Learning, Literature and Remembrance in English Classrooms

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This year’s centenary has served so far to (re-)kindle old and new debates about the popular memory of the First World War and how it may link to teaching. In January 2014 one such controversy was sparked by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, whose remarks on the dissemination of purportedly unpatriotic, ‘left-wing’ views on the First World War quickly developed into a heated debate on the teaching of the First World War rather than just its representation in media and historiography. Although Gove himself had not made links to teaching explicit, the Daily Mail did claim in its introduction to Gove’s comment piece that the TV series Blackadder Goes Forth was ‘still shown in schools to help children learn about the war’. The claim was primarily directed at History teachers, whose indignant responses in letter pages and social media were backed by Blackadder star Sir Tony Robinson, increasing public attention to the debate. As History teacher Louise Birch pointed out in the online journal The History Vault, however, History teachers were notably excluded from voicing their view in mainstream media outside the letter pages, Twitter and professional forums, continuing:

Yes, teachers do use Blackadder in the classroom, but they do not teach Blackadder as fact. Certainly the way I use Blackadder is to teach pupils how to conduct an enquiry. Pupils recognise Blackadder as being satirical and furthermore recognise it as one version of history. The skill of recognising differing interpretations is one which is at the forefront of history teaching today.
Her point – namely, that jumping to conclusions about the gist of teaching by looking purely at sources used results in a flawed perception of what actually happens in classrooms – is equally relevant to the teaching of First World War literature.

Needless to say, criticism by Michael Gove and others has not been limited to historical representations of the First World War and the way it is taught in History lessons. The war’s literary canon, and the way it is taught by English teachers, has come in for its fair share of criticism. Indeed, we can trace a longstanding argument on the part of military historians that war poetry in particular is responsible for a narrow, misleading popular memory of the war in Britain. In an article based on his Armistice Day Lecture to the Combat Stress Society on 5 November 2003, for instance, distinguished military historian Correlli Barnett, then Honorary National President of the Western Front Association, said:

How [...] did this depressing, and as I believe, false, picture of the war and the Western Front come to get fixed in the national mind? Who originally created this myth more appropriate to a national defeat than a victory? My answer is simple: it was the famous writers who served in the trenches on the Western Front, and then, at the end of the 1920s, published a spate of best-selling books about their experiences – books either written as straight memoirs, or in the form of novels or verse.4

Other historians from Brian Bond and Gary Sheffield to David Reynolds have voiced similar, if often less polemically worded views.5 In March 2014, The Times reported on BBC veteran Jeremy Paxman’s complaint to an audience of teachers that ‘the war was “only ever taught as poetry now”’,6 which sparked a partial rebuttal from historian Max Hastings and angry comments in the letter pages, with one teacher commenting:

Sir, A key area of study in the First World War is the use of art, language and the media to manipulate public opinion. A study of propaganda reveals to the student the inherent danger of accepting well-rehearsed arguments at face value. In believing and disseminating the unsubstantiated and PREJUDICED argument that the First World War is taught mainly through poetry Jeremy Paxman ironically displays a profound ignorance of history teaching in modern Britain.7
It is interesting and perhaps logical that it is a History teacher and not an English teacher who makes this retort: after all, what would be more natural for an English teacher than to teach poetry? The BBC recently picked up the same controversy (and indirectly highlighted the tension between the perspectives of English Literature and History) in the form of an online feature with poet Ian McMillan, who explored the question ‘Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?’ for BBC iWonder. McMillan’s conclusion is that it has, reiterating the idea that the ‘trench poets’ and memoirists were instrumentalised by those who sought to discredit the First World War as futile:

A select group of well-educated soldier officers, including Wilfred Owen, came to view the war as one of pity and horror. This was a minority view but expressed through powerful and well-written poetry. In the 1960s a literary elite decided this was the most authentic view of the conflict because it chimed with their own anti-war feelings. This resulted in the publication of two key war poetry anthologies edited by Brian Gardner and Ian Parsons. These heavily featured Owen and other poets whose work seemed to suggest World War One had been futile.

