
To End All Wars

A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion,
1914–1918

Adam Hochschild

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*For Tom Engelhardt,
analyst of empire, emperor among editors*

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INTRODUCTION: CLASH OF DREAMS

AN EARLY AUTUMN BITE is in the air as a gold-tinged late afternoon falls over the rolling countryside of northern France. Where the land dips between gentle rises, it is already in shadow. Dotted the fields are machine-packed rolls, high as a person's head, of the year's final hay crop. Massive tractors pull boxcar-sized cartloads of potatoes, or corn chopped up for cattle feed. Up a low hill, a grove of trees screens the evidence of another kind of harvest, reaped on this spot nearly a century ago. Each gravestone in the small cemetery has a name, rank, and serial number; 162 have crosses, and one has a Star of David. When known, a man's age is engraved on the stone as well: 19, 22, 23, 26, 34, 21, 20. Ten of the graves simply say, "A Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God." Almost all the dead are from Britain's Devonshire Regiment, the date on their gravestones July 1, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Most were casualties of a single German machine gun several hundred yards from this spot, and were buried here in a section of the front-line trench they had climbed out of that morning. Captain Duncan Martin, 30, a company commander and an artist in civilian life, had made a clay model of the battlefield across which the British planned to attack. He predicted to his fellow officers the exact place at which he and his men would come under fire from the nearby German machine gun as they emerged onto an exposed hillside. He, too, is buried here, one of some 21,000 British soldiers killed or fatally wounded on the day of greatest bloodshed in the history of their country's military, before or since.

On a stone plaque next to the graves are the words this regiment's survivors carved on a wooden sign when they buried their dead:

THE DEVONSHIRES HELD THIS TRENCH
THE DEVONSHIRES HOLD IT STILL

The comments in the cemetery's visitors' book are almost all from England: Bournemouth, London, Hampshire, Devon. "Paid our respects to 3 of our townfolk." "Sleep on, boys." "Lest we forget." "Thanks, lads." "Gt. Uncle thanks, rest in peace." Why does it bring a lump to the throat to see words like *sleep*, *rest*, *sacrifice*, when my reason for being here is the belief that this war was needless folly and madness? Only one visitor strikes a different note: "Never again." On a few pages the ink of the names and remarks has been smeared by raindrops—or was it tears?

The bodies of soldiers of the British Empire lie in 400 cemeteries in the Somme battlefield region alone, a rough crescent of territory less than 20 miles long, but graves are not the only mark the war has made on the land. Here and there, a patch of ground gouged by thousands of shell craters has been left alone; decades of erosion have softened the scarring, but what was once a flat field now looks like rugged, grassed-over sand dunes. On the fields that have been smoothed out again, like those surrounding the Devonshires' cemetery, some of the tractors have armor plating beneath the driver's seat, because harvesting machinery cannot distinguish between potatoes, sugar beets, and live shells. More than 700 million artillery and mortar rounds were fired on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918, of which an estimated 15 percent failed to explode. Every year these leftover shells kill people—36 in 1991 alone, for instance, when France excavated the track bed for a new high-speed rail line. Dotted throughout the region are patches of uncleared forest or scrub surrounded by yellow danger signs in French and English warning hikers away. The French government employs teams of *démineurs*, roving bomb-disposal specialists, who respond to calls when villagers discover shells; they collect and destroy 900 tons of unexploded munitions each year. More than 630 French *démineurs*

have died in the line of duty since 1946. Like those shells, the First World War itself has remained in our lives, below the surface, because we live in a world that was so much formed by it and by the industrialized total warfare it inaugurated.

Even though I was born long after it ended, the war always seemed a presence in our family. My mother would tell me about the wild enthusiasm of crowds at military parades when—at last!—the United States joined the Allies. A beloved first cousin of hers marched off to the sound of those cheers, to be killed in the final weeks of fighting; she never forgot the shock and disillusionment. And no one in my father's family thought it absurd that two of his relatives had fought on opposite sides of the First World War, one in the French army, one in the German. If your country called, you went.

My father's sister married a man who fought for Russia in that war, and we owed his presence in our lives to events triggered by it: the Russian Revolution and the bitter civil war that followed—after which, finding himself on the losing side, he came to America. We shared a summer household with this aunt and uncle, and friends of his who were also veterans of 1914–1918 were regular visitors. As a boy, I vividly remember standing next to one of them, all of us in bathing suits and about to go swimming, and then looking down and seeing the man's foot: all his toes had been sheared off by a German machine-gun bullet somewhere on the Eastern Front.

The war also lived on in the illustrated adventure tales that British cousins sent me for Christmas. Young Tim or Tom or Trevor, though a mere teenager whom the colonel had declared too young for combat, would bravely dodge flying shrapnel to carry that same wounded colonel to safety after the regiment, bagpipes playing, had gone "over the top" into no man's land. In later episodes, he always managed to find some way—as a spy or an aviator or through sheer boldness—around the deadlock of trench warfare.

