

Unquiet on the Home Front: Scottish popular fiction and the truth of war

Ever since C. E. Montague's account of wartime disillusionment, *Disenchantment* (1922), it has been common to believe that the popular press in the First World War played a part in effectively silencing soldiers: representing the actions in which they were involved in vague euphemistic terms; relying heavily either on outright lies or an outdated and inappropriate vocabulary of heroism, glory, and honour to render the experience of wartime unrecognisable to the soldiers themselves; forcing a cognitive chasm between servicemen and credulous civilians across which meaningful communication was no longer possible. These are the arguments that underpin Paul Fussell's analysis of the corrosive ubiquity of wartime euphemism in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.¹ They underline, too, Samuel Hynes's diagnosis of an 'unbridgeable gap' between soldier and civilian with its consequent debauching of the currency of language, and contribute to Randall Stevenson's characterisation of the First World War as an 'unspeakable war'.²

The aim of this chapter is not to refute such interpretations but to qualify them – particularly as they relate to the part played by popular fiction and film in the war. There can be no doubt that many soldiers were embittered by the failure of civilians to fully understand their experiences, and there is ample evidence to suggest that much popular culture was complicit in perpetuating the kinds of damaging euphemism of which literary historians complain. Aspects of that culture will be explored below, but so too will other strands of popular fiction that were much more direct and unambiguous in their representations of the war. These not only challenge assumptions that popular writing about the war was uniformly evasive and misleading, but also raise additional and awkward questions about where the responsibility lay for the breakdown in communication between soldiers and their civilian counterparts.

I.

¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 155-90.

² Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), 116. Peter Buitenhuis describes a similar 'unbridgeable' gap in his *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda 1914-18 and After* (London: Batsford, 1989), 179. Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-61. See also Hazel Hutchison, *The War That Used up Words: American Writers and the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

The most trenchant post-war critic of the damage done by the war to free, accurate expression was C. E. Montague – a journalist on the *Manchester Guardian* who had played a part in the war's news-management as an officer in military intelligence. His disaffected polemic *Disenchantment* (1922) was written out of frustration at having seen his own and others' good intentions compromised by the many evasions, half-truths, and occasional outright lies necessitated by war. In a chapter telling titled 'You Can't Believe a Word You Read' he vented a long-suppressed anger at the complicity between the General Staff and war writers in betraying the experience of the ordinary soldier:

‘Our casualties will be enormous’, a General at G.H.Q. said with the utmost serenity on the eve of one of our great attacks in 1917. The average war correspondent—there were golden exceptions—insensibly acquired the same cheerfulness in face of vicarious torment and danger. In his work it came out at times in a certain jauntiness of tone that roused the fighting troops to fury against the writer. Through his despatches there ran a brisk implication that regimental officers and men enjoyed nothing better than ‘going over the top’; that a battle was just a rough, jovial picnic; that a fight never went on long enough for the men; that their only fear was lest the war should end on this side of the Rhine. This, the men reflected in helpless anger, was what people at home were offered as faithful accounts of what their friends in the field were thinking and suffering.³

Philip Gibbs, the official war correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Glasgow Herald* and perhaps the war's most highly-regarded journalist, had reported under Montague's censorship.⁴ But he shared Montague's low opinion of the relationship between a complacent military and complaisant press. In *Realities of War*, 1920 (published in the United States as 'Now It can be Told') Gibbs recalled General Hague's rather limited estimation of the role and capabilities of the press and his encouragement to journalists 'to get hold of little stories of heroism, and so forth, and to write them up in a bright way to make good reading for Mary Ann in the kitchen, and the man in the street.' Gibbs demurred, but still found himself content to accept wartime censorship and make his accounts within its

³ C. E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922), 97-8.

⁴ Philip Gibbs, *The Pageant of the Years: An Autobiography* (London: William Heinemann, 1946), 166. See also his *Adventures in Journalism* (London: William Heinemann, 1923), 240-41. Like the other four official war correspondents Gibbs was knighted for his wartime service in 1920.

constraints, even though, as he said, ‘I had to leave out something of the underlying horror of them all, in spite of my continual emphasis, by temperament and by conviction, on the tragedy of all this sacrifice of youth’.⁵ Gibbs came out of the war with a pride in having done a decent job in difficult circumstances, but also (and perhaps like Montague) a nagging worry at having been complicit in shielding the newspaper-reading public from the worst of the war’s horror and the occasional incompetence of those who managed it. He also emerged with the realisation that wartime censorship had been less driven by a concern at offering comfort to the enemy as suppressing dissent at home: ‘it was’ as he put it, ‘fear of their own people, not of the enemy, which guided the rules of censorship, then and later’.⁶

Daily and evening newspapers were the principal means of conveying information from the front, and the work of intelligence officers such as Montague and compliant official correspondents like Gibbs meant that such information was often limited in its scope and detail. Access was restricted and news managed – sometimes for honourable reasons as well as dishonourable ones – and as a consequence most reporters could do little other than serve up the information from the front in a manner palatable to the military and civil authorities.

