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Georgette Heyer, Wellington's Army and the First World War

Vanda Wilcox

'Military anecdotes are never acceptable to me. [...] The reflections of a General must always be of value – though I fancy we have heard enough of the late war: those of a junior officer can only weary his audience.'¹

When these words were published in *The Quiet Gentleman* in 1951, some among Georgette Heyer's readers must have found themselves wholeheartedly in agreement. If they were seeking escapism from postwar austerity, they would certainly have been keen to hear no more about the 'late war' and all the depressing reflections to which the conflict of 1939–45 would have given rise. But unlike her character the Dowager Countess of St Erth, who uttered this blighting remark, Heyer found military anecdotes more than acceptable. Military memoirs and histories were a source of profound interest and inspiration to her. She famously researched and read deeply, and for all that she has been seen as primarily a writer of romance her passion not just for history but for the history of war shines through in her work. Indeed, several of her novels feature extremely detailed battle scenes – her depictions of Hastings and Waterloo display a formidable knowledge of both events – while serving army officers and veterans populate her casts of characters. Given that Heyer lived through two world wars, it is perhaps unsurprising that war and soldiering should loom large in her mental world, as they would have for her many readers. But what influence did these conflicts have on her writing? In the novels about the Napoleonic Wars, where she engages most explicitly with war, there are numerous clues to suggest that the First World War had a profound and lasting effect on Heyer's understanding of war and conflict, while

the cultural legacies of 1914–18 can be traced in multiple ways through her historical romances.

This chapter first positions Heyer's work within the landscape of interwar fiction as shaped by the First World War. It then explores her depiction of Wellington's army across several novels. Finally it considers Heyer's construction of gender roles in wartime.²

English middlebrow fiction and the Great War

Much literary scholarship about the cultural impact of the First World War lies in the shadow of Paul Fussell's 1975 classic, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.³ He proposed that innocence, certainty, 'high diction' and traditional romantic conceptions of war as heroic and glorious were decisively and permanently destroyed by the First World War, and replaced by a more cynical and above all ironic world-view. He writes:

there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; [...] it is essentially ironic; and [...] it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.⁴

In support of this argument, Fussell cites the interwar 'war books boom' and the profusion of anti-war poetry. Since the 1960s, he claims, these have come to dominate British cultural perceptions of the war and its impact on literary production.⁵

The most dramatic years of this literary output were 1928–30, when *All Quiet on the Western Front* became a runaway bestseller first in Germany and then in Britain (over 25,000 copies were sold in a fortnight when the work was first published in March 1929). At almost the same time R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* was first staged; it would go on to become 'the great middlebrow success of the interwar years on the stage [...] and the most successful war play ever produced in Britain'.⁶ The play is open to many interpretations, and indeed critics and audiences responded in a variety of ways to its first production. However, it has generally been taken as a condemnation of war and as a part of the 'futility' school of war memory, even though that was certainly not Sherriff's intention.⁷ Fussell suggests that in the face of the horrors of the war, certainties and fixed meanings became impossible, while postwar literary fiction had to grapple with

rupture, discontinuity and the loss of the conventions and traditions of the past – even in works not directly about the war itself.

However, this interpretation of modernism and modernity as reactions to the Great War relies heavily on the analysis of a very elite literary corpus (in addition to ignoring the fact that disenchantment was not solely a product of the frontline experience).⁸ Between the wars British fiction was dominated not by the highbrow but by the middlebrow: bestselling popular writing, produced by and for the middle classes and asserting the enduring value of both traditional literary forms and traditional moral, social and political values. The middlebrow transcended genre: it included the historical novel, a form that became increasingly associated with women writers and readers in the 1930s, detective mysteries, contemporary fiction and more.⁹ Like the modernists, many middlebrow writers tackled the consequences and legacies of the Great War. However, as Rosa Maria Bracco has shown, they took a very different approach. In her book *Merchants of Hope* she analyses:

a host of minor literature which attempted to rescue the war from futility not through the defunct rhetoric of glory and honour but by describing for its readers the link between the suffering and the lessons of the war, and an uninterrupted pattern of historical, and particularly English, significance.

An enormous corpus of middlebrow writing, including bestsellers both about the war and other fields, ‘ascribed sustaining and irreducible meaning to history, legitimized by parochial strands of traditional and national writing’.¹⁰ In other words, while the brutality, suffering and horrors of the war were fully acknowledged in middlebrow writing, it was perceived neither as futile nor ironic, but ultimately a worthwhile, even essential endeavour. The war was brutal, but not brutalising; it was inhumane but not dehumanising. In fact the very horrors of the war made the men who served in it and overcame its terrors the more heroic. In public and private memory, and in cultural representations, the war was regularly depicted in deeply traditional terms.¹¹

In rejecting irony and the discontinuity of the highbrow modernists, Bracco explains that

middlebrow literature in the inter-war years kept the canon of nineteenth-century fiction, as it understood it, alive and functioning by safeguarding it against modernism.

It 'ultimately reaffirmed continuity' and was 'clearly modelled on nineteenth-century fiction'.¹² Georgette Heyer's work is firmly located in this tradition and the disruptive modernist effects of the First World War find no place in her work. On the contrary: the idea of 'ascribing sustaining and irreducible meaning to history' sounds like a precise definition of her creative approach. Heyer's methodology was inherently antimodernist. While she was by no means scholarly in her methods and practices, she placed tremendous value on research. Her work – based on the deliberate assembling of a great barrage of detail and on the meticulous use of primary sources for historical figures to establish a concrete and entirely linear narrative, bolstered always by the known – was a tacit rejection of the entire modernist approach. There were no doubts or haziness, no unknowability or fog of war for Heyer.¹³ Instead, her work is a clear example of Bracco's description of middlebrow's inherent faith in tradition and continuity – values which almost all of her romantic and historical production embraces.