As I grew older and learned more history, I found that this very deadlock had its own fascination. For more than three years the armies on the Western Front were virtually locked in place, burrowed into trenches with dugouts sometimes 40 feet below ground, periodically emerging for terrible battles that gained at best a few miles of muddy, shell-blasted wasteland. The destructiveness of those battles still seems beyond belief. In addition to the dead, on the first day of the Somme offensive another 36,000 British troops were wounded. The magnitude of slaughter in the war's entire span was beyond anything in European experience: more than 35 percent of all German men who were between the ages of 19 and 22 when the fighting broke out, for example, were killed in the next four and a half years, and many of the remainder grievously wounded. For France, the toll was proportionately even higher: one *half* of all Frenchmen aged 20 to 32 at the war's outbreak were dead when it was over. "The Great War of 1914–18 lies like a band of scorched earth dividing that time from ours," wrote the historian Barbara Tuchman. British stonemasons in Belgium were still at work carving the names of their nation's missing onto memorials when the Germans invaded for the next war, more than 20 years later. Cities and towns in the armies' path were reduced to jagged rubble, forests and farms to charred ruins. "This is not war," a wounded soldier among Britain's Indian troops wrote home from Europe. "It is the ending of the world."

In today's conflicts, whether the casualties are child soldiers in Africa or working-class, small-town Americans in Iraq or Afghanistan, we are accustomed to the poor doing a disproportionate share of the dying. But from 1914 to 1918, by contrast, in all the participating countries the war was astonishingly lethal for their ruling classes. On both sides, officers were far more likely to be killed

than the men whom they led over the parapets of trenches and into machine-gun fire, and they themselves were often from society's highest reaches. Roughly 12 percent of all British soldiers who took part in the war were killed, for instance, but for peers or sons of peers in uniform the figure was 19 percent. Of all men who graduated from Oxford in 1913, 31 percent were killed. The German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, lost his eldest son; so did British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. A future British prime minister, Andrew Bonar Law, lost two sons, as did Viscount Rothermere, newspaper mogul and wartime air minister. General Erich Ludendorff, the war's key German commander, lost two stepsons and had to personally identify the decomposing body of one, exhumed from a battlefield grave. Herbert Lawrence, chief of the British general staff on the Western Front, lost two sons; his counterpart in the French army, Noël de Castelnaud, lost three. The grandson of one of England's richest men, the Duke of Westminster, received a fatal bullet through the head three days after writing his mother, "Supply me with socks and chocolates which are the two absolute necessities of life."

Part of what draws us to this war, then, is the way it forever shattered the self-assured, sunlit Europe of hussars and dragoons in plumed helmets and emperors waving from open, horse-drawn carriages. As the poet and soldier Edmund Blunden put it in describing that deadly first day of the Battle of the Somme, neither side "had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won." Under the pressure of the unending carnage two empires, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman, dissolved completely, the German Kaiser lost his throne, and the Tsar of Russia and his entire photogenic family—his son in a sailor suit, his daughters in white dresses—lost their lives. Even the victors were losers: Britain and France together suffered more than two million dead and ended the war deep in debt; protests sparked by returning colonial veterans began the long unraveling of the British Empire, and a swath of northern France was reduced to ashes. The four-and-a-half-year tsunami of destruction permanently darkened our worldview. "Humanity? Can anyone really believe in the reasonableness of humanity after the last war," asked the Russian poet Alexander Blok a few years later, "with new, inevitable, and crueler wars in the offing?"

And in the offing they were. "It cannot be that two million Germans should have fallen in vain," Adolf Hitler fulminated less than four years after the war ended. "...No, we do not pardon, we demand—vengeance!" Germany's defeat, and the vindictiveness of the Allies in the peace settlement that followed, irrevocably sped the rise of Nazism and the coming of an even more destructive war 20 years later—and of the Holocaust as well. The First World War, of course, also helped bring to power in Russia a regime whose firing squads and gulag of Arctic and Siberian prison camps would sow death and terror in peacetime on a scale that surpassed many wars.

Like my uncle's friend with no toes on one foot, many of the war's more than 21 million wounded survived for long years after. Once in the 1960s I visited a stone, fortress-like state mental hospital in northern France, and some of the aged men I saw sitting like statues on benches in the courtyard their faces blank, were shell-shock victims from the trenches. Millions of veterans, crippled in body or in spirit, filled such institutions for decades. The war's shadow stretched also onto tens of millions of people born after it ended, the children of survivors. I once interviewed the British writer John Berger, born in London in 1926, but who sometimes felt, he told me, as if "I was born near Ypres on the Western Front in 1917. The first thing I really remember about [my father] was him waking up screaming in the middle of the night, having one of his recurring nightmares about the war."

