

Meyer, Jessica: *Men of War. Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009. ISBN: 978-0230-22201-4; 232 S.

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In the few last decades, the study of Britain during the First World War has broadened from a focus on political and strategic aspects to embrace the experiences of and responses to the war of both combatants and non-combatants. Branches of this work have investigated these in terms of gender, the variety of soldiers' responses to the war and the connections between those men and the home front. This has given us a greatly enhanced and nuanced picture of the lives of soldiers and those they left behind, particularly women. 'Men of War' joins a small but growing field of research that focuses on men and masculinity in wartime, moving away from the former emphasis on female experiences of the Great War. As with recent work by Michael Roper, Meyer combines a study of masculinity with a broader investigation of soldiers' writing during and after the war, finding a combination of domestic and military masculine ideals and identities in both, as nineteenth-century ideals and precedents met twentieth-century warfare. This work runs parallel and complementary to studies like Helen McCartney's work on Liverpool Territorial soldiers that highlight the importance of connections with home and the maintenance of men's pre-war identities in wartime.¹ 'Men of War' uses analysis and comparison of portrayals provided by men themselves in various forms in turn: wartime letters and diaries, post-war memoirs and letters written to the ministry of pensions², and also letters of condolence written by comrades and others. She describes an interplay between heroic and domestic masculine ideals that varied in strength between the different forms of evidence and their audience, domestic aspects particularly (and perhaps not surprisingly) most prominent in letters home, fear and discomfort present more in diaries and memoirs. Meanwhile letters of condolence stressed ideal and real elements of the man's heroic

identity and pensions letters stressed men's sacrifices for the nation and their attempts to re-enter civilian domestic and economic life. Changing conceptions of heroism are also identified through the wartime and post-war depictions, in which 'neither hero nor victim dominate' (p. 167), to the point that endurance and self-control become courageous traits (pp. 142-45). Meyer is scrupulous in acknowledging the varieties of background, experience and depiction among the soldiers and ex-servicemen and the influence of the prospective audience (pp. 160-61). Where the popular view remains a rather hegemonic one of enthusiastic volunteers turning into an alienated and disillusioned generation, recent research has brought a picture of a much closer practical and emotional relationship between the two, as well as the variety of responses and depictions the war provoked among its participants and survivors.³

For all this useful insight into conflicting and interacting masculinities in servicemen's (predominantly soldiers') self-depiction and depiction by those close to them, Meyer falls short of her declared aim (backed up by the book's subtitle) of demonstrating 'what it was to be a man in the era of the First World War' (p. 2). Indeed a few pages later the focus becomes 'the complexities of what it meant for British soldiers and ex-servicemen of the First World War to be men at war' (p. 13, similarly p. 164), which more accurately reflects the content of the book. Aside being an unfortunate misrepresentation of what is a very good, well researched and readable study of soldiers and ex-servicemen, this lack of attention to non-servicemen is a sad loss from its pages. The coverage of men who did not fight comes with an opening quotation from and comments on George Orwell (who was too young to fight), a reference to shirkers in

¹ See Michael Roper's chapter in Stefan Dudink / Karen Hagemann / John Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities in politics and war: gendering modern history*, Manchester 2004. Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: the Liverpool territorials in the First World War*, Cambridge, 2005.

² One of these letters (quoted on p. 122) happens to have been written by my great-grandfather, W.J. Hallifax, a Royal Navy shipwright from 1913-1920 who was discharged with neurasthenia and briefly had a disability pension. It is remarkable how the Great War looms in so many families' stories.

³ Cf., among others, Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers*.

a letter of condolence and a passage from a soldier's memoir quoted twice towards the end of the book (pp. 1, 82, 151, 163). Non-servicemen were not only those 'too young or too old or the wrong gender' (p. 163); in fact the majority of British males did not fight, indeed only a slim majority of military-aged males served in the armed forces at all.⁴ There are areas of the male war experience that could be subjected to this type of scrutiny in terms of gender, for instance with voluntary enlistment and conscientious objection.⁵ A closer look at these or the self-depictions of those who appealed against military service on grounds other than conscience through the prism of martial versus domestic masculinity would have been a very welcome addition to this book

Another avenue left unexplored is comparison between the experiences of the different types of soldier, particularly between volunteers (pre-war Regulars, Reservists and Territorials, and wartime volunteers) or conscripts. Differences between these two groups (or the absence of any) would have been an interesting addition to a study of servicemen's identities. For instance, did the depiction of a dead man as making a willing sacrifice apply to those who were compelled by law to serve? Work by Helen McCartney suggests that conscripts adapted to life at the front similarly to volunteers.⁶ It would also be interesting to know why two thirds of the diary entries and dated wartime letters quoted came from 1915-16, whether this was a simple logistical fact of the Imperial War Museum collections on which these chapters are based, or a preference for this material (inherently under-representative of conscripts, who did not arrive at the front until late 1916) on the part of the author.

Dealing with different types of first-hand evidence and the self-depictions contained in them, Jessica Meyer has written a strong study that combines readability with attention to detail and finds convincing conclusions while acknowledging wide variations in experiences. Her findings are solid and backed up by good use of evidence and interesting sources. As a study of 'men at war', this book is limited by its focus only on servicemen; however, as a study of 'citizen soldiers'

and the complexities of that role in Britain's first mass citizen army and among its mass of ex-servicemen, it is an interesting and insightful book that comes as a welcome addition to a growing body of work dealing with the experiences of British life in the era of the Great War.

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⁴ J.M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, Basingstoke 2003, p. 75, gives figures of 6.15m servicemen and a prewar population of 11.54m men of 15-49.

⁵ Nicoletta Gullace, *Blood of Our Sons: men, women, and the renegotiation of British citizenship during the Great War*, New York 2002; Lois Bibbing, *Images of Manliness: The Portrayal of Soldiers and Conscientious Objectors in the Great War* in *Social Legal Studies* 12 (2003), pp. 335-358.

⁶ McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers*, pp. 131-33.