

4. What is going on ‘out there’

It is not easy to be sure what King’s School boys knew about the War; still less what they thought about it. It is, however, a mistake to suppose that they were unaware of what was going on. As Adrian Gregory points out “the alienation of soldiers from civilians is such a literary stereotype that the obvious point has been forgotten; the two were inevitably linked in countless ways”.¹ In Canterbury, as at many schools, the proximity of military camps, the threat of Zeppelin raids and even the blackout as well as reports in the newspapers meant that it seemed relatively easy to feel involved as well as to follow the course of events. Indeed in the early stages of the fighting more details were directly available than was the case later on.

The first wartime *Cantuarian* in November 1914 included several ‘Letters from the Front’. One was from Percy Snatt on the retreat from Mons and the Battle of the Aisne, including an account of how he was wounded. This was followed by a remarkable series of letters from Charles Fremoult Battersby of the Royal Field Artillery. There are details on shells fired – “We did great work on Monday, saving the situation several times by mowing down the German Infantry as they advanced; we fired 940 odd rounds that day – 800 of them in four hours – and we must have accounted for 300 or 400”; on living conditions – “I am at present living in a hole five feet long, 2½ feet wide and 5½ feet deep, which is covered over with earth, etc.”; on casualties – “Tuesday was a bad day as their heavy howitzers pitched some very lucky heavy shells into our battery, all into my section; the last one was the most disastrous, as it fell just behind one of my guns and broke back killing two sergeants and wounding six other men”; and on the food – “Our meals are extraordinary and may interest you – 3.30 a.m.: tea, porridge, fried bacon, bread and jam. 9 a.m.: bread and jam, cocoa. 12.30 noon, bread and cheese (bully beef sometimes). 4.30 p.m.: tea, bread and jam. 7.30 p.m.: soup, stewed bully beef, bread and jam, rum.”²

Battersby’s immediate assessment of the fighting – “As far as my own little area is concerned it is a game of stalemate” – would become all too familiar. His more general conclusion (and he was a professional soldier, albeit only having served since 1907) was one that his readers may have found less understandable and congenial in these opening months of the conflict: “I must say war is a horrible thing and I shall be only too glad when it is over.” By contrast, ‘O.K.S. News’ in the March 1915 edition reported on George and Roland Jukes that “both sound very cheerful”, and on Fred Housden, who “writes cheerfully from the firing line, and says, ‘it is just like being at home save that one cannot have a comfortable bath or sleep in pyjamas’.”³

Over the next two years, ‘Letters from the Front’ continued to be fairly informative about conditions in Belgium and France. Censorship was limited to the identification of units and of specific locations. In the early stages, some of the correspondents were almost light-

¹ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War*, p. 133.

² *The Cantuarian*, November 1914, pp. 724-8. Extracts from the letters were included in an article in the *Kentish Gazette* on ‘Old King’s Scholars on Active Service’. K.G. 28.11.1914. A copy of Battersby’s diary is in the School Archives.

³ *The Cantuarian*, March 1915, pp. 19-20.

hearted in their approach. John Musson could write: “I’ve been out about a fortnight now and am quite enjoying it.” This attitude was relatively unusual, however. Lennox Robertson began his account by saying: “I was in the first brigade to attack so I saw all the fun and was actually in everything except the taking of the front lines.” But his cheerfully upbeat style could not entirely disguise the reality of the situation:

I was the only officer left in the company by that time. After that the fighting was entirely open and we soon cleared the village you’ve heard about and swept on for another mile. As we were pretty badly cut up by that time we waited and the next line went on through us. Personally, I came off very luckily. I was hit in the left arm on the first day and in the face on the second, but both were only scratches.⁴

Many letters gave precise details of what was happening in a matter-of-fact style that nonetheless exposed the harsh realities of war. Walter Fluke was particularly frank:

We have a few days in trenches and a few days in billets. The trenches were very far apart, about 800 yards or more, but we never went back to the same ones, but have shifted along the line. Those we are in now are more interesting, only 40 yards from the Germans and in several places less than 15! This may sound absurd, nevertheless it is perfectly true... In one of the trenches a man (German) has been buried, and his head is sticking out of the side; in another place a man’s leg is protruding.⁵

There was no romanticising of war here and schoolboys should have had no illusions about what they might have to face themselves in a year or two’s time. It is easy to sympathise with Christopher Berryman, writing in the June 1916 issue: “I shall be very glad when the war is over. To me it seems that it will never end. Where we are now the trenches are in the same place as they were at the beginning of the war.”⁶

The published letters are clearly only a selection. From time to time brief notes were drawn from others and included in ‘OKS News’. Thus in March 1915 there was information from JB Sidebotham (“Things are pretty lively in the artillery line. I have not had a bath for over a month.”), CW Swithinbank (in the Arabian Sea, “which work was both monotonous and hot”), HG Paris and FH Seabrooke, as well as GF and TR Jukes and EF Housden.⁷ The News pages sometimes included accounts of wartime incidents (“when some Germans who had crept up in the darkness showered bombs into the trench”) or acts of bravery (“he did splendidly on September 25 and 26 at Loos and Hill 70, where he was twice wounded, fortunately slightly”) and even reports from prisoners of war (“teaching Russian officers English and learning Russian from them”).⁸ None of the original letters have survived.