The conditions for other forms of coverage, particularly those of reportage or fiction which placed a higher premium on colour and atmosphere than on matters of strategy and fact, were, however, considerably less restrictive. From the very beginning of the war readers in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, looked to supplement the bare facts of newspaper coverage with more vivid tales of frontline experience from other sources. One ready supply came in the weekly papers, which had a long tradition of employing features and fiction to supplement their commentaries on the news of the day. The most significant of these, and easily the best-selling in Scotland at the time was the *People’s Journal*.

The *Journal*’s characteristic slant on the hostilities, especially in the war’s early stages, can be seen in a feature titled ‘The Gunners’ Last Stand’ which it published in November 1914. The story is ostensibly a piece of factual reporting that details a recent action in which two members of the Royal Field Artillery have won Victoria Crosses. The piece’s veracity as reportage is somewhat compromised by the stylistic choices it makes – preferring, for example, to use the omniscient narration of fiction rather than the subjective perspective of an identifiable eye-witness, and quoting implausibly long sections of direct speech. The piece’s unashamedly tabloid style, with its descriptive prose, hackneyed

⁵ *Realities of War* (London: William Heinemann, 1920), 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

metaphors and historical references, and its formulaic characterisations of valour make it seem the epitome of General Hague's 'little stories of heroism' for 'Mary Ann in the kitchen, and the man in the street':

Nelson's face was ghastly; his lips were blue and his teeth chattered as though with bitter cold. But in his eyes there burnt a spirit dauntless as that of his immortal namesake of Trafalgar.

'You've done your bit,' said Captain Bradbury. 'You aren't fit to go on fighting, Nelson; it's time you retired from the fighting line.'

He gave orders for him to be carried to the rear.

But Nelson laughed grimly. Not if General French himself was to bid him retire would he obey while that German gun remained unbeaten, he declared.

Captain Bradbury was about to remonstrate once more. There was a momentary lull in the firing, and Nelson had a chance to get to the rear which might not come again.

'I'm staying here,' gasped Nelson. 'I may be useful yet.'

As the words left his lips there came the scream of a shell. They felt the wind on their faces. It was the best-aimed shell that had come as yet, and as it struck the earth and burst, they were half-paralysed for a moment by the shock of the explosion. Brown whirling earth: green choking fumes blotting out everything next moment. The green fumes curled away, and revealed the shattered body of Lieutenant Campbell.

'Fight on Boys!' he gasped; then he crawled under a limber and died.'⁷

The bridge that such an article makes between factual reporting and magazine fiction is one that many fictional war stories and books were also happy to make – larding ostensibly factual tales of military experience with the familiar tropes of popular fiction. A common factor in these was the winning of the Victoria Cross. Stories in popular magazines were quick to adapt their formulae to accommodate this honour as the acme of manly endeavour, as were novels arriving at the fag end of the Kailyard tradition. The story, 'Ian Stuart V.C.: A Hero of the War' in the *People's Friend*, was one of very many magazine stories to give this heroic, military twist to the boy-wins-girl formula common to women's magazines.⁸ J. L. Dickie's tales of the couthy country folk of 'Glengollach', collected in *Peter Tamson: Elder*

⁷ 'The Gunners' Last Stand', *People's Journal, National Edition*, 21 November 1914, p. 5.

⁸ M. C. Ramsay, 'Ian Stuart V. C.', *People's Friend*, 23 November 1914, 450-51.

o' the Kirk and Sportsman (1915), similarly bent its serio-comic schtick in this direction, having its hero enlisting at the improbably advanced age of 55 (with the help of a London theatrical wig-maker) and winning the highest honour in saving the life of a young subaltern.⁹

Many popular works by serving soldiers (almost always officers) saw a similar tendency towards what Montague characterised as a casual 'cheerfulness in face of vicarious torment and danger' and a 'jauntiness of tone' that betrayed the true nature of the conditions under which the war was being fought. R. W. Campbell's highly-popular series of novels featuring the reformed reprobate Spud Tamson (a Catholic-Irish son of Glasgow's Saltmarket who discovers his life's purpose in military, and later imperial, service – and another fictional winner of the Victoria Cross)¹⁰ reduces military life to a series of quirky humorous adventures, along the way peddling the deceit noted by Montague that our men enjoying nothing more than 'going over the top':

'Fix bayonets prepare to charge,' was the next order flashed along the line. The clicking of the steel rings on the bayonet standards was a cheerful sound to all.

'Charge!' A wild hurrah was heard from seven thousand men. Seven thousand bayonets gleamed in the now sparkling sun. And down like an avalanche swept the sons of Empire. Words can never depict a charge. It is wild, almost insane, yet glorious. [. . .] And this was an Imperial charge a charge of willing volunteers, who loved the Motherland.

The stupefied Germans were horror-struck. Seven thousand fresh and lusty warriors struck terror into their hearts. And those bayonets! Well, who wouldn't run! They fled like hares on a frosty morning, pursued by the yelling and stabbing multitude.¹¹

What edge there might be here, in the portrayal of the awful terror of a bayonet charge, is somewhat blunted by the amiable, colloquial tone ('And those bayonets! Well, who wouldn't run!') and the depiction of Germans, like something out of Surtees, fleeing like hares on a frosty morning. In many ways, both thematic and stylistic, the war is being rendered here, as Montague had feared, as a kind of 'rough, jovial picnic'.

