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**Wayward Sons: The New British Masculinity in World War I**

Christopher Parker  
*University of Notre Dame*, cparke22@nd.edu

# WAYWARD SONS: THE NEW BRITISH MASCULINITY IN WORLD WAR I

CHRISTOPHER PARKER \*

**Abstract:** At the 1914 outbreak of World War I, the popular image of the British soldier had fundamentally changed from its portrait only three decades earlier. The British public and media hailed the soldier, once seen as failing in his masculine duties, as the new epitome of manhood. Such a drastic reversal suggests that the British government somehow enacted this shift in public opinion out of a need for fighters in World War I. This essay argues instead that a gendered shift was in fact already taking place through the mid- to late-19th century, nudged on by the development of the British empire and European social sciences. Wartime propaganda reflected this shift and used it recruitment purposes. Themes of imperialism and Social Darwinism which appear in propaganda posters are consistent with the evolving public image of soldiers in the decades before the war. The documents and artwork of these years depict a soldier who was productive, protective and primal, all of which we find in the transition from Victorian to Edwardian Britain. Propaganda emasculated civilians who did not fit their narrative, specifically conscientious objectors, while underplaying or censoring the stories of soldiers who challenged it. Thus Britain seized on already shifting trends to weaponize masculinity as a recruitment tactic and motivator in the war.

## Introduction

In the 1880s, British novelist Flora Thompson, writing about her childhood in rural England, said that any neighborhood boy joining the army risked committing “social suicide.”<sup>2</sup> This fact is surprising on its own by most modern standards. Whatever opinions a person has about war as an occupation, few individuals would describe soldiers as less of a man than their civilian counterparts. Especially considering the mania surrounding enlistment and masculinity that lay only 30 years down the road, Victorian Britain’s attitude towards the army is confounding. What did Thompson think at the dawn of the Great War, as those same local boys flocked to recruitment offices? To what did she attribute this change in her country in 1914? One standout reason might have been the barrage of propaganda launched by the British government and tightly-controlled

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Parker recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree from the University of Notre Dame, where he studied history, Latin, and journalism. He concentrated in 20<sup>th</sup> century dictatorships, studying how these governments manipulated the media as they retained power. He currently interns at the National Museum of American History in their communications office. He loves matcha tea and *Landmark* by Hippo Campus.

<sup>2</sup> W. J. Reader, *At Duty’s Call: A Study in Obsolete Patriotism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 58.

media. State institutions poured unprecedented energy into getting boys in uniform. On every street corner and in every pack of cigarettes, they implored, “Britons... Join Your Country’s Army!”<sup>3</sup> It is easy to believe that this iconic propaganda campaign mobilized the men of Britain on its own. In reality, however, the war overlapped with a quieter but equally as powerful evolution of British masculinity and patriotism.

This paper will compare the ideal man depicted in British propaganda to the lived experiences of British men at home and abroad. It will show that British institutions did not create a new connection between military and manhood in order to boost recruitment, although they certainly capitalized on it. Developments of the late nineteenth century, including an expanding empire and a new science of natural selection, blended with old masculine ideas to reinvent the soldier as a manly icon. Each of these forces shaped the promises of manhood employed in British propaganda, including motifs of adventure, physical and ethnic superiority, and team identity. Meanwhile, propaganda emasculated men who defied these definitions, specifically conscientious objectors, even though few soldiers even remotely resembled the larger-than-life portraits being painted of them back home. Collectively, these points will demonstrate the centrality of the new masculine ideal in Britain’s Great War history.

### **Glory and Gore**

The first asterisk to this argument is a substantial one: it is not true that *all* soldiers underwent a rebranding from 1850 to 1914. Some army men never lacked prestige to begin with. Winston Churchill himself recommended the British cavalry corps for “the young man who wants to enjoy himself” between school and starting a career.<sup>4</sup> The difference between respectable and rejectable soldiers was one of economic class. Churchill came from nobility, a grandson of the Duke of Marlborough, and British aristocrats used the military much like the Roman senators of the republic. Wealthy young men with political ambition would become officers and serve for several years in order to win some recognition. Service provided a chance for distinction, indicating discipline and a robust physicality that elite men approved. Even those who remained in the military often got involved in politics. Meanwhile, many men in the lower classes committed

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred Leete, *Britons. Join Your Country's Army!*, poster, Imperial War Museum, 1918, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/16577>

<sup>4</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 6.

to a career of desperation with limited upward mobility. Their pay was meager, and their duties mundane. Common soldiers had a reputation as quick-tempered drunks. High recruitment among starving Irish boys demonstrates both the socioeconomic makeup of the army and its equally poor public image.<sup>5</sup> H. O. Arnold-Foster, the British Secretary of State for War from 1903-5, called the infantry “the last step in the downward career of a young man.”<sup>6</sup> The public perception was, in basic terms: for a rich officer, the army was resume building, but for a poor grunt, the army was welfare.

This double standard reveals something crucial about Victorian masculinity, making it an excellent place to start analyzing how that masculinity would change. The foundation of British manhood across all social classes was providing for one’s family. John Tosh has written extensively on the Victorian masculine ideal and argues from the opening sentences of his book, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, that domestic life was absolutely central for the image of masculinity. The “hard-working breadwinner” journeyed out into the city or the fields each morning, often making physical or moral sacrifices during the day in order to feed his family.<sup>7</sup> This role itself resulted from the Industrial Revolution, before which “most paid productive work was carried on within the home,” and the whole family assisted.<sup>8</sup> When this arrangement changed, making men the primary if not sole source of income for the home, their financial responsibility became deeply ingrained in their sense of manhood. Thus Churchill, who used military service as a career stepping stone, was met with approval from his fellow men. A soldier who took glorified charity for unskilled labor was failing in his domestic duties.