However, this does not mean that the war and its cultural representations had no effect on Heyer's writing. Far from it: in her work we can identify many features common to other middlebrow authors of the period, both male and female, that derive directly from the problems and interpretative difficulties of the war. It is worth noting that the First World War came at a critical moment in Heyer's life. She was almost 12 years old when it began and living with her family in Paris, where they remained throughout August and September 1914; during the battle of the Marne she could clearly hear the German guns. In 1915 her father volunteered for the army, despite being overage. He received a temporary commission and was despatched to France, where his excellent French served him well; in 1916 he was promoted to a captaincy and eventually moved into a Staff position. Serving in non-combatant roles throughout, George Heyer eventually earned the MBE for his war service. Meanwhile his wife, Georgette's mother, volunteered as a nurse with the Red Cross. Heyer's very close relationship with her father, as well as connections with various family and friends who served, meant that the war played a critical role in shaping her teenage years.¹⁴

The Napoleonic Wars dominated the era in which Heyer chose to set most of her works: the Regency. During the First World War comparisons with the conflict of the previous century were regularly made – the centenary of the Battle of Waterloo fell during the war, and once again the same belligerent powers were engaged in fighting not all that far away from the original battlefield, albeit in a very different

alliance (rather embarrassingly for commemorative purposes).¹⁵ Indeed Heyer makes a knowing nod to the battlefields of the First World War in *An Infamous Army*, when the Belgian Comte de Lavissee comments, 'this poor land of mine has often been the battlefield of Europe, and may be so yet again – perhaps many times'.¹⁶ More than these direct comparisons, however, the First World War influenced the ways in which war is represented in Heyer's novels, and informs some of the value judgements we can identify associated with officers, soldiers and military conduct.

This is not, of course, to deny the care with which she pursued accuracy, above all in her more 'serious' historical novels, which include the two works in which she focuses explicitly on the Napoleonic Wars. Her research was extensive, exploiting a range of primary sources and incorporating Wellington's own words wherever she could find them, as the notes and bibliography included in *An Infamous Army* make clear. She also consulted many biographies and memoirs and relied a great deal on the ground-breaking work of Sir Charles Oman, Chichele Professor of Modern History at Oxford. He published an enormous history of the Peninsula War in seven volumes between 1902 and 1930, and an important study entitled *Wellington's Army* in 1913;¹⁷ he was also the father of Heyer's close friend Carola. However, as many scholars have observed, Heyer's literary world was not an accurate recreation of the past. It was rather a private one in which twentieth-century mores and values are set within a diligently assembled framework of historical detail.¹⁸ In the words of Maroula Joannou:

Heyer uses verifiable historical facts to transform the known past into a utopian space in which fantasies and romantic aspirations can be expressed.

Her heroines are distinctly modern in sensibility and behaviour; her private Regency is strongly reflective of the era in which they are written (as we see, for instance, when we consider the extent to which opulence, playfulness and wish-fulfilment are actually increased in the 1940s novels written under wartime and postwar austerity).¹⁹ Paul Fussell noted that 'everyone fighting a modern war tends to think about it in terms of the last one he knows anything about'; Heyer, writing about a historical war, tended to think about it in terms of the most recent one she knew anything about.²⁰

Heyer wrote two novels specifically about the Napoleonic Wars: first *An Infamous Army* (1937), about the Battle of Waterloo, and then

The Spanish Bride (1940), which covers the Peninsular Campaign and the Hundred Days. Although she tends to downplay the social impact of the conflict in many of her works, there are several other books which heavily feature both political and military elements of the Napoleonic Wars in their plot (such as espionage, smuggling, Waterloo), including *The Reluctant Widow* (1946), *The Unknown Ajax* (1959) and *A Civil Contract* (1961). In the latter two novels the hero is a veteran of the conflict, as he is also in *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951) and *The Toll-Gate* (1954). Meanwhile even when little or no mention is made of war, military service features commonly as a current or potential career for many minor characters. Beyond her Regency works Heyer also wrote very detailed battle scenes in *Simon the Coldheart* (1925) and *The Conqueror* (1931), while the theme of England at war is also dominant in *Beauvallet* (1929).

This chapter examines three specific areas in which the influence of the First World War on Heyer's writing about war and military matters is clearly discernible. First, her depiction of officers and officership; second, her depiction of other ranks; and finally, her presentation of wartime gender roles. For these purposes *The Spanish Bride*, published in 1940, is of particular importance. It would have been almost impossible for Heyer (and indeed anyone of her age) not to be thinking about the First World War at the moment when the Second broke out. However, *An Infamous Army*, which stages the unlikely romance between dashing widow Lady Barbara Childe and the serious-minded Colonel Charles Audley against the backdrop of Napoleon's Hundred Days campaign, also offers numerous echoes of the Great War.

Beyond these three themes, there are several other areas in which the influence of the First World War might be traced but which lie outside the scope of this chapter. One is Heyer's depiction of the Duke of Wellington himself, who seems to resemble Sir Douglas Haig in several key respects. Haig was not, in the interwar years, the pantomime villain that British popular culture later made him – on the contrary, he was widely admired, and as a living embodiment of aristocratic service was perhaps to Heyer almost above criticism, just as Wellington was.²¹ It might also be interesting to examine some of the ways in which Heyer writes about combat itself as reflecting the prevailing images and style of First World War writing. Her description of Badajoz is the best example. Siege warfare was the aspect of the Napoleonic campaigns closest to the experience of the First World War, and a close reading of her account of the storming actually evokes the act of 'going over the top' of the trenches.

Wellington's army in Heyer's novels

In choosing to focus so much on the army, Heyer reveals her interests to be fundamentally those of the post-Great War era rather than the early nineteenth century itself, for before the climactic events of Waterloo the navy was generally of far greater cultural importance. Consider Austen's novels in which the navy is paramount – respectable, even heroic – and the army barely considered (unless to disparage the morals and conduct of the militia). If anything, Heyer's almost total snubbing of the navy is quite an odd perspective given its importance at the time of which she writes (particularly given the huge popularity of the almost contemporary 'Hornblower' novels by C. S. Forester, the first of which was published in 1937). During and after the First World War, however, the British navy was perceived as having contributed much less to overall victory than the army, and Heyer's representation of post-1815 England perhaps reflects this judgement.²² Instead of heroic naval officers, Heyer's heroes are army officers in elite units – usually the cavalry or the Rifle Brigade.