Crucially, McMillan’s criticism – like Paxman’s – is directed particularly against the teaching of history through war poetry, neglecting to acknowledge the possibility that war poetry may be taught primarily as poetry and failing to address its role in the English literature classroom. In the wake of the centenary, however, literature teachers and critics are beginning to argue back to such history-centred interpretations, suggesting that the position held by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in the war’s popular memory and the contribution of their poetry to an arguably limited public understanding of the conflict is not the whole story. Commenting on McMillan’s BBC feature, Andrew Bradford, Chair of examiners at OCR, pointed to the fact that war poetry is part of the literature curriculum, not the one for History, and that poets can hardly be held responsible for readings of their work as history rather than literary texts. He highlighted the particular remit of English literature as it is taught in secondary education:

War poetry is nearly always included within the requirement for “literary heritage” in English Language and English
Literature. Our job is to offer interesting poems, which use vivid language and show how poetry works. It’s not the role of English to give a wider and balanced picture of the war, although OCR have set poems that offer different responses to the war.9

McMillan himself defends his (and our) continuing interest in Wilfred Owen as a poet who ‘wears his heart on his sleeve’ and ‘spares us no detail’, arguing that he simply has to be seen as one poet among many, but can still be appreciated for the quality of his writing and the strength of his emotional appeal.10 Similarly, the President of the English Association, Adrian Barlow, has argued implicitly in a recent blog post, ‘In defence of the War Poets’, that it is particular literary qualities that have prompted sustained critical engagement with a select number of war poets. Responding to David Reynolds’s criticism of the fact that a small number of canonical war poets have been given more scholarly attention than ‘the 4 million non-white troops who fought for the Allies during the Great War’, Barlow points out that Reynolds offers a ‘false antithesis’ since, he observes,

Nearly all the words written about the war poets have been written about the poems as literature, not as history, and have been written by poets, critics, teachers and scholars. If not enough has been written about the non-white troops who fought for the Allies, the responsibility for this lies, I would have thought, with those whose job is history, not poetry.11

The crucial point of Barlow’s argument here is that of different perspectives and, most importantly, different remits for literary scholars as opposed to historians. Given the overlap between literary studies and cultural history in academia, this distinction is unfortunately not always clear-cut, particularly when looking at research on First World War writing over the past decade and its re-discovery of popular and transient war writers.12 However, it is certainly a distinction of great relevance for the teaching of literature, and particularly the teaching of English literature in secondary schools. Barlow’s blog post prompts two fundamental questions. Firstly, can and should English teachers combine their teaching of literary responses to the war with the teaching of (cultural) history and if so, how? And secondly, what do English teachers themselves think? The remainder of this article attempts to answer these questions by looking at
results from a new research project. This project investigated the teaching of the First World War in secondary schools in England by asking teachers directly, in a bid to gather some evidence from practitioners rather than rely on what politicians, historians and media personalities think teachers do.\(^\text{13}\)

Titled ‘The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory’, the project was funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Exploratory Award from February 2013 to May 2014. It was based on an interdisciplinary approach, led by Principal Investigator Dr Catriona Pennell, Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Exeter, and Co-Investigator Dr Ann-Marie Einhaus, Lecturer in Modern & Contemporary Literature at Northumbria University in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The researchers collaborated with key stakeholder groups such as the English Association, Historical Association and the Institute of Education, and the active phase of the project included an initial two-day symposium with teachers, representatives from professional bodies, museums and exam boards and academic experts, followed by an online survey and three regional focus groups. As an exploratory project with a limited budget its remit was restricted to secondary schools located in England, acknowledging the different systems in place in other parts of the UK. Central research questions for the project – which were formulated prior to the debate sparked by Gove, but proved to be very timely – included the following:

- How is the First World War taught in English secondary schools in English and History, particularly in the GCSE and AS/A Level curricula?
- Does teaching of the First World War contribute to the formation of a specific cultural memory of the war / a literary canon that emphasises a select group of poet ‘truth speakers’?
- What is already happening in secondary school classrooms?
- What challenges and opportunities are there?

