Re-reading and Reading Ahead: teaching the literature of the First World War afresh

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Coming away from the 2013 Symposium, ‘The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory’, I was inspired to test out some of the conflicting attitudes to texts, to the business of studying, to the available content and to the ways of teaching which we had discussed. I was fired by the sense that, in the words of Edward Thomas, ‘This Is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong’ but an excellent crucible within which to examine further the relationship between History and English. Once home again and reviewing my notes, however, I must admit that my main feeling was of confusion.

How to make sense of it all, for myself, let alone my students? I began by sitting down to survey my own experience first to see where I needed redirecting and where I could challenge myself to be able to teach WW1 Literature over the coming years again, but afresh.

My own learning about WW1 had begun at my Scottish public school with the then usual Owen and Sassoon poetry comparison at GCSE. Sundry other poems were thrown in, including a bit of countrified Edward Thomas (which made no sense to me then as War Poetry) and some purposefully patriotic Rupert Brooke. I weighed this against my experience in an Army family and my school’s CCF, which seemed largely pointless at the time but did provide me some small sense of how physical depredation could feel. We lugubriously laid wreaths at the War Memorial once a year but made no association at all that I recall between Remembrance Day and Literature. I had no History GCSE, my knowledge of war coming solely from my Latin and Greek study to A-level; my Oxford English Literature and Language degree included virtually no study of WW1.
So none of this qualified me to embark on teaching the literature of the First World War to my students in a way which would sit easily with both History and English specialists at University level, but it did equip me to understand that Literature does not stand alone, is subject to varying attitudes and often little resembles real life; that our reception of it changes over time, and that to cope with such study in a contextual manner, a very high degree of study and thinking skills are required. My canonical but also contextual Literature and Language degree gave me skills in speed reading, divergent and convergent thinking and writing, selecting and evaluating key evidence, focused analysis, finding and testing patterns of ideas, comparing such patterns with the theorized approaches of others and living with whole bodies of authors’ work and periods until they become clearly envisaged ways of looking at the world. These skills do meet the demands of both History and English. The challenge for us teachers is to work out how we gained these skills and how to develop them in others, over and above elucidating texts. To this end, designing methods for students to apply these skills, even simply as cards outlining processes or questions applicable to WW1 texts, works well. A fascinating window for discussion opens up, for example, simply putting side-by-side lists of questions which Historians and English analysts would consider relevant. This in essence is what happened in my head as I sat and listened to the panel discussions at the Symposium, and this is what awaits my students.

But this was a far cry from my first year of teaching, when I returned to WW1 of necessity, tutoring a Sikh University student in War Poets in Context for an examination, using the excellent Out in the Dark anthology of poems, edited by David Roberts. The book’s basic notes illuminated the concerns of the authors, comparing their work with factual texts, but in my teaching I simply followed that more-or-less-textbook and the Edexcel syllabus. In doing so I emphasized the changing attitudes over time in England to the Western Front, but I missed the chance to discuss the enormous contribution of Indian soldiers and to evaluate how representative these texts are of their experiences. At that time I was simply not aware of these soldiers’ contribution. We enjoyed our study and the poets worked their familiar magic – my student kept the text to study more after his exam, returning it six months later annotated all over.

Encouraged by this evidence of personal engagement and by a somewhat patronising sense of having opened up a parcel of the past, my work with this student became the basis for a scheme of work during my PGCE.
Moving on to a stronger awareness of attitudes developed through the war, but still situated firmly within the traditional tragic narrative of optimism to disaster, this scheme was entitled ‘Recruitment to Regret’ and was taught to largely Asian Y11s at a North London boys’ private school. Mass engagement was my main aim – a kind of recruitment to the cause of Poetry – and accordingly my scheme was replete with marching activities accompanied by relevant and rousing Music Hall songs, gory pictures and group-based creation of film trailers for poems from that old stalwart, *Up The Line To Death*. We produced a much-praised anthology of recreative verse – but again, unfortunately, with no further global reach than a few poems about the sea.