Meanwhile, the vocation that did reconcile paternal obligations to a sense of patriotism and militancy was that of the colonial sailor. The career of a seafaring merchant grew in prestige through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A sailor’s image may on the surface seem to mirror a soldier’s— both occupations required strong physical bodies and strategic prowess to ensure survival in unfamiliar territory. But a man who sailed for a chartered trading company was

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<sup>5</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Lois Bibbings, “Images of Manliness: The Portrayal of Soldiers and Conscientious Objectors in the Great War,” *Social & Legal Studies* 12, no. 3 (September 2003): 338.

<sup>7</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 3.

enterprising and self-sufficient, not a deadbeat. He provided a tangible service for his family. The sailor's lifestyle was "explicitly... capitalist" and therefore counted towards a breadwinning masculine ideal.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, the public profile of British soldiers was high during the Napoleonic Wars, when Britain felt threatened and needed a standing army. During peacetime, though, the army only served one of two roles. Either they remained on the island, making a paltry salary running drills with their company, or they were stationed in a faraway land and kept a very distant peace. Sailors existed in both worlds, departing Britain for uncharted lands and returning with wealth for their nation. They mirrored the workday commute that British heads-of-household undertook. Dawson writes that "adventure became very tightly associated with specific circumstances in which men could journey 'abroad' in search of their fortunes."<sup>10</sup> For this reason, sailors represented a masculine idea for Victorian Britain.

However, as the years approached 1900, two trends began precipitating a gradual renewal of the soldier's identity. The work of British social and natural scientists, for one, altered the public's understanding about Britain's relationship to the rest of the world. War and competition came to represent a benevolent struggle. By subjugating other nations with their individual and collective strength, Britain could improve its own population and humanity at large. Alongside and closely related to "survival of the fittest" was a new understanding of a man's connection to the domestic sphere. As the empire expanded, colonies generated more interest within Britain. Colonial soldiers, who had initially seemed far removed from home, were recast as protectors who provided for Britain abroad rather than in the household. They became a subject of national pride. These two trends converged in 1899 for the Second Boer War in South Africa.

New ideas about humanity's "natural" tendencies, developed by British thinkers, created a pseudoscientific mandate for British masculine domination. Thomas Malthus' *Essay on Population* framed life as a meaningful struggle for survival. He argued fundamentally that nature intended everyone to compete in order to make use of their full potential: "to urge man to further the gracious designs of Providence by the full cultivation of the earth."<sup>11</sup> His essay inspired a generation of scientists, including Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace and Herbert Spencer

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 2010), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 58.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Claeys, "The 'Survival of the Fittest' and the Origins of Social Darwinism." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 2 (2000): 231.

(though only the former tends to get name-brand recognition), to build on it. They added that “this struggle *improved* species,” including humanity, by passing on the best traits.<sup>12</sup> Out of this idea developed the perceived primacy of certain “races” and societies who would eventually dominate the world as a result of natural selection. For a Victorian, it was obvious that women were not up to this task; they needed to stay home and tend to the superior babies. It would be the British man who journeyed out into the world to prove that his lineage was the greatest. The belief caught like wildfire in Britain and spread through European countries, such that “Darwin's metaphorical application of the ‘survival of the fittest’ to society was in fact virtually a commonplace by 1859.”<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the demands of a growing empire rewrote social expectations for men’s paternal duties. The role of provider now extended beyond the departure from and return to home as breadwinner. Colonial soldiers protected Britain’s economic interests broadly by maintaining its grasp on lucrative overseas resources and trading hubs. They earned the respect and appreciation of the island as colonial economic contributions grew. Britain’s fascination with these distant heroes is evident in the popularity of biographies chronicling military adventures in India and South Africa. L. J. Trotter, a British biographer and army captain, storied *The Life of John Nicholson* about a colonial brigadier more than 40 years after the man’s military feats in India. It was reprinted six times “within a year of publication.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, for young men, the soldier embodied the thrill and fun of military adventure. Rudyard Kipling wrote extensively about India and created the character of a lovable and troublemaking young private. “Tommy,” the everyman British enlistee, “was always brave, always cheerful, formidable in battle yet chivalrous and sportsmanlike.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, Tommy did not represent all British privates. Yet the “rough, untutored, even drunken” soldier still embodied the “manly virtues” discussed above.<sup>16</sup> Though paid meagerly, soldiers came to be respected as adventurers who protected and provided for Britain at large. The stage was set, and the dawn of the twentieth century gave the perfect test run for the implications of this new masculinity of soldierhood.

In some ways, the 1899 beginning of the Second Boer War was Britain’s Great War experience in miniature. For the first time, public opinion played a huge role. Successful attacks

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<sup>12</sup> Claey's, “Survival of the Fittest,” 236.

<sup>13</sup> Claey's, “Survival of the Fittest,” 234.

<sup>14</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 58.

on British troops by the South African Republic and Orange Free State deeply had wounded national pride. Over 10,500 men enlisted to fight without any propaganda posters to help them along.<sup>17</sup> Critically, this war made short-term military service “admirable” instead of “eccentric,” opening the door for the peer pressure that defined Great War enlistment.<sup>18</sup> Rather than deciding a career, these boys were making the patriotic and daring choice. Colonial obsession and desire for adventure showed its influence during this war. The first diary entry of Private Walter Putland of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex Regiment reveals his fascination with the exotic: one of the first details he notes is the cheap fruit and cigars sold on the boat to Cape Town. Later on, he writes of the “grand” natural splendor of South Africa and the hospitality of the indigenous people.<sup>19</sup> His descriptions also hint at the Darwinian national superiority that the soldiers believed in. His writing is not necessarily derogatory but certainly patronizing, informed by racial and religious hubris. Upon arrival in Cape Town, Putland writes that the hero-worshiping welcome that met his regiment “brought tears to more than one mans [*sic*] eyes to think that people of a strange Country should treat us the way they did.”<sup>20</sup> The first days of the Boer War validated the martial masculinity of Britain’s young men, providing them with the thrill of adventure and the moral satisfaction of defending their imperial honor.