The online survey, which was split into two distinct pathways for English and History teachers, was open from 21 June to 1 December 2013.\(^\text{14}\) It was advertised widely and, despite being of rather formidable length,
attracted 98 English Pathway respondents and 353 History Pathway respondents, many of whom were Heads of Department (29.3% in the English Pathway; 52.9% in the History Pathway). Overall, the sample of respondents represented around 4.6% of all History departments and 0.9% of all English departments in secondary schools in England. Generally speaking, the aim of the survey was to gain depth rather than breadth of insight while also gathering some hard data on teaching content, an approach that was reflected in a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions with ample free-text options and opportunities to rate responses on a scale of importance or relevance. In addition, our three regional focus groups offered some opportunity to follow up on and refine survey data. The survey achieved a representative demographic spread among respondents with respect to age distribution, gender, ethnicity and religion. There is, however, the need for two important disclaimers: firstly, respondents to the survey were necessarily a highly self-selecting group and likely to include only particularly motivated teachers with a special interest in the First World War who were also willing to give up between twenty and thirty minutes of their time. Secondly, far from all schools teach First World War writing. As such, many teachers may have felt unable to respond to the survey. The First World War featured in the 2007 National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 only in so far as it named Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, R.C. Sherriff and Pat Barker as writers potentially suitable for study. Although a new draft English curriculum for Key Stage 4, which was to be implemented in September 2014, initially explicitly referred to ‘representative poetry of the First World War’ in the section for subject content, this was later changed to a rather more general ‘selection of poetry since 1850’ and ‘British fiction or drama since the First World War’. This means that as before, each English department and/or individual teacher will have to make a conscious decision to either adopt an exam board option that includes or focuses on First World War literature, or use examples by First World War writers as part of other units where this is possible. As can be seen from Fig. 1 below, the vast majority of English teachers will address the First World War as part of poetry analysis units, with conflict writing coming in a surprising sixth place out of nine possible contexts for teaching First World War writing.
This breakdown of contexts at first sight seems to suggest that war writing is firmly taught as literature, with attention to its specifically literary qualities, rather than as examples of cultural history. However, other named contexts with one reference each were not only biography (which broadly falls under life writing) and creative writing, but also ‘trauma studies, shell shock and gender studies’ as well as ‘prejudice, morality and suffering’, with the latter two statements distinctly entering into the realm of cultural history. Moreover, context alone cannot give us a full picture, and it is worth looking also at what texts are taught in these varying literary contexts. As Fig. 2 shows, the authors that respondents
stated they were likely to teach are in line with expectations. While it is heartening to see a fairly broad range of soldier writers represented, including Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves and Ivor Gurney alongside the still overwhelmingly popular Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, the balance of gender and ideological stance remains highly uneven, and coverage is indeed almost exclusively restricted to the British Western Front experience. Virtually all of the most popular writers ranked in Fig. 2 are either commonly seen as ‘disillusioned’ or – like Jessie Pope – offer a patriotic and traditionalist foil for disillusioned writers. The ‘other’ writers listed in the free text option partly back this division into traditional versus disillusioned ways of writing about the war. On the side usually considered more traditional in their responses to war, we find Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, presumably chosen for his ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’. On the ‘disillusioned’ or critical side, respondents listed nurse writer Eva Dobell; R.C. Sherriff, who was mentioned twice; Margaret Postgate Cole, a socialist poet whose brother was a conscientious objector, and James K. Baxter, a New Zealand writer whose father was also a conscientious objector in the First World War. Other respondents stated that they taught a ‘wide[r] variety of poets’ than those stated in the options for the question, or that they let their pupils research and choose which authors they wanted to study.

To a large extent, teachers’ selection of texts is inevitably guided by the availability of material and also by selections made by compilers of anthologies and exam board materials. At Key Stage 4 and Sixth Form, the need to teach in preparation for assessment potentially dictates teachers’ choice of texts and approaches. This goes a long way towards explaining the predominance of canonical poets like Owen and Sassoon on the one hand and Kipling, Hardy and Brooke on the other. However, the presence of female and socialist writers and the fair mix of periods (wartime, inter-war, postwar and modern) in our sample suggests that many teachers – where possible – are trying for a wider spread of voices in a bid to achieve greater balance in their teaching of war writing within the constraints of the current assessment system. Naturally, these attempts are subject to the availability of texts and materials, which will be discussed in further detail below, but even a teaching anthology offers choices, and even a limited selection of texts can be taught in a consciously critical manner.
The Use of English