There appears to have been a major shift in attitude in 1916, at least in what was published. It is not possible to be sure whether this reflected a change in what was being written by OKS at the front or a modification in editorial policy over what should appear in

⁴ The Cantuarian, November 1915, p. 118.

⁵ The Cantuarian, June 1915, p. 64.

⁶ The Cantuarian, June 1916, p. 210.

⁷ The Cantuarian, March 1915, pp. 19-20.

⁸ E.g. The Cantuarian, July 1915 no. 2, p. 50; December 1915, p. 143, March 1917, pp. 388-9; June 1917, p. 428; December 1917 pp. 539-41; and March 1918, p. 583-4.

print. Herbert Poole was rather subdued in his report from (presumably) the Somme: “I have had a variety of experiences – most of the present day ones except that of ‘going over the top’...” and concluded: “Tomorrow the Division should by rights go into ten days rest – it deserves it, as it has been doing great things as you have doubtless read in the papers.”⁹ Curteis Ryan was also at the Somme, but his account as published (and there are plenty of omissions indicated) couched his observations in very generalised terms. “It is a risky and unpleasant business going over to see people in the Somme area as one is always likely only to find the news that they have gone under.” He concluded: “The War ... is a pretty beastly business; the men stick it wonderfully and nothing can be said sufficiently in praise of the infantry soldier.”¹⁰

Some writers recognised that it was difficult to be explicit about what they experienced. Francis Latter, nephew of the Headmaster, had been wounded in July 1916. When he returned to the front in 1917, his account as published focused on the terrain and there was no mention of death.

I have spent the last three days in touring the captured ground – the sight of which it is impossible to describe. Standing on the site of a much talked of farm, which changed hands several times, one sees all round – for a radius of a thousand yards or so – a perfect sea of shell craters, not scattered, but touching one another everywhere. I was so astounded that I stood and gaped for some time.¹¹

In the July 1917 *Cantuarian* ‘Letters from the Front’ were replaced by ‘O.K.S. Letters’. The change of headline reflected the change of emphasis. From this point on, most of the letters were no longer from the Western Front, but largely from India or Mesopotamia – where it was still possible for John Smith to write: “You’ll despise a letter from the Base in Mesopotamia, I fear. It has none of the thrill and glamour of the dug-outs, the barbed wire and the shells.”¹² One suspects that Smith is more out of touch in his attitude to ‘thrill and glamour’ than the editors – and readers – of *The Cantuarian*.

A partial exception is Walter Fluke, whose earlier exploits were mentioned above. Having served in the infantry, he was now in the Royal Flying Corps. The tone of his letter published in March 1918 – “This life is certainly a change for the better after trenches; there is nothing like it” – is partly explained by the fact that his role was now flying reprisal bombing raids and so less obviously in the front line.

Occasionally we organise little expeditions, armed with revolvers and rifles, and go out boar hunting... we had quite a lot of tobogganing, and often went out after dinner and tobogganed by moonlight... We play a lot of soccer here among ourselves, but funnily enough the majority are rigger players, and are longing for a game... The other day when we set out on a raid it was a lovely morning here, but when we got across the Vosges it looked as if enormous white clouds had

⁹ The *Cantuarian*, November 1916, p. 290. The letter is signed D H Poole, but the writer is presumably the former housemaster of Holme House, who had left in 1915 to join the Buffs.

¹⁰ The *Cantuarian*, December 1916, pp. 339-40.

¹¹ The *Cantuarian*, March 1917, p. 392. Latter was killed in May 1917. Cf. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, ch. 5: ‘A Turn of Speech’ for the problems of finding appropriate language to describe the war.

¹² The *Cantuarian*, June 1917, p. 429.

descended from the sky and filled up all the valleys and low-lying ground; we had an awful job to find our objective.¹³

As it turned out, Fluke was shot down on 24 March and became a prisoner of war. An account of his experiences was published after the war in the *Kentish Gazette*.¹⁴

Many letters in 1917 and 1918 commented on encounters with other OKS, rather than on the conflict. Curteis Ryan mentioned ten old schoolfellows and Ted Berryman thirteen, and Frederick Goad's mention of Edward Moline losing a leg after the explosion of a trench mortar and Llewellyn Thomas's reference to Ralph Mead's death when a bomb fell on the mess are unusual.¹⁵ The brutal reality of the fighting in the second half of the war was thus largely absent from the pages of *The Cantuarian*. Whereas the Somme had at least been alluded to in the 'Letters', Passchendaele and the German Spring Offensive of 1918 were missing.

A similar shift can be detected in the obituaries published in the magazine. In 1914 and 1915, details of the circumstances of death seemed almost obligatory. The accounts of Vernon Austin ("shot through the right breast by a rifle bullet, and died within a few minutes"), Arthur Fluke ("wounded in four places... but was struck down by the fifth and fatal bullet") and Roland Jukes (whose men "found themselves up against barbed wire entanglements which had not been destroyed and they were the target for machine guns and rifles at 25 yards") are not untypical. The point seems to have been to convey the laudable nature of their end. Thus Austin "made the great sacrifice" and was "a gallant lad who had died doing his duty to his country" and Fluke's death was "sad but glorious" and "truly an heroic end".¹⁶ An exception was the case of Nelson Bendyshe, when *The Cantuarian* merely stated that: "no details have been received as to how he met his death". As he was shot by one of his own men in bizarre circumstances, this may have been tactful, but it was added that "the Admiralty told his relatives that he had shown conspicuous bravery on several occasions".¹⁷ The need to make deaths seem worthwhile and even exemplary is clear in the obituary of William Rowan Robinson: "We have no details as to his end, but we feel confident it was a glorious one".¹⁸

