

The Last Post

British Press Representations of Veterans of the Great War

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Introduction

Harry Patch (1898-2009) was the last surviving British soldier to have fought in the trenches of the Western Front. He entered the media spotlight, and told his story for the first time at the age of 100, when approached to contribute to the BBC documentary *Veterans* (1998). The BBC's obituary for Patch tells of how he overcame his reluctance to testify when faced with the facts about the dwindling band of combat veterans from the war (BBC, 2009). So, the stoic, silent man born in the reign of Queen Victoria, emerged into the limelight in the age of the media confessional, reality TV and semiotic saturation. He featured subsequently in the 2003 TV series *World War 1 in Colour* and *The Last Tommy* (2005). His autobiography *The Last Fighting Tommy* was published in 2007 amidst a wealth of attention, which included poetic tribute from the Poet Laureate and a choral dedication by the Keeper of the Queen's Music, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies as well as a dedicated song about him from the rock band Radiohead.

There has been a considerable degree of attention afforded veterans like Patch, exploring their experiences and anticipating their inevitable passing, in the press, broadcast media and in public history productions which includes tours, books, DVDs, websites and so on. To us, as media and cultural historians, this activity appears to have marked a moment of reinvigoration in the memorialization of World War 1 which preceded, perhaps perforce, the anniversary marked by 2014. Indeed, this reinvigoration appears to have been attendant upon a growing realization over the decade up to 2009 that so few who participated as combatants remained alive, and that it was highly unlikely that any would continue to be so at the point of centenary commemorations of 1914. The passing of these individuals took on the status of event, staged through the coverage of their experiences, lives and perspectives on the First World War in the British Press, and this moment can be understood in a context of broader debates about national identity, public history and memory.

In what follows, we briefly outline the intellectual context informing our ideas about historical representation and approach to the popular press and our survey methods. We go on to explore the meanings of this representation in order to consider the following questions: how does Patch serve as a synecdoche, a representational proxy, for the millions of others who fought, of the meaning of their lives and deaths, embodying ideas of generational and social change? Likewise, how do the icons of the Great War's contemporaneous representation work in the space of the popular press? In particular, we are concerned with the familiar motifs and tropes of the narrative of war in the context of the rhetorical devices such media typically employ for the affective engagement of readers. While we are interested in the historiography of the Great War, what we offer here is not a contribution to the understanding of that

historical event in terms of its causes, conduct and political-economic and social aftermath. Rather, our approach as historians is informed by the kinds of questions raised by cultural studies about historical representation and memory, and the *contemporary* role of the popular press in constructing ideas about historical events. So, we offer a consideration of how historical understanding has itself been mediated recently: by British press coverage of the remaining veterans of the First World War and in particular the very last of them, and for a time Britain's oldest man, Harry Patch.

Representing the Great War: Public History and Cultural Memory

That the press is a source of contemporary record – the fabled site of the 'first draft of history' – is an idea clearly significant in any consideration of the events of modern history. Yet the press is also important in the production of *contemporary* historical perspectives and of ideas *about* the past, contributing to the practices of public history and cultural memory. Observing the growing domain of memory studies, however, Barbie Zelizer and Karen Tenenboim-Winblatt have commented on the relative absence of journalism from this setting, which leaves 'journalism's status as a primary recorder of a shared past both unsettled and unarticulated' (2014: 2).

Public history, as Ludmilla Jordanova (2002) indicates, constitutes a field of practice in which ideas of the past are produced from a variety of genres, in a variety of popular and sometimes informal ways which are quite distinct from the conventions of academic history and which present particular issues for professional historians. Pondering this point, Jerome De Groot suggests that

Non-academic or non-professional history – what has been defined as 'public' history – is a complex, dynamic phenomenon. While 'public' history is increasingly attended to by historians, the implications of new ways of engaging with the past have not been thoroughly investigated. This is often the result of professional distaste for the various popular forms of history, emerging from a critique of the popular and a theoretical model of the cultural industries which encourages a binary of high (History) versus low (heritage or 'the historical') (De Groot, 2009: 4).

Whether labelled public history or otherwise, there has been a prodigious growth in interest in the past in recent decades in what Andreas Huyssen describes as an acceleration of memory discourses, an obsession with the past that at the same time evinces also a fear of forgetting (p. 12). For Huyssen, this acceleration is in part a result of media saturation in which 'Untold recent and not so recent pasts impinge upon the present through modern media of reproduction like photography, film, recorded music, and the Internet, as well as through the explosion of historical scholarship and an ever more voracious museal culture.' (p. 1). Amongst the forms which provide this saturation, of course, are press images, rhetoric and the detail of heavily mediated historical experiences that have contributed to *our* contemporary experience and perspective on events such as World War One. Thus, contemporary landscapes of memory are underpinned by the fact that, as television scholar John Ellis has argued, we live in an age of witness: 'We know more and have seen more of this

century than the generations of any previous century knew or saw of theirs. The acceleration of communications has brought us word of so many events, so many peoples, so many places [...] face to face with the great events, the banal happening, the horrors and the incidental cruelties of our times' (Ellis, 2000: 9). We must be mindful, too, that memory is political: what is forgotten is as important, says as much, as what is remembered. The wealth of available documentation of the Great War has made us proxy witnesses to its scope, its tangibility as historical event conveyed in turn by figures such as its veterans, whose living testimony became ever rarer as their numbers dwindled. In such figures, we were confronted by a conjunction of the presentness of the war as conveyed in the presence and authenticity of their experience of it.