The struggle in South Africa had several important implications for the Great War. This war was Britain’s first experience with volunteer soldiers on a national scale. For the first time, Britons enlisted in the military as infantrymen with no plans to make it their career.<sup>21</sup> Young and inexperienced boys looking for adventure volunteered even after army leadership stopped recruiting. Reader writes that a “new and strange desire... to scramble into uniform and then back out of it again as soon as the fighting stopped,” swept through the island.<sup>22</sup> The result was a rude awakening, not only for the relatively few enlisted men who actually made it to South Africa but also for their officers. Within a few diary entries, our cavalier Private Putland starts complaining about the brutal climate and tedious labor. Men like Putland found the war to be increasingly less

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<sup>17</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Putland, “The Personal Diary of Private Walter Putland,” Dec. 2, 1899 entry. *South African Military History Society*, December 2000. <http://samilitaryhistory.org/diaries/diaputld.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Putland, “Personal Diary,” Dec. 30, 1899 entry.

<sup>21</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 339.

<sup>22</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 9.

“glamorous” as it progressed, tasked with rounding up Boer women and children for detention.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, army leadership complained about the ill-prepared and unreliable men that now fell under their command. None of this discontent got much attention in the press of the day, though. British newspapers and government addresses focused on the army’s heroic defense of empire. This acquiescence, too, was a precursor for the coming conflict- why worry about a few grumbles when a celebration of victory benefitted the country at large?

### **Posters, Postcards, and Cigarette Boxes**

In August of 1914, Lord Horatio Kitchener left his command in the Middle East to accept a post as Secretary of State for War. He was immediately tasked with raising a fighting force for the escalating conflict in mainland Europe. Unlike his peers in the British government, Kitchener had no delusions that the war would be a brief one; his first calls for volunteers required a stint of three years on active duty.<sup>24</sup> The war would require millions of men, and the challenge of recruiting them would require the whole weight of the British government. Kitchener was the man to do it, for he was what every young British boy now wanted to be, and recruiting efforts would reflect that. British propaganda conveniently rewrote Victorian England’s domestic masculinity and doubled down on the modern notions of imperial adventure, survival of the fittest, and the lovable everyman soldier.

Certainly, fatherhood as a masculine ideal did appear in Great War propaganda. Many pieces played on a father’s duty to protect their family. In one 1914 poster, published by the Underground Electric Railways Company of London, a pleading army officer points off towards some nondescript violence and urges a British father to leave his wife and baby to join the fight<sup>25</sup>. British propaganda often portrayed the threat to a man’s family as immediate, putting the violence of mainland Europe in view of the British Isles and creeping closer. Propaganda also promised shame in the future of men who shirked their duties. A common poster format showed an inquisitive child asking, “What did you do during the war?” insinuating that a man who never served could not be an adequate father.<sup>26</sup> Yet this particular image of a father as a masculine

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<sup>23</sup> Reader, *At Duty's Call*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 35.

<sup>25</sup> See Illustration 1.

<sup>26</sup> Savile Lumely *Daddy, what did You do in the Great War?*, poster, Imperial War Museum, 1915, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/17053>

protector and provider might have seemed quite foreign to a Victorian, who perceived the father's protectorate as economic in nature rather than physical. Undoubtedly, the idea that a father ought to risk his life abroad and abandon his post in Britain would not have made sense before 1850. Though propaganda did use paternalism, it was a new and unfamiliar strain.



Illustration 1. Propaganda poster of father and family. Source: Adam Matthews First World War Database.

Recruitment also relied heavily on growing excitement surrounding imperial



Illustration 2. Poster depicting young soldier and maps. Source: Adam Matthews First World War Database.

adventure. Propaganda pieces drew on a new expectation of masculinity: to fully come into manhood, a boy needed to journey abroad on a British mission. Many on the island had started reading Kipling and following news out of South Africa. Dawson writes that “narrative tropes... came to color popular anticipation that the coming war in Europe was going to be an adventure.”<sup>27</sup> Boys saw themselves as the main characters of their own stories, not considering any real danger from which their strength and wit could not save them.

Propaganda expressly implied that “the sacrifice of service, if it was considered to be a sacrifice, would only be brief... and the rewards great.”<sup>28</sup> In one popular poster, reprinted several times for Australian and Canadian recruitment, a map of the homeland is pictured next to a map of Europe. A young soldier is overlaid on top of the maps, rifle in hand, looking off to the east. Jovial and inviting script calls out, “Boys, come over here, you’re wanted.” Propaganda like this prominently displayed the allure of adventure, especially as a fulfillment of masculine identity.

<sup>27</sup> Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 339.