Why does this long-ago war intrigue us still? One reason, surely, is the stark contrast between

what people believed they were fighting for and the shattered, embittered world the war actually created. On both sides participants felt they had good reasons for going to war, and on the Allied side they *were* good reasons. German troops, after all, with no justification, invaded France and, violating treaty guaranteeing its neutrality, marched into Belgium as well. People in other countries, like Britain, understandably saw coming to the aid of the invasion's victims as a noble cause. And didn't France and Belgium have the right to defend themselves? Even those of us today who opposed the American wars in Vietnam or Iraq often hasten to add that we'd defend our country if it were attacked. And yet, if the leaders of any one of the major European powers had been able to look forward in time and see the full consequences, would they still have so quickly sent their soldiers marching off to battle in 1914?

What kings and prime ministers did not foresee, many more far-sighted citizens did. From the beginning, tens of thousands of people on both sides recognized the war for the catastrophe it was. They believed it was not worth the inevitable cost in blood, some of them anticipated with tragic clarity at least part of the nightmare that would engulf Europe as a result, and they spoke out. Moreover, they spoke out at a time when it took great courage to do so, for the air was filled with fervent nationalism and a scorn for dissenters that often turned violent. A handful of German parliamentarians bravely opposed war credits, and radicals like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht later went to prison—as did the American socialist leader Eugene V. Debs. But it was in Britain, more than anywhere else, that significant numbers of intrepid war opponents acted on their beliefs and paid the price. By the conflict's end, more than 20,000 British men of military age had refused the draft. Many refused noncombatant alternative service too, and more than 6,000 served prison terms under harsh conditions: hard labor, a bare-bones diet, and a strict "rule of silence" that forbade them from talking to one another.

Before it became clear just how many Britons would refuse to fight, some 50 early resisters were forcibly inducted into the army and transported, some in handcuffs, across the English Channel to France. A few weeks before that famous first day on the Somme, a less known scene unfolded at a British army camp not far away, within the sound of artillery fire from the front. The group of war opponents was told that if they continued to disobey orders, they would be sentenced to death. In an act of great collective courage that echoes down the years, not a single man wavered. Only at the last minute, thanks to frantic lobbying in London, were their lives saved. These resisters and their comrades did not come close to stopping the war, and have won no place in the standard history books but their strength of conviction remains one of the glories of a dark time.

Those sent to jail for opposing the war included not just young men who defied the draft, but older men—and a few women. If we could time-travel our way into British prisons in late 1917 and early 1918 we would meet some extraordinary people, including the nation's leading investigative journalist, a future winner of the Nobel Prize, more than half a dozen future members, of Parliament, one future cabinet minister, and a former newspaper editor who was publishing a clandestine journal for his fellow inmates on toilet paper. It would be hard to find a more distinguished array of people ever behind bars in a Western country.

In part, this book is the story of some of these war resisters and of the example they set, if not for their own time, then perhaps for the future. I wish theirs was a victorious story, but it is not. Unlike, say, witch-burning, slavery, and apartheid, which were once taken for granted and are now officially outlawed, war is still with us. Uniforms, parades, and martial music continue to cast their allure, and

the appeal of high technology has been added to that; throughout the world boys and men still dream of military glory as much as they did a century ago. And so, in much greater part, this is a book about those who actually fought the war of 1914–1918, for whom the magnetic attraction of combat, or at least the belief that it was patriotic and necessary, proved so much stronger than human revulsion at mass death or any perception that, win or lose, this was a war that would change the world for the worse.

Where today we might see mindless killing, many of those who presided over the war's battles saw only nobility and heroism. "They advanced in line after line," recorded one British general of his men in action on that fateful July 1, 1916, at the Somme, writing in the stilted third-person usage of official reports, "...and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine-gun and rifle fire that finally wiped them out.... He saw the lines which advanced in such admirable order melting away under the fire. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks, or attempted to come back. He has never seen, indeed could never have imagined, such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination. The reports that he had had from the very few survivors of the marvellous advance bear out what he saw with his own eyes, viz, that hardly a man of ours got to the German front line."

What was in the minds of such generals? How could they feel such a slaughter to be admirable or magnificent, worth more than the lives of their own sons? We can ask the same question of those who are quick to advocate military confrontation today, when, as in 1914, wars so often have unintended consequences.

A war is usually written about as a duel between sides. I have tried instead to evoke this war through the stories within one country, Britain, of some men and women from the great majority who passionately believed it was worth fighting and some of those who were equally convinced it should not be fought at all. In a sense, then, this is a story about loyalties. What should any human being be most loyal to? Country? Military duty? Or the ideal of international brotherhood? And what happens to loyalty within a family if, as happened in several of the families in these pages, some members join in the fight while a brother, a sister, a son, takes a stance of opposition that the public sees as cowardly or criminal?

This is also a story about clashing sets of dreams. For some of the people I follow here, the dream was that the war would rejuvenate the national spirit and the bonds of empire; that it would be short; that Britain would win by the time-honored means that had always won wars: pluck, discipline and the cavalry charge. For war opponents, the dream was that the workingmen of Europe would never fight each other in battle; or, once the war began, that soldiers on both sides would see its madness and refuse to fight on; or, finally, that the Russian Revolution, in claiming to reject war and exploitation forever, was a shining example that other nations would soon follow.

