

SILVIA MERGENTHAL

# A Man Could Stand Up

Masculinities in British  
and Australian Literature  
of the Great War



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#### UMSCHLAGBILD

„Geisterhafte“ Skulpturen (von der Künstlerin Jackie Lantelli) der Soldaten,  
die starben im Ersten Weltkrieg neben den Gräbern in Slimbridge Friedhof.  
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"'The War is a Sitting Target': The Theatre Workshop's 'Oh What a Lovely War' (1963)", in: *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 29 (2018), pp. 51-59.

When I asked my mother a few years ago whether her father had ever talked about his war, she sighed and said: "Actually, he never stopped." "So what did he tell you?" "I can't remember – we didn't listen to him". This book is dedicated to my grandfather, Franz Sieber (1893-1965).



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# 1 Introduction

One of the problems with trying to write about the First World War is that most people have already read Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks before you get to them.<sup>1</sup>

In her highly acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy – comprising *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995)<sup>2</sup> – Pat Barker describes the impact of World War I on British society from the summer of 1917 to just before the Armistice of 1918.

The title of the first volume and of the trilogy as a whole is borrowed from a medical experiment conducted by W. H. R. Rivers, anthropologist, neurologist, psychiatrist and one of the protagonists of the three novels, and by his one-time colleague Henry Head, on Head's radial nerves, which were severed so that the two could trace, over a period of five years, their "regeneration".<sup>3</sup> Rivers is portrayed in the trilogy in his wartime working environment, chiefly as medical officer at Craiglockhart War Hospital, one of the specialised treatment centres set up by the War Office to deal with the vast number of soldiers suffering from what was then known as "shell shock".

Rivers is only one of the historical personages who populate Barker's trilogy; the others include War Poets Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, the latter two of whom were Rivers's patients at Craiglockhart, Rivers's friends and opponents in the medical establishment and politicians such as Noel Pemberton Billing. There are also cameo appearances by, for instance, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a friend of Rivers's father, and by Rivers's sister Katharine, one of the young girls whom Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll, was notoriously attracted to, exposing her, as Barker has said in an interview, to "an emotional pressure and emotional demands that call something out of the child that the child is not ready to give."<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, and although Barker herself rejects the label "historical fiction"<sup>5</sup> for her texts as it seems to her to consign historical events to the past while ignoring their relevance to the present, these "real" people are made to interact with fictitious characters such as Billy Prior: Prior, in whose person issues of gender, class, and individual and collective violence are combined, is one of the minor figures of the first, but emerges as

<sup>1</sup> Richard Holmes: *Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918*, London 2005, p. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Pat Barker: *Regeneration*, Harmondsworth 2008; *The Eye in the Door*, Harmondsworth 2008; *The Ghost Road*, Harmondsworth 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Barker: *Regeneration*, p. 45; *Eye in the Door*, p. 142 and p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> Barker in an interview with Sheryl Stevenson: "With the Listener in Mind. Talking about the *Regeneration* Trilogy with Pat Barker", in: Sharon Monteith et al. (eds.): *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, Columbia 2005, pp. 175-183, here p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Barker adds, however, that a "historical novel can be a backdoor into the present". Quoted in Karin E. Westman: "Generation Not Regeneration: Screening Out Class, Gender, and Cultural Change in the Film of *Regeneration*", in: Sharon Monteith et al. (eds.): *Critical Perspectives*, pp. 162-174, here p. 163.

one of the key players in the second and third volumes of the trilogy. It is through him that the reader, in *The Eye in the Door*, is introduced to the repressed and repressive atmosphere of a wartime London riven by sexual and political tension and obsessed with espionage and surveillance. It is also with Billy Prior that the reader is finally taken, in *The Ghost Road*, to the Western Front: paradoxically, the excerpts from the diary Prior writes there, which supposedly provide the most authentic account of life in the trenches in the novel, are those chapters in which Barker, in the one fully invented case history of the trilogy, departs completely from her sources.

In what must be a rare instance of a consensus among literary and military historians, Barker's trilogy has been criticised on two (interrelated) grounds<sup>6</sup>: first, for its reliance on, and subscription to, what has variously come to be known as the "soldier's tale" or the "great casualty myth"<sup>7</sup> as propagated in autobiographical, semi-autobiographical or fictionalised accounts of World War I published during the so-called "War Books Boom" of the late 1920s and early 1930s: these include, for instance, Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* of 1928, Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* of 1929 and Siegfried Sassoon's Sherston trilogy *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and *Sherston's Progress* of 1928, 1930 and 1936, respectively.<sup>8</sup> In these canonical texts, the trenches of the Western Front become the most important British *lieu de mémoire* of World War I. Their narrators and/or protagonists, as indicated by the title of the second volume of Sassoon's Sherston trilogy, are predominantly subaltern infantry officers; like Sassoon himself or Robert Graves, they have usually been born into upper- or middle-class families and educated at public schools, and, when war is declared on August 4, 1914, they immediately enlist. According to Samuel Hynes in his *A War Imagined: First World War and English Culture*, the stories they tell contain the following ingredients:

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Brian Bond: *The Unquiet Western Front. Britain's Role in Literature and History*, Cambridge/New York 2002, p. 77; and: Dan Todman: *The Great War. Myth and Memory*, London and New York 2005, pp. 173-185.