Engagement was achieved, but arguably merely in a circular fashion: I set out the emotions presumed to have been experienced and the authorial intentions displayed in a small traditional range of texts, consolidating typical literary analysis of poetry, using labels to talk about effects, and then congratulating the boys when they had reproduced these emotions in their own writing. There was a good deal of worth in this work, but I am now unsure whether this circularity of concepts was sufficient. I am surprised now, with the benefit of hindsight and an awareness of the war beyond the Western Front, that I could not have mapped out a broader experience for the boys, one more consonant with the actuality of the war itself, rather than its traditional teacherly manifestation which, as an embryonic teacher lacking an adequate background, I had imagined for myself: perhaps not right or wrong, just not broad enough.

I was able to replay this scheme ‘better’ at my first mixed comprehensive. I was still committed to teaching a wide range of poems swiftly, catching the main authorial intentions and connecting to teen experience, ‘doing’ Newbolt’s ‘Vitai Lampada’ in 15 minutes with a core of cricket mad Year 10s, though everyone in the class grasped the notions of team-based honour. I widened the study into an investigation of Wilfred Owen’s poetry, using internet-sourced documents from his life, including the telegram reporting his death and various dispatches, delivered in the form of a miscellaneous archive for the students to sort. They were also required to find their own relevant images and to interrogate their suitability; a dangerous business, asking students to look up bombs online, but useful for encouraging an accurate sense of period. With the growth now of the Oxford Digital Archive, preparing this material would be a real joy and much simplified. Nevertheless, it fired the imagination of my classes, sharpening their poetry analysis skills through their wish to envisage Owen’s experience, combined with some attention to
manuscript redrafting. I am glad these students gained such a wide experience of the literature within which Owen is situated but, as with my first student, I do wonder now whether I was still just replaying uncritically the idea of Owen as the great soldierly and literary tragic hero, and implicitly reinforcing the narrative of tragedy which is now being widely criticized by military historians such as Hew Strachan as our main way of remembering the war.

More recently, in my current school, WW1 has figured so far only as an adjunct to my other teaching, mainly as part of teaching Modernist texts in context (W.B.Yeats, T.S.Eliot, Woolf) at A-level. But following the Symposium, and to ‘sort out’ my self-perceived historical deficit, I began by reading Dan Todman’s The Great War: Myth and Memory, focusing on the chapter on Poetry. This particularly critiques Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory, which I also read at the same time. I was impressed by how Todman clearly defines the poetic part of this remarkably ‘literary war’ as an emanation of a means of personal communication standard at the time: he easily helps the reader trace the publication and reception history of key figures. Teaching 6th Form, I would give them this chapter itself, with a graphic organizer of the headings and main arguments, to help create a sensible schema around which to read.

Focusing in a little more on Owen, whom I had thought I knew so well, Todman swiftly introduced me to a rich vein of mistaken attitudes and misappropriations: his mother’s presentation of him as much more pious than he was, for example, never mind the careful missing out of his sexuality, which perhaps sits better in University study. Owen’s writing about how he conveyed the impression of himself as a more trustworthy and ‘good’ soldier than he felt he was is also moving and relevant when reading his poetry, which attempts to pierce what he saw as prevalent destructive attitudes at home. These small but significant matters join together neatly with Todman’s very clear reminder of the remarkably selective preservation and publication of Owen’s work by his influential friends Sassoon and Blunden (perhaps denied to others) which would work well with older students as a route to a more complex understanding of the literary legacy of the war. All these thoughts, which easily convert into textual comparisons or investigations for students, were sitting ready for me, within just a few pages of Todman’s book, which would otherwise be considered a History text. Although I regularly read History texts in preparation for teaching other texts in context, especially at A-level, it really is remarkable to me, and a testament to the
force of iconic Great War poetry, that I have never felt the need to do so before with literature from WW1.

