

Service, duty, and social cohesion, 1914-18

'I, James Ernest Brown, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as in duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.'

~ the Canadian military's First World War Oath of Allegiance, signed by J.E. Brown, Calgary, January 1916

A hundred years ago, people on the cusp of the Great War saw the world differently. A romantic patriotism and social optimism dominated Western thought, and the lives of men and women conformed to a relatively clear set of approved patterns. No one could foresee the century of disillusionment and reckless individualism waiting just around the corner.

After the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the world came apart and a new era began. It's still with us, though the cyber revolution promises a cultural change radical enough to displace it.

One way to assess cultural change is to mark the evolution of social and personal values. In this respect, the values of service and duty, critical to the First World War, tell us a lot about the last hundred years and the way we see things now.

A Mortal Innocence

"They all believed, every one of them believed there would be something romantic about it, some notion of adventure. They all wanted it to be beautiful in some way, noble, I suppose. What they got instead was a living hell with nothing resembling beauty or nobility in it." . . . No subsequent generation, Allward suddenly knew, would ever achieve such innocence.

*~ Walter Allward in Jane Urquhart's novel *The Stone Carvers**

Most volunteers for active service in the First World War were motivated by notions of service and duty. Acting on shared beliefs about homeland and responsibility, they were both elevated and burdened by the notions they carried to the front. Just as their physical gear sustained them in the trenches but slowed them in combat, so their ideas and idealism both supported and doomed them when adventure turned to nightmare.

The typical First World War soldier went to the Western Front with robust cultural confidence. Whichever side he served – the Allied or Central Powers – he was buoyed by his country's recent achievements and knew its future was critical to a better world. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with their stunning intellectual and material progress, had confirmed his nation's importance, and it was up to him to help preserve its strength and advance its interests.

The nineteenth century had been a period of steady socialization in Western Europe. As the historian Modris Eksteins says, social stability was achieved through “the subordination of individual interests and whims to the needs and ends of society.” Secular schooling boosted literacy, stressed civic responsibility, and promoted national pride. The big thing, however, was “the general breakdown of individual self-sufficiency in a mass industrial society” and the state's emergent role in people's lives. Agents of the state (officials or professionals of various kinds) spread bourgeois values, principles, and notions of virtue that reinforced social norms and increased people's sense of connectedness to their country and each other:

In the ideal moral code of the nineteenth-century middle class, the goal of individual effort was always social harmony, the commonweal, the public good. In the end the interests of the individual, which were to be protected and furthered by the state, were nevertheless subservient to the public good. Personal restraint was the hallmark of respectability. And the idea of service to the public, or duty, became the great achievement of this class. (Eksteins, Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age, 1989)

This was especially true in Britain, where progress was linked to self-sufficiency, pluck, devotion, and hard work in the service of society, social ideals, and one's fellows. “Thank God I have done my duty,” Admiral Nelson murmurs as he dies, epitomizing nineteenth-century Britain's romantic, nationalistic, idealistic, and supremely self-disciplined code of behaviour.

By the early 1900s, Britain and France were proud but traditional societies, while Germany, also politically conservative but more militarist and expansionist, had become “the challenger to a century of certainty.” Since unification in 1871, it had, with energy, determination, and boldness, emerged as a major mili-

tary and industrial power. “The foremost representative of innovation and renewal,” it had become “the very embodiment of vitalism and technical brilliance.” Now it wanted greater dominance in world affairs, and war could make that happen.

Eksteins argues that war might also enable Germany to assert its “spiritual freedom.” It would be “a war of liberation . . . from the hypocrisy of bourgeois form and convenience” exemplified by Britain and France. So if for Britain and France the war was, initially at least, a defensive “struggle to preserve social values and civilization,” for Germany it was a chance to rebel against those values and express its vigorous modernism, dynamism, and will.

In any case, when war broke out in 1914, millions of men from both sides rushed to enlist. Motivated by religion, nationalism, and notions of service and duty, many were sucked into what became a new kind of war in which many volunteers, especially those commissioned as junior officers, were drawn from middle-class, white collar backgrounds and shared a range of ideals and values taught in the nursery, classroom, and workplace.

But again, it was nineteenth-century social progress, optimism, and material prosperity that made this possible. Dick Diver, the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*, tours the Somme after the war and gets it right:

This western front business couldn't be done again, not for a time. . . . This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes . . . You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers . . . This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine, and country deacons bowling and marraines in Marseilles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Würtemberg and Westphalia. Why, this was a love battle – there was a century of middle-class love spent here . . . All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up here with a great gust of high-explosive love.

A century of surety, social stability, and middle-class love. And then it was gone.

Raw recruits became soldiers, quickly. They were trained: reflexes and behaviours were drilled into them. They accepted martial authority, followed orders, and became part of the unit they were sent to. They put up with a lot, even before the front, but they stuck it out. Training, discipline, and a fear of shame or punishment kept them at it, reinforced by a code of values and beliefs instilled by their society and upbringing before the war: "The war, it seemed, was run on the basis of assumptions, on reflex responses that were engendered by a code of values and ideas, not solely about the war itself but about civilization in general." Chief among the code's virtues was honour, and the key to honour was loyalty.

Loyalty meant everything. For soldiers on both sides, it had been a core value at school, at home, and among friends. It was associated with personal virtue, soundness of character, and integrity. Without it there was no honour, and without honour there was no respect or acceptance. Social status and material success weren't enough: "the willing adherence to a code of values and compliance with certain forms of behavior were the key to membership in bourgeois society." Now loyalty took men to the front and kept them there.

With loyalty came a sense of duty, and for some soldiers a defining idealism. A striking example: men who enlisted in what were known as Canada's University Companies often viewed the war as a "crusade to save the world from German militarism" and a chance "to construct a better and more just society." Many did not seek commissions as officers – which, because of their education and privilege, was probably a sure thing – but chose instead to enlist as privates: "Some thought it almost profane to use their class position or education to get a leg up on the men with whom they would share the trenches."

The ultimate ideal, of course, was noble self-sacrifice. Margaret W. Westley, author of *Remembrance of Grandeur: The Anglo-Protestant Elite of Montreal*, says of that city's English-speaking volunteers: "All their principles and beliefs required that they defend the Empire, and they had quite simply offered their lives for the principles in which they believed." Like European soldiers on both sides of the conflict, they believed their duty lay in risking their lives in the service of civilized forces pitted against a debased enemy. Duty and honour were inseparable, and it was an honour to serve.

One way to grasp the era's extraordinary idealism is to read its high-minded public documents, especially those from the first year or so of the war. In language that sometimes seems not simply dated but preposterous, writers and orators praised their soldiers and urged them to achieve great things. Duty, patriotism, and the perfidy of the enemy were described in torrents of sentimentality, exhortatory vigour,

and the kind of high diction that betrays the self-righteous ignorance and self-importance that sent millions to their deaths. This was the downside to the era's idealism. Sometimes merely silly or naïve, it could also be deadly.

