AFTERWORD BY
KATE MOSSE

VERA BRITTAIN

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

'A haunting elegy for a lost generation'
The Times

Contents

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925

Vera Brittain

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PHOENIX

Vera Brittain (1893–1970) grew up in provincial comfort in the north of England. In 1914 she won an exhibition to Somerville College, Oxford, but a year later abandoned her studies to enrol as a VAD nurse. She served throughout the war, working in London, Malta and the Front in France.

At the end of the war, with all those closest to her dead, Vera Brittain returned to Oxford. Th ere she met Winifred Holtby – author of *South Riding* – and this friendship, which was to last until Winifred Holtby's untimely death in 1935, sustained her in those difficult post-war years.

Vera Brittain was a convinced pacifist, a prolific speaker, lecturer, journalist and writer; she devoted much of her energy to the causes of peace and feminism. She wrote 29 books in all – novels, poetry, biography and autobiography and other non-fiction – but it was *Testament of Youth* which established her reputation and made her one of the best-loved writers of her time. The authorised biography, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (1995) by Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, is published by Virago.

Vera Brittain married in 1925 and had two children, one of whom, Shirley Williams, writes the preface to this edition of her mother's most famous work.

Shirley Williams, born in 1930, is the second child of Vera Brittain and George Catlin. Elected as a Labour MP in 1964, she served in the Wilson and Callaghan governments. In 1981 she was one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party, and became the new party's first elected MP following a by-election at Crosby. From 2001 to 2004, she was leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords.

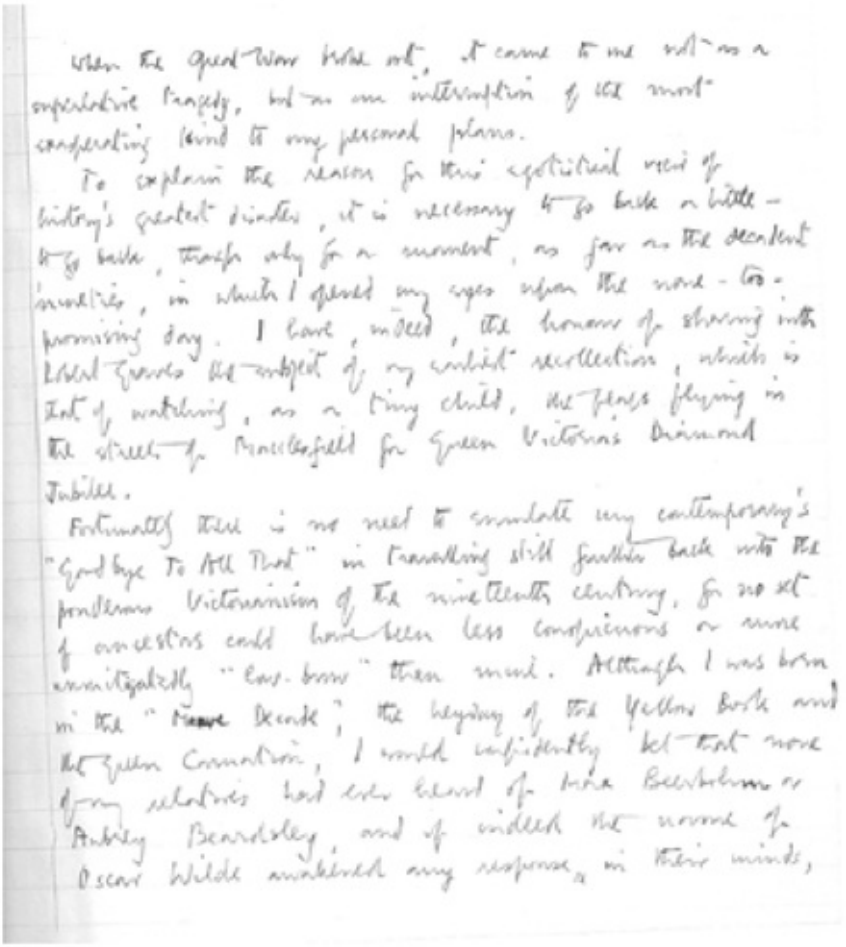
Mark Bostridge is an award-winning writer whose books include *Vera Brittain: A Life, Florence Nightingale: The Woman and Her*

Legend, and *The Fateful Year: England 1914*.

To
R.A.L. and E.H.B.
In Memory

‘And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them. But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten . . . Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore. The people will tell of their wisdom, and the congregation will shew forth their praise.’

ECCLESIASTICUS XLIV



When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a
supernatural tragedy, but as an interruption of the most
exasperating kind to my personal plans.

To explain the reason for this egotistical view of
history's greatest disaster, it is necessary to go back a little –
to go back, though only for a moment, as far as the decadent
nineties, in which I opened my eyes upon the none-too-
promising day. I have, indeed, the honour of sharing with
Lloyd George the subject of my earliest recollection, which is
that of watching, as a tiny child, the fancy flowing in
the streets of Manchesterfield for Queen Victoria's Diamond
Jubilee.

Fortunately there is no need to emulate my contemporary's
"Good-bye To All That" in travelling still further back into the
ponderous Victorianism of the nineteenth century, for no set
of ancestors could have been less conspicuous or more
unanticipatedly "Gay-brow" than mine. Although I was born
in the "Naughty Decade", the heyday of the Yellow Book and
the Green Carnation, I would confidently bet that none
of my relatives had ever heard of Mme Bernhardt or
Aubrey Beardsley, and of course the name of
Oscar Wilde awakened any response in their minds,

The opening page of chapter 1 from the holograph manuscript of *Testament of Youth* (William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada)

Introduction

On 28 August 1933, *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain's classic memoir of the cataclysmic effect of the First World War on her generation, was published by Gollancz to a generally enthusiastic reception and brisk sales. 'Oh what a head-cracking week . . .', Brittain recorded in her diary, after reading the early reviews. 'Never did I imagine that the *Testament* would inspire such praise at such length, or provoke - in smaller doses - so much abuse.'[1] Lavish praise came from, among others, Rebecca West, Pamela Hinkson, Compton Mackenzie and John Brophy while, in the *Sunday Times*, Storm Jameson commented that 'Miss Brittain has written a book which stands alone among books written by women about the war'.[2] By the close of publication day, *Testament of Youth* had sold out its first printing of 3,000 copies, and was well on its way to becoming a bestseller. In Britain, up to the outbreak of the Second World War, it would sell 120,000 copies in twelve impressions. In the United States, where Macmillan published the book in October, and where Brittain was feted on a triumphant lecture-tour in the autumn of 1934, it enjoyed similar success. 'Of all the personal narratives covering the World War period', wrote R. L. Duffus in the *New York Times*, 'there can surely have been none more honest, more revealing . . . or more heartbreakingly beautiful than this of Vera Brittain's.'[3]

Several of the original reviewers, though, were unnerved by the autobiography's frankness. James Agate struck a blow for misogyny when he wrote that it reminded him of a woman crying in the street. However, in her diary, Virginia Woolf expressed the more widespread response. Although she mocked Brittain's story - 'how she lost lover and brother, and dabbled hands in entrails, and was forever seeing the dead, and eating scraps, and sitting five on one WC'[4] - she admitted that the book kept her out of bed until she had finished reading it, and later wrote to Brittain about how much *Testament of Youth* had interested her.[5] Woolf's interest in the connections that Brittain had 'lit up' for her between feminism and pacifism would leave its mark on the novel she was

then writing that would eventually become *The Years*, and even more decisively on the radical analysis of *Three Guineas*.[6]

For Vera Brittain, the publication of *Testament of Youth* represented the crossing of a personal Rubicon. Approaching forty, she had at last passed from relative obscurity to the literary fame she had dreamed about since childhood, when as a girl she had written five 'novels' on waste-cuts from her father's paper-mill. In the process she had exorcised her 'brutal, poignant, insistent memories'[7] of the war, releasing her deeply felt obligations to her war dead: her fiancé Roland Leighton, shot and fatally wounded at Christmas 1915; her brother Edward, killed in action on the Italian front just months before the Armistice; and her two closest male friends, Victor Richardson, shot through the head and blinded at Arras, who survived for a matter of weeks until June 1917, and Geoffrey Thurlow, killed in an attack on the Scarpe earlier that spring.

Brittain had been attempting to write about her experiences of the war, during which she had served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse in military hospitals in London, Malta, and close to the front line in France, for more than a decade. In 1922 she had selected and typed sections of the diary she had kept from 1913-1917, and submitted it for a prize offered by a firm of publishers for a personal diary or autobiography.[8] It was not chosen, and in the course of the next few years she struggled with several unsuccessful attempts to write her war book as fiction. Having finally settled on the autobiographical form, with the intention of making her story 'as truthful as history, but as readable as fiction',[9] she subsequently found her progress on the book impeded by all manner of domestic interruptions and tensions. Within weeks of beginning *Testament of Youth*, in November 1929, Brittain had unexpectedly discovered that she was pregnant with her second child, her daughter Shirley, born the following summer. In 1931, a year after Shirley's birth, she wrote to her friend Winifred Holtby: 'My "Testament of Youth", if only I get the time . . . to do it properly, might be a great book. It is boiling in my mind and I shall become hysterical if I am prevented from getting down to it very much longer . . . If I am to continue sane I *must* have . . . a) rest from the children & house and b) freedom and suitable circumstances to continue my book'.[10]

By the middle of February 1933, she had completed her manuscript, but other problems soon became apparent. In the final stages leading to publication, she was confronted by the strong objections of her husband, the political scientist

George Catlin, to his own appearance in the book's last chapter. Catlin scrawled his comments in the margins of the typescript: 'intolerable', 'horrible', 'pretty terrible'.[11] Believing that his wife's book would hold him up to ridicule among his academic colleagues - not least, one suspects, because of the account of the continuing importance to her of her intimate friendship with Winifred Holtby - he begged Brittain to make changes to certain passages, and prayed that 'this spotlight' would pass swiftly.[12] She complied by reducing him to a more shadowy figure in the final draft, though she bitterly regretted that the theme of her post-war resurrection, symbolised by her marriage, had been irretrievably weakened.

