**Background for *Testament of Youth*—Required Reading for 3/11.**

**Note:** The essay below was used as the introduction to the Penguin edition of the book on which the film *Testament of Youth* is based. Its author, Mark Bostridge, who wrote a biography of Brittain and is working on one about Florence Nightingale, offers a context for the film. In the original article, Bostridge also gives away some key plot points, even in the 1st paragraph below the title. I have cut those spoilers, but I’ve given you the link to the full article at the end, if you already know the story.

**The Making of a Peacenik** By Mark Bostridge

Vera Brittain made many failed attempts at encapsulating her sentiments about the first world war, [. . . ] before publishing her landmark autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, 70 years ago. Mark Bostridge on one of the most eloquent exposés of the horrors of 1914-18

Originally published 29 August 2003, Last modified on 7 January 2016 After reading early reviews of *Testament of Youth*, her classic memoir of the cataclysmic effect of the first world war on her generation, Vera Brittain wrote: "Oh what a head-cracking week ... Never did I imagine that the Testament would inspire such praise at such length, or provoke - in smaller doses - so much abuse." Lavish praise came from, among others, Rebecca West, Compton Mackenzie and John Brophy, while the Sunday Times commented that "Miss Brittain has written a book which stands alone among books written by women about the war." By the close of publication day 70 years ago, on August 28 1933, Testament of Youth had sold out its first printing of 3,000 copies and was well on its way to becoming a bestseller.

Some reviewers, though, were unnerved by the autobiography's frankness. James Agate struck a blow for misogyny when he wrote that it reminded him of a woman crying in the street. But in her diary Virginia Woolf expressed the more widespread response. Although she mocked Brittain's story - "how she lost [people she cared about], and dabbled hands in entrails, and was forever seeing the dead, and eating scraps, and sitting five on one WC" - she admitted that the book kept her out of bed until she'd finished reading it, and later wrote to Brittain about how much Testament had interested her. Woolf's interest in the connections that Brittain had "lit up" for her between feminism and pacifism would leave its mark on the novel she was then writing that would eventually become The Years, and even more on the radical analysis of Three Guineas.

For Brittain, the publication of Testament of Youth represented the crossing of a personal Rubicon. Approaching 40, she had at last passed from relative obscurity to the literary fame she'd dreamed of since childhood, exorcising in the process her "brutal, poignant, insistent memories" of the war, which she had spent more than a decade attempting to write about. Having finally settled on the autobiographical form, with the intention of making her story "as truthful as history, but as readable as fiction", she had subsequently found her progress on the book impeded by all manner of domestic interruptions and tensions. Within weeks of beginning Testament, in November 1929, Brittain unexpectedly discovered she was pregnant with her daughter Shirley, born the following summer. Then, in the final stages of writing, Brittain's husband, [. . .] raised strong objections to his own appearance in the book's last chapter. He scrawled his comments in the margins of the manuscript: "intolerable", "horrible", "pretty terrible". Believing that his wife's book would hold him up to ridicule among his academic colleagues - not least, one suspects, because of the account of the continuing importance to her of her intimate friendship with Winifred Holtby - he begged Brittain to make changes to certain passages, and prayed that "this spotlight" would pass swiftly. She complied by reducing him to a more shadowy figure in the final draft, though she bitterly regretted that the theme of her own postwar resurrection, symbolised by her marriage, had been irretrievably weakened.

*Testament of Youth* underwent its own remarkable resurgence in the late 70s, almost a decade after Brittain's death, when it was reissued by a feminist publishing house and adapted as a landmark BBC drama. The famously no-nonsense Carmen Callil, head of Virago Press, found herself weeping while reading it on holiday in her native Australia, and back home propelled the book back into the bestseller lists, while the five-part television adaptation, with a luminous performance by Cheryl Campbell in the central role and an intelligent script by Elaine Morgan, introduced Brittain's story to a wider audience than ever before.

Today, *Testament* is firmly enshrined in the canon of the literature of the first world war. It remains the most eloquent and moving expression of the suffering and bereavement inflicted by the 1914-18 conflict, as well as offering what is generally considered to be reliable testimony of Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nursing, based on Brittain's service in hospitals in London, Malta and France, and of a host of other aspects of the social history of the war. The early sections of the book, of course, are also an account of a young woman's struggle for education. More insidiously, *Testament of Youth* dramatises a conflict between a pre-war world of "rich materialism and tranquil comfort" and the more liberated society that developed partly out of the war. Its avoidance of modernist idioms seems to underline this, while the autobiographical figure of Brittain herself embodies a central paradox: that while she proposes a form of egalitarian marriage and other radical reforms, and despite the fact that she envisages herself as a modern woman, she remains at heart a Victorian.

My own initial interest in the book stemmed from my horror at the fate of its four young men: [plot spoilers removed here].

Working as a research assistant for Brittain's daughter Shirley Williams in the summer of 1985, I came across a first edition of Testament on the shelves of her London flat, which seemed to encapsulate the book's elegiac qualities. The Gollancz jacket was still bright mustard yellow with deep magenta lettering. Inside, affixed to the front flap, was a faded house photograph from Uppingham School, where three of Brittain's friends had been educated, taken in July 1914, and with a note indicating that the copy had once belonged to an Uppingham schoolmaster. His inscription was touching and pathetic: "I knew these boys."

