

The Sound of War: Audio, Radio and the First World War

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When we consider the First World War, the first things that spring to mind are probably *visual*. We might think of propaganda posters, including the iconic image of Earl Kitchener wanting the spectator to enlist. It may be more in the realm of the perceived verisimilitude of photographic technology as in, for example, the monochromatic images of soldiers: military portraits of uniformed men; troops marching joyfully to the front; doomed youth bedraggled and haggard in filthy trenches; the wounded and maimed in hospital; and corpses, hanging on the old barbed wire of No Man's Land. In addition, we might think of motion photography: the First World War was the first consistently filmed war and 'silent' newsreel footage of all aspects of the conflict continues to define our perception of this century-old conflict. In this regard, the Great War is captured for us by the technological culture of the camera.

Remarkably, perhaps even disturbingly, the power of the technical media of visual culture had a direct impact on First World War military life itself. Joanna Bourke cites the example of a Royal Fusilier who ordered a group of entrenched machine gunners to imagine they were filming rather than aiming at the enemy: 'cinematograph the grey devils... (and take) as many pictures as possible'.¹

However, the camera was not the only new technology with an indelible impact on the documentation and cultural legacy of the First World War. Sonic cultures are as important as the visual to our understanding of the First World War. Along with the cinematograph, one of the last great inventions of the nineteenth century was the gramophone. The gramophone enabled the circulation of music and popularised sentimental, jingoistic or comical songs. But the gramophone also captured other sounds including examples of documentation and the

spoken word. People purchased recordings of recitations and political and militaristic speeches. There are also unique audio documents that are as striking or revealing as any photograph or prose account. These include remarkable eye-witness accounts told by survivors and even interviews with British prisoners of war recorded by their German captors. There are also examples that are effectively audio drama before the invention of radio. The theoretical basis for radio was established in the late nineteenth century with its practical implementation coming in the early twentieth century. The burgeoning wireless technology had an important role in military activity and it is this practical use that paves the way for broadcast radio. In addition, the diverse sonic content of gramophone recordings (from music to documentation to drama) is eventually reflected in the content of radio transmission. This essay will look at examples of ‘pre-radio’ drama produced during the First World War as well as a survey of how radio drama has presented the First World War in the one hundred years since the conflict. However, before we analyse and evaluate these aspects of audio culture and technology, it is important to explore the concept of *sound* itself.

The Sound of War

During the First World War, if the weather over London promised clear skies and moonlight, many people would take to trains to escape the city. This was because moonlight threatened enemy bombing raids. With this new era of warfare in which civilians in their own homes became ‘legitimate’ targets, people learned how to *listen* – because their lives might depend upon it. Virginia Woolf recounts a raid in December 1917:

Nothing was further from our minds than air raids; a bitter night, no moon up till eleven. At 5 however, I was wakened by L. to a most instant sense of guns: as if one’s faculties jumped up fully dressed... (The guns) fired very quickly, apparently towards Barnes.

Slowly the sounds got more distant, & finally ceased; we unwrapped ourselves & went back to bed. In ten minutes there could be no question of staying there: guns apparently at Kew... Servants apparently calm & even jocose. In fact one talks through the noise, rather bored by having to talk at 5 a.m. than anything else. Guns at one point so loud that the whistle of the shell going up followed the explosion. One window did, I think, rattle. Then silence. Cocoa was brewed for us, & off we went again. Having trained one's ears to listen one can't get them not to for a time; & as it was after 6, carts were rolling out of stables, motor cars throbbing, & then the prolonged ghostly whistlings which meant, I suppose, Belgian work people recalled to the munitions factory. At last in the distance I heard bugles [...] it struck me how sentimental the suggestion of the sound was, & how thousands of old ladies were offering up their thanksgivings at the sound [...]ⁱⁱ

Woolf's diary entry is significant for its prevalent sense of the auditory. Her vivid description takes us through the detected sense of impending peril that can rouse one from the darkness of sleep; the aural mapping of the targeted zones; the chatting and joking through the noise; the rattling window in the immediate domestic space; the acute silence before the eerie whistling drifting over from Belgian factories; and the bugles heralding that the skies were clear. This was a war in which, for many people, more was *heard* than *seen*. For Woolf and other people in Southern England during aerial bombing raids, they needed to shelter in the relative security of dark basements or ground floor rooms. They were hidden out of view, deprived of vision, but nothing could stop the permeation of sound. Such testimony makes us realise how important sound was (and is) in the experience of warfare. Throughout the First World War, while the public might see carefully mediated newsreels, press coverage and censored

correspondence, nothing could prevent the sound of the guns from being heard in the South of England and London.