Testament of Youth underwent its own remarkable resurgence in the late seventies, almost a decade after Brittain's death. Brittain had been heartened by the assessment of Oliver Edwards (nom de plume of Sir William Haley) in *The Times* in 1964, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, that *Testament of Youth* was 'the real war book of the women of England'. [13] However, she had believed in her final years that as a writer she was largely forgotten, and that any future interest in *Testament of Youth* would be of only a minor kind. She would certainly have been surprised by the extent of the book's renewed success after it was reissued in 1978 by a feminist publishing house and adapted as a landmark BBC TV drama. Carmen Callil, head of the nascent Virago Press, found herself weeping while reading it on holiday in her native Australia, and back home propelled the book once more to the top of the bestseller lists; while the five-part television adaptation in 1979, with a luminous performance by Cheryl Campbell in the central role, and an intelligent script by Elaine Morgan, introduced Brittain's story to a wider audience than ever before. It has never been out of print since.

Today, *Testament of Youth* is firmly enshrined in the canon of the literature of the First World War. It remains the most eloquent and moving expression of the suffering and bereavement inflicted by the 1914-18 conflict, as well as offering generally reliable testimony of a VAD serving with the British army overseas,[14] together with a host of other aspects of the social conditions of the war as experienced by the English middle-classes. Furthermore, in writing her autobiography - or 'autobiographical study' as she preferred to call it - Vera Brittain was also contributing a chapter to the wider history of women's emancipation in England. It has sometimes been overlooked that a little more

than a third of *Testament of Youth* is concerned with Brittain's account of her wartime experiences. Two chapters of almost a hundred pages precede the beginning of her narrative of the war, which describe Brittain's attempts to escape the living death of her provincial young ladyhood and her personal struggles for education. Rebecca West saw this as 'an interesting piece of social history, in its picture of the peculiarly unsatisfying position of women in England before the war'.[15] And in the book's final section, after the declaration of the Armistice in November 1918, and following the granting of the vote to women over thirty in February of that year (an event that passed unnoticed by Brittain at the time because of her absorption in her work as a nurse in France), *Testament of Youth* returns to feminist themes: to Brittain's post-war involvement in equal-rights feminism, to her working partnership with her great friend Winifred Holtby and, finally, to her engagement to a survivor of the war generation, and the promise of a marriage that will be defined in feminist terms.

More insidiously, though, Brittain's autobiography dramatises a conflict between a pre-war world of 'rich materialism and tranquil comfort' and the more liberated society that developed partly as a consequence of the war. Its avoidance of modernist idioms seems to underline this, while the autobiographical figure of Brittain herself embodies a central paradox: that though she proposes a form of egalitarian marriage and other radical reforms, and despite the fact that she envisages herself as a modern woman, she remains at heart a product of her Victorian bourgeois background.

For an understanding of *Testament of Youth* in a broader context, the book needs to be viewed as one of the large number of women's autobiographies and biographical histories published in the twenties and thirties, which attempted to reconstruct and assess the pre-war period and the years between 1914 and 1918. Works like Beatrice Webb's *My Apprenticeship* (1926), Ray Strachey's *The Cause* (1928), Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* (1931) and Helena Swanwick's *I Have Been Young* (1935), adopted what had hitherto been a predominantly masculine form of writing in order to celebrate the achievements of women's public lives. Vera Brittain, too, was concerned to place on record the unsung contribution of women to the war effort, though, ironically, much of the confidence and assurance of her autobiographical voice emanates from her passionate identification with her young male contemporaries and her experience of living vicariously through them. But in keeping with her fundamental belief in 'the influence of worldwide events and movements upon the destinies of men

and women',[16] she was also anxious to write history in terms of personal life, and to illustrate what she had come to regard as the inextricable connection between the personal and the political.[17]

The germ of the idea behind *Testament of Youth* can be traced back to March 1916, when Vera Brittain wrote to her brother Edward that '. . . if the War spares me, it will be my one aim to immortalise in a book the story of us four . . .'[18] (her close friendship with Geoffrey Thurlow, the fifth member of her wartime circle, still lay in the future). The seventeen years between this statement and the appearance of her autobiography saw Brittain produce a bewildering number of fictional versions of her war experiences, some of which are preserved in the vast Brittain archive at McMaster University in Ontario.[19] As early as the summer of 1918 – at the time when Brittain's earliest published utterances about the war, her *Verses of a V.A.D.*,[20] were just appearing - she was close to completing her first war novel. Variously entitled 'The Pawn of Fate' or 'Folly's Vineyard', and drawn from her spell as a VAD at Étaples in northern France, it centred on a melodramatic plot involving a senior nursing sister, based on Faith Moulson, the sister in charge of the German ward where Brittain had nursed in 1917.

Fear of potential libel action led Brittain to put this manuscript aside, and when she returned to plans for a war novel in the early twenties, after the publication of two other works of fiction, *The Dark Tide* (1923) and *Not Without Honour* (1924), it was to a more broadly conceived book. The survival of a variety of incomplete novel drafts, together with references in Brittain's correspondence to several similar projects that appear never to have materialised, indicates the extent of her confusion as to how best to commit her experiences to paper. 'The Two Islands' contrasts the 'sombreness of the Grey Island' (Britain) with 'the brightness of the Gold' (Malta, where Brittain had served 1916-17), but portrays the deepening of the shadow that war cast over both of them. The Roland Leighton character, Lawrence Sinclair, killed at Loos, is little more than a cipher. This is probably because Brittain was still wary of how his family, especially his dominating mother Marie, would react to his appearance in a book by her. However, one of Roland's characteristics, as a poet, has been transposed to the brother figure, Gabriel, whose loudly proclaimed hatred of women,

depicted in his preference for being nursed by male orderlies rather than pretty young VADs, is an extreme version of Brittain's view of her own brother Edward.[21] In 'The Stranger Son', another novel from the late twenties, Brittain makes a determined effort to write away from her direct experience through the character of Vincent Harlow who dramatises 'the clash between the desire to serve one's country, & the desire to be true to one's belief that War is wrong'. But with 'Youth's Calvary', she is entrenched in firmly autobiographical territory. Nominally it is still fiction, but surviving chapters show it to be a very close progenitor of *Testament of Youth*. Yet, without a first-hand narrative, and especially without the first-hand testimony provided by letters and diaries, 'Youth's Calvary' altogether lacks the vivid immediacy of its famous successor.

Testament of Youth's eventual appearance came at the tail-end of the boom in the war literature of disillusionment that began a decade after the Armistice with the publication in 1928 of Edmund Blunden's autobiography, *Undertones of War*, and of Siegfried Sassoon's skilfully fictionalised *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. In 1929 the spate of war books had reached its numerical peak: twenty-nine were published that year, including the English translation of Erich Maria Remarque's *In Westen nichts Neues* as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which sold 250,000 copies in its first year, Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, and Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*.[22]

Vera Brittain made a close study of the war books of Blunden, Sassoon, and Graves, and they revived her own hopes of contributing to the genre. 'I am reading "Undertones of War"', she wrote at Christmas 1928; 'grave, dignified, but perfectly simple and straightforward; why shouldn't I write one like that?'[23] Early in 1929 she went with Winifred Holtby to see R.C. Sherriff's trench drama, *Journey's End*, the theatrical hit of the season; and towards the end of that year, she reviewed Aldington's *Death of a Hero* in *Time and Tide*, finding it to be 'a devastating indictment of pre-war civilization, with its ignorance, its idiocies and its values even falser than those of today'.[24]

In none of these works, however, did Brittain find adequate acknowledgment of the role of women in the war; indeed, she attacked Aldington's novel for its misogyny and for the way in which it poured a 'cynical fury of scorn' on the wartime suffering of women. It was obvious to her that no man, however sympathetic, would be able to speak for women.

The war was a phase of life in which women's experience did differ vastly

> from men's and I make no puerile claim to equality of suffering and service when I maintain that any picture of the war years is incomplete which omits those aspects that mainly concerned women . . . The woman is still silent who, by presenting the war in its true perspective in her own life, will illuminate its meaning afresh for its own generation.[25]

By the time she wrote those words, at the beginning of 1931, she had already embarked on her own book, and clearly intended to be that woman.

Of course, *Testament of Youth* was very far from being the only account by a woman of her wartime experience, though it remains the best known.[26] A large number had been published both during the war and in the years since, and for some of these, like Mary Lee's 1929 novel, *It's a Great War*, written from an American standpoint, Brittain had expressed warm words of commendation. She would also later read, 'with deep interest and sympathy', Irene Rathbone's novel, *We That Were Young* (1932), based on Rathbone's own experiences as a VAD, like Brittain, at the 1st London General Hospital in Camberwell. It conveyed, as no other book had done to date, the full horror of nursing the mutilated and wounded.[27] In the later stages of writing *Testament of Youth* in the summer of 1932, Brittain was concerned that Ruth Holland's recently published novel, *The Lost Generation*, anticipated her own theme. Overall it is difficult to avoid the impression that Brittain wanted to perpetuate the idea that hers was the one work about the war by a woman that mattered. [28] On the other hand, none of these other books are of comparable stature to *Testament of Youth*, lacking its range and narrative power. As Winifred Holtby wrote on one occasion when Brittain needed particular reassurance, 'Personally, I'm not in the least afraid of other people's books being like yours. What other woman writing has *both* your experience *and* your political training?'[29]

However, it is the men in Vera Brittain's story who typify the central founding myth on which *Testament of Youth* is based. Although in the early stages of the book's evolution she claimed to be writing for her generation of women, she was subsequently to expand her claim to include her generation of both sexes.[30] Certainly, nothing else in the literature of the First World War charts so clearly the path leading from the erosion of innocence, with the destruction of the public schoolboys' heroic illusions, to the survivors' final disillusionment that the sacrifice of the dead had been in vain. *Testament of Youth* is the *locus classicus*

of the myth of the lost generation, and it is important to understand why this should be so. Brittain's male friends were representative of the subalterns who went straight from their public schools or Oxbridge, in the early period of the war, to the killing fields of Flanders and France. As a demographic class these junior officers show mortality rates significantly higher than those of other officers or of the army as a whole. Uppingham School, where three of Brittain's circle were educated, lost about one in five of every old boy that served. The Bishop of Malvern, dedicating the war memorial at another public school, Malvern College, said that the loss of former pupils in the war 'can only be described as the wiping out of a generation'.[31] The existence of a lost generation is not literally true, and is entirely unsupported by the statistical evidence; [32] but, given the disproportionate death rate among junior officers, it is perhaps no wonder that Brittain believed that 'the finest flowers of English manhood had been plucked from a whole generation'. Robert Wohl has shown how this cult of a missing generation provided 'an important self-image for the survivors from within the educated elite and a psychologically satisfying and perhaps even necessary explanation of what happened to them after the war'.[33]

Vera Brittain had another aim in writing her book: to warn the next generation of the danger of succumbing out of naïve idealism to the false glamour of war. This gives *Testament of Youth* a significant difference of tone that sets it apart from the work of the war's male memoirists. Whereas a writer like Edmund Blunden tries to evoke the senselessness and confusion of trench warfare by revealing the depth of the war's ironic cruelty, Brittain, contrastingly, tries to provide a reasoned exposition of why the war had occurred and how war in the future might be averted. The publication of *Testament of Youth* at the end of August 1933 exactly matched the mood of international foreboding. It was the year in which Hitler had become chancellor of Germany, the Japanese had renewed their attack on Manchuria, and there had been difficulties over negotiations for disarmament at the League of Nations in Geneva. As a result, parallels between the tense world situation and the weeks leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914 were endemic in the press. Yet while Brittain often referred to *Testament of Youth* as her 'vehement protest against war', she was, at the time of writing it, still several years away from declaring herself a pacifist. In 1933, as the final chapters of her autobiography show, she clung to the fading promise of an internationalist solution as represented by the League of Nations. However, the process of writing her book undoubtedly hastened her transition to

pacifism in 1937, for looking back at the tumultuous events of her youth, she could for the first time separate her respect for the heroism and endurance of her male friends from the issue of what they had actually been fighting for.

