

Richard Blaker in the Twenties : a Case Study

There is a still widely-accepted myth about war writing, perhaps first articulated by Herbert Read in 1930:

All who had been engaged in the war, all who had lived through the war years, had for more than a decade refused to consider their experience. The mind has a faculty for dismissing the débris of its emotional conflicts until it feels strong enough to deal with them. The war, for most people, was such a conflict, and they never got “straight” on it. Now they feel ready for the emotional reckoning and *All Quiet* was the touch that released this particular mental spring.¹

This idea has been developed further by later writers, such as Paul Fussell, and by Elaine Showalter, who writes of the bulk of the 1920s as “a 'latency period' in which male war experience was forgotten.”² This interpretation of literary history has the appeal of echoing Freudian-influenced ideas about the repression of war experience, as formulated in the writings of W.H.R. Rivers³ and others, and seems to extend the idea of traumatic amnesia from the individual who cannot bear to remember the horror he has endured to a whole generation who cannot face up to their collective experience until a decade later. Recent psychiatric research, however, has cast serious doubt on the whole idea that amnesia can be caused by mental rather than physical trauma, and suggests that dissociative amnesia is a literary myth rather than a medical reality.⁴

This chapter will examine the theory that writers during the twenties were psychologically unable to write about the war until the “War Books” boom of 1928-30 by means of a case study of Richard Blaker, a writer with only one late entry in Hager and Taylor's bibliography of novels of the Great War.⁵ Blaker's career might at first seem to be evidence in the theory's favour, since he worked as a novelist throughout the nineteen-twenties, producing work in various genres with little success until *Medal Without Bar* (1930) a novel closely based on his experience in the Royal Artillery, and one that graphically

1 Herbert Read “Books of the Quarter”, July 1930 *Criterion*, vol 9 p 764 Read is reviewing *All Quiet on the Western Front* (18 months after its British publication) and other war books.

2 Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*, London, Virago paperback edition, 1995 p 191

3 See, for example “The Repression of War Experience” by W.H.R. Rivers, M.D.(Lond.), F.R.C.P.(Lond.), F.R.S., Late Medical Officer, Craiglockhart War Hospital, published in *The Lancet*, 1918. The text is available online at: <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/comment/rivers.htm>

4 See Pope, Poliakoff, Parker, Boynes and Hudson “Is dissociative amnesia a culture-bound syndrome: Findings from a survey of historical literature” , *Psychological Medicine* 2007,37, 225-233 C.U.P.

5 Philip E.Hager and Desmond Taylor, *The Novels of World War I : an Annotated Bibliography*, Garland, New York and London, 1981.

conveys the appalling nature of the war.

Blaker's novel was a critical and commercial success in 1930, and was highly regarded both by ex-soldiers and by the authoritative critic Cyril Falls in his *War Books*:

How did the average ordinary man of some position and substance, not young, untrained, fare in the War if he had the fortune to come through alive and unspoiled in health? Mr Blaker cleverly answers the question in this, one of the longest and most detailed of war novels. He also gives us perhaps the finest picture yet painted of life in a field-artillery battery... His attitude to the War itself is sane and just. This is one of the books which could not possibly have been written save upon the foundation of experience.⁶:

Medal Without Bar has not kept its place in the accepted Great War canon, however. It is given only passing mentions in Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and Blaker's name is not in the index of Samuel Hynes's *A War Imagined*⁷. Possibly this neglect is because, despite its graphic horrors, *Medal Without Bar* does not express the kind of disillusionment that modern readers expect to find in novels of the Great War written after 1928. Of modern critics, only Hugh Cecil has dealt with Blaker's work at length⁸.

Blaker's career is by no means a typical one, but it is precisely because he often goes against the grain of his times that he provides an opportunity to investigate the pressures – personal, generic and commercial – that were at work on a writer beginning in the immediate post-war decade with military experience behind him and an uncertainty about whether that could profitably be converted into fiction.

Born in 1893, Blaker enlisted in the Honorable Artillery Company early in 1915, interrupting his student career at Queen's College, Oxford, but his life had already been eventful. He was born and brought up in India, but in 1909 came to England, where he stayed with his Uncle Stanley, (Percy Stanley Blaker, born 1873) and Aunt Mamie (who was much younger than her husband). He tried office work and disliked it, but settled in well at Oxford. In 1912 Mamie's sister died in the Russian town of Grozny, (in what is now

6 Cyril Falls, *War Books: A Critical Guide*, Peter Owen, London, 1930

7 Nor is it in the ODNB, nor in the NCBEL. In 1964 his widow wrote to a fan: "His books are now out of print and only a few people remember the name of Richard Blaker. So your letter gave me particular pleasure..." (Bodleian Mss Eng Lett d 339 f 2)

8 Hugh Cecil, *The Flower of Battle: British Fiction Writers of the First World War*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1995. Cecil gives a sympathetic reading of Blaker's life, but is inaccurate in some details of the publishing history. He does not seem to have read the early novels, but bases his account of them on the reviews in Blaker's scrapbook (Bodleian Eng Misc. d 779.)

the Chechen Republic). Blaker was asked to accompany his aunt to deal with matters in Russia, and they became very close. When a daughter (Betty) was born in 1913, Stanley acknowledged the child as his⁹.

During the War, Blaker served with the artillery on the Somme, in Flanders, and in Palestine. Returning to France in 1918, he caught what he would later refer to euphemistically as “a slight whiff of mustard gas.”¹⁰ While convalescent he was “partially billeted” on Arnold Bennett in East Anglia. “Some of the billettees,” Blaker said later, “were very genuine wrecks – down and out physically and mentally haggard,” though he avoids classing himself with these. Blaker was impressed by Bennett's liberality, and by his “genius for putting people at their ease” and his “technique of sly ironic sympathy”. Bennett encouraged Blaker to write.¹¹

Before the end of the War, Blaker had completed two stories, which were accepted (at the rate of £5 per published page) by the first magazine he sent them to, the weekly *Land and Water*¹², in early 1919. The first of these, “Choice of Weapons: The Story of a Lewis Gun Post”, is a grim story in the realistic style, promoted by the magazine on the grounds of its authenticity: “It is hardly necessary to say that the author himself was in the trenches,” insists the strapline. The first half of the story is devoted to the kind of slightly unexpected grim detail that is the marker of that kind of authenticity:

It was the duck-board he sought, and when he found it he dragged it with his pick out of the gurgling, sucking mass. He stood it against the wall and set his back against it. Then, holding his gum-boots at the knee, he drew first one foot and then the other out of the mud and placed them against the opposite wall. Thus suspended he proceeded to shave his boots from the knee downwards with the brim of his tin hat. He wiped his hat with his hand, and his hand on his sheepskin jacket. Then he tucked both hands among the sandbags stuffed in between his waders and his thighs, and rested.¹³

9 A fuller account of this entanglement is given in Cecil, *Flowers of Battle*.

10 “Literary News Notes” published by the Doran Company in 1922. The cutting is in Bodleian Eng Mss b115 f64

11 This account comes from the transcript of a radio programme, Meet the Author (KMPC Los Angeles 12th Oct 1938. (Bodleian Mss Eng Misc b 115 p.10 leaf 4) Blaker claims he showed Bennett his paintings, after which Bennett advised him to choose a writing career instead, but this is probably facetious exaggeration.

12 The editor of *Land and Water* was Hilaire Belloc, who used it as a platform for his political ideas. However, as is suggested by Arnold Bennett's letter below, the editorial responsibility devolved onto J.C.Squire, who selected Blaker's stories for print (as is made clear in letters to Blaker from Edward Shanks, Squire's assistant, Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 323 f 5).

13 *Land and Water* May 29th, 1919, p.20-21. The story is presented as by “Richard Merrill” a pseudonym that Blaker continued to use right up till the publication of *The Voice in the Wilderness* under his own name in 1922.

The soldiers living in this mud are presented unromantically, racked by bronchitis, spitting and blaspheming. The author writes as an insider: “The secret in bronchitis is not to breathe too deeply...” but with an implied superiority to the rank and file with their “sordid curses and trite jests.” The men's situation is grim, but they are not presented as passive victims of the war; they fire off a drum of Lewis gun ammunition randomly into the mist in the hope of disturbing “Jerry” as he was mending his wire.

The story moves from description to anecdote when an enemy barrage attacks the post. One of the men (“known as Willy for his alleged likeness to the Crown Prince”) has a hacking cough and a large boil on his neck. During the bombardment he coughs even more violently than usual, and “the mud at the corners of his mouth... was tinged with red.” When he collapses the other soldiers realise that “A great splinter had taken the back of his head and embedded half his helmet in the parapet before him.” The reaction of the soldiers is unsentimental:

“Ere, shove a bit of dirt over those brains before the orficer comes round,” said the corporal, as the relief was heard coming along.

