

A Subaltern on the Somme

By Mark VII

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reprinted by The Imperial War Museum, Department of Printed Books, in association with Battery Press, Nashville, 1996, in a limited edition of 500 copies.

A role, a battle, a rifle cartridge. The title and author of this intriguing memoir are styled as little more than an anonymous collection of First World War paraphernalia, undistinguished, given coherence by the sonority of alliteration and by the contextual pull of the most devastating Great War battle. Who can say how many cartridges were fired, how many subalterns were among the dead and wounded of the Somme? If the memoir's title conveys the diffidence of anonymity, this is in keeping with its subject matter, which records the experience of trench warfare in 1916 and draws attention to the spirit of those ordinary men who went unrewarded by the conventional military pro-

cedures. The author, however, was anything but ordinary. Max Plowman not only resigned his commission following his experience on the Somme, but later became General Secretary of the Peace Pledge Union, and thus “resigned” from war altogether.

A Subaltern on the Somme is unlike some of the war memoirs that were published at around the same time, such as Graves’s *Goodbye to All That* or Sassoon’s George Sherston memoirs, in that it lacks the panoramic vision of those publications. It is not a portrait of social or individual change with the war as a special agent; it doesn’t have the cast of characters, the witty aplomb, the verve and anecdotal repertoire of the better-known representatives of the genre. Instead it focuses, very closely, on six months spent in the environs of the Somme with little sense of the historical perspective, or even of the strategic gains and losses that have made that battle the ironic centrepiece in the mythology of the war. As Malcolm Brown’s informative Introduction to this edition makes clear, Plowman admired Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* for its “poignancy”, and recommends him “to heaven for truth, while I shall go to the provincial records office for veracity” (Introduction, np). If *A Subaltern on the Somme* declines to invoke a powerfully individualised sense of the futility and waste of war, it conveys instead the texture of the experience: the dullness, discomfort and boredom punctuated by intense and horrific activity; the circuitous, debilitating marching at the command of the befogged but cosy general staff; the arbitrariness of death; the moments of companionship, the “courses” that officers attend in order to fulfil administrative requirements, irrespective of need and appropriateness; the mammoth injustices; the rotting bodies; the rats, the mud, the rain, the small comfort of a decent billet and reliable rations. And threaded throughout these are reflections on warfare, on humanity, on morals and sensitivity, and on creative endeavour.

It is related in the present tense. An unusual strategy, perhaps, for a memoir written some ten years after the event. But it creates a sense of immediacy, a texture redolent of unfiltered reality. And this is part of the project, it seems to me, that writers such as Owen, Graves and Sassoon were engaged in: the search for an unvarnished discourse that tells not of “glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power”, and that eschews the “big words” that elevate the lexicon of the arm-chair patriots. High diction is avoided because it is inappropriate. In this context it is hardly to be expected that the deserving will be rewarded by the military elite and even the advance of a recommendation is

greeted by one "hero", Jackson, with indifference, as if the narrator "had betrayed his confidence to fools" (198). The chapter titles follow a relentless course from July to January, suggesting the illusion of advance while the narrator becomes further enmeshed in the literal mud, the strategic fog, the organisational absurdity, and the physical and mental attrition that characterise the Western Front.

Throughout the memoir there is a disjunction between imagination and actuality. The narrator describes this as the state of being unable to "solve" the Front, that is, being unable to reconcile his imaginative conception of the task in hand and the role required of him with the place where there are waterlogged trenches, machine guns, barbed wire, "where blind death keeps groping hideously" (129). He is troubled by the instinct to contrast the "force and velocity" of a shell, "with the human bodies it was making for" (92), by the instruction not to fire low, "because the head is the most vulnerable part of a man" (191). By contrast he takes pleasure in contemplating the "fruit trees dancing in the sunlight", the expanse of blue above ("Shutting off the landscape [the trenches] compel us to observe the sky"), and the "soul of harmony" represented by the artistic endeavour in a set of Renaissance prints. He cannot reconcile the human capacity for pity, imagination, thought and creativity, with the barbarism of war. "Art celebrates or prophesies the perfection of life. War shatters its very fabric" (232). Plowman resigned his commission, not for the same reasons that Sassoon made his protest—that the aims of the war had fundamentally changed—but because he saw all war as "organised murder" and looked forward to a time when creative thought would make the act of war impossible to human beings. His pacifism, then, derives not from experience alone, but from an accompanying commitment to a radical and Romantic concept of Imagination. This, he hopes, will free men from the machine-dominated "idiocy" that permits an illusion of technological control to set its own trajectories, a series of goals which then become severed from human instinct.

Plowman may have consigned himself to the record office for "veracity", but that is no reason for the contemporary reader to overlook his memoir. Its value lies not only in the recreation of the lived experience, but in its subtle exploration of the relation of war to art and politics. This reprint, which marks the eightieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, offers us the chance to re-evaluate the memoir in the context of the more celebrated of its genre.