Heyer's officer corps

Many of Heyer's characters – both heroes and secondary figures – are, or want to be, army officers. They can be placed into three broad groups as a military career performs one of three key functions for these characters: it offers redemption, escape or respectability. Most commonly, the prospect of service offers a chance for personal redemption and reform, a way out of an idle and purposeless life and a way to be useful to both society and one's family. This is especially true for dissolute younger sons or brothers who can only be rescued from uselessness (or worse) by some wealthy relative buying them a commission (for example, Dysart in *April Lady*, Bertram in *Arabella* and Cedric Brandon in *The Corinthian*, who is keen to go off to the Peninsula).²³ For other characters a commission represents an escape from boredom and from the irksome constraints of civilian life – this applies to *The Toll-Gate's* John Staples, Richmond in *The Unknown Ajax* and possibly to Gideon in *The Foundling*. Finally officership is suitable for, or perhaps productive of, responsible, loyal, serious-minded, dutiful gentlemen: Amanda's Captain in *Sprig Muslin*, Gervase in *The Quiet Gentleman*, Hector Kirby in *Bath Tangle*, Adam Deveril in *A Civil Contract*. And of course, implicitly, the feckless wastrels of the first group

will eventually be converted into this latter type by the time they have done their growing up in the army, although the novels acknowledge it does not always work: Conrad, Venetia's brother, for example, remains fundamentally selfish and immature despite his military career.

While Heyer chooses to situate most of her novels in the very highest echelons of society – far outstripping her supposed model, Austen – she does not echo this choice in military rank. In these war years of high casualties and rapid promotion, colonels and even generals could achieve their appointments surprisingly young (Wellington himself was not quite 40 when first sent out to command the British forces in the Peninsula). It was perfectly possible for a senior officer to be young enough to star in a romantic tale. Instead, Heyer's military heroes are usually junior officers. This is highly revealing of an important cultural legacy of the First World War, whereby in both fiction and non-fictional writing junior officers were the predominant protagonists. The particular importance Heyer gives to junior officers is revealed, rather paradoxically, in the remark made by the dowager countess in *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951) quoted at the start of this chapter. When the awful – and remarkably stupid – Dowager declares that junior officers' accounts of the late war are of no interest, we can be sure that Heyer means quite the opposite: in the mouth of one of her most loathsome characters, these words can only be interpreted as deeply ironic. Certainly Heyer, who had read so vociferously on the subject, did not appear to think that we had heard 'enough' of the Napoleonic War or she would not have contributed her own works in the field. Nor did she disdain junior officers in her writings.

It is instructive, however, to consider the Dowager's remark in the light of the enormous 'war books' publishing boom that began in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s, in which the memoirs, diaries and fictional accounts of veteran officers became incredibly popular.²⁴ The works of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves are perhaps the best known, but less commercially successful memoirs proliferated during this period. Officers' memoirs were of course the main primary source on which Heyer drew so skilfully in her research for *The Spanish Bride*. This is also the most important work we have for assessing her depictions of Wellington's army since, unlike *An Infamous Army*, even the romantic plot strand is based on real historical figures. The novel is based on the true (and well-documented) story of Harry and Juana Smith's marriage, which took place in 1812 immediately after the British storming of Badajoz, when Juana was just 14. Heyer had read Harry Smith's memoirs in 1937 while carrying out her extensive

research for *An Infamous Army* and saw in his story the potential for a full novel, despite the difficulty for modern readers in envisaging a child bride as a figure of romance. Along with Smith's *Autobiography* (first published in 1901), the memoirs of John Kincaid (1830 and 1835) and George Simmons (1899) allow some of the novel's most important characters to speak in their own words.²⁵

It is clear that Heyer, like the reading public of the 1930s, believed junior officers' recollections of war to be very important indeed. But while these memoirs are crucial sources for her, right down to sections of dialogue, the contemporary fictional landscape suggests other models too. The officer as dashing young adventure seeker, such as *The Toll-Gate's* John Staples, carries echoes of the fictional veteran Hugh 'Bulldog' Drummond, star of the immensely popular (if low-brow) adventures written by H. C. McNeile under the pen-name 'Sapper' during the 1920s and 1930s. Bulldog Drummond was a gentleman, a patriot and a physically fearless thrill-seeker. His wartime experiences had made him bored of the stifling conventions of peacetime life – a description that almost precisely matches Staples too.²⁶

The values embodied by Heyer's officers are deeply imbued with codes about 'Englishness'; they echo her contemporary writers of historical romance closely. Helen Hughes offers a portrait of the type: English upper-class men are superior, chivalric, unflappable, innately more militarily skilful, deserving of victory and indeed of supremacy; they are loyal, rooted in rural culture, unpretentious and dependable – embodiments of honour and decency. Hughes argues that in early twentieth century historical novels war is perceived as an area in which England excels. Individual freedom, independent spirit and personal autonomy, contained within a framework of aristocratic guidance, form the basis of English parliamentary democracy, but also make England both militarily strong and deserving.²⁷ These themes, highlighted by Hughes, recur in the depiction of the war against Napoleon, described in Heyer's works as a 'monster'.²⁸

Heyer's officers also embody the common characteristics that her contemporaries bestowed upon First World War officers. Interwar fictional First World War officers are either aristocratic (and Heyer's novels repeatedly emphasise the 'natural superiority' of the aristocracy)²⁹ or upper-middle class, committed to 'playing the game' at all times. Their conduct is flippant, light-hearted and jocular, sport-loving and unemotional, their bravery and patriotism always extremely understated, their treatment of tragedy or disaster ironic and detached.³⁰ This sounds like a precise description of Harry Smith and his friends, or indeed of

Charles Audley and his coterie. Wellington was known to prefer aristocratic officers and certainly in Heyer's fictional world he was surrounded by them.