Later as the three stumbled towards the support trench, he remarked, “Well, it don't make much odds, not really. 'E'd have *corfed* 'is guts out if 'e 'adn't stopped that one. Choobuckle, 'e'd got, 'e told me once – that's why he wouldn't go sick, bloody fool.”

This is a story that answers a widespread desire of readers towards the end of the War to be told the very worst – it refuses to put a cover of euphemism over the spilt brains, and presents death as routine. What is more, the title, “Choice of Weapons” implies that if war doesn't get a man, natural causes will, and that war merely intensifies the grimness of the usual human condition.

“Choice of Weapons” describes a squalid death, but the second story of Blaker's to be published is the first of Blaker's tales of rebirth. “Identity Discs: The Story of a Man who Died”¹⁴ begins on a quiet post-War afternoon in Queen's Road, Bayswater, “quite the most ordinary and uninteresting of London streets.” The narrator's memory flashes back to afternoons in less ordinary places – the trenches, and wartime Palestine and Egypt – and then he begins to notice the cabs of the commercial travellers outside “every somnolent shop-door.” He regards these effeminate travellers with scornful pity:

What do *they* know of romance, or what mystery have they to teach with their shiny silk

¹⁴ *Land and Water* July 24th, 1919 pp 20-22

hats and frock coats and white linen slips inside their waistcoats...

He sees them as “being gradually anaesthetised, knowing nothing of hope or hate or ambition or aspiration” and living less intensely than men who “had ducked for their lives and killed men with their naked hands, and seen good white men beside them knocked into heaps of rags and blood.”

His interest is piqued when he sees a salesman with just one arm. (“He, at any rate... had known at least that romance – the romance of fear and sleeplessness”) Looking more closely, he is astonished to find that the man is Carvin – an officer whose remains, “tied up in a blanket and groundsheet” the narrator had followed “to a slushy grave in Flanders.” The “messy corpse” has been transformed into “a ladies' underwear specialist – white waistcoat slips, boiled shirt cuffs, waxed moustaches and all”.

When they meet again, Carvin explains how one day in the War he went forward with two others to an O.P. in front of the lines, and after a heavy barrage a whizz-bang took off his arm and killed his two comrades. He had been thinking about what a waste his life had been until that point, and in particular how he had let down his wife. He decided to give them both a new chance, by swapping his identity disc with that of a dead man. “Well, we did have another chance – both of us. That was six years ago now. Eleanor has made something good out of hers. She is very happily re-married, I gather, to a parson, and has a fine little girl.”¹⁵

Carvin has swapped a very male persona - “broad and tousled, with great loose-knit shoulders on which no responsibility had ever sat” for an apparently effeminate one. The narrator recalls him “calmly putting revolver bullets in the brains of writhing horses or cutting a boot off a shattered foot.” and now he is fussing about Hygenic Corsets, “with little bows of blue and pink ribbon, no doubt.” The story can be taken to mean that ultra-male wartime values will be of little use in the post-War future, and that peace will give the opportunity of a new identity. Carvin has found a new personality that suits him, and at the end, significantly, he is leaving England to establish “ateliers” in Moscow and Hungary – two places that in 1919 very much symbolised a new and very different future. The narrator is left feeling less superior to salesmen; there is a sense that while he has been lazily continuing to define himself in terms of his wartime memories, Carvin has chosen to explore other, less conventional possibilities.

¹⁵ “That was six years ago now” is the first hint that the frame narrative is set in the future, and that this is one of those post-war stories that try to make sense of wartime experience by setting it within a larger timescale.

Publication of stories in a prestigious magazine gave Blaker access to literary circles. He made contact with Arnold Bennett, who gave him encouraging but practical advice:

If you have sold two stories to Land and Water it is very satisfactory, as the editor, J.C.Squire, is a very good judge and very difficult to please. I think I had better introduce you to J.B.Pinker, my own agent, of Talbot House, Arundel Street, Strand. I have sent him a line on the subject, but I do not know whether he will take you on. He is the best agent I know. I cannot repeat too strongly that if you go to a good agent you must supply him with plenty of stuff. You must write to him.¹⁶

In the event the man who became Blaker's agent was J.B. Pinker's son, Eric, who seems to have formed an affinity with Blaker because they had both been in the Artillery. He would later reiterate Bennett's crucial advice:

I have for some time come to the conclusion that up to a point the quantity of a man's work is almost as important as the quality from my point of view. I must have plenty of straw.¹⁷

Blaker later said that Bennett also advised that “no editor was likely to publish a war story, however good, now that the war was over; and if I wanted to write, I had better try a novel.”¹⁸

A. M. Burrage a magazine writer who at the end of the decade would write *War is War*, one of the best of the ‘war books boom’ memoirs, gave another reason for not sending war stories at this time:

Your war stuff is the real stuff. I can follow you because I fought over the same ground; but most magazine editors employed their wartime more profitably, and that stuff means nothing to them. Moreover there is still – God knows why – a prejudice against short stories dealing with the war. There are one or two highbrow journals whose editors haven't that prejudice, but I think both the form of the story and its lack of conviction would put them off. But, as I said, the Blue might have it if you care to chance your arm.

Blaker took this advice, and for a year produced short stories not about the war. Two slight anecdotes were eventually sold to *Time and Tide*, but Blaker had not gauged his market well. His agent, Pinker, gave some advice:

By the way, do you mind my making a suggestion? I should be a little less erudite in

16 Letter May 28th 1919. Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c317 f45

17 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c321 f109

18 Bodleian Mss Eng Misc b115 p10 leaf 7

your choice of titles and in particular avoid Latin. The majority of editors have never learned this ancient and admirable language and I think it is apt to annoy them.¹⁹

While producing these stories, Blaker's main income came from a business venture. He had an interest in an American firm, the Wilson Rubber Company, which made rubber gloves for surgeons and engineers. Blaker was in charge of the sales in England, and according to his daughter's account, was a successful salesman, although the company's affairs were to give him a great deal of trouble.²⁰ Meanwhile, he was also working on a long novel, *The Molehilleer*²¹ which, like many other novels of the immediate post-war years²², incorporates chapters about the war within a longer narrative that contextualises the war experience. The novel is a *bildungsroman* whose events have clear similarities to those of Blaker's own life. The book plays against some of the expected conventions of the *bildungsroman*, however, because its narrator Castleton is generally a passive anti-hero, and learns little from his experiences. Random chances take him from India to a job with a travel agent, to the journey (to deal with a death) on which he falls in love with a married woman, to Oxford, and to war. He is summed up by the label on his trunk: "Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger". If this is a depiction of Blaker's own career, it is a bleak and self-critical one.

The war is also presented unromantically. The first soldier the reader is Bertram Tagney, the imperceptive solicitor husband of Castleton's mistress, whom Castleton has decided to find "too pathetic a figure for contempt or hatred..".²³ As a Territorial, he had, on the outbreak of war "immediately hurried off to wonder, in the company of other Territorials, what was going to happen to them."²⁴ When he returns:

Mr Tagney strode in, stubby and round-shouldered, quite deformed by his short jacket and the complete elimination of his knees from his figure, for he wore loose trousers and about nine inches of puttee...His thin sandy hair was covered with little beads of moisture and cut across by a dark red line where his cap had gripped it. Most comical of

19 The story with the Latin title was "De Gustibus" an anecdote about a little girl who rejects her expensive toys in order to play with some very ugly baby moles. It was one of the pair bought by *Time and Tide*.

20 Bodleian Mss Eng Misc b115 p10 leaf 8

21 This novel in its draft form is sometimes referred to as *The Molehilleer* and sometimes as *The Molehiller*. Since Blaker seems mostly to have preferred the -eer form, I have used that, unless directly quoting a document that uses the other spelling. Several manuscript drafts of the novel are in the Bodleian archive, but I have given references to the shortened and re-ordered version of the book published in 1923 as *Geoffrey Castleton Passenger*, which retains the War section of the original draft with only minor alterations.