In the June 1916 *Cantuarian*, there were still examples of more or less gruesome details – Harry Maclear was cleaning his teeth when "a stray bullet caught him on the top of his head. He must have died instantaneously"; Francis Vaughan picked up a bomb, "but before he could throw it back it exploded wounding him mortally, though he had saved the life of a comrade"; and Charles Field was shot by a sniper 50 yards from the German lines.¹⁹ But the weight of casualties, and maybe the dawning awareness of the many less than glorious ways in which men might die in war, made it increasingly difficult to keep up this attitude. Of the seventeen deaths recorded in November 1916, six were just 'killed in action'

¹³ *The Cantuarian*, March 1918, pp. 584-6.

¹⁴ K.G. 21.12.1918.

¹⁵ *The Cantuarian*, June 1917, p. 429 for Goad; December 1917, pp. 542-4 for Thomas and Ryan; and June 1918, pp. 624-5 for Berryman.

¹⁶ *The Cantuarian*, March 1915, pp. 4-6 and July 1915 no. 2, pp. 33-4. The obituary of Fluke was largely drawn from that in the *Kentish Gazette*: K.G. 23.1.1915.

¹⁷ *The Cantuarian*, July 1915 no. 2, p. 32.

¹⁸ *The Cantuarian*, July 1915 no. 2, p. 33.

¹⁹ *The Cantuarian*, June 1916, pp. 193-5.

and three ‘killed’. Few details were provided of the others, though Geoffrey Burton “was killed in action, gallantly leading his men” and John Deighton, who was wounded in the head, “insisted on the others having their hurts first attended to” before he “passed quietly away”.²⁰ There were several fulsome tributes in 1917 and 1918, but sometimes obituaries were very brief or focused on school careers and character. And *The Cantuarian* did not mention that the wounds from which Claude Bamber died in January 1919 seem to have been self-inflicted.²¹

It was one thing to read about the war in the school magazine or in the newspapers. It was quite another to feel engaged in what was happening. The involvement of the School in the Canterbury funeral of OKS Vernon Austin in February 1915 made a more immediate impression. He had been killed at La Bassée in northern France, and his was one of the last bodies to be repatriated before the government ruled that all were to be interred near where they fell. As his father was Herbert Austin of the Austin Motor Company, this was a particularly imposing and memorable occasion:



The funeral cortège of Vernon Austin in Burgate on Monday 8 February 1915

We are glad to think that his affection for this place was so strong and so constantly expressed, that his father wished him to be buried near his old School. The body was brought from France to Canterbury on Saturday, Feb. 6th, and lay in the Innocents’ Chapel [in Canterbury Cathedral] till Monday. On Monday afternoon he was buried with full military honours in St. Martin’s Churchyard. Mr. Austin followed the gun-carriage as chief mourner, accompanied by several

²⁰ *The Cantuarian*, November 1916, pp. 278-86.

²¹ *The Cantuarian*, July 1919, p. 738.

friends, and there were also present many officers from the Barracks, and the officers and cadets of the School O.T.C. There were many beautiful wreaths including one from the Masters, one from the School and one from the Contingent. Not the least touching object in the touching military ceremony was a plain wooden cross that reposed on the coffin with the sword. It bore an inscription in hurried writing “a last adieu from his comrades on the battle-field,” and had marked the spot where first rested all that was mortal of a gallant lad who had died doing his duty to his country.²²

There were two other wartime funerals of OKS at St Martin’s Church. Eric Coppin Bing (KSC 1905-14), killed in a motorcycle accident whilst in England for training, was buried there in August 1915 and Leonard Heming (KSC 1906-14), who died of pneumonia as a complication of his wounds, in February 1917. The Headmaster officiated at Bing’s funeral, but as it was during the holidays, the School did not participate. The OTC played a full part in the latter ceremony, with Richard Greaves Hodgson, the former Lower Master, conducting the service.²³ Both boys were young enough to be remembered by some of those still at school, but the effect of these events is still open to question. *The Cantuarian* editor made this point directly. Heming’s funeral, he observed, “brought home the destructiveness of war, which cuts off the young man in his prime”, but he also noted that while this “has had a sobering effect upon the most careless of us... it will soon pass from the memories of most”.²⁴

Heming’s brother John was still at the School at the time and there are many other examples of pupils losing relatives. Geoffrey Crowley was in the third form when his eldest brother was killed at Ypres in April 1915, and Edward Gough was in the fourth form when two of his brothers were killed: George in Jerusalem in December 1917 and Noel in Ypres in March 1918. Richard Jukes had lost two OKS brothers before he entered in 1916. (A fourth brother, Ralph Jukes, would become Headmaster of the Junior School and lose his own son, who was named Thomas Roland after his dead uncle, in the Second World War.) Francis Latter, a nephew of the Headmaster, had a brother and two cousins in the School. He was reported wounded and missing in May 1917, but was not confirmed as dead until after the war.²⁵ When the war was over, *The Cantuarian* editor could reflect with understandable exaggeration that “nearly all of us have lost a brother or a cousin or some one dear to us”.²⁶

The highly visible military presence in Canterbury was a further reminder that the conflict was not very far away. The Infantry, Artillery and Cavalry Barracks were in nearby Northgate and there were Military Parade services every Sunday in the Cathedral – ‘attended by soldiers numbering from 2000 to 2500’ it was noted in 1915.²⁷ The School itself participated in several high profile events. On 13 June 1916 there was a memorial service for

²² *The Cantuarian*, March 1915, pp. 4-5; see also K.G. 13.2.1915: ‘Military Funeral for an O.K.S.’ The cross is now in the Memorial Chapel.