The uncontrollable auditory signifiers of conflict can challenge the very sanity of the listener, especially a former combatant. For example, in the final, poignant verse of Siegfried Sassoon's 'Repression of War Experience' the peaceful summer of home is invaded by the 'Thud, thud, thud, – quite soft' of the 'whispering guns' which drive the soldier 'stark, staring mad'.ⁱⁱⁱ The sound of the guns is so distant – a mere whisper – yet able to crawl beneath the skin and send the listener insane. For the combatants in the First World War, it would seem that sound and its close association with anamnesis (in other words, the intense recollection of memory) could send someone insane as much as the desperation of the circumstances or the horrors the eyes beheld. The military historian, Richard Holmes, informs us that during the bombardment of the Verdun forts in 1916, although the garrisoned troops were 'safer' than the more exposed soldiers in shell-holes, 'the sheer din of shells smashing into the forts [...] and the agony of waiting for the arrival of the next shell drove men stark mad'.^{iv}

Richard Holmes has done much to capture the visceral dimension of the experience of war. He reveals how for the soldiers fighting on the front, the auditory is as acutely important as it is (literally) resonant. The First World War introduced a cacophony the world had never encountered before, as is captured in this description:

These small knots of men, scuttling hunched against the fire, or sheltering behind such cover as can be found, are assailed by noise which is often, as (Field-Marshal) Alanbrooke said of that at the Battle of the Somme, 'unimaginable'. The sounds of

battle fill a broad spectrum from the soft moan of a wounded man to the ear-splitting crash of a shell-burst.^v

With experience of the front, soldiers could chart a taxonomy of sounds: Holmes quotes Charles Carrington's vivid description of how every gun and projectile had its own sonic 'personality' and Charles Sorley heard within the gunfire what seemed like the noise of motorbikes and trains or even the sounds of cows and buffaloes.^{vi} These mechanical projectiles may have sounded like modes of transport or bucolic animals, but they were designed to maim and kill. Moreover, when they succeed in attaining their designed effect, this too has a number of distinct sounds:

Sometimes the impact of bullet or shell fragment is clearly audible. Bullets make a solid thud or, more rarely, a metallic shriek as the spinning round is deflected by bone.^{vii}

If not killed by projectiles, a new field of distinct sounds opened up as revealed in Passchendaele survivor Edwin Campion Vaughan's description of the (significantly) lightless battlefield:

From the darkness on all sides came the groans and wails of wounded men; faint, long, sobbing moans of agony, and despairing shrieks.^{viii}

It is hardly surprising that this panoply of sounds imbedded itself into the memory of the war's survivors. Robert Graves nearly died from shrapnel wounds at the Battle of the Somme and suffered shell shock. He would remain terrified of loud or sudden noises which would

cast him back to the trenches: ‘I couldn’t face the sound of heavy shelling now; the noise of a car back-firing would send me flat on my face, or running for cover’.^{ix}

During the First World War, shell shock was often formally described as ‘neurasthenia’ or, in other words, exhaustion-induced weakness of the physical nervous system. Looking at Graves and other veterans now, they would seem to be clear victims of ‘hyperacusis’ or extreme sensitivity to noise. Contemporary science closely associates hyperacusis with Post-Traumatic Stress. There is evidence that heightened stress levels at the time of acoustic trauma expose the cochlea to acoustic damage and therefore heighten the likelihood of developing hyperacusis.^x In this regard, we see that sound – so often as uncontrollable as it is unstoppable – can have a physical *and* psychological impact. The eardrum-tearing blast of detonation or impact, the mechanized rhythm and retort of weaponry or the sickening sounds of demise and injury, all permeating through total darkness or blinding light, imbed themselves in the memory and sometimes even the physiognomy of combatants.