The role of the First World War in public history and collective memory, of ideas about it and its cultural representation, is a theme that has been instructively explored in works such as Jay Winter's *Sites Of Memory, Sites Of Mourning* (1998) or Paul Fussell's mediation on its literary representations in *The Great War And Modern Memory* (1975/2009). Likewise, as Gary Sheffield (2001) and, most recently, Dan Todman (2005) suggest, the way that the war has been remembered and represented across cultural forms contributes enormously to the contexts for its interpretation and understanding as a historical event. For Todman, the war's popular representation, at least, has been increasingly personalized by the manner in which veterans have been enlisted by historians, newspaper journalists and television documentarists seeking talking heads who afford their accounts the stamp of authenticity. He writes that

Ironically, the point at which veterans of the First World War began to die in large numbers coincided almost exactly with the moment at which their testimony, as process as much as content, began to take a significant place in national mythology. (Todman, 2005: 187).

The growing significance echoes Michael Roper's observation that

recent work has tended to focus on the collective meanings and functions of [...] remembering, exploring the ways in which popular conventions of representation are invoked in personal testimony. It has demonstrated that the individual experience of war is always represented within public narratives of soldiering' (2000: 183).

Roper is influenced by Alistair Thomson's (1994) suggestions about the ways in which Australian veterans framed their experiences of WW1, so constructing and celebrating national manhood. Thomson's perspective (and others involving the memories of communities at war) evinces an approach to popular memory associated with the work not only of Roper but of scholars such as T.G. Ashplant (et al., 2004) and Graham Dawson (2013), who explore the interactions of private memory and public narratives of war. Here, the public narratives incorporate widely circulated images of nation and the 'soldier hero', which in turn feature in popular culture such as films and TV. For Dawson, personal narratives are 'composed' in relation to such accounts. Here, the testimonies of figures such as Patch can be understood in reference to such

imaginaries which link the general and particular and, as Roper summarises, construct a past with which one can deal with in psychic terms (Roper, 2000: 183).

Todman (2005), too, is keen to locate the testimonies of veterans in terms of the wider cultural memory of the war, even as he is cautious about questioning the reliability of accounts of the individual experience of veterans. He focuses in particular on the ways in which WW1's representation has been constructed in relation to a set of specific reference points. In this analysis, the last quarter of the twentieth century is identified as a period in which the First World War has been reduced to a single set of easily communicated myths (2005: 187). Todman writes of an interpretative framework that has become conventional, a form of common sense in which 'the war as tragedy and disaster still pervades British culture' (Todman, 2005: xii). He ponders the collective cultural mythology of the war, in which the complexity of the past is reduced to an easily understood set of symbols. This is not to suggest that such versions of the past are a lie but that in some way they go beyond academic accounts and are overtly symbolic of much more than the fact of the historical event itself.

A useful idea here is that of public memory and of the way experience constitutes its raw material. Todman suggests that traces of memory become accessible in its rehearsal, modes of telling and retelling that construct usable and enduring versions of the past. The more individuals retell the narratives which memory and interpretation have together constructed, the more available they become for future use. He writes that 'Rehearsal of memories is a public act. It is therefore affected by the culture of the social group in which it takes place, its taboos and traditions of expression as well as the myths current within it' (Todman, 2005: 11).

Key reference points for the development of a popular framework for thinking about the Great War can be identified from the history of British television, for example, and the manner in which its forms of telling drew upon available histories, sources and modes of history making. For instance, James Chapman (2007: 23) suggests that eyewitness testimony has been a feature of television documentary since the BBC's monumental *The Great War* (1964). This series combined interviews with veterans and actuality film of events, people and places. For Chapman, the approach had parallels with post-war social history, and 'demonstrated a shift away from what might be called "mandarin history", based around the memoirs of major historical figures, towards the use of the recollections of "ordinary" people. This is what social historians refer to as "bottom-up" rather than "top-down" history' (Chapman, 2007: 23). As Todman (2002) and others who have written on this series (e.g. Badsey, 2002) have pointed out, *The Great War* was produced in a particular moment, one in which a strongly negative view of the conflict gained prominence. This drew upon Alan Clark's *Donkeys* (1961) and the theatrical and film versions of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963/1969), originated by the radical Theatre Workshop under Joan Littlewood, as well as the dissemination through the educational curriculum of poetry about the war by figures such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