As I tried to make sense of why these two very different sets of people acted as they did in the crucible of wartime, I realized that I needed to understand their lives in the years leading up to the war—when they often faced earlier choices about loyalties. And so this book about the first great war of the modern age begins not in August 1914 but several decades earlier, in an England that was quite different from the peaceful, bucolic land of country estates and weekend house parties so familiar to us from countless film and TV dramas. Part of this prewar era, in fact, Britain was fighting another war—which produced its own vigorous opposition movement. And, at home, it was in the grips of a

prolonged, angry struggle over who should have the vote, a conflict that saw huge demonstrations, several deaths, mass imprisonments, and more deliberate destruction of property than the country has known for the better part of a century.

The story that follows is in no way a comprehensive history of the First World War and the period before it, for I've left out many well-known battles, episodes, and leaders. Nor is it about people usually thought of as a group, like the war poets or the Bloomsbury set; generally I've avoided such familiar figures. Some of those whose lives I trace here, close as they had once been, fell out so bitterly over the war that they broke off all contact with each other, and were they alive today would be dismayed to find themselves side by side in the same book. But each of them started by being bound to one or more of the others by ties of family or friendship, by shared beliefs, or, in several cases, by forbidden love. And all of them were citizens of a country undergoing a cataclysm where, in the end, the trauma of the war overwhelmed everything else.

The men and women in the following pages are a cast of characters I have collected slowly over the years, as I found people whose lives embodied very different answers to the choices faced by those who lived at a time when the world was aflame. Among them are generals, labor activists, feminists, *agents provocateurs*, a writer turned propagandist, a lion tamer turned revolutionary, a cabinet minister, a crusading working-class journalist, three soldiers brought before a firing squad at dawn, and a young idealist from the English Midlands who, long after his struggle against the war was over, would be murdered by the Soviet secret police. In following a collection of people through a tumultuous time, this book may seem in form more akin to fiction than to a traditional work of history. (Indeed, the life story of one woman here inspired one of the best recent novels about the war.) But everything in it actually happened. For history, when examined closely, always yields up people, events, and moral testing grounds more revealing than any but the greatest of novelists could invent.

I. Dramatis Personae

1. BROTHER AND SISTER

THE CITY HAD NEVER seen such a parade. Nearly 50,000 brilliantly uniformed troops converged on St. Paul's Cathedral in two great columns. One was led by the country's most beloved military hero, the mild-mannered Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, a mere five feet two inches in height, astride a white Arabian horse like those he had ridden during more than 40 years of routing assorted Afghans, Indians, and Burmese who had the temerity to rebel against British rule. Mounted at the head of the other column, at six feet eight inches, was the tallest man in the army, Captain Oswald Ames of the Life Guards, wearing his regiment's traditional breastplate, which, with the sunlight glinting off it, seemed as if it might deflect an enemy's lance by its dazzling gleam alone. His silver helmet topped with a long horsehair panache made him appear taller still.

It was June 22, 1897, and London had spent £250,000—the equivalent of more than \$30 million today—on street decorations alone. Above the marching troops, Union Jacks flew from every building; blue, red, and white bunting and garlands adorned balconies; and lampposts were bedecked with baskets of flowers. From throughout the British Empire came foot soldiers and the elite troops of the cavalry: New South Wales Lancers from Australia, the Trinidad Light Horse, South Africa's Cape Mounted Rifles, Canadian Hussars, Zaptich horse-men from Cyprus in tasseled fezzes, and bearded lancers from the Punjab. Rooftops, balconies, and special bleachers built for this day were packed. A triumphal archway near Paddington station was emblazoned "Our Hearts Her Throne." On the Bank of England appeared "She Wrought Her People Lasting Good." Dignitaries filled the carriages that rolled along the parade route—the papal nuncio shared one with the envoy of the Chinese Emperor—but the most thunderous cheers were reserved for the royal carriage, drawn by eight cream-colored horses. Queen Victoria, holding a black lace parasol and nodding to the crowds, was marking the 60th anniversary of her ascent to the throne. Her black moiré dress was embroidered with silver roses, thistles, and shamrocks, symbols of the united lands at the pinnacle of the British Empire: England, Scotland, and Ireland.

The sun emerged patriotically from an overcast sky just after the Queen's carriage left Buckingham Palace. The dumpy monarch, whose round, no-nonsense face no portrait painter or photographer ever seems to have caught in a smile, presided over the largest empire the world had ever seen. For this great day a clothier advertised a "Diamond Jubilee Lace Shirt," poets wrote Jubilee odes, and Sir Arthur Sullivan, of Gilbert and Sullivan, composed a Jubilee hymn. "How many million of years has the sun stood in heaven?" said the *Daily Mail*. "But the sun never looked down until yesterday upon the embodiment of so much energy and power."