The intensely potent effect of sound on the emotional and physical levels make it no surprise that sound is recurrently important in First World War poetry. For poets such as Sassoon, the auditory is a consistent element of his poetic language. In ‘Before the Battle’, Sassoon finds solace in silence and the natural sounds of birdsong and ‘low-voiced streams’ which offer the speaker safety and strength to scorn ‘the growl and rumble of the fight’.^{xi} Similarly, in ‘Secret Music’ Sassoon describes the ‘music in my brain / No din this side of death can quell’.^{xii} If Sassoon juxtaposes music against cacophony, for some other poets there is horror in the stillness and silence after conflict, as in Margaret Sackville’s ‘A Memory’:

There was no sound at all, no crying in the village,
Nothing you would count as sound, that is, after the shells;
Only behind a wall the low sobbing of women,
The creaking of a door, a lost dog – nothing else.^{xiii}

What remains for Sackville is ‘Silence’, a silence that can be felt and is ‘[h]orrible’ and ‘soft like blood’.^{xiv} In contrast to the acute auditory sensibility of Sassoon and Sackville, some poets are dominated by the *visual*. Isaac Rosenberg is a particularly striking example in this regard, his poetry imbued with a sense of the visual – but he was a trained artist, after all. Nevertheless, one of Rosenberg’s most accomplished poems, ‘Dead Man’s Dump’, concludes its powerful vision-dominated journey with a haunting irony revealed through sound as a dying soldier shifts from *heard* life to *beheld* death:

We heard his weak scream,
We heard his very last sound,
And our wheels grazed his dead face.^{xv}

Recording the War

Ironically, the onslaught of battle sounds, from deafening, mechanized blasts to the frailty of human utterance, was counteracted with *melody*. Richard Holmes informs us that the German military (re)introduced the use of bugles in March 1918 in an attempt to boost morale. For the German soldier Alfred Bruntsh, weeping in terror, the shifting auditory experience seems to be the cause and the (near) cure for his state of mind:

I was emotionally finished... and glad in my heart when, after the four-hour barrage, the signal 'spring up' sounded. This ancient call blown by our trumpeter helped me to get rid of my tears but the fear still remained.^{xvi}

As well as the martial sound of bugles or other armies' drums or bagpipes, popular songs were an indelible part of the soldier's experience. Almost certainly, the First World War has more songs associated with it than any other conflict in history [as George Simmers' contribution to this volume testifies]. Troops on both sides were encouraged to sing songs to boost morale and build an *esprit de corps*. As well as in the trenches, songs were popularised in music halls, sheet music and recordings. These gramophone and phonograph recordings were not just for listening by the home fires: gramophones were actively encouraged in both the British and German armies. Indeed, as Fred Gaisberg (who was a sound recordist during the First World War) notes, the gramophone was more than just encouraged: it was regarded as a 'vital necessity' for troops and these listening habits led to a post-war boom in the gramophone industry.^{xvii} The gramophone permitted multiple versions of favourite and new songs to be spread, working in close relationship to the oral circulation of rumours, stories and jokes.

For writers during the First World War, popular song and the gramophone could have a powerfully ironic position. In the poem 'Gramophone Tunes' by the wartime nurse Eva Dobell, we experience a poignant observation of severely wounded and traumatised patients in the ward as they play gramophone records over and over again. Although the tragic patients seem to find solace in the music, for Dobell 'these common tunes / Can never sound the same again' for all she can hear in the 'nasal melodies' is, 'clear and plain', the 'laugh of death and pain'.^{xviii} For one such patient, Sassoon, in 'Dead Musicians' the great German and Austrian

composers once ‘built cathedrals in my heart’, but have lost all relevance: it is only in listening to gramophone recordings of popular songs that his fallen comrades are brought to mind. However, what may have brought solace and remembrance eventually brings panic: when the song finishes the poet realises that he is as alone as his comrades are dead: ‘For God’s sake stop that gramophone.’^{xix}. The powerful impact of recordings was not just understood by individuals: it was recognised by the military authorities: the aforementioned Fred Gaisberg was tasked by the British army to record prisoners and deserters singing traditional folk songs and heartfelt messages to urge their erstwhile trench comrades to desert. These recordings were then played across No Man’s Land to apparently great if localised effect.^{xx}

Although synonymous with music, the gramophone had always been used to capture the spoken word. There were spoken word recordings of Lloyd George and other politicians and military figures. There were also recorded testimonies by active soldiers such as Edward Dwyer. This nineteen-year-old Victoria Cross winner was recorded giving fascinating eye-witness accounts of life in the frontline. As Tim Crook signals, the recordings of Dwyer – ostensibly produced as ‘rallying’ propaganda – are notable for their sense of realism, revealing in honesty that aspects of the war were ‘agonizing’ and a ‘nightmare’.^{xxi} The fact that Dwyer returned to the front and was killed in action at the Battle of the Somme adds to the poignancy of the recording. Indeed, Crook has detected the ‘haunting’ quality this has had in reception, a particularly potent example of Derridean ‘hauntology’ wherein the present only exists in relation to the ghosts of the past.^{xxii} In this regard, audio artist Greg Whitehead’s description of listening to radio voices as hearing ‘a whole chorus of death rattles’, voices ‘severed from the body’,^{xxiii} is never more apt than when applied to spoken word recordings from the First World War. The disembodied voice in recordings can be an uncanny