There was a sober dignity in King George's message to the British Expeditionary Force as it left for France in August 1914: "I have implicit confidence in you, my soldiers. Duty is your watchword, and I know your duty will be nobly done." A month later, however, David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, made this thumping great pitch for war:

We have been living in a sheltered valley for generations. We have been too comfortable, too indulgent, many, perhaps, too selfish. And the stern hand of fate has scourged us to an elevation where we can see the great everlasting things that matter for a nation; the great peaks of honour we had forgotten – duty and patriotism clad in glittering white: the great pinnacle of sacrifice pointing like a rugged finger to Heaven. We shall descend into the valleys again, but as long as the men and women of this generation last they will carry in their hearts the image of these great mountain peaks, whose foundations are unshaken though Europe rock and sway in the convulsions of a great war.

A great war indeed.

Similarly, as late as 1916, the poet Robert Bridges published his salute to Empire and the British soldier's uncorrupted death:

Britons have ever fought well for their country, and their country's Cause is the high Cause of Freedom and Honour. That fairest earthly fame, the fame of Freedom, is inseparable from the names of Albion, Britain, England; it has gone out to America and the Antipodes, hallowing the names of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand; it has found a new home in Africa: and this heritage is our glory and happiness. We can therefore be happy in our sorrows, happy even in the death of our beloved who fall in the fight; for they die nobly, as heroes and saints die, with hearts and hands unstained by hatred or wrong.

Like many public figures, Lloyd George (the ambitious wartime politician) and Bridges (the venerable man of letters) used high language to sell the war as a noble and moral undertaking. As the war went on and their rhetoric tired, they were aided by skilled war propagandists like Canadian novelist Sir Gilbert Parker, tasked with selling the war to a reluctant America: "This war," he wrote, "is a purgatorial passage through which mankind is moving into a new existence."

Canada's nation-builders also liked high language. After Lieutenant-Colonel George Baker, member of the Canadian House of Commons, was killed in action in 1916, J.W. Cunliffe wrote that the spirit of such men was "an inspiration to the world." Had men like Baker not died, Cunliffe wrote, "they would have given their energies to the upbuilding of the Dominion." Their death was an incalculable loss "materially," but "spiritually it is an immeasurable gain."

Religion, too, did its bit. Many favoured a divine interpretation of the war, or a blend of imperial enthusiasm and romantic, soldierly Christianity. Montreal's famed Canon Scott, an army chaplain on the Western Front, employed "religious terms evoking the Arthurian legend and chivalric codes still present in the cultivated Anglo-Protestant mind." "Where," he asked, referring to Canadian soldiers, "could one find a nobler, knightlier body of young men?" Even after his own son was killed in France, Scott kept the faith, providing comfort while supplying a spiritual dimension to the slaughter.

Though shopworn and devalued, high diction survived the war. In a speech at Scotland's St. Andrews University in 1919, Field Marshall Douglas Haig used what Eksteins calls "the old lofty terms" to justify recent history:

We were fighting for a world ideal in which God was with us. We were doing battle for a higher form of civilization, in which man's duty to his neighbour finds a place more important than his duty to himself, against an Empire built up and made great by the sword, efficient indeed, but with an efficiency unredeemed by any sense of chivalry or of moral responsibility towards the weak.

About the millions killed, maimed, or grieving, little was said, even after the Armistice. By turns self-serving, unworldly, propagandist, and vacuously political, public language failed to reflect the depth of private suffering. The innocence of 1914-15 was gone, but, for a while at least, few people wanted to hear about it.

The Limbo of All Sane Humanity

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness . . . so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be . . . gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words.

~ Henry James in a letter to a friend the day after Britain entered the war

The transition first from civilian life to military training and then to the trenches saw a soldier's world shift from romance to realism and then, abruptly, surrealism. This was especially true in the early stages of the war, before recruits, and eventually conscripts, knew something about the horror awaiting them. Described by the poet-soldier Siegfried Sassoon as "the limbo of all sane humanity and world-improving imagination," the front line on both sides was a place of sustained misery punctuated by bursts of terror.

It was also a place where, after a few weeks, a soldier's thoughts, emotions, and reactions were suppressed. Men reported that the prolonged awfulness of trench warfare induced a passive, almost anesthetized state in which they acted automatically, their perceptions dulled and normal instincts suspended. Some went into action too drugged by exhaustion and shock to do otherwise. The Austrian musician Fritz Kreisler, who served early in the war, remarked on the soldier's "strange psychological, almost hypnotic, state of mind." Men stood or fell, helpless, beyond resistance. "There were no heroes," a German soldier said, "only victims."

Isaac Rosenberg, who wrote some of the war's finest poems, described this dullness of mind in letters home: "Sometimes I give way and am appalled at the devastation this life seems to have made in my nature. It seems to have blunted me. I seem to be powerless to compel my will to any direction, and all I do is without energy and interest." An ordinary soldier tasked with menial duties, he described his daily fatigue: "No drug could be more stupefying than our work." His wretchedness compounded by ill health and pain, he wrote: "We've had shells bursting two yards off, bullets whistling all over the show, but all you are aware of is the agony of your heels."

Worse still for Rosenberg was the petty nastiness and vicious stupidity of those in authority. It wasn't the duties themselves, he said; it was the "brutal militaristic bullying meanness of the way they're served out to us." The American writer Paul Fussell, who served in the Second World War, called this meanness a "sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline."

Soldiers wore out. Relentless discomfort, fear, and tedium killed their idealism and vitality. Repeated failure by high-ranking officers eroded respect for senior command, and the endless tragedy led to a dark fatalism, cynicism, and bitterness. As the war dragged on and millions were sacrificed for nothing, front-line soldiers focused on a new enemy: the "bureaucrats, politicians, brass hats, journalists, and war profiteers – those on the outside who fed like jackals on the carnage and misery." Disillusioned, many turned

from martial idealism to pragmatic concerns and personal attachments. "Traditional authority had abandoned the soldier to his own fate," and he knew it.

Stuck between a callous military hierarchy and an uncomprehending home front, many men found solace in their unit and comrades, becoming, as one German soldier put it, "instinctive socialists." Losing faith in their politicians and generals, they identified with each other, and the focus of their duty shifted from the national to the regimental. In letters and diaries written mid-war, soldiers wrote less about themselves and what they thought, and more about their mates:

It was real concerns rather than sublime principles that kept men going. In the soldier's immediate surroundings, his regiment became the focus of duty. An intense sense of comradeship was one of the strongest sentiments generated by the war. . . . The core of this comradeship was a feeling of responsibility toward and utter dependence on one's fellows. It was an intense sense of belonging.

Captain Liddell Hart, a veteran of the Somme, said about the war that it "achieved little except loss," and by late 1916, with both sides mired on the Western Front, further loss seemed inevitable. A new pessimism appeared among frontline soldiers, and with it a sense of irony, disillusionment, and alienation from "the existing social order and its values."

It is possible to chart the war's course through its poetry, from the British perspective at least. In the first year of the war, Rupert Brooke wrote the romantic "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England." In a similar vein, Laurence Binyon composed "For the Fallen," still recited at Remembrance Day ceremonies:

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

And John McCrae wrote "In Flanders Fields" ("Take up our quarrel with the foe"). That was in May 1915, around the time Rupert Brooke died at sea of an infected mosquito bite on the way to Gallipoli.