<sup>7</sup> See for a review of this Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider and Claudia Sternberg: *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Mediendiskurse der Erinnerung in Großbritannien. Autobiographie-Roman-Film (1919-1999)*, Würzburg 2005, p. 149. See also Astrid Erll: *Gedächtnisromane. Literatur über den Ersten Weltkrieg als Medium englischer und deutscher Erinnerungskulturen in den 1920er Jahren*, Trier 2003. (Studies in English Literary and Cultural History, Vol. 10).

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Blunden: *Undertones of War*, London 1928. For Graves and Sassoon, the following editions have been consulted: Robert Graves: *Good-Bye to All That. An Autobiography*, Providence 1995; Siegfried Sassoon: *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, London 1964. Incidentally, it is to Blunden's *Undertones of War* that Barker is indebted for one of the more harrowing episodes of *Regeneration*: "Not far away from that shafthead, a young and cheerful lance-corporal of ours was making some tea as I passed one warm afternoon. I went along three firebays; one shell burst behind me; I saw its smoke faint out, and I thought all was as lucky as it should be. Soon a cry from that place recalled me; the shell had burst all wrong. Its butting impression was black and stinking in the parados where three minutes ago the lance-corporal's mess-tin was bubbling over a little flame. For him, how could the gobbets of blackening flesh, the earth-wall sotted with blood, with flesh, the eye under the duckboard, the pulpy bone be the only answer?" (pp. 62-63) In *Regeneration*, this becomes one of the traumatic experiences which Billy Prior has repressed, and which Rivers helps him recover from and come to terms with.

the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant, patriotic women; the growing sympathy for men on the other side, betrayed in the same way and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped.<sup>9</sup>

Given her protagonists Sassoon, Owen and Graves, and her sources – in addition to the "War Books Boom" texts already mentioned, there are diaries and letters by these three and other War Poets and, of course, their poetry in which the soldier's tale can already be seen taking shape – it is hardly surprising that Barker should have modelled her trilogy on this kind of narrative, which Gordon Corrigan has referred to, somewhat flippantly, as "mud, blood and poppycock"<sup>10</sup>. For revisionist military historians like Corrigan, however, the soldier's tale and its furious denouncement of the futility of war – informed, as they are, by the political and social discontents of the post-war decade – misrepresent both the real conditions of trench warfare on the Western Front as well as how war was perceived and interpreted by the majority of soldiers, their families and the nation at large: points already made, as will be seen, by some of the contributors to the "War Book Controversy" which, in the wake of Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* of 1928 (published in English translation as *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1929), accompanied the "War Books Boom".

As far as literary historians are concerned – and again, their arguments will be discussed in more detail later – narratives patterned on the soldier's tale have come to dominate the British literary canon to such an extent that the complexity of literary responses to the Great War has been largely erased from the record.<sup>11</sup> Among what might be called the casualties of this process of canonisation – casualties for which, incidentally, military as well as literary historians tend to blame Paul Fussell's extremely influential study of First World War literature, *The Great War and Modern Memory* of 1975<sup>12</sup> – are,

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Hynes: *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London 1990, p. 439. For an extensive discussion of the 'soldier's tale' see Chapter 2 below.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Corrigan: *Mud, Blood and Poppycock*, London 2003. As another revisionist military historian, Gary Sheffield, puts it: "Therefore, contrary to received wisdom, the First World War was a 'good', justified war. [...] Trench warfare was a terrible experience, but the prospect of defeat at the hands of Germany was worse." See Gary Sheffield: "Oh! What a Futile War: Representations of the Western Front in Modern British Media and Popular Culture", in: Ian Stewart and Susan L. Carruthers (eds.): *War, Culture and the Media: Representations of the Military in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, Trowbridge 1996, pp. 54-74, here p. 59. See also Chapter 9 below.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive review of British literary responses to the First World War see Korte et al.: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 143-241. For a critical survey of approaches to WWI literature see Joanna Scutts: "Contemporary Approaches to the Literature of the First World War: A Critical Survey", in: *Literature Compass* 3.4 (2006), pp. 914-923. See also Esther MacCallum-Stewart: *The Cause of Nowadays and the End of History: First World War Historical Fiction*. Working Papers on the Web, 2006, <[www.extra.sh.ac.uk/wpw/historicising/MacCallum-Stewart.htm](http://www.extra.sh.ac.uk/wpw/historicising/MacCallum-Stewart.htm)> (Web, 25 May 2021)

<sup>12</sup> Paul Fussell: *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York 1975. For a concise survey of the debate surrounding Fussell's book see Adrian Gregory: *The Last Great War. British Society and the First World War*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 272-273. See also Robin Prior and Trevor

for obvious reasons, texts which insist that the Great War, in spite of its unprecedented horrors, was neither unnecessary nor ineptly conducted, while for the individual soldier it could actually be a self-enhancing experience; texts with settings other than the Western Front or with protagonists from other (that is, non-infantry) branches of the armed services; war literature by male civilian or female authors (suggesting, as Joanna Scutts has claimed, that the "primary, if not the only, legitimate responses to war came from male combatants"<sup>13</sup>); finally, texts which do not conform to the formal conventions of what Fussell posits as the distinctive tone or mode of First World War writing, namely, the ironic.

