

Meyer, Jessica (Hrsg.): *British Popular Culture and the First World War*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2009. ISBN: 978-90-04-16658-5; 383 Seiten

**Rezensiert von:** Stuart Hallifax, Queens College, Oxford

The experience of the First World War and its cultural legacy are two areas of its history that have been subject to a great deal of attention in recent years, particularly 'modern memory' of the conflict. Happily these studies have moved away from (and critiqued) an elite-dominated view and moved towards an understanding of its place in 'popular culture' both contemporary and modern. This volume effectively brings both experience and legacy together and, echoing Jay Winter, its editor Jessica Meyer stresses the need to look at and discuss a full range of 'popular' culture(s) and neither focus on nor exclude elite culture (p. 6). This book, based on the proceedings of a 2006 conference at the University of Newcastle, does this well, addressing different levels, periods and aspects of British contemporary and modern 'popular culture' and memory relating to war, from food to literature, from women in uniform to counterfactual history. One half of the book deals with memory of the war, perhaps the largest area of study of British culture and the Great War, looking at the war generation(s) and modern cultural productions. The remaining two sections hang together less well as a pair but also address major themes of study: women's role and behaviour and the soldiers' experience(s) of the war. Together with Meyer's introduction, they form a useful survey of recent work on these three aspects of British Great War history and memory.

In the two sections dealing with memory, two major themes stand out: the importance of generations and the influence of interwar memory and cultural output on their modern counterparts. This should not surprise anyone conversant with Samuel Hynes's idea of 'myths' of the war built up in interwar literature (quoted on p. 305 here) and particularly Dan Todman's study of modern 'myth and memory' of the war<sup>1</sup>, but nonetheless, their application to particular subjects here

is interesting and stimulating. Stephen Badsey and Claudia Sternberg highlight the influence of interwar books and films on modern productions, specifically books' counterfactual accounts of the war, although Virginie Reynard's study of modern fiction might have drawn a similar conclusion. Rather than this influence, however, her study shows an interesting commonality among these modern writings in their use of detective-like investigation by the leading protagonist of a 'truth' about the war that is in danger of disappearing through amnesia, death or simply the passage of time. This detective story is used to engage the modern reader with a 'lost' history, in much the same way as the many episodes of popular BBC series 'Who Do You Think You Are?' dealing with Great War ancestors have done for television audiences.

These modern films and books share with the 1940s fiction discussed by Victoria Stewart a prominent role for generational change passing on a message or 'truth' of the war. The war generation needs to pass on its memories and wisdom to those too young to know, or, in the 1940s, about to undergo a similar experience and potentially repeat the same mistakes of a failed peace settlement domestically and internationally. Beyond fictional narratives, generations play a great role in Douglas Highbee's study of war commemoration, in which the memory of the war is contested by the state and the veterans, with the former winning as official commemoration and public remembrance focused on the fallen rather than the living survivors (particularly the disabled or unemployed). I would suggest that the generational element of this is more important than Highbee portrays it and the struggle was rather, as Joanna Bourke states (and Highbee quotes), between veterans and the bereaved<sup>2</sup>. In this the bereaved had both access to power locally and nationally and experience of commemoration, with war shrines and discussion of permanent memorials to the fallen from 1916 onwards<sup>3</sup>. Similarly cut out of popular remembrance were the 'Sa-

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London 1990, p. 439. Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory*, London 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the male*, London 1996, p. 250, quoted here on page 209.

<sup>3</sup> See Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain*,

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lonika army', whose attempts to counter their 'forgotten' status Eugene Michail investigates here.

The chapters on women in the war reflect the modern focus on discourses, attitudes and behaviours, dealing with the impact of rhetorical and often exaggerated discourses that attempted to control women's work, romantic lives and their attitudes and actions relating to alcohol. Again, generations play a role, particularly in the latter, with existing worries about the supposed decline in the morals and femininity of young women continuing into the war. This continuation also appears in of the narrative of women in uniformed auxiliary organisations, addressed by both Krisztina Robert and Lucy Noakes. The similarity of the underlying narrative, against which their studies of attitudes towards auxiliaries and the wearing of uniforms are set, is a weakness of the section; although each stands up well in itself, these two consecutive chapters might more usefully have been combined to address both subjects together.

'Trench cultures' are the focus of the first section, dealing with aspects of soldiers' experiences during the war: clothes, food and home. Keith Grieves's study of literary allusions to home and recognisable landscape adds another string to the bow of those who see home and war fronts as inextricably linked. Equally notable in soldiers' own writings during and after the war is the importance of food<sup>4</sup>, discussion of which Rachel Duffett concludes gave men an acceptable subject through which to channel complaints about broader conditions and unfair treatment. Joan Tynan's argument on army uniforms, however, is not as effective. While the uniform is indeed a method of control (making men's appearances uniform) and a utilitarian item of kit, allowing movement, storage of items and (by 1914) camouflage protection, Tynan's assertions that its production and issue amounts to 'surveillance' (for instance pp. 79-80) and 'stock-taking of the male body' (p. 82) is less clearly grounded in direct evidence (and resonance with soldiers' writing) than the arguments made by Grieves, Duffett and the volume's other contributors. Her application of recent work on clothing and mass-production makes for an interesting

but, for me, unfulfilling argument. What are we to make, for instance, of the widespread private provision (commercially or charitably) of minor items of clothing for soldiers, the lack of consistency and informality of some items such as cloth unit-identification badges, or the issuing of essential but non-uniform items like sheepskins?

Overall the shortcomings of this book are few and the articles are written at a good and consistent quality. It will not give a reader new to the subject a complete overview of contemporary or modern 'popular culture' relating to the war, but a book of this length would be hard pushed to do so, and it makes up for this with interesting investigations into specific avenues of enquiry. In this way it provides a useful tool for those seeking greater insights and recent research into major elements of current study of the Great War and British culture: women's and soldiers' experiences and the memory of the war.

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Oxford 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Helen McCartney *Citizen Soldiers: the Liverpool Territorials in the First World War*, Cambridge 2005; Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, Basingstoke 2008.