Apparently, this propaganda worked (at least in the beginning). Much like the diary of Private Putland, the opening entries of firsthand Great War accounts reflected the craving to go abroad in defense of empire. Raymond Smith, a Worcester boy who enlisted and eventually rose to rank of captain as an NCO, describes only positivity in his recruitment experience. Although he does not mention any particularly impactful propaganda piece, he states that the “martial spectacle” of public drills in his town inspired him to join.<sup>29</sup> He spent 1914 in training, but his unit was mobilized to France in the early months of 1915. He writes about the breathless excitement of embarking on “the second stage of the Great Adventure.”<sup>30</sup> Another source, journalist John Maclean, attached to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, travelled with his assigned unit across the Channel for their first stint in France. He describes an “awesome thrill and fascination,” for himself as well as the soldiers, when they hear their first gunshots of the Great War.<sup>31</sup> Oblivious to the slaughter that awaited them, these men bought into the masculine expectation of excitement that British propaganda capitalized on.

Just as important as this new conception of masculine identity were the implications of Social Darwinism and distinctions between European ‘races.’ Speaking in October 1914, Winston Churchill spoke of the war as more than a traditional battle for territory but “a struggle between nations for life and death.”<sup>32</sup> Britons across the island believed that the Great War was a real-life test of survival of the fittest and that they now had the chance to prove their supremacy. Propaganda exploited this belief in interesting ways. One of the most impactful strategies was to depict the German ‘race’ as under-evolved and animalistic. From the offset, rebranding Germans as Huns helped dehumanize them in the mind of the British. The famous “Destroy this mad brute” poster, which actually an American propaganda effort that was clearly influenced by earlier British pieces like the famous “?” poster, depicts the German as a massive gorilla attacking a terrified and defenseless bare-chested woman. In other cases, propagandists did not bother with characterizations. An advertisement from the English newspaper *The Daily Mail* commanded bluntly, “REFUSE TO BE SERVED BY AN AUSTRIAN OR GERMAN WAITER.”<sup>33</sup> Alongside

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<sup>29</sup> Raymond Smith, *A Soldier's Diary: Sidelights on the Great War 1914-1918* (Evesham: The "Journal" Press, 1940), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Soldier's Diary*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> John Maclean, *On Active Service with the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders: A Ranker's Reminiscences and War Notes* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Chronicle Press, 1926), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Marwick, *Deluge*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Marwick, *Deluge*, 50.

the negative degradation of the enemy was a strong positive force of hyper-nationalism. “Rule, Britannia,” an eighteenth-century ode to British militarism, experienced a rival during the enlistment craze. The song is all about British supremacy over “nations, not so blest as thee.”<sup>34</sup> Lyrics about the struggle between “foreign” and “native,” with Britons eventually coming out on

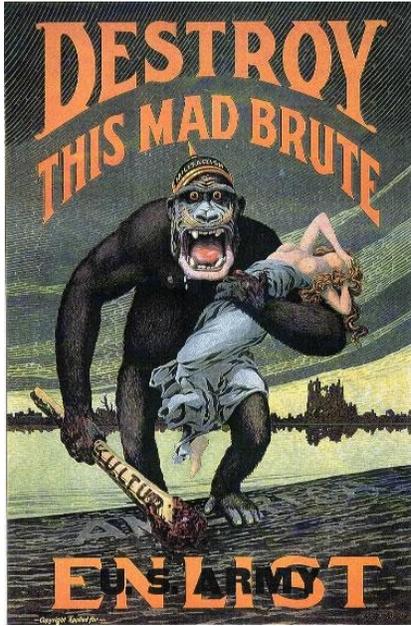


Illustration 3. American anti-German propaganda. Source: Berhing Center, National Museum of American History.

top, embody the influence of Social Darwinism on masculine identity during the war.

War propaganda promised manhood through adventure and through ethnic supremacy, but it also promised manhood through teamwork. Kipling had created the young rascal soldier as a lovable figure in his colonial narratives. Drawing on this image, British propaganda pushed an image of the army that looked more like a soccer team than a fighting force. One 1915 poster asks, “Who can beat this plucky four?” and depicts four infantrymen with Scottish, Welsh, English and Irish flags. The implications of this poster from a Social Darwinist standpoint are very interesting- Irish and English are racial comrades, but Germans are brutish Huns...? The target audience, though, seems to be young boys who love the camaraderie of team sports. Another propaganda piece, conceived on the British island and circulated in Australia, drives this point home. The words “JOIN TOGETHER - TRAIN TOGETHER - EMBARK TOGETHER - FIGHT TOGETHER” span the top of the poster, above a border of robust, young Australian boys playing different sports. Language of sport and war are purposefully intertwined, implying that the Great War would be the ultimate sport (THE game, as written at the bottom of the poster). Since the ideal man was a soldier, and the ideal young soldier was loveable and

<sup>34</sup> Ben Johnson, “Rule Britannia.” *Historic UK*.



Illustration 5. Australian "Sportsmen's 1000" propaganda. Source: Imperial War Museum.

scrappy, propaganda enticed British boys with the icon of a fresh-faced sportsman surrounded by his mates.

With Tommy as their mascot, these boys enlisted en masse, encouraged by the creation of so-called pals battalions. Young men tended to join in groups, proud to prove their manliness to each other and fearful of being labelled a

coward. Lord Derby coined the term "battalion of pals" after the British government noticed this pattern and allowed local groups to serve together.<sup>35</sup> These battalions were massively successful as a recruitment tactic. Ralph Smith, a working-class Bristol boy, wrote in his memoir that "I thought there would be more chance of meeting someone I knew" in his city's battalion.<sup>36</sup> And for those who joined alone, the pals battalions promised a deep bond with other locals. One propaganda poster depicts four Scottish boys marching in a line, laughing and joking with each other.<sup>37</sup> From the viewer's perspective, the identical uniforms and facial expressions almost blend into one another. The message here is clear. The boy who wants to fit in, to meet new friends and work with them towards something greater, will find all he desires in a pals battalion.