In the decades following the 1960s, these perspectives changed relatively little. Significant presentations on television included the BBC adaptation of Allison and

Fairley's *The Monocled Mutineer* (1978/1986), which received extensive criticism for left-wing bias, and a First World War incarnation of the seminal comedy series *Blackadder* (*Blackadder Goes Forth*, 1989). Neither sought to revise the 1960s view of the war and its prosecution. More recently, these have been augmented by independent films such as *The Trench* (Boyd, 1999) and the TV film *My Boy Jack* (Kirk, 2007). Both focus on the experience of young soldiers in the British trenches – the latter personalised around the loss of Rudyard Kipling's son – and drive home both the horror of war in general, and the horrors of this war in particular. Significant here is the cultural life of Michael Morpurgo's book for children *War Horse* (1982), which was successfully adapted by Nick Stafford for the stage in 2007, for radio in 2008 and as a film directed by Steven Spielberg in 2011.

This repertoire of images and ideas of the Great War presents a vision of a historical moment that has proven to be remarkably powerful and enduring and, increasingly, a highly contested terrain. Historians such as Gordon Corrigan have offered a revision of this received wisdom about the war, a revision taken up in the media arena in newspapers like the *Daily Mail*. John McLeod, for instance, has decried the 'specious nonsense' taught by teachers of English literature and promoted in TV comedy like *Blackadder Goes Forth*, capturing several important motifs in popular ideas about the war:

We have long believed that it was completely unnecessary - waged for class-ridden imperial splendour; that it was incompetently directed; that not a tenth of those who served survived; that untold thousands of shell-shocked men were shot as deserters (MacLeod, 2008: 17).

Most recently, the politics of the historical record and the memory of the war have been played out around the UK educational curriculum. The avowed intention of former Education Secretary Michael Gove was to counter 'left-wing academics' feeding a negative mythology 'by attacking Britain's role in the conflict' (quoted in Perry, 2014).

Patch's story – alongside those of the other 'last' veterans – can be understood against a century of ideas, representations and interpretations of the war and its meaning. This has meant, for instance, that although Patch's exceptional qualities – age and participation in the Great War – afforded him authenticity, he was also accorded a particular authority. Whatever the virtue of his words, they were heard and understood within a set of tropes that precluded any critical reflection.

Looking for veterans in the popular press

Although his book was published in 2005, Todman registered his notice of the dwindling band of veterans from the perspective of 1998, anticipating, like Eleanor Bavidge (2009) more recently, the manner in which their passing would itself become news and thus a significant historical event. The quality of this event is suggested in our introduction, which describes the efflorescence of activity devoted to this group and their passing as the centenary of the outbreak of war approached; activity which affirmed this sense of significance and presented a momentous event to be accounted

for. A sense of the prodigious scope of the discourse about Great War veterans and the figure of Harry Patch in particular can be detailed initially in a *quantitative* survey of newspaper articles concerned with these subjects.

Approaches to harvesting such a wealth of material to aid in-context analysis of press representation are well established (see, for instance, Partington, 2012), allowing for the survey of relatively extensive sample periods using the Nexis database. Such work is often predicated on simple search terms which can be nuanced into more specific details, and focused on particular sectors of media (as discussed throughout Norris et al., 2013). Quantitative attention to patterns translates into qualitative attention to the nuance of language use and the context of the medium, and we look to examples such as Darren Kelsey's critical discourse analysis of the 'Blitz spirit' in British newspaper responses to the bombings of 7 July 2011 (Kelsey, 2013). For the present study, it is also important to note that the speed and reach of Nexis allows for the capture of a relatively recent sample of material, incorporating neither the war itself nor its emergence as an object of memory work in the early 1960s. In this sense, our reading of the coverage of Patch in the sample is perforce framed by the tropes produced in other fields of cultural work – across literature, popular histories, theatre, film and so on.

Our sampling period began, then, in 1997, based on the claim that Patch came to public attention in 1998 (although some limited earlier mentions of him appear in regional newspapers, in stories typically concerning his already advanced age). The database produced a list of over 1400 articles with major mentions of the search term 'Harry Patch', though in a number of these Patch was only tangential to the main subject, and this bounty included coverage of a race horse named in posthumous honour of the veteran. Our focus was *British* newspapers and for the purposes of this article, we chose to concentrate on that group of publications labelled 'tabloid' – the 'popular press'. In the UK, these are the best-selling national newspapers, relying as they do upon stories that are presented primarily through a conjunction of illustration and a brief word count. House style evinces a pithier form of prose than that of publications described as the 'quality' end of the market – *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian* and so on – otherwise known as broadsheets or quality newspapers, which are more regularly turned to as sources of historical record. As Adrian Bingham suggests (2012), it is worth noting that the term 'quality' sometimes inflects the way in which tabloids might be understood, denying their often complex and sometimes internally contradictory positions on events – balanced between a gesture to objective reportage and more overt editorialisation.