⁹ J. L. Dickie, *Peter Tamson: Elder O' the Kirk and Sportsman* (London: Country Life, 1915), 110-19.

¹⁰ See R. W. Campbell, *Private Spud Tamson* (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1915); *Sergeant Spud Tamson, V. C.* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1918). And *Spud Tamson out West* (London & Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, [1924]).

¹¹ *Private Spud Tamson*, 289-90.

Similar qualities can be seen, too, in Ian Hay's best-selling *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915).¹² Like Campbell, Hay was a popular writer turned military officer, and his account of military life and warfare is similarly softened by the good-humoured patronage his narrator extends to his 'humorously-pathetic' men, lauding both the cheerfulness and the resolve of these 'sturdy, valiant legions' even as they face the horrors of the Battle of Loos.¹³

It appears clear, then, that Montague's denunciations of the wartime press for misrepresenting the experience of the conflict might be applied also to the works of supposed reportage and fiction appearing in wartime magazines and popular books. Works like Hay's and Dickie's had appeared first as serialised contributions to magazines, as had other works of their ilk, such as Thomas M. Lyon's *In Kilt and Khaki* books and Lachlan MacLean Watt's *In France and Flanders with the Fighting Men*.¹⁴ The determination of such coverage to stay within the conventional boundaries of popular magazine journalism, most notably through its use of stereotypical characterisation, a non-confrontational approach to class and social difference, and a persistent tone of ameliorative optimism, appears to bear out the claims of Fussell and Hynes that journalism and popular culture had a deadening effect on the war's participants: alienating servicemen who knew the whole truth, and insulating civilians who were denied knowledge of the less agreeable facts of the war.

II.

But this is only part of the story. For there were other witnesses to the war who wrote troubling accounts of action for readers on the home front. One of these, also present at the Battle of Loos, was Patrick MacGill. MacGill was an Irish immigrant to Scotland who had risen before the public eye as the author of graphic accounts of the appalling poverty of working-class Scotland in his autobiographical novels *Children of the Dead End* (1914) and

¹² The book sold in its first year 115,000 copies in Britain and the colonies and 350,000 copies in the United States. See Gordon Urquhart, "Confrontation and Withdrawal: Loos, Readership and 'the First Hundred Thousand'," in *Scotland and the Great War*, ed. Catriona M. M. Macdonald and E. W. McFarland (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1999), 125-27.

¹³ Ian Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand: Being the Unofficial Chronicle of a Unit of 'K (1)'* (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1915), 342. See also his *Carrying On: After the First Hundred Thousand* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1917).

¹⁴ Hay's books were serialised in *Blackwood's Magazine* and Dickie's in *Country Life* and *Scottish Field*. Lyon's books, *In Kilt and Khaki: Glimpses of the Glasgow Highlanders in Training and on Foreign Service* (Kilmarnock: Standard Press, 1915) and *More Adventures in Kilt and Khaki: Sketches of the Glasgow Highlanders and Others in France* (Kilmarnock: Standard Press, 1917) were published serially in the *Kilmarnock Standard*. The stories in MacLean Watt's *In France and Flanders: With the Fighting Men* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917) first appeared in *The Scotsman* and *Chamber's Journal*.

The Rat-Pit (1915). He had already published two lightly-fictionalised accounts of his experiences of the war in *The Amateur Army* (1915) and *Red Horizon* (1915) before describing his experiences of the Battle of Loos in his third, *The Big Push* (1916). This book offered a noticeably grimmer take on the battle than that offered by Hay and Campbell. In one episode, for example, MacGill finds himself struggling across the battlefield at night:

‘At that moment I tripped on something soft and went headlong across it. A dozen rats slunk away into the darkness as I fell. I got to my feet again and looked at the dead man. [. . .] Buffeted by the breeze, battered by the rains it rotted in the open. Worms feasted on its entrails, slugs trailed silverly over its face, and lean rats gnawed at its flesh. The air was full of the thing, the night stank with its decay.’¹⁵

The tone here is markedly different to the jovial stoicism of Hay or Campbell which, like the story of the Gunners in the *People's Journal*, tend to keep the intimacies of death and wounding at arm's length, obscured in a fog of metaphor and euphemism. Here the facts of death and the slow rotting of the body are inescapable, lying exposed in the open to be bumped into and tripped over by narrator and reader alike. Also markedly absent from MacGill's account is a sense of wider purpose, of a necessary sacrifice. His litany of the battle's devastating aftermath is noticeably scant of consolation in its descriptions of the trenches

fringed with dead; dead soldiers in khaki lay on the reverse slope of the parapet, their feet in the grass, their heads on the sandbags; they lay behind the parapets, on the levels, in the woods, everywhere. Upwards of eleven thousand English dead littered the streets of Loos and the country round after the victory, and many of these were unburied yet.

