Alicante Journal of English Studies 31 (2018): 5-12

Introduction:
Reading the First World War 100 Years after

Sara Prieto
Universidad de Alicante
sara.prieto@ua.es

Nick Milne
Carleton's School of Public Policy & Administration
nickmilnewalasek@cmail.carleton.ca

> 'For nearly a decade I have wanted, with a growing sense of urgency, to write something which would show what the whole War and post-war period—roughly, from years leading up to 1914 until 1925—has meant to the men and women of my generation. [...] I wanted to give too, if I could, an impression of the changes which that period brought about in the minds and lives of very different group of individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from which my own family comes'
>
> Vera Brittain, 'Preface' to *Testament of Youth*

Just like Vera Brittain did in 1933, but for more than a hundred years now, writers, historians, and scholars have attempted to "show what the whole War and post-war period" meant for a generation of men and women who had to endure one of the most tragic events of the 20th century and the radical changes that the war brought about. Brittain spent more than ten years shaping her acclaimed war memoir *Testament of Youth*, in an attempt to give voice to her generation; likewise, criticism around the First World War has, ever since the Armistice, revisited this massacre in an attempt to give voice to the different histories—and stories—of the war that have allowed us to complete the cultural and literary canvas of the Great War.[1]

Our reading and understanding of the First World War has changed throughout the decades. Traditional criticism favoured the view that combat experience was the only and legitimate approach to write and portray this war. This view has been mostly influenced in the English-speaking world by Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) and Samuel Hynes's *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (1990). The latter coined the trope of 'the myth of the War' and discussed the impact that this myth has had on English culture:

This document is under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0)

> A generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (1992: x)

Fussell's and Hynes's notions around the soldier's traumatic experience in the trenches were central to criticism on the literatures of the First World War in English up to the 1980s, when feminist, cultural, and historiographic studies gradually claimed for a broader approach towards our reading of the conflict. One of the most influential studies in the current cultural understanding of the First World War is Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1994), which reevaluates our mechanisms of commemoration and remembrance around the war. Among the early feminist revisions of war literature it is also worth mentioning Catherine Reilly's *Scars upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (1981); Sharon Ouditt's, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (1994); Trudi Tate's *Women, Men, and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories* (1995), Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman, and Judith Hattaway's *Women's Writings on the First World War* (1999), or Margaret Higonnet's *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars, Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (1999) and *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War* (2001). All these studies called for alternative readings of the war that moved away from combat experience.

Consequently, new parameters of analysis and interpretation that moved away from the Western Front and from the so-called soldier-poets have emerged in the last decades. These claim for the inclusion of civilians' experiences, women's and children's voices, colonial and pacifist readings of the Great War, and other forms of representing the war in popular culture, cinema or drama studies. Such is the case of Michael Paris's *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present* (1999), Patrick J. Quinn and Steven Trout's *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory* (2001), Gordon Williams's *British Theatre in the Great War: A Revaluation* (2003), Svetlana Paris and Sarah Wallis's *Intimate Voices from the First World War* (2003), Mark Bryant's *World War I in Cartoons* (2004) and Santanu Das's influential *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (2011). The incorporation of these voices to the debate has enabled more vivid and dynamic methods to look at the war, thus enriching a fascinating field that still has many areas awaiting exploration.

The last four years, coinciding with the 100 Anniversary of the war, have richly contributed to new interpretative pathways on the war.[2] Only in 2018, the publication of several co-edited volumes such as Santanu Das and Kate McLoughlin's *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity*, Anna Branach-Kallas and Nelly Strehlau's *Re-Imagining the First World War: New Perspectives in Anglophone Literature and Culture,* Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer's *The Remembered Dead, Poetry, Memory and the First World War* (2018), or the special issues of the *Women's History Review, Representing, Remembering and Rewriting Women's Histories of the First World War*, or other journals such as *Anglica* or *Anuario IEHS*[3] gives evidence of the interest that this

field still arouses. Books on recovered voices have also been published, such as Mary Thorp's diary, published by Oxford University Press in *An English Governess in the Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary of Mary Thorp* (2018); and new readings that revisit the experience of war in different media, such as Chris Kempshall's *The First World War in Computer Games* (2015), have opened the field to a more comprehensive understanding of the event today.