Testament of Youth has been so often adduced as an historical source in studies of the First World War that it might be easy to forget that it is not history but autobiography and, moreover, autobiography that at a number of points uses novelistic devices of suspense and romance to heighten reality. This is particularly true of Brittain's treatment of her relationship with Roland Leighton, where rather than dealing with the complex web of emotions that existed on both sides she creates a conventional love story. She had carefully researched the background to the war in historical records, like the *Annual Register* and in the collections of the British Red Cross Society and the Imperial War Museum, and also employed a patchwork of letters and diaries to bring the characters of her major protagonists alive, which provide the backbone of the finished book. But she was fearful of 'numerous inaccuracies through queer tricks of memory',[34] and inevitably some mistakes slipped through the net. Her narrative of the period she had spent as a VAD at the 24 General at Etaples, from August 1917 to April 1918, does not possess the reliability of precise chronology and detail of earlier parts of *Testament of Youth*. She had ceased to keep a diary after returning from Malta in May 1917, and had only some letters to her mother, a few rushed notes to Edward, and a sometimes hazy recollection of events some fifteen years or so after they had taken place. For her - highly inaccurate - description of the Etaples mutiny, which had occurred in September 1917 while she was at the camp, she had been forced to rely on little more than the memory of Harry Pearson, an ex-soldier and friend of Winifred Holtby, who had had no direct involvement in the events either.[35]

The publication of Vera Brittain's wartime diaries and correspondence has revealed the extent of the complexity and ambivalence underlying her contemporary responses to the war. The evidence of these private records demonstrates that while at times she could rail against the war with anger and distress, at others she took refuge in a consolatory rhetoric rooted in traditional values of patriotism, sacrifice and idealism of the kind espoused by the wartime propaganda of both Church and State, or the sonnets of Rupert Brooke. In her letters written after Roland's death, for instance, her need to continue believing that the war was being fought for some worthwhile end - manifest in such gung-ho sentiments as, 'It is a great thing to live in these tremendous times',[36] or her

conviction that war is an immense purgation[37] - is perhaps entirely understandable. But equally, in *Testament of Youth*, it is not surprising to find that this kind of ambivalence is largely absent, and that Brittain is reluctant to confront her own susceptibility as a younger woman to the glamour of war, and unwilling to probe too deeply the roots of her own idealism in 1914.[38] For by the time she had completed her autobiography, Vera Brittain was ready to reject anything that identified war 'with grey crosses, and supreme sacrifices, and red poppies blowing against a serene blue sky'.[39]

In 1989, while writing Vera Brittain's biography, I travelled to the Somme to pay a visit to Roland Leighton's grave at Louvencourt. Our party of four, including two of Vera Brittain's grandchildren, spent the night in Albert, at the Hotel de la Paix, where Brittain herself had lunched in July 1933 during the second of her two visits to the cemetery where Roland was buried; and the next morning, which happened to be Remembrance Sunday, we made the hilly drive to Louvencourt. On the south-east side of the village, a large stone cross dominates the skyline, surrounded by acres of tranquil farmland. It is a small cemetery, of 151 Commonwealth and 76 French graves, beautifully cared for, as are all the military cemeteries of the First World War, by the Commonwealth Graves Commission. Roland's grave is in the middle, not far from the memorial cross and cenotaph, and its inscription includes the closing line from W.E. Henley's 'Echoes: XLII', 'Never Goodbye'.

I found the visitors' book in a little cupboard in the wall. Among its messages, I counted no fewer than ten people from around the world who, in the period of just two months, had come to this relatively out of the way area of the Somme in order to pay tribute to Roland Leighton - and to pay tribute to him because they had read about his brief life and early death in *Testament of Youth*. As Shirley Williams, Vera Brittain's daughter, says in her preface, it is a precious sort of immortality.

More than seventy years after its first publication, *Testament of Youth*'s power to disturb and to move remains undiminished.[40] Vera Brittain's 'passionate plea for peace', which attempts to show 'without any polite disguise, the agony of war to the individual and its destructiveness to the human race',[41] is one that, tragically, still resonates in our world today.

Mark Bostridge
London, February 2004

Preface

It is now sixty years since the First World War ended, and few are still alive who survived that fearful experience at first hand. The War should now be a part of history; the weapons, the uniforms, the static horror of battles fought in trenches are all obsolete now. Yet the First World War refuses to fade away. It has marked all of us who were in any way associated with it, even at one generation's remove through our parents. The books, the poetry, the artefacts of those four and a half years still speak to young men and women who were not even born when the Second World War ended.

Why are we so haunted? I think it is because of the terrible irony of the War; the idealism and high-mindedness that led boys and men in their hundreds of thousands to volunteer to fight and, often, to die; the obscenity of the square miles of mud, barbed wire, broken trees and shattered bodies into which they were flung, battalion after battalion; and the total imbalance between the causes for which the war was fought on both sides, as against the scale of the human sacrifice. As Wilfred Owen put it in 'The Send-Off',

Shall they return to beatings of great bells
In wild train-loads?
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells

There is another reason, too. The First World War was the culmination of personal war; men saw the other human being they had killed, visibly dead. Men fought with bayonets, with knives or even their bare hands. The guns themselves were on the battlefields, thick with smoke, the gunners sweaty and mudbound. War had not yet become a pitting of scientist against scientist or technologist against technologist. Death was not, on either side, elimination through pressing a button, but something seen and experienced personally, bloody, pathetic and foul.

My own picture of the War was gleaned from my mother. Her life, like that of so many of her contemporaries who were actually in the fighting or dealing with its consequences, was shaped by it and shadowed by it. It was hard for her to laugh unconstrainedly; at the back of her mind, the row upon row of wooden crosses were planted too deeply. Through her, I learned how much courage it took to live on in service to the world when all those one loved best were gone:

her fiancé first, her best friend, her beloved only brother. The only salvation was work, particularly the work of patching and repairing those who were still alive. After the War, the work went on – writing, campaigning, organising against war. My mother became a lifelong pacifist. I still remember her in her seventies, determinedly sitting in a CND demonstration, and being gently removed by the police.

Testament of Youth is, I think, the undisputed classic book about the First World War written by a woman, and indeed a woman whose childhood had been a very sheltered one. It is an autobiography and also an elegy for a generation. For many men and women, it described movingly how they themselves felt. Time and again, in small Welsh towns and in big Northern cities, someone has come up to me after a meeting to ask if my mother was indeed the author of *Testament of Youth*, and to say how much it meant to them. It is a precious sort of immortality.

I hope now that a new generation, more distant from the First World War, will discover the anguish and pain in the lives of those young people sixty years ago; and in discovering will understand.

Shirley Williams
August 1977

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V. B.
May, 1933

Foreword

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 the years leading up to 1914 until about 1925 - has meant to the men and women of my generation, the generation of those boys and girls who grew up just before the War broke out. 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 groups of individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from which my own family comes.

Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War. It is true that to do it meant looking back into a past of which many of us, preferring to contemplate to-morrow rather than yesterday, believe ourselves to be tired. But it is only in the light of that past that we, the depleted generation now coming into the control of public affairs, the generation which has to make the present and endeavour to mould the future, can understand ourselves or hope to be understood by our successors. I knew that until I had tried to contribute to this understanding, I could never write anything in the least worth while.

The way to set about it at first appeared obvious; it meant drawing a picture of middle-class England - its interests, its morals, its social ideals, its politics - as it was from the time of my earliest conscious memory, and then telling some kind of personal story against this changing background. My original idea was that of a long novel, and I started to plan it. To my dismay it turned out a hopeless failure; I never got much further than the planning, for I found that the people and the events about which I was writing were still too near and too real to be made the subjects of an imaginative, detached reconstruction.

Then I tried the effect of reproducing parts of the long diary which I kept from 1913 to 1918, with fictitious names substituted for all the real ones out of consideration for the many persons still alive who were mentioned in it with a youthful and sometimes rather cruel candour. This too was a failure. Apart from the fact that the diary ended too soon to give a complete picture, the fictitious names created a false atmosphere and made the whole thing seem spurious.

There was only one possible course left - to tell my own fairly typical story as truthfully as I could against the larger background, and take the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private, however great its public significance and however wide its general application. In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavour to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women.

I have tried to write the exact truth as I saw and see it about both myself and other people, since a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest. I have also made as much use as possible of old letters and diaries, because it seemed to me that the contemporary opinions, however crude and ingenuous, of youth in the period under review were at least as important a part of its testament as retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge. I make no apology for the fact that some of these documents renew with fierce vividness the stark agonies of my generation in its early twenties. The mature proprieties of ‘emotion remembered in tranquillity’ have not been my object, which, at least in part, is to challenge that too easy, too comfortable relapse into forgetfulness which is responsible for history’s most grievous repetitions. It is not by accident that what I have written constitutes, in effect, the indictment of a civilisation.

The task of creating a matrix for these records has not been easy, for it is almost impossible to see ourselves and our friends and lovers as we really were seven, fifteen or even twenty years ago. Many of our contemporaries of equal age, in spite of their differences of environment and inheritance, appear to resemble us more closely than we resemble ourselves two decades back in time, since the same prodigious happenings and the same profound changes of opinion which have moulded us have also moulded them. As Charles Morgan so truly says in *The Fountain*: ‘In each instant of their lives men die to that instant. It is not time that passes away from them, but they who recede from the constancy, the immutability of time, so that when afterwards they look back upon themselves it is not themselves they see, not even - as it is customary to say - themselves as they formerly were, but strange ghosts made in their image, with whom they have no communication.’