A low-lying country, wet fields, stagnant drains, shell-rent roads, ruined houses, dead men, mangled horses. To us soldiers this was the only apparent result of the battle of Loos. . . .¹⁶

¹⁵ Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push: An Episode of the Great War* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916), 210-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 221-2.

If, as Gibbs asserted, the greatest fear of those prosecuting the war was to ensure that the public were not overly unsettled by graphic representations of warfare, it might be reasonable to expect that accounts like his would be suppressed. MacGill was a serving soldier under military discipline, after all, and even as his book was going through the press in early 1916 the authorities were stamping down on dissent among munitions workers on the Clyde – closing down briefly the Glasgow Independent Labour Newspaper *Forward* and permanently the Socialist *Vanguard*, while exiling members of the Clyde Workers Committee from Glasgow.¹⁷

But, in fact, MacGill's work met no impediment and instead received considerable backing from its publisher and from reviewers, quickly selling 50,000 copies in its first six months. Reviewers were quick to note and to praise the book's rawer qualities - one fearing its 'realism at times is almost too graphic', and another describing it as 'very painful reading' for its presentation of 'all the terrible aspects of the struggle'.¹⁸ *The Scotsman's* reviewer similarly hesitated over MacGill's 'almost morbid tendency to dwell upon the more painful aspects of the struggle for existence', but hailed *The Great Push* for offering an 'extraordinarily vivid idea of the psychical and physical experiences of the individual soldier'.¹⁹ So the book was widely welcomed. And this welcome extended to his employers in the military, who did not simply allow the book to be published but actively assisted in its promotion. They granted MacGill time to give public recitals from it with his wife, as he did in charity readings at London's Aeolian Hall in February 1916 and Dundee's King's Theatre and Edinburgh's Freemasons' Hall in November 1916 and allowed a band from the Royal Scots to accompany the performances.²⁰

Part of the reason for this, as it turns out, was because MacGill had been recruited in early 1916 into an obscure branch of the Intelligence Services, MI 7b (1), a unit dedicated to literary propaganda in whose service he remained until the end of the war.²¹ This was not a covert attempt to co-opt and suppress MacGill – he continued to maintain a high profile as a public lecturer and writer, going on to pen another three books about the experiences of Irish, American, and Australian soldiers in the war, and then in 1921 a strongly anti-war novel

¹⁷ See Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983), 49-62.

¹⁸ 'Literature of the Day', *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 August 1916, 3; 'A Literary Letter: "The Great Push" by Patrick MacGill', *The Sphere*, 29 July 1916, 22

¹⁹ 'New Books', *The Scotsman*, 19 June 1916, 2.

²⁰ See 'Rifleman MacGill's Story Of Loos', *Times*, 11 Feb. 1916, 3, and "'The Great Push" Recital in Kings Theatre: Full House will Greet Patrick and Mrs MacGill', *Dundee Courier*, 15 November 1916, 4.

²¹ See the MI 7b (I) Farewell Magazine, *The Green Book*, No.1 (January 1919), reprinted in facsimile in D. J. L. Arter, *MI 7b: The Discovery of a Lost Propaganda Archive from the Great War* (Jeremy Arter, 2013). The Scottish writer, Frederick Sleath, author of *Sniper Jackson* (1919) was another soldier serving in the unit.

*Fear!*²² So what purpose did military intelligence have in mind in supporting MacGill's graphic, soldier's-eye accounts of the realities of warfare?

One suggestion can be found in another officially-backed work aimed at a popular audience, Geoffrey Malins's and John McDowell's film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916). This was easily the most-watched film of the war and is, in Nicholas Reeves's view, 'arguably the most successful British film of all time'.²³ Purporting to be a straightforward documentary, but in fact incorporating staged combat scenes and footage of troops in training, the film promised a highly-detailed account of the preparations for the battle as well as scenes of actual fighting and its consequences. Scottish audiences, like others across the United Kingdom, flocked to it. The film was showing in Scotland from 28 August 1916, a mere eight weeks after the battle's beginning and while it still raged, with the press reporting on the 'tremendous crowds' in unprecedented sizes attending screenings in Glasgow and Edinburgh, with continuous screenings from 11 am to 10.30 pm.²⁴ It was billed as an Official War Film and was advertised with endorsements from Lloyd George, then Secretary of State for War, so there was a strong implication that it was both authentic and authoritative.²⁵ Given this, it is a surprise to see its unsparing treatment of the consequences of battle. Early parts of the film show the impressive logistical preparations for the battle, displaying mountains of accumulated materiel and cheerful columns of marching soldiers. But the aftermath is less innocently reassuring, as the film displays scenes of material devastation, wounded soldiers being carried back to a dressing station and a field of British corpses driven over by the guns and limbers of a field artillery unit. The film's fifth and final section is especially disturbing, as the camera pans across German corpses lying contorted in a shell hole with others spread haphazardly along the bottom of trenches and shell holes. Shocking, even to a modern audience, is the lingering shot of a British corpse bent double at the bottom

²² In *The Brown Brethren* (1917), *The Dough Boys* (1918), *The Diggers* (1919). David Taylor quote several reviews of *the Brown Brethren* which suggest that it maintained MacGill's reputation for uncompromising realism, David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick Macgill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 11-12. For a view that MacGill sold out and remained effectively a propagandist, see Jonathan Atkin, *A War of Individuals: Bloomsbury Attitudes to the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 168-9. It's perhaps worth noting, too, the *Edinburgh Evening News*'s opinion that in later works like *The Brown Brethren* MacGill 'is somewhat more restrained in his style and descriptions than in his earlier work', 'The Brown Brethren', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 5 September 1917, 2.