22 For example, Wilfrid Ewart's *Way of Revelation*, Michael Sadleir's *Privilege*, Rose Macaulay's *Told by an Idiot*

23 Richard Blaker, *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, Jonathan Cape, London 1923, p.138.

24 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.148.

all, I thought, were his dainty, dusty brown boots and the two stripes of authority on his arm.²⁵

When he begins to talk about the War, his wife reveals that he has been cuckolded, and Tagney is shown as even more absurd:

Her words simply failed to penetrate Mr Tagney's mind. He mopped the tea from his short moustache with his lower lip and sat staring at her, as he stared at the Daily Telegraph – unintelligent, without a wrinkle upon his face.²⁶

The narrator's scorn for the military is reinforced by his friend Cartlidge, who calls it “a job for the Neolithics” and at Mrs Tagney's insistence he finds himself a safe job at Woolwich, working on problems of calibration (at Oxford he was a mathematician). He is shamed out of this, partly by seeing himself mirrored in the complacency of a colleague, and partly by the reality of Tagney's divorce petition. (“The canting hypocrisy of its prayer-book phrases, its prodigal vulgarity and stupid coarseness would defy the picturesque imagination of a Mediterranean sea-port tout.”²⁷) He attempts a rebirth as “97094 Bdr Jefferies, K/458 Brigade RFA”²⁸ but this leads only to banality and “the somewhat coveted post of groom and batman to a fairly easy-going sergeant-major” in “a quiet part of the line.”²⁹ Without strong motivation, he drifts into a commission and is sent to Salonika and “the boredom of the Vardar campaign.”³⁰

War is presented as uniformly unglamorous, and merely a nuisance that keeps him from other areas of life; the chapter dealing with the War comes with a warning that it will be rather boring.³¹ Mr Tagney dies a soldier's death of sorts, but it is as undignified as his life:

He was somewhere behind the lines with his headquarters. A runaway mule kicked him very badly and he died soon afterwards... It took me some days to get over the gross absurdity of the thing, and to become cold in my classification of it, with a few other incidents of my life, as merely irrelevant.³²

As the Daily Telegraph would say when the book was finally published as *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*:

25 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.158

26 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.159

27 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.200

28 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p. 207

29 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.209

30 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.214

31 In the published version, *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, the War chapter is ironically titled “Peace” in contrast to the emotional dramas that have gone before.

32 *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*, p.215

The war intervenes in the story, and the heroine behaves as if it all happened to annoy her. Otherwise the war is a mere incident.³³

If the war is absurd and banal, then Castleton sees it fitting in with the general pattern of his life so far. Just as in “Choice of Weapons” presented war as not especially more lethal than natural causes, in this book, war is a condition that merely contains in large measure the “gross absurdity” found in other departments of life. Completely absent in this book are the aspects of wartime life that would later receive full attention in *Medal Without Bar* – the sense of comradeship, the admiration for the fortitude of artillerymen, and for their technical skill

The Molehilleer having been rejected by several publishers, Blaker tried something different, a novel that did not make any obvious use of his own experiences (and avoids explicit mention of the War). The first page of *The Voice in the Wilderness* tells us that it is set thirty years ago. This nineties setting seems one in which Blaker takes only a marginal interest, though some plot use is made of the New Drama, of feminism, and of the coming of the motor car. The book's hero Petrie, an eccentric ex-musician who walked out on his art for reasons only approximately specified (an argument of some sort). At the start of the novel he is withdrawn, in almost autistic non-communication with his family, eating alone and connecting with the others only through a brutal and logical unsentimentality. He makes a living doing translations of business letters for local firms, but is alienated from everyone, especially his pallid and hypochondriac wife. His symptoms are like those sometimes described in post-war novels about soldiers unable to adapt to mundane life after the greater and more terrible drama of war. Petrie, it is implied, has experienced existential extremes through his art, and has the same problems of connection. In a pattern reminiscent of some 1920s stories about ex-soldiers, Petrie gradually returns to life, (though through his own efforts rather than through the love or help of others, which is the commonest pattern in books about soldiers)³⁴. The main catalyst for this return to a fuller life is his daughter, whom he discovers to have a genuine musical talent, and whom he insists should go to study at the academy in Germany from which he had walked out many years before. The daughter's leaving home jolts Petrie's wife out of her invalidism, and she too begins to take control of her life.

In the third and final section of the novel, Petrie suffers a stroke that robs him of the use of

33 *Daily Telegraph*, Mar 8, 1924. (collected in Blaker's clippings book, Bodleian Ms Eng Misc d 779 Page 91.)

34 I shall deal with narratives of this kind in another section.

his legs. Realising that he is becoming a burden to his family, who are sacrificing their own lives and careers for his sake, he takes his unsentimental philosophy to its logical conclusion, refuses to exercise “the tyranny of the weak”, and commits suicide. In this episode too it is possible to see a direct response to Blaker's wartime experience. In *Medal Without Bar*, one of the most powerful scenes comes when Reynolds, a likable young officer, is very seriously wounded. Cartwright, the character through whose eyes we see the War, loosens the tourniquet on Reynolds' leg, so that he will bleed quietly to death. Hope, the real-life equivalent of Reynolds, had survived the war for several crippled and deeply unhappy years, but had died in 1921, while Blaker was writing this book.

The novel was accepted by Jonathan Cape, a new publisher just establishing himself, whose first list had appeared only the year before. As is described in Michael Howard's *Jonathan Cape, Publisher*, Cape wanted to build his list quickly, and was looking for new talent. Blaker's book was accepted when Doran (an American publisher) agreed to take 1000 sheets, which defrayed the costs. Author and publisher seemed well-suited. Pinker wrote to Blaker in June 1922:

I am glad you like Cape. He is a good chap and efficient, I think, and really interested in literature. Most publishers as no doubt you are aware are merely tradesmen, and would do just as well, possibly better, in the grocery business, but Cape, I believe, is something more than that.³⁵

The publication was apparently very successful. On 22nd June, 1922, *The Pall Mall and Globe* announced:

Mr Richard Blaker has scored a success at the outset with his first published novel, *The Voice in the Wilderness*. A second impression has become necessary within three weeks of publication, and a third impression is on the machines. It is also to be published immediately in America...

The Times also reported that “The Voice in the Wilderness' by Mr Richard Blaker is going into a third edition.”³⁶ These announcements were slightly misleading, however. When Blaker asked Jonathan Cape about rumours of a second impression, he replied:

That comforting and encouraging little piece of information, *2nd impression* is intended to suggest that in some mysterious way the public have got hold of your book at the start and have absorbed the first printing, which generally speaking is regarded as being

35 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c321 f83

36 Both of these press cuttings are in Blaker's press cuttings album, Bodleian Mss Eng Misc d 779, pages 9 and 21.

something more than a thousand copies. This is certainly the case. We printed more than 2000 copies and after the machine hand had run off 2000 copies he had a walk round, and possibly a cigarette. On coming back he started up again, but took care to insert those modest little words on the back of the title page. We are now using that second impression. You will bear in mind that out of the 2000 copies 1560 went to Doran [the book's American publisher] and about 100 have been distributed free. Actually we have sold to date 350 copies plus something over 100 as a colonial edition. People are inclined to get interested in a book which they think is catching on. It is the old adage, nothing succeeds like success.³⁷

Having achieved some critical success with *The Voice in the Wilderness*, Blaker returned to *The Molehilleer* and reshaped it rather oddly, so that it began with Castleton's arrival in England, and included a slightly abridged version of the childhood Indian sequence only as a confusing flashback. Jonathan Cape was unenthusiastic about this book, but published it as *Geoffrey Castleton, Passenger*. Reviewers were unimpressed, particularly by the odd structure caused by the reshaping, and the book did not sell well.³⁸ When Blaker suggested that his publisher had not backed the novel wholeheartedly, or with sufficient publicity, Cape replied:

The sales of *Geoffrey Castleton* to date are 332 English and 84 colonial. We spent £53 in advertising with practically no effect, as the sales before publication accounted for 300 out of the total of the English sales. In view of this it would have been sheer madness for us to go on advertising it.

As you know, I was quite certain in my own mind that it would have no success. The break of its continuity in the middle puzzled and bothered those who read it, as I was sure it would. I published it however as I felt it was exceedingly important to you

37 Letter to Blaker June 21st 1922. Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c318 f19

The practice described in this letter may not be untypical of Jonathan Cape in the ambitious early days of his publishing house. In *Jonathan Cape, Publisher* (Cape, London 1971, page 51) Michael Howard tells how a book called *Shadow and Sunlight* (1921) was advertised in *The Times* with the phrase "5th thousand" while in fact only 2,500 copies were printed, of which nearly 1000 remained unsold after six years. Howard suggests that Cape later stopped advertising sales figures in this way.

Hugh Cecil in *The Flower of Battle* (p325) describes *The Voice in the Wilderness* as "a success, selling more than 8000 copies" but I think he must have been misled by one of Blaker's index cards in the Bodleian archive (Ms Eng Lett c557 f 30) which gives the total sales of the novel up to 1936, and therefore includes both American sales and the cheap edition (in the Florin series) reissued by Cape in the 1930s, after the success of *Medal Without Bar*. For this reissue, Blaker was paid the standard royalty of £6 per 1000 copies bound, so the income from the book was never considerable. (Bodleian Ms Eng Lett c322 f 22).