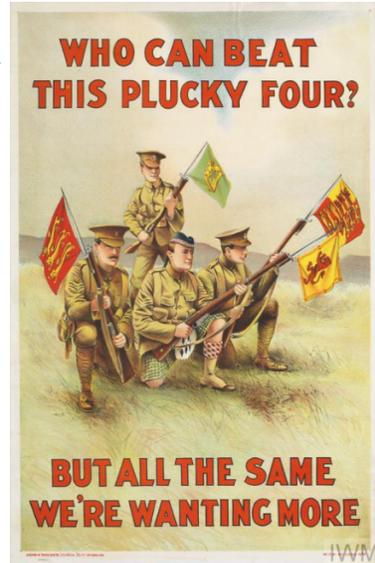


Illustration 4. Multinational British propaganda poster. Source: Imperial War Museum.



Illustration 6. Poster depicting group of Scottish soldiers. Source: Adam Matthews First World War Database.

<sup>35</sup> "The Pals Battalions Of The First World War." Imperial War Museums.

<sup>36</sup> Clive Burlton, "The Bristol Pals and Recruitment in Bristol and South Gloucestershire (2013" *The First World War*. 2013. Accessed May 11, 2021. <http://www.firstworldwar.amdigital.co.uk.proxy.library.nd.edu/Explore/Essays/TheBristolPals>.

<sup>37</sup> See Illustration 6.

British propaganda did not invent the exemplary British man. Literature and public opinion show that the man's role in the domestic sphere was changing during the Victorian Era. Meanwhile, due to the expansion of the British empire and a sudden obsession with racial natural selection, the soldier left behind his bad reputation and came to represent the masculine ideal. Print and written propaganda manipulated motifs of adventure, survival of the fittest and fraternal culture to mobilize British men to the war effort. An unspoken promise had been made to the British public: if you enlist, you will become a man. It follows, then, that the politicians and newspapers behind this campaign needed to appear like they were keeping this promise. Any examples of masculinity in opposition to soldierhood, or examples of soldiers who were distinctly unmanly, could easily disillusion the incoming volunteers. Conscientious objectors (COs) posed a direct threat to masculinity and were therefore dramatically vilified in the British press and government. The dissatisfaction and unmanly behavior of soldiers, on the other hand, received no attention and were often covered up.

### **COs and “Standing for Future Liberty”**

So far, this focus of this paper has been mostly on positive motivations in propaganda, with a message of, “Look how strong and manly you can be if you join the army!” But negative motivations were also pervasive and had a serious impact on British men. For example, the White Feather campaign involved the public presentation of a feather, a display of a man's alleged cowardice, by a young woman. Such embarrassment at the hands of a source of masculine validation was crushing. This campaign was effective not least because it provided such an easy answer: join up, and a man can reclaim all of his lost masculinity. Thus British wartime masculinity was simultaneously “aspirational, yet apparently easily attainable.”<sup>38</sup> Propaganda seized on these negative motivations, attacking the masculinity of noncombatants. Recall depictions of fathers facing their children, who ask, “What did YOU do in the Great War?” or some variation on that theme. The obvious implication is that to shirk military service was a failure of domestic duties. Other posters disparaged a non-soldier's militancy, like an Irish recruiting poster that shows a woman, gun in hand, pointing across the sea to Belgium and asking a man, “Will you go or must

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<sup>38</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 346.

I?” Broadly, the recruitment effort weaponized shame and created an expectation that no real man had any excuse to forgo fighting.

In light of this, COs made the perfect straw man through whom any noncombatant could be emasculated. The problem with COs was not actually a shortage of British soldiers in Europe. About 16,000 to 16,500 British men identified as conscientious objectors, compared to the 4.9 million who fought.<sup>39</sup> This group, consisting of one-third of one percent of British soldiers, disproportionately made appearances in newspaper headlines and parliamentary speeches throughout the Great War. The only way we can possibly understand this spotlight is through a gendered lens. The existence of COs challenged every masculine principle of the recruitment campaign. If boys could become men without enlisting, why would they risk their lives in Europe? If these men loved their country but were not going to fight, why was being a soldier so important? A masculine CO threatened the whole system, so British institutions immediately sought ways to emasculate them.



Illustration 9. Irish recruitment poster.  
Source: Imperial War Museum.

The most straightforward emasculation that propagandists could manage was through Social Darwinism, an attack on strength and the physical body. Circumventing the conscience in “conscientious objector,” they created a caricature of the CO who was physically unfit and therefore too weak for military service. Published tribunals referred to COs as “a shivering mass of unwholesome fat” or “a case of an unhealthy mind in an unwholesome body.”<sup>40</sup> In the press, COs had the reputation of being physically defective. A 1913 *Daily Mirror* article compares a few French war horses, who became anxious and suffered sprains at the front, to CO “shirkers.” The piece’s subheading says it all: “French Horses Which Have Conscientious Objection to Shell Fire.”<sup>41</sup> Reports about COs also placed them in direct opposition to the hypermasculinity of soldiers. Intimidation tactics during CO tribunals were common. Robert Wright, a Lancashire

<sup>39</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 341.

<sup>40</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 346.

<sup>41</sup> W. L. McAlpin, “Equine Shirkers,” *The Daily Mirror*, May 15, 1916, Adams Matthews First World War Database.

Primitive Methodist preacher, kept a diary throughout his tribunal process and time in prison. He writes that two soldiers threatened him during his trial, and “after some fearful swearing” brought him a gun and began ordering him to suit up.<sup>42</sup> In launching these attacks, Britain reassured the public that COs were incomplete men, inferior to soldiers.