experience. Certainly, listening to the voice of Edward Dwyer chatting to us – vividly and humbly, colloquially and accented (he came from Fulham) – and singing ‘We’re Here Because We’re Here’ can be an eerie, poignant experience. Audio has an uncanny power, the disembodied voice can be so full of vitality not least because, in stark contrast to photographs, it is time-based. Sound is invisible and, like life, ephemeral and yet recordings can capture it.

It is not only recordings of voices that can be uncanny: voices, too, can be uncanny. This is revealed in contemporaneous poetry of the First World War. In Mary Symon’s poem ‘A Recruit for the Gordons’ (written in Aberdeenshire dialect), the poet gives voice to an enthusiastic young man enlisting into the Gordon Highlanders, but his keenness to join is tempered by a haunting final verse:

It’s laich, laich noo, in Flanders’ sod,
An’ I’m mairchin’ wi’ the drum,
‘Cause doon the lang La Bassée road,
There’s dead lips cryin’ ‘Come!’^{xxiv}

A similar uncanny sound of the voices of the recently fallen is heard in Sassoon:

A wind of voices from sightless faces;
‘Have patience, and your bones shall share our bed.’
Their voices haunt dark ways and ruined places,
Where once they spoke in deeds; who now are dead.^{xxv}

The ghosts are auditory, haunting the dark and the ruined: significantly, it is death that seems to have given voice: when alive the soldiers spoke in ‘deeds’, it is now that they converse in an enmeshed, unseen voice.

It can be a small step from the uncanny to the disturbingly absurd. If we return to Edward Dwyer’s rendition of ‘We’re Here Because We’re Here’, crackling from its gramophone recording, we find a song that was a popular favourite amongst the British ‘Tommyes’. It is a song that has a disconcerting quality of repetition and futility. This was demonstrated to great effect in the launch of the Europeana Collections 1914–18 project. This enormous digital project features a portal of several hundred thousand First World War items from numerous pan-European collections. At the British Library launch event in London in December 2013, the musician P. J. Harvey recited the lyrics to several popular First World War soldier songs to haunting effect as a British Library blog recounts:

Stripped of the accompanying music, the cold absurdity of their lyrics was laid bare.

[...When] you listen to the lyrics – really listen – they are jaw-dropping in their calm horror. The biggest revelation among the lyrics that Polly read was the song ‘We’re here because’: originally sheltered behind the tune of ‘Auld Lang Syne’, that night the lyrics opened up a Beckettian no-man’s land of senseless repetition. ‘Here because we’re here because we’re here because we’re here’: on it went, that tortuous, clinically neat, anti-logic.^{xxvi}

Audio Drama during the First World War

Amongst the many examples of non-music recordings on gramophone, there are pioneering examples of audio drama. Although the technology of radio had been invented by the First

World War, its use was primarily for shipping: the death toll on the *Titanic* in 1912 would have been even higher if it had not been for the ship sending an emergency call. By the time of the First World War, wireless had also become an important communication tool for the military and it determined the course of the conflict. Following this, and the gradual uptake of radio technology by amateur enthusiasts, the development of network radio broadcasting began in the 1920s. Early in the evolution of radio, examples of drama can be detected and eventually the genre of 'radio drama' became an extremely important part of its provision. In his pioneering research into radio, Tim Crook argues that the First World War is a key era in the development of audio drama. Effectively, wartime dramatic recordings are examples of audio drama in an emphatically pre-radio era.