²³ For Bing, see *The Cantuarian*, November 1915, p. 90. There was a very full report of the funeral in the *Kentish Gazette*: K.G. 21.8.1915. For Heming, see *The Cantuarian*, March 1917, p. 369; see also K.G. 24.2.1917: ‘O.K.S. Officer’s Funeral at Canterbury’. Geoffrey Maclear was also buried at St Martin’s, but in February 1919.

²⁴ *The Cantuarian*, March 1917, p. 366.

²⁵ His obituary appeared in *The Cantuarian*, March 1919, p. 711.

²⁶ *The Cantuarian*, December 1918, p. 665.

²⁷ Chapter Act Book, 25 November 1915.

Lord Kitchener and the King's Scholars were represented.²⁸ When the colours of HMS Kent were received in the Cathedral on 1 July 1916, the OTC formed part of the procession from Canterbury West station and joined in the service.²⁹ Two weeks later there was a service for the colours of HMS Canterbury, with twenty members of the Corps present.³⁰

1911 - 1914	July 27 th	Davis Steiner	O.S.
1906 - 1909	Oct. 16 th - 15	R. J. Beardsworth.	
1906 - 1911	" 21 st 1915	P. D. Hodder.	
1909 - 1915	Oct 27 th 1915	G. M. H. Lawson.	
1908 - 1913	Nov 1 1915	C. E. Pullan	
1910 - 1913	Nov. 19 th "	H. G. Laws.	
1904 - 1912	Nov. 16 th "	A. B. Balton	
1911 - 14	Nov 18 th "	A. C. Terrell	
1896 - 1901.	Nov. 28. 1915	T. A. Izard	
1911 - 12	Nov. 30 th 1915	Hubert Wheeler.	
1905 - 11	Dec 4 th 6 th	C. Ryan	
1907 - 13.	Dec 14 th 15	Terence F. Sandes.	
1906 - 13	Dec 11 th 15	F. L. Sidbotham	
1908 - 15	Dec. 14 th 15.	R. Mason	
1909 - 14	Dec. 20. 15	E. H. Kebble	
1909 - 15	Dec. 20. 15.	B. W. Galpin.	
1910 - 15.	Jan 28 16.	G. F. Clayton	
1904 - 11	Jan 29. 16	H. Sprue	
1908 - 13	February 12-16	E. J. Hodgson.	
1900 - 5	February 14 th	R. A. B. Limer	
		R. Fisher.	
1906 - 14	March 5 th	C. L. R. Heming	

Royal Naval Division. "Hawke"	
Page Record Office Canadian Expeditionary Force	
112 th Battery 24 th Brigade R.F.A.	6 th Division
R. M. A. Woolwich.	
16 th Durham Light Infantry	
3 rd R. West Kent.	
5 th Middlesex Regt.	
5 th ATSD - Medway Regt.	
King Edwards Horse.	2 nd Bn.
H. M. S. Britannia.	Middleham.
late 75 th Field Coy R.E.	15 th (Scottish) Division
2 nd 15 th East Surrey Regt.	
1/2 nd Home Counties Fd. Coy. R.E.	
123 rd Bty. R.F.A.	
5 th Bn. "The Buffs"	
H. M. S. "Vivid".	
2/3 H.C. R.F.A.	2 nd Lt.
3 rd The Buffs.	2 nd Lt.
18 th S. Staffs.	2 nd Lt.
57 th Infantry Brigade.	C-7.
2 nd Leinster Regt.	4/16.

The OKS visitors' book recording the visit of Victoria Cross winner Terence Fleming-Sandes in 1915
All those listed were in the forces and Beardsworth, Lawson, Pullan, Terrell and Heming were to be killed

One possible source of direct information about the fighting was from visiting OKS. Many are listed in the visitors' book and also in *The Cantuarian*, but no record survives of what they may have said. The most notable such occasion was the December 1915 visit of Lieutenant Terence Fleming-Sandes, who had recently been awarded the Victoria Cross. The emphasis was very much on the School greeting and honouring a hero. He was met at Canterbury East station and the band played 'See the Conquering Hero Comes' and 'For He's a jolly good Fellow', before he was escorted through the town to the School. There the Dean congratulated him; Fleming-Sandes replied; and the young officer was then 'chaired' around the Mint Yard. When he visited Holme House the following evening, it seems that his main concern was regret that the house was closing. Only the official announcement of the award, read out by the Dean, provided any detail of his time at the front.³¹

²⁸ K.G. 17.6.1916. The School's participation is unrecorded in *The Cantuarian*.

²⁹ *The Cantuarian*, August 1916, pp. 257-8; K.G. 8.7.1916: 'War Tattered Relics'.

³⁰ *The Cantuarian*, August 1916, p. 259.

³¹ K.G. 11.12.1915; *The Cantuarian*, December 1915, p. 127; and *Holme House Gazette*, Vol. 10, p. 160. He signed the visitors' book.