Moreover, COs refused to travel abroad for the war effort, making themselves easy targets for attacks on the basis of empire. If first the sailor and then the soldier drew his masculinity from his dangerous excursions into the unknown defending the interests of Great Britain, then the CO became the lazy and awkward homebody who refused to pull his own weight. Propaganda played up this expectation. Frank Holland, a cartoonist for *The Daily Mail* and other publications, depicted a conscientious objector reclining on a chair, smoking and smiling smugly. His thoughts of the rest of his family scattered across the world does not seem to bother him. The caption gets to the heart of the imperial accusation against COs: “this little piggy stayed home.” Adventure and risk-taking must have been substantial in forming masculinity, because even COs who were willing to help the war effort without fighting faced emasculation. Some COs were “absolutists” who refused to help Britain at all, but others were “alternativists” who only refused to kill and took on “work of national importance.”<sup>43</sup> Alternativists faced emasculation just the same, as in a British cartoon showing COs “at the front!” The two COs wear the costume of a maid and sweep up the trenches, while the much stronger and more handsome Tommies fire their rifles. Compare this to the ideal

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<sup>42</sup> Jill Barber, “Wright, Robert, The Diary of a Conscientious Objector, 1916-18,” *My Primitive Methodists*, March 8, 2014, entry for March 18, 1917. [https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/subjects-2/first\\_world\\_war/conscientious-objectors/robert\\_wright](https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/subjects-2/first_world_war/conscientious-objectors/robert_wright).

<sup>43</sup> Harold Bing, “Conscientious Objectors In Their Own Words,” Imperial War Museums, accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/conscientious-objectors-in-their-own-words>.

man of Victorian England, defined by domesticity and return to the home, and the centrality of imperial adventure in WWI-era masculinity becomes evident.

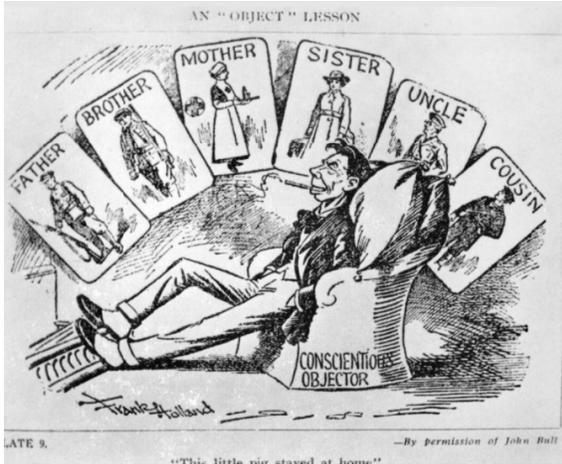


Illustration 10. Newspaper cartoon on conscientious objectors. Source: Imperial War Museum.

reality, diametrically opposed.

Some soldiers recognized that a CO's unwillingness to fight did not suggest a hatred for Britain and actually understood objection as an expression of masculine conviction. Reframed in different terms, conscientious objection actually becomes massively patriotic. Duty to country, although certainly associated with military service, involves making sacrifices on behalf of one's nation. COs saw in Europe the massacre of Britain's young males, especially the country's "heroic poor who are the salt of its English earth," as one CO wrote.<sup>45</sup> They all made the difficult choice to face public shaming in order to protest these killings. Some faced harsh physical punishment or jail time. Many lost the love of family and friends. Yet in the diary of Robert Wright, the CO never turns away from the country that turned away from him. He continues to use "we" in reference to Britain and explicitly

Obviously, it was in the best interest of the British government to emasculate COs, but that task did not always come easily. Other standards of masculinity, those that predated Darwin and Kipling, actually worked to the objector's advantage. In the spheres of patriotism and Christian ethics, COs were difficult to degrade. Unreported by British newspapers or government briefs were the "soldiers' respect for and sympathy with objectors,"<sup>44</sup> complicating the story that propaganda told. COs and soldiers were not, in



Illustration 11. Postcard depicting COs cleaning the trenches. Source: EnglishHeritage.org.uk

<sup>44</sup> Bibbings, "Images of Manliness," 351.

<sup>45</sup> Bibbings, "Images of Manliness," 353.

mentions his love for various English cities.<sup>46</sup> In prison, reflecting on his choice, Wright says that “I realised that we [COs] were standing for future liberty.”<sup>47</sup> In the army, Wright’s sacrifice and others like it were met with anything from cynical disbelief to grudging respect to, in some cases, proud optimism. Bibbings quotes Commander Josiah Clement Wedgewood, MP: ““I think I am prouder of my country than I was before, because it has produced people who have sufficient conscientious scruples to enable them to face a long term of imprisonment rather than upset their consciences.”<sup>48</sup> The sacrificial nature of conscientious objection harkens back to the role of the provider.

Though the relationship between Christianity and masculinity had shifted during the Victorian era, genuine religious objection to the war was also difficult to undermine and emasculate. By the start of the Great War, the influence of so-called “muscular Christianity” was undeniable. New religious youth programs like the YMCA and Boy Scouts paired well with the social movements overtaking Britain that emphasized equal parts physical and moral strength. One stated aim of muscular Christianity was protection of the weak, which coincided with Britain’s entrance into the Great War on behalf of Belgium. Still, though popular, this movement did not encompass all Christians, and many COs spoke out for a more peaceful understanding of their religion. The case against muscular Christianity was not a difficult one to make. Robert Wright’s powerful diary entry for December 31, 1916, reads, “May this Christmas be the last when the birth of the Prince of Peace is stained with the sacrifice of innocent men and women.”<sup>49</sup> The poor treatment of COs further added to their religious credibility. Their suffering in the hopes of saving others from death certainly mirrors Jesus’ own mission in the New Testament. With the moral force of Christianity behind them, the plights of religious COs, especially longstanding pacifists like Quakers, could muster sympathy from the public and even soldiers. Whatever argument could be made about protecting Belgium and standing up to Germany, some Britons understood that COs, as Cpt. Godfrey Buxton said, “took that phrase ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’, and therefore the matter of ‘kill’ did seem to be final.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Wright, Entry for Jul. 19, 1918.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, Entry for June 18, 1918.