In reality, however, only a tiny proportion of the officer corps was aristocratic, the majority being drawn from the middle class or at most the minor gentry.³¹ Wellington was not greatly enamoured of promotion from the ranks, believing that 'you could not perfectly trust' officers who had been commissioned in this way as 'their low origin came out' when it came to a propensity to drink.³² Such officers did nonetheless exist, just as they did in the First World War, but they feature neither in the interwar fiction on 1914–18 nor in Heyer's writings on the Napoleonic Wars. Instead the social and cultural profile of British junior officers in Heyer's novels is clearly drawn from the same shared imaginary as the fictional officer corps of Great War writing.

Wellington's troops and the 'Tommies' of the First World War

The influence of the Great War on Heyer's depiction of Wellington's army is also clear in the way she writes about the ordinary rank and file soldiers. The British army had comprised some 40,000 men in 1792; it was forced to expand incredibly fast to reach roughly 250,000 by 1813. These additional men were recruited, or at least perceived to be recruited, exclusively from 'the lowest classes of British society' and were widely seen as the 'dregs'.³³ Wellington himself supposedly described them repeatedly as 'the scum of the earth', declaring it to be 'quite shocking what excesses our men committed when once let loose'.³⁴ He apparently stated that

people talk of their enlisting from their fine military feeling – all stuff – no such thing. Some of our men enlist from having got bastard children – some for minor offences – many more for drink; but you can hardly conceive such a set brought together.³⁵

These feelings were largely inspired by the troops' conduct at Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and Vitoria. Here well-documented atrocities and mass plunder were widespread, with officers wholly unable to control the depredations of their men. Literacy rates and education among enlisted men were extremely low in this period, as was respect for conventional moral standards. Men enlisted when they had little real

alternative in terms of career or livelihood and plunder was seen by many as a legitimate and intrinsic reward of service. Heyer's description of the sack of Badajoz made this clear: drinking, thieving, destroying homes and property for the sheer sake of it and raping women of all ages were the order of the day. She describes it as 'a hell of misrule in which the horrors of the breaches were being fast surpassed' in which 'no efforts of the officers could quell the unleashed brutality of [the] men'.³⁶ Even though the atrocities are only lightly sketched, this is nonetheless an unusual scene to encounter in a romance novel. It might have been a little surprising for British readers to dwell on these crimes in 1940, just as British Expeditionary Forces once more made ready to set foot on the European mainland, but Heyer is at pains to suggest that the inhabitants of the town brought matters on themselves (by failing to surrender earlier) and had only themselves to blame. Thus, even within the novel, the worst depredations of the British forces are subtly excused and downplayed.

We can understand the attitude which both the army authorities and respectable British society held towards the ordinary private soldier by examining army disciplinary methods and witnessing how they evolved over time. The Peninsula army had employed a brutal system of discipline, which fundamentally treated the men as criminals; it relied heavily on extremely brutal corporal punishment and both the threat and the regular use of capital punishment. In her description of the aftermath of the sacking of Badajoz, Heyer notes that Wellington 'hanged one or two men, and the rest took timely warning'.³⁷ This brutality was only gradually diminished by successive reforms starting in the 1830s, but Wellington himself, based on his own experiences in command, remained staunchly convinced of the efficacy and necessity of brutal disciplinary methods until his death in 1852.³⁸ Flogging in the military was only really phased out by about 1850. Interestingly, however, there was no public complaint nor any sense that it was disproportionately harsh or brutal during the Napoleonic era itself. Only from the mid-nineteenth century were recruits seen in a more positive light. Military historian Hew Strachan explains that:

The process of 'improving' the soldier was [...] a gradual one. If finally successful, it might perhaps so alter the public image of the army as to attract a better class of recruit. The growth in the popularity of the soldier in the nineteenth-century [...] is particularly apparent from about its mid-point.³⁹

By the era of the First World War troops had become representatives of the nation to be supported and celebrated. Corporal and capital punishment were seen as much more controversial and the humble soldier had become the salt of the earth.⁴⁰

Indeed, by 1914–18, the ordinary British private was reimagined in an altogether more chivalric mode – and one that made him a much more suitable subject for romance. A women’s magazine story entitled ‘The Bridegroom at War’, published in 1916, describes a scene in which the heroine, Peggy, faints in the street and is assisted by several ‘Tommies’ nearby:

The girl’s white face and utter helplessness appealed to the manliness and chivalry that are in every British soldier – a chivalry that extends to the helpless wounded of the enemy and to their enemy’s women.⁴¹

The innate chivalry of the British soldier towards the enemy and his women would have been news to the people of Badajoz, who endured mass rape, murder, plunder and defilement a century earlier. Interestingly, however, although Heyer describes these brutal scenes scrupulously, whenever she offers us imagined dialogues of ordinary private soldiers they are surprisingly polite, even honourable, respectful of their officers and moved by an instinctively chivalric code in their treatment of Juana Smith. They ‘regard her with affectionate respect’, treat her as ‘a lady quite out of the common run’ and take great pains not to ‘soil the ears of the likes of her’ with reference to their own extra-marital relations, thus preserving her purity and virtue.⁴²

In her presentation of ordinary private soldiers, Heyer is entirely typical of other interwar middlebrow writers. Bracco notes:

the working-class was [...] referred to [...] with the same concern, affection, and (when necessary) severity that officers had displayed towards their men. If the working classes let themselves be guided [as in] the wartime common effort, justice and harmony would be among [the] great rewards.⁴³

In middlebrow war novels the ‘figure of the young soldier’ is characterised by ‘endurance, self-sacrifice and sense of humour’ along with a prosaic, pragmatic approach to military service.⁴⁴ The Highlanders who enchant Judith in Brussels before Waterloo or Harry Smith’s men who treat Juana as a kind of mascot fit more closely with this paradigm than

they do with Wellington's 'scum of the earth'. Where Heyer draws on the historical record, we see Wellington's troops; where she draws upon her imagination (especially for dialogue), we find the cultural image of the First World War Tommy, dressed up in a scarlet uniform.