It is because of these difficulties of perspective that this book has been so long delayed; even to be wise in my generation and take advantage of the boom in War literature, I could not hurry it. Now, late in the field and already old enough

for life’s most formative events to seem very far away, I have done my best to put on record a personal impression of those incomparable changes which coincided with my first thirty years.

Vera Brittain *November 1929-March 1933*

PART I

‘Long ago there lived a rich merchant who, besides possessing more treasures than any king in the world, had in his great hall three chairs, one of silver, one of gold, and one of diamonds. But his greatest treasure of all was his only daughter, who was called Catherine.

‘One day Catherine was sitting in her own room when suddenly the door flew open, and in came a tall and beautiful woman, holding in her hands a little wheel.

‘“Catherine,” she said, going up to the girl, “which would you rather have - a happy youth or a happy old age?”

‘Catherine was so taken by surprise that she did not know what to answer, and the lady repeated again: “Which would you rather have - a happy youth or a happy old age?”

‘Then Catherine thought to herself: “If I say a happy youth, then I shall have to suffer all the rest of my life. No, I will bear trouble now, and have something better to look forward to.” So she looked up and said: “Give me a happy old age.”

‘ “So be it,” said the lady, and turned her wheel as she spoke, vanishing the next moment as suddenly as she had come.

‘Now this beautiful lady was the Destiny of poor Catherine.’

Sicilianische Märchen, by Laura Gonzenbach.

(Included in *The Pink Fairy Book*, edited by Andrew Lang.)

1

Forward from Newcastle

THE WAR GENERATION: AVE

In cities and in hamlets we were born,
And little towns behind the van of time;
A closing era mocked our guileless dawn
With jingles of a military rhyme.
But in that song we heard no warning chime,
Nor visualised in hours benign and sweet
The threatening woe that our adventurous feet
Would starkly meet.

Thus we began, amid the echoes blown
Across our childhood from an earlier war,
Too dim, too soon forgotten, to dethrone
Those dreams of happiness we thought secure;
While, imminent and fierce outside the door,
Watching a generation grow to flower,
The fate that held our youth within its power
Waited its hour.

V.B. 1932.

1

When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans.

To explain the reason for this egotistical view of history's greatest disaster, it is necessary to go back a little - to go back, though only for a moment, as far as the decadent 'nineties, in which I opened my eyes upon the none-too-promising day. I have, indeed, the honour of sharing with Robert Graves the subject of my

earliest recollection, which is that of watching, as a tiny child, the flags flying in the streets of Macclesfield for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Fortunately there is no need to emulate my contemporary's *Good-bye to All That* in travelling still further back into the ponderous Victorianism of the nineteenth century, for no set of ancestors could have been less conspicuous or more robustly 'low-brow' than mine. Although I was born in the 'Mauve Decade', the heyday of the Yellow Book and the Green Carnation, I would confidently bet that none of my relatives had ever heard of Max Beerbohm or Aubrey Beardsley, and if indeed the name of Oscar Wilde awakened any response in their minds, it was not admiration of his works, but disapproval of his morals.

My father's family came from Staffordshire; the first place-names bound up with my childish memories are those of the 'Five Towns' and their surrounding villages - Stoke, Hanley, Burslem, Newcastle, Longport, Trentham, Barlaston and Stone - and I still remember seeing, at a very early age, alarming glimpses through a train window of the pot-bank furnaces flaming angrily against a black winter sky. At an old house in Barlaston - then, as now, associated with the large and dominant Wedgwood family - my father and most of his eleven brothers and sisters were born.

The records of my more distant predecessors are few, but they appear to have been composed of that mixture of local business men and country gentlemen of independent means which is not uncommon in the Midland counties. They had lived in the neighbourhood of the Pottery towns for several generations, and estimated themselves somewhat highly in consequence, though there is no evidence that any of them did anything of more than local importance. The only ancestor of whom our scanty family documents record any achievement is a certain Richard Brittain, who was Mayor of Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1741. The others were mostly small bankers, land agents, and manufacturers on a family scale.

In 1855, when Victorian prosperity was flourishing on the pinnacle represented by the Great Exhibition of 1851, my great-grandfather gave up his work at a private bank in Newcastle, and purchased a little paper mill in the Potteries from a Huguenot family of paper-machine inventors. Towards the end of the century, his growing firm, in which my father was now a junior partner, acquired another small mill in the neighbourhood of Leek. From this business - of which, in 1889, the weekly wages bill was under £12 - the greater part of the family income has

since been derived. My father was one of the four chief directors until his retirement during the War, and even I am a capitalist to the extent of owning a few shares.

Out of my great-grandfather's experiment has now grown a large and flourishing concern which produces some exquisite fine papers from the most up-to-date plant and machinery, though the outlook of its directors - honourable, efficient business men, like the shrewd North-country manufacturers in a Phyllis Bentley novel - is still tinged with the benevolent commercial feudalism of the later nineteenth century. The collective psychology of the neighbourhood in my childhood may be deduced from a saying once proverbial in Staffordshire: 'Let us go to Leek out of the noise.' In those days my father, who even now regards my membership of the Labour Party as a strange highbrow foible, used often to boast to chance visitors that his firm 'had never had a Trade Union man on the place'.

When my father, who was the best-looking and the most reasonable of a large and somewhat obstinate family, married my mother in 1891, his relatives disapproved, since she was without money or pedigree, and had nothing but her shy and wistful prettiness to recommend her. Instead of being the prospective heiress of 'county' rank which my prospering grand-parents doubtless thought appropriate for their eldest son, she was merely the second of four daughters of a struggling musician who had come from Wales to take the post of organist at a church in Stoke-on-Trent. Since the remuneration brought in by this appointment was quite insufficient for the support of a wife and six growing children, he gave music and singing lessons, which paid a little, and composed songs and organ voluntaries, which did not pay at all.

As a young man my father fancied his voice and so took a few singing lessons from the kindly organist; thus he met my mother, then a graceful and exceptionally gentle girl of twenty-one, dominated by her more positive mother and sisters. After they were married - rather quickly and quietly at Southport, owing to the sudden premature death of my charming but impecunious grandfather - my father's family showed no disposition, beyond a formal visit on the part of his mother to hers, to see any more of these modest in-laws, and for some years the two families continued to live within a few miles of each other, but hardly ever to meet.

When I reached an age of comparative intelligence, I deduced from various anecdotes related by my young and pretty mother the existence of this attitude of

initial disdain on the part of my father's people towards her own. For some years it puzzled me, since to my hypercritical youth the majority of my paternal relatives, with their austere garments and their Staffordshire speech, appeared uncongenial and alarming, while my mother's sisters, all of whom made their way in the world long before independence was expected of middle-class women, were good-looking and agreeable, with charming musical voices and a pleasant taste in clothes. But after I left school, I soon learnt from my brief experience of the fashionable 'set' in Buxton that a family's estimate of its intrinsic importance is not always associated with qualifications which immediately convert the outsider to the same point of view.

2

During the early years of their marriage, my parents lived at Newcastle-under-Lyme.

They began their life together with a series of misfortunes, for their first child, a boy, was still-born, and shortly afterwards my father developed appendicitis, which proved a baffling mystery to the rough-and-ready provincial surgeons of the time, and left him prostrate for nearly twelve months. Eventually, however, I made my appearance at the decorous little villa in Sidmouth Road, arriving precipitately but safely during my father's absence at a pantomime in Hanley.

In the early stages of that urge towards metropolitanism which I developed with adolescence, I used to believe that such a typically provincial suburb as Newcastle could never have produced any man or woman of the smallest eminence, and with the youthful confidence that characteristically prefers to dwell on the fruits of success rather than to calculate their cost, I made up my mind as quickly as possible to repair that omission. But a few years ago I strangely discovered, through a chance meeting in a *wagon-lit* on the way to Geneva, that the small Staffordshire town - or rather, an adjacent village known as Silverdale - was at least the birthplace of Sir Joseph Cook, a former High Commissioner for Australia, who during our brief acquaintance at the League that summer habitually addressed me as 'Little Newcastle'.

I must have been about eighteen months old when my family moved to Macclesfield, which was a reasonable though none too convenient railway journey from the Potteries. Here, in the small garden and field belonging to our house, and in the smooth, pretty Cheshire lanes with their kindly hedges and

benign wild flowers, I and my brother Edward, less than two years my junior, passed through a childhood which was, to all appearances, as serene and uneventful as any childhood could be.

The first memories of my generation are inevitably of an experience which we all share in common, for they belong to dramatic national events, to the songs, the battles and the sudden terminations of suspense in a struggle more distant and more restricted than that which was destined to engulf us. Like the rest of my contemporaries, I began to distinguish real occurrences from fables and fancies about the time that the South African War broke out at the end of 1899. Before 1900, though animate and assertive, I could hardly have been described as a conscious observer of my background.

From the unrolling mists of oblivious babyhood, the strains drift back to me of ‘We’re Soldiers of the Queen, me lads!’ and ‘Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you’. An organ was triumphantly playing the first of these tunes in a Macclesfield street one cold spring morning when I noticed that banners and gay streamers were hanging from all the windows.

‘It’s because of the Relief of Ladysmith,’ my mother explained in response to my excited questioning; ‘Now Uncle Frank will be coming home.’

But Uncle Frank - a younger brother of my father’s who had been farming in South Africa when the War began and had joined the Queen’s forces as a trooper - never came home after all, for he died of enteric in Ladysmith half an hour before the relief of the town.

I had quite forgotten him on a grey January afternoon nearly a year later, when I sat snugly in our warm kitchen, drawing birds and dragons and princesses with very long hair, while the old lady whose Diamond Jubilee had made such an impression upon my three-year-old consciousness sank solemnly into her grave. In front of the fire, the little plump cook read the evening paper aloud to the housemaid.

‘“The Queen is now asleep,”’ she quoted in sepulchral tones, while I, absorbed with my crayons, remained busily unaware that so much more than a reign was ending, and that the long age of effulgent prosperity into which I had been born was to break up in thirteen years’ time with an explosion which would reverberate through my personal life to the end of my days.

It seemed only a few weeks afterwards, though it was actually eighteen months, and peace with South Africa had already been signed, that Edward and I

were assiduously decorating with flags the railing which divided the lower lawn from the hayfield, when my father came hurriedly up the drive with an anxious face and a newspaper in his hand.