This special issue, *Reading First World War Literature 100 Years After*, contributes to these new approaches. It scrutinizes the war from different angles and in a transcultural perspective within the English-speaking world, without leaving aside comparative approaches that give evidence of the international cultural impact of the conflict. The volume contributes to existing debates on the literature of the First World War; at the same time, it incorporates new interpretations on how we can read the war in 2018. The eleven articles that constitute the volume shed more light on scholarship of the First World War and put together responses to the conflict that go beyond the canonical and Western-centric perspective of the war. While there are not, unfortunately, any essays addressing women's views about the war,[4] there are, nevertheless, pieces that look at juvenile press, at the war in the colonies, as well as comparative approaches between the literatures written in English and those from other countries such as Turkey or France. As editors, we have attempted to put together a wide array of essays that cover more traditional forms of writing such as poetry, fiction, and drama, as well as approaches to the war that consider the potential uses of the digital humanities or video games in the critical examination of the First World War.

The first six essays in this issue deal with texts from the war period and its aftermath. They look into the responses to the war created by those who experienced the war and its most immediate consequences. The volume opens with Fraser Mann's discussion of imagined space and material place in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). In spite of discussing one of the most canonical American authors from the First World War, Mann's postmodern analysis of the tensions between space and place through the lenses of Michel Foucault's 'heterotopia' (1986) allows for a novel reading of these texts, and their performative and ritualistic experience. Hemingway's spaces are understood both as a representation of the traumatic and violent experience of the European war, and as an opportunity to recalibrate the meaning of America and American identity and aestheticism.

One of the elements that contributed to shaping national identities during the First World War was the different propaganda campaigns the warring nations designed to promote the war. Our understanding of propaganda today differs from the way it was conceived and understood during the Great War. In "'Seducers of the People': Mapping the linguistic shift", Fiona Houston argues that the term has undergone a process of change, and traces the different interpretations and uses of the term from the Edwardian period to the late 20th century. Houston argues that the First World War was "a pivotal moment in history where the understanding of propaganda began to alter", but, at the same time, warns about modern-day tendencies to apply current interpretations of the term to evaluate the role that propaganda played in the past.

The press was one of the key propagandists during the war. In "'Ireland first': The Great War in the Irish Juvenile Press", Elena Ogliari examines the response of the Irish

separatist press, with special attention to the representation of the war in juvenile periodicals, an understudied branch of the Irish press in relation to the First World War. Ogliari explores how the press became a powerful tool to advance the nationalist agenda and how it also contributed to portraying an essentially Irish view of the war that would later shape the Irish experience—and modes of remembrance—of the war. Also looking at Irish representations of the war, Jonathan Patterson compares Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1929) to British dramatist R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928). Both plays were written and performed ten years after the Armistice, coinciding with the literary boom of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In his essay, Patterson argues that both plays consciously build a description of trench space that works as a traumatic space for soldiers, turning the trench into an "experiential ruin". Trench space helps Sherriff and O'Casey to rebuild trench experience not only in physical terms but also in psychological ones, thus reconstructing the relationships between space—in this case trench space—and trauma.

In "'Sons of Two Empires': The Idea of Nationhood in Anzac and Turkish Poems of the Gallipoli Campaign", Berkan Ulu and Burcin Cakir examine the poetic responses to the Gallipoli Campaign (1915), comparing English and Turkish poems by combatants and non-combatants that have been overviewed by traditional criticism. Gallipoli is considered the first campaign in which the Australian and New Zealander forces differentiated themselves from the British Empire. Ulu and Cakir explore how nationality and ideology shaped the aesthetic construction of the campaign and to what extent the sense of belonging to the empire is portrayed or contested in the poems written in English. Julia Ribeiro also studies the relationships between poetry and history in "'Knowing you will understand': The usage of poetry as a historical source about the experience of the First World War" but from a different angle. In her comparative study of French and British poetry, Ribeiro calls for the need of using First World War poetry as a source in our understanding of the event. She attempts to establish a valid theoretical framework to use poetry as a source in our historical, anthropological, literary, or linguistic analyses. In the second part of her essay, Ribeiro presents two digital humanities projects to show how this theoretical framework can be put to use to better establish a relation between history and poetry as valid resources for cultural historians.

In its combination of the use of sources from the war period and the use of contemporary resources such as digital humanities, Ribeiro's essay represents a bridge in this issue, as it links those essays that deal with the literature written between the 1910s and the 1930s and more contemporary publications about the war. In "'Prefer not, eh?': Re-Scribing the Lives of the Great War Poets in Contemporary British Historical Fiction", Cristina Pividori discusses the novels of three contemporary British authors, Jill Dawson's *The Great Lover* (2009), Geoff Akers's *Beating for the Light: The Story of Isaac Rosenberg* (2006) and Robert Edric's *In Zodiac Light* (2008) in order to study the narrative memory of the war in these three novels. Through Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction", Pividori examines how the three novels borrow from the writings and lives of three war authors, Rupert Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney, and interrogates about the choices that Dawson, Akers and Edric made in their reconstruction—or omission—of war events and the implications these entail.