If Wellington's officers and men, in Heyer's hands, turn out to owe quite a lot to their counterparts of a full century later, what of the heroines in these novels? Even the two 'war books' are still romances, and both Barbara Childe and Juana Smith must pursue their love lives in close proximity to the battlefield. Of these two, it is arguably *The Spanish Bride* which shows the influence of the Great War most directly, but both were intimately concerned with women's conduct and responsibilities in wartime.

Modelling gender roles in wartime

The Spanish Bride was published in early April 1940, when Britain once again found itself at war. Much women's fiction in the Second World War would follow the model of the First, in which 'multiple and often conflicting constructions of wartime behaviour [were] offered to young women in cultural discourse, through plots which are at once escapist and at the same time reflect the actual concerns of readers'.⁴⁵ While Heyer's research had been active for several years before publication, much of *The Spanish Bride* was written after 3 September 1939, with the war under way; she finished the novel just before Christmas. Heyer was acutely aware of the war while writing the novel and indeed the *Woman's Journal*, which regularly serialised her work as part of its prestigious literary list, turned it down as being too heavy for readers at the time.⁴⁶ Most of Heyer's later wartime writing would be escapist, as her own comments on *Friday's Child* in 1943 made clear:

I ought to be shot for writing such nonsense [...] but it's unquestionably good escapist literature [...] and I think I should rather like it if I were sitting in an air-raid shelter or recovering from flu.⁴⁷

This function, always an important element in the appeal of her writing, became even more central in wartime. Not only readers but she herself as a writer was keen to enjoy something more light-hearted to distract her from the oppressive news from the continent.⁴⁸ At the same time her self-denigration is perhaps part of a wider trend of

disparagement of women's cultural contribution in wartime, as Diana Wallace has argued.⁴⁹ It is thus not surprising that Heyer decided to abandon the more serious Napoleonic subjects after 1940, nor that she did not in the end write the Agincourt novel that she briefly contemplated at this time as a patriotic response to national crisis. Yet what it lacked in escapism *The Spanish Bride* made up with its didactic function, clearly addressing the concerns of the Second World War in light of the experience of the First.⁵⁰ This is also by no means the only novel in which Heyer sets out strong instructions; Laura Vivanco has convincingly outlined the strong didactic functions of *The Nonesuch* (1962) in her research.⁵¹

To a generation which had hoped that the war of 1914–18 would end all war, this was a terrible time; the shadows and fears of that conflict returned to them in full. What lessons, then, might the British reading public – and Heyer's public in particular – draw from a still earlier experience of total war, to enable them better to endure and understand the current conflict? First, the novel offers a strongly consolatory message: not only do British forces win a memorable and lasting triumph, but the much-feared prospect of an enemy invasion is utterly defeated by the effectiveness of the British Expeditionary Forces. In the spring of 1940, with the phony war about to give way to full-scale combat, this spoke directly to contemporary anxieties – even though the British Expeditionary Forces which were to fight in Norway and France over the next three months would not live up to the Peninsula example. Beyond this optimistic and patriotic conclusion, the novel has much to say about men and women's conduct in wartime.⁵²

Juana's marriage, attended as it is by great urgency (the couple marry just a few days after meeting) and little formality, is an extreme example of a common phenomenon: the wartime wedding. In 1939 and 1940 British 'war brides' took sexual and romantic risks unnecessary in peacetime; they rushed to the altar, exchanging the conventional romance of a carefully planned wedding for the security of married status as their men went off to war. Juana's story therefore had a particular appeal at this moment.⁵³ We see some of this climate of risk-taking too in Heyer's description of social life in Brussels in 1815 in *An Infamous Army*. At a ball, early in the novel, Heyer writes, 'civilian gentlemen were plainly at a discount, and the young lady who could not show at least one scarlet uniform enslaved was unhappy indeed'.⁵⁴ All through May and June the characters live 'in a whirlpool' with 'no time for anything but pleasure [...] as though we were all a little mad', in the

sensible Judith's words.⁵⁵ As news spread of the imminent engagement at the Duchess of Richmond's ball, held the night before Waterloo, a strange atmosphere arose in which:

officers [...] lingered to exchanged touching little keepsakes with girls in flower-like dresses who [...] clung with frail, unconscious hands to a scarlet sleeve. [...] A queer, almost greedy emotion shone in many countenances. Life had suddenly become an urgent business, racing towards disaster, and the craving for excitement, the breathless moment compound of fear, and grief, and exaltation [...] surged up under the veneer of good manners and shone behind the dread in shocked young eyes.⁵⁶

These scenes of excitement conditioned by fear, along with the seductive glamour of the men in their military uniforms, echo the moral panic about 'khaki fever' that arose during the First World War. In such strange times, it was lamented by some that 'young women were so excited by the sight of men in military uniforms that they behaved in immodest and even dangerous ways'.⁵⁷ At the Duchess of Richmond's ball in 1815 young women are gripped with a kind of 'scarlet (coat) fever' and forget their careful training. In 1914 wartime led the shackles of sexual morality to be cast off and previously respectable girls to transgress established boundaries (or at least so it was widely feared in Britain). A drumhead marriage was obviously preferable to this in Heyer's view; in *The Spanish Bride* war brides might see that their story held a romance all of its own, with the reassurance that a happy outcome was possible after even the briefest of courtships. In fact, women's magazines during the First World War actively encouraged the romance of the 'reckless' marriage as a way for women and girls to participate actively in the 'drama' of the war.⁵⁸ The heightened emotional climate of the war must be directed towards romance and marriage, safely containing the sexuality of young women.⁵⁹

