

Mobilizing Charity - Voluntary Action in the First World War

1 – Financial Capital/Social Capital

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1 – Financial Capital/Social Capital

Introduction

In the words of a famous play and film ‘We’ve got a few songs, well at least poems, for you, a few jokes and a few battles.’ But, being an academic gathering, there are, sadly, some statistics too.

Let’s start off with a poem.

“Breakfast”

*We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
When Jimmy Stainthorp played full-back instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.*

While I’m talking just ask yourself when during the First World War you think that might have been written and by whom.

Why did the allies win the First World War and why were the British and Empire armies the ones that were most successful in this victory?

There is no simple answer but a number of factors might be suggested:

- Was it the superior morale and military strategy of our armies? I think a good case can be made.

- Was it the superior economic resources of the allies? This was certainly an important factor.
- Was it the weaknesses of Germany's political system exacerbated by their disastrous pursuit of a 'command economy'? The strength of Britain and France's democratic system is often overlooked.
- Or was it that the German 'home front' lost faith in the war whereas, in Britain, support remained strong and determined if not necessarily enthusiastic?

This last point is often made in relation to the collapse of Germany but rarely examined from the British point of view. Was it simply that the Germans were starving and we were not? This is too simplistic.

One critical element was that Britain's forces were backed by another army of volunteers whose support never wavered and which was keenly appreciated by our sailors and soldiers. These were the hundreds of thousands of voluntary and charitable workers who provided food and drink often within range of the enemy guns, who knitted 'comforts', collected funds, visited the wounded, acted as part-time police, wrote letters to prisoners, sold flags, organised committees and a thousand-and-one other activities.

There is a, quite possibly apocryphal, story of how an exiled Frenchman commented to his host that if the French aristocracy had played cricket with the peasants the Revolution would never have happened.

It may be that the allies would still have won the Great War but if aristocratic ladies and working class women hadn't knitted socks victory might have been even more difficult to achieve.

This talk therefore has a quite simple proposition:

- That voluntary action on the home front during the Great War provided the social capital that helped Britain's victory.

For that proposition to be proved I think it is necessary to demonstrate two things:

- Firstly that the financial capital was sufficient to 'make a real difference' – that the sums raised and numbers of people who took part was significant enough.
- Secondly that the response to voluntary action: by refugees; by soldiers' dependents and most especially by the troops themselves was overwhelmingly positive rather than negative.

I hope you will find that some of what I have to say may alter your preconceived ideas about the war or, at least, stimulate your thinking about perhaps the most significant event in modern British history.

Financial Capital - the extent of war-time charitable giving and who gave it

How much?

Just how many organizations were there? If we take 1920 as a suitable, though somewhat arbitrary, cut-off date, the total number of war charities was 17,899:

Table 1 - Number of registered charities 1920

Number of Charities	
Registered 1916-1920	11,407
Exempted from Registration	6,492
Refused Registration	42

This is a huge number, especially when compared with the number of charities operating before the war 36,865 in 1913 – an increase of nearly 50%.

The amounts they is problematic as no official figures were ever compiled.

The single largest charity operating between 1914 and 1918 was, not surprisingly, the British Red Cross Society. Their total wartime income was an enormous £22 million of which the majority came via *The Times* appeal.

By April 1915 the National Relief Fund (NRF) had realised the remarkable sum of £5 million and the net cost of the YMCA's work during the First World War was eventually estimated at a staggering £8 million.

The first estimate of an overall figure can be made from sums given by contemporary commentators. The first national estimate would seem to have been calculated by the journalist and social commentator W.E.Dowding who said that in the opening ten months of the war some £25 million, in money or in kind, had been donated. A similar figure to

Dowding's (minus the 'in kind') was given in a parliamentary debate on 8th December, 1915 by the Labour MP Will Anderson. Around the same date another semi-official, Home Office, estimate was that £27 million had been raised and in February 1916 the *Daily Chronicle* reported:

It is estimated in the past 18 months £29 million has been subscribed by the British people to benevolent objects at home and abroad connected with the war.

The next question is, if £20-£27 million had been raised by the end of November 1915 how much had been raised by the end of the war?