²³ Nicholas Reeves, "Official British Film Propaganda," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 31.

²⁴ S. D. Badsey, "Battle of the Somme: British War Propaganda," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 3, no. 2 (1983): 108. "Cinema Chit-Chat," *Entertainer*, 2 September 1916, 5.

²⁵ Though it was later acknowledged that the film's battle scenes – which included British soldiers falling as though shot – were, in fact, filmed during training exercises.

of a trench – almost, it might seem, as if asleep but for the unnatural stillness and the telling sight of his pendent hand black with livor mortis.

III.

Cinema audiences and readers were, then, not as wholly insulated from the grimmer realities of war as has sometimes been suggested. They did not have to look too hard to find detailed instances of the horror of war, exacted on British as well as German troops. Such examples were also found in abundance in one of the most popular Scottish fiction writers of the war, Boyd Cable. Hailed by *Punch* as ‘one of the prose Laureates of the War’ for his unparalleled ability to capture ‘vividly the noise, the squalor, the terror, the high courage, the self-sacrifice, and again the nerve-shattering noise that make up the fierce confusion of trench fighting’, he has been long neglected and is now almost wholly forgotten.²⁶

Cable, born Ernest Andrew Ewart and educated at Aberdeen and Banff Grammar Schools, had been an itinerant worker and occasional writer before the war, travelling extensively in Europe and Australasia.²⁷ He enlisted on the outbreak of war as an artillery officer and began to publish stories of the front-line in the *Cornhill Magazine* and *Westminster Gazette* which were collected as *Between the Lines* (1915). The book met immediate success, selling over 100,000 copies in its first year, and was republished in the United States, and translated into French in 1917.

The book’s main selling point was its purported authenticity – these were stories told by a soldier within earshot of the guns (a fact Cable was keen to emphasise) and which appeared to offer unmediated accounts of frontline experience. This directness was reinforced by the structure of the stories – each having as an epigraph the bland words of an official despatch above a graphic and detailed account of the grim realities that underlay them. The intention it seems was to generate the kind of exasperated irony at official euphemism that Fussell describes as the defining mode of serving soldiers; the irony that would be exploited by Erich Maria Remarque in titling his epic novel of suffering and loss, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.²⁸

²⁶ "Our Booking-Office," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 14 March 1917, 176.

²⁷ "Obituary," *Daily Commercial News and Shipping List*, 1 November 1943, 2.

²⁸ In fact, Cable anticipates Remarque here. His story ‘Nothing to Report’ begins with the ironic epigraph from an official despatch ‘On the Western Front there is nothing to report. All remains quiet.’ Boyd Cable, *Between the Lines* (London: John Murray, 1917), 84.

The technique is seen in the collection's first story, 'The Advanced Trenches'. This begins with the terse communiqué: '*Near Blank, on the Dash-Dot front, a section of advanced trench changed hands several times, finally remaining in our possession.*'²⁹ The story that follows describes the reality cloaked by these seemingly innocuous words:

Supports poured out to their assistance, and for a full five minutes the fight raged and swayed in the open between the trenches and among the wire entanglements. The men who fell were trampled, squirming, underfoot in the bloody mire and mud; the fighters stabbed and hacked and struck at short arm-length, fell even to using fists and fingers when the press was too close for weapon play and swing. [. . .] The British flung in on top of the defenders like terriers into a rat-pit, and the fighters snarled and worried and scuffled and clutched and tore at each other more like savage brutes than men. The defence was not broken or driven out—it was killed out; and lunging bayonet or smashing butt caught and finished the few that tried to struggle and claw a way out up the slippery trench-sides.³⁰

'The Advance', similarly starts with the anodyne words of an 'Official Despatch': '*The attack has resulted in our line being advanced from one to two hundred yards along a front of over one thousand yards.*'³¹ And again, Cable is unsparing in confronting the reader with the brutalities that underlie the easy words, talking of attackers exterminating and being 'exterminated'; of 'shooting, stabbing, flinging hand grenades' and of being 'intent only on the business at their own bayonet points, to kill the enemy facing them and push in and kill the ones behind':

When their ammunition was expended they used rifles and cartridges taken from the enemy dead in the trench; having no grenades they snatched and hurled back on the instant any that fell with fuses still burning. They waged their unequal fight to the last minute and were killed out to the last man.³²

²⁹ Ibid., 1.

³⁰ Ibid., 7 & 10.

³¹ Ibid., 130.

³² Ibid., 143-5.