Victoria's empire was not known for its modesty. "I contend that we are the first race in the world," the future diamond mogul Cecil Rhodes declared when still an Oxford undergraduate, "and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race." Later, he went on to say, "I would annex the planets if I could." No other celestial body yet sported the Union Jack, but British territory did cover nearly a quarter of the earth. To be sure, some of that land was barren Arctic tundra belonging to Canada, which was in effect an independent country. But most Canadians—French-speakers and native Indians largely excepted—were happy to think of themselves as subjects of the Queen this splendid day, and the nation's prime minister, although a Francophone, had made a voyage to England to attend the Diamond Jubilee and accept a knighthood. True, a few of the territories optimistically colored pink on the map, such as the Transvaal republic in South Africa, did not think of themselves as British at all. Nonetheless, Transvaal President Paul Kruger released two Englishmen

from jail in honor of the Jubilee. In India, the Nizam of Hyderabad, who also did not consider himself subservient to the British, marked the occasion by setting free every tenth convict in his prisons. Gunboats in Cape Town harbor fired a salute, Rangoon staged a ball, Australia issued extra food and clothing to the Aborigines, and in Zanzibar the sultan held a Jubilee banquet.

At this moment of celebration, even foreigners forgave the British their sins. In Paris, *Le Figaro* declared that imperial Rome was "equaled, if not surpassed," by Victoria's realm; across the Atlantic the *New York Times* virtually claimed membership in the empire: "We are a part, and a great part, of the Greater Britain which seems so plainly destined to dominate this planet." In the Queen's honor, Santa Monica, California, held a sports festival, and a contingent of the Vermont National Guard crossed the border to join a Jubilee parade in Montreal.

Victoria was overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection and loyalty, and at times during the day her usually impassive face was streaked with tears. The overseas cables had been kept clear of traffic until, at Buckingham Palace, the Queen pressed an electric button linked to the Central Telegraph Office. From there, as the assorted lancers, hussars, camel troopers, turbaned Sikhs, Borneo Dayak police, and Royal Niger Constabulary marched through the city, her greeting flashed in Morse code to every part of the empire, Barbados to Ceylon, Nairobi to Hong Kong: "From my heart I thank my beloved people. May God bless them."

The troops who drew the loudest cheers at the Diamond Jubilee parade were those who, everyone knew, were certain to lead the way to victory in Britain's wars to come: the cavalry. In peacetime as well, Britain's ruling class knew it belonged on horseback. It was, as a radical journalist of the day put it, "a small select aristocracy born booted and spurred to ride," who thought of everyone else as "a large dim mass born saddled and bridled to be ridden." The wealthy bred racehorses, high society flocked to horse sales, and several cabinet members were stewards of the Jockey Club. When a horse belonging to Lord Rosebery, the prime minister, won the prestigious, high-stakes Epsom Derby, in 1894, a friend sent him a telegram: "Only heaven left." Devoted fox hunters donned their red coats and black hats to gallop across fields and leap stone walls in pursuit of baying hounds as often as five or six days a week. The Duke of Rutland's private chaplain was rumored to wear boots and spurs under his cassock. Horses and hunts were admired even by sailors, and for those who could afford it, a favorite tattoo showed riders and hounds covering a man's entire back, in pursuit of a fox heading for the crack between his buttocks. Hunting, after all, was as close as one could come in civilian life to the glory of a cavalry charge.

For any wellborn young Englishman making a military career, it was only natural to prefer the cavalry. Joining it was not the privilege of all, however, for this was the army's most expensive branch. Until 1871, British officers had to purchase their commissions, as one might buy membership in an exclusive club. ("Good God," one new subaltern is said to have remarked when a deposit from the War Office appeared on his bank statement. "I didn't know we were *paid*.") After reforms abolished the sale of commissions, an infantry or artillery lieutenant might belong to a regiment so lacking in elegance that he could live on his own salary, but not a cavalry officer. There were the necessary club memberships, a personal servant and a groom, uniforms, saddles, and above all else buying and maintaining one's horses: a charger or two for battles, two hunters for pursuing foxes, and

of course a couple of polo ponies. A private income of at least £500 a year—some \$60,000 to-day—was essential. And so the ranks of cavalry officers were filled with men from large country houses.

The late-nineteenth-century horseman's sword and lance were not so different from those wielded at Agincourt in 1415, and so cavalry warfare embodied the idea that in battle it was not modern weaponry that mattered but the courage and skill of the warrior. Although the cavalry made up only a small percentage of British forces, its cachet meant that cavalry officers long held a disproportionate number of senior army posts. And so, from 1914 to 1918, five hundred years after Agincourt and in combat unimaginably different, it would be two successive cavalrymen who served as commanders in chief of British troops on the Western Front in the most deadly war the country would ever know.