Further focus on Owen then revealed striking differences from the more popular ‘home’ poets such as John Oxenham (of whom I had previously never heard), in publishing terms apparently by far the most popular poet during WW1. This showed very clearly how Owen uses, in spite of his reputation for poetic innovation, largely similar poetic technique, just in a radically more effective way. Such comparisons when applied in class would rapidly reveal that there is technique and there is originality, there is mainstream and there is development. I am used to teaching A-level Renaissance poetry, highlighting the distinctiveness of John Donne, but my own personal ‘myth’ of WW1 literature had not previously suggested to me any need to conduct comparison more widely beyond the iconic selected poets demonstrating stepping stones in attitudes. Strachan rightly suggests the commemorations should not be ‘sterile and boring’, but there is an advantage to seeking out the ordinary and mediocre for comparison if it illuminates what was new and strange. Oxenham’s saccharine ‘A Little Te Deum Of The Commonplace’, for example, would make a marvelous comparison with ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, together with a focus on other fictional and real accounts of religion in the trenches. This could be widened out to consider the assumption of the centrality of Christianity to the war, looking at Rosenberg from Jewish London or the Sikh and Hindu Indian troops. This would both diversify any study of Owen away from the typical central focus on British ironies and demonstrate that such incredible deprivations were taking place globally.

Where is an Owen of Gallipoli, I wondered? The selectivity in Britain that has brought us these iconic poets and the overwhelming focus on their one theatre of war, has obscured the experiences of youth across the world. In this way, poetic pity has been reserved for the Western Front. I was struck, however, on exploring poems for Anzac day and discovering Leon Gellert, to notice the continuance of the pitiful narrative here. A globalized view is clearly not enough either to test the questions of ‘why poetry?’ and how we should treat the material rendered this way up against the rest of the forces’ experience. Books like John Brophy’s collection of soldiers’ songs and slang from 1914-18, *The Long Trail* (1965) and Max Arthur’s *Last Post: The Final Word From Our First World War Soldiers* (2006), including remembered snippets of songs and poems alongside plainer sounded personal and social remembrances, may be a better corollary.
Dan Todman’s critique of Fussell also attacks the literary argument that WW1 was a key event in the development of ‘an ironic mode of expression that was a distinctive feature of ‘modern’ literature’. Todman accurately situates Fussell as an inheritor of Northrop Frye and unmasks him as a polemical, myth-making, ‘seriously flawed’ pretender to cultural, social or military history. Although not having had cause to teach either Fussell or Frye directly, these kinds of statements do cause one to reexamine one’s assumptions. It is, however, noticeable that Todman at the same time acknowledges the peculiar capacity of literary critics to exist in a world of ideas all their own, suggesting that Fussell’s book as a work of literary criticism ‘may be judged a success’, but also claiming that Fussell was nevertheless ‘spectacularly ignorant of the military history of the war’. Todman then avers that Fussell’s implicitly romanticizing assumptions about which factual elements of the war matter produced yet more of the mud, blood and tears focus that were the main basis for the subsequent publishing booms which produced *Regeneration* and *Birdsong*, further entrenching these ideas and recycling these myths of WW1. When reading these novels, perhaps for 6th Form coursework, exposure to this argument would provide a useful framework within which to reconsider Barker’s and Faulkes’ circumscribed choices of content.

To me, however, as an English teacher currently more interested in revivifying poetry teaching with attention to historical veracity, Fussell does appear to suggest an intriguingly fluid continuity between the attitudes evinced by Ford Madox Ford, Evelyn Waugh, Rosenberg, Owen and Sassoon (in that order). He makes a convincing series of symbolic links back, via Ruskin, to the Romantics, asserting that these War Poets were all engaged in ‘an attempt to make some sense of the war in relation to inherited tradition’. And to my mind, bent on creating literary historical coherence myself, this is highly attractive. However, it also constitutes not only a peculiar conflation of first hand and entirely fictional accounts (contrast Owen’s trench recollections and those attributed to Ford’s fictional observer, Tetjens), but a strange linkage of attitudes out of sync with the chronology of writing and a selectivity of material (typical of the English student) used to validate a coherent idea. If we are aiming as teachers to create in students the ability to trace patterns and develop critical ideas from them, then Fussell remains attractive. But if we want also to inculcate a rigour in evaluation of evidence, then his theory becomes suspect. So whilst in the average classroom, even at 6th Form, none of this would be discoverable, Todman’s critique of Fussell certainly sounds a useful warning about the
importance of taking one’s time to read and evaluate the main ideas available about the literature of WW1 before pontificating upon it. I will now feel encouraged to pay more attention to the production and publication history of texts and to my assumptions about the selections for comparison, whilst continuing to be on the lookout for interesting relationships between literary traditions.