Cable's book was published in 1915, before the introduction of conscription, and as such its depictions of extreme violence could be construed as a discouragement to volunteering – as antithetical to the message of moral responsibility fostered by Kitchener's 'Your Country Needs You' poster. Such accounts, though, might attract a different sort of volunteer – one avid for war's adventure and its loosening of moral constraints – and this is an impulsion that perhaps ought not to be underestimated. Philip Gibbs would later talk of the 'call of the wild—the hark-back of the mind to the old barbarities of the world's dawn' as a motivating factor for a number of volunteers, noting the manner in which 'some instinct of a primitive savage kind for open-air life, fighting, killing, the comradeship of hunters, violent emotions, the chance of death, surged up into the brains of quiet boys, clerks, mechanics, miners, factory hands'.³³ A reviewer in the urbane *Punch* noted such attractiveness in Cable's extreme realism. While remarking that Cable was an exception to the many 'war chroniclers' who 'deal only sparingly with the absolute killing and being killed that are at the heart of the whole hideous business', the reviewer highlighted the power and popular appeal of his approach – praising a representation 'so vivid that at times the roar and reek, the whole terrific nerve-wracking tension of trench warfare seems to leap out at you from the pages. It is a terrible and thrilling glossary that will be read and re-read in countless homes.'³⁴

As Cable's wartime career developed, however, it became clear that there was another reason for the explicit violence of his narratives besides simply thrilling readers and feeding fantasies of violence and revenge, and another reason why the authorities would continue to back his work in the way they supported MacGill and *The Battle of the Somme*. This relates to his role as an artillery officer, and in particular to his anxieties about the lack of ordnance finding its way to the front line in the early stages of the war.

Between the Lines was being written in the middle of the so-called Shell Crisis of 1915, the shortage of munitions that was often cited – especially by the Northcliffe papers – as the main factor in the disaster of the British offensive on Aubers Ridge in May and the devastating losses of the Battle of Loos in the autumn. The scandal, whipped up as it was by interested parties in the press, led directly to the promotion of Lloyd George to a new Ministry of Munitions in 1915 and, ultimately, to the Premiership the following year. A further complication to the crisis was industrial unrest in the munitions industry, arising from the bullish, peremptory attitude of the new Ministry and the resistance of workers to changes

³³ Gibbs, *Realities of War*, 58.

³⁴ "Our Booking-Office," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 1 December 1915, 459.

in their working practices and protected status. Glasgow was a particular problem. There had been a successful rent strike in the city earlier in 1915, and Lloyd George considered it one of the ‘worst districts’ for industrial disruption on account of the organisation of munitions workers by shop stewards and the Clyde Workers’ Committee.³⁵ When Lloyd George came to the city to face down the workers on Christmas day 1915 he was subjected to sustained heckling and interruption from the floor. The consequence of this affront to a Minister of the Crown was the temporary suppression of newspapers like *Forward* and the forced removal of key shop stewards mentioned earlier.³⁶

Between the Lines addresses the shell shortage and attendant industrial unrest both implicitly and explicitly, not least in its second story, ‘Shells’. This begins, like the others, with the words of an official dispatch: ‘to the right a violent artillery bombardment has been in progress’.³⁷ The reality is, needless to say, quite different. The allied forces are not engaged in violently bombarding the enemy at all but are rather endangered by, and frustrated at, the inability of their artillery to respond adequately to the German guns. A Scottish voice is heard in the trenches questioning why the allied forces aren’t counter-bombarding the Germans – a question that raises the wrath of the story’s central character:

He turned angrily at last on one man who put the query in a broad Scots accent,
 ‘No,’ he said tartly, ‘we ain’t tryin’ to silence their guns. An’ if you partickler wants to know why we ain’t—well, p’raps them Glasgow townies o’ yours can tell you.’
 He went on and No. 2 Platoon sank to grim silence. The meaning of the gunner’s words were plain enough to all, for had not the papers spoken for weeks back of the Clyde strikes and the shortage of munitions? And the thoughts of all were pithily put in the one sentence by a private of No. 2 Platoon.
 ‘I’d stop cheerful in this blanky ’ell for a week,’ he said slowly, ‘if so be I ’ad them strikers ’ere alongside me gettin’ the same dose.’³⁸

This frustrated sense of the imaginative distance from the trenches to the homeland animates *Between the Lines* (it closes with one soldier plaintively saying to another ‘what I wants to

³⁵ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 1 (London: Odhams Press, 1938), 187.

³⁶ For accounts of the event by Lloyd George’s antagonists, see William Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1940; repr., A Workers’s Library), 77-99; David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt* (London: George G. Harrap, 1935), 110-12.

³⁷ Cable, *Between the Lines*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

know—an' there's a many 'ere like me—is why don't somebody let 'em know about it ; let 'em really know') and offers the key to the book's insistent depiction on the grim realities of the frontline experience.³⁹ Cable is clearly attempting to bridge a cognitive gap between soldier and civilian reader, to forcefully undeceive the home population and ensure the suffering of soldiers is properly acknowledged. But it is plain he also harbours a more contentiously political intention – to display the horrors of frontline experience as a means of shaming workers into complying with the national armaments strategy.