Capt. Aley, in non-military garb (Photograph from John Heming)

In the last year of the War, Captain Alfred Aley of the Royal Fusiliers was attached to the OTC and clearly had a particular appeal to the boys. *The Cantuarian* reported that he has had a long spell on the other side and has been three times wounded. He has already given us many enlivening reminiscences and is full of the latest military ‘Stunts’. As well as a most excellent knowledge of all thing military, he has a large and most interesting collection of war trophies, which the School had the privilege of seeing and hearing about.³²

He went to the harvest camp, helped with a rag concert and relieved the Headmaster of his OTC duties.

In addition to the newspapers, a convenient resource for boys who wanted to know about the War was the School Library. Three contemporary histories – John Buchan’s *A*

³² *The Cantuarian*, June 1918, p. 619.

History of the Great War, Frank Mumby's *The Great World War: A History* and HW Wilson's *The Great War* – were available, with their new volumes being acquired as they came out. A few other books on war-related themes were listed in *The Cantuarian*, including Henry Newbolt's *Tales of the Great War*, Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand*, Sapper's *Sergeant Michael Cassidy RE*, Philip Gibbs' *The Soul of War* and, in 1918, Rupert Brooke's *1914 and Other Poems*. It is not possible to tell which books were borrowed, still less which made an impact. The bulk of purchases were on other subjects, with fiction the mainstay of the Library and, most likely, of schoolboy reading. In May 1915 a letter in *The Cantuarian* observed that all 28 books on the Library's suggestions list, perhaps the best indication of pupils' interests, "were novels or books of fiction".³³ John Buchan's *The Thirty Nine Steps*, Conan Doyle's *His Last Bow* and HG Wells' *Mr Britling Sees It Through* were among the more notable new fiction titles, but if we are to judge by acquisitions in the war years then Ian Hay was the most popular author. Seven of his novels were added to the shelves, including *The Lighter Side of School Life*.

Debates were the obvious opportunities for discussion of the war, but there were few of them.³⁴ The first, in October 1914, was on the arbitration of disputes, and there were three in 1916: on compulsory military service, on reprisals and on punishing Germany.³⁵ The last two might have given boys the chance to express strong views on how to deal with the enemy. After all, the Dean had written a forceful letter to *The Times* in 1915 on 'Bringing the Crime Home', proposing that those responsible for the Zeppelin raids "should be delivered up to our Government for public execution".³⁶ In the event, although the results were perhaps predictable, the arguments were relatively balanced.

On the motion that 'the policy of Reprisals is not justified', Richard Routh opened by saying:

the idea of avenging Zeppelin raids on women and children by doing the same to our enemies was contrary to all the laws of warfare, contrary to the spirit of the British nation, and really useless as far as any military objects were concerned. It was a policy which even the 'Daily Mail' did not recommend...

His opponents included the "most eloquent" Ralph Mead:

He pointed out the barbarous way in which the Germans treated English prisoners, and said that if some civilised means were not possible, then the Germans would have to be brought to their senses by reprisals on the part of the English. However we were not to go too far; he advised "one good strong reprisal" which would effect all that was required at one fell swoop.

Mead was to be killed in 1917 on his first day in France, when a German aircraft dropped bombs into his camp. Eric Smith, son of a naval officer, "quoted the case of the E5 to prove that the English had not kept themselves entirely free from underhand methods of warfare" and Noel Gough, "in a sound and clearly delivered speech" said that

³³ *The Cantuarian*, March 1915, p. 27. On Hay and Sapper, see Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 47-52.

³⁴ 'R.E. Form' complained about the lack of debates in a letter to *The Cantuarian*, August 1916, p. 273.

³⁵ *The Cantuarian*, November 1914, pp. 741-43; March 1916, pp. 180-82; June 1916, pp. 215-17; December 1916, pp. 358-60.

³⁶ Letter dated 20 October 1915 in *The Times* 21 October; also published in KG 23.10.1915. See Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, esp. ch. 4: 'Moral Issues in Wartime'.

since all civilized means had been exhausted it was absolutely necessary to resort to the barbarous practices of our enemies. He would have “Peace at the earliest opportunity and at any price”. If the death of a few women and children was going to bring peace any nearer and thus save thousands of lives he would urge the adoption of a policy of reprisals.

The motion was lost by 15 to 27.³⁷

The final debate of 1916 was on the curiously worded motion that “it is unjustifiable in the interests of humanity to mete out to Germany the punishment which she seems to deserve”. In the event, the proposer started “by declaring that many people thought that Germany as a nation should be wiped off the face of the earth in payment for her evil deeds”; but concluded: “he was not going to say that the atrocities should go unpunished, but it was clear that the full penalty could not be exacted in the interests of humanity”. In opposition, Stephen Galpin, the Captain of School, “appeared to take a very much more lenient view of the punishment deserved by that nation than the proposer... Germany should be split up into its original small States... [which] would stamp out the military domination in the country... [and] he saw no reason why war indemnities should not be paid by the Germans.” The motion was lost by 8-17.³⁸

Thereafter the only recorded debate was in November 1917 on the motion that “the study of Classics is a better education than the study of Science”. This traditional subject nonetheless produced some allusions to the War. Arthur Dean, proposing, defended a Classical Education “against the charge so often brought against it, that it is responsible for the manner in which Great Britain has fallen behind her commercial and industrial rivals”. Eric Lindsey, opposing, “concluded his speech with some telling remarks about the present need of shells, which could only be supplied by science”. Finally, Richard Newton condemned the Classics as unpractical: “they were part of the old pre-war system of things which was never likely to prevail again”. The motion was defeated by 23-17.³⁹