But what came next? No twentieth-century British war brides could follow the drum as Juana did; Heyer's novel instead allowed a fantasy for the wife or girlfriend left behind, a way imaginatively to follow her partner into the largely masculine domain of the battlefield.⁶⁰ The novel emphasises the hardships and stress – not to mention danger – that this entailed for Juana, perhaps reassuring readers that they really were better off at home and that this exploit was best left to the realm of the imaginary. Diana Wallace has argued that

The meticulously-researched detail of Heyer's historical settings novels produces an effect of 'realism' [...] but it also, paradoxically, acts as a kind of distance, signalling the text's status as fantasy.⁶¹

Juana's experience is at once 'realistic' and entirely fantastical. But there is still a clear lesson for women readers about their conduct in wartime: Juana is dedicated and self-sacrificing, she quickly learns to take on all the necessary domestic tasks to enable her to support her husband and she never makes a fuss, even when she experiences a minor injury to her foot. She quickly 'rouse[d] herself from her state of self-pity' and 'drank the tea Harry brewed for her' (like the good Englishwoman her marriage has apparently made her!), then set out her plans to overcome the injury 'in a determined voice' before 'stoutly den[ying] feeling any pain'.⁶² Above all Juana never asks Harry to neglect his duty or in any way fall short of giving his best self to the army. When she is struggling one night in a storm before the battle of Salamanca, she meets Harry's fellow officer Johnny Kincaid, who is in love with her. He asks her whether her husband is busy on some task for his superior officer and she replies: 'Enrique never neglects his duty'. 'Only his wife?' said Kincaid quizzically. 'You know better!' she retorts.⁶³ A few weeks later, facing separation in the face of an upcoming skirmish, Harry sends her away to safety – a prospect she views with dismay:

Words seemed to be strangled in her throat; she wanted to cling to him, to hold him fast; but of course she knew she must not do that.⁶⁴

Jealous and furious if she thinks she has been neglected for another woman, Juana is perfectly happy to come second to Harry's military duty. She is in many ways the antithesis of the coquettish, superficial woman, interested only in fashion and fun, who is so brutally stigmatised in many interwar middlebrow works – and in some of Heyer's own romances. Women readers in 1940 could thus see a patriotic model for themselves to follow, very much along the lines which many First World War recruiting posters had embraced: *Women of Britain say Go!* and *Is your best Boy in Khaki?*⁶⁵ Trying to keep your man at your side was shown to be selfish and unworthy; properly feminine behaviour required that he do his military duty. Indeed, this was the form which patriotic sacrifice took for women: in Nicoletta Gullace's words, 'the sending of men to battle became the womanly

equivalent of enlistment itself.⁶⁶ When Harry Smith is first told he is to be sent to America, Juana cries desperately. But then

when the first abandonment of her despair was over, Juana said: 'you must go. It is your duty. I am sorry I cried. You see, I – I had never thought that perhaps we might be separated.'⁶⁷

She resolves to be 'calm and reasonable' and even manages to tell Harry that she is glad for him. This depiction comes straight from Smith's autobiography:

My duty was my duty – I gloried in it; my wife even still more so, and never did she say, 'You might have been with me', or complain if I was away. On the contrary, after many a day's fatiguing march, when I sought her out in the baggage or awaiting me, her first question invariably was 'Are you sure you have done all your duty?'⁶⁸

Heyer, however, rewrites this anecdote from the feminine perspective and greatly expands upon it, reiterating Juana's conduct on multiple occasions. Her courage and self-sacrifice exactly embody the Great War era's presentation of those values in their feminine form.

There is an interesting contrast here with Barbara in *An Infamous Army*: she is evidently bored by, and impatient of, Charles's military duties in the early part of the novel. Frivolous and selfish, she encourages him to neglect his work in favour of pleasure-seeking and romance. Early in their romance, with the great struggle against Napoleon looming, she asks him to apply for leave; he replies 'Unthinkable!' She asks:

'Perhaps you don't wish for leave?'
'I don't,' he said frankly. 'Why, what a fellow I should be if I did!'
'Don't I come first with you?'
He glanced down at her. 'You don't understand, Bab.'
'Oh, you mean to talk to me of your duty!' she said impatiently.
'Tedious stuff!'⁶⁹

Barbara's conception of duty is depicted as flawed and limited: she sees it only as an imposition (perhaps a consequence of her unpleasant first marriage and difficult upbringing) and cannot understand the elevated, lofty conception of duty that a true soldier such as Charles embraces.

He, with typical English reticence, cannot or will not attempt to explain it to her – it is too heartfelt. She has little interest in patriotism either, being wholly absorbed in herself and even – shockingly! – flirting with a foreigner, the Belgian Count de Lavisse.

Unlike Juana, Barbara has to learn the value of duty. Only once she has redeemed herself through extreme anxiety and hard work, once the fighting has begun, can she even begin to see Charles's service in a more 'correct' framework: when he returns to the house briefly after the battle at Quatre Bras and before the main engagement at Waterloo, to change and eat, she remains calm and reassuring. Judith says in surprise:

'He behaved as though nothing were of the least consequence but this dreadful war!'

Barbara gave a laugh. 'Is anything else of consequence? I like him for that.'