It has been argued by some that 'donor fatigue' set in or that the sums raised by some charities remained steady throughout the war, meaning that when inflation is taken into account they fell in real terms. My own researches have however not found evidence to back up this assertion.

One indicator is the sums raised by street collections in London later in the war and the year after victory. These show a rise that more than compensated for inflation:

Table 2 - Amounts raised from London street collections

Amounts Raised from London Street Collections		
Year	Number of Collections	Amount Raised (£)
1916-17	263	268,736
1918	261	391,864
1919	287	416,640

An even more reliable indicator that 'donor fatigue' may not have occurred is the income of the largest of all wartime fund raising efforts, *The Times* Fund, started on 1st September 1914:

Table 3 – Income for *The Times* Fund

<i>Income per Year to The Times Fund (adjusted for inflation)</i>	
Sept 1914 – Aug 1915	£1,655,807
Sept 1915 – Aug 1916	£2,244,676
Sept 1916 – Aug 1917	£2,058,863
Sept 1917 – Aug 1918	£2,555,273
Sept 1918 – Aug 1919	£2,676,493

The remarkable thing about these is that, adjusted for inflation, the income remained so remarkably constant throughout the war.

Assuming this ‘steady state’ theory, and I don’t believe it can be hugely wrong, then the total value of funds raised for war-time charities based on Dowding’s and other contemporary estimates was not less than £75 million.

Another method of calculating a national figure from Dowding’s is to use those statistics that do exist. Though many local histories of the Great War were produced, only a handful of them attempted a comprehensive listing of amounts raised. These are five of those who did, plus Glasgow, together with a calculation of amounts raised per head of population:

Table 4 - Amounts raised in local communities

<i>Amounts Raised in Local Communities</i>			
Town	Amount Raised (£)	Population (1911)	Amount Raised per head (£)
Bradford	470,186	288,458	1.63
Bristol	586,026	357,144	1.64
Crieff (Scotland)	17,735	5,500	3.22
Glasgow	3,500,000	784,000	4.46
Hartlepool	93,969	63,923	1.47
Todmorden	38,377	25,404	1.51

How reliable are these figures as being typical of the entire country? The first point is the consistency of the per-head totals with the exception of the two Scottish examples. Crieff is perhaps not surprising in that smaller communities might well have raised more per head than larger ones. But how can one explain the apparent anomaly of Glasgow? This is, perhaps, the most significant of all the statistics as it was the only place, as far as I have been able to ascertain, that collected comprehensive, systematic information on war time charitable giving. They were accurately audited at least until the end of 1915 and later presented before a government committee and in a detailed newspaper report at the end of the war.

It could perhaps be partly explained by the fact that Glaswegians contributed relatively little to national, London-based, UK appeals; for example, opposition to the NRF led to a Glasgow-based version being started. Or perhaps it reflected the city's historical generosity; it was, for example, the first city in the UK to utilise flag days and Dowding indicated that Glasgow newspaper funds were especially effective. However the likeliest explanation is that as some middle class incomes were squeezed and they were able to give proportionally less to charity that this loss was more than compensated for by a

corresponding rise in giving by the working class who saw a real increase in their incomes. If it be thought that the comparatively better off workers would not be likely to give to charity this is refuted both by evidence from the pre-war period and from modern research which shows that the poor are statistically more generous than the rich in their support for charitable causes.

If the median figure per head above (£2.32) were multiplied up over the entire country you get a total of £107 million, significantly above the first estimate of £75 million. If the overall average (£2.90) is used which, given the greater precision of the Glasgow figure may be more accurate, it would yield a national figure of £133 million. More research and more examples are needed to confirm the validity of these findings but they may be more accurate than those of Dowding and his contemporaries.

To these cash figures we might add the value of the goods donated or produced for troop comforts and hospitals and the contributions directly from officers for the comforts of their men. Here we have Mr D'Aeth's (of the Liverpool Council on Voluntary Aid) estimate that the figure was equivalent to £5 million in the first year of the war and the Glasgow figure was £240,000 after two years. Again, from my studies of a range of organisations, I would not consider these to be an over-estimate. If so this would add a further £20 to £30 million to the total figures.

Overall then the total fund raising effort for the war was, in my view, certainly not less than £100 million, was more likely to have reached £125 to £150 million and may have been greater than that.