38 *The Times Literary Supplement* of Nov 22, 1923, for example, having explained that a middle-aged Castleton is supposedly writing this narrative for his seven-year-old son, says: "We fear that this fictitious infant... would find that his father had a queer idea of constructing a book, and would be considerably puzzled by the extraordinary jump which takes place two-thirds of the way through."

psychologically at that time to know that the book was coming out and actually to see it in a physical form – I felt that it would be a help to you in getting through your business worries, and it would encourage you to keep on writing.³⁹

Six months later, Cape was enthusiastic about Blaker's new manuscript, *Secret Commissions*, calling it “undoubtedly the best thing you have done...It is wonderfully close to life and above all I think that it is 'juicy’”⁴⁰ Blaker, however wanted him to back up this enthusiasm with a three-year contract, according to which he would provide a novel each year, and Cape would give him a substantial fixed sum in advance of royalties. As a relatively new publisher still establishing himself financially, Cape did not find this an attractive proposition, but he had been aware since 1923 that other publishing houses were showing an interest in Blaker. When he discovered that the much larger firm of Hodder was offering a more generous royalty than the 10% that he had given on Blaker's first two novels, he became a bidder in an auction conducted by Pinker, Blaker's agent, which ended with Hodder offering a £300 a year advance on a 20% royalty (rising to 25% after 10,000 copies were sold) for the next three years, provided that Blaker produced a novel a year – a very generous arrangement for a so far unsuccessful author, but one that shows how the potential of Blaker's talent was valued.⁴¹

On January 15th, 1925, Cape wrote to Blaker, voicing “regret” that he had gone to Hodder, and reminding him that publishers make sacrifices when introducing new novelists:

Some authors have recognised this and have remained with their publishers and have refused to be tempted by glittering offers from the publishing 'factories'...

I have always resisted this three-year salary suggestion because it is an open question whether it will in the long run be beneficial to you.⁴²

That last sentence may have struck Blaker as less than candid. Cape knew that Blaker's two novels (representing four years work) had by this time between them sold fewer than 1000 copies. A royalty of 10% on a cover price of 7/6d had produced less than £40 in English

39 Letter June 26th, 1924. Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 318 f34. On the English sales of this novel, Blaker earned £12/9/- in royalties - less than he had earned for the magazine publication of his two short stories in 1919.(Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c321 f 129)

40 Letter December 31st, 1924 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 318 f35

41 Contract with Hodder Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 557 f 118. American editions of Blaker's books continued to be published by Gregory H.Doran, who gave a straight 10% royalty, in line with usual American practice.

As a long-established publishing house with a large and profitable backlist, Hodder were much better positioned to risk a medium-term commitment (and what amounted to a salary) to a still unproven author than Cape, who were only just beginning to establish themselves. In 1921, Cape's turnover had been £10,955, but their profit only £103, and the directors had not drawn salaries. From 1922 the position improved considerably, but they resisted paying a salary even to Edward Garnett, their chief reader and literary advisor. (Howard, *op.cit.* P 58-9).

42 Letter Jan 15th 1925, Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 318 f37

earnings, though this was enhanced slightly by the proceeds from American sales.

An earlier warning of Pinker's, when Hodder had shown an interest in Blaker's work in 1923, might have had more substance in the long term.

I do not know that I would advise you to leave Cape, as I think you are under a certain obligation to him, and as a general rule it is in the interest of an author to stay with one publisher.⁴³

By changing publishers several times in his career, Blaker missed the chance of having his works reissued in a uniform format that might have enhanced his later reputation. By 1925, however, Pinker had finally taken the view that:

One may have to admit that Hodder-Williams seeks, in his own way, to reap where he has not sown, but he is at any rate an enthusiastic reaper, while if we make a contract with Cape he will enter into it unwillingly and will I am certain never let us forget that his hand was forced as he put it to me this afternoon. I therefore plump for H & S and the Nonconformist conscience.⁴⁴

With this last phrase, Pinker is referring to the fact that since the foundation of Hodder and Stoughton in 1868, a substantial source of its prosperity had been its long list of religious works, including Moffat's translation of the Bible. As the firm's historian writes:

Contrary to later belief, the partners' publishing policy was never limited to religious publications, though they would doubtless maintain that all their books were fit reading for Christians.⁴⁵

During the twenties there was occasional conflict between the firm's pious tradition and current literary trends. In 1924, Hodder turned down the chance of Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* on moral grounds. As a member of the firm said:

How can a publisher retain his integrity, carrying *The Green Hat* in one hand and Moffatt's translation in the other?⁴⁶

Blaker was made aware of this aspect of the firm's ethos when he received a letter from Sir Ernest Hodder-Williams, the senior partner of the firm:

43 Letter 20 Sep 1923 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 321 f 95

44 Letter Jan 12th, 1925, Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 321 f 129

45 Michael Attenborough, *A Living Memory: Hodder and Stoughton Publishers 1868-1975*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1975.

46 Attenborough, op.cit p.103. Happily for the firm's finances, this moral disapproval did not extend to cover the sadistic violence and enthusiastic racism of Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond* novels.

Will you allow me to throw out two very small suggestions?

The first refers to the sanguinary epithet. I do not know how you feel about this, and I certainly feel that it is a point that I should never wish to press too hard upon you. But it is a fact that even in these days that particular adjective does still give offence to a great many broad-minded people. In fact, I will be perfectly frank, and say I don't like seeing it in print myself. I do honestly believe that it is worth your while to consider whether some or all of them could go. The word actually occurs five times, on pages 76, 82, 203, 255 and 256. You don't mind my making the point for your consideration, do you?

...Is not your perfectly delightful English style just the least let down by that Americanism "He said not to wait" (on page 42), "Varney said to burn it"(page 259) "Mrs Tyson said to tell you" (page 266) Of course, I do not know how you feel about this, and it may just be one of my private abominations.⁴⁷

Blaker stood his ground over the perceived Americanisms, but complied with his new publisher about the "bloodies". Sir Ernest replied:

Thank you so much for your delightful and understanding letter. You are as charming in your little disagreements as in your little consents. Of course the phrase that I happen to dislike shall stand. Your argument in its defence is impregnable. But thank you so much for agreeing about the sanguinaries, the infinitely more important point.⁴⁸

Blaker's main contact at Hodder was Sir Ernest's youngest brother, Ralph Hodder-Williams, who had joined the firm only in 1923, from an academic career at the University of Toronto. Ralph Hodder-Williams had served in the War, and had written a history of his regiment, packed with the kind of technical detail and proud rhetoric that would appeal to his old comrades.⁴⁹

At his publisher's suggestion, Blaker renamed *Secret Commissions*, and it was published in Autumn 1925 as *Oh! The Brave Music*. Like *The Voice in the Wilderness*, this is the story of a man who energetically achieves unexpected things while his family prefer lives of conformity. Tyson is not a Nietzsche-inspired artist, however, but a retired sea-captain,

47 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 319 f 97-9

48 Letter Jun 8, 1925 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 319 f 100. It is a matter of speculation whether Cape would also have wanted to censor the language of this novel. While Cape's list was on occasion far more daring than that of Hodder and Stoughton, and took the risk of publishing Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, Jonathan Cape would annoy Ernest Hemingway in 1932 by his unauthorised bowdlerisation of the language of *Death in the Afternoon*. (Howard, *Jonathan Cape Publisher*, page 80).

49 *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919* / by Ralph Hodder-Williams, with a foreword by the Lady Patricia Ramsay and an introduction by Lieutenant-Colonel A. Hamilton Gault. Hodder and Stoughton, London and Toronto, 1923.

discovering the adventure of business in apparently unromantic (and to his wife unrespectable) areas such as the timber and laundry trades.

Reviewers were generally as enthusiastic as they had been about *The Voice in the Wilderness*, and some compared it with the work of Arnold Bennett. John O'London's, for example, considered that in both writers:

There is the same happy abundance of human joy in creative endeavour, there are the humours and manoeuvres of family life.⁵⁰

The novel has similarities in attitude with Bennett's *Mr Prohack* (1922), with its vision of post-war England as a playground of possibilities. Tyson is very different, though, from the ex-officer Charlie Prohack, who:

had gone to war from Cambridge at the age of nineteen. He went a boy, and returned a grave man. He went thoughtless and light-hearted, and returned full of magnificent and austere ideals. Six months of England had destroyed these ideals in him.