The second reason why Barker has been criticised by military and literary historians alike focuses on the uses to which she appears to have put the Western Front narrative. In an article on Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (first published in 1997 and re-issued two years later)<sup>14</sup>, Bernard Bergonzi, one of the foremost authorities on World War I literature, veers between scathing attack and what might be called damning with faint praise. As an example of the latter, his reiterated emphasis on the "neatness" of Barker's presentation of historical figures and sources may be adduced – the implication being that this presentation is altogether *too* neat, not least because, once again, of its adherence to the conventions of the soldier's tale. The former is primarily directed at what Bergonzi identifies as historical inaccuracies; these inaccuracies range from minor factual errors – there was no candyfloss in British seaside resorts in 1917 or 1918, so characters should not be described consuming it – to Barker's reading of shell shock. Here, Bergonzi is indebted to an article by Ben Shephard entitled "Digging Up the Past"<sup>15</sup>, which he summarises briefly: Shephard takes Barker to task over her reliance on 1970s and 1980s "fashionable but over-simple" accounts of "shell-shock and other forms of disturbance", citing the way in which she has set up Lewis Yealland as "an awful contrast to the humane and gentle Rivers". Ultimately, Bergonzi – like Shephard or, for that matter, Blake Morrison in yet another Barker review, published in *The New Yorker* of January 22, 1996 – registers his dissatisfaction with what Morrison labels "the very nineteen-nineties" issues of gender and emasculation. Hence, the most serious flaw Bergonzi finds in the trilogy is the depiction of Billy Prior, who, although he does emerge as a plausible fictional character, does not fit into the historical context in which Barker places him:

In this respect Billy recalls the English Angry Young men, while his bisexuality, his cool hanging-loose to the world, align him with the American beats and hipsters of the 1950s and 60s. In the idiom of that era, he is AC/DC, swinging either way; 'I do anything' he smilingly tells Manning after their first sexual encounter. When Rivers sees in Billy an 'incongruous mixture of effeminacy and menace', I am reminded of the young Mick Jagger. Billy dominates the trilogy, but he does so like a visitant from the future in some work of science fiction or magic realism. The point is not that people could not have been bisexual

Wilson: "Debate. Paul Fussell at War", in: *War in History* 1.1 (1994), pp. 63-80. *The Great War and Modern Memory* will be discussed in more detail below (Chapter 11).

<sup>13</sup> Scutts: "Contemporary Approaches", p. 916.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Bergonzi: "Pat Barker's Trilogy", in: Bernard Bergonzi: *War Poets and Other Subjects*, Aldershot 1999, pp. 3-14. Blake Morrison's review of the trilogy is summarised in Sharon Ouditt: "Myths, Memoirs, and Monuments: Reimagining the Great War", in: Vincent B. Sherry (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 245-260.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Shephard: "Digging Up the Past", in: *Times Literary Supplement* 4851 (1996).

or bitterly class-conscious eighty years ago, but that they could not have thought or spoken about these things in the terms that Barker gives to Billy.<sup>16</sup>

As a result – and now Bergonzi situates Barker's trilogy in the tradition of historical fiction – the mixture of "real" and invented characters, for instance in the Craiglockhart setting of the first volume, paradoxically does not serve to render the latter more authentic, but to make the former somehow appear less "real".

Pat Barker, to give her her due, does alert her readers to the fact that she has drawn on "two modern texts which contain stimulating discussions of 'shell-shock'", namely on Eric Leed's *No Man's Land* of 1979 and Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* of 1985.<sup>17</sup> She also reflects quite wryly on the mapping of potentially anachronistic gender-based readings onto the experiences of World War I combatants and non-combatants alike when, in her novel *Another World*, she has a female historian who is interviewing a World War I veteran try (in vain, obviously) "to get Geordie to frame his war experience in terms of late-twentieth-century preoccupations. Gender. Definitions of masculinity. Homo-eroticism. Homo-*what*?" asked Geordie."<sup>18</sup>

It is, however, precisely because of Barker's own gender-inflected perspective, that is, because she herself gets her characters to frame their war experiences in terms of late-twentieth-century preoccupations – in much the same way, arguably, as authors in the late 1920s and early 1930s framed their war experiences, and those of their characters, in terms of *their* preoccupations – that Barker's fiction foregrounds issues which are elided in the traditional soldier's tale, with its historically conditioned gender configurations. First and foremost, the typical protagonist of the soldier's tale is not only a soldier but, as has been stated above, a well-educated, young and single infantry subaltern. While these details of social background and class, age, family status and military rank already, by implication, relegate other types of *soldiers* to the margins of the respective texts – for instance older, working-class, married soldiers – they also marginalise other types of *men*: male non-combatants, who, in the soldier's tale, either profit in various ways (economically, politically, sexually) from the soldier's absence, or, as conscientious objectors, shirk their patriotic duty, or, perhaps most insidiously, as patriotic fathers willingly sacrifice their sons. By contrast, Barker both portrays male non-combatants sympathetically, for example conscientious objector William Roper (in *The Eye in the Door*) or doctors Henry Head and W. H. R. Rivers, and has them reflect on their moral dilemmas, as when the latter contemplates two church windows depicting, respectively, the crucifixion and Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as

the two bloody bargains on which a civilization claims to be based. *The* bargain, Rivers thought, looking at Abraham and Isaac. The one on which all patriarchal societies are

<sup>16</sup> Bergonzi: "Pat Barker's Trilogy", p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Barker: *Regeneration*, "Author's Note" (pp. 251-252); the references are to Eric J. Leed: *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge 1979, and to Elaine Showalter: *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, London 1985. On Leed and Showalter see Chapter 11 below.