In 1916 the total value of all charity investments was £34 million and annual charitable income was just £14 million. Therefore war causes more than doubled pre-war

charitable income. With regard to fund raising for domestic purposes the increase is even more dramatic, as 40% of pre-war charity income went to overseas missionary activity.

At the 'median' modern value of the wartime pound (£45 in 1916) £100 million would be the equivalent of four-and-a-half billion today, or rather more than £1 billion a year. This is roughly equivalent to the total sum raised for 'good causes' by the UK National Lottery.

There is one further question we should ask before leaving this subject and that is what the impact was on existing charities and existing charitable giving? Was some of the income of war charities simply 'displaced' from existing causes?

There is evidence of a wartime effect on some charitable giving in the early war years. Between 1913 and 1916 both the number of endowed charities registered and the value of new endowments went down. However the figures from the Charity Commission for the entire war period demonstrate that there was certainly no obvious adverse effect on endowed charities, even taking wartime inflation into account.

Figures for London charities for the war period are also available from two different sources and these specifically exclude both war-related charities and those whose work shifted to war-time causes.

The number of charities surveyed by Howe went down from 897 in 1912-13 to 885 in 1917-8 (a decline of just 1.3%) but two of the years (1913-14 and 1917-18) actually show slight rises in numbers. Again the pre-war trend had already been downwards (from 933 in 1910-11 or a 4% drop by 1912-13). The income of these charities shows the following trend during the war years:

Table 5 - Income of London non-war-related charities 1912-1918

<i>Income of London Non-War-Related Charities 1912-1918</i>					
1912-13	1913-14	1914-15	1915-16	1916-17	1917-18
£8,088,778	£8,705,980	£8,443,131	£8,590,484	£8,335,620	£9,098,997

This actually shows an increase in income of over £1 million a year during the period.

These figures include, of course, investment income as well as donations and don't take into account inflation.

Those from the 'Annual Charities Register and Digest' are very similar but also include figures for direct charitable contributions and point to immediate post-war trends:

Table 6 - Charitable contributions to and overall income of Metropolitan charities

<i>Charitable contributions to and overall income of Metropolitan Charities</i>		
Year	Charitable contributions (£)	Total income (£)
1912	3,800,153	8,672,980
1913	3,534,105	8,307,573
1914	3,523,405	8,920,711
1915	3,318,025	7,660,449
1916	3,800,919	8,437,467
1917	3,805,307	8,195,427
1918	4,618,387	9,884,415
1919	5,348,742	10,880,441
1920	5,434,235	13,606,666

What we can reasonably conclude is that the dramatic increase in charitable effort and giving to war-related causes certainly had no catastrophic effect on existing charities.

Indeed the significant post war increase in charitable income tentatively suggests that

the stimulus to charitable activity during the war may have continued into peacetime, with people now donating at a higher rate to existing charitable causes, at least while higher wages and full employment continued.

Overall, if you looked at the figures for the income of existing charities without knowing their historical setting, it would be difficult to realise that such a cataclysmic event as the First World War had even taken place.

How many?

The above evidence suggests that the value of wartime charitable activity was perhaps greater than has previously been realised. One might also ask just how many people were involved in this effort. Though not having a direct monetary value it was again highly significant. This is an even more elusive question as it requires a definition of what constituted a contribution and therefore what to 'count'.

If we try to confine the question just to those who regularly and consistently gave a 'significant' amount of their time to charitable work there is again some indirect evidence. Inevitably the fact that, by definition, these people had to have time to give meant that certain sectors of the population were over-represented: women more than men; older people more than younger; the better off rather than the working class – but not perhaps to the extent some have claimed as I will show.

Local histories again provide some help as they sometimes list the numbers of those engaged in wartime charitable work. In Bradford the numbers engaged in regular war charity work was put at 2,000 men and 5,000 women from an adult population (excluding those in the services) of about 100,000 giving estimates of 4% of men and 10% of women. This is a highly significant number when compared with the pre-war numbers

involved in charitable work. For example in 1911 the number of volunteers for the entire Guild of Help network, the largest social welfare organisation at the time, was 8,000 and they were considered to be “uniquely successful in enrolling citizens for charitable work”. Locally extrapolated figures might indicate that something like 400,000 men and 1.2 million women might have been regularly engaged in working for wartime charities. They can be partially substantiated by reference to the total number of people (mainly women) who applied for and received the official badge issued by the Director General of Voluntary Organisations. In his final report the DGVO gave the total number of badge holders as 400,000. To qualify for the badge a volunteer had to work on a regular basis for a period of at least three months for one of the charities registered with the DGVO. These numbered 2,983 or approximately one-sixth of the total number of wartime charities. If the badge holders also represented one-sixth of all regular charity workers then this would give an overall total of 2.4 million.