For example, when teaching Sassoon’s ‘Everyone Sang’, I will be including a range of materials about singing in the trenches, from that excellent compilation of historical documents from soldier culture, *The Long Trail*, newspaper reports on the Armistice, Robert Graves’ description of this poem as an Armistice poem and various critical commentaries suggesting that, to the contrary, Sassoon wrote this poem later whilst in a bout of emergent socialism. We may even critique the Poetry Archive’s well structured and illuminating lesson on this poem (currently available online) which does not mention the symbolism of the bird at all. I might begin with a focus on animals in the war, contrasting Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse* with various descriptions of animals and of human behaviour described in an animalistic sense, combining Sassoon’s love of the English countryside from his *Memoirs* and McCrae’s larks, perhaps to generate a new dictionary of symbolism with a range of potential responses: Raymond Williams’ *Key Words* adapted for WW1. The old chestnut of deciding what is in or what is out in terms of key symbols or places or ideas could easily be adapted here by allotting particular points of view on the war to students taking part in an editorial conference for such an encyclopaedia of symbolism. Todman and Fussell might find themselves at work in the same classroom yet!

After such a mass of critical reading and thinking, I began to feel the pull again of the English student who wants to experience the texts and spend time with people between the pages. As a result I set about filling in gaps in my prose reading. I read with pleasure, but also surprise at the similarity of it all, Erich Remarque’s *All Quiet On The Western Front*, Graves’ *Goodbye to All That*, Sassoon’s *Memoirs*, Blunden’s *Undertones of War*, Madox Ford’s *No More Parades* and Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy. It was apparent to me that just by reading these texts one could subtly stretch one’s understanding of the theatres of war, the slowness of it all and the very broad reach of networks of people involved at home and at the Western Front, in both England and Germany. Perhaps because of the Symposium, or after reading Todman’s deconstructions of myths I had previously accepted, or because of the sense of Sassoon’s reticence contrasted with Graves’s forthright opinions and Blunden’s gushing detail,
or the flatness of Barker’s fictional characters offset against the
preposterous nature of Ford’s, I came to realize one should not take any
of this at face value. All this reading did increase my overall sense of
confusion, but this time usefully so. My idealistic and perhaps naïve wish
to create coherent pathways was gradually replaced by a gentle pleasure
at spending time with these voices. I felt as if I was learning something
profound if not precise whilst walking the long road to Bethune several
times over with different writers guiding me.

I also experienced a strange range of emotions, from an almost enjoyable
disgust at their descriptions of degradation and death to a certain
excitement at the unknown territory of popular wartime romances and
adventures churned out by the crate-load for public enjoyment. These
were surprising feelings to encounter, further complicating my own sense
of right or wrong at vicariously looking in on this complicated generation.
Maybe we need to read some of those popular books, and not just those
authors I think of as ‘venerable’, to get a fuller sense of being a reader
then. Perhaps that would be an excellent project in itself – what would a
reader in the years after the First World War have been able to read and
how might they have felt about it? This in itself would be an area of
literary history worth exploring.

Most of all this reading left me wanting to find a way to share this walk
alongside these lives with my students, but wondering how to do it other
than by serving up a reading list or sharing small sections. Along with my
realization that comparative reading is key, producing a map of places
where these people, real and fictional, ‘went’, with books and chapters to
read to ‘meet’ them there would be a worthwhile piece of work. Or
alternatively some family tree method of exploring the relationships
which also emerged through this parallel reading: Sassoon’s *Memoirs* and
*Regeneration*, together with the letters and poetry of himself and Owen,
plus Graves’ commentary on the life of Sassoon would be an obvious
place to start, combined with historical texts about them and their
experiences, in a ripple effect.

Such mapping, however, takes considerable time, even shared with
students, History Departments and Librarians. And, in spite of my
advocacy for developing inter-disciplinary skills, exhaustive
contextualising can be a distraction from what we English and History
teachers both know: reading can still be an end in itself. So, perhaps we
should reread and read ahead to refresh our understanding of WW1 and
its changing historiography, but we can leave the History study to other
classes, holding on to our parallel awareness that while not everything we
read is real, it still matters.