‘You can take down your decorations,’ he announced gloomily. ‘There’ll be no Coronation. The King’s ill!’

That night I prayed earnestly to God to make the dear King better and let him live. The fact that he actually did recover established in me a touching faith in the efficacy of prayer, which superstitiously survived until the Great War proved to me, once for all, that there was nothing in it. To those who were twenty or more at the time of Victoria’s death, the brief reign of Edward - to whatever extent that indefatigable visitor to Paris and Biarritz may have been a factor in the coming of the deluge when it did - must have seemed merely a breathing space between the Victorian age and the German invasion of Belgium. To us, the War generation, it was much more than that, for in those nine years we grew from children into adolescents or adults. Yet of the King himself I remember nothing between his untimely attack of appendicitis, and the pious elegy in the best Victorian manner which I produced at school when my form was told to write a poem in memory of his passing.

3

Not only in its name, Glen Bank, and its white-painted semi-detachment, but in its hunting pictures and Marcus Stone engravings, its plush curtains, its mahogany furniture and its scarcity of books, our Macclesfield house represented all that was essentially middle-class in that Edwardian decade.

Following the long-established example of my father’s parents, we even had prayers before breakfast, during which performance everybody - from my mother, who perturbedly watched the boiling coffee-machine on the table, to the maids who shuffled uneasily in their chairs while the postman banged at the front door and the milkman thundered at the back - presented an aspect of inattentive agitation. The ceremony frequently ended in a tempestuous explosion on the part of my father, since Edward was almost always late, and could never say the Lord’s Prayer as rapidly as the others. As a rule he was still patiently pleading with the Deity to lead him not into ’tation, while the rest of us were thankfully vociferating ‘Amen’.

Although my father, as a self-willed young man in his thirties, was somewhat liable to these outbursts of irritation, they never really alarmed me, for he was always my champion in childhood, and could be relied upon as a safe bulwark against the bewildering onslaughts of his practical-joke-loving younger brothers and sisters, who regarded a small girl as fair game for their riotous ingenuity. Far more disturbing to my peace of mind was the strange medley of irrational fears which were always waiting to torment me - fears of thunder, of sunsets, of the full moon, of the dark, of standing under railway arches or crossing bridges over noisy streams, of the end of the world and of the devil waiting to catch me round the corner (this last being due to a nursemaid who overheard me, at the age of five or six, calling Edward 'Little fool!' and immediately commented: 'There, you've done it! *Now* you'll go to hell!').

Parents and nurses had by that time outgrown the stage of putting children into dark cupboards as a 'cure' for this type of 'tiresomeness' - an atrocity once perpetrated on my mother which adversely affected her psychology for ever afterwards - but such terrors did appear to them to have no other origin than a perverse unreasonableness, and I was expostulated with and even scolded for thus 'giving way'. There seemed to be no one to whom I could appeal for understanding of such humiliating cowardice, nobody whom I instinctively felt to be on my side against the mysterious phenomena which so alarmed me. Since I thus grew up without having my fears rationalised by explanation, I carried them with me, thrust inward but very little transformed, into adulthood, and was later to have only too good reason to regret that I never learnt to conquer them while still a child.

On the whole, in spite of these intermittent terrors, the years in which life is taken for granted were pleasant enough, if not conspicuously reassuring. For as long as I could remember, our house had always been full of music, never first-rate, but tuneful, and strangely persistent in its ability to survive more significant recollections. To the perturbation of my father, who never really cared for music in spite of the early singing lessons, there was always much practising of songs, or pianoforte solos, and later of violin exercises, and in Macclesfield my mother gave periodic 'musical evenings', for which Edward and I, at the ages of about seven and nine, used to sit up in order to play tinkling duets together, or innocuous trios with our governess.

My mother, who had an agreeable soprano voice, took singing lessons in Manchester; at musical parties, she sang 'When the Heart is Young', 'Whisper

and I Shall Hear' or 'The Distant Shore' - a typical example of Victorian pathos which always reduced me to tears at the point where 'the mai-den - drooped - and - DIED'. I was much more stimulated by 'Robert the Devil', and whenever my mother, her back safely turned towards me, trilled 'Mercy! Mercy! Mer-russy!' in her ardent soprano, I flung myself up and down upon the hearthrug in an ecstasy of masochistic fervour.

My first acquaintance with literature was less inspiring, for in Macclesfield the parental library consisted solely of a few yellow-back novels, two or three manuals on paper-making, and a large tome entitled *Household Medicine*, in which the instructions were moral rather than hygienic. Lest anyone should suspect the family of being literary, these volumes were concealed beneath a heavy curtain in the chill, gloomy dining-room. My father was once told by a publisher's traveller that the Pottery towns held the lowest record for book-buying in England. Being a true son of his district, which has an immense respect for 'brass' but none whatever for the uncommercial products of a poetic imagination, he remained faithful in Cheshire as in Staffordshire to his neighbourhood's reputation.

When I had exhausted my own nursery literature - a few volumes of Andrew Lang's fairy-tales, one of which was punctiliously presented to me on each birthday, and some of the more saccharine children's stories of L. T. Meade - I turned surreptitiously to the yellow-back novels. These were mostly by Wilkie Collins, Besant and Rice, and Mrs Henry Wood, and many were the maudlin tears that I wept over the sorrows of Poor Miss Finch and Lady Isabel Vane.

It was not till later, at the age of ten, that I discovered the manifold attractions of *Household Medicine*. The treatment of infectious diseases left me cold, but I was secretly excited at the prospect of menstruation; I also found the details of a confinement quite enthralling, though I had never shown that devotion to dolls which is supposed to indicate a strong maternal instinct. The whole subject of child-birth was completely dissociated in my mind from that of sex, about which I knew little and cared less. I was particularly impressed at the time by the instructions given to the child-bearing woman in the final stage of labour, though I can now only remember that she was advised to braid her hair in two plaits, and to wear an old flannel petticoat under her nightgown.

I must have been about eight when two solitary classics - probably neglected Christmas presents - found their way on to a whist table in the drawing-room. One was *Longfellow's Complete Poems*, bound in a bilious mustard-brown

leather, and the other a copy of Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*. I soon had Longfellow's poems - including 'Tales of a Wayside Inn' and 'The New England Tragedies' - almost by heart, and even now, when I am searching through my memory for an appropriate quotation, 'Life is real, life is earnest', and 'Hadst thou stayed I must have fled!' will insist upon ousting A. E. Housman and Siegfried Sassoon. But I found *Sohrab and Rustum* even more entrancing than Longfellow, and over and over again, when I was sure of having the drawing-room to myself, I indulged the histrionic instinct which had derived so much satisfaction from 'Robert the Devil' by imitating in dumb show the throes of the unfortunate Sohrab,

Lovely in death, upon the common sand.

My mother did her conscientious best to remedy the deficiencies of our literary education by reading Dickens aloud to us on Sunday afternoons. We ploughed through *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* in this manner, which perhaps explains why I have never been able to finish anything else by Dickens except *A Tale of Two Cities*. Far more effective as compensations for the lack of external stimulus were the five 'novels' that I wrote before I was eleven, on special books patiently constructed for me by a devoted and intelligent governess out of thick waste paper from the mills, and the exciting legends of a mythical community called 'The Dicks', which from my bed in the night nursery I used to relate to Edward across the passage in the day nursery after we were both supposed to be asleep. I was always the inventor and he the recipient of these enthralling communications, which must have begun when I was about six, and continued until I reached the mature age of eleven and went to school.

Edward was always a good listener, since his own form of self-expression then consisted in making unearthly and to me quite meaningless sounds on his small violin. I remember him, at the age of seven, as a rather solemn, brown-eyed little boy, with beautiful arched eyebrows which lately, to my infinite satisfaction, have begun to reproduce themselves, a pair of delicate question-marks, above the dark eyes of my five-year-old son. Even in childhood we seldom quarrelled, and by the time that we both went away to boarding-school he had already become the dearest companion of those brief years of unshadowed adolescence permitted to our condemned generation.

When I was eleven our adored governess departed, and my family moved from Macclesfield to a tall grey stone house in Buxton, the Derbyshire ‘mountain spa’, in order that Edward and I might be sent to ‘good’ day-schools. His was a small preparatory school of which a vigorous Buxton man was then headmaster; mine inevitably described itself as ‘a school for the daughters of gentlemen’. My brother’s school, which certainly gave him a better grounding than I received from mine, will always be associated in my recollection with one significant experience.

Soon after Edward went there I happened, on my way to the town, to pass the school playground at a time when the boys were uproariously enjoying an afternoon break. Seeing Edward, I stopped; he called several of his newly made cronies, and we spent a few moments of pleasant ‘ragging’ across the low wall. I felt no consciousness of guilt, and was unaware that I had been seen, on their return home along an adjacent road, by my mother and an aunt who was staying with us. At tea-time a heavy and to me inexplicable atmosphere of disapproval hung over the table; shortly afterwards the storm exploded, and I was severely reprimanded for my naughtiness in thus publicly conversing with Edward’s companions. (I think it was the same aunt who afterwards informed me that the reason why our letters had to be left open at my school was ‘in case any of the girls should be so wicked as to write to boys’. Probably this was true of most girls’ schools before the War.)

The small incident was my first intimation that, in the eyes of the older generation, free and unself-conscious association between boys and girls was more improper than a prudish suspicion of the opposite sex. It aroused in me a rebellious resentment that I have never forgotten. I had not heard, in those days, of co-educational schools, but had I been aware of their experimental existence and been able to foresee my far-distant parenthood, I should probably have decided, then and there, that my own son and daughter should attend them.

I do not remember much about my day-school except that when I first went there I was badly bullied by two unpleasant little girls, who soon tired of the easy physical advantage given them by their superior age and stature, and instead endeavoured to torment my immature mind by forcing upon it items of sexual information in their most revolting form. My parents, who had suffered such qualms of apprehension over my entirely wholesome friendliness with Edward’s riotous companions, remained completely unaware of this real threat

to my decency and my peace. I never mentioned it to them owing to a bitter sense of shame, which was not, however, aroused by my schoolfellows' unæsthetic communications, but by my inability to restrain my tears during their physical assaults. So ambitious was I already, and so indifferent to sex in all its manifestations, that their attempts to corrupt my mind left it as innocent as they found it, and I resented only the pinchings and wrist-twistings which always accompanied my efforts to escape.