Tyson is disillusioned neither by the War nor by the country he has returned to. The War is something he regards objectively, as a fact of his life, not as a subject for mythologising:

He saw all the war pictures, largely in order to make up his mind how much of them were genuine, and how much, and how successfully, faked.⁵¹

Insofar as the war has affected him, it is positively. He is described as behaving “with the punctilio of a normally uniformed man about to appear in mufti.”⁵² and the can-do attitude that he brings to business is explicitly related to his wartime experience:

The war showed that officers need not know much at the beginning as long as they're the right sort.⁵³

Like Charlie Prohack, he makes mistakes that lead to some embarrassment, but – once again like Charlie – he comes out triumphant; the novel does not moralistically punish the over-reacher.

Hodder promoted the book with enthusiasm, and reviews were at least as positive as those of *The Voice in the Wilderness*, but the book did not sell well. 3000 copies were printed, of

50 John O'London's Weekly, 19th September 1925. The review is included among Blaker's press cuttings in the album filed as Bodleian Mss Eng Misc d 779, page 123. This album shows that the novel was also compared with Bennett's work by reviewers from *G.K.'s Weekly* and the *Western Mail*

51 Richard Blaker *Oh! The Brave Music*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1925 page 21.

52 *Oh! The Brave Music* page 23

53 *Oh! The Brave Music* p.236

which 2199 were bound, but only 1079 were sold at full price. The Hodder accounts show a £355 loss on the publication up to March 1926, of which only £40 was recouped by further sales over the next three years. With this novel, Blaker was not earning the £300 a year that the firm was investing in his talent.⁵⁴

There is some evidence that Hodder put pressure on their new writer to be more commercial in his writing, perhaps by adding the love interest that *Oh! The Brave Music* was lacking, in order to appeal to female readers. A letter from Frank Morley first tells Blaker, “I like it enormously and I’ve found three women who do so too. That they shouldn’t is all my eye.” and goes on to advise:

I seriously think you’d make a tragic mistake if you succumb to Hodder and do the popular stunt. I hope -honestly hope – you can continue the celibate line. ...why not tell the publishers to go to, and keep up the real thing. You do understand it, no one better, none more pleasure-givingly.⁵⁵

A letter from John Farrar (Blaker’s American publisher at George H. Doran) seems to be similarly urging him to ignore commercial advice. Having commiserated over the low American sales of *Oh! The Brave Music!* (“Believe me, we are doing everything in our power to put it over.”) he urges Blaker: “Meanwhile, for Heaven’s sake, go ahead and write whatever you want without getting self-conscious about your public.”⁵⁶

If Morley and Farrar spoke up for literary integrity, Blaker must have found it hard to ignore the voice of financial urgency, especially when his agent, Eric Pinker, who had received 10% of very little in the years since 1919, reported Ralph Hodder-Williams’s reaction to the manuscript of Blaker’s next novel, *Enter, a Messenger* to Blaker as:

very pessimistic in regards to its prospects of success. The two chief reasons are the excessive length of the book and the amount of business detail into which you have gone... I do not know who the reader is, but she is a woman, like the majority of library subscribers, and Hodder-Williams has the greatest faith in her.

Hodder-Williams said that he skipped large bits of it, notably the golf and the business stuff. The latter, you will remember, we discussed in connection with “The Brave Music” and though personally I think you write very well about business, as indeed you do

54 Guildhall Library Ms 16312/5

55 Letter 27th October, 1925. Bodleian Mss Eng Misc c320 f 181.

56 Bodleian Mss Eng Misc c 318 f112. In a previous letter, Farrar had tactfully warned Blaker of the book’s probable lack of success in America by saying, “*Secret Commissions* is a good book. I suppose it is a trifle too good to reach a wide public.” (c318 f107)

about most things, there is no doubt that the average reader is not interested in business.

You see, Dick, it is of immense, almost vital importance, that this book should be a success. By which I mean that it needs at least to do better than “The Brave Music” and I therefore think you should very seriously consider Hodder's criticisms and see if you cannot do something about them.⁵⁷

A good deal of “the golf and the business stuff” remains to slow down the emotional flow of the published novel, which itself is precisely about the hero's difficulty in balancing the demands of his emotional and his business life. Johnnie is married to Phyllis, but their potentially idyllic marriage keeps being interrupted by the messengers from a wider world who distract Johnnie away to war, or business, or helping other people. Both war and business are presented as absorbing games:

For about a year Johnnie was in and out of the trenches, playing at a game that was, at times, not unlike being in the scrum. He then had a long leave, a course at a training school, a short leave after it, and then went back to a lonelier game up in the skies.⁵⁸

Business is a game too; the novel reinforces the triumphant message at the end of *Oh the Brave Music!* - “The Game is life!” and endorses the earlier novel's view of businessmen as a “band of stalwart and austere adventurers – men who forswear the soft and seductive things of life in order to do and to get.”⁵⁹ With some subtlety the novel describes the interplay between business and personal relationships. Johnnie is drawn into association with a rich American for love of the enterprise, while his seemingly innocent wife is much more aware of the possible material rewards of the personal connection. This association is endangered when Johnnie (following a common pattern in Blaker's novels) feels the erotic power of an older woman, and Phyllis becomes jealous. In the heat of the crisis, memories of the War return to him, a time of “cold blood-curdling funk; the sensationless, almost putrescent functionless known as 'hanging on'. Then suddenly the relief of stinging agony and blood.”⁶⁰ These memories remind him of his ability to be self-sufficient, and to come through in the end, despite everything. Thus the War – though hateful at the time - becomes a positive force in the novel, and a reminder to Johnnie of his potentiality. War was not necessarily seen as a major theme of the novel by contemporary readers, however. Of the eighteen reviews collected in Blaker's press-clippings album, only four think the

57 Bodleian Mss Eng, Lett c 321 f 162-3

58 Richard Blaker *Enter, a Messenger* Doran, New York 1927 p 24

59 *Oh! the Brave Music* p 238

60 *Enter, a Messenger* p.233

War episodes significant enough to mention, even in passing.⁶¹

Critically a mild success, the book was a commercial failure. Of the 2000 copies of *Enter a Messenger* printed, only 886 were sold at full price (plus 390 at the colonial rate).

Hodder's ledgers record a loss on the novel of £329.4.1 for the financial year 1927-8, of which only £15 was recouped by selling off some of the stock cheaply over the three succeeding years.⁶² Notwithstanding his earlier misgivings about the book, Hodder-Williams wrote to Blaker after its lack of success became apparent:

I too am sorry for our joint [sic] disappointment over "Enter a Messenger," but it is a fine novel, and I do not for a moment regret its publication under our imprint, although financially of course it has not been profitable.⁶³

A short story of the mid-twenties called "Memorial" returns more obviously to the theme of war. Its central character, Drew, takes a dim view of the piety that was erecting war memorials in every British town and village:

The idea of an exhausted pauper country flinging money about sticking up a lot of tombstones all over the place. Why couldn't they forget it all; wipe it out now that it was done with, and get on with the job?⁶⁴

His resentment of memorials is sparked by seeing "spirit photographs" taken at the Cenotaph⁶⁵ but gradually the story reveals his personal motive for not wanting to remember. He and a fellow-soldier, Jimmy Pratt, had been rivals in love, and on leave had both told Gladys Loader that they loved her. When they return to the Salient, it is with an unvoiced understanding that the survivor will get the girl.. The battle of Paschendale is presented in nightmare terms:

Fantasy had crept in to take the place of bare fact. Mud, like that mud, was incredible; such noise was incredible. The torment of lice under the torment of straps that bit into the very flesh was incredible; and it was incredible that he should have looked from time to time across at Jimmy and Jimmy should have looked across at him, merely to see

61 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 320

62 Guildhall Library Ms 16312/5

63 Bodleian Mss Eng Lett c 319 f 107

64 Bodleian Mss Eng Misc d777 p.131

65 Each Armistice Day from 1922 to 1924, the Spirit Photographer Ada Deane positioned herself above the crowd at the Whitehall Cenotaph and exposed her photographic plate for the two minutes of the Silence. When the pictures were developed, this crowd of disembodied faces had been recorded. These were assumed to be the faces of fallen soldiers returning from the Other Side, and attending the Remembrance service. The *Daily Sketch*, London, November 13-22, 1924, however, revealed that the heads mysteriously shown in that year's photograph were in fact pictures of footballers, cut from the *Daily Sketch*.

whether the other one was still there.⁶⁶

Through the confusion of battle Drew sees Jimmy in hand to hand combat with an enemy guardsman. Drew struggles with his conscience but finally throws a Mills bomb that kills both Jimmy and the German. After the war he marries Gladys, but is tormented by reminders, such as the spirit photograph, and the local war memorial. He tries desperately to chip Jimmy's name off the memorial, but is unable to do so, any more than he can erase the memory from his mind. This lurid dramatisation of a survivor's guilt seems to be saying the opposite of Herbert Read's "The mind has a faculty for dismissing the debris of its emotional conflicts until it feels strong enough to deal with them." In Blaker's story the debris of conflict refuses to be dismissed. On the other hand, this melodramatic story does not seem to have been accepted for publication in a magazine, which perhaps means that editors felt that their readers were not ready for a story that cast doubt on the memorial project's ability to provide closure for the emotions and conflicts of war.