Either way the number of people regularly volunteering to help war time charities on a regular basis would certainly seem to run to perhaps one or two million; a figure that would compare favourably with the 2.6 million men who volunteered for the armed forces.

Who were they?

Who were these workers? Were they all middle-class? These next set of figures are based on an analysis of the committee members of war charities in three communities across England. Suburban Croydon, newly industrialised Coventry (with its concentration of cycle and aero engineering) and the West Yorkshire mill towns of Todmorden and Barnoldswick. The exempted charities examined in Todmorden are those smaller scale organisations usually based around a single work place.

Firstly I looked at the social class make-up of the committees.

Table 7 - Social class of office holders of war charities

<i>Social Class of Office Holders (%)</i>						
	I	II	III (N)	III (M)	IV	V
Croydon (n = 135)	53	24	15	6	1	1
Coventry (n = 63)	10	25	13	43	10	0
West Yorkshire (registered) (n = 50)	22	12	18	42	6	0
West Yorkshire (exempted) (n = 79)	6	14	10	46	14	10

The class of office holders was then compared to the class make-up of the district to produce the following figures that indicate whether each class group was under or over-represented on the charity committees. Blue figures show an over-representation by that ratio, red figures an under-representation, an = shows an exact correlation and the blanks indicate where there were no representatives of that class on a committee.

Table 8 - Ratio of over/under representation of class groups on war charity committees

<i>Ratio of Over/Under Representation of Each Class</i>						
	I	II	III (N)	III (M)	IV	V
Croydon	+8.8	+2.4	- 1.5	- 4.3	- 5.0	- 30.0
Coventry	+ 5.0	+4.2	=	- 1.5	- 2.5	
West Yorkshire (registered)	+ 11.0	+ 2.4	+ 1.8	- 1.4	- 1.3	
West Yorkshire (exempted)	+ 3.0	+ 2.0	=	- 1.3	+ 1.75	- 1.3

These figures indicate that in every area class group I was, not surprisingly, significantly over-represented (charities today would show the same tendency) but that this was less marked in Coventry and, especially, with the exempted charities in Yorkshire. The over-representation of class group II was fairly even with the exception of Coventry which may have 'evened up' the relatively smaller proportion of Class I representatives on committees with members of that group. Skilled non-manual workers were the group whose proportion on committees most closely matched that in the general population. Manual workers of all kinds were underrepresented but this under-representation was significantly more marked in Croydon than in the more industrialised towns.

This analysis can be further explored by looking at the overall class composition of charity committees. How many were entirely composed of upper and middle-class members; how many of only working-class members and how many of members of both/all classes? These are shown in the following table:

Table 9 - Class composition of charity committees

Class Composition of Charity Committees				
	% with all members from Class I	% with all members from Classes I & II	% with no members from Classes I & II	% with at least one member from Classes I & II and one from Classes III to V
Croydon (n = 37)	38	22	3	38
Coventry (n = 17)	0	12	29	59
West Yorks (registered) (n = 12)	8	17	42	33
West Yorks (exempted) (n = 50)	2	10	76	12

These figures reinforce the findings from analysis of individual class above. In the south 60% or more of the charities operated without any committee representation from the working classes whereas fewer than 25% did so in the midlands and north. Equally, virtually no charities in the south were entirely run by working class members (the single exception was, unsurprisingly, the Croydon branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers). In Coventry the figures demonstrate the greatest social mix on committees with 59% having members of both upper/middle and working classes whereas in the smaller Yorkshire charities an overwhelming 76% of organisations operated with no input from upper or middle class representatives.