Soon, however, the mood changed, socially and poetically. Writers like Sassoon and Robert Graves, friends and fellow officers in the trenches, no longer saw in war an opportunity for adventure, patriotism, and honour but rather an unheroic slaughter, hopelessness, bureaucratic stupidity, military incompe-

tence, and civilian complicity. While British poets in 1914 and 1915 saw the potential for noble sacrifice, those writing a year or two later saw the reality of empty sacrifice. They saw death imposed en masse by a remote and privileged few. They saw butchery on an impersonal, industrial scale. "The old lie" that it was sweet and right to die for one's country must, Wilfred Owen wrote in 1917, no longer be told to "children ardent for some desperate glory." There must be no more rhetoric, platitudes, or high language. "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" Owen asked.

For soldiers from many countries, the Battle of the Somme, which lasted from July 1 to mid-November 1916, put an end to the past. Its strategic significance is debated, but for those who were there it was simply hell. The poet and artist David Jones, who served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers (Sassoon and Graves's regiment), "looked on the Somme offensive as the last great action of the old world. Until then, the old customs and attitudes had held. What came after, he called 'The Break': 'The whole of the past, as far as I can make out, is down the drain.'"

A.J.P. Taylor wrote:

Idealism perished on the Somme. The enthusiastic volunteers were enthusiastic no longer. They had lost faith in their cause, in their leaders, in everything except loyalty to their fighting comrades. The war ceased to have a purpose. It went on for its own sake, as a contest in endurance.

It seemed that way on both sides of the line. For Ernst Jünger, a German writer and war hero, everything changed at the Somme: "Here chivalry disappeared for always. Like all noble and personal feelings it had to give way to the new tempo of battle and to the rule of the machine. Here the new Europe revealed itself for the first time."

For the West, this was the critical moment, the supreme tipping point. As the rule of the machine took over and the past went down the drain, "the I became all-important," and our restless, uprooted, individualistic age was born. We trace our historical transformation, our sea change, to the Somme and the "permanent reverberations of July 1916."

In 1914, Sassoon, a member of the British fox-hunting set, signed up before war was declared. Though “officer class” by breeding and education, the 27-year-old enlisted as a private in a mounted regiment, hoping his horse could come with him. Injured in training – his arm was broken when he was thrown – he changed course, accepted a commission with the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and went to France as a second-lieutenant. He was keen to get at it, and his early war poems reflect a patriotism “written under the enchantment of a chivalric ideal.”

By 1917, the enchantment was long gone. His beloved younger brother had died at Gallipoli, and many close friends had been lost, some under his command. Nicknamed “Mad Jack” by his men, he began to show a reckless ambivalence about survival.

In mid-1916, around the time of the Somme, he was awarded the Military Cross after risking his life to bring back British soldiers wounded in a raid. A year later, recovering in England from a wound of his own, and in a rage about the war, he tore the medal ribbon from his tunic and threw it into the mouth of the River Mersey.

Sassoon’s story describes the arc of disillusionment shared by many soldiers of the Great War. The difference is that he didn’t keep it to himself. Not content with publishing realistic poetry about the war – and damning the politicians, profiteers, and indifferent public that sustained it – he refused to return to France. Risking court martial, disgrace, and imprisonment, he said he no longer believed in Britain’s war aims and was unwilling to support them in any way. To make this as public as possible, he published “A Soldier’s Declaration,” part of which read:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, on which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. . . . I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

The army responded by institutionalizing him for shell shock, effectively silencing his dissent while saving him from a brave but self-destructive moral stand. While hospitalized in Scotland, he wrote a number

of poems, including "Sick Leave," in which he's visited by "the homeless ones, the noiseless dead." They've failed to find him in the line and now gather by his bed:

*In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
"When are you going out to them again?
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?"*

Several months after being hospitalized, and recognizing that further protest was futile, he returned to active service, insisting on a posting to the front. Very simply, he hated the war but not the warriors. Tormented by bitter safety and exile, and by the knowledge that his protest might be misunderstood by those he loved most, he went back to the war. The explanation is in a poem called "Banishment":

*I am banished from the patient men who fight
They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.
Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,
They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light.
Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight
They went arrayed in honour. But they died, —
Not one by one: and mutinous I cried
To those who sent them out into the night.
The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
To free them from the pit where they must dwell
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.*

"Only when he was risking his own life," Jean Moorcroft Wilson writes, "could he feel guilt-free."

Damned either way – fighting a war he no longer believed in, or exiled from his comrades – he chose war. Love drove him back, and there he stayed until wounded again and sent home for good.

We revere the Great War poets, especially those who stuck it out from loyalty, empathy, pity. They acted from the heart, and spoke from it. Sassoon: "The simplicity that I see in some of the men is the one candle in my darkness." And Owen: "I, too, saw God through mud – The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled." By extension, we believe that other fine soldiers, literary or not, fought on for similar reasons.

For most, however, it was primarily a matter of discipline and social norms. Reflexes and instincts were prescribed by their society, both civilian and military, and the vast majority toughed it out because that's what was expected of them. Even as disillusionment grew, and volunteers were joined by conscripts, frontline soldiers did as they were told. "Men still made this war," Eksteins writes, "not only generals but miserable foot soldiers." The old order might be disintegrating, but enough men were still willing to fight. "Despite horror, weariness, and even despondency," relatively few resisted, deserted, or harmed themselves.

Again, a core sense of duty was the key. According to Eksteins, most historians stress the soldier's increasing disenchantment and fail to appreciate his sense of obligation. They fail, in other words, to recognize that his service was rooted in something volitional and, in many respects, positive.

As the war entered its second and third years, talk about duty lost its "aggressive and confident overtones." At the same time, the soldier's *acceptance* of duty became even more important. As innocence, adventure, and high language fell to stalemate, attrition, and exhaustion, adherence to duty became the foundation of continued warfare and potential victory. Reluctant compliance and half-hearted allegiance meant defeat.

It had been easier when war aims were still simple, clear, and credible, but once soldiers started to lose faith in the sincerity and wisdom of their political and military leaders, the war "had to be fought on the strength of 'eternal verities,' inner resources one had acquired from one's culture and society." The soldier might doubt his leaders but not his homeland or his duty to serve it. Now "the assumptions of the civilizations and cultures fighting the war were all-important."

Thus the nature of duty changed. As soldiers shed their idealism, they looked for other reasons to carry on. Love of homeland and family worked for some; others found what they needed in loyalty to their unit and comrades. Some officers said that the bond with their men, though constrained by class and custom, kept them going, and many men of all ranks discovered a new respect for those outside their class and station. Wilfred Owen, referring to his soldiers' steady, unassuming fortitude, wrote that he heard "music in the silentness of duty," and Edmund Blunden, a former officer writing after the war, wondered if the sort of kindness he'd been shown by a sentry, an enlisted man, "would ever have such power again."

Sometimes fellowship extended beyond the regiment, beyond even the soldier's own army. As it dawned on them that they had a mutual enemy – the war and those responsible for it – some frontline soldiers felt an uneasy solidarity with the Fritz or Tommy facing them. They had a lot in common.

As in Duty Bound: A Sense of Connectedness

Sociality, the binding together of members of a group, is the first requirement of defense, since without it people will not put the group's interests ahead of their own or be willing to sacrifice their lives in battle. Lawrence H. Keeley, an anthropologist who has traced aggression among early peoples, writes in his book "War Before Civilization" that "Warfare is ultimately not a denial of the human capacity for cooperation, but merely the most destructive aspect of it."