Blaker's next attempt at a novel was in yet another genre. *Scabby Dichson* (1928) went back to the Indian childhood previously dealt with in *The Molehilleer*, but with a keener interest in the psychology of the child. It was respectfully reviewed, but sold less well than *Enter a Messenger*, and Hodder's accounts recorded a loss of £307.18.6 on the novel for the financial year 1927-8. Despite this third successive commercial failure, Hodder demonstrated that they still had some confidence in Blaker's potential, by agreeing a new three-year contract, though on reduced terms. He would now receive an annual sum of £200 a year in advance of royalties, which remained at the same generous rate of 20% on the first 10,000 copies and 25% thereafter.

The first novel Blaker offered under this new contract was *The Umpire's Game*, an experiment in yet another genre, the comedy thriller. The genre of the book is made even clearer in the American edition, which was titled *The Jefferson Secret*, with the subtitle "A Mystery With Love and Without a Murder"⁶⁷. This can be seen as a gesture towards accommodating his publisher's and agent's preference for a book with a wider and more commercial appeal, but it was also a way in which Blaker could make use of his unperformed play *The Private Office*⁶⁸, whose characters and basic structure it uses, though adding a more melodramatic and less morally ambiguous ending. The story is set in a the Jefferson steel factory, and its MacGuffin is a blue envelope containing the only

66 Bodleian Mss Eng Misc d777 p.140

67 Published by Doran, New York, 1929.

68 A typescript of this play is in Bodleian Mss Eng Misc d 776

copy of a secret formula for processing steel. This is passed from character to character, switched, lost and stolen in implausible and mildly entertaining way, but the theatrical origin of the novel is betrayed by the succession of long dialogue scenes in the same location.

The novel is written in a light and lively manner, but touches on many of Blaker's usual themes. Business enterprises are at the centre of the plot again, although they are markedly different from those in *Oh! The Brave Music*, which suggested that commercial success came easily to anyone who applied himself to it with gusto. Here business is a field of anxiety, opening practitioners to threat and the possibility of catastrophe. There is also the typical Blaker situation of a young man having to choose between an older woman and his childhood girlfriend. As in *Enter, a Messenger* the older woman is described with more erotic intensity, but he ends contented with the younger one when his father marries the older woman.⁶⁹

Like many thrillers of the 1920s, the book has a subtext relating to the War, which is used rather conventionally as a touchstone of the character's virtue. The villain Willis, who, in the words of one character, "isn't quite the clean potato,"⁷⁰ was a munitions profiteer now fallen on hard times and longing to regain power. The two most sympathetic characters in the book, on the other hand, have a friendship that was consolidated among "gun-pits and horse-lines and trenches"⁷¹ As frequently happens in Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond* novels, physical action against the criminal brings back memories of the war: "...suddenly he had for an instant the feelings of a wiring party for a Verey light..."⁷²

The sales of *The Umpire's Game* were not encouraging.⁷³ At this time we can see an interesting duality in the attitude of Hodder and Stoughton towards Blaker and his novels. Within the firm harsh commercial judgments were made of Blaker's earning potential (see fig 1) but the business side of things, was kept, so far as was possible, apart from questions of literary merit and personal friendship

69 This ending is one of the more significant departures from the play *Secret Office*, in which the young man loses the older woman, but is not interested in the younger.

70 Richard Blaker *The Umpire's Game* Hodder and Stoughton, London 1929 p.248

71 Ibid p.22

72 Ibid p.259

73 Hodder and Stoughton record a loss of £137/8/- in the first financial year of publication, of which only £24/9/1 was recouped by reissuing the book as a cheap edition. (Guildhall Library Ms 16312/5)

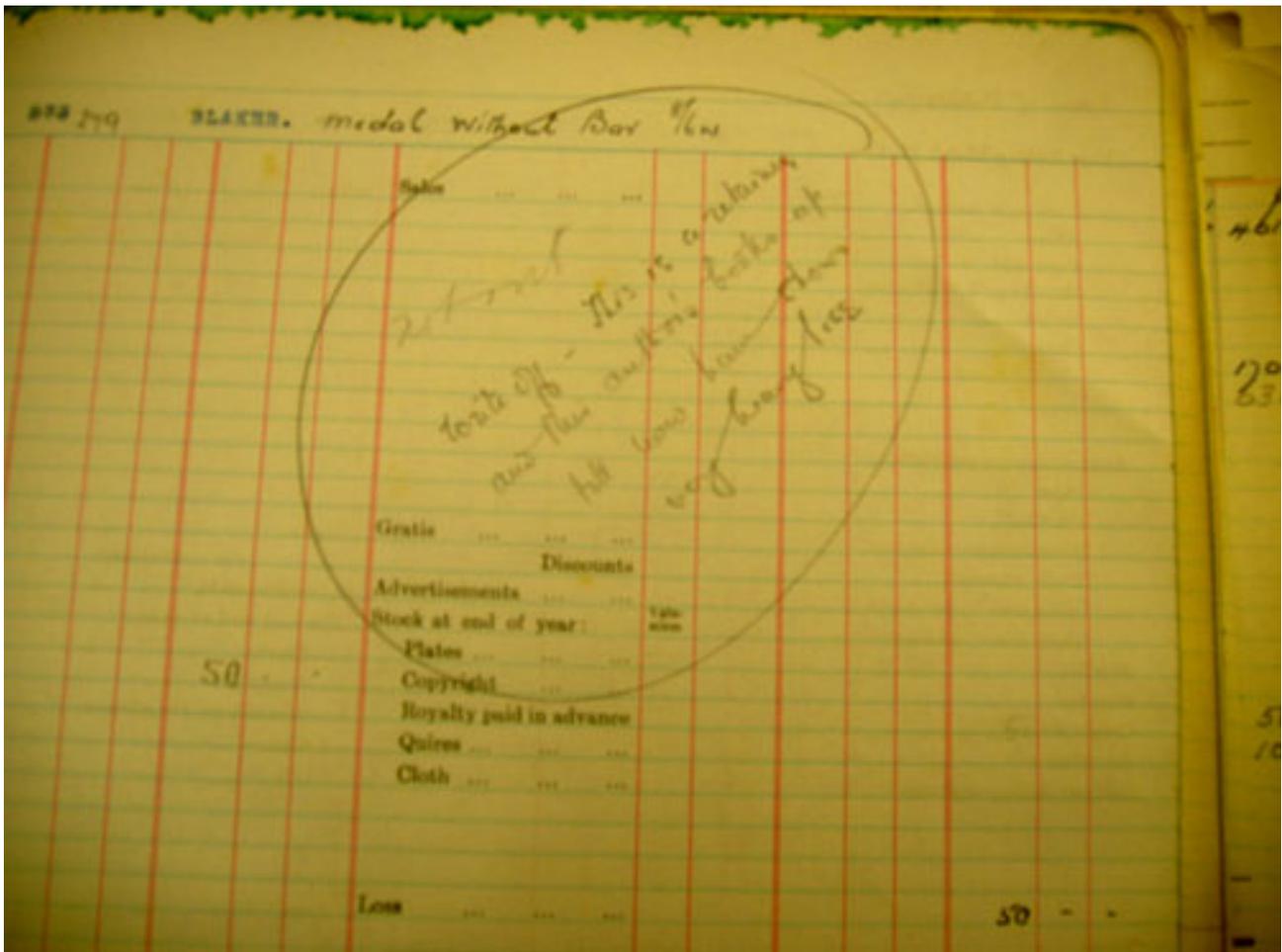


Fig 1. Page from Guildhall Library Ms 16312/5. This shows the initial advance of £50 on Medal Without Bar being written off with the comment: “Not out. Write off – this is a retainer and this author's books up till now have shown very heavy loss.”