<sup>48</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 351.

<sup>49</sup> Wright, Entry for Dec. 31, 1916.

<sup>50</sup> “Voices of the First World War: Conscientious Objection,” Imperial War Museums, accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-conscientious-objection>.

The public image of objectors would begin to change at the conclusion of the war. Some war novels published in 1918 and 1919 had COs as their heroes, often depicted as fiercely brave or patriotic.<sup>51</sup> But during the war, no mainstream newspapers or MP speeches openly condoned conscientious objection. Propagandists emasculated COs where they could, by belittling their physical abilities and adventurous spirit, while ignoring any inspiring virtues they might have like religious devotion or love of country. The same two-pronged strategy, of highlighting convenient truths while censoring inconvenient ones, applied to soldiers in Europe. Across the pond, the average Tommy looked almost nothing like his poster back home. Men left for war believing it would make them men. Many returned with a broken connection to the domestic sphere, a deep cynicism about British control abroad, and physical or mental scars from their experience. In short, the “Great Adventure” had, by the standards of the day, emasculated them.

### **No Role Models**

Even the amended masculine role of the father, with its weaker attachment to home, dissolved for many soldiers in Europe. One unquestionable continuity between Victorian and Edwardian masculinities was marital fidelity. The ideal man fought *for* his wife and children, to keep them safe, as propaganda so clearly depicted. But once in uniform, some soldiers frequented prostitutes or had affairs with local women both in Britain and abroad. Marwick writes about an unspoken sentiment— “Give the boys on leave a good time”—that directly opposed the propagandized image.<sup>52</sup> While holding objectors to stringent standards, Britain collectively turned away from the damages to the household that such affairs created. Although Bourke believes that a majority of soldiers probably did not have affairs,<sup>53</sup> the culture surrounding infidelity forced a generation to rethink their understanding of male-female relationships. Divorce rates tripled between 1913 and 1919.<sup>54</sup> Roughly 400,000 soldiers contracted venereal disease between August 1914 and November 1918. Newspapers tended to ignore the voices of women who dealt with the consequences of this culture, mothers of the so-called “war babies.”<sup>55</sup> British propaganda also tried to appeal to the old role of the economic provider through posters that clearly stated a soldier’s

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<sup>51</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 351-2.

<sup>52</sup> Marwick, *Deluge*, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 156.

<sup>54</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 163.

<sup>55</sup> Marwick, *Deluge*, 108.

pay and how his wife would survive should she become a widow. For many, though, the loss of men’s labor on the farm outweighed any payment the government provided. Private H. T. Clements recorded a lyric to a popular soldier’s song in his diary while fighting in France: “When next this country has a war on/we’ll find a job with better pay.”<sup>56</sup> Though British authorities stressed the paternal masculinity of the soldier, that image clashed with the lived experiences of men and their families.

Likewise, the imperial odyssey that British propaganda had promised actually left soldiers disillusioned with their role in the Great War. The allure of travelling the world, getting in and out of danger, disappeared quickly. One can only imagine how a soldier felt when he arrived in France, expecting natural splendor and exotic sights, only to find miles of identical filthy trenches with brief excursions through the moonscape of bombed France. Clements captures the dichotomy in two separate diary entries. At the front, his stories are not tales of worldly daring like propaganda would have us believe. Instead, he chronicles long marches during which “one loses [*sic*] all sense of time and is conscious of nothing but plod plod.”<sup>57</sup> His most animated entries are from his breaks in French towns, and even then, he dissociates from the empire and shows no interest in the adventurous spirit. He writes, “In the countryside it seems hard to think there is a war on. Only my damned uniform spoils the peace.”<sup>58</sup> Before the war, the expanding empire had piqued British interest in the furthest corners of their world. Because of the war, the empire’s vanguard gave up its craving for adventure.

Most starkly, the British propaganda machine downplayed the war’s physical cost for its men and ignored the soldiers’ rebellion against “survival of the fittest.” Beyond just death count, the casualties of men who fought in the Great War stunned Europe. Families who felt relieved that

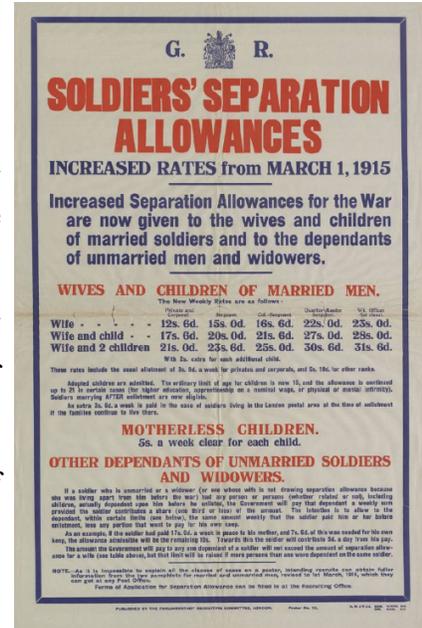


Illustration 12. Poster showing pay rates for soldiers' families. Source: Adam Matthews First World War Database.

<sup>56</sup> H. T. Clements, *The Diary of H. T. Clements, 1914-1919*, 72. From Adam Matthews First World War Database. [https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.proxy.library.nd.edu/Documents/SearchDetails/documents\\_003413\\_A](https://www-firstworldwar-amdigital-co-uk.proxy.library.nd.edu/Documents/SearchDetails/documents_003413_A).

