can equal the excitement of the war, no other occupation can be half as interesting," and adds, "Most men of all ranks agree with me, but are not as free in expressing it" (168). It suggests that the voicelessness of private soldiers encouraged officers to overgeneralise about them. On Armistice Day of 1922, a procession to the Cenotaph carried a wreath bearing an inscription: "From the living victims—the unemployed—to the dead comrades, who died in vain" (Hannington 77). After their death, regardless of their feelings and beliefs, their experiences are used by those who are still alive. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to understand their personal feelings and beliefs through the eyes of others: Frederick Hodges says, "It was difficult in those days of the British Empire for boys to show emotion whatever we felt inside. We were trained to 'keep a stiff upper lip'" (40). Second-lieutenant Ian Hay, nevertheless, realises their interindividual differences. He explains how military trainings have unified his men into one regiment, but he also writes, "[W]hen you come to individuals, [...] you find it impossible to generalise. Your one unshakable conclusion is that it takes all sorts to make a type" (171). The army consisted of different individuals from the beginning, and war experiences, which were also different from one another, did not eliminate their differences, but only complicated them, though they tend to be divided into two groups—those who

regard their experiences as futile or ironic and those who regard them as worthwhile—and the champions of each group ignore or criticise the other.

Even Carrington confesses that in the spring of 1917, “fighting had entirely ceased to be good fun” (*Subaltern* 100), and wrote to his mother that he was “heartily sick of the whole affair” (*Soldier* 145). “Theoretically,” he tries to interpret his past feelings rationally, “I should have delighted in this month of open fighting and should have been proud of our exploits. Chiefly, I had been cold and frightened and I could not persuade myself it had been great fun” (*Soldier* 145). *Soldier* is the book which assimilates his own experiences and feelings into a coherent history based on his personal beliefs. Leaving the front on leave, he confesses, “I was hating the war and at the same time longing to be back with the regiment,” in his former memoir published in 1929 (*Subaltern* 101). His career as a historian and his animosity towards pacifists provided him with a coherent perspective and resolves this discrepancy, while Sassoon borrowed pacifist ideas towards the same end in “A Soldier’s Declaration.” They modified other soldiers’ feelings and even their own into self-consistent narratives. Carrington writes, “We were a band of brothers pledged to destroy German militarism” (*Soldier* 221-22). However it should mean “I believe that we must have been,” rather than “we were.” One may say that Carrington’s experiences and feelings during the war were as incoherent as Blunden’s, and as complex as Sassoon’s.

### V. Beyond Myths

A soldier’s experiences on the Western Front were extremely limited. Blunden leaves unsaid what he could not understand. Sassoon replaces it with pacifist ideas in the “Declaration,” but afterwards he separates his war and the war as a whole, and focuses on his individual experiences. He comments on his memoir, “[I]t is my own story that I am trying to tell [...]; those who expect a universalization of the Great War must look for it elsewhere” (*Memoirs* 291). Carrington, on the contrary, shifts his interest from his war to the war as a whole. He is indifferent to the unknown, which is replaced by his knowledge as a historian. Moreover, he tries to erase the influence of the myth, developing a strong repulsion towards it. In this process, he interprets and attunes his past experiences and feelings, and his “happy warrior” part dominates his view, which constructs a counter-myth. He

remarks that his memoir is "untainted by the influence of the later writers who invented the powerful image of 'disenchantment' or 'disillusion,'" because most of his material for it was written during the war (*Soldier* 12). Even if the material itself is "untainted," Carrington is unsuccessful in his attempt to negate the myth; it is firmly embedded in his narrative.

It is interesting that some former soldiers who counter the myth admire Blunden's *Undertones of War*: Douglas Jerrold points out that unlike other war books, it "deal[s] with the actualities of war," and Carrington acclaims it as the only war memoir that should be classed "as literature in its own right," though neither of them gives detailed reasons (Jerrold 7, *Soldier* 267). Carrington adds that *Undertones* is hard to understand because it is "allusive not explicit, and that his *Soldier* helps us "to detect his undertones" (*Soldier* 267). Carrington believes that additional information is necessary for civilian readers to understand Blunden's narrative, and tries to replace Blunden's incoherent narrative with his more coherent one. Yet, as we have seen, it is incoherence that is at the core of *Undertones*, a narrative based on the unknown with scant firsthand information. It is essential to understand soldiers' lack of knowledge from which their feelings were aroused rather than to add information accumulated after the war. To avoid overgeneralising about soldiers and to understand the diversity of soldiers' narratives, we must not forget that soldiers' views on their wartime experiences, feelings and beliefs differed from one another and even inside themselves at different times. Accordingly, we must pay more attention to Carrington's and other veterans' narratives in which positive aspects of the war are highlighted, instead of ignoring them, which maintains the myth, or hastily regarding them as historical facts free from the influence of the myth, which may lead to creating a counter-myth. Rank-and-file soldiers' narratives therefore demand a more detailed analysis of their individual transition and interaction.

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