The absence of any debates thereafter is surprising. The Debating Society, already languishing – “oh! Where and oh! Where is the Society?” J.A.W. had complained to *The Cantuarian* in March 1917 – finally lapsed for two years.⁴⁰ It was reconstituted in October 1919, discussing the liberty of the press and the building of a Channel Tunnel. Both occasions produced reflections on war, past and future. On the motion that “the liberty of the press is abused and ought to be curtailed”, William Dixon West “drew special attention to the General Maurice affair”, while John Parmiter mentioned journalists thanking Lord Northcliffe “for what he had done for the press during the War”. On the motion that “the building of a Channel Tunnel will not be in the interests of the nation”, concerns were expressed about the need to destroy it in wartime and the dangers from an invading force.⁴¹

³⁷ *The Cantuarian*, June 1916, pp. 215-17. Gough was killed in action in March 1918.

³⁸ *The Cantuarian*, December 1916, pp. 358-60.

³⁹ *The Cantuarian*, December 1917, pp. 544-7.

⁴⁰ *The Cantuarian* and March 1917, pp. 401-2; cf. an earlier complaint on the lack of debates, blaming “the lack of inspiration of the Monitors”: August 1916, p. 273.

⁴¹ *The Cantuarian*, November 1919, pp. 33-4. The motion on the press was lost by 53-46; the motion on the Channel Tunnel was lost by 57-13.

In February 1920, the Society turned to the topical issue of war crimes. The motion was that “the trial of the Kaiser is justified and quite necessary”. The new President, the Revd Alfred Mayne, based his case on “atrocities that had been committed during the War” and the view that the Kaiser “had originated the war”. William Dixon West in reply asked the house “not to be swayed by mere patriotic sentiments in their opinions”, but blamed “the general tendency of the German character” rather than one man. The issue aroused “considerable excitement” and the motion was won by 29-20.⁴²

There were numerous talks on war-related subjects. Yet even here, few were from participants speaking about their experiences. The exceptions were Mr Creighton on the Dardanelles in February 1916; Mr Rowan on the retreat from Mons in March 1917; and OKS Harold Wachter on his medical experiences in France, but in November 1918 after the war was over.⁴³ And it is difficult to know what to make of Mr Wyatt, “who gave us a very jolly account of the splendid doings of our navy in the present war” on Empire Day 1918.⁴⁴ William Potts in his last term at school gave a talk to the Harvey Society on ‘The Campaign in France’ in 1915. “The lecturer treated his difficult subject with remarkable clearness, and the excellent diagrams he drew on the blackboard coupled with a map of Europe which was from time to time thrown on the screen must have caused comprehension in the minds of even the dullest among his audience.”⁴⁵ Within a few weeks he was commissioned in the Royal Field Artillery.

There is limited evidence on how the boys reacted to all this, though “the passionate utterances of [the Comte de Croze] on the subject of Alsace and Les Bosches were received with great enthusiasm” in February 1915.⁴⁶ It does seem, however, that once the initial excitement was over it took some time for the harshness of wartime reality to sink in. “After eight months of war,” noted the *Cantuarian* editorial of March 1915 “although it has hit us hard, we are beginning to get accustomed to it... changes which loomed large in our minds at first have now lost their gravity and their novelty.” The writer almost seemed embarrassed that things were “settling down” too much. Great events ought to have had great consequences, but so far they had not. It was all somewhat puzzling: “The war, too, must have affected – though, perhaps, we cannot now see in what way – our School spirit.”⁴⁷

It is also important to remember that however seriously schoolboys took the war, it was only rarely at the forefront of their minds. The *Cantuarian* editorial of November 1916, probably written by Arthur Dean, was explicit about their priorities:

But while the question of such defeats and triumphs as these [i.e. football and cricket] occupy our more immediate attention, there always looms in the background the consciousness, which must never be allowed to escape entirely from our thoughts, of what is going on ‘out there’, the great struggle in which many of us will sooner or later have the chance to take their part.⁴⁸

⁴² The *Cantuarian*, March 1920, pp. 67-8.

⁴³ The *Cantuarian*, March 1916, p. 172; June 1917, p. 435-6; December 1918, p. 704.

⁴⁴ The *Cantuarian*, July 1918, pp. 657-8.

⁴⁵ The *Cantuarian*, July 1915 no. 2, pp. 51-2.

⁴⁶ The *Cantuarian*, March 1915, p. 17. He was lecturing on behalf of the French Red Cross.

⁴⁷ The *Cantuarian*, March 1915, p. 1.

⁴⁸ The *Cantuarian*, November 1916, p. 277.

His successor in June 1918 made a similar point:

Was there ever a better time to think? To think of the hundreds of things of everyday life, of the cricket, the boats and the tennis and for some of us work. But as we remain in this lazy meditation, there must at some time creep over us thoughts of those on the other side of the water. We think of our friends and admire them tremendously, more especially those who have been “faithful unto death.”

The war was not ignored, but the School came first.