~ Nicholas Wade, *The New York Times*, December 1, 2009

It's easy to confuse the concepts of duty and service or to think they're synonymous. They're not. In principle at least, duty is rooted in responsibility and obligation, while service stems from devotion. And while duty may be taught, the source of service is the natural desire to give, even if giving means self-sacrifice. Duty can be imposed, but the urge to serve comes from within. We say "I do my duty" or "I have a strong sense of duty," but simply "I serve."

Through the character of Adam in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare describes the essence of service and the ideal servant. Adam, now elderly, has no use for the man suddenly set above him, the unworthy son and heir of his former master, and wants only to serve the latter's *good* son. "Let me be your servant," Adam tells the penniless Orlando. "Though I look old, yet I am strong and lusty." Moreover, he says, he's saved

five hundred crowns for his old age, “When service should in my old limbs lie lame, / And unregarded age in corners thrown.” This money he now offers Orlando: “Master, go on; and I will follow thee / To the last gasp, with truth and loyalty.”

Orlando laments the passing of true service: “O Good old man, how well in thee appears / The constant service of the antique world, / When service sweat for duty, not for meed! / Thou art not for the fashion of these times, . . . ” Perhaps the best is always in the past. No matter: Adam is an admirable character, and his relationship with Orlando – in no way reluctant or obligatory – is rooted in devotion.

Though different, service and duty both call for discipline, commitment, a belief in something greater than the self, and a setting aside of self-interest. From the world’s perspective, both imply loyalty and, again in principle, are respected and valued. Ideally, in other words, loyalty, as well as other strengths that can’t be taught (such as selflessness, patience, and caring), are recognized in the working world and rewarded materially.

In reality, of course, it’s not that simple. Many who serve are exploited by their employers, their service amounting to servitude at the low end of the economy. The word service is derived from *servus*, the Latin for slave, and many of the world’s most powerless serve of necessity.

It’s hard to make a living in the developed world’s service industry, harder still in the developing world, where even poorly-paid service jobs can be scarce and their duties set by especially harsh market forces. In a famous *Harper’s* article, David Foster Wallace describes his impressions of low-echelon Asian staff on a European-run cruise ship, the sort of setting in which Western rich and Eastern poor come into contact. Though the cruise line’s P.R. representative assures him that service staff “really love what they’re doing and love serving people,” what he sees is “the kind of pinched weariness . . . one associates with low-paid service employees in general, plus fear.” Fear, in their case, of losing the income they and their families depend on. Theirs is an economically-enforced service, the fate of poor people serving the affluent. It’s the dark side of service, and it’s an old story.

In November 2003, BBC Radio's "In Our Time" featured a discussion of duty. Over the better part of an hour, host Melvyn Bragg and three academic guests reviewed the history of duty in the West, from the ancient world to the present, via Christianity, Kant (for whom duty was "the categorical imperative"), the heroic age of Nelson ("England expects every man to do his duty"), and Nietzsche (who wasn't keen on duty at all). Rooted originally in "the station, office, or position held in a society or organization," duty evolved into a moral notion meant to regulate our actions, thus "a foundational duty ethics." Later, it was rejected by people like Nietzsche, undermined by the Great War, and left in a confused state in the 1920s. It remains with us in Western secularized modernity, but weakened. Still linked to underlying social and moral convictions, it seems a little dated and, more often than not, inconvenient.

It gets more respect in religion. In the West, there's the Christian idea of duty (based on the ethics of thou shalt and thou shalt not), the Jewish notion of mitzvot (commandments or charitable acts), and the Islamic concept of prescribed actions, including Zakaah (almsgiving). There are counterparts in the East, of course, such as Hinduism's dharma (when associated with performing virtuous or dutiful acts) and Buddhism's "right action" (ethical conduct).

During the First World War, however, duty was still a fundamental social expectation, and, again, it was "the idea of 'duty', *devoir*, *Pflicht*" that kept the war going:

For the British and French, duty and devoir remained . . . essentially social concepts revolving around family, comrades, regiment, and country. In the letters and diaries of front soldiers it is in fact surprising how little attention is devoted to the self, to discussions of personal emotions such as courage, fear, hope, or anger. The social content of duty retained significance, . . . For German soldiers . . . Pflicht involved a powerful spiritual component linked usually with a personal sense of honour and will.

Social expectations about duty and "the unwritten laws of civilized behavior" ran deeper than rhetoric. In July 1917, the future anarchist-poet, Herbert Read, then a junior officer in France, wrote: "I begin to realize that quite the most important thing in life is to possess the vague qualities of, and be upon every occasion, a 'gentleman.'" This social ideal, based on the principle of duty, lay behind so much courage, decency, and self-abnegation.

It was a crucial principle for Great War gentlemen-officers like Percy Molson and Talbot Papineau of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Social expectations and the gentleman's code, deeply internalized, drove men like them to the front and governed their active service. In Percy's case, the sole

expression of anger in his letters home was triggered by a fellow officer's ungentlemanly behaviour. When this man, dissatisfied with his rank, left the battalion he'd recruited in Canada, Percy was caustic: "I cannot see how he can abandon them." A gentleman to the core, he believed that character counts above all, and that it means not only a "strong sense of public duty" but "an obligation to more than ordinary service." Setting an example, and giving one's all, wasn't a matter of choice.

Talbot, too, viewed duty and service as requisite. "Sacrifice is the keynote of our service here," he said at the Canadian Corps School in France. "It should continue to be our guiding principle in our citizen life." At Passchendaele a few months later, he knew his duty and died doing it. His mother, bereft but patriotic, wrote his commanding officer that it would be a "welcome service" to do anything she could for the regiment. Like her soldier son, she understood the ethos of duty.

It was different for sculptor Walter Allward, architect of the Vimy Monument. Older, married, and a father, he didn't join up. His service came later when he constructed Canada's "primary altar to the fallen of the war." "We are obligated never to forget their sacrifice," he said, "and to live by the values for which they died." Recognizing his obligation, he did his duty to the dead while serving their survivors.



The sense of duty was also strong in enlisted men like James Ernest Brown of Alberta, who held slackers in contempt. In November 1916, he wrote his mother:

But I know you would not want me to shirk my duty for safety's sake. So far I can clearly say I have shirked nothing and I would detest myself, and would deserve to be detested by all my friends, if I had stayed in England or Canada on a bomb proof job as so many who enlist do. It is much better to die a man than live a conquered coward, and when I go back I want to be able to look any man in the face and say I have done my duty at all times.

Pride depended on doing your bit and not letting the side down. Soldiers stuck it out because their mates needed them, but also, as we have seen, because it was the thing to do.

Then there was the passion for home. Soldiers stood by their country "as they might have stood by a pal whose luck was out." This connectedness to home as well as comrades made it possible to carry on.

Rooted in sociality, the ability to bond with others even at the cost of self-sacrifice, this attachment to country and comrade bound soldiers not only to each other but to the war itself.

The BBC tells us that duty provides men and women with meaning, purpose, and, in some cases, a reason to die. It has “duped people into doing terrible things and inspired them to wonderful achievements.” Further: “It can give your life clarity, focus, and strength in times of trouble. It can also bind a nation.” In fact, it’s difficult to imagine social cohesion (the binding of individuals to each other in a collective body) without a shared sense of duty, and it was precisely that duty – the sense of personal responsibility and obligation – that defined the era immediately before the Somme.