Judith replied, 'You are made to be a soldier's wife.'⁷⁰

It is no coincidence that Barbara's redemption comes about through the patriotic and womanly work of care-giving, and in particular through nursing. The idealised role of women as carers was critical to wartime rhetoric in 1914–18, even when it came to less immediately obvious areas such as the recruitment of women for industrial work.⁷¹ Nursing was the form of care which received most attention and, especially at the outset of the war, aristocratic and upper-middle class women volunteered to nurse in considerable numbers. Heyer's mother was a volunteer nurse and her close friend Joanna Cannan joined the Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) in 1914.⁷² Joanna even fell in love with and married a handsome young captain, thus embodying the glamorised myth of the romantic, aristocratic young volunteer nurse which has rather overshadowed the realities of professional nursing during the First World War.⁷³

Professional military nursing did not exist during the Napoleonic Wars, of course, being a creation of the Crimean War. After the Battle of Waterloo, as Heyer describes it, the local population turned out onto the streets of Brussels to help the wounded, as well as inviting them into their homes to convalesce, while 'local ladies worked hard' to assist them. Yet nursing in general was not seen as suitable work for well-born ladies in this period; it was a task rather undertaken by lower-class women or nuns.⁷⁴ By contrast, in *An Infamous Army* Heyer's aristocratic ladies rush to volunteer their time and efforts as nurses as if they were

in an early form of the VAD. As well as patriotism, their actions are motivated by the need to be involved in the stirring events unfolding:

The feeling of being able to do something which would be of use in this crisis did much to relieve the oppression of everyone's spirits.⁷⁵

Arguably, however, these women's quest to participate actively was a twentieth-century attitude, a product of the First World War quite anachronistic in the context of the Napoleonic era. Nursing exposes Barbara (and her hostess Judith) to the horrors of conflict and shocks her out of her complacency and selfishness. This episode proves to be a turning point in the novel, transforming Barbara from a shocking flirt into a self-sacrificing caregiver, ready for the reader to identify with and finally worthy of the hero's love. In short, it is nursing that makes her into a romantic heroine. It will be her care – feminine, devoted and self-sacrificing – that is crucial to Charles Audley's ultimate recovery and survival after being wounded, despite the practical reality that 'there was so little that could be accomplished by inexpert hands'.⁷⁶ The experience of nursing the wounded in the streets also establishes a unique bond between the two women, making them comrades-in-arms. When they describe their work to their middle-class acquaintance Lucy Devenish, she is horrified.

Lucy shuddered. 'Oh, how I admire you! I could not! The sight of the blood – the wounds – I cannot bear to think of it!'

Judith and Barbara catch one another's eye:

A faint smile passed between them; in that moment of wordless understanding each was aware of the bond which, no matter what might come, could never quite be broken between them.⁷⁷

The inimitable camaraderie born of shared hardship and trauma is a key theme in the Great War memoirs of both men and women.

Barbara's misbehaviour in the first half of the novel arises at least in part from resentment that army duties might drive love and romance out of her lover's mind. This was a fear that many women experienced in 1914–18, and again after 1939. Here, too, *The Spanish Bride* provides a very consoling picture. Throughout the novel we see that Harry Smith's concern for Juana is real and profound despite

his military responsibilities. She is loved and cherished however demanding his duty may be; the female reader whose partner was away at war could thus find reassurance that her lover was still thinking of her, still devoted. Crucially, however, this romantic love in no way hinders Harry's devotion to his duty nor makes him any less the soldier. This is at once reassuring to the woman reader who, unlike Juana, could not accompany her man overseas and thus might fear being forgotten. But in fact Harry is also a model for men: his marital responsibilities and his military responsibilities are kept in perfect balance, and he successfully upholds the highest standards of both military and domestic masculinity. There is, apparently, no opposition between the two – though it is clearly not easy to fulfil both roles.

This is a significant response to a hugely important debate which had played out during the First World War in Britain. How should men balance their military and their domestic duties, and by what codes of masculinity should a true British man try to live? Jessica Meyer, Laura Ugolini and others have highlighted the way in which during the First World War masculinity became a publicly contested ground; men's private duties as husbands, fathers and sons were weighed in the balance against their public and patriotic duty to serve as soldiers.⁷⁸ Put in its most basic form, should masculinity be martial or domestic? Despite a strongly patriotic, even militaristic wartime culture, there was a surprising degree of space for men to express and uphold alternate forms of masculine ideal during the First World War. The conflict between multiple models was not easily resolved. Harry Smith, however, successfully integrates both identities, emerging as an excellent, responsible officer *and* a devoted husband. For men and women in 1940, facing the prospect of renewed tension in negotiating conflicting ties of homeland and family, Meyer offers an idiosyncratic but consoling image of how to perform masculine duties in wartime. A lesson from the Napoleonic Wars could help to resolve a problem which the experience of the First World War suggested might well recur in the Second.

Conclusion

At the end of *An Infamous Army* the Duke of Wellington visits Lady Worth and says to her (in words taken from one of his actual private conversations):

'My friends, my poor soldiers – how many of them have I to regret! [...] I have never fought such a battle, and I trust I shall never fight such another. War is a terrible evil, Lady Worth.'⁷⁹

While Wellington never had to fight another such battle, Britain certainly did. To read of the battle scene of Waterloo, with its gruesome piles of dead lying in muddy Belgian fields, less than 20 years after the end of the First World War would immediately evoke that conflict. Although the novel presents war against the dictator who has conquered most of Europe (Napoleon) as righteous and necessary, Heyer's readers, no less than Heyer herself, would have ardently hoped in 1937 that Britain would never have to fight another such war. By 1940, when *A Spanish Bride* was published, those hopes had been dashed. Taken together, Heyer's military writings drew on the experience of the First World War to offer models through which British women and men could rise to whatever challenge they might meet – and so prove themselves worthy of their heroic ancestors of more than a century before.