<sup>18</sup> Pat Barker: *Another World*; here quoted from the 1999 Penguin edition, p. 98. For an analysis of this passage see Korte et al.: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 228. See also Maria Holmgren Troy: "The Novelist as an Agent of Collective Remembrance. Pat Barker and the First World War", in: Conny Mithander, John Sundholm and Maria Holmgren Troy (eds.): *Collective Traumas. Memories of War and Conflict in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, Brussels 2007, pp. 41-78.

founded. If you, who are young and strong, will obey me, who am old and weak, even to the extent of being prepared to sacrifice your life, then in the course of time you will peacefully inherit, and be able to exact the same obedience from your sons. Only we're breaking the bargain, Rivers thought. All over northern France, at this very moment, in trenches and dugouts and flooded shell-holes, the inheritors were dying, not one by one, while old men, and women of all ages, gathered together and sang hymns.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, and with regard to the "women of all ages" of the above quotation, the soldier's tale, in Samuel Hynes's definition, chiefly knows one type of woman, namely, "ignorant, patriotic women" towards whom, as towards politicians and profiteers, the soldier feels resentment. In fact, "resentment" is far too weak a term for the misogynist viciousness with which "patriotic women" are lampooned for instance by Sassoon, who had already reviled female non-combatants in poems such as "Glory of Women" and its companion piece "Their Frailty", both written at Craiglockhart. In his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, he recounts a conversation between his *alter ego* George Sherston and "Lady Asterisk":

We were alone in the library. She listened to me, her silver hair and handsome face bent slightly forward above a piece of fine embroidery. Outwardly emotionless, she symbolized the patrician privileges for whose preservation I had chucked bombs at Germans and carelessly offered myself as a target for a sniper. When I had blurted out my opinion that life was preferable to the Roll of Honour she put aside her reticence like a rich cloak. 'But death is nothing,' she said, 'Life, after all, is only the beginning. And those who are killed in the War – they help us from up there. They are helping us to win.' I couldn't answer that; this 'other world', of which she was so certain, was something I had forgotten about since I was wounded.<sup>20</sup>

The other (comparatively minor) roles reserved for women in the soldier's tale are those of mothers, or in Sassoon's/Sherston's case aunts, who appear to have stepped out of sentimental Victorian novels and whose moral codes and value judgements are entirely irrelevant to the protagonists' all-male worlds. In addition, several novels mention encounters with (usually French) prostitutes, who are more often than not carriers of venereal diseases.

By contrast, Barker writes women back into the war narrative; in the process, she destabilises the boundary line drawn by the soldier's tale between the (feminine) "home front" and the (masculine) "war front", or rather exposes the permeability between these two gendered spaces. In particular, Barker focuses, as she does in her early novels on Tyneside working-class life, on working-class women (chiefly represented by Billy Prior's lover Sarah and her friends and workmates), whose lives change for the better because they now earn their own money and are able to enter public spaces which had previously been off-limits to them. Hence, when Billy Prior, in *The Eye in the Door*, visits his family in the working-class district of an industrial town in the north of England and meets two neighbours, he muses: "two married women going out for a drink together. Unheard of. And in his father's pub too. No wonder the old bugger thought Armageddon had arrived." And: "Meat might be scarce, bread might be grey, but the area was booming

<sup>19</sup> Barker: *Regeneration*, p. 149. For a more extensive discussion of the discourse of "negative paternity" see below, Chapter 6.

<sup>20</sup> Sassoon: *Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, pp. 465-466.



for all that. Part of him was pleased, delighted even. 'Bits of lasses earning more money than I do?' Good. Lobster tins in Mrs Riley's dustbin?"<sup>21</sup>

Yet another prominent feature of the soldier's tale which Samuel Hynes has isolated, the concomitant of the "growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting" (that is, from male as well as female non-combatants), is the intense bonding *between* soldiers, that is, an emotional interaction in which they define themselves as integral parts of an all-male group. This presupposes, as historian Joanna Bourke has convincingly argued, "a consciousness of masculinity as gender so that, although distinctions such as those based on class or ethnicity may be recognised, these distinctions are subordinated to the gender identity".<sup>22</sup>

In wartime, male bonding is promoted by military authorities as *esprit de corps*, both through intimidation and through positive reinforcement such as an emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the male body and of men as a group. In the actual war situation, men's reliance on other men for the staples of life – and for life itself – requires trust and affection, and also makes for a more fluid interpretation of gender roles as, in the absence of women, men have to perform tasks they do not normally perform; not only do they cook or darn, but they also nurse friends who are ill or kiss and cradle them when they lie dying.<sup>23</sup> It is the homoerotic potential of these relationships which is the third theme reinserted by Barker into the soldier's tale.

Although there can be no doubt that male bonding does play an enormously important part in the soldier's tale, its proponents, most aggressively perhaps Richard Aldington's narrator in his 1929 *Death of a Hero*<sup>24</sup>, repudiate any implication in what was, after all, from the point of view of wartime British society, the illicit side of male bonding, namely, same-sex sexual acts. To quote from the *Manual of Military Law* of 1907:

It is a misdemeanour punishable with two years' imprisonment for any male person, either in public or in private, to commit or be a party to the commission of any act of gross indecency with another male person, or to procure or to attempt to procure the commission by any male person of such an act; and it is also a misdemeanour to do any grossly indecent act in a public place in the presence of more persons than one, or to publicly exposed the person, or exhibit any disgusting object.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Barker: *Eye in the Door*, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Bourke: *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London 1996, pp. 126-127.