**Fig. 2: Authors respondents consider themselves likely to teach by percentages (multiple answer question)**

In addition to the wider spread of ‘eyewitness’ writers taught, however, it is interesting to note the evidently huge popularity of modern, retrospective fiction about the war, represented overwhelmingly by Michael Morpurgo’s war fiction for children and young adults. Morpurgo’s popularity, and particularly the wide use of *War Horse* (1982) and *Private Peaceful* (2003) in teaching, poses very particular problems for the teaching of First World War writing in secondary schools from a cultural history perspective – problems, moreover, that have to be seen as to some extent separate from controversies surrounding the use of canonical war poetry in teaching.
Like Owen and Sassoon, Morpurgo appears to be popular because he has easy appeal and can engage pupils who otherwise struggle to take an interest in literature, as described in a letter to the Observer on the subject of teaching First World War writing in January 2014. The teacher in question related how she had ‘taught Michael Morpurgo’s War Horse to a group of year eight students who had hitherto shown no interest in reading. They were gripped by the intensity of the battle scenes, and the relationship between man and horse.’ Where Morpurgo’s novels form part of a teaching unit, however, this strong appeal to young readers, which is founded on the exploitation of powerful emotional responses to death and suffering, and Morpurgo’s novelisation of the same simplified version of the First World War disseminated in media representations and teaching anthologies, serves to reinforce a limited understanding of the war in pupils’ minds. One English teacher who participated in the focus groups observed that ‘Morpurgo works with KS3 simply because the imagery is so vivid. [...] It’s that hook to associate yourself with the situation – he’s so good at allowing the students to relate to another youngster.’ At the same time, she acknowledged that Morpurgo’s easy appeal helps to drown out more authentic, ‘raw’ voices of the conflict. It seems likely, then, that many teachers who opt for young adult fiction about the war are aware that it encourages a cultural or historical bias towards a modern, retrospective and necessarily limited interpretation of the war, but feel that this is outweighed by considerations of pupils’ motivation.

Teaching Morpurgo’s novels as war literature in secondary schools thus illustrates a central dilemma faced by secondary-school teachers of English, namely the endeavour to engage pupils and develop their sense of empathy on the one hand, yet to offer them examples of excellent literature and, ideally, a balanced view of historical context. Naturally, there will be many teachers who fully endorse Morpurgo’s depiction of the war, including the letter writer to the Observer quoted above. Unlike Owen and Sassoon, however, whose version of the First World War may be seen as equally restricted to a particular perspective and experience of the war, Morpurgo’s fiction can neither claim eyewitness status, nor the literary and ideological complexity of earlier writers’ work, rendering it problematic in a different way. English and History teachers who attended the focus groups were critical of contemporary writing despite its popularity, particularly writing about the First World War specifically targeted at children and young adults. The feeling was one of wariness
towards any ‘books almost written to teach history’, and their popularity was explained by the ready availability of both the texts themselves and of film adaptations, notes and resources to aid teaching and preparation.

![Figure 3: Books present in school stock cupboards by percentage of respondents stated (multiple answer question)](image)

The teaching of popular modern writers like Morpurgo and canonical ones like Sassoon and Owen alike is perpetuated not only by their appeal to pupils, but also by practical considerations. For obvious reasons, teachers are more likely to teach well-resourced texts, and a comparison of Fig. 2 and 3 shows a close correlation between texts held in school stock cupboards and the popularity of their authors for teaching purposes. As one retired English teacher who participated in the initial workshop pointed out, ‘when an English Department feels impelled to
teach the First World War, they are much more likely to look in the stock cupboard for possible texts than to go through the catalogues to find something to spend a couple of hundred pounds on’. Besides perpetuating the presence of Morpurgo’s novels in the classroom once they are in stock, these practical and economic decisions also favour exam board teaching anthologies, which are unfortunately just as likely to disseminate a limited view of the war’s literature. Striving, as Andrew Bradford put it, ‘to offer interesting poems, which use vivid language and show how poetry works’, these anthologies draw on a canonical selection of war poetry, structured and accompanied by a reductive outline of its context. The influence on teaching anthologies and textbooks of contentious and outmoded studies like Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), and that of early anthologists such as Brian Gardner and Ian Parsons, is still strong. Their idea of the war’s literature as a journey from patriotic enthusiasm to disillusionment, from innocence to disenchantment, is easy to convey to pupils in need of simple, intelligible frameworks for understanding the texts they study, not to forget doing well in exams in an examination system that relies too heavily on demonstrating knowledge of particular key- or buzzwords.

Exam board anthologies and contemporary fiction for young adults are also reductive in the sense that they cater to what Esther MacCallum-Stewart has called ‘a desire to say the right thing’, leading them to omit any literary evidence that the war was experienced differently – at times even positively – by different people depending on their location, occupation, gender or race. This ‘desire to say the right thing’ is no doubt shared by many well-intentioned English teachers who strive to combine their teaching of First World War writing with a strong message about either the futility or the cost of war – two concepts that are by no means synonymous. It is important to recall, however, that the desire to convey a sense of the cost of war does not preclude a wish to do justice to the breadth of war experience. Rather, the narrow focus on particular texts and viewpoints should be seen to result often unintentionally from the complex range of practical, ideological and aesthetic factors outlined above.