Convincingly, Tim Crook cites a Boer War era (1899–1902) recording, 'The Departure of the Troopship', as an important precursor to the First World War audio drama recordings. In this popular record, the listener hears a melding of departing troops, emotional well-wishers, military bands (playing songs including 'God Save the Queen') and the whistle of the embarking steamship. This (re)constructed soundscape permits the listener to experience an auditory moment that is simultaneously dramatic, patriotic and sentimental, and 'The Departure of the Troopship' sets a template for First World War recordings. As Crook reveals, as well as a huge number of popular music and spoken word recordings, First World War phonograph records included a wealth of 'mini-plays':

The mini-plays dramatize a wide range of narratives including a German bombing raid on a seaside town, embarkation by the troops to France and a mother's tearful farewell, heroic Victoria Cross winning action in the trenches, a re-enactment of the Great War myth of the Angels of Mons – the ghosts of angels said to have saved British troops

from the German advance, and the sinking of the Lusitania by U-boat off the coast of southern Ireland. These are also supplemented by clear evidence of early sound documentary, journalism and actuality recording.^{xxvii}

In regard to actuality, sometimes ‘Gas Shells Bombardment, Lille, 1918’ has been cited as the only actual sound recording of the frontline, but argument persists as to whether this is really a studio recording created with kettle drums and whistles.^{xxviii}

A particularly important collection unearthed by Crook is the ‘On Active Service’ series released by Columbia records. This 1917 series of phonograph recordings produced by the British soldier Major A. E. Rees (and based on his own experiences) comprises six three-and-a-half minute dramatized sketches titled ‘Leaving for the Front’, ‘In the Trenches’, ‘The Night Attack’, ‘The Big Push’, ‘For Valor!’ and ‘Back Home in Blighty’.^{xxix} Crook has analysed ‘In the Trenches’ in some depth, convincingly arguing that it demonstrates a remarkable ability to present ‘complex, sophisticated and highly entertaining performance by a large cast with a range of synthesised sound effects that create a clear sound design’.^{xxx} In its succinct 3 minutes 28 seconds duration, ‘In the Trenches’ is a powerfully directed piece of audio drama which features a background soundscape of machine-gun and shelling sounds with foregrounded dialogue. As Crook notes, there is much to impress us about this pioneering example of audio drama:

A balance between the foreground dialogue and background sound of larger numbers of soldiers and atmospheric and spot effects has been clearly arranged. The result is that here is a propagandist and popular drama being communicated with clarity on a

wax phonograph and predating production techniques which were to become standard five to six years later.^{xxx1}

Rees's series remains an exciting and pioneering collection of recordings that capture the intense experience of the soldier. Other contemporaneous recordings can be somewhat disturbing. Just as the print media spread propaganda myths about German atrocities perpetrated against babies and children and the industrial extraction of fat from dead soldiers,^{xxxii} some recordings are surprising in their emphatically uncompromising approach. As an example of what he terms 'the Sound of Hatred', Crook cites a 'chilling' December 1914 recording about the capture of a spy in a British trench:

Listeners can hear the prisoner being searched, the discovery of a packet of papers including signal codes and military telegrams. His denials and refusal to answer questions are met by being blindfolded and stood up against a wall to be shot. The German's repeated and desperate cries of 'Mercy! Mercy!' fall on deaf ears. His crying and wailing continues as the Colonel is dramatized offering no due process of trial and coldly ordering his execution.^{xxxiii}

Such recordings are evidently designed to shock the listener with an unsentimental sense of the desperate realities of war (and, of course, the dastardly conduct of the Hun). As Crook writes, the spectrum of recordings reveal the use of sonic technology 'to inform, motivate, comfort and amuse' and in so doing became a sound agency for recruitment, mourning, patriotism, religious observance, cultural anxiety as well as outrage.^{xxxiv} Looking forward, Crook writes that:

The records provide audio textual evidence of a culture mobilized and emotionalized for total war. In addition, they also represent the foundations of broadcast radio drama and sound design for the talking film.^{xxxv}

Certainly in the genre of war films, the construction of effective sound design is immensely important. Even in theatre, the success of National Theatre Wales' site-specific epic *Mametz* (2014) owed as much to the rich and elaborate soundscape of distant and frontline combat tearing across No Man's Land and the adjacent forest as it did to the physically reconstructed trenches and landscape. However, as Crook suggests, the key significance of these pioneering recordings is in regard to broadcast radio drama. Once the war was over, cultural reflection and reminiscence began and, with the new technology of radio, this would take to – and never leave – the airwaves.