Cable acknowledged such an intention in the preface his next book, *Action Front* (1916). Addressing those 'who complained that my last book was in parts too grim and too terrible', he retorted that not only that it is 'impossible to write with any truth of the Front without the writing being grim', but that 'I felt it would be no bad thing if Home realised the grimness a little better'.⁴⁰ Like MacGill, Cable found himself increasingly encouraged in this by the authorities and was drawn into the realm of propaganda not because he had written evasively or amelioratively about the war, but because he had confronted it directly and abrasively.

This encouragement was seen in another Cable book of 1916, *Doing Their Bit*, a book intended to depict the war industries from the soldier's point of view, and for which he was seconded by the War Propaganda Bureau and the Ministry of Munitions to the factories whose workers he had criticised. His secondment offered Cable the opportunity not only to explain the work of the munitions factories to the troops, but also to take to their workers the message of *Between the Lines* and 'tell them what a shortage of shells meant to the Front'. Cable recounts lecturing the workers on the frustrations felt by soldiers over

the squabbling amongst munition workers and their haggling over 8d. or 8½d. an hour pay, or Saturday half-holidays, or double overtime for Sunday, while the men in the trenches suffered a hell of shell-fire, and soaked in knee-deep gutters, and lost their limbs and lives from frost-bite, and put in six or sixteen-day spells, as need be, with no half-holiday and a shilling a day pay for time and overtime.⁴¹

In hectoring workers who haggled over their pay and supposed perks Cable did not spare the grim details. His intention was explicitly to 'make these men understand what it means to see

³⁹ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁰ Boyd Cable, *Action Front* (London: Smith, Elder, 1916), vii.

⁴¹ *Doing Their Bit: War Work at Home* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1916), 62-3.

a line of infantry hung up by barbed wire', to 'watch the line dwindle and wither and melt away to heaps and clumps of dead lying still in the mud or squirming in the clutch of the wire entanglements, to scattered figures crawling and rolling and dragging their broken limbs and shattered bodies back across the shell- and bullet-swept ground in a last struggle to reach shelter'.⁴²

Like MacGill, Cable was not hindered in this by the authorities but rather actively supported. Following *Doing their Bit* and *Action Front* he published two more accounts of trench warfare, *Front Lines* (1918) and *Grapes of Wrath* (1917) – a work of opportunistic propaganda aimed at American supporters of the war – and a book *Airmen o' War* (1918) which was commissioned by the Royal Flying Corps. His work received explicit official sanction – *Doing their Bit* appeared with a preface by Lloyd George – and was published and serialised in many magazines and newspapers. The *Post Sunday Special*, for example, which hailed Cable as 'The Greatest Scottish Writer Discovered by the War', serialised *Between the Lines* in early 1917 not stinting on reprinting the more graphic passages, including on February 4th the story quoted earlier, 'The Advanced Trenches', in which British soldiers are depicted as terriers in a rat-pit, snarling, worrying, scuffling, and clutching and tearing at each other 'more like savage brutes than men'.⁴³ Like MacGill, Boyd was also in demand for public lectures to a variety of audiences. In October 1917 he addressed a fashionable audience in the West End of London chaired by his 'warm friend and admirer' Lord Cowdray.⁴⁴ In March 1918 he exhorted an audience of West of Scotland munitions workers that 'extra energy at home by war workers meant the saving of lives at the front, and the shortening of the war'.⁴⁵

IV.

The examples of Cable and MacGill demonstrate that the military and civilian authorities were not wholly concerned with suppressing or disguising the less savoury facts of wars, but might at times be content to allow them to be spelled out and amplified. To some home readers the gruesome realities of war might be off-putting, but to many others they might act

⁴² Ibid., 128.

⁴³ "Between the Lines," *The Post Sunday Special*, 24 December 1916, 5.

⁴⁴ "Boyd Cable's New Role," *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 6 October 1917, 2.

⁴⁵ "Lecture to War Workers," *Airdrie and Coatbridge Advertiser*, 30 March 1918, 2.

as a reminder of the terrible existential seriousness of the war and a spur to the increased endeavour that would lead to victory.

This is consistent with other measures taken by the military authorities in seeking to acquaint a wide audience with conditions at the front. A significant part of Montague's labour in working for military intelligence, as it had been for John Buchan, had comprised in conducting civilian visitors on tours of the front line. Such visitors were often politicians, dignitaries, and opinion formers, but they also comprised delegations of workers, particularly those representing trades unions. Cable in fact describes such a visit of trades unionists in the concluding story of *Front Lines*, ironically titled 'The Conquerors'.⁴⁶ The book's preface gives an indication of likely tenor of this encounter, with its statement that the 'workers at home' are 'either woefully ignorant still of what the failure of their fullest effort means to us, or, worse, are indifferent to the sufferings and endurings of their men on active service,' adding the by now characteristic Cable barb that they 'are unpatriotic, narrow, selfish enough to put the screw on the nation for their own advantage.'⁴⁷ Needless to say, Cable's overweening trades unionists are suitably humbled by the conditions at the front and the arguments of the soldiers they meet.