What these tables demonstrate is that there are clearly significant differences in the make up of charity committees in the southern, suburban locations from those in the midlands and the north. This can be partially explained by the class structure of the areas in question and, perhaps, by the differing views on class in these communities. Despite these factors it is clear that working class people were far more likely to be

involved in the organisation and running of wartime charities in the industrial midlands and north than in the suburban south.

More research needs to be carried out to confirm these findings and other areas need to be analysed but the above results may help to give further credibility to the argument that the working classes contributed a greater degree of support to wartime giving than perhaps previously considered and that this strengthened as the war went on, when the majority of the smaller exempted charities were formed.

Social Capital - the reaction to charity

How was the outpouring of charitable and voluntary effort seen by the fighting forces? Were soldiers resentful of this 'charity' seeing it as the reaction of an out-of-touch and over-patriotic civilian population? Did some react negatively because they believed that the state should be providing for all their needs? Or did the majority react favourably, gratefully receiving the gifts and assistance and generously thanking their givers? These questions are critical from the perspective of the 'social capital' thesis. To what extent was there a united response to 'charitable' works? If reaction was split, with a negative response by servicemen this would tend to undermine the view that voluntary action led to the accumulation of 'social capital' which, in turn, assisted Britain's war-winning effort.

Our view of the home front during the Second World War is probably of happy cockneys having a sing-song in a tube station during the blitz whereas that of the First is more likely to be of a bunch of hard-faced jingoists with absolutely no comprehension of what life in the trenches was really like. Both, I would suggest, are misleading. The former, shaped by *Dad's Army* and the songs and films of Gracie Fields, George Formby and Vera Lynn, is far rosier than the reality. The latter is too bleak. Where does it come from?

Its roots are in the writings of a small number of war poets and war writers who recorded their views in the later 1920s and '30s either as direct memoirs or, slightly adapted, into fictionalised form. Most prominent of all, and undoubtedly the most readable, talented and influential of the lot, were Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. Together with their two close comrades Edmund Blunden and Wilfred Owen, they are easily the most widely

read and studied writers of the Great War. Indeed today Owen, who was virtually unpublished during his lifetime and unknown until the 1960s, is the second most read author after Shakespeare in British schools.

However, I would say that the negative view doesn't really come from the writers themselves but from those who, from the 1960s onwards, have interpreted their works and, most prominently, by Paul Fussell and his followers. Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* was first published in 1975 and was quickly acclaimed as a 'classic', winning both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. It was named as one of the hundred best non-fiction books of the twentieth century by the Modern Library and was deemed worthy of a twenty-fifth anniversary edition by its publishers in 2000. Many people have looked to *The Great War and Modern Memory* as going beyond a limited analysis of a small group of writers and accepted it as "laying bare not just a fragment of the war but its essence." The book also seemed to provide the intellectual underpinning for more popular and didactic works such as the play and film *Oh What a Lovely War*.

Fussell comments on the home front that:

It was not just from their staffs that the troops felt estranged: it was from everyone back in England. That division was as severe and uncompromising as the others generating the adversary atmosphere. The visiting of violent and if possible painful death upon the complacent, patriotic, uncomprehending, fatuous civilians at home was a favourite fantasy indulged by the troops.

Today I am not going to look at Fussell's shaky grasp of political or military history but point out that Fussell's analysis of the literary sources he selects, where he ought to be

at his soundest, are just as flawed and that his view that soldiers resented and were alienated from the 'home front' is entirely mistaken.

Fussell is wrong on at least three counts:

- That the war writers were representative of soldiers' opinions as a whole
- That soldiers were alienated from civilians
- That the majority of writers were both anti-war and had a hatred for civilians

Firstly the supposedly 'anti-war' writers were a significant minority. Most were officers from more-or-less privileged backgrounds and many felt marginalised in other ways (Sassoon and Graves for their 'foreign' backgrounds, Sassoon, Graves and Owen for their sexuality for example). Interestingly the one really famous working class war poet, Isaac Rosenberg, said nothing critical about either civilians or generals in his poems. The majority of the British people, soldiers and, indeed, writers were instead loyally patriotic. At times they might have been more grimly determined than 'gung-ho', as Dominic Hibberd has pointed out:

The literature of 1914-18 cannot be understood without an awareness that most British people, soldiers as much as civilians, were convinced throughout the four years that Germany had to be driven out of Belgium and that military victory was therefore essential.