For Sassoon, duty shifted from the patriotic to the pragmatic, from the abstract to the human. For Rosenberg, it was different. Prefiguring a later, unpatriotic, and estranged twentieth-century sensibility, Rosenberg’s reason for enlisting is jarring: he needed the money. So poor was he, and so desperate were his parents’ circumstances, that he enlisted for the tiny income it would bring them:

I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over. Anyhow before the war I helped at home when I could and I did other things which helped to keep things going. I thought if I'd join there would be the separation allowance for my mother.

Raised in East End London, Rosenberg tried to work his way out of poverty, unsuccessfully. Though a trained and gifted painter, his paintings seldom sold. Nor did his poetry bring in much money. Increasingly unable to help his parents, he joined up. For this, his mother, who learned of his enlistment only after the fact, received a small, one-time “separation allowance” plus a weekly payment based on six-pence a day. Though conscious of “the immorality of joining with no patriotic convictions” (his words), he saw little alternative.

Rosenberg felt his duty keenly, but his fundamental sense of connection and obligation was to family and friends rather than country. And then there was his art:

I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.

In “Break of Day in the Trenches,” he watches a rat travel freely between opposing lines: “Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew / Your cosmopolitan sympathies.” Post-nationalist in his own sympathies, Rosenberg signalled a twentieth-century internationalism he wouldn’t live to see. On April 1, 1918, he was killed on night patrol.

Sassoon, Graves, Jones, and Read made it to the end, but Owen was killed in early November. A week later, with Armistice bells pealing, his parents learned of his death, and the war was over.

So the survivors went home: to Skye and Salzburg, Manchester and Munich, Sofia and Sydney. And to Revelstoke, Brandon, Cobalt, Montreal, and Antigonish.

In *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, Jonathan Vance analyzes Canada’s response to the post-war era. Instead of finding the social unease and innovation typical of 1920s Europe, he discovers a desire to return to pre-war and wartime values, views, and social structures. In fact, as Britain and the Continent swung into a period of release, excess, and cultural daring – characterized by stylish nonconformity, artistic audacity, and intellectual intensity – a sober and sensible Canada set about repairing its socio-cultural fabric, incorporating moderate change, and ensuring that tradition and convention won out. While some veterans wanted a radical approach to social progress, Canada’s leaders preferred the status quo and nation-building along conservative lines, and most people agreed, seeing little need to remake their world. As for those whose loved ones had been at the front, they wanted to hear that they’d served well and for a reason.

Thus, Vance says, a “myth of victory” emerged. According to this myth, Canadians had fought bravely and admirably throughout the war, but their true victory lay in courage, nobility, and decency. If they died, they did so with a pure spirit, and willingly: “To lose one’s life was a tragedy; to give one’s life by making the supreme sacrifice was the ultimate in selflessness.”

And the sacrifice was for . . . ? Well, it was for the usual things, plus the dream of a prouder, more autonomous Canada. According to this view, the soldier’s willing sacrifice had contributed to a stronger

national identity at home and a new credibility and authority in international affairs. In a sense, Vance writes, this story of the war was “an official memory . . . created to secure the rule of the existent leadership by promoting a nationalistic, patriotic culture.” In fairness, however, everyone wanted to find meaning in the war:

. . . one might suggest that a vernacular memory of the war as a wasteful and tragic episode that stemmed from the avarice of political and economic elites was driven to the ground by an elite memory of the war as a nation-building experience Nevertheless, the suggestion that the myth was simply a product of elite manipulation is profoundly unsatisfying. It robs countless Canadians of a sense of agency and prevents us from allowing that they might have embraced the myth, not to mention taken a hand in shaping it, because it spoke to their souls. . . . At the core of the memory were the fallen. They were the foundation upon which the entire edifice was constructed. Any attempt to forge an alternative vision of the war came up against the emotional needs of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who had lost loved ones in those four years. As Adrian Gregory has argued, High Diction and all that it symbolized may have been a fatuous myth that deserved exploding, but to do so left a tragic vacuum for the bereaved.

Similarly, though self-interest fed politicians’ sanctimony about the war, citizens mourning their fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and lovers needed no prompting to venerate the battlefields, cemeteries, and relics of combat and death. Battlefield crosses and debris were brought home by post-war pilgrims and incorporated into Canadian churches, war memorials, and private collections “as artifacts taken from the new Holy Land.” Anything to do with the war had a spiritual significance, and the blood of Canada’s lost was said to forever consecrate the former front line. This continued, Vance writes, through the 1920s and 1930s, and ended only with a fresh war.

In general, however, Canadians were soon ready to leave 1914-18 behind, or, if they couldn’t, to carry on. Either way, they didn’t want to hear about the war’s devastation and waste. They stuck to sanitized images of what had happened, and to traditional values and ideals. Social connections held, and the nation remained bound by a durable if simplistic story. ■

Sources and supplementary material

(pages 1-2:)

See *James Ernest Brown: Soldier for his times*, a short biography of a Canadian farmer, First World War veteran, and social democrat. An agrarian activist and social progressive, Ern Brown was a member of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the precursor of Canada's New Democratic Party. *Soldier* is also on this website.

At the June 2014 Ideacity Conference in Toronto, Wade Davis spoke about the way in which the First World War changed everything: "Everything you know about your life, every sense you have of being modern, every neurotic affliction and affectation, was born in the mud and blood of Flanders." Davis's presentation, "The First World War: the Fulcrum of Modernity," is available at [Ideacity](#).

The passage from Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* is on pp. 339-40 of the McClelland & Stewart paperback edition.

Unless otherwise noted, the quotes in the first pages of this article are from Modris Eksteins's *Rites of Spring*. Quotes and key concepts from this brilliant work are drawn in particular from pp. 3-4, 227-28, 230, 234, 235, and 244-46, and Eksteins is my principal source for the cultural origins of the war.

The reference to Germany as the challenger to a century of certainty is from a 2012 CBC Radio interview with Eksteins (the "Ideas" program, with Paul Kennedy).

(page 3:)

The quote about Germany's assertion of spiritual freedom is from an essay by Eksteins entitled "When Death was Young . . . : Germany, Modernism, and the Great War." It reads in part:

From the start of the war the Germans regarded it as above all a spiritual conflict, one which did not require precise war aims even and which as a result could readily be regarded by virtually the entire population as essentially a struggle to assert

the right to a spiritual freedom. . . . The focus of exploration for Germans was directed inward and toward the future: the war was a 'spiritual necessity' . . . The British and the French, in turn, regarded the war as a struggle to preserve social values and civilization, . . . notions of justice, dignity, civility, restraint, and 'progress' governed by a respect for law. . . . For them the war was a practical necessity, . . .

"When Death was Young" was published in *Ideas Into Politics: Aspects of European History, 1880-1950*, edited by Roger J. Bullen, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, and A.B. Polonsky, 1984.