Blaker and Hodder-Williams were spared the embarrassment of discussing money matters directly. As Hodder-Williams would write to Blaker rather later in their relationship:

Our negotiations with Pinker are progressing rather slowly! With the best will in the world it is not too easy to adapt two points of view. You are not “Yiddish” and I hope you do not think we are. Anyway I am glad to have a third party through whom we can discuss finance.⁷⁴

Even when Blaker was in extreme financial difficulties the use of an agent as intermediary allowed author and publisher to create a mutual fiction of a non-mercenary relationship. In 1929 Blaker and Hodder-Williams were personally very close, and Blaker's next novel, *Medal Without Bar*, is one that Hodder-Williams influenced considerably. This is not the case with the previous Hodder novels, about which (at least so far as the surviving correspondence indicates) there was no serious discussion before Blaker delivered his

⁷⁴ Letter from R H-W to Blaker, 21 Mar 1930 (Bodleian Ms Eng Lett c319 f171). This was written when *Medal Without bar* was at the height of its success, and Blaker, through his agent, was attempting to consolidate his financial position. The attempt would fail, and Blaker would move on to Heinemann.

manuscript.

Hodder-Williams had himself written a book about the War. His *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919* is a well-written example of regimental history, full of technical detail and regimental pride, but the post-war interest in that genre was fading.

Hodder-Williams retained a keen interest in the subject, however, and possibly shared the publisher's instinct that caused Jonathan Cape to write to T.E. Lawrence in July 1928, about the publication of E.E. Cumming's war novel:

The Enormous Room is printed, and is being published on July 20th... I always remember you continually advising me to publish this book. I fought shy of it because war books were entirely at a discount then, but the conditions have changed now, I think. We have done quite well with young Gristwood's *The Somme* which Wells sent to me.⁷⁵

Medal Without Bar was published well into the war-books boom of 1929-30, and seems to have been planned at least in part as a reaction to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which was not published in Britain until early in 1930, but whose German edition had generated a huge amount of publicity for its completely negative view of war. Hodder-Williams had definite ideas about the kind of book that he wanted Blaker to write, and found ways of steering him in the right direction. For example, when *Journey's End* was staged in January 1929, Hodder-Williams sent "a hard-headed man" to report back on "how it hit him as a war performance."⁷⁶ The emissary thought the play superior to the usual "light, dirty or mixed stuff served up on the London stage," and thought it positive that "there is no woman in the play, and consequently no sex exploitation." On the other hand, he considered:

There is something sadistic in luring an audience to have a raw nerve touched and in seeing and feeling again just the literally damned silly waste of war...

There is no creative power here – only prosaic memory dramatised more or less vividly.⁷⁷

Forwarding this report to Blaker, Hodder-Williams summarised it:

75 Michael Howard *Jonathan Cape, Publisher*, Cape, London 1971 page . This awareness of interest in the War as early as July 1928 casts some doubt on Herbert Read's suggestion that *All Quiet* alone "was the touch that released this particular mental spring."

76 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 104. The "hardheaded man" signed his report AH, but I have not so far been able to identify him.

77 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 106

“His answer boils down to the sentence on page 2: 'Reproduction is not interpretation.' So say I. What do you think?”⁷⁸

Neutral reproduction of “the literally damned silly waste of war” was precisely the style that Blaker had chosen when he wrote *Choice of Weapons* at the end of the war; now his intentions were more ambitious. *The Molehilleer* had presented one image of his war experience, showing a young man reluctantly diverted by the conflict from more absorbing private emotions; this time he was going to give the subject of war his full concentration, and explore its effect on soldiers and civilians.

To some degree Hodder-Williams attempted to limit Blaker's realism, and a surprising amount of their correspondence about the book is devoted to negotiations about the use of swear-words, which still offended the Nonconformist ethos of the firm. Hodder-Williams wrote to Blaker:

This language business is a difficult problem in a book of this kind. As you say, the sanguinary adjective, so far as the soldier is concerned, is simply nothing but dialect, but I incline to this general rule. Where you have got two vulgarities within two or three words, as you have in this case, (“bloody” & “arse”) take out one of them, unless, of course, you are dealing with a moment of high emotion. This is not, of course, an absolute rule, but as we are going on, the use of the two words that appear in this line is going to get a good deal more frequent, and I vote for a certain pruning wherever possible.⁷⁹

Blaker stood firm in some instances, but cooperated in others, saying “And believe me, I'm all for steering clear of *All Quiet*.” When the phrase “Can't tell his arse from his elbow” gave problems. Blaker suggested “knee from his elbow”:

The soldier can recognise in this the assumption of a time-honoured phrase – possibly just a printer's error – and the most that Aunt Jane can say is “How very odd!”⁸⁰

Hodder-Williams's attitude is always that of a discerning sophisticate who nevertheless has to worry about the reactions of the less sophisticated:

I really think you will upset a good many Aunt Janes and a good many awfully nice people with your capital “L” and your capital “S” for the Last Supper. Oh yes, I quite

78 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 104.

79 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 117 In this typed letter the words “bloody” and “arse” have been added in Hodder-Williams's handwriting, perhaps to avoid having to ask a female secretary to type such expressions.

80 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 121. In the published version the phrase is replaced by the ingenious “his ears from his elbow”.

agree, I see it, but will they? Won't your discerning reader get your point perfectly if you do not emphasise it with the capitals? These capitals will upset people terribly.⁸¹

Other concerns about sensitivity included an apparently slighting reference to Nonconformists and the YMCA, and one closer to the interests of Hodder and Stoughton:

I want you as a personal favour to take out the words “Soldiers’ stories by Sapper” about three paragraphs from the end... it is not very complimentary to Sapper. He is a very important author of ours and something in the way of being a personal friend. For another, I am going to try and get Sapper interested in the book...

For a third, it is not quite fair to Sapper. Personally, I mean, not as a writer of soldiers’ stories; for if you had heard Sapper talk about the War as I have you would find him a good deal more like Cartwright felt, at that particular moment, than you can possibly imagine.

It is perfectly true that the phrase as it stands is not a sneer, but it is equally true that Sapper, in his present mood, would take it for one, and he is about the most sensitive man I know.⁸²

Blaker complied with these requests where they did no harm to the book, but stood firm when asked to moderate important points of character, such as toning down the drunk and irresponsible senior officer, “a fellow called Parley, known to the rank and file as 'Voo-voov'...not only a drunken swab, but he's equally a swab when sober.”⁸³

Hodder-Williams steered him away from negativity, but also from the style and preoccupations of his own book:

A definite criticism – confirmed by my wife. When you get to France you are inclined to hold the human narrative up for too much “History of the PPCLI” sort of thing. A bit too much military exactitude, particularly in topography.

The humans are the thing – they must dominate the inanimates on every page. Sharpen up the pruning-knife for the Somme!!⁸⁴

This was good commercial publishing advice and showed a recognition of what Blaker was capable of as a novelist when not lured into the kind of technicality that thins the human

81 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 136

82 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 137

83 Medal Without Bar p.569. One of the things that Hodder-Williams disliked in *Journey's End* was the representation of some officers as alcoholics.

84 Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett c319 f 111

interest; on the other hand, it is possible to see Blaker's use of accurate detail as one of the book's great virtues. Jean Moorcroft Wilson, writing of Siegfried Sassoon, describes how:

All Quiet on the Western Front irritated him not just because of its sensationalism, but also because it gave “no place names”, left “everything vague”. It seemed to him the “exact opposite” of Blunden's approach. He had been reading Remarque's book while writing *Infantry Officer* in 1929 and it undoubtedly strengthened his determination to be factually precise. Like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which he was re-reading while writing his own book, it is the combination of factual detail and direct personal experience vividly rendered that makes *Infantry Officer* a convincing and compelling picture of war.⁸⁵

It was exactly this kind of combination that gained Blaker the praise of ex-soldiers for a book very different from Sassoon's; the archive of his correspondence contains many letters of appreciation, especially from gunners who felt that the book exactly portrayed their own experience, and sometimes picked him up on minute details of accuracy:

As far as the grass-growing incident on page 337 is concerned, have you not told it of the wrong brigade? Unless it happened to 2 brigades at the same time, I think the episode should be credited to D/60. I happened to be in charge of the wagon-lines at the time...⁸⁶

While based securely in fact, *Medal Without Bar* is not autobiography, and the story of Cartwright, its hero, is only indirectly a depiction of Blaker's own wartime career. When a young novelist, Blaker had invested middle-aged protagonists like Petrie and Tyson with a youthful vitality and an eagerness to re-invent themselves and achieve the unexpected. Now, at 36, he takes an unexceptional man of his own age and puts him through the experiences and adventures that he had endured when young. Cartwright is the age of the cuckolded and despised Tagny in *The Molehilleer*, and like him a solicitor. This is also roughly the age of the narrator of that book when he sets down his life story for his son. On the first page of *Medal Without Bar*, Blaker is at pains to tell us that his hero is not an extraordinary over-achiever, but a conventional man, without any “independence of thought or peculiarity of emotion.”