The army career of one of those men began forty years earlier, in 1874, when, at the age of 21, after pulling the appropriate strings, he found himself a lieutenant in the 19th Regiment of Hussars. John French had been born on his family's estate in rural Kent; his father was a retired naval officer whose ancestors came from Ireland. French's short stature may not have fit the image of a dashing cavalryman, but his cheerful smile, black hair, thick mustache, and blue eyes gave him an appeal that women found irresistible. His letters also displayed great warmth; to one retired general who needed cheering up, French wrote, "You have the heartfelt love of every true soldier who has ever served with you and any of them would go anywhere for you to-morrow. I have constantly told my great pals and friends that I would like to end my life by being shot when serving under you." What French could not do, however, was hold on to money, an awkward failing given a cavalryman's high expenses. He spent lavishly on horses, women, and risky investments, running up debts and then turning to others for relief. A brother-in-law bailed him out the first time; loans from a series of relatives and friends soon followed.

Officers of the 19th Hussars wore black trousers with a double gold stripe down the side and leather-brimmed red caps with a golden badge. From April to September they drilled during the week and then marched to church together on Sundays, spurs and scabbards clinking, black leather boots smelling of horse sweat. During the autumn and winter, French and his fellow officers spent much of their time back on their estates, enjoying round after round of hunting, steeplechases, and polo.

Like many an officer of the day, French idolized Napoleon, buying Napoleonic knickknacks when not out of funds and keeping on his desk a bust of the Emperor. He read military history, hunting stories, and the novels of Charles Dickens, long passages of which he learned by heart. Later in life, if someone read him a sentence plucked from anywhere in Dickens's works, he could often finish the paragraph.

Soon after French joined the regiment, the 19th Hussars were sent to ever-restless Ireland. The English considered the island part of Great Britain, but most Irish felt they were living in an exploited colony. Recurrent waves of nationalism were fed by tension between impoverished Catholic tenant farmers and wealthy Protestant landowners. During one such dispute, French's troops were called in—on the landlord's side, of course. An angry Irish laborer rushed at French and sliced his horse's hamstrings with a sickle.

French was soon promoted to captain. An impulsive early marriage came to a quick end and was omitted from his official biography, for Victorian society looked on divorce with stern disapproval. At 28, French married again, this time with much fanfare. Eleanora Selby-Lowndes was the daughter of a hunt-loving country squire, the perfect mate for a rising, well-liked cavalryman. He seemed genuinely

fond of his new wife, although this would not stop him from embarking on an endless string of love affairs.

In the army in which French was making his career, an important military virtue was sportsmanship. On his death, one officer left more than £70,000 to his regiment, in part for the encouragement of "manly sports." Some regiments kept their own packs of foxhounds, so officers did not need to take a day's leave to hunt. A book from the era, *Modern Warfare* by Frederick Guggisberg, who was later to become a brigadier general, likened war to soccer, which the British call football: "An army tries to *work together* in battle ... in much the same way as a football team *plays together* in a match.... The army *fights* for the good of its country as the team *plays* for the honour of its school. Regiments *assist* each other as players do when they... *pass the ball* from one to another; exceptional gallant *charges* and heroic *defences* correspond to brilliant *runs* and fine *tackling*." War's resemblance to another sport, cricket, was the theme of one of the most famous poems of the day, Sir Henry Newbolt's "Vitaī Lampada" (The Torch of Life):

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night—
Ten to make and the match to win—
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote—
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The sand of the desert is sodden red,—
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;—
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The poem would last; when Lieutenant George Brooke of the Irish Guards was mortally wounded by German shrapnel at Soupir, France, in 1914, his dying words to his men were "Play the game."

To the young John French, that desert red with blood long seemed out of reach. Except for the sickle-wielding Irish farmhand, he passed the age of 30 without seeing battle. Then, to his delight, in 1884 he was ordered to an outpost that promised action: a colonial war in the Sudan. At last French experienced the combat he had long dreamed of when troops he led successfully repulsed a surprise attack by an enemy force that surged out of a ravine, armed mainly with swords and spears. This was the real thing: hand-to-hand fighting, rebellious "natives" vanquished in textbook fashion by disciplined cavalry and British martial spirit. He returned to England with praise from his superiors, medals, and a promotion, at the unusually young age of 32, to lieutenant colonel. Only a few years later, a bit bowlegged from more than a decade on horseback, he took command of the 19th Hussars.

Through the wall of the commanding officer's quarters, John and Eleanora French and their children could hear the growls and roars of the regimental mascot, a black bear.

For an ambitious young officer, it could be a career advantage to get your ticket punched on several continents. And so French was pleased when, in 1891, the 19th Hussars were ordered to India. In this grandest and richest of Britain's colonies many officers spent the defining years of their careers, convinced that they were carrying out a sacred, altruistic mission.

Enjoying a peacetime routine of polo field, officers' mess, and turbaned servants, French saw no military action. He busied himself instead training his horsemen to a high pitch in close-order drill, sending them trotting, galloping, and wheeling across the spacious Indian *maidans*, or parade grounds, raising clouds of dust behind them. With his family left behind in England, he spent his spare time in pursuit of another officer's wife, with whom he slipped away to one of the hill stations where the British fled the summer heat of the plains. The angry officer then sued for divorce, citing French as a co-respondent. There were rumors that he had also been involved with the daughter of a railway official, and with his commander's wife.