Having looked at what is being taught, we need to consider the question of what teaching First World War writing in secondary schools can and perhaps should achieve, returning to the question of the remit of teaching literature. As we have seen, critics and exam board representatives have begun to call for a greater focus on teaching war writing as literature rather than history, while obviously not suggesting it should be taught in a
contextual blank space. This controversy, ultimately, seems to be about
the focus to be adopted in English teaching. Contextual knowledge has to
be provided for a basic understanding of First World War texts and to
prepare pupils for context-related assessment objectives; but should
considerations of influencing and shaping pupils’ cultural and historical
awareness of the war guide the selection of texts? Should English teachers
not put aesthetic considerations first? And where do practical concerns
come in?

Teachers themselves seem to have mixed views on this issue, in line with
existing research on English teachers’ diverse approaches to their
practice. Many of the English teachers who participated in the workshop
and focus groups stressed their interest in using their teaching of the
war’s literature towards conveying cultural and historical knowledge
about the war. Anecdotal evidence suggests a wider support for such
views, evidenced for instance in the following letter by English teacher
Tilly Baker to the Observer in the wake of the Gove controversy:

I have taught English in several state comprehensives, to
students of many different abilities and nationalities, for
more than 30 years. The most compelling texts were
invariably those which emphasised the horror and futility of
the first world war [sic]. The literature of endurance, heroism
and despair has captured the imaginations of students from
all cultures and ranges of ability. [...] A mixed-ability year
seven class impressed Ofsted because all the students were
able to reinterpret Dulce et Decorum Est in their own words.
The power of this literature is that it conveys so poignantly
the horror, the shocking loss of life, and the anger and
frustration of the poets, novelists and dramatists. These great
writers have not “belittled Britain”, Mr Gove, they have
immortalised the Great War, they have passed on their
reflections to all our children. I, and all my colleagues, will
continue to do the same. 24

Respondents to the English Pathway were asked to rate by importance a
range of goals and motivations for teaching First World War literature in a
multiple answer rating grid. Only 34% stated that they had no particular
personal aims because the topic was set by the exam board used in their
school, indicating that on the one hand, by no means not every school
opts for a First World War-themed course option at GCSE or A-Level, and
that even where that is the case teachers may not perceive the adoption of a particular exam board course as the primary reason for teaching war literature, particularly if they themselves had input into choosing this option. The table below shows the percentage of respondents who rated each of the remaining goals as either important or very important:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Goal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98%</td>
<td>Elicit a personal response from pupils and Development of contextual understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96%</td>
<td>Demonstrate changes in attitude to war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Development of critical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Demonstrate changes in poetic language/technique and Widen understanding of the war beyond what is usually covered in the media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88%</td>
<td>Educate pupils about how texts form or reflect values such as duty and sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Show how it changes the way we think and write about war and Demonstrate the futility of war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84%</td>
<td>Explore the effect of intense / common experience on literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Illustrate the wide range of reactions to a major event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78%</td>
<td>Illustrate use of literature for propaganda and Educate pupils about the cost of war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72%</td>
<td>Explore personal development in reaction to hardship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>Illustrate step change in modern literature</td>
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</tbody>
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Fig. 4: Goals and motivations for teaching First World War literature in the English Pathway, by % of respondents who rated as important or very important (multiple answer grid)

This breakdown shows a fairly even spread between generic and/or practical goals (eliciting a personal response from pupils, development of critical skills, and exploring personal development in reaction to hardship),
literary analysis goals (demonstrating changes in poetic language/technique, showing how the war changes the way we think and write about war, exploring the effect of intense/common experience on literature, and illustrating the use of literature for propaganda/a step change in modern literature), cultural history goals (development of contextual understanding, demonstrating changes in attitude to war, widening understanding of the war beyond what is usually covered in the media, and illustrating the wide range of reactions to a major event), and goals that constitute teaching a ‘moral’ lesson (educating pupils about how texts form or reflect values such as duty and sacrifice, demonstrating the futility of war, and educating pupils about the cost of war).