This use of an older hero allows the war to be examined through a mature temperament, and one that will be able to survive the war sane and unembittered. This is not a protest

85 Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Journey from the Trenches: A Biography (1918-67)* Duckworth London 2003 p 239

86 Letter from Hubert Hirschland, Bodleian Ms Eng Lett c 319 f 88-9 Fan letters from ex-artillerymen, commenting on the veracity of Blaker's book were still arriving sixteen years after his death. See Bodleian Ms Eng. Lett d339 f 1

novel, and contains no criticism of politicians or generals, though there are harsh words for staff officers who keep behind the lines. The War is there as a job to be done, and the front-line soldiers tackle it without question. Equally, there is no blaming of the Home Front or “Old Men.” In this book the older generation is represented by Cartwright’s father, a decent, kindly and efficient solicitor who is a support to his son. Though the horrors of war are graphically presented – descriptions of wounds are explicit and appalling – equal attention is given to the positive by-products of war, such as courage, comradeship and mutual respect among soldiers.

In all of these ways, the book does not fit the typical pattern of the “disillusioned” war novel of the 1929-30 “war-books boom”. Nor does its symbolic pattern conform to those of novels that use the war to criticise society. Its time-scale runs almost precisely from the outbreak of war to the Armistice; there is no presentation of the pre-war period as either a time of perfection which the War horribly and ironically reveals to be shallow and unseeing, or as a period of decadence whose sins will find it out in wartime. The pre-war world in this novel is suburban and decent, valuing the same unspectacular virtues that will be useful in the War.

Another way in which the book is untypical (and perhaps a reason for its relative neglect by those establishing “the myth of the War”) is that it is about the Artillery. These soldiers do not go over the top into machine-gun fire; they never confront Germans face to face. (The only Germans seen in the novel are some prisoners glimpsed in the distance.) The gunners are involved in a long routine of bombardment, serving much longer stretches in the War Zone than the infantry do. They face shelling from the enemy on a more or less random basis. It is slow but definite attrition, a corporal one week, a captain a few days later. The worst deaths, though, are those caused by ‘prematures’ - a shell exploding before it has left the barrel.

The idealism of the 1914 recruits fades, but the gunners are kept going by comradeship and pride in the work they are doing. This pride in the job is something that crops up as a theme in Blaker’s novels of the twenties, as I’ve noted before. It is also the theme of an undated “Preface to Novels” that he wrote, possibly in the 1930s, in which he takes Conrad as his example:

The Job contemplated by Conrad as – in the loosest sense of the word – an ideal was the job of outwitting the unscrupulous and inscrutable sea; but the relationship of a man (or woman?) to any job is the same. Conrad found it, even

when it exhibited itself as a resentment and a bitter hate, to be a peculiar kind of love. Its caresses are not of hands, or of trembling lips, but of a slab of pumice-stone, a mop and a bucket, a polishing-rag or a hank of cotton rag and an oilcan. They are performed upon timbers that can be caused to gleam, upon bright-work that will sparkle with the light which only the violence and elbow-grease of love can bring to it, upon cranks and piston-rods whose song of happiness can be turned to a scream of agony thirst or a smear of grit. It is the irony of this love of a man for his job, and his enslavement by it, that produced in Conrad the amazement that was the greatness of his art.; and it is this same odd mingling of love and hate in every kind of willing servitude that weaves a legible pattern into the conduct of planters and plumbers and salesmen, of mechanics and Viceroy's and grocers.⁸⁷

The heroes of *Medal Without Bar* are those who take pride in doing a good job, despite the fears that they cannot always suppress. There is Browne, for example, a Corporal who delights in the challenge of producing ingenious and usually unnecessary gadgets for the company, like the bell-pull that summons a servant to the officers' dugout by pulling the trigger of a revolver that fires a bullet into sandbags. The delight in creation lets him rise above the grim circumstances of war – and takes his comrades with him.

The opposite of the craftsman is the careerist; the one class of person that Blaker criticises is the regular officer who knows how to keep himself out of harm's way while furthering his career. Major Dolbey, for example, who toadies to his Colonel, or the regular officers who creep back into active service at the end of the war, to be "in at the death" and claim credit. The book's main interest is in the depiction of men under extreme pressure – a huge cast of characters, all reacting and coping differently, each with his private fears and superstitions. A particularly remarkable passage is where the experienced and rather boastful Whitelaw gets in a rage because someone else's action breaks his own personal taboo against volunteering. We are suddenly shown the turbulent fears beneath his surface pose.⁸⁸

In a drafted (but inally rejected) dedication, Blaker said the book was for those too young to have fought, to tell them what it is like. Mentally composing what he would like to say to his son, John, who wants to enlist, Cartwright thinks:

War was wrong; the discovery by it of the things that were right in life did not make it itself right, These things were only man's persistence in good humour and in the poise of something within himself...He knew that there would always

87 Bodleian Eng Lett c 557 f 89-91

88 *Medal Without Bar* 427

be a lure in the thing which no verbal argument would ever expose as an empty mockery...

John does enlist, despite Cartwright's wishes, and becomes a pilot. Cartwright fears for him - "any tumble of flame and filthy smoke could be John" - but with an immense unstated pride, and the novel ends with them drinking Johnny Walker together on Armistice Day.

Ends, that is, apart from a short postscript about the world twelve years afterwards. Cartwright's wife, Dorothy feels "There was something about it all men must have *liked*... or you wouldn't think about it the way you do; and read those books; and talk about it." Like the young, she can see "only the badness of that execrable job." But soldiers remember, and:

Their yearning is for man's brotherhood, revealed to them only through the chaos of his imbecility – the brotherhood whose tokens are the simplicities of courage and faith; and laughter.⁸⁹

This final message may have seemed conservative to some readers in 1930, but Blaker can not be dismissed as one of Rosa Bracco's middlebrow "merchants of hope," because the picture of war that he has given is complex and unsettling.

Commercially the book did quite well, despite competition from other war books published at the same time. Blaker earned more than his £300 retainer for once, and the book became a steady seller over the next decade. In 1939 Blaker could write proudly to his American agent:

Medal without Bar, I am told, is the only war novel which goes on selling year after year in any extent comparable with the *Spanish Farm* trilogy.⁹⁰

It did not, however, do well enough for Hodder to agree to a complete re-evaluation of Blaker's contract, and his next book was published by Heinemann.

This brief account has shown that Blaker's progress can not be summed up as the stereotyped progression from conflict, through repression, to release, nor as a progression from war-enthusiasm to disillusion. Blaker was keen to write about the war from the beginning, and when deflected by commercial considerations, allows it in to apparently disparate works as a key subtext. We see him going from the stark realism of "Choice of

⁸⁹ *Medal Without Bar* p.638

⁹⁰ Bodleian Ms Eng Lett d 339 f 8

Weapons” (effective, but artistically as well as commercially a dead end) through stories that put war in its place as a mere episode in life, or as a stepping-stone to better things. In *Enter a Messenger* memories of the war validate the hero's sense of his own identity, and in *Medal Without Bar* he finally describes war experience at length and in full, combining the realism of the early stories with the greater subtlety of emotional analysis that he had developed over a decade of fiction-writing. The rejection of *All Quiet on the Western Front* that is part of the motivation for writing the novel is also a rejection of the style and attitudes of his own earliest work.

This case study has also shown how analysis of a writer's work in purely literary or psychological terms is incomplete without an awareness of the economic context within which he is working. Blaker wanted to write profitably, and his failure to write a war novel before 1930 may in part be put down to the received wisdom of the publishing industry that war books did not sell. Established writers like Ford Madox Ford or C. E. Montague might be able to ignore such caveats from publishers, editors or agents, but a writer like Blaker, without any solid commercial success behind him, could not. His war experience had to emerge as a subtext rather than as a dominant theme in the novels. It would be a mistake, however, to see the influence of the publishing industry as entirely negative. During the writing of *Medal Without Bar*, many of Hodder-Williams's criticisms and suggestions were artistically acute, in their insistence that Blaker should focus on the personal, and not retreat into technicalities. Even when the publisher's suggestions seemed to be limiting, the debate helped Blaker to define precisely what he wanted his book to be. Blaker's change from a negative to a positive view of the spiritual effects of the war (He never deviated from insisting that the physical effects were terrible.) could be interpreted in conflicting ways. It can be seen as a retreat into conservatism as he got older, as a longing for fixed values when life became difficult, or as a growth in maturity. Possibly it was a mixture of all three. What this chapter has shown, however, is that through the twenties, while the meaning of the War may have been remoulded and re-interpreted, it was never forgotten.