Analysis of the 21 wartime editorials in the school magazine from November 1914 to December 1918 confirms this impression. The main focus was almost always on school life, and although about half included some serious reflection on the war, the reflections were almost exclusively from the point of view of the School. Thus a reference in November 1916 to “those who are fighting and dying for their country in the trenches of the Somme or the deserts of Mesopotamia” was in the context of the importance of those at school ‘carrying on’ and maintaining ‘the spirit of the school’. Casualties were discussed in relation to the School’s Roll of Honour; the spirit of self-sacrifice, which was frequently mentioned, was seen in terms of OKS serving their country; and discussion of the progress of the war itself and details of the campaigns were almost entirely absent. It is also worthy of note that there is no evidence of anti-war feeling, nor of significant anti-German feeling either, and while there are references to duty and sacrifice, there was no overt glorification of war.

One of the most revealing reflections on the war comes in the March 1918 editorial. This took the form of a conversation between the editor and a friend, when they are woken up at 1am by an air raid.

“Why so serious? You haven’t uttered a syllable for the last ten minutes, what is it?”

...

“Well, I was just trying to imagine what we should be thinking about if there weren’t these nice solid walls round us, and if those beastly shells were being aimed at us with nothing but cold black nights all around us. It strikes me that I’m only just beginning to realise what that vague word, “the front”, means, and what some of the finest men that ever lived have done and are doing for us now out across the water. I’m afraid I’m a bit too pensive to-night...”

The article ends: “N.B. To reassure anxious parents, it may be said that the local colour of the above is rather exaggerated.”⁴⁹ Yet one is left with the impression that a Zeppelin raid was exciting rather than frightening. The School Archives contain a fragment of shrapnel recovered from the Green Court in early 1918 by John Mather. He was then in the Fourth Form and in sending this memento to the School in 1973, he recalled a German raid and going out to look for souvenirs after breakfast. “Needless to say”, he added, “the raids in those days were nothing compared to the terrible times everybody suffered in the 39-45 war.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The Cantuarian, March 1918, pp. 557-8.

⁵⁰ Letter dated 7 August 1973: KSC Archives, box W 1.

A letter to *The Cantuarian* in November 1915 is a salutary reminder that teenagers' indifference to matters that were not of immediate concern to themselves may have been the normal state of affairs.

May I be permitted through the medium of your Magazine to suggest that when the casualties of old King's Scholars are read out in Chapel each Sunday afternoon the School stand to attention? Surely such would be an act of reverence to the dead; an acknowledgement, at least, that we honour them for what they have sacrificed for us.

Surely that "great cloud of witnesses" would like to see us honour them at attention (a military attitude, too,) rather than lolling about anyhow, as most of us do.

It is a small act of homage from us, but it may mean a lot to them.

Yours in all sincerity,

A MEMBER OF THE CORPS.⁵¹

Two years later, 'Loyalty' repeated this plea – "It is a great pity that such an act of reverence [i.e. standing to attention] should not be performed" – a clear indication that nothing had changed.⁵² Adolescents have always lolled about and there is no reason to suppose that the King's School boys of the war years were any different.

On the other hand, the accumulative effect of the casualties does eventually seem to have had some impact. *The Cantuarian* of June 1916 makes this point very clearly.

In the School there has been a change, a change which has gradually been effected during the last two years; the realization of war has come, as it was bound to come, and the ever growing "Roll of Honour" has left its due mark upon the tone of the King's School, as it has upon every school in the country. Youth with its abundance of life tried to throw off the thought of darker things, and it was only after many noble examples of "self-sacrifice" that the fullest meaning of that word dawned upon us.⁵³

At the same time it is apparent that the older a boy was – and the closer the prospect of joining his predecessors at the front – the more his attitude towards the war became 'serious'. Equally relevant was the fact that the senior boys were more likely to remember some of the casualties as recent schoolfellows. *The Cantuarian*, of course, almost entirely reflected the attitudes of the Sixth Form.

The School has suffered heavily during the last two or three months, no fewer than eighteen O.K.S. having fallen in battle since last August, of whom there were several young enough to be known to some still at School. It is the death of such as these that brings home to us more clearly than any newspaper reports the deadliness of this war, and makes it harder to remain behind in apparently useless inactivity.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *The Cantuarian*, November 1915, p. 122.

⁵² *The Cantuarian*, December 1917, p. 554.

⁵³ *The Cantuarian*, June 1916, p. 189.

⁵⁴ *The Cantuarian*, November 1916, pp. 277-8. The *Kentish Gazette* made a similar comment at the same time: "The realities and the terrible losses of the war have been brought home to the people of Canterbury and district with special force during these last few weeks." K.G. 21.10.1916. Cf. Seldon and Walsh, pp. 86-9 for the

Dean's memoir makes the same point:

Casualty rates were terribly high and an increasing number of my near-contemporaries were killed or wounded. Later on, when I became an editor of the school magazine, I had the sad task of writing obituaries for boys (and masters) many of whom I had known. More than once the OTC provided firing parties at their funerals.⁵⁵

The Somme seems to have been the turning point. Over twenty OKS were killed in the campaign as well as former member of staff Harold Brown. Two OKS Somme obituaries appeared in the August 1916 issue and a further thirteen in November.⁵⁶ A sense of inevitability in the accumulation of bad news was epitomised in the *Kentish Gazette* headline in August – ‘Another Old King’s Scholar Killed in Action’ – announcing the death of Geoffrey Burton.⁵⁷ Quite a few of the deaths were not reported until much later, including three in June 1917 – twelve OKS were to be listed on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme – but even so the impact appears to have been considerable.⁵⁸