Even Sassoon and Owen were determined to 'see things through' and defeat Germany and were, along with Graves, highly ambiguous in their attitudes towards war. As Martin Stephen has said:

If the sentiments found in many collections [of poetry] are the whole and only truth about that war, it is difficult to explain why there was no mass desertion, no sustained and extensive mutiny amongst British troops.

Secondly Fussell, and many others, simply overstate the division between the troops and the home front in their understanding of the 'realities' of war, and the supposed 'alienation' of soldiers and veterans from civilians. Of course a civilian couldn't really know what it was like to stand in a muddy trench under heavy fire but equally they were not as cut off or 'hoodwinked' by propaganda as many people believe. There were many ways that the British public, if they wanted, could keep in touch with battlefield conditions, not least by reading Sassoon's poems. In fact it is difficult to think of any war in history before Vietnam where it was easier to know what was going on; and of all the theatres of war between 1914 and 1918 the Western Front was the one with which it was simplest to stay in touch. Consider this passage:

I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No Man's Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head ... We were all of us in a barn one night, and a shell came along. My pal sang out, *'Help me, old man; I've got no legs!'* and I had to answer, *'I can't, old man; I've got no hands!'*

These are not the diary, memoirs or fiction of a soldier but the thoughts of a 24-year-old woman writer, Rebecca West, that were published in March 1918.

The third count on which Fussell and his followers err is about the supposed outright hostility to civilians even in the works of the writers he selects. It is not even true of the prose works of Sassoon or the poetry or prose of Graves. Even Sassoon's letter of 'wilful defiance' was careful only to criticise profiteers, politicians and media magnates rather than the army, its commanders or the public and Sassoon came quite close to repudiating it. In a letter to E.M.Forster in June 1918 Sassoon stated how he could no longer support Bertrand Russell's pacifist ideas in the light of Germany's renewed militarism and, in *Siegfried's Journey*, he says:

I must add that in the light of subsequent events it is difficult to believe that a peace negotiated in 1917 would have been permanent. I share the general opinion that nothing on earth would have prevented a recurrence of Teutonic aggressiveness.

It is true that there is far more venom in Sassoon's poetry, where his ambivalent attitude to war is also significantly less apparent, but this throws up an important distinction. The poems are quite deliberately written for their shock effect, they are exaggerations of 'what happened', not factual descriptions, which is one reason they are expressed in poetry. Poets wouldn't have had any difficulty with the separation of 'poetic truth' from the facts or 'what really happened' and yet, so often, interpreters of their work continue to make this confusion.

Fussell and others are also guilty of mistaking the ironic humour of soldiers' songs and the *Wipers Times* for genuine hostility, an error which *Oh What a Lovely War* rather repeats in its misuse of extracts from the famous trench journal. It is interesting that when Gitz Rice's song *I Want to Go Home*, became highly popular with the troops a German newspaper report "came to the triumphant conclusion that the morale of the British Army was so low that the war was bound to end soon." Fussell and many of his followers also appear to have suffered the same 'humour by-pass'. The war poet Ivor Gurney's comments on the song are far more relevant "*I Want to Go Home* is a song our men sang when the last strafe was at its hottest – a very popular song about here; but not at all military... Not a brave song, but brave men sing it."

Far more representative than the war poets was the most famous British cartoon figure of the war, Bruce Bairnsfather's 'Old Bill'. As Trevor Wilson has said "he offers no

glorification of war. He is sardonic, scornful of the 'brass hats', but above all a symbol of endurance."

Example 1 – It's called 'So obvious'

Young naive soldier: "What made that 'ole?"

Old lag: "Mice"

It was not, however, obvious to the Germans. They distributed this cartoon to their troops as an example of British humour but with the added line "it was not mice, it was a shell"

Example 2 - Sentry: "Alt, who goes there!"

Soldier on the scrounge: "You shut yer fucking mouth or I'll knock yer fucking 'ed orf!"

Sentry: "Pass friend!"

Example 3 – On wartime shortages. Couple on getting engaged:

"Darling, every potato I have is yours."