I hope I've done justice to Eksteins's views on the cultural origins of the war. There are competing views and opinions, of course. In this connection, my friend James Middleton, who knows far more than I do about the First World War, recommends David Fromkin's *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* On p. 12, Fromkin writes that not only is "the explanation of the war the biggest question in modern history; it is an exemplary question, compelling us to re-examine what we mean by such words as 'cause.' There were causes – many of them – for Europe's Great Powers to be disposed to go to war with one another. There were other causes – immediate ones – for them to have gone to war when and where and how they did."

What matters in this article on service, duty, and social cohesion is the importance of specific values to soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Strategy, diplomacy, and international intrigue were the concern of other men.

In the arts, pre-war Germany was indeed more avant-garde than France or Britain. In Britain's case, this is evident, for example, in its tardy acceptance of early modernist designs by Scottish artist-architect Charles Rennie Macintosh years after they were taken up in Germany, Austria, and Eastern Europe.

On p. 244 of *Rites of Spring*, Eksteins writes that the First World War was, above all, "the civil war of the European middle class." Again, unless noted, quotes in these first pages are from that work.

About social class, James Middleton writes that the First World War "was unique in the number of middle class people involved, perhaps in part because the middle class was still fairly new. But this understates how much larger was the contingent of rural and urban working men. Then, too, it was middle class survivors who left the memoirs that form our impressions of the war. It wasn't until much later that we got the oral histories of working class survivors, such as those collected by Lyn Macdonald."

In an appendix to his 2012 novel *Dominion*, an alternative history of the European mid-twentieth century, C.J. Sansom writes: "European history in the first half of the twentieth century was, apart from Russia, a

story of nationalism triumphant. The rivalries between big-nation nationalisms culminated in the war of 1914 and nationalist spirit kept that war going for four years despite its unprecedented slaughter.”

The passage from *Tender is the Night* is on p. 57 of the Scribner paperback edition published in 2003.

(page 4:)

In reviewing the British television series, *The Village*, George Simmer points out that First World War soldiers are often depicted as vicious bullies or helpless victims, seldom as “men trained to do a difficult job.” ([The Village](#))

On the subject of class, Harry Leslie Smith, a working-class veteran of the Second World War, writes that the earlier war was fought, in the case of the British at least, by working-class men, and he finds his government’s claim that they fought for freedom and democracy “profane”: “Too many of the dead from that horrendous war didn’t know real freedom because they were poor and were never truly represented by their members of parliament.” (Source: “This year, I will wear a poppy for the last time,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2013.)

The quote about the war being run on the basis of assumptions is from *Rites of Spring*, p. 230. The next quote (“the willing adherence to a code of values”) is from p. 245.

On the subject of loyalty, Frederick Hart, sculptor of The Three Soldiers (or The Three Servicemen), a Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C., said about his figures: “They wear the uniform and carry the equipment of war; they are young. . . . The contrast between the innocence of their youth and the weapons of war underscores the poignancy of their sacrifice. There is about them the physical contact and sense of unity that bespeaks the bonds of love and sacrifice that is the nature of men at war.” (Source: Hart’s obituary in *The Washington Post*, August 15, 1999.) See also [Washington memorials](#). The Three Soldiers is a more traditional, figural complement to Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

The source with respect to the University Companies is David J. Bercuson’s *The Patricians: The Proud History of a Fighting Regiment*, 2001. See especially p. 68.

See Margaret W. Westley’s 1990 volume *Remembrance of Grandeur: The Anglo-Protestant Elite of Montreal, 1900-1950*, p. 127.

(page 5:)

King George is quoted on p. 235 of *Rites of Spring*.

David Lloyd George was soon to be, in quick succession, Britain's Minister of Munitions, Secretary of State for War, and Prime Minister.

Robert Bridges, an elderly man with no military experience, played into the era's odious mythologizing while attempting to comfort an anxious and grieving public. The source of his extended quote is his preface to *The Spirit of Man: An Anthology*, published in 1916.

Parker is quoted in "War and How We Told It," Crawford Kilian, *The Tye*, November 11, 2008.

In *Queen's Quarterly*, Summer 2015, Sandra Martin says about the era's propaganda that: "At the time it was considered patriotic. Later it would seem like a betrayal to the thousands of young men who felt duped into fighting and dying for an empty shell of an imperialist ideal."

(page 6:)

See J.W. Cunliffe's "A Canadian Soldier," printed for private circulation in 1917 and available at [George Baker](#). Karen Molson, author of *The Molsons: Their Lives & Times, 1780-2000* (and great-grand-daughter of Baker's cousin Kenneth Molson), sent me this link.

See Canon Scott's *The Great War As I Saw It*, Chapter XXXIII, "Preparing for the Final Blow – September, 1918." Scott is also quoted in Westley, p. 123.

The online "20th Century Poetry and War," published by the Peace Pledge Union, addresses high language, German as well as British, at [poetry and language](#).

The source of this quote from Field Marshall Haig, as well as the reference to "old lofty terms," is *Rites of Spring*, p. 252. Sometimes known as the Butcher of the Somme, Haig is quoted in "20th Century Poetry and War": "Every position must be held to the last man. There must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause, each one must fight to the end."

After the war, Haig dedicated himself to the welfare of ex-servicemen.

It's not surprising that the public wasn't keen to learn how bad it had been at the front. It was too much to bear, and too soon. Westley says about mourners in the war's aftermath that it "would be many years before people began to tell them that the sacrifice had been pointless. For the immediate future, the point was to cope." Silence and consolation were the order of the day.

The Henry James letter is widely if inconsistently quoted. I took this excerpt from Paul Fussell's influential work on the cultural impact of the war, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 1975, p. 8.

(pages 7-8:)

Re the term *surrealism*: Eksteins points out that it was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in his program notes for a Diaghilev production in 1917. Wounded at the front in 1916, Apollinaire died of influenza two days before the war's end.

"The limbo of all sane humanity": this is how Siegfried Sassoon, another veteran, referred to the trenches in his foreword to the 1937 edition of Rosenberg's work. A later volume, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg: Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings and Drawings* (1979), includes Sassoon's original foreword and Rosenberg's extraordinary art.

See *Rites of Spring* (especially pp. 226-29) for more on the soldier's anesthetized state of mind. Kreisler is quoted on p. 228 of that work, while the German soldier ("there were no heroes") is quoted in the article by the Peace Pledge Union, cited above.

The source of the passages from Rosenberg's letters is *The Collected Works*. In order, they are from letters to Miss Seaton (his friend and former teacher), John Rodker, Gordon Bottomley, Miss Seaton again, and Edward Marsh.

The Paul Fussell quote is from *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, though I found it at goodreads.com.

The source of the passage about politicians, profiteers, etc. is *Rites of Spring*, p. 281. As for senior officers, some continued to inspire faith in their men, and General A.C. Macdonnell was clearly one of them. See *Soldier for his times*, note 31, for more on this big-hearted man who, by 1917, commanded the 1st Canadian Division. "It is not sentiment, but simple fact, to say that he was loved and honoured," writes

Ian McCulloch in “‘Batty Mac’: Portrait of a Brigade Commander in the First World War, 1915-17.” (Source: *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1998.)

The passage about soldiers being left to their own fate is on p. 281 of *Rites of Spring*. The German soldier’s statement about instinctive socialists is on the same page.

The quote about the intense sense of comradeship is from *Rites of Spring*, p. 239.