Though my school took a few boarders, most of its pupils were local; in consequence the class-room competition was practically non-existent. At the age of twelve I was already preening the gay feathers of my youthful conceit in one of the top forms, where the dull, coltish girls of sixteen and seventeen so persistently treated me as a prodigy that I soon lost such small ability as I had possessed to estimate my modest achievements at their true and limited worth.

When I first went to the school, it was in charge of an ancient mistress who was typical of the genteel and uncertificated past, but soon afterwards a new Principal was appointed with an unimpeachable Degree acquired from Cheltenham. In Buxton this was regarded as quite a remarkable qualification for a headmistress, and in those days my parents' standards of scholarship were almost as unexacting. They had never, indeed, had much opportunity to become otherwise, for my mother had received a very spasmodic and unorthodox education, while my father, after reacting with characteristic if pardonable obstinacy against the rigours of Malvern in the eighteen-seventies, had been sent to the High School at Newcastle-under-Lyme, where the boys' only consistent occupation was a perpetual baiting of the much-enduring masters.

During my father's uproarious days at Newcastle High School, a Hanley boy, two or three years his junior, named Enoch Arnold Bennett, was more profitably pursuing his studies at the Middle School in the same town. There was, needless to say, very little communication between the pupils from the Middle School, and the domineering young tyrants at the High School. Even after the author of *The Old Wives' Tale* had won his lasting place in English literature, my relatives still thought nothing much of the Bennetts, whom they characteristically described as 'very ordinary people'.

The education given to my parents, in both quality and quantity, was of a type at that time shared, and considered quite adequate, by almost the whole of the provincial middle-classes. Its shortcomings were in no way compensated by the superior attainments of their friends, for throughout my childhood in

Macclesfield and Buxton, I cannot remember that anyone ever came to the house of more interest to me than relatives, or mentally restricted local residents with their even more limited wives.

These families were typical of the kind that still inhabit small country towns; the wives ‘kept house’, and the husbands occupied themselves as branch bank-managers, cautious and unenterprising solicitors, modest business men who preferred safety to experiment, and ‘family’ doctors whose bedside manner camouflaged their diagnostical uncertainties. Schoolmasters were not encouraged, as my father found their conversation tedious. Always a staunch Free-Trader, he was ready to join issue against any supporter of Joseph Chamberlain in the topical controversy of Free Trade *versus* Tariff Reform, but he did object to being diverted from the enthralling discussion of paper manufacture to subjects of such remote interest as the bombardment of Port Arthur, the Turkish atrocities in Macedonia, or the policy of the Russian revolutionary party which was bloodily agitating for the establishment of a Duma.

To my own immature ears, hardly an echo of these or other far-off and rather more divine events ever succeeded in penetrating; even the elements of fiscal argument, though respectable enough, were regarded as beyond a schoolgirl’s understanding. I suppose it was the very completeness with which all doors and windows to the more adventurous and colourful world, the world of literature, of scholarship, of art, of politics, of travel, were closed to me, that kept my childhood so relatively contented a time. Once I went away to school, and learnt - even though from a distance that filled me with dismay - what far countries of loveliness, and learning, and discovery, and social relationship based upon enduring values, lay beyond those solid provincial walls which enclosed the stuffiness of complacent bourgeoisdom so securely within themselves, my discontent kindled until I determined somehow to break through them to the paradise of sweetness and light which I firmly believed awaited me in the south.

I often wonder how many of my present-day friends were themselves limited by a horizon as circumscribed as that which bounded my first thirteen years. Up to the time, indeed, that I was twenty-one, my sole contacts with life outside England were confined to a Cook’s tour to Lucerne, where I developed mumps immediately on arrival and spent the rest of the fortnight in a sanatorium, and a brief visit to Paris, during which my father was knocked down by a taxicab and promptly insisted upon all of us returning to Buxton.

I believe that it is Albert Edward Wiggam, the American author of *The Fruit of the Family Tree*, who has calculated that half the world's distinguished men and women are produced by only one per cent of its population, and that all the teeming mediocre millions of the rest of mankind are required to contribute the other half of its leaders. But when I consider - and in my later teens I often used to consider - the incalculable advantages of heredity and early environment that are involved in merely being born a member of such families as the Huxleys, the Haldanes, the Frys, the Darwins or the Arnolds, what really seems remarkable is not that the undistinguished residue produces only half the sum of human talent, but that those who belong to it ever emerge at all from the blackest obscurity.

5

At the age of thirteen, small for my years and still very much of a child in spite of my mature Fifth Form associates, I was sent away to school at the recently founded St Monica's, at Kingswood in Surrey - a safe choice, because the eldest and ablest of my mother's sisters was one of the two Principals. Her partner, Louise Heath Jones, a brilliant, dynamic woman who had been educated at Cheltenham and Newnham, alternately inspired and intimidated both girls and mistresses by her religious idealism and the strongly individual quality of her teaching. The *tempo* at which her ardent spirit caused her to live wore out too quickly her fragile constitution; a premature breakdown led to her early retirement soon after I left the school, and she died in 1931 after many years of illness.

My aunt, level-headed and self-reliant, remained in charge from 1914 until the end of 1930, and though she possessed neither college degree nor technical training in education, her personal dignity and her natural gift for organisation soon raised St Monica's to a high position, with a refreshingly enlightened and broad-minded regime among girls' private schools. It has recently passed out of this category into the hands of an exclusively masculine committee, and now ranks as a public school.

When, a few years before the War, I first went to St Monica's, the young school had not yet reached the high educational standards of its later days, and though my budding ambition to go to college - which developed as soon as I discovered that such places as women's colleges existed, and learnt what they stood for - met with real sympathy from both Principals and staff, it received no

practical preparation for the necessary examinations, which were not then taken as a matter of normal routine. No doubt my father's persistent determination throughout my schooldays that I should be turned into an entirely ornamental young lady deterred both my aunt and Miss Heath Jones from the efforts that they would otherwise have made on my behalf; the most benevolent and aspiring headmistresses are, after all, singularly helpless in the hands of misguided but resolute parents.

My classroom contemporaries regarded my ambitions, not unnaturally, with no particular interest or sympathy. Many of them were fashionable young women to whom universities represented a quite unnecessary prolongation of useless and distasteful studies, and they looked upon my efforts to reach the top of a form, and my naïve anxiety to remain there, as satisfactorily exonerating them from the troublesome endeavour to win that position for themselves.

Socially, of course, I was quite without standing among these wealthy girls, designed by their parents for London or Edinburgh society, with their town addresses in Mayfair or Belgravia, and their country houses of which the name 'Hall' or 'Park' was frequently a part. My parents could not afford the numerous theatres and concerts to which many of them were taken by request of their families; my 'best' clothes were home-made or purchased from undistinguished shops in Buxton or Manchester; and the presents that I received at Christmas or on birthdays did not bear comparison with the many elegant gifts that my class-mates displayed for the admiration of contemporaries on returning to school after the holidays.

It is hardly surprising that few of the girls coveted the reputation unenthusiastically conceded to me for 'brains', or even envied my comparative freedom from refused lessons, but regarded these assets as mere second-rate compensations for my obvious inferiority in the advantages that they valued most. In those days as in these, girls' private schools attracted but few parents possessed of more than a half-hearted intention to train their daughters for exacting careers or even for useful occupations. Both for the young women and their mothers, the potential occurrence that loomed largest upon the horizon was marriage, and in spite of the undaunted persistence with which both the Principals upheld their own progressive ideals of public service, almost every girl left school with only two ambitions - to return at the first possible moment to impress her school-fellows with the glory of a grown-up *toilette*, and to get engaged before everybody else.

Although I was then more deeply concerned about universities than engagements, I shared the general hankering after an adult wardrobe which would be at least partly self-chosen, since all girls' clothing of the period appeared to be designed by their elders on the assumption that decency consisted in leaving exposed to the sun and air no part of the human body that could possibly be covered with flannel. In these later days, when I lie lazily sunning myself in a mere gesture of a bathing-suit on the gay *plage* of some small Riviera town - or even, during a clement summer, on the ultra-respectable shores of southern England - and watch the lean brown bodies of girl-children, almost naked and completely unashamed, leaping in and out of the water, I am seized with an angry resentment against the conventions of twenty years ago, which wrapped up my comely adolescent body in woollen combinations, black cashmere stockings, 'liberty' bodice, dark stockinette knickers, flannel petticoat and often, in addition, a long-sleeved, high-necked, knitted woollen 'spencer'.

At school, on the top of this conglomeration of drapery, we wore green flannel blouses in the winter and white flannel blouses in the summer, with long navy-blue skirts, linked to the blouses by elastic belts which continually slipped up or down, leaving exposed an unsightly hiatus of blouse-tape or safety-pinned shirt-band. Green and white blouses alike had long sleeves ending in buttoned cuffs at the wrist, and high collars covering the neck almost to the chin, and fastening tightly at the throat with stiff green ties. For cricket and tennis matches, even in the baking summer of 1911, we still wore the flowing skirts and high-necked blouses, with our heavy hair braided into pigtails; it was not until after the War that the school went into sleeveless white linens for summer games. Only in the gymnasium class did our handicapped limbs acquire freedom, and even then the tight, long-sleeved blouses were worn under our weighty pleated tunics. In spite of these impediments, the games and drill did make us lithe and hard, and during the War I had reason to thank them for the powers of endurance of which they laid the foundation.

The only intimate friends that I made at Kingswood were a small, dark, half-foreign girl and a pretty, fair, sweet-natured Anglo-Saxon, whose names might very suitably have been Mina and Betty. Mina, a younger daughter in a large and wealthy family, displayed at school a real artistic talent, while Betty possessed intellectual possibilities which she was never sufficiently interested to explore, owing to a quite frankly acknowledged desire to marry and have children. In neither case did the intimacy long survive our departure from school.

Mina, during the War, developed under the stress of a perturbing love-affair a strong disapproval of my character, which led her to conclude that I had never been worthy of her friendship. When I was nursing in London in the early part of 1916, and she was cultivating her considerable gift for drawing at an art school, she made an appointment with me at - of all appropriate places for a moral condemnation - the Albert Memorial, in order to inform me that I was selfish, insincere, ambitious, and therefore no longer deserving of her affection. I can see her sturdy little figure now, conspicuous in a coat and skirt of strange pink cloth against the solid stone basis of the immaculate Albert, as she arraigned me for the harsh, unmelting bitterness into which I had been frozen by the first real tragedy of my experience.