<sup>23</sup> On the significance of the kiss in WWI writing see Santanu Das: "'Kiss me, Hardy': Intimacy, Gender, and Gesture in World War I Trench Literature", in: *Modernism/Modernity* 9.1 (2002), pp. 51-74; republished as Chapter 3 of Santanu Das: *Touch and Intimacy in First World War I Literature*, Cambridge 2005. See also André Loez: "Tears in the Trenches: A History of Emotions and the Experience of War", in: Jenny MacLeod and Pierre Purseigle (eds.): *Uncovered Fields. Perspectives in First World War Studies*, London and Boston 2004, pp. 211-226.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Aldington: *Death of a Hero*, London 1929: "Let me at once disabuse the eager-eyed Sodomites among my readers by stating emphatically once and for all that there was nothing sodomitical in these friendships [between soldiers, that is]" (ibid., p. 26) See below, Chapters 2 and 4.

<sup>25</sup> Download from <<http://www.archive.org/details/manualofmilitary00greauoft>> (Chapter VII, p. 97; Web, 25 May 2021).



While there is no evidence that Sassoon, whose poem "Repression of War Experience" has been read as a text whose speaker represses the fact that he is sexually attracted to other men at least as rigorously as he does his feelings of fear and despair,<sup>26</sup> had discussed his sexuality with Rivers, it is, strikingly, only after he had been Rivers's patient that he seems to have come out to his friends. In his *Sherston* trilogy, however, his protagonist does not exhibit any prominent homoerotic feelings, and certainly does not engage in any same-sex activities. Instead, and even in places where one would least expect it, namely, when Sassoon transcribes large sections of his diaries and imports them into *Sherston's Progress*, the passages in question are, as Janet Watson has noted, purged of any references to sexuality. Thus, the following diary entry, dated May 4, 1918,

"I watch the *men* lying about on the decks in the sunlight, staring at the glittering, glorious blue sea and the huge boats ploughing along in line . . . I like to see them leaning against each other with their arms round one another – it is pathetic and beautiful and human (but that is only a sexual emotion in me – to like them in those attitudes)"<sup>27</sup>,

becomes, in *Sherston's Progress*: "Leaning against one another in indolent attitudes, the men seem much nearer the realities of life than the average soldier."<sup>28</sup> In Barker's *Regeneration*, by contrast, while Sassoon, like his *alter ego* George Sherston, does not engage in same-sex sexual acts himself, he is an object of homoerotic desire for both Wilfred Owen and, somewhat less plausibly, W. H. R. Rivers. Same-sex sexual activities are mainly dramatised in the trilogy through Billy Prior, who, for instance in *The Eye in the Door*, has sex with another fictitious character, Charles Manning; Manning is picked up for one of the misdemeanours covered by the *Manual of Military Law* but – unlike the 22 officers and 270 other ranks who were in "real life" court-martialled for indecency during the war – he gets away with having himself referred to a psychologist, namely, to W. H. R. Rivers.

The final re-accentuation of the soldier's tale undertaken in Barker's trilogy relates to the topic of shell shock.<sup>29</sup> The term was first coined by psychiatrist Charles S. Myers, who, in an article published in *The Lancet* in February, 1915, defined it as a functional

<sup>26</sup> See Patrick Campbell: "'Thoughts That You've Gagged All Day': Siegfried Sassoon, W. H. R. Rivers and '[The] Repression of War Experience'", in: Patrick J. Quinn and Steven Trout (eds.): *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered. Beyond Modern Memory*, London 2001, pp. 219-229. See also Adrian Caesar: *Taking It Like A Man. Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets*, Manchester and New York 1993, pp. 77-91.

<sup>27</sup> Siegfried Sassoon: *Diaries 1915-1918*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1983, p. 242 (italics in the text). See Janet S. K. Watson: *Fighting Different Wars. Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain*, Cambridge 2004, p. 235.

<sup>28</sup> Sassoon: *Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, p. 608.

<sup>29</sup> For accounts of the aetiology, treatment and cultural significance of shell shock see for instance: Anthony Babington: *Shell-Shock. A History of the Changing Attitudes to War Neurosis*, London 1997; Peter Leese: "'Why Are They Not Cured?' British Shellshock Treatment During the Great War", in: Mark S. Micale and Paul F. Lerner (eds.): *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 206-221; Ben Shephard: *A War of Nerves. Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge/Mass. 2001; Martin Stone: "Shellshock and the Psychologists", in: Frederick William Bynum et al. (eds.): *The Anatomy of Madness. Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, II, London: 1988, pp. 242-271. For a more extensive discussion of the issue see below, Chapter 5.

nervous disorder which he believed to have been caused by shells bursting at close range and thus to have organic causes, for instance injuries to the brain or the nervous system; however, he failed to find these organic causes, especially since some of the sufferers had not been anywhere near an exploding shell, and their breakdowns often could not be traced back to a single shocking event. Eventually, some members of the medical establishment came to believe that shell shock might be a reaction to the chronic conditions of war itself, which still posed the question of why some soldiers broke down, while others – under the same, or comparable, conditions – did not. Hence, theories around shell shock saw its origin in a hereditary disposition to mental instability, or "degeneracy", which had remained undetected in recruiting procedures. At any rate, by the end of the Great War, around 80,000<sup>30</sup> shell shock victims had been treated in army and civilian medical facilities; of those, approximately 30,000 were committed to institutions such as Craiglockhart. This makes shell shock a particularly prominent – as well as problematic – example of the way in which World War I turned men (and their bodies) into what women (and *their* bodies) had already become, namely, the subjects of medicine.<sup>31</sup> Treatment was intended to eventually re-fit the patient for active service, but methods ranged from the disciplinary approach to the psychotherapeutic: at one end of the treatment spectrum, there were doctors like Yealland, whose description in his *Hysterical Disorders of Warfare* of how he had treated a patient suffering from mutism is fictionalised in Chapter 21 of *Regeneration*. At the other end, doctors such as Rivers opted for a modified form of psychotherapy, based, in Rivers's case, on the concepts of "autognosis" and "re-education".