The source of the Liddell Hart quote is “Michael Morpurgo on the Pity of War.” Morpurgo, Britain’s former Children’s Laureate, the author of *War Horse*, and a pacifist, visits the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres and thinks not only of the First World War but all the killing fields since. See *Intelligent Life* magazine, Spring 2011, and a 2014 piece about Morpurgo at [Marlborough College](#).

Visitors to the Menin Gate in Ypres find a plaque bearing Winston Churchill’s high language about the former battlefields as a “sacred place for the British race.”

The quote about “the existing social order and its values” is from *Rites of Spring*, p. 232.

(page 9:)

One of the characters in C.J. Sansom’s *Dominion* believes that the Great War “made mass slaughter ordinary, that was why Stalin and Hitler could commit murder on a scale inconceivable before 1914.”

The first Owen quote is from “Dulce et Decorum est,” the second from “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” Horace’s “Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori” (Owen’s “old lie”) is inscribed at the Menin Gate, where 54,896 war dead are memorialized. Some visitors respond very positively to the memorial and its sentiments; others, like Sassoon, do not. See his short poem, “On Passing the New Menin Gate.”

An early draft of “Dulce et Decorum est” was written while Owen and Sassoon were being treated for shell shock at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. Both were later released and returned to the front. In a letter written after renewed combat, Owen told Sassoon: “I cannot say I suffered anything; . . . My senses are charred.” (Source: [war poetry](#).)

Ernest Hemingway wrote from experience about the war's empty rhetoric. At 18, he was wounded on the Italian-Austrian front while serving with the Red Cross, and a decade later he published *A Farewell to Arms*, a novel based on his service. His fictional protagonist, Frederic Henry, sums up the bankruptcy of high language:

There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

Veterans Affairs Canada says this about the first day of the Somme Offensive:

The Battle of the Somme began early on the morning of July 1, 1916, near the town of Beaumont-Hamel. Thousands of soldiers from Britain and Newfoundland climbed out of their trenches to walk through a hail of machine gun fire toward the German line. In less than half an hour, the fighting was over. 57,470 British soldiers were killed or wounded on what remains the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army. Newfoundlanders suffered especially heavy losses on that day: of the approximately 800 who had gone into battle, only 68 were able to respond at roll call the following morning.

The quoted passages from David Jones and, a couple of paragraphs later, Ernst Junger, are on pp. 279 and 192 of *Rites of Spring*.

The A.J.P. Taylor quote (also cited in *Soldier for his times*) is from *The First World War: An Illustrated History*, 1963, p. 140.

The Eksteins quote about the "I" is on p. 279 of *Rites of Spring*.

The source of the phrase "permanent reverberations" is Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Fussell writes:

Today the Somme is a peaceful but sullen place, unforgetting and unforgiving. . . . To wander now over the fields destined to extrude their rusty metal fragments for centuries is to appreciate in the most intimate way the permanent reverberations of July, 1916. When the air is damp you can smell rusted iron everywhere, even though you see only wheat and barley.

(page 10:)

Sassoon was educated at Marlborough College and Cambridge. He did not complete his degree, leaving university for a literary life in London.

The source of the quote about Sassoon's early war poems is *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*.

Some of these biographical details are drawn from Britain's [History Learning Site](#).

Sassoon wrote extended memoirs as well as a trilogy of semi-autobiographical novels entitled *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*. The latter comprises *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *Sherston's Progress*.

See Jean Moorcroft Wilson's *Siegfried Sassoon, The Making of a War Poet, A Biography 1886-1918*, the first volume of her two-volume biography. See also Max Egremont's *Siegfried Sassoon: A Life*.

Wilson writes that Sassoon contrasted the individual Fusilier's "vast anonymity of courage and cheerfulness" with the attitude of profiteers and politicians who, he now believed, wanted the war to continue. Prolonging the war, he said, would enable those who benefited from it to carry out their scheme of "crushing Kaiserism and Prussianism." In his view, power and profit underscored it all.

Looking back in 1945, he said he no longer believed that the negotiated peace he'd wanted would have held. Nevertheless, as Wilson says, "his willingness to be sacrificed for his ideals, however impractical, remains as impressive today as it was then."

Sassoon expressed his disgust with the safe and complacent public in "Blighters":

*The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!
I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.*

(page 11:)

Wilson quotes from Sassoon's autobiography: "It was for the fighting men that my appeal was made, for those whose loyalty and unthinkingness would have been betrayed whatever acquisitions the Peace might bring to the British Empire." (Source: p. 376 in the first volume of Wilson's *Siegfried Sassoon*.)

Wilson's statement that Sassoon could be guilt-free only when risking his own life is on p. 428 of the same volume, as is her remark that he feared his fellow officers' reaction when he returned to the regiment. "He did not anticipate rejection – they were too kind and genuine for that – but he did fear their puzzled misunderstanding of his apparent volte-face. How could he possibly explain to those trained largely to repress their emotions that it was love of his men which had driven him back?"

Robert Graves wrote to Sassoon in early 1918: "My nerves have been bad recently, and attacks of the horrors . . . But you have them worse than me." (Source: note, p. 574, in Wilson.)

(page 12:)

The Sassoon and Owen quotes are from the former's diary, cited on pp. 427-28 in Wilson, and the latter's "Apologia pro Poemate Meo."

See *Rites of Spring*, pp. 453-54: "The emphasis on duty has been badly understated in the subsequent literature on the war, which has been dominated by the 'disenchantment' school of thought." Also, on p. 244: "The literature on the war is lacking in balance. It concentrates for the most part on the negative repercussions of the war, not on the positive instincts that fired it for over four years."

These miscellaneous quotes are from *Rites of Spring*, pp. 232, 237, 243, 244, and 453-54.

Eksteins writes that by 1917, "duty and devoir began gradually to disappear from the active vocabulary of front soldiers. Many more of these men were now conscripts. In Britain compulsory service had been introduced in January 1916." (*Rites of Spring*, p. 240.) Nevertheless, though the war dragged on with no end in sight, there was still "the soldiers' willingness, despite fatigue and despondency, to 'carry on,' to 'stick it to the end.'" (*Rites of Spring*, p. 241.) There was less talk about duty, but no less dutiful action.

Eksteins notes that Haig distrusted the British conscripts: he felt they couldn't have "the spirit of devotion and duty of earlier troops." "What is striking," Eksteins says, "is how loyally the soldiers, old and new, performed, against all expectations of the high command." (*Rites of Spring*, p. 241.)

About the soldiers' morale, Eksteins writes that "Only in Russia did the front collapse. . . . Elsewhere, the Russian example did spark murmurs of sympathy in the second half of 1917, but on the whole morale held." (*Rites of Spring*, p. 233.) Revolutionary change was on the way. Outside Russia, however, it came in the form of radical cultural change.

(page 13:)

The Owen quote is from "Apologia pro Poemate Meo." The Blunden quote is from "The Watchers," one of the poems he appended to his memoir *Undertones of War*, published in 1928.

The epigraph to this section on service and duty is from a *New York Times* article entitled "We May Be Born With an Urge to Help."

In practice, of course, service and duty (or devotion and obligation) are integrated when we wholeheartedly embrace a duty to serve someone or something. Sometimes, too, the terms are found together, interchangeably or at least linked. Thus a journalist's *service* to the truth or public interest may imply a *duty* to check sources and verify facts. (See [Katharine Viner](#).)