To indicate the influence of the 'Fussell' analysis of the war I'll just give a couple of examples. The feminist historian Susan Kingsley Kent has written: "the soldiers on the line felt a greater sense of solidarity with Germans sitting across No Man's Land than with their compatriots at home." Being as generous as it is possible to be it is true that soldiers do often identify with their enemies as individuals in the same predicament as themselves but 'empathy' is vastly different from 'solidarity'. Kent doesn't understand that soldiers could feel some comradely thoughts for the German in the next trench but real animosity towards Germans as a whole. These thoughts were often triggered by

incidents where the troops felt the Germans simply weren't 'playing the game' and targeting civilians as this extract from a soldiers' letters demonstrate:

I see that they have been over Zepping again and done a considerable lot of damage, I cannot imaging what they are thinking about killing innocent people in cold blood, I think out airmen ought to do the same to Berlin then perhaps it might bring them to their senses.....

They ought to make all single young men join and so help to defend their own country from those Murderous Huns.... I hope they soon capture Kaiser Bill or his pupil little Willie as we call him; he wants punishing, killing would be too good for him.

Another example of a rather distorted view is a 1999 article in the history teacher's professional journal, *Teaching History*, which suggested that "reading and writing poetry was the ideal way to teach children about the First World War." It will certainly help them to understand the poets and their view of the events they lived through but would they suggest this for any other period in history? Is studying Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for example, an 'ideal' way to learn about the Wars of the Roses?

Brian Bond gave an even more blatant example of 'historical revisionism' from 1990:

In a BBC Radio 4 discussion on the baleful influence of the public school a speaker confidently asserted "And that is why we lost the First World War"

The comment went entirely unremarked on the programme.

We now need to turn to the other side of the argument: are there examples of a positive reaction from soldiers to the home front?

A recent, eloquent, exposition of the majority of servicemen's responses to the public and their philanthropic efforts is presented by Deborah Cohen. Though she is referring

to responses by disabled ex-servicemen her findings still hold true; indeed you might have expected those who had been disabled by the war would have greater resentment than others, yet she says:

Historians have often written of British ex-servicemen's hostility toward their fellow citizens, drawing on the writings of the War generation's literati, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves among them. However my research does not support that conclusion.... I found very little evidence, whether published or unpublished, to support the idea that disabled ex-servicemen were hostile toward the public. From secondary sources as well as the literature of the time, I had expected bitterness, anger, or at the very least grousing. Yet in the thousands of letters from disabled veterans that I read in philanthropic and state archives, I found almost nothing of the sort. For example, in the more than 600 letters of application to the War Seal Mansions, only one man referred to the public's obligation with any sort of ire.

I would entirely concur with Cohen's view which is fully supported by my own research. For example the letters from just one village, Great Chart in Kent. These were written to their local Troops Comforts charity. One was Private Frederick Tutt, B Company, 7th Battalion Buffs, 20th December 1915:

It cheers one up to think that someone thinks a little bit about us chaps out here. The pair of socks knitted by Ivy Woodason were very nicely done and came in very handy last time in trenches. We were up to our waist in Freezing Water.... There is an Old Church here that the YMCA have took over you can bye almost anything as cheep as you can at home or write and read. Closing at night a prayer meeting is held and hymes sung in which we all join heartley in. I fancy there will be a lot better men about after this job is over.

From Private William Harding, E Company, 1/5th Buffs, Kamptee, India, 5th August 1915:

It gives us all great pleasure to know that so many friends have taken our welfare to heart, and although we are so many miles away we are still respected by all our dear Friends at home, and I feel that the least we can do is our duty, and fit ourselves as soon as possible for greater service when called upon, and it is our one great desire that we may soon be rendering a far greater service than garrison duty in India, although we are given to understand that our labours here are as useful as any, we feel from the very bottom of our hearts, that our own place is in the firing line, where our many chums are bravely fighting for the love of their mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers at home, and also for the freedom of their King and country. It is with great pride that I read of all the brave men who have given their services in time of need. More especially do I look with pride upon the role of honour from my own little village, and although our little village is small, we all hope its deeds will bear out its name Great Chart.

There are no fewer than 22 bound volumes of letters expressing, in virtually every case, the same sentiments.