One of the most widely explored aspects of the First World War is the notion of trauma and the psychological impact of trench experience on the soldiers.[4] In "Portraits of Veterans Traumatic Re-enactments: Portraits of Veterans in Contemporary British and Canadian First World War Fiction", Anna Branach-Kallas examines and compares how veterans' trauma is depicted in a series of British and Canadian contemporary novels. Branach-Kallas claims that in spite of national differences, the discourses of trauma and futility are a useful tool to denounce and critique the catastrophic social consequences of the war. Likewise, these British and Canadian novels, published in the 21st century, serve as a tool to deal with contemporary anxieties, such as violations of human rights or the abuses of institutions of power.

Traumatic trench experience is not, however, the only combat experience portrayed in the literatures of the First World War. There is one aspect of the war that is traditionally associated with a more positive and even idealistic view of the conflict. In "A Different Perspective (?): Air Warfare in Derek Robinson's Post-Memory Aviation Fiction", Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż explores the war in the air in Derek Robinson's *War Story* (1987) to question the traditional view of air narratives from the First World War as representatives of chivalric tales in the modern world. Sokołowska-Paryż argues that Robinson's post-memory representation of air warfare, set in 1916 in the Battle of the Somme, may have been influenced by Robinson's own experience as a pilot in the Royal Army Forces after the Second World War, and may, therefore, necessarily move away from the representation of air warfare as a romantic experience. Sokołowska-Paryż defends that Robinson removes his text from this tradition and portrays the war in a Remarquian fashion in which air narratives are not presented as heroic experiences of war, but as extended versions of trench narratives.

The last three pieces of this volume provide a different angle to our reading of the war. They must be taken as a whole, as a representation of the ongoing discussion around the potential use of video games in our understanding of the history of the First World War and the narratological discourses around this event. In "Great War Games: Notes on Collective Memory, the Adynaton, and Posthumanism", Iro Filippaki examines how *Valiant Hearts* and *Super Trench Attacks* (2014) memorialize the First World War through the trope of the adynaton. War gaming may trigger a more radical affective response than traditional monuments of unknown soldiers, and may, therefore, introduce the collective memory to the age of posthumanism. In "Race, *Battlefield 1* and the White Mythic Space of the First World War", Stefan Aguirre Quiroga argues that there has traditionally been a predominance of white men soldiers in discourses and representations of combat experience. His essay considers the white mythic space of the First World War through the analysis of *Battlefield 1* (2016), and looks at the gamers' negative attitudes towards the inclusion of soldiers of colour in the game. Aguirre Quiroga explores the reasons for this rejection to conclude that it is a continuation of a historic denial of agency for soldiers of colour in our collective memory of the First World War. In the latter part of this volume, Filippaki and Quiroga converse about the potentiality of video games as research tools to study the historical and narratological construction of the Great War today.

Reading the First World War in 2018 is a complex and challenging endeavour. Our interpretation of the war is no longer shaped by a unique collective memory, but by the

multiple voices and methodological approaches applied in our understanding and critical interpretation of the cataclysm. The essays gathered in this special issue contribute to the ongoing debate around literary and cultural responses to the First World War. The editors of this special volume would like to take this opportunity to commend all the authors in this volume for their valuable contributions to enrich the field. They would like to express, as well, their gratitude to all the reviewers who generously devoted their time to the invaluable chore of peer review.

Notes

1. The image of the First World War as a literary canvas appears in the 1915 war memoir of the American journalist Mary Roberts Rinehart: "it will take a hundred years to paint this war on one canvas. A thousand observers, ten thousand, must record what they have seen" (Rinehart, 1915: 11; Prieto, 2018: 189).

2. Some of the studies that have emerged in the last four years reconsidering our understanding and reading of the representation of the First World War are Scott Emmert and Steven Trout's *World War I in American Fiction: An Anthology of Short Stories* (2014), Andrew Frayn's *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War Prose, 1914–30* (2014), Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż's *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film* (2014), Hazel Hutchinson's *The War That Used Up Words: American Writers and the First World War* (2015), George M. Johnson's *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond: Grappling with Ghosts* (2015), Lissa Paul, Rosemary R. Johnston, Emma Short's *Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War* (2015), Andrew Griffiths, Sara Prieto and Soenke Zehle's *Literary Journalism and World War I: Marginal Voices* (2016), Vincent Trott's *Publishers, Readers and the Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918* (2017), Ann-Marie Einhaus, Katherine Isobel Baxter *The Edinburgh Companion to the First World War and the Arts* (2017), or Sara Prieto's *Reporting the First World War in the Liminal Zone: British and American Eyewitness Accounts from the Western Front* (2018).