‘You never really cared for Roland; you only wanted to marry him out of ambition! If you’d really loved him you couldn’t possibly have behaved in the way you’ve done the past few weeks!’

It was, of course, typical of the average well-to-do girl of the period to assume that the desire for power, which is as universal among women as among men, could only be fulfilled by the acquisition of a brilliant husband. I do not recall the mood in which I spent the long ’bus ride back to Camberwell, but I probably minded dreadfully at the time. At any rate, we parted for good, and I cannot recollect that I have ever encountered Mina since that morning.

With Betty the association lasted longer and I owe far more to it; for nearly two years during the War we served by arrangement in the same military hospitals, and even after it was over kept up the kind of friendship that renews itself at Old Girls’ Association meetings and exchanges of annual Christmas cards. But real intimacy between us became difficult as soon as we left school, for our homes were in different parts of England, our parents cherished different social aspirations, and our personal ambitions were not the same. Betty had no desire for a university education or the independence of a professional woman. The War, which frustrated individual as well as national hopes, caused her future to remain uncertain until 1922, when she married a man considerably her senior who soon afterwards became a Conservative Member of Parliament. To-day her two pretty children, a little older than my own, still provide a point of contact between lives which in other respects could hardly differ more widely.

6

I remember Kingswood very clearly as it looked twenty years ago, with the inviolate Downs stretching away to Smitham, and the thick woods unbroken by the pink and grey eruption of suburban villas which has now torn them ruthlessly into sections. On summer evenings one of our favourite rambles took us across the sloping fields, sweet with clover and thyme and wild roses, between Kingswood and Chipstead; there as twilight descended we looked a little nervously at the darkening sky for indications of Halley's Comet which was said to herald such prodigious disasters, or listened more serenely to the nightingales in a stillness broken only at long intervals by the lazy, infrequent little trains which ambled down the toy railway line in the valley. The thyme and the roses still blossom bravely about those doomed meadows, but I have never heard the nightingales there since the War, and the once uninterrupted walks have long been spoilt by barbed-wire barriers and notices drawn up for the intimidation of stray trespassers.

In the months before I went up to Oxford, when I had to plough, solitary and unaided, through the tedious intricacies of examination syllabuses, I often privately condemned my parents for not sending me to Cheltenham, or Roedean, or even to an ordinary High School, where practised authorities would have saved me from the fret of wrestling with academic mysteries. But of late years I have realised that St Monica's, although it did not then possess certain routine advantages of a public school, is very far from being a matter for regret. No doubt it did not provide that prolonged and exacting type of education which is now the inevitable preliminary to any professional career; but such training was then mainly obtainable in schools which sterilised the sexual charm out of their pupils, and turned them into hockey-playing hoydens with *gauche* manners and an armoury of inhibitions.

St Monica's did not, of course, prepare me either for the strain and stress of a very few years later, but I question if the artificial atmosphere of hockey matches and High School examinations would have done this any better, or whether, indeed, the early development of a more critical and less idealistic spirit would have proved, in the long run, an effective weapon against annihilating calamity. A dozen years' periodic observation of Oxford dons has led me to doubt whether, even for those misguided dupes the boys and girls of the War generation, an over-development of the critical faculty would not have been at least as dangerous as its under-development. The latter, at any rate, does nothing to destroy that vitality which is more important than any other quality in

combating the obstacles, the set-backs and the obtuse ridicule which are more often encountered in early youth than at any other time.

We were too young to have had power to divert the remorseless impetus of history; we should probably have gone - have had to go - to the War whatever our psychology, and it is arguable that our early months of illumined faith were a factor in the ultimate return of some of us to life. At least the unexacting demands of the easy lessons at St Monica's, the mildness of the intellectual competition - a little more substantial than that of the Buxton school only because the girls were drawn from a wider area - and the lovely peace of the rich, undisturbed country, left scope for much reading of Dante and Shakespeare, of Shelley and Browning and Swinburne, and gave opportunity for dreams of which many, in the strangest ways and against all probability, have since materialised.

Only the other day a fellow-journalist, half rueful and half amused, told me that I had made a better thing out of sex equality than she had ever thought possible for such a portentous topic until I began to scatter articles on equal pay and married women's careers through the pages of the daily and weekly Press. If that is so, I can only reply that I have written nothing on the various aspects of feminism which has not been based upon genuine conviction, and that the foundations of that conviction were first laid, strangely enough, at a school which was apparently regarded by many of the parents who patronised it as a means of equipping girls to be men's decorative and contented inferiors.

Miss Heath Jones, who from my knowledge of her temperament I now suspect to have been secretly in sympathy with the militant suffrage raids and demonstrations which began after the foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1905, was an ardent though always discreet feminist. She often spoke to me of Dorothea Beale and Emily Davies, lent me books on the woman's movement, and even took me with one or two of the other senior girls in 1911 to what must have been a very mild and constitutional suffrage meeting in Tadworth village. This practical introduction to feminism was to be for ever afterwards associated in my mind with the great heat, the railway strikes, the Parliament Bill debates and the international crises of that hectic summer, which provided such wealth of topical detail for my passionate editorial in the 1911 School Magazine.

To this day I can remember some of the lessons which Miss Heath Jones gave us in History and Scripture - lessons which raced backwards and forwards in the

same five minutes from the French Revolution to the Liberal Victory in the 1910 General Elections, from the prophecies of Isaiah to the 1911 Italian invasion of Tripoli. From the unimaginative standpoint of pre-war examinations they were quite unpractical, but as teaching in the real sense of the word - the creation in immature minds of the power to think, to visualise, to perceive analogies - they could hardly have been surpassed. In 1908, after Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, she set us drawing maps of the Balkan Peninsula, and in 1911 she arranged a school debate on the Morocco crisis - about which I held forth with vague but patriotic fervour - when Germany sent the *Panther* to Agadir.

Her encouragement even prevailed upon us to read the newspapers, which were then quite unusual adjuncts to teaching in girls' private schools. We were never, of course, allowed to have the papers themselves - our innocent eyes might have strayed from foreign affairs to the evidence being taken by the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce or the Report of the International Paris Conference for the suppression of the White Slave Traffic - and the carefully selected cuttings invariably came from *The Times* or the *Observer* unmodified by contrary political opinions, but the fact that we had them at all testified to a recognition of the importance of current events far from customary at a time when politics and economics were still thought by most headmistresses to be no part of the education of marriageable young females.

Among the girls Miss Heath Jones's lessons were not always appreciated, for most of the sheltered young women in that era displayed no particular anxiety to have the capacity for thought developed within them. Even now I recall the struggles of some of my contemporaries to avoid facing some of the less agreeable lessons of 1914. There is still, I think, not enough recognition by teachers of the fact that the desire to think - which is fundamentally a moral problem - must be induced before the power is developed. Most people, whether men or women, wish above all else to be comfortable, and thought is a pre-eminently uncomfortable process; it brings to the individual far more suffering than happiness in a semi-civilised world which still goes to war, still encourages the production of unwanted C3 children by exhausted mothers, and still compels married partners who hate one another to live together in the name of morality.

Out of the desultory and miscellaneous reading in which, under Miss Heath Jones's inspired and unconventional tuition, I indulged between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, a poem, a novel and a challenging triumph of propaganda

especially determined the direction in which I was moving. During Preparation one wild autumn evening in St Monica's gymnasium, when the wind shook the unsubstantial walls and a tiny crescent of moon, glimpsed through a skylight in the roof, scudded in and out of the flying clouds, I first read Shelley's 'Adonais', which taught me in the most startling and impressive fashion of my childhood's experience to perceive beauty embodied in literature, and made me finally determine to become the writer that I had dreamed of being ever since I was seven years old. I still defy anyone, however 'highbrow', to better the thrill of reading, for the first time and at sixteen, the too-familiar lines:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity . . .

The novel, strangely enough, was Mrs Humphry Ward's deistic tract, *Robert Elsmere*. Had I realised when I read it that its author was even then portentously engaged in rallying the anti-suffrage forces, it might have influenced me less, but I remained ignorant until some years later of Mrs Ward's political machinations, and her book converted me from an unquestioning if somewhat indifferent church-goer into an anxiously interrogative agnostic.

To Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* - that 'Bible of the Woman's Movement' which sounded to the world of 1911 as insistent and inspiring as a trumpet-call summoning the faithful to a vital crusade - was due my final acceptance of feminism. Miss Heath Jones lent me the book soon after its publication, and I can still tingle with the excitement of the passage which reinforced me, brought up as were nearly all middle-class girls of that period to believe myself predestined to a perpetual, distasteful but inescapable tutelage, in my determination to go to college and at least prepare for a type of life more independent than that of a Buxton young lady:

' *" We take all labour for our province! "*

'From the judge's seat to the legislator's chair; from the statesman's closet to the merchant's office; from the chemist's laboratory to the astronomer's tower, there is no post or form of toil for which it is not our intention to attempt to fit ourselves; and there is no closed door we do not intend to force open; and there is no fruit in the garden of knowledge it is not our determination to eat.'

Thus it was in St Monica's garden, beside a little over-grown pool where the

plump goldfish slid idly in and out of the shadows, and the feathered grasses drooped their heavy heads to the water's edge, that I first visualised in rapt childish ecstasy a world in which women would no longer be the second-rate, unimportant creatures that they were now considered, but the equal and respected companions of men. Indeed, that school garden, now trimly beautiful in its twenty-year-old mellowness, but then recently hewn from the rough surface of the Downs and golden-hedged with tangled gorse and broom, has been for me somehow associated with every past phase of life.

There, at the age of sixteen, I first began to dream how the men and women of my generation - with myself, of course, conspicuous among that galaxy of Leonardos - would inaugurate a new Renaissance on a colossal scale, and incidentally redeem all the foolish mistakes of our forefathers. There, more realistically, I planned my long-desired and constantly postponed career, there sought refuge after the anxiety of college examinations, there waited for news from the War, and felt the sinister shudder of the guns from the Belgian coast shake the Caterham Valley like a subterranean earthquake. There, too, when the War was over, I wandered about after taking the older girls for classes in history and international relations, thinking about relations quite other than international, and wondering whether or not to get married.

But I anticipate. In my last term, as head-girl, I did no examinations and very little work, except for special history and literature classes with a visiting mistress, Miss F., one of those rare teachers who, like Miss Heath Jones, possessed originality and a real talent for inspiring ideas. Her gifts may be judged from the fact that she succeeded in filling me with a tremendous enthusiasm for the works of Carlyle and Ruskin. 'The most important of all terms so far - as it marked the rising of my Star,' begins an earnest fragment of sixteen-year-old diary recorded during the holidays after Miss F. first went to Kingswood - though fortunately the reference was not to herself, but to the impetus given by her teaching to the growth of those sentiments which, under the influence of *Past and Present,* I should then have described as my Ideals.