When French returned to England in 1893, word of these episodes slowed his career. On half pay, as officers often were between assignments, he, Eleanora, and their three children were forced to move in with a forgiving older sister. Far more humiliating, the cavalryman tried to resort to a bicycle as a less expensive alternative to a horse, a substitute steed he never fully mastered. Fellow officers observed French hopping down the road beside it, unable to mount. And yet his free-spending ways continued, and he had to pawn the family silver. In disgrace, he waited restlessly for a new posting, or better yet, a war.

In John French's England, the boulevards along which Victoria's Jubilee parade marched were splendid indeed, but large stretches of London and other cities were less glorious, for little of the wealth the country drew from its colonies ever reached the poor. In a cramped row house near a coal mine, a hungry family might occupy a single room, and the dwellings of an entire unpaved street might use a single hand-pumped water faucet; in the vast slums of London's East End, one boarding house bed might be shared by two or three impoverished workers sleeping in eight-hour shifts. Children's growth was stunted by malnutrition; their teeth already rotting, they might eat meat or fish only once a week. The poorest of the poor ended up in the workhouse, where they were given jobs and shelter but made to feel like prisoners. Barefoot workhouse children shivered through the winter in thin, ragged cotton clothes, often with only backless benches to sit on. In the worst slums, with some 20 of every 100 babies failing to survive their first year, infant mortality was nearly three times that for children of the wealthy. Just as combating the empire's enemies in distant corners of the world would shape the likes of John French, so combating injustice at home and wars abroad would shape other Britons of this generation—even, in some cases, those who sprang from French's own class.

Among them was a woman now remembered by her married name, Charlotte Despard. As girls, she and her five sisters would slip through the fence around their estate's formal garden to play with children in the closest village, until their parents discovered and put a stop to it. This—in Charlotte's memory at least—ignited a rebellious spark, and at the age of ten she ran away from home. At a nearby railway station, she later wrote, "I took a ticket to London where I intended to earn my living

as a servant." Although caught after one night away, she was "not tamed." Her father died the same year, and her mother, for reasons we don't know, was confined to an insane asylum a few years later. Charlotte, her sisters, and a younger brother were then raised by relatives and a governess, with Charlotte lending a hand in caring for the younger children. The governess taught them a hymn:

I thank the Goodness and the Grace
That on my birth hath smiled,
And made me in these happy days
A happy English child.

I was not born a little slave
To labour in the sun,
And wish that I were in the grave,
And all my labor done.

"That hymn was the turning-point," Charlotte would claim. "I demanded why God had made slaves, and I was promptly sent to bed."

When she was a little older, she visited a Yorkshire factory and was horrified to see ill-paid women and children picking apart piles of old cloth to make rope from its threads. In her early twenties, she saw the slums of the East End: "How bitterly ashamed I was of it all! How ardently I longed to speak to these people in their misery, to say, 'Why do you bear it? Rise.... Smite your oppressors. Be true and strong!' Of course I was much too shy to say anything of the sort."

In 1870, at the age of 26, Charlotte married. Maximilian Despard was a well-to-do businessman but like his new wife he favored home rule for Ireland, rights and careers for women, and many other progressive causes of the day. Throughout their married life, he suffered from a kidney disease of which he eventually died, and there are hints that his relationship with his wife remained unconsummated. The two traveled widely together for 20 years, however, several times going to India and for decades afterward she spoke of how happy a time it had been. Whatever the frustrations of a marriage without children and possibly without sex, Charlotte Despard enjoyed something rare for her time and class: a husband who respected her work. And this meant being a novelist. Modern readers should not feel deprived that Despard's seven enormous novels (publishers made more money on multivolume works) have long been out of print. Abounding in noble heroines, mysterious ancestors, Gothic castles, deathbed reunions, and happy endings, they were the Victorian equivalent of today's formula romances.

If the country gentleman's role in life was to be on horseback, the upper-class Victorian woman's was to be mistress of a grand house, and so the Despards bought a country home, Courtlands, standing amid fifteen rolling acres of woods, lawn, stream, and formal gardens overlooking a valley in Surrey. A dozen servants handled the indoors alone. Living on an even grander estate nearby, the Duchess of Albany recruited Charlotte for her Nine Elms Flower Mission, a project in which wealthy women brought baskets of flowers from their gardens (also tended by servants) to Nine Elms, the poorest corner of London's overcrowded Battersea district. This was as far as a proper upper-class woman of the era was expected to go in response to poverty.

After her husband died in 1890, however, Despard startled everyone by making Battersea the center of her life. Using money she had inherited from him as well as from her parents, she opened

two community centers in the slum, grandly called Despard Clubs, complete with youth programs, a drop-in health clinic, nutrition classes, subsidized food for new mothers, and a collection of layettes and other baby supplies that could be loaned out as women gave birth. Most shockingly to her family she moved into the upper floor of one of her clubs, although for a time still retreating to Courtlands on weekends. Despite her background, Despard evidently had a knack for dealing with the children of Battersea. "She does not find them unmanageable," reported one observer, the social reformer Charles Booth. "They submit readily to her gentle force. 'You hurt me,' cried a big, strong fellow, but he did not resist when she took him by the arm in the cause of order."