Notes

- 1 Heyer, *The Quiet Gentleman*, 13. The fictional St Erth, who has recently sold out, served in the 7th Hussars, later to be the regiment in which the young Douglas Haig was first commissioned.
- 2 Many thanks are owed to Shelagh Wilcox Hughes, who introduced me to the delights of Georgette Heyer as a child and took me to visit the battlefield at Waterloo, and to Jessica Meyer, who encouraged and inspired me to work on this project. Since I began it several other women historians of the First World War have confessed to me their secret enjoyment of Heyer. I am grateful for the opportunity to present this work at the 2018 'The Nonesuch' conference in London and for the comments received there; Jonathan Boff and Ann-Marie Einhaus also made helpful suggestions. I recently learned that Ann-Marie Einhaus presented a paper entitled 'Facets of Memory: Georgette Heyer and the Oblique Literary Memory of World War I' at the Modern Languages Association Conference in 2016, which I have unfortunately not seen.
- 3 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.
- 4 Fussell, *The Great War*, 15.
- 5 On the history of how the war has been perceived, represented and remembered in Britain see Todman, *The Great War: Myth and memory*. For important critiques of Fussell's argument, see Smith, 'Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-five years later', 241–60; McLoughlin, 'The Great War and Modern Memory', 436–58.
- 6 Bracco, *Merchants of Hope*, 145.
- 7 Bracco, *Merchants*, 178.
- 8 Frayn, *Writing Disenchantment*.
- 9 Wallace, "'History to the Defeated'", 76–92 (pp. 76–7); Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*.
- 10 Bracco, *Merchants*, 1.
- 11 Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.
- 12 Bracco, *Merchants*, 12.

- 13 Compare Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, 14–15.
- 14 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 33–40.
- 15 Raxhon, *Centenaire sanglant*.
- 16 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 127.
- 17 Oman, *Wellington's Army*.
- 18 See the rather rude definition of her period detail as 'pseudoinformation' which 'ultimately reveals nothing about society', Robinson, 'On Reading Trash', 321–35.
- 19 Joannou, *Women's Writing*, 80.
- 20 Fussell, *The Great War*, 314.
- 21 Todman, "'Sans Peur et sans Reproche": The retirement, death, and mourning of Sir Douglas Haig'. On Heyer's attitude to Wellington see Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 169–70.
- 22 On the cultural image of the British navy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*; Colville and Davey, eds, *A New Naval History*.
- 23 Bell, 'Cross-Dressing in Wartime'.
- 24 For an early assessment of the phenomenon see Falls, *War Books*.
- 25 Harry George Wakelyn Smith, *Autobiography of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Smith*; Kincaid, *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade*; Kincaid, *Random Shots from a Rifleman*; Simmons, *A British Rifle Man*.
- 26 Meyer, 'The Tuition of Manhood', 113–28.
- 27 Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, chap. 5.
- 28 For instance, in *The Grand Sophy* Lady Ombersley refers to 'the escape of that dreadful Monster from Elba'. Heyer, *The Grand Sophy*, 7.
- 29 Hughes, *Historical Romance*, 136.
- 30 Bracco, *Merchants*, 70–1.
- 31 Haythornthwaite, *British Infantry of the Napoleonic Wars*, 8.
- 32 Stanhope and Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington*, 13.
- 33 Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 5.
- 34 Stanhope and Wellesley, 9, 14.
- 35 Stanhope and Wellesley, 18.
- 36 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 34.
- 37 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 59.
- 38 Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy*, 80–2.
- 39 Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy*, 79–80.
- 40 See for instance Herbert, *The Secret Battle*, which offered a stark denunciation of the practice of capital punishment in wartime.
- 41 Cited in Acton, 'Best Boys and Aching Hearts', 173–93 (190).
- 42 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 61–2.
- 43 Bracco, *Merchants*, 52–3.
- 44 Bracco, *Merchants*, 54; 67–70.
- 45 Acton, 'Best Boys', 183.
- 46 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 197–8.
- 47 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 11.
- 48 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 205–9.
- 49 Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel*.
- 50 For this phenomenon more generally in middlebrow fiction see Stewart, 'The Last War', 259–81; also Bell, 'Cross-Dressing in Wartime'.
- 51 Vivanco, 'Georgette Heyer: The Nonesuch of Regency Romance'.
- 52 See also Bell, 'Cross-Dressing in Wartime', who argues that *The Corinthian*, published later in 1940, 'negotiates and addresses a number of social and political debates current at the time', relating to proper wartime conduct and in particular to gender roles (461). It is interesting that Heyer chose to set this work at the height of the Peninsular War, around 1812/13, reinforcing the idea of a parallel between this conflict and the Second World War.
- 53 Joannou, *Women's Writing*, 68.
- 54 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 23.
- 55 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 261.
- 56 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 248.
- 57 Angela Woollacott, "'Khaki Fever" and Its Control', 325–47, 325.

- 58 Acton, 'Best Boys', 181–2.
- 59 In some of Heyer's later works this theme returns, for instance Amanda in *Sprig Muslin* is keen to be married as soon as possible precisely because she knows her Captain may be sent away. Heyer also later explored the possibility that a traditional wartime romance between an eligible young woman and a wounded hero is not necessarily a good idea: Julia and Adam's relationship in *A Civil Contract* is the product of wounded-hero syndrome and would have led to a disastrous marriage.
- 60 The idea of women accompanying soldiers overseas in their imagination was directly explored by other middlebrow writers between the wars, for instance the very successful 1932 novel by Pamela Hinkson, *The Ladies Road*. Bracco, *Merchants*, 114–15.
- 61 Wallace, "History to the Defeated", 82.
- 62 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 160.
- 63 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 90.
- 64 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 126.
- 65 Paul Ward, "Women of Britain Say Go", 23–45.
- 66 Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*, 63.
- 67 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 289.
- 68 Harry George Wakelyn Smith, *Autobiography*, 74.
- 69 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 107.
- 70 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 294.
- 71 Smith, 'The Girl behind the Man behind the Gun', 223–41.
- 72 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 41–2.
- 73 Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*. In some ways Vera Brittain is the prototype for Heyer's aristocratic ladies on the streets of Brussels.
- 74 Howard, 'British Medical Services at the Battle Of Waterloo', 1653–6.
- 75 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 263.
- 76 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 276. Judith's complaints about the excessive cheerfulness and jocularly of the military doctor John Robert Hume appear drawn directly from the account by Magdalene, Lady De Lancey of nursing her husband on his deathbed at Waterloo. De Lancey, *A Week at Waterloo in 1815*.
- 77 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 282.
- 78 Meyer, *Men of War*; Ugolini, *Civvies*.
- 79 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 402.

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