In terms of ranking by importance, however, the first literary goal in fact only appears in a shared fourth place and is preceded by four distinctly generic and/or cultural goals. The fact that respondents considered context more immediately important than poetic technique gives us food for thought, and seems to indicate that for many teachers, teaching war literature is indeed about more than teaching these texts as literature, and that there is a distinct tension between practical, aesthetic and ideological considerations. First World War literary texts, it seems, inevitably come with other obligations of a moral and cultural nature, particularly given that not all pupils who take English will continue to study History, and thus may never encounter the First World War in a context other than literature. How can we reconcile these perceived other obligations with the core business of teaching war writing as literature, given the awkward ‘double mission’ that teaching First World War writing evidently entails, particularly in a school context where time and curriculum constraints curtail individual teachers’ freedom to choose what they teach and how they can teach it? Two immediate conclusions suggest themselves: firstly, an acknowledgement of the problematic nature of teaching literature as a history lesson, and secondly, the advantages of cross-curricular teaching between English and History.

Our research suggests that many teachers would sincerely ‘love to see a much wider range of texts available and move away from Owen and Sassoon and [towards a] greater inclusion of women’s writing’, as one participant put it. In an ideal world scenario, English teachers would be able to teach a large and varied range of texts reflecting the full spectrum of experiences of the First World War. Ideally, their teaching of these texts in English lessons would be supported by equally comprehensive teaching of their historical context in History, timed either to precede or coincide with teaching of the war’s literature. In practice, however, a
swathe of institutional and personal factors ensures this rarely happens: the fact that History is not considered a core subject and not compulsory up to GCSE; the adoption of different exam boards and non-compatible options in the two subjects; lack of inter-departmental communication; lack of time to coordinate cross-curricular work; and generally time pressures coupled with the need to prepare pupils for particular forms of assessments. As a result, even English teachers with the best intentions of covering both the literary text and its historical context are at risk of doing justice to neither the experience of war, nor the literary qualities of the text. It is neither desirable to teach First World War writing without its context, nor to teach this context reductively, and it is particularly important to acknowledge in this context that hard-pressed English teachers cannot be expected to also be History teachers. Under pressure of providing historical context, it is all too tempting to convey to pupils a simplistic idea of the war as limited to Western Front misery and a home front characterised by women’s war work on the one hand and jingoist rhetoric on the other, particularly at Key Stage 4, where teachers are likely to work with a more limited range of texts and materials than at A-Level. In a sense, this divide amounts to taking the immediate setting and content of the most popular First World War texts – Owen, Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Jessie Pope – as their own sole context, and results in a generalised view that cannot hope to represent the complexity of the war’s experience or indeed its literary expression. This is what Santanu Das is referring to when he suggests that ‘[i]n the classroom, First World War poetry often ceases to be poetry and begins to look like history by proxy’,26 an observation that can easily be extended to cover First World War literature more generally.

Naturally, it is easy for those outside the teaching profession to come to conclusions that can only ever generalise on classroom practice. As researchers and teachers in Higher Education, our access to frontline teaching practice is always limited, even in the context of a dedicated research project. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to attempt some recommendations on the basis of the (however limited) insight gathered in the course of our research. For English teachers faced with the task of teaching First World war writing, we would suggest a compromise between subject-specific concerns and the perceived wider cultural ‘mission’ of English. In practice, this means teaching those literary texts that combine literary quality with accessibility as emotional ‘hooks’ to capture pupils’ attention, and that are well-resourced for teaching, while highlighting each text’s distinctive individual nature. Even given time constraints that prevent teaching a wider range of texts, teachers can still
emphasise the fact that the many millions of people who experienced the
war did so in different ways – depending on class, gender, location,
occupation, social and educational background, nationality and ethnicity –
without necessarily having to teach literary examples illustrating all these
different perspectives.

As Louise Birch has pointed out, conveying critical skills to pupils and
increasing their awareness of context and perspective is not just about
what one teaches, but how: even a ‘biased’ source, be it Blackadder Goes
Forth or ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, can become the centrepiece of a critical
inquiry that looks at both the particular qualities of the individual cultural
product, and its position in a wider field of differing opinions, styles,
approaches and perspectives. Rather than endeavouring to teach a vast
range of literary texts in the limited time available, one may teach
particularly interesting examples of literary responses whilst highlighting
that no individual text can speak for everyone. The key lies in teaching
First World War texts with their literary nature in mind first, in reading –
to paraphrase Das – literature as literature, ‘paying attention to questions
of form and how it is shaped by social, political and material contexts.
In other words, the context needs to be seen as facilitating the
understanding of the literary text, not the other way around, and we need
to discourage any assumption on the part of pupils that the experience of
war more generally can be extrapolated from isolated literary
testimonies.