While symptoms of mental or emotional breakdown are not absent from the soldier's tale, explanations for these nervous disorders are invariably slanted towards the (literally) intolerable conditions of modern warfare and away from a scrutiny of the shell shock victims' hereditary or acquired predispositions. Thus, Sherston (in *Sherston's Progress*) suffers, like his author, from what W. H. R. Rivers famously diagnosed as an "anti-war" (rather than war) neurosis<sup>32</sup>, and Sassoon's therapy sessions with Rivers are recast, in *Sherston's Progress*, as conversations with someone who "did, on the whole, find me a refreshing companion". Both Sassoon and Sherston are also keenly aware of the potential stigma attached to their condition, and both invariably distance themselves from their fellow patients and assert their identities as a "healthy young officer", "dumped down" in

<sup>30</sup> According to Jay Winter, it is more than likely that, for a number of reasons, psychiatric morbidity was massively underreported. See his "Shell Shock", in: Jay Winter: *The Cambridge History of the First World War. Volume III: Civil Society*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 310-333.

<sup>31</sup> In addition, shell shock sufferers were difficult to distinguish from malingerers. Hence, after the war, there was intense concern that among the 3,000 soldiers sentenced to death by courts-martial during the war, 346 of whom were executed, there were a considerable number who may have suffered from war-induced mental illness and thus had been unjustly punished. See Ted Bogacz: "War Neurosis and Cultural Change in England, 1914-22. The Work of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock'", in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (1989), pp. 227-256. See also: Julian Putkowski: "Tommyrot: The Shot at Dawn Campaign and First World War Revisionism", in: Michael Howard (ed.): *A Part of History. Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War*, London 2008, pp. 17-26. For further comments on the Shot at Dawn campaign see below, Chapter 12.

<sup>32</sup> Sassoon: *Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, p. 518.

the emasculating environment of "nurses and nervous wrecks", thus re-inscribing their masculinity in ableist terms: "After all, I haven't broken down; I've only broken out".<sup>33</sup>

Compared to soldiers' tales, Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy engages far more extensively with a whole range of contemporaneous discourses on shell shock, including, for instance, the claim that symptoms of shell shock are unevenly distributed over different social classes and different branches of the armed services. However, and although her fictional Rivers treats his patients in accordance with the principles outlined by the historical Rivers, Barker's Rivers takes his analysis of the reasons for shell shock one step further than his historical counterpart; borrowing from Barker's sources, Eric Leed's *No Man's Land* and Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady*, he reflects:

One of the paradoxes of the war – one of the many – was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was ... domestic. Caring. As Layard would undoubtedly have said, maternal. And that wasn't the only trick the war had played. Mobilization. The Great Adventure. They'd been *mobilized* into holes in the ground so constricted that they could hardly move. And the Great Adventure – the real life equivalent of all the adventure stories they'd devoured as boys – consisted of crouching in a dugout, waiting to be killed. The war that had promised so much in the way of 'manly' activity had actually delivered 'feminine' passivity, and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known. No wonder they broke down.<sup>34</sup>

The fictional Rivers here interweaves<sup>35</sup> attitudes dating from the period of the Great War and its immediate aftermath and late-twentieth-century gender-inflected re-inscriptions of these attitudes. This gap between the historical and the fictional Rivers does not necessarily invalidate the hypotheses of the latter: rather, the fictional Rivers makes explicit what the historical Rivers and many of his contemporaries appear to have intuited, namely, structural analogies between both the causes and the symptoms of male and female hysteria.

To state that Barker's fiction addresses topics which are largely absent from the traditional soldier's tale – the roles of male and female non-combatants, the homoerotic potential of comradeship among soldiers, the mental and emotional costs of modern warfare for the individual soldier – is, of course, not to claim that the soldier's tale should have engaged with these issues more openly. It is, however, important to recognise that it also, in much the same way as the soldier's tale represents a specific literary response to the Great War, responds in very specific ways – that is, by imaginatively constructing a specific type of masculinity – to what, in the memorable phrase coined by Judith Butler, might be called the "gender trouble" of the immediate post-war decade: given the prevalence of the trench in the soldier's tale, it is perhaps no coincidence that the impression one gets from reading novels such as Sassoon's Sherston trilogy or Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* is one of retrenchment.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 523.

<sup>34</sup> Barker: *Regeneration*, pp. 107-108. See Rob Nixon's interview with Barker, originally conducted in 1992 and reissued in: *Contemporary Literature* 45 (2004), pp. 1-21, here pp. 9-10.

<sup>35</sup> As does, rather irritatingly, Greg Harris in his 1998 article on Pat Barker. Greg Harris: "Compulsory Masculinity, Britain, and the Great War: The Literary-Historical Work of Pat Barker", in: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39.4 (1998), pp. 290-304.

In alignment with the work of other literary historians<sup>36</sup>, this book will reread novels – either predating the soldier's tale or written in explicit or implicit reaction to it – which offer variations on, or alternatives to, its narratives of disillusionment and retrenchment. The focus of these rereadings will not predominantly be on whether these novels represent divergent literary responses to the Great War, but on whether they diverge from the soldier's tale's emplotments of what it means to be a man in times of war, by depicting, for instance, a less aggressive assertion of heterosexual normativity, or a less misogynist attitude towards women, or a more spontaneous expression of feelings.