3. See *Anglica*, 27.3 (2018), edited by Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż and *Anuario IEHS*, 33 (2018), edited by Emiliano Gastón Sánchez.

4. One proposal was received on Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, but reviewers found it unfitting for publication.

5. For further discussion on trauma in the First World War see Peter Leese's *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (2002), Ross Wilson's "It Still Goes On: Trauma and the Memory of the First World War" (2014) or Jonathan Hart's *The Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature* (2015).

References

Andrews, Maggie, Alison Fell, Lucy Noakes and Jane Purvis, eds. (2018): Special Issue: *Representing, Remembering and Rewriting Women's Histories of the First World War*. *Women's History Review*, 27.4,

Brittain, Vera (1994): *Testament of Youth*. Mark Bostridge, ed. Reissue edition. New York: Penguin Classics.

Bryant, Mark (2004): *World War I in Cartoons*. London: Grub Street Publishing.

Cardinal, Agnes, Dorothy Goldman, and Judith Hattaway (1999): *Women's Writings on the First World War*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Das, Santanu (2011): *Race, Empire and First World War Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Das, Santanu, and Kate McLoughlin (2018): *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Einhaus, Anne Marie and Katherine Isobel Baxter, eds. (2017): *The Edinburgh Companion to the First World War and the Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Emmert, Scott, and Steven Trout, eds. (2014): *World War I in American Fiction: An Anthology of Short Stories*. Kent: Kent State University Press.

Frayn, Andrew (2014): *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War Prose, 1914–30.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Fussell, Paul (1975): *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Griffiths, Andrew, Sara Prieto, and Soenke Zehle (2016): *Literary Journalism and World War I: Marginal Voices*. Nancy: Éditions Universitaires de Lorraine.

Gastón Sánchez, Emiliano, ed. (2018): Dossier*: "El impacto cultural de la Gran Guerra". Anuario IEHS*, 33.

Hart, Jonathan (2015): *The Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Higonnet, Margaret R. (1987): *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, edited by Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Higonnet, Margaret R. (1999): *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*. Harmondsworth: Plume.

Higonnet, Margaret R., ed. (2001): *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War*. Boston: Northeastern.

Hutchison, Hazel (2015): *The War That Used Up Words. American Writers and the First World War.* New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Hynes, Samuel (1992): *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Pimlico.

Kempshall, Christ (2015): *The First World War in Computer Games*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Johnson, George M. (2015): *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond: Grappling with Ghosts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Leese, Peter (2002): *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Löschnigg, Martin and Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż (2014): *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

Ouditt, Sharon (1994): *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*. London; New York: Routledge.

Palmer, Andrew, and Sally Minogu (2018): *The Remembered Dead, Poetry, Memory and the First World War*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Paris, Michael (1999): *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Paris, Svetlana and Sarah Wallis (2003): *Intimate voices from the First World War*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Paul, Lissa, Rosemary R. Johnston and Emma Short (2015): *Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War*. London: Routledge.

Prieto, Sara (2018): *Reporting the First World War in the Liminal Zone: British and American Eyewitness Accounts from the Western Front*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Quinn, Patrick J., and Steven Trout, eds. (2001): *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Reilly, Catherine, ed. (1981): *Scars upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*. London: Virago.
Rinehart, Mary R. (1915): *Kings, Queens and Pawns*. New York: George Doran Company.
Sokołowska-Paryż, Marzena, ed. (2018): Special Issue: *The Great War*, 27.3. *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies.*
Tate, Trudi, ed. (1995): *Women, Men, and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories*. New York: Manchester University Press.
Thorp, Mary (2018): *An English Governess in the Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary of Mary Thorp.* S. de Schaepdrijver and T.M. Proctor, eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Trott, Vincent (2017): *Publishers, Readers and the Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918*. London: Bloomsbury
Williams, Gordon (2003): *British Theatre in the Great War: a Revaluation*. London: Continuum.
Wilson, Ross (2014): "It Still Goes On: Trauma and the Memory of the First World War". In M. Löschnigg and M. Sokołowska-Paryż, eds., *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 43-58.
Winter, Jay (1994): *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural* History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.