It was said that you could smell Battersea long before you reached it, for its air was thick with smoke and fumes from a large gasworks, an iron foundry, and coal-burning railway locomotives on their way to Victoria and Waterloo stations. Coal dust coated everything, including the residents' lungs. Many women took in washing from the wealthier parts of the city. Dilapidated houses and apartments swarmed with rats, cockroaches, fleas, and bedbugs. Urban manufacturing areas like Battersea lay at the heart of Britain's Industrial Revolution, and in the great war to come their factories would mass-produce the weapons, and their crowded tenements the manpower, for the trenches.

Battersea was then a battlefield of a different sort, Despard quickly discovered, a center for radical politics and the growing trade union movement. Its gas workers had gone on strike to win an eight-hour day; later the borough council would refuse to accept a donation for the local library from the Scottish-American magnate Andrew Carnegie because his money was "tainted with the blood" of striking U.S. steelworkers. The part of Battersea where Despard worked reflected the empire's ethnic hierarchy, for like many of England's poorest neighborhoods, it was largely Irish, filled with evicted tenant farmers or families who had fled even more impoverished parts of Dublin in search of a better life in London.

In identification with Battersea's Irish poor, thumbing her nose at the upper-crust Protestant world of her birth, Despard converted to Roman Catholicism. She also developed a passion for theosophy, a woolly, mystical faith that includes elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, and the occult. Nor was this all: "I determined to study for myself the great problems of society," she would later write. "My study landed me in uncompromising socialism." She befriended Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor, and in 1896, representing a British Marxist group, was a delegate to a meeting of the federation of socialist parties and trade unions from around the world known as the Second International. An oddly assorted bouquet of belief systems this might have been, but one thing shone through clearly: a desire to identify with those at the bottom of Britain's class ladder and to offer them something more than baskets of flowers.

Just as she left behind the life she had been expected to lead, so Despard left behind its dress. She now clothed herself in black, and instead of the elaborate upper-class women's hats of the day that clearly telegraphed leisure, she covered her graying hair with a black lace mantilla. In place of shoes she wore open-toed sandals. She dressed this way at all times, whether on a lecture platform or cooking a meal for a group of slum children at one of her community centers. Eventually she would also wear these clothes to jail.

Before long she was elected to a Poor Law Board, whose job was to supervise the running of the local workhouse. Among the first socialists on one of these boards, she protested valiantly against the

rotten potatoes given to inmates and fought to expose a corrupt manager whom she caught selling food from the kitchen while the workhouse women were on a bread and water diet. Despard was now devoting her copious energy to the women she called "those who slave all their lives long ... earning barely a subsistence, and thrown aside to death or the parish when they are no longer profitable."

In every way, the lives of Charlotte Despard and John French form the greatest possible contrast. He was destined to lead the largest army Britain had ever put in the field; she came to vigorously oppose every war her country fought, above all the one in which he would be commander in chief. He went to Ireland to suppress restive tenant farmers; she ministered to the Irish poor of Battersea, whom she called "my sister women" (although they might not have spoken of her quite the same way). They both went to India, but he drilled cavalymen whose job was to keep India British; she returned committed to Indian self-rule. At a time when a powerful empire faced colonial rebellions abroad and seething discontent at home, he would remain a staunch defender of the established order, she a defiant revolutionary. And yet, despite all this, something bound them together.

John French and Charlotte Despard were brother and sister.

More than that, for almost all of their lives they remained close. She was eight years senior to "Jack," as she called him, and he was the beloved little brother whom she taught his ABCs after their parents had disappeared from their lives. His sexual adventuring and reckless spending, which dismayed other family members, never seemed to bother her. When he went off to soldier in India, it was she who welcomed his wife Eleanora and the children to Courtlands, turning her house over to them while she lived in gritty Battersea. And when French returned from India under a cloud of debt and scandal, Despard took him in as well, lending him money long after his exasperated other sisters ceased to do so.

Their two very different worlds met when Despard periodically loaded some of Battersea's poor into a horse-drawn omnibus for a Saturday or Sunday at Courtlands, away from the grime and coal smoke of the city. French's son, Gerald, who would later follow his father into the army, remembered one such group of Battersea visitors, and his tone hints at what the rest of the family must have felt about Despard:

It certainly was amusing to some extent, but it had its trying side. For instance, they came equipped with several barrel-organs, which, of course, they never ceased playing from the time of their arrival until their departure. Their womenfolk accompanied them, and dancing went on during the greater part of the day, on the lawns and on the drive.

My father ... threw himself nobly into the breach, and helped to organize sports for the men.... I think he was more amused than anyone at the extraordinary antics of the invaders of our peace and quietness. They swarmed all over the place, and when the evening came and they set off on the return journey to London, we, at any rate, were not sorry that the entertainment had at last come to an end.

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