Historian Peter Simkins has recognised the value of voluntary action and its role in developing and maintaining social capital when he said:

British military historians are in broad agreement that the nature of British society in 1914-18 provided a bedrock of social cohesion which prevented the BEF from total collapse, even during the crisis of March and April 1918. There may be some truth in the view that the huge network of welfare facilities – including canteens and YMCA and Church Army huts – as well as provision of concert parties and organized sports, offered the British soldier comfortingly familiar recreational and cultural outlets which were not enjoyed to the same extent by men of other armies.

It is perhaps significant that the French army had no equivalent of this ubiquitous network of practical support, an important consideration given the mass mutinies it suffered in 1917.

Perhaps, then, Graves, Sassoon, Owen and the rest were, in the final analysis, less typical than another famous writer who fought in the war. In 1962 J.B.Priestley summed up his experiences by saying he was “deeply divided between the tragedy and comedy” of war. In this way it can be seen that the comments of Sassoon and others regarding the ‘horrible death’ they’d like to inflict on ‘do-gooding’ civilians in the First World War was no more ‘real’ than were John Betjeman’s in the Second. Believe it or not Betjeman was being ironic when he asked the ‘friendly bombs’ to fall on Slough.

Finally, let me return to the poem with which I began:

“Breakfast”

*We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
When Jimmy Stainthorp played full-back instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.*

It has often been anthologised as an example of ‘realistic’ anti-war poetry by a Western Front soldier post-1916. In fact it was written in October 1914, before trench warfare began, even before Rupert Brooke’s supposedly pro-war sonnets, and its author, W.W.Gibson was, at the time, a civilian and never went abroad.

There are other poems which give more revealing views of the war on the home front and voluntary action in particular. *The General* by G.K.Menzies, Secretary of the Royal Society of Arts, first appeared in *Punch*. It isn't a great poem but, utilising gentle humour, I think it says a great deal about its time and context:

*Last night, as I was washing up,
And just had rinsed the final cup,
All of a sudden, 'midst the stream,
I fell asleep and dreamt a dream.
I saw myself an old, old man,
Nearing the end of mortal span,
Bent, bald and toothless, lean and spare,
Hunched in an ancient beehive chair.
Before me stood a little lad
Alive with questions. 'Please, Granddad,
Did Daddy fight, and Uncle Joe,
In the Great War of long ago?'
I nodded as I made reply:
'Your Dad was in the H.L.I.,
And Uncle Joseph sailed the sea,
Commander of a T.B.D.,
And Uncle Jack was Major too –'
'And what,' he asked me, 'what were you?'
I stroked the little golden head;
'I was a General,' I said.
'Come, and I'll tell you something more
Of what I did in the Great War.'
At once the wonder-waiting eyes
Were opened in a mild surmise;
Smiling, I helped the little man
To mount my knee, and so began:
'When first the War broke out, you see,
Grandma became a V.A.D.;
Your Aunties spent laborious days
In working at Y.M.C.A.s;
The servants vanished. Cook was found
Doing the conscript baker's round;
The housemaid, Jane, in shortened skirt
(She always was a brazen flirt).
Forsook her dusters, brooms and pails
To carry on with endless mails.
The parlourmaid became a vet,
The tweeny a conductorette,
And both the others found their missions
In manufacturing munitions.
I was a City man. I knew
No useful trade. What could I do?
Your Granddad, boy, was not the sort*

*To yield to fate; he was a sport.
I set to work; I rose at six,
Summer and winter; chopped the sticks,
Kindled the fire, made early tea
For Aunties and the V.A.D.
I cooked the porridge, eggs and ham,
Set out the marmalade and jam,
And packed the workers off, well fed,
Well warmed, well brushed, well valeted.
I spent the morning in a rush
With dustpan, pail and scrubbing-brush;
Then with a string-bag sallied out
To net the cabbage or the sprout,
Or in the neighbouring butcher's shop
Select the juiciest steak or chop.
So when the sun had sought the West,
And brought my toilers home to rest,
Savours more sweet than scent of roses
Greeted their eager-sniffing noses –
Savours of dishes most divine
Prepared and cooked by skill of mine.
I was a General. Now you know
How Generals helped to down the foe.'
The little chap slipped off my knee
And gazed in solemn awe at me,
Stood to attention, stiff and mute,
And gave his very best salute.*