The First World War and Radio Drama

With the inauguration of radio broadcasting in the 1920s, radio drama gradually came into being. In the British context, radio drama first began with the recitation of stage plays by Shakespeare and other writers before the production of adaptations of fiction. Eventually, original plays began to be written for radio: the first British radio drama is usually credited as *A Comedy of Danger* by Richard Hughes in 1924. Radio has the potential to present an extraordinarily intimate dynamic. This is recognised in Hughes's pioneering drama itself, which builds up suspense and claustrophobia: the play is set in a coalmine during a power cut. By the late 1920s, other plays would also seem to use the intensely personal nature of radio, such as Cecil Lewis's 'The Night Fighters' (26 March 1928) and Mannin Crane's 'The Howling Silence' (10 November 1928), both of which attempt to capture and recreate

personal experiences of the First World War. These examples reveal the beginnings of what would become a subgenre of audio readings and radio drama related to the First World War.

BBC Radio has featured innumerable historical documentaries and audio readings of First World War writing, including in November 2006 a twice-daily series presenting *The Complete War Poems of Wilfred Owen*. Linked to this, there are a number of examples of biographical drama on British radio. In 1984, the BBC broadcast David Buck's *Her Privates We*, an adaptation of Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune: Somme & Ancre, 1916*, a powerful autobiographical novel originally published anonymously in 1929 with Manning's identity only formally acknowledged in 1977. In 2010, the BBC broadcast Louis Nowra's *The Light of Darkness*, a play about Leslie Davis, the American consul when Turkey entered the war in support of Germany in 1915, based on Davis's memoir *The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917* (1989). In 2014, BBC Radio 3 broadcast Iain Burnside's biographical drama *Music in the Great War: A Soldier and a Maker*, about the First World War writer and composer Ivor Gurney, which featured Gurney's songs and writings interwoven with original dramatic scenes.

Similarly, just as British radio has used biographical sources for its drama, it has also presented other ostensibly 'pre-existing' texts, including versions of classic First World War-themed stage plays such as R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928) in 1956; Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1929) in 1966; and Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered* (1932) in 2013. In 1999, the BBC broadcast a four-hour version in two parts of Karl Kraus's anti-war drama *The Last Days of Mankind* (*Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, 1926). Giles Havergal's audio adaptation captured the epic scope of this masterpiece of Austrian literature, using the

atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg and his peers to capture the mood of Kraus's account of the collapse of a great civilization into the insanity and horror of war.

However, given the traditional popularity of the adaptation of novels as a genre in radio drama, it is no surprise that radio has dramatized numerous examples of war fiction. In 2003, the BBC broadcast Robert Forrest's adaptation of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* in a major production nearly three hours in duration. Similarly, BBC Radio 4's Classic Serial has permitted substantial adaptations of major but frequently neglected (at least by the screen media) examples of fiction. These include: in 2006, Robin Brooks's adaptation of Rebecca West's largely prewar narrative *The Fountain Overflows* (1957); in the same year, Omar Sharif starred in Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-57), an epic Egyptian family saga set at the end of the First World War and beyond; and in 2009, Gerda Stevenson's adaptation of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932).

Jaroslav Hasek's epic satirical masterpiece *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-23) has enjoyed several significant adaptations on British radio with, seemingly, several generations readapting the work: R. D. Smith's dramatization of Paul Selver's translation *The Good Soldier Schweik* appeared in 1962; Barry Campbell's adaptation of Cecil Parrott's definitive English translation of *The Good Soldier Švejk* appeared in an outstanding serialization starring Richard Griffiths in 1981; and a two one-hour part version by Christopher Reason was broadcast in in 2008. The adventures of the happy-go-lucky Josef Švejk in the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War works exceptionally well on radio. The picaresque escapades of Švejk with their rich panorama of characters, journeys and absurdity can create a particularly fulfilling audio experience, as dramatic as it is hilarious.

In 2002, Mike Walker adapted two examples of First World War-based fiction: Humphrey Cobb's account of a true-life court-martial of French soldiers for cowardice, *Paths of Glory* (1935), and Marc Dugain's novel about the life of a severely disfigured French lieutenant, *The Officers' Ward* (*La chambre des officiers*, 1998). Interestingly, both these anti-war books enjoyed increased popularity through film versions: Stanley Kubrick's 1957 version of *Paths of Glory* starring Kirk Douglas remains a classic First World War drama; and François Dupeyron's 2001 screen version of Dugain's novel was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Undoubtedly, the popular film versions of the source novels were an impetus for audio adaptation. Similarly, First World War audio adaptation has extended into aspects of popular genre: in 1976, the BBC broadcast Alison Plowden's dramatization of Anthony Price's novel *Other Paths to Glory* (1973), a popular 'crime' thriller about an historian who uncovers details about the Battle of the Somme that put his life at risk.