However cosmetic or superficial such trench visits might have been they were hardly consistent with an official policy to hide or disguise the truth in order to preserve industrial stability and social peace of mind. Not only was information available for those who sought it, but at least some of those involved in intelligence and propaganda saw the advantages in making it widely available. The fact that MacGill and Cable were actively encouraged in their writing – offering trench visits of a different kind – suggests a different, and perhaps more disturbing anxiety troubling those responsible for ensuring public morale: not so much that civilians needed to be protected from the truth, but that they were increasingly less interested in hearing that truth.

This is perhaps borne out by the experience of the war's other predominantly popular medium, cinema. From early in the war it was becoming apparent that soldiers preferred not to read accounts of war action, finding attempts to portray the realism of the trenches paradoxically 'horrible' and discomfiting.⁴⁸ An official report on wartime cinema habits noted their dislike of dramatic film and their particular aversion to films about military

⁴⁶ Boyd Cable, *Front Lines* (London: John Murray, 1918), 295-306.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴⁸ For an account of such attitudes to 'horrible realism' see Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War 1914-1918*, 84-92.

action.⁴⁹ American film director Bennet Molter visited cinemas in the war zone and remarked on soldiers' preference for Westerns over war pictures – in Molter's view 'a real picture', a dramatic feature, would fall flat as the soldiers 'don't want to have to think'.⁵⁰

The fact of the huge success of the *The Battle of the Somme* might appear to prove that such arguments didn't hold in their application to civilian audiences, and it is certainly true that these audiences showed a healthy appetite for war-related films in the early stages of the conflict. But it is also true *The Battle of the Somme* was the high point of popular cinematic interest in the war. Three more full-length official films followed *The Battle of the Somme*, but each attracted less interest than its predecessor. *The Battle of Ancre* (1917) was, according to the Scottish section of the *Bioscope* film magazine, withdrawn from cinemas two days early because of its lack of business at the box-office.⁵¹ Malins's *The Battle of the Arras* filmed in April 1917, only eight months after his *Battle of the Somme*, was a failure and prompted the ending of full-length official war films. Lord Beaverbrook, soon to become the First Minister of Information, observed that 'the present style of films is played out. The public is jaded and we have to tickle its palate with something more dramatic in the future'.⁵²

In an attempt to save this situation in 1917 and to ensure that war documentary continued in cinemas the War Office Cinematograph Committee set up an official newsreel, the War Office Topical Budget. But this, too, failed to capture the public imagination, with the *Glasgow Herald* noting its shortcomings in 1918.⁵³ Towards the end of the war the War Office's films were screening regularly in only 150 cinemas across Britain (this at a time when there were one billion cinema attendances annually in UK), and according to audiences lacked 'human interest' and 'cohesion'. The resistance of exhibitors and commercial audiences to was such towards the end of the war that the Ministry of Information was experimenting with methods of screening, including touring units, that would bypass the commercial cinema entirely.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *The Cinema. Its Present Position and Future Possibilities: Being the Report of and Chief Evidence Taken by the Cinema Commission of Inquiry Instituted by the National Council of Public Morals*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1917), 228.

⁵⁰ Molter, quoted in Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978), 46.

⁵¹ *Bioscope*, 15 February 1917, p. 737. Quoted in Nicholas Reeves, "Cinema, Spectatorship and Propaganda: "Battle of the Somme" (1916) and Its Contemporary Audience," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 17, no. 1 (1997): 12.

⁵² Quoted in "The Power of Film Propaganda - Myth or Reality?," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13, no. 2 (1993): 194.

⁵³ "Germany and Film Propaganda," *Glasgow Herald*, 24 May 1918, 5.

⁵⁴ Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 240. See also "The Power of Film Propaganda," 181-201.

It had been a similar story with dramatic films of war – the visual equivalents of the stories of Campbell, Hay, and those of the *People's Journal*. As early as January 1915, the *Bioscope* was commenting on the outpouring of war dramas, and reporting a 'growing opinion that the public is being given quite enough, if not too much, war topics', suggesting that audiences were instead looking for 'relaxation and encouragement in its daily tasks'.⁵⁵

The difficult truth faced by the cinema, amply demonstrated by its audience, was that civilians were weary of the war and would much rather be diverted from it than forced to confront it in what little time they had for leisure. It seems reasonable to assume that the magazine and fiction buying public were little different and that they were content, once their initial curiosity about the war had been satisfied, to shift their attentions elsewhere. It was just such a lack of attention and empathy that enraged Cable and prompted him to his graphic depictions of the war's horrors – to shock into realisation that mass of civilians he described as 'indifferent to the sufferings and endurings of their men on active service'. And in attempting to drive the hard truths of the war home, he was, like MacGill, helped rather than hindered by the popular publishers who printed and distributed his work and by the military establishment that employed him. Given this, it seems inadequate simply to blame the breakdown in communication between combatants and non-combatants on the press, or the military authorities, or on the failure of language to be able to satisfactorily represent the truth of the war. This wasn't so much a problem with transmission as with reception. The outlets were there for those who wanted to speak, but the conclusion that might be drawn is that there were disturbingly few people willing to listen.

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⁵⁵ "The Topical "War" Drama," *Bioscope*, 21 January 1915, 205.

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