The following section of this introduction is not intended to preclude a more nuanced discussion of key concepts in later chapters but will merely outline, very briefly, some of the assumptions which underpin this discussion. First of all, then, and borrowing from sociologists Stephen Whitehead's and Frank Barrett's working definition, this book does not regard masculinity as a monolithic construct, but recognises differences between men (or, for that matter, between male literary characters). Thus,

seeing masculinities as plural, changing, and historically informed around dominant discourses or ideologies of masculinism. In this respect we cannot answer, in any absolute sense, the question 'What is masculinity?' The nearest we can get to an 'answer' is to state that masculinities are those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine. So masculinities exist both as a positive, inasmuch as they offer some means of identity signification for males, and as a negative, inasmuch as they are not the 'Other' (feminine).<sup>37</sup>

Like many other contributions to masculinity studies, this definition builds on the seminal work of R. W. Connell<sup>38</sup>, who regards masculinity as an inherently relational concept organised along two axes of power: the first of these concerns the dominance of men, and corresponding subordination of women, in gender orders, the second organises differences between men. Connell's term "hegemonic masculinity", defined as "the

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Claire M. Tylee: *The Great War and Women's Consciousness. Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-64*, Basingstoke 1990, and Rosa Maria Bracco: *Merchants of Hope. British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939*, Providence 1993. See also Stephen M. Cullen: "'The Land of My Dreams': The Gendered Utopian Dreams and Disenchantment of British Literary Ex-Combatants of the Great War", in: *Cultural and Social History* 8 (2011), pp. 195-211.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett: "The Sociology of Masculinity", in: Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (eds.): *The Masculinities Reader*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 1-26, here pp. 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> See in particular R. W. Connell: *Masculinities*, Cambridge 2005. For critiques of Connell see Therese Frey Steffen: "Masculinities/Maskulinitäten and its Mal(e)Contents", in: Therese Frey Steffen (ed.): *Masculinities – Maskulinitäten. Mythos-Realität-Repräsentation-Rollendruck*, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 270-287, here p. 277. See also Stefan Horlacher: "Überlegungen zur theoretischen Konzeption männlicher Identität. Ein Forschungsüberblick mit exemplarischer Vertiefung", in: Stefan Horlacher (ed.): *"Wann ist die Frau eine Frau?" – "Wann ist der Mann ein Mann?" Konstruktionen von Geschlechtlichkeit von der Antike bis ins 21. Jahrhundert aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive*, Würzburg 2010, pp. 195-238. For a discussion of relational masculinities in the German WWI context see Jason Crouthamel: *An Intimate History of the Front. Masculinity, Sexuality and German Soldiers in the First World War*, Basingstoke 2014.

configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy"<sup>39</sup>, references both these axes, but also explicitly draws attention to the cultural dynamics between different kinds of masculinity which are formed and transformed over time.

In an article entitled "The Domestication of the Male?", British historian Martin Francis reviews some attempts to sketch the cultural dynamics of British masculinities. The most widely accepted chronology is John Tosh's, according to whom the pattern which hegemonic discourses informing British masculinities appear to have followed in the last decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century is one of "domestication, reaction, and ultimate re-domestication".<sup>40</sup> In Francis's summary of Tosh's chronology, the reaction to the domestication of the Victorian man "found its apotheosis in the homosocial world of the boy's adventure story", which, in the decades immediately before the Great War, celebrated a militaristic and robust masculinity; however, in the aftermath of the war, in which "the romantic language of heroic masculinity suffered a fatal blow", domesticated and private categories of masculinity were reasserted. By contrast, Francis himself proposes replacing this simplistic narrative by an awareness that men, in the decade after the war, "were continually seeking to reconcile and integrate the contradictory impulses of domestic responsibility and escapism, both of which could, at various times, find sanction in the polyphonic voices of popular culture or politics."<sup>41</sup> There is, after all, plenty of evidence to demonstrate that Tosh's "militaristic and robust masculinity" had already become destabilised in pre-war British society, for instance in the context of the suffrage movement, while, conversely, traces of it survived, albeit perhaps in modified form, into the post-war period.

To talk about "fatal blows", "contradictory impulses" or "destabilisation" in the context of British masculinities is, emphatically, not to subscribe to a rhetoric of "masculinity in crisis"<sup>42</sup>; at the same time, historically significant changes in men's experiences and opportunities are reflected in changing notions of masculine selves, and war may initiate – as well as accelerate or decelerate – social transformation, with numerous implications for both men and women. This, of course, also means that war, or at any rate modern warfare, is a deeply gendered experience: put quite simply, in a war, (some) men bear arms, while most women (and some men) do not. As far as the Great War is concerned, not only was the military still seen as a source of masculine authority, and as a privileged arena of masculine activity,<sup>43</sup> but also, as Nicoletta Gullace has demonstrated in some

<sup>39</sup> Connell: *Masculinities*, p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Francis: "The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity", in: *The Historical Journal* 45.3 (2002), pp. 637-652, here p. 641. The most detailed version of the domestication/reaction/re-domestication trajectory can be found in John Tosh: *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, New Haven/ Conn. 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Francis: "Domestication of the Male", pp. 641-643. For an adult version of the "boy's adventure story" see John Buchan's *Mr Standfast*, discussed in Chapter 8 below.