In regard to the scheduling of the aforementioned dramas, BBC Radio has aired its First World War dramas as standalone plays on Radio 4 and occasionally Radio 3 as well as in the form of Radio 4 serialized dramas in daytime or nighttime slots. It is evident that First World War radio drama is perceived as commanding a wide audience from those interested in experimental literary adaptation on Radio 3 as much as those receiving a daily dose of fifteen-minute serial drama presented within the midmorning Radio 4 *Woman's Hour* slot. Over the years, the organization has also commissioned and premiered several examples of audio drama specifically for Remembrance Days (11 November). These include, in 1998, Peter Wolf's *Strange Meeting* about the death of Wilfred Owen; and, in 2002, Charlotte Fyfe's biographical drama *The Tears of War* about the First World War poet May Wedderburn Cannan and her relationship with the war hero Bevil Quiller-Couch who survived the conflict,

but died in the 1919 influenza epidemic. On the 11 November 2011, the BBC broadcast *Laurels and Donkeys* (based on Andrew Motion's collection of verse) which featured poems about war from 1914 to the contemporary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This assembled 'play' of new and historical texts is reminiscent of 1998's *The Girls They Left Behind*, which was presented as a journey through the battlefields of the First World War, seen through the eyes of teenagers from a high school in Edinburgh (using original poetry as well as First World War reminiscences).

Playwrights have used skills of historical research to create original radio plays. Dave Sheasby's *Donkeys Led By Lions* (1999) was a powerful drama about the severe treatment of a conscientious objector; Gregory Burke's *Shell Shocked* (2002) portrays the different lives of two brothers separated in the trenches; and Adam Thorpe's *Devastated Areas* (2009) explores civilian grief through the interweaving stories of a German sculptress working on a memorial statue to the volunteers; a glazier repairing the blown-out windows of a church in the Somme; and a gardener in England.

The sheer output of BBC radio drama means that we can find works that take a unique or neglected angle in original or in pieces informed by in-depth historical research. In 1996, *One Hot Summer* presented a dramatic account of the true story of the 1919 race riots in Liverpool and the tensions of the immediate aftermath of the War. Tina Pepler's docudrama *The Silence of Memory* (1998) explored the 1920 burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Linked in theme, Stephen Wyatt's *Memorials to the Missing* (2007) is a play about the establishment of the Imperial War Graves Commission. In 2009, *The Last Tsar* by Ian Curteis was a dramatic investigation of the apparent refusal of King George V to give sanctuary to his cousin Tsar Nicholas during the Russian Revolution.

As we can see, spoken word and drama on radio has produced a wealth of material, with topics and 'angles' ranging from the predictable to the surprising. Moreover, First World War radio has proved highly influential. One of the most famous productions in the history of British political theatre – *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), devised by Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop – is a play that has regular stage revivals and was adapted to the screen by Richard Attenborough in 1969. Interestingly, this landmark in British theatre finds its roots in British radio. The Theatre Workshop drew direct inspiration from Charles Chilton's *The Long Long Trail* (1961), a BBC Home Service radio documentary that established a similar structure in its interweaving statistics, facts, reminiscences and songs (especially the ironic rewritings created by the troops). Chilton created *The Long Long Trail* largely for personal reasons: his father had been killed during the Second Battles of Arras in 1918 aged 19, shortly after Chilton had been born. Chilton's mother died soon afterwards and he was raised by his grandmother. Although his father was acclaimed as a hero, Chilton knew very little about the actions of his father or the circumstances of his death. This enigma that determined the beginning of his life (and the lives of so many others) provided Chilton with a creative impetus: he interviewed war veterans in London pubs and when he started working at the BBC in the 1930s. He also discovered a popular wartime book of songs called *Tommy's Tunes*. The songs, ranging from the morale-boosting and the sentimental to the bleakly ironic provided Chilton with a highly successful way to structure his innovative radio documentary. In many respects, despite their unmistakable similarities in style and structure, the Theatre Workshop's reimagining of *The Long Long Trail* creates a much more politicised drama than Chilton's reflective documentary. This is not least reflected in the titles themselves: although both directly alluding to wartime songs, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is a sardonically biting title compared to the pain and tragedy embodied in *The Long Long Trail*.