An elegant, introspective, temperamental creature, Miss F. once spent a few days in Buxton with me and my family - who mildly disapproved of her - and told our fortunes on a dull afternoon. Over Edward, who was then sixteen, she appeared indefinite and uncommunicative, but to me she remarked: 'I think you'll be married all right' (the phrase implying acceptance even on her part of what was still supposed to be the major preoccupation of an intelligent girl), 'but

if you're not married at twenty-one, you'll have to wait till you're thirty. By that time you'll have some kind of a career; I don't know quite what it will be, but it will turn out well and your marriage won't interfere with it.'

Just before I left St Monica's I played the part of the Madonna in *Eager Heart*, Miss Buckton's Christmas mystery play, which gave a peculiarly memorable and emotional quality to my last weeks at school. Temperamentally, at least, I was thoroughly well adapted to the role, and this fact, to anyone who knows the play, with its half-sentimental, half-mystical detachment from the pedestrian demands of everyday life, will perhaps give a better idea than anything else of the state of mind in which, before I had turned eighteen, I left school to 'come out' into the alien atmosphere of Buxton 'society'.

7

It would not, I think, be possible for any present-day girl of the same age even to imagine how abysmally ignorant, how romantically idealistic and how utterly unsophisticated my more sensitive contemporaries and I were at that time. The naïveties of the diary which I began to write consistently soon after leaving school, and kept up until more than half way through the War, must be read in order to be believed. My 'Reflective Record, 1913', is endorsed on its title page with the following comprehensive aspirations:

'To extend love, to promote thought, to lighten suffering, to combat indifference, to inspire activity.'

'To know everything of something and something of everything. '

The same page contains a favourite quotation from Rostand's '*Princesse Lointaine*':

Ah! l'inertie est le seul vice, Maître Erasme,
Et le seul vertu, c'est . . . l'enthousiasme.

One entry, made on December 20th, 1913, after a local dance, runs as follows: 'It leaves me with a very unsatisfied feeling to have met so many stupid and superficial men with whom all the girls are obviously so pleased. How I wish I could meet a good strong splendid man, full of force and enthusiasm, and in earnest about his life! There must *be* such!'

I have never shown this expression of my emotional aspirations to my husband, so I do not know whether or not he would regard himself as fulfilling the description.

By 1916, the optimistic ideals of earlier years had all disappeared from the title-page of my ingenuous journal; they were replaced by a four-line verse from the writings of Paul Verlaine which has always seemed to me to represent more precisely than any other poem the heavy sense of having lived so long and been through so much that descended upon the boys and girls of my generation after a year or two of war:

Oh, qu'as tu fait, toi que voila'
Pleurant sans cesse?
Dis, qu'as tu fait, toi que voila'
De ta jeunesse?

William Noel Hodgson, who when only twenty was killed on the Somme, similarly lamented this lost youth which we had barely known in one of the saddest little songs that the War produced. It brought me near to weeping, I remember, when after four years of hospitals, and last leaves, and farewells, I heard it sung by Topliss Green at the Albert Hall about 1919:

Take my Youth that died to-day,
Lay him on a rose-leaf bed,—
He so gallant was and gay,—
Let them hide his tumbled head,
Roses passionate and red
That so swiftly fade away.

Let the little grave be set
Where my eyes shall never see;
Raise no stone, make no regret
Lest my sad heart break, - and yet,
For my weakness, let there be
Sprigs of rue and rosemary.

But again I anticipate. The naïve quotations from my youthful diary which I have used, and intend to use, are included in this book in order to give some idea of the effect of the War, with its stark disillusionments, its miseries unmitigated by polite disguise, upon the unsophisticated *ingénue* who 'grew up' (in a purely

social sense) just before it broke out. The annihilating future Armageddon, of which the terrors are so often portrayed in vivid language by League of Nations Union prophets, could not possibly, I think, cause the Bright Young People of to-day, with their imperturbable realism, their casual, intimate knowledge of sexual facts, their familiarity with the accumulated experiences of us their foredoomed predecessors, one-tenth of the physical and psychological shock that the Great War caused to the Modern Girl of 1914.

It is, of course, conceivable that young women brought up, like myself, in the provinces, were more childishly and idealistically ignorant than their London contemporaries; yet, looking back upon the London girls with whom I went to school, I do not think that the difference was very great. One of them I well remember saying to me, just after she ‘came out’, that she was always afraid of going too far with men, because she really didn’t know what ‘too far’ was. I was quite unable to enlighten her, though an incident that had happened to me two or three years earlier made me certain that the vague peril was something extremely embarrassing and profoundly uncomfortable.

At the end of one school term, I had been as usual shepherded by a mistress into the train at St Pancras for the long journey to Buxton. Carefully observing the rule, which originated in contemporary White Slave Traffic alarms, that we were never to travel in carriages alone with men, she selected a compartment in which the one male passenger was safely accompanied by a respectable elderly female. Unfortunately at Kettering, the first stop after we left St Pancras, the elderly female got out, and immediately the train started again the strange man, a swarthy, black-haired individual of the commercial-traveller class, with rolling eyes and large hairy hands, came over from his corner and sat down beside me.

‘I was waiting for that old cat to get out so that we could have a nice little talk,’ he promisingly began.

More alarmed than I allowed myself to appear, I looked helplessly at the closed door leading to the corridor, but though its very existence protected me better than I realised, it was completely cut off by my companion’s insinuating bulk.

‘I see you’re going to Buxton,’ he continued, looking at my initialled suitcase. ‘How I wish I hadn’t got to get out at Leicester! Now won’t you just tell me your name?’

Encouraged by the mention of Leicester, which was only another half-hour’s

journey, I responded inventively that my name was Violet Brown and that I didn't live in Buxton but was only going there for a week to stay with friends - a fabrication inspired by the nightmarish fear that this apparition might suddenly appear in search of me on our own front doorstep.

'And how old are you?' he inquired, pressing closer, and looked disappointed when I answered truthfully that I was fourteen.

'Why,' he exclaimed, 'you're such a pretty little girl - I thought you must be quite seventeen! When you get home you must send me your photograph—' and he squeezed me still further into the corner.

It was then that I realised that the train, upon which I was depending to convey me to Leicester and salvation, had suddenly come to a standstill. Some shouts were raised along the line; my enemy heard them, and informed me with satisfaction that we had broken down, and could not possibly get to Leicester for over an hour.

'Now what a lucky thing we're together!' he said softly, and took my hand - a grubby enough schoolgirl's fist, with ink-stained nails chipped by games and amateur gardening. 'Pretty little girls like you shouldn't bite their nails,' he murmured playfully, examining my fingers. 'You'll stop biting them to please me, won't you? - and give me a kiss to show that we're pals?'

The leering black eyes, the pawing hands and the alcoholic breath combined with the train's delay to drive me into a panic. Suddenly desperate, and probably more muscular than my tormentor had anticipated, I flung myself with an immense effort out of his encroaching arms, and dashed frantically into the corridor. The subdued middle-aged woman into whose compartment I blindly stumbled, flushed and hatless, regarded me with amazement, but she accepted my incoherent tale of an 'awful man', and pacified my agitation by giving me a share of her luncheon sandwiches. When, after quite an hour's breakdown, we did at last pass Leicester, she went with me to retrieve my suitcase from the compartment in which I still feared to see my swarthy assailant, but he had gone.

I never related this incident to my family - the thought of the hullabaloo that would follow, of the fuss that would be made both at home and at school whenever I had to travel alone, filled me with too great a distaste - but so deep was the repugnance aroused in me that I remember it as clearly as though it had happened last week. It was not, however, until the summer of 1922, when from an open-air platform in Hyde Park I supported the Six Point Group in urging the

passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill by the House of Commons, that I realised the existence, as legal conceptions, of indecent assault and the age of consent.

So far as I can now judge, at eighteen I was at least as interested in social problems and in what were then always referred to as ‘the facts of life’ as most of my contemporaries, though my sexual curiosity was always a bad second to my literary ambition. Yet when the War broke out, I did not clearly understand what was meant by homosexuality, incest or sodomy, and was puzzled by the shadow that clung to the name of Oscar Wilde, whose plays I discovered in 1913 and read with a rapturous delight in their epigrams.

Nearly all the older girls with whom I went to school had been addicted to surreptitious conversations about the advent of babies; periodic discovery by parents or teachers thrust these intriguing speculations still further underground, and led to that intensive searching for obstetrical details through the Bible and such school-library novels as *David Copperfield* and *Adam Bede* which appears to have been customary almost everywhere among the adolescents of my generation. Thanks to this composite enlightenment in addition to the decorous elucidations of *Household Medicine*, I had a fairly comprehensive though somewhat Victorian idea of the primitive fashion in which the offspring of even the most civilised parents make their appearance, but of how to rear infants and train small children I had not the slightest notion either in theory or in practice, since the influence of married women in the education of girls mostly destined for wifehood and maternity was then considered even less desirable than it is to-day. I was also, despite my stock of physiological information, still extremely hazy with regard to the precise nature of the sexual act.

This half-knowledge engendered in me so fierce an antipathy to the idea of physical relationship in so far as this happened to be separable from romance, that when, soon after I left school, I was proposed to by a neighbour of ours - a large, athletic young man with limited brains and evangelical principles, who strongly disapproved of my ‘unwomanly’ ambitions, and could not possibly have been attracted by anything more substantial than my childish pretty-prettiness - my immediate and only reaction was a sense of intolerable humiliation and disgust.

When first I had to nurse a case of venereal disease - which I had hitherto seen referred to in the Press only under the mysterious title of ‘the hidden plague’ - I did not know exactly what it was; I was fully enlightened only in 1917, when in

a Malta hospital I watched a syphilitic orderly die in convulsions after an injection of salvarsan. Finally, my pre-war knowledge of Army doctors and nurses was derived entirely from the more idealistic poems of Kipling, which by no means helped me to understand the suggestive words and movements, the desperate secret manœuvrings, of men and women tormented by unnecessary segregation.

It should now be clear that - easy victims as I and the boys and girls similarly reared provided, with our naïve, uninformed generosities and enthusiasms, for the war propagandist in a non-conscription country - few young women could have been less forewarned and forearmed than I was against war in general, and Army Hospital Service in particular.