Certainly the School was aware of the Somme, not least through a visit to the cinema: On Friday, Oct. 20th, at the Headmaster’s kind invitation the School visited St. George’s Cinema to see the “Somme Film.” The performance started at 11 o’clock and continued for an hour and one quarter, the last two periods of morning work being excused. We take this opportunity of thanking the Headmaster for giving us this opportunity of seeing the most interesting and instructive of War films.⁵⁹

The film had been released in August, and in Canterbury as elsewhere it was remarkably popular: “between nine and ten thousand persons paid for admission – a record business” at St George’s.⁶⁰

It is tempting to assume that the effect of the Somme – and of the continuing news of casualties without any signs of victory for a further two years – must have led to growing disillusionment with the war. Yet there is no evidence for this. As at most other schools, there may have been “low-level grumbling” but there was no open dissent.⁶¹ Even making allowances for the semi-official nature of the bulk of the surviving evidence in *The Cantuarian*, the language seems to have remained positive.

The most obvious opportunity for presenting an ‘official’ view of the war came on Speech Day, when both the Headmaster and the Dean spoke. They were addressing parents, pupils and OKS, but were aware that their words would be recorded not only in the school

variety of responses at other schools and K.G. 8.7.1916 for the initial reaction to the battle: “It is wonderful news which we are having from the Western Front these last few days.”

⁵⁵ Arthur Dean, *Recollections of Two World Wars*, p.1.

⁵⁶ *The Cantuarian*, August 1916, pp. 228-9, which noted news of four other deaths, and November 1916, pp. 278-86. Locations of deaths were not mentioned, but the obituary of Frank Straker referred to ‘the first phase of the Great Push’.

⁵⁷ K.G. 12.8.1916.

⁵⁸ OKS recorded at Thiepval are: Brinsley-Richards, Burgess, H.I. Ferguson, Goldsmith, Haward, Mather, Meeking, Moir, Partridge, Petley, Pugh and B. Wright.

⁵⁹ *The Cantuarian*, November 1916, p. 323.

⁶⁰ K.G. 4.11.1916.

⁶¹ Seldon and Walsh, p. 94: “Our research reveals plenty of low-level grumbling, but precious little open dissent or even articulate questioning of the prosecution and objectives of the war.”

magazine but also in the local newspapers. In 1915 the emphasis was on the pride that so many were serving, with the Dean commenting that “the public schools of England had not been backward in responding to their country’s call”. There was only a passing mention of casualties, when the Headmaster noted: “the memories of those who had fallen would not easily be forgotten...” There was even some optimism from McDowall that the war would soon be over, if not immediately. “Those present would have to wait, he feared, until another Speech Day for their celebration of victory”.⁶²

From 1916 onwards, the contribution of OKS to the war effort was announced in detail: the numbers serving; the numbers killed and wounded; and the honours received. According to the Headmaster (now Algernon Latter), this was “a very splendid record” (1916) and “a list of which they might justly be proud” (1918). His audiences clearly agreed, as newspaper reports mention applause at the appropriate points. The Dean set the School’s contribution in a wider context. “For the last two years, the country itself, and the schools of the country had been going through the severest test they had ever had to face...” (1916) “The war had been, and would continue to be for a long time, the greatest educator of the nation.” (1917) Both men saw the sacrifice of lives as a consequence of old boys doing their duty to their country. Their attitude to the war itself seems to have been neither enthusiastic nor critical; rather they accepted it as inevitable.⁶³

The senior boys at least acknowledged this spirit of self-sacrifice. The editorial in the July 1915 *Cantuarian* made the significant point that career expectations were now very different:

Those of us who were going to complete our education at the University, and to have a few more years probation before undertaking a man’s duties, are for the most part to pass out at once into Life and Manhood. Thus have we indeed become more definitely connected with the outside world.

And we are no more afraid of Death because it is in many touching ways brought nearer to our doors. Who would scorn to think his name worthy of being added to the roll of honour; who does not thrill at the phrase “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori”?

To the writer the Horace was far from being ‘that old lie’. He went on to quote Kipling’s ‘The English Flag’:

There is not one Englishman who is not proud to think that:—

“Never the lotus closes, never the wild-fowl wake,

But a soul goes out on the East Wind that died for England’s sake —

Man or woman or suckling, mother or bride or maid —

Because on the bones of the English, the English Flag is stayed.”⁶⁴

There seems to have been a continuing tension between recognition of the seriousness and deadliness of the conflict being fought not very far away, and acknowledgement of the need for School life to ‘carry on’ as normally as possible. It was not always easy to reconcile these two feelings, but the day-to-day concerns of the classroom and the games field were

⁶² The *Cantuarian*, November 1915, pp. 92-5; see also K.G. 31.7.1915.

⁶³ The *Cantuarian*, November 1916, pp. 291-94; see also K.G. 5.8.1916; The *Cantuarian*, November 1917, pp. 487-9; K.G. 4.8.1917; The *Cantuarian*, December 1918, pp. 677-8; and K.G. 27.7.1918.

⁶⁴ The *Cantuarian*, July 1915 no. 2, p. 30.

almost always the more immediate. It wasn't so much that the boys were ignorant or didn't care. Rather the practical business of daily life came first. War impinged from time to time – and sometimes dramatically – but in the main it was always going on 'out there'.