As we have seen, the BBC has often portrayed and featured the First World War, and with the centenary of the conflict the radio has featured ambitious team-written series, namely *Home Front* and *Tommies* (both 2014–18). The team-written *Home Front* charts the lives of a group of fictional characters through the First World War, presenting about twenty-five hours of drama each year (in three eight-week seasons) spread over the four ‘centennial’ years, with every well-researched episode set precisely one hundred years to the day. This is an interesting experiment in commemoration, a character-driven drama (in the tradition of *The Archers*) which can explore social change against an historical backdrop in a ‘real’ timespan. While *Home Front* charts the impact of the war on those at home (initially in Folkestone), *Tommies* is a parallel series, also team-written, which focuses on the experience of the frontline.

The central character in *Tommies* is Mickey Bliss, a sergeant from the Indian army with a specialist skill in wireless signalling. Bliss’s expertise is apt for radio: it is the technology that will supersede telegraphy and help to win the war; but it is also the same technology which will go on to pave the way for broadcast radio. Hence, in *Tommies*, we have a work of radio about radio. Bliss is not the only character: *Tommies* has an epic range that captures the enormity of the conflict and the diverse people swept up into it. This scope is evident in the first broadcast episode (7 October 2014) written by Michael Chaplin. The ambitions of the play are immediately established, the Commentator providing an omniscient narrative that spans the past and the future: the play opens with Alphonse Minet, a French farmer, ploughing his land as generations of his family have done only for the Commentator to tell us that Minet ‘will be killed by a stray bullet fired by one of his own countrymen in January 1917’.^{xxxvi} Although *Tommies* unfurls in ‘real time’ (inasmuch as, like *Home Front*,

the episodes tie onto the respective centenary dates), the Commentator consistently contextualises the narrative with an overview that passes through, beyond and into the characters. In the space of the first half-hour episode, we encounter the British and German soldiers as well as the local farmers and nuns. The series is as dramatically exciting as it is well-researched. Its historically accurate detail maps the work onto real locations and gives an account of the technological developments, not least in Bliss risking his life in his attempts to get the wireless to work. At the same time, Chaplin's script shows a social world that is changing (upper-class fox-hunting officers with swords drawn) and, already, the baptism of fire the young soldiers are experiencing just a few weeks into the conflict.

The ambition and scope of *Tommies* is reflected in the fact that the second episode (14 October 2014), written by Nick Warburton, we follow Bliss and Walter Oddy (injured at the end of episode 1) away from the frontline to the doctors and nurses at Boulogne. The episode is concerned with medical process and the equally desperate situation the medics find themselves in. The treatment of the seriously injured Oddy is focal to the episode and Warburton uses audio to its full potential: the dialogue, Commentator's narrative and sound effects take us up close to Oddy's infected wounds and linger there in a way at which the screen might have balked. We hear the doctor Celestine's professional engagement:

(She looks) down at Walter's ruined leg. It doesn't disgust her, it fascinates. To her this is a piece of nature. It's a fungus, it's a flower. That's Celestine. How she always was.

She puts her fingers to the skin. It's so tight it shines under the lamplight.^{xxxvii}

A few moments later, we have stark juxtaposition in Bliss's perception:

There's no rifle-fire here, no bombardment, no glorifying touch of danger. This is a quiet table with lamps.

It terrifies him.^{xxxviii}

In this way, *Tommies* uses radio drama to the fullest degree, giving us the experiential as well as the meticulously researched. We find in this rolling series the heroic as well as the tragic and yet it is consistently *real* rather than idealistic, maintaining an effective drama without needing to become melodramatic or sermonising. It is an example of BBC contemporary radio drama at its most crafted and distinctive.

At the beginning of this chapter we saw how Virginia Woolf recounted the experience of an air raid in principally auditory terms. When peace came at last, Woolf describes her realisation:

Twentyfive minutes ago the guns went off, announcing peace. A siren hooted on the river. They are hooting still. A few people ran to look out of windows [...] So far neither bells nor flags, but the wailing of sirens & intermittent guns.^{xxxix}

It is significant that although only a 'few people' ran to look outside, the aural signs were evident and understood. The horror of war can arrive in sound and its ending is first detected sonically. We can close our eyes or avert our gaze, but it is almost impossible not to listen. What is more, one hundred years of audio recording and radio broadcasting shows that we *want* to listen.

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- ^{iv} Holmes, Richard. *Firing Line* (Pimlico, London, 1994), 166-67.
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- ^{xvii} Quoted in Crook, Tim. 'Vocalizing the Angels of Mons: Audio Dramas as Propaganda in the Great War of 1914 to 1918' *Societies* 2014, 4(2), (180-221), 202
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