<sup>42</sup> See, on the long history of the "masculinity in crisis" rhetoric, Whitehead and Barrett, "The Sociology of Masculinity", pp. 6-10; see also Judith A. Allen: "Men Interminably in Crisis? Historians on Masculinity, Sexual Boundaries, and Manhood", in: *Radical History Review* 82 (2002), pp. 191-207.

<sup>43</sup> See John Horne: "Masculinity: Politics and War in the Age of Nation-States and World Wars, 1850-1950", in: Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (eds.): *Masculinities in Politics and War. Gendering Modern History*, Manchester/New York 2004, pp. 22-40. See also

detail, British wartime propaganda casts British participation in the war in explicitly gendered terms.<sup>44</sup>

Of Connell's two axes of power, it is, as will be seen, the second which is foregrounded in most World War I fiction, with its overwhelmingly male casts of characters. *A Man Could Stand Up* will, therefore, explore the interplay between fictional masculinities variously inflected by age, class, political affiliation or sexual orientation. More specifically, in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, the differences between men which Connell's second axis organises are between competent and incompetent soldiers (Chapter 3: "Turning Men Into Soldiers"), between heterosexual and homosexual men (Chapter 4: "Same-Sex Relationships"), between those who succumb to the stressful effects of combat and those who do not (Chapter 5: "Shell Shock") and between combatants and non-combatants (Chapter 6: "Non-Combatants and Others"). By contrast, Chapter 7 ("The Reciprocal Gaze") is dedicated to Connell's first axis and explores the imbalances of power between men and women.

Literary texts enter into a complex relationship with the cultural conventions of their time, including its conventions regarding constructions of gender: literary texts may reinforce hegemonic ideals of masculinity, but they may also offer alternative roles or images. Thus, while male fictional characters are often quite explicitly confronted with hegemonic ideals of masculinity to which they may be expected to conform, this does not mean that they cannot translate these ideals into their self-perceptions and emotional sensibilities. In the process, normative statements can be assessed self-reflexively and become modified; in some instances, these modifications, by allowing for new male subject positions, will then filter back into society beyond the text. However, in some literary responses, it is their indebtedness to specific generic traditions which may engender a specific type of masculinity and, by implication, a corresponding attitude to war, for instance by either granting or denying their soldier protagonists a degree of agency in what happens to them. Therefore, the soldier's tale's emplotments of what it means to be a man in times of war (see Chapter 2: "The Soldier's Tale Template and Some Variations") will be contrasted in Chapter 8 ("Gender and Genre") with representations of men at war in adventure novels, which typically feature a hero who, on an important and moral mission, overcomes obstacles and dangers to achieve his goal – to triumph over injustice and lawlessness (in the western), to save the nation (in the spy story) or to overcome fear and defeat (in the combat story).

While a number of novels reviewed in *A Man Could Stand Up* were published during the war itself, others attempted to take stock of what the war had meant around the tenth anniversary of the Armistice (during the so-called "War Books Boom"). If their (retrospective) attitudes to the war are shaped by the domestic as well as international insecurities of the post-war decade, this is also true for their depictions of wartime gender dynamics. Moving forward to other anniversaries of the Great War – the 50<sup>th</sup> in the 1960s (Chapter 9: "Theatrical Interlude", which, incidentally, also extends the generic scope of

James Longenbach: "The Women and Men of 1914", in: Helen M. Cooper et al. (eds.): *Arms and the Woman. War, Gender, and Literary Representation*, Chapel Hill and London: 1989, pp. 97-123; and Joshua S. Goldstein: *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Cambridge 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Nicoletta F. Gullace: *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War*, New York 2002. For other work on World War I and masculinities see also Watson: *Fighting Different Wars*; and Jessica Meyer: *Men of War. Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, Basingstoke 2009.



this book to two plays) and the run-up to the centenary in the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century (Chapter 12: "A Tale of Two Stephens: British and Australian Commemorative Fiction") – *A Man Could Stand Up* will argue that gender issues of these later decades are similarly projected onto those of World War I. In the process – and progressively as communicative memory of the war recedes – fiction about the Great War draws on a vast repository of sedimented images, stock characters and plotlines which have been stored in the various institutions of cultural memory since 1914; this archival material includes, as is the case in Barker's *Regeneration*, the work of literary and cultural historians (Chapter 11: "Historical Interlude"). Novels by Barker and other late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century authors are, then, indebted not only to canonical (and, less frequently, non-canonical) texts emanating from the war and post-war years themselves but also to modern (and, indeed, postmodern) critical reassessments of these texts.

Inevitably, at this point, *A Man Could Stand Up* must also address the question of how the Great War is remembered and commemorated. Therefore, and while the book is centrally concerned with British World War I fiction and with British constructions of masculinity, four chapters will reference Australian texts (Chapters 9, "Theatrical Interlude", 10, "Anzac Musters", 11, "Historical Interlude" and 12, "A Tale of Two Stephens: British and Australian Commemorative Fiction") because Australian texts demonstrate, even more clearly than do their British counterparts, how constructions of masculinity intersect with constructions of national identity and with the different position assigned to the Great War in respective national imaginaries. In other words, differences in how the Great War is remembered in Britain and Australia have impacted on their cultures of commemoration and, concomitantly, on constructions of military manhood in the two countries. Significantly, in this context, it is not the Western Front, setting of nearly all the British novels discussed in *A Man Could Stand Up*, but the Gallipoli Peninsula which is Australia's most important – literary and more widely cultural – *lieu de mémoire*.