Nothing else in the literature of the first world war charts so clearly the path leading from erosion of innocence, with the destruction of the public school boys' heroic illusions, to the survivors' final disillusionment that the sacrifice of the dead had been in vain. *Testament of Youth* is the locus classicus of the myth of the lost generation, but it is important to understand why that is so. Brittain's male friends were representative of the subalterns who went straight from their public schools or Oxbridge, in the early period of the war, to the killing fields of Flanders and France. As a demographic class these junior officers show mortality rates significantly higher than those of other officers or of the army as a whole (of Uppingham's old boys, one in five was killed). The existence of a lost generation may not be supported by statistics, but it is perhaps no wonder that Brittain believed that "the finest flowers of English manhood had been plucked from a whole generation".

Brittain had another aim in writing her book: to warn the next generation of the danger of succumbing out of naïve idealism to the false glamour of war. It is this significant difference of tone and intent that sets Testament apart from the work of the war's male memoirists. Whereas a writer such as Edmund Blunden tries to evoke the senselessness and confusion of trench warfare by revealing the depth of the war's ironic cruelty, Brittain tries to provide a reasoned exposition of why the war occurred and how war in the future might be averted. She often referred to Testament as her "vehement protest against war". But at the time of writing it, she was not yet a pacifist, and clung still to the fading promise of an internationalist solution, represented by the League of Nations.

The germ of the idea behind *Testament of Youth* can be traced back to 1916 when Brittain wrote to her brother Edward that "If the war spares me, it will be my one aim to immortalise in a book the story of us four." The 17 years between this statement and her autobiography saw Brittain produce a bewildering number of fictional versions of her war experiences, some of which are preserved in the vast Brittain archive at McMaster University in Ontario. As early as the summer of 1918, Brittain was close to completing her first war novel. Variously entitled *The Pawn of Fate* or *Folly's Vineyard*, and drawn from her spell as a VAD at Étaples in northern France, it centred on a melodramatic plot involving a senior nursing sister, based on Faith Moulson, the sister in charge of the German ward where Brittain had nursed.

Fear of potential libel actions led Brittain to put this manuscript aside, and when she returned to plans for a war novel in the early 20s, after the publication of two other works of fiction, it was to a more broadly conceived book. The survival of a variety of incomplete novel drafts, together with references in Brittain's correspondence to several similar projects that appear never to have mate realized, indicates the extent of her confusion as to how best to commit her experiences to paper. The Two Islands contrasts the "sombreness of the Grey Island" (Britain) with "the brightness of the Gold" (Malta, where Brittain had served in 1916-17), but portrays the deepening of the shadow that war casts over both of them. The Roland Leighton character, Lawrence Sinclair, [. . .], is little more than a cipher - probably because Brittain was still wary of how his family would react to his appearance in a book by her - but one of his characteristics, as a poet, has been transposed to the brother figure, Gabriel, whose loudly proclaimed hatred of women, depicted in his preference for being nursed by male orderlies rather than pretty young VADs, is an extreme version of Brittain's view of her own brother Edward.

In *The Stranger Son* , another novel, from the late 20s, Brittain makes a determined effort to write away from her direct experience through the character of Vincent Harlow who dramatises "the clash between the desire to serve one's country, & the desire to be true to one's belief that War is wrong". But with *Youth's Calvary*, she is entrenched in firmly autobiographical territory. Nominally it's still fiction, but surviving early chapters show it to be a very close progenitor of *Testament of Youth*. Yet, without a first-person narrative, and especially without the first-hand testimony provided by letters and diaries, *Youth's Calvary* altogether lacks the vivid immediacy of its famous successor.

These early versions of *Testament* do reveal something about Brittain's reluctance to confront her own susceptibility as a young woman to the glamour of war, which is evident in the mature work in her unwillingness to explore the roots of her own idealism in 1914. In wartime letters, her need to continue believing that the war was being fought for some worthwhile end is manifest in such gung-ho sentiments as, "It is a great thing to live in these tremendous times", or a conviction that war is a great purgation. By the mid-20s, however, the words of Ruth, a fictional alter-ego, reach a much less sanguine conclusion: "Ruth did not believe in permanent regeneration, nor that War could be ended by War ... but she did realise that the only way to endure War at all was to take part in it."

*Testament of Youth* clearly isn't straight history: comparison with Brittain's diaries and letters shows that at a number of points she used novelistic devices of suspense and romance to heighten reality. Recently, the historian Douglas Gill, who has written extensively on the base camp at Étaples, to which Brittain was posted in August 1917, has made a more damaging claim, arguing that Brittain's account of the plight of the wounded German prisoners in her ward is exaggerated. Studying the records kept by the base administrative staff - a source I admittedly didn't consult while writing Brittain's biography - Gill concludes, for instance, that her assertion that at least a third of the men were dying is hardly borne out by the recorded mortality rate of less than 2%.

How is one to account for this disparity? It is true that much of Brittain's narrative of her time in France doesn't possess the reliability of precise chronology and detail. She'd ceased to keep a diary in April 1917, and had only her letters to her mother, a few rushed notes to Edward, and a sometimes hazy mental recollection of events some 15 years or so after they'd taken place. For her - highly inaccurate - description of the Étaples mutiny, which had occurred while she was at the camp, she'd been forced to rely on little more than the recollections of an ex-soldier friend, who had no direct involvement in the events either.

Brittain certainly didn't invent the horrific details of her experience of nursing German prisoners, an important staging post on her postwar road to internationalism and eventually to pacifism; and much of it is confirmed in her wartime correspondence. But her narrative did employ subtle shifts of chronology, designed to present the episode to its fullest, most dramatic effect. In this instance, the novelist rather than the autobiographer might be said to have gained the upper hand.

Mark Bostridge is writing a biography of Florence Nightingale.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview18>