Writers such as Susan Hill, Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks or Michael
Morpurgo are a separate case, in that they not only approach the war at
second or third hand, but draw on very particular kinds of literary
predecessors and are thus even less likely to offer us a view of what the
war was really like for everyone. What these modern writers can
demonstrate, however, is how popular memory of the war gradually takes
shape and changes. Last but not least, then, English teachers can use their
teaching of First World War literature, particularly modern literature, to
raise awareness of how literary texts contribute to shaping our memory
and understanding of the war, and are shaped by them in turn. What we
read shapes how we think about the war. Encouraging pupils to question
how the texts they have read influence the way they think about the war,
and asking them why and how they think that is the case, allows them to
question not only their own responses to literary texts, but the social
function of literature in a wider sense. In his ‘Cambridge Contexts in
Literature’ volume The Great War in British Literature (2000), for instance,
Adrian Barlow explicitly invites student readers to question the concept of
both the war’s modern mythology and its literary canon. To focus on texts that combine literary quality with accessibility and student appeal, and to teach these in a spirit of awareness of their limitations as individual expressions of experience, may be the closest we can get to having our cake and eating it.

Some useful resources for inclusive teaching of First World War literature

Teachers may find the following resources useful in either selecting texts or establishing context, with particular emphasis on highlighting diversity of experiences and responses.

Freely accessible articles, reports and podcasts

- 1914-1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War (launching in October 2014, this will be the result of an international collaborative project to make available a multi-perspective, public-access knowledge base on the First World War), http://www.1914-1918-online.net/ [Last accessed 6 May 2014].


Ready-to-use teaching resources
• British Library World War One portal: http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/teaching-resources (wide selection of topics and materials that can be adjusted for different age ranges between 11 and 18).
• Imperial War Museum First World War Learning resources: http://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/resources/first-world-war (growing collection of resources which include slide presentations, sources materials to work with and suggested activities).
• Oxford University’s First World War Poetry Digital Archive: http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/education (online tutorials, worksheets, free software and ideas for / examples of student research projects).

Ideas on teaching First World War literature
• Teaching Exchange section on the First World War in the Classroom project website: http://ww1intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/teachingexchange/ (allows users to post own ideas and experiences via site owners)

Notes

6. “‘Poetry is no way to teach the Great War’ Paxman says schools should address the important issues rather than fixating on horror, writes Nicola Woolcock.” *The Times*, 14 March 2014, p. 3.


9. Andrew Bradford, Chair of examiners at OCR, comment on BBC *iWonder* with Ian McMillan, ‘Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?’, http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z38rq6f [Last accessed 3 March 2014].

10. Ian McMillan, ‘The poem we all remember’ [transcript], BBC *iWonder*, ‘Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?’ http://a.files.bbci.co.uk/bam/live/content/zmmqn39/transcript [Last accessed 2 April 2014].


13. Besides being based on a survey of teachers, this article has benefited from input by a former English teacher, Tracey Iceton (now a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Northumbria University), who read the final draft and offered essential advice from an experienced teaching professional’s perspective.

14. For a comprehensive account of the survey, its design, advertising and analysis, please refer to the full and final project report on ‘The First World War in the Classroom’, which is available via the project website: http://ww1intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/

15. For a full breakdown of figures, statistics and demographic data, please refer to the project report, which is freely available via the project website (see above).

16. In line with national statistics, a higher number of respondents were female, the overwhelming majority were white British or Irish, and respondents mostly identified as Christian or having no religion. While some of these findings are obviously problematic in and of themselves in terms of the representation of minorities within the teaching profession, there is not room to dwell on them here. It is also worth noting that although the survey was open to teachers in both secondary and Further Education, only a tiny fraction of respondents taught in FE.
25. A clear distinction has to be drawn here between the cost of war and its perceived futility, as reflected in this comment made in the free-text option at the end of our survey’s English Pathway: ‘I really didn’t like this question’s wording: Illustrating the horror/ futility of war. It implies that these two things are synonymous and that the futility of war, all war, is a given. Whilst I appreciate that a sense of futility and disillusion pervades much scholarship and literature related to WWI, as the wife of a serving member of the armed forces, I do not like the implicit suggestion that the sacrifices my husband and those like him make on a daily basis are born of “futility”.’