<sup>57</sup> Clements, *Diary of H.T. Clements*, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Clements, *Diary of H.T. Clements*, 84.

their sons and fathers were returning from France soon discovered that the war had not made them men as promised. Historian Joanna Bourke has written entire books on the impact of the war on the physical body and makes two crucial points for a gendered understanding of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder: first, the modern weaponry of the Great War had created a new and baffling condition in soldiers, and second, this “shell-shock” was understood to be an extension of fear.<sup>59</sup> As a result, a treatable disease was instead labelled a crisis of masculinity when the first wave of soldiers returned with it. Stories about shell-shock were heavily censored for years of the war in the government’s hope of “preserving discipline at the front” and “hiding the psychological harms of war.”<sup>60</sup> Even soldiers who made it through the war without psychological damage lost their gung-ho attitudes about militancy. Clements’ diary attests to war weariness among men on active duty. He identifies as “a man of peace” who cannot stand constant fighting and bombing as early as May 30 of 1916.<sup>61</sup> He also records the lyrics of a popular soldiers’ tune, “Sing Me To Sleep,” that laments the miseries of combat and yearns for the calm of home.<sup>62</sup> Yet, no British institutions at home chronicled this breakdown of martial patriotism.

Instead, masculinity was still evaluated by a man’s outward presentation. Masculinity came from the outside in, and “bodily exertion was the means to a sound mind.”<sup>63</sup> If a man had trouble presenting as a man, he could be cured through physical rigor. The media, while skirting the mental blight of soldiers, opted to magnify and lambast soldiers whose image or behavior did not match British propaganda. Tabloids like *News of the World* particularly emasculated men who cross-dressed as a stand against “masculinity, male bonding, and militarism.”<sup>64</sup> Victor Wilson and Frederick Wright were two soldiers who faced public disgrace for dressing as women. The reports about them in *News of the World* implied or claimed that their only motivation for how they dressed was fleeing military service.<sup>65</sup> Ironically, in socially acceptable circumstances like wartime theater, male drag was extremely common. But when gender identity got in the way of being a soldier, propaganda did what it did best. The stories of cross-dressing soldiers were blown out of proportion

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<sup>59</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 109-110.

<sup>60</sup> Bibbings, “Images of Manliness,” 350.

<sup>61</sup> Clements, *Diary of H.T. Clements*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Clements, *Diary of H.T. Clements*, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Roper, “Between Manliness and Masculinity: The ‘War Generation’ and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950.” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 343-62.

<sup>64</sup> David A. Boxwell, “The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-18.” *Modernism/modernity* 9, no. 1 (2002): 2.

<sup>65</sup> Boxwell, “Follies of War,” 1-2.

and made to seem like perversions or anomalies. Thus, the Social Darwinist fixation on physical supremacy remained intact. This strategy kept the public focused on a masculinity that it could understand.

### Conclusion

In history, the less complicated a narrative, the less likely it is to reflect reality. The simple story of masculinity in the Great War is that the drawings and newspaper articles shown in this essay created larger-than-life characters in order to entice boys into the army. Primary sources prove this to be false. Masculinity was changing in Britain as early as the 1840s, spurred by rapid changes at home and abroad. Propaganda reflected a new recipe for the ideal man, one with a pinch less of connection to home and heaping cups more of desire for war and adventure. Its role was temptation, amplifying the drums of war too loudly to be ignored, rather than creation. British institutions made promises of supremacy, excitement, and fraternity while shunning men who deviated from the norm, but by no means did wartime propaganda form these aspirations. What would explain the rush to enlist in the 1899 Boer War, when the army actually capped the number of soldiers they accepted, if propaganda were central?

Scholars agree that masculinity changed again in the wake of the war, though they disagree about the timeline. Michael Roper contends that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British middle-class males began to reexamine codes of masculinity and shifted towards a masculine idea focused on the self. He believes that groupthink filtered out of popular discourse as psychology and psychoanalysis filtered in.<sup>66</sup> His research includes books and autobiographies from the era that suggest a deeper reflection on manhood. Joanna Bourke, meanwhile, argues for continuity between pre- and post-Great War masculinities. She writes that experts continued to claim shell shock could be treated with physical exercise and that any accounts of psychoanalysis are exceptions.<sup>67</sup> This would suggest a much longer period of transition out of a one-track minded masculinity. Even if things did get better for COs after the war, Bourke would argue that general beliefs on manhood held for an astonishingly long time.

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<sup>66</sup> Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity," 345.

<sup>67</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 115-18.

These arguments alone would require another whole paper to address, even without widening the scope to other questions of post-war masculinity. After all, the world that created Edwardian British masculinity began its slow decline as a direct result of the First World War. The Paris peace conference marked the beginning of the end for *de facto* colonialism, or at the very least questioned the absolute benevolence of empire. The lofty, liberal ideas of self-rule coming out of European countries (though almost certainly not intended for colonial consumption) sparked a wave of national resistance across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. With Britain's empire slowly being dismantled, what would become of the imperial call to adventure for young boys?

To an average American today, issues of gender may seem to be on the rise in political spheres compared to a few decades ago. Some may pine for the mythic past when discourse over gender was simpler and less divisive. But such a past truly is a myth, as this brief excursion into Great War masculinity has shown. Gender has always and will always be fundamental to humanity's understanding of itself and its past. Beliefs about how the quintessential man or woman should act tend to simplify a complex story and serve an agenda. For this reason, gender remains necessarily political and historical, as it has been since the days of Flora Thompson.

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