In a July 15, 2014 *Globe and Mail* article on the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the writer states: "At home and abroad, the Regiment provides each wounded or injured serving soldier, veteran, widow or family member a duty of care. A framework of support has been developed to meet both the needs of its serving members and retired members." Duty of care seems to marry the concepts of debt and help, or duty and service.

(page 14:)

Terry O'Reilly, host of CBC Radio's "Under the Influence," dedicated a full episode to "Tales of Customer Service" in 2013. Recounting stories of companies that go out of their way to serve customers – and staff

who go beyond the call of duty *with their employers' blessing* – O'Reilly depicts a startling warmth in the commercial sector. As rare as it is, he says, it always works in the company's favour.

David Foster Wallace's article was published in *Harper's* magazine as "Shipping Out." Renamed, it was the title essay of his *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, 1997.

Service is not without risk. In serving others – in caring for them or looking after their interests – there's the danger of developing an unhealthy sense of personal virtue and self-importance, of using service to meet one's own emotional needs.

And not everyone or everything *should* be served. Dickens's smarmy, cold-blooded Mr. Casby, a slumlord in *Little Dorrit's* nineteenth-century London, employs Mr. Pancks to collect rent from his impoverished tenants. "Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze," Casby commands Pancks – "you are made to do your duty" – and for a while Pancks does. So while young, selfless Amy Dorrit exemplifies "noble service," Pancks stands for those who serve unworthy and ignoble masters.

Meanwhile, service and duty are routinely sentimentalized by public figures and corporate interests. There's nothing like a tale of selfless service or duty bravely (and modestly) done to win our hearts, pump up partisan sympathies, and sell us something.

(pages 15-16:)

The BBC show was first broadcast on November 13, 2003. See: [BBC broadcast](#).

The source of two of the quotes from this program ("the station, office, or position" and "foundational duty ethics") is Angie Hobbs, one of Melvyn Bragg's radio guests. All excerpts from the BBC broadcast are from my partial transcript, except the quote about "terrible things," which was drawn from the show's written introduction.

Ram Dass, the American spiritual teacher, says about right action that it is "doing one's dharma as impeccably as you can, because that is your duty, role . . . the part you play, an offering." In this case, dharma simply means the appropriate thing to do, the right thing.

On the subject of service, see Ram Dass's *How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service* (written with Paul Gorman) and *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service* (written with Mirabai Bush).

Robert Coles, child psychiatrist and social critic, also writes at length about voluntary service in *The Call of Service* (1993), a work that explores, in his words, “the ‘service’ we offer to others, and, not incidentally, to ourselves.”

For more on Ram Dass, dharma, karma yoga, and *seva* (Sanskrit for selfless service), see [Ram Dass](#). About the origins of the word *service* and words related to it, see [Online Etymology](#).

The passage about duty, *devoir*, and *Pflicht* is from Eksteins’s “When Death Was Young.”

The quotes about social expectations and Herbert Read are from *Rites of Spring*, p. 244.

See separate articles on Percy Molson, Talbot Papineau, and Walter Allward, also on this site.

The source for the Vimy Monument as the “primary altar to the dead of the war” is Jonathan Vance’s *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, 1997, p. 70. Jane Urquhart says of Allward’s monument that it was meant to be “a memorial to grief, on the one hand, and a prayer for peace, on the other.” (*The Stone Carvers*, p. 377.)

Allward’s remark about the dead and our obligation to them – “never to forget their sacrifice and to live by the values for which they died” – is on p. 29 of Jacqueline Hucker and Julian Smith’s *Vimy: Canada’s Memorial to a Generation*, 2012.

See *Soldier for his times*, especially pp. 26-28, with respect to soldiers’ solidarity and frontline service.

While still at the front, Brown wrote about duty in relation to the post-war future. One of Canada’s duties, he said, was to do whatever it could for wounded servicemen and their families, not only while the war was on but indefinitely.

The quote about men standing by their country is also in *Soldier*, p. 28. Its source is Denis Winter’s *Death’s Men: Soldiers of the Great War*, 1978, p. 234.

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About sociality, see Nicholas Wade, *The New York Times*, December 1, 2009.

On the BBC program cited above, Hobbs says that duty can give us “clarity and focus,” and it is she who notes its potential to bind a nation together and sustain us individually or collectively. It can also, as the program’s introduction points out, dupe us into doing terrible things. Susceptible to abuse and distortion, as well as the expression of courage and discipline, the principle of duty lends itself equally to actions good and bad. From warfare to so-called honour killings, it can be a tool of unthinking and unfeeling compliance, and if it draws on unmerited respect for authority and tradition, its consequences can be vile.

The source of the quote that includes “Nothing can justify war” is a letter from Rosenberg to Edward Marsh (December 1915), published in *The Collected Works*. About the portion of Rosenberg’s weekly pay meant for his mother, see the same letter, as well as the later letter to Sydney Schiff, also on p. 227 of *The Collected Works*. The quote about “the immorality of joining with no patriotic convictions” is from a letter to Schiff, October 1915, written before enlistment. And the passage in which Rosenberg writes that his experience at the front “will all refine itself into poetry later on” is from a letter to Laurence Binyon, autumn 1916.

In a 1998 article entitled “The Grave of Poet Isaac Rosenberg,” Trevor Tasker quotes Joseph Cohen, author of *Journey to the Trenches: The Life of Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918*: “Ironically Rosenberg sketched very little of the war he saw and experienced; most of the sketches were portraits of his comrades, which he gave away for them to send home.”

(pages 18-19:)

Paul Fussell considered “Break of Day in the Trenches” the greatest poem of the war. (Source: *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 250.)

In his last letter, addressed to Edward Marsh and postmarked the day after his death, Rosenberg enclosed his final poem, “Through these Pale Cold Days.” The letter begins:

I think I wrote you I was about to go up the line again after our little rest. We are now in the trenches again and though I feel very sleepy, I just have a chance to answer your letter so I will while I may. It’s really my being lucky enough to bag an inch of candle that incites me to this pitch of punctual epistolary. . . . We are very busy just now and poetry is right out of our scheme.

It ends:

I've seen no poetry for ages now so you mustn't be too critical – My vocabulary small enough before is impoverished and bare.

Rosenberg's gravestone is in a cemetery near Arras in France. It records his name, rank, serial number, regiment (The King's Own Royal Lancasters), date of death, and age at death (27). There's a Star of David in place of the usual cross, and beneath that the words Artist & Poet.

See *Death So Noble*, especially pp. 49-51 and 257-67 about the myth of victory. (The extended quote is from pp. 261-62.) See also pp. 56-70 about the post-war pilgrimage to the Canadian National Vimy Memorial and the religious aspects of the battlefield and its relics. In his research, Vance uncovered an enormous amount of romantic, sentimental, and patriotic writing about the Great War written by Canadian men and women between the wars.

All quotes in the final paragraphs of this article are from *Death So Noble*.

Vance quotes Sir Arthur Currie, former commander of the Canadian army: "Who can forget the example of untarnished honour and flaming valour which shone amid the horror and the darkness of strife? Who can forget the deeds of kindness and self-sacrifice which proved that the soul of man still held the divine spark?"

It's high diction, of course, but heartfelt and probably healing.