In total then, across coverage from newspapers such as *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Express*, *Daily Mail* and their Sunday versions or companion papers, we consulted in excess of 200 articles. Our aim was not, however, to systematically examine the detail of the emergence and change of representations of Patch over the duration of the sample of the period from 1997 until his death. Rather, we have used specific examples to illustrate our analysis, in which we have sought to interpret this quantity in a *qualitative* manner by examining the narrative and generic tropes of this coverage, of the particular rhetorical turns in the representation of Patch's story, his place in the

Great War and ideas about that event in terms of the prose and imagery of the tabloid press.

Rhetoric of the press: typical pictures, typical stories.

Our approach has been, in the main, to concentrate on the verbal rhetoric of press representations of the veteran: the narratives, phrases and motifs produced in prose articles usually fewer than 1500 words in length. This is not because there is nothing to say of the imagery of the press; on the contrary, stories of Patch – and other veterans – and of the wider vista of the war as a whole are generally illustrated, using a balance of recurring types of picture. First is the often familiar image of Flanders battlefields and muddy trenches – the kind of iconic image Todman discusses in his reflection on the imagery of the trenches in *The Great War: Myth and Memory*. The ‘public’ historical material of the press is often married with personal and individualized archival portraits such as images of the veteran in his uniform, recently enlisted or home on leave. Inevitably black and white, both types of image are full of the weight of history and that ‘auratic’ quality described by Walter Benjamin and lately reconsidered and reclaimed by Marlene A. Briggs. Briggs notes the contingencies of the idea of aura, its simultaneous distance and proximity which place contemporary viewers in an ambivalent relationship with the history these images represent (2006: 115). As Michael Griffin suggests, such photographs can be approached not as factual, informational evidence of the past but instead act ‘As markers of collective memory [...] most useful when they symbolize socially shared concepts or beliefs’ (1999: 147).

A second type of visual trope operates at the other extreme of the chronology of the press treatment of veterans. Here we see recently captured images of the veteran – reportage of their existence and role in contemporary stories concerning their survival, memory and disappearance. These images reveal his frailty, his obvious mortality, often framed by a *mise-en-scene* of commemoration. Frequently accompanied by younger men in uniform, he sits in his inescapable wheelchair, holding a wreath of poppies, found at monuments and in war cemeteries. Often we see him alone in such locations, as if to underscore his literal isolation as a living reminder not only of the many dead buried at his feet but also of those millions who survived the war and of whom only he, like Job, is left: ‘and I only am escaped alone to tell thee’. Likewise, collective images of veterans sat together like a council of wise elders serve to underscore their time-won authority and the gravitas of their opinions about the war and its conduct. We should underline the use of the masculine pronoun here in order to note that the veteran’s story is a gendered story: these are survivors of the experience of combat, attended to by others destined for the same experience. The impact of the war on family, on children and wives does not merit attention to those of them who have survived time’s ravages. As Bavidge (2009) dares to suggest (see below), it is possible to conceive of a Last Veteran who might not be a man!

The lessons of history, of the connectivity of this narrative gesture to the sacrifice of the past, is repeatedly married with the present by the use of counterpoised images of soldiers involved in present day conflicts in the Middle East or Afghanistan. The context in which these images sit is no less formulaic, and draws on the same principal

tropes. These wise old warriors, Patch significant among them, are used as a touchstone to measure the modern: do those around us today show the same great, perhaps heroic, qualities; the same British spirit; the same loyalty to their nation? In an era marked by considerable social division, evidence of what David Cameron describes as 'Broken Britain', and a nostalgia for the kind of traditional values represented by the sacrifice and dedication of the veterans, what do they think of us?

This juxtaposition of shoddy modern and heroic past was most pronounced in stories following the receipt by Henry Allingham (formerly Britain's oldest man) and Patch of the French *Legion d'honneur*, and the lack of a corresponding British honour in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. 'While political cronies, celebrities and sports stars were awarded honours, the only surviving British veterans from the Great War were missed out', we were told (Allen and Drury, 2009). Focusing more closely on the war itself, some stories presented a critique from the mouths of the veterans themselves – they asked 'was it all worth it?' (Jack Davis in Roberts, 2002: 19) and decried the nature of war: 'all war is disastrous and terrible' (Arthur Halestrap in Hall, 2002: 28). As Patch himself observed, 'nothing could really have prepared me for the horror' (Patch in Hughes, 2009: 7).

A notable theme was the sense of a countdown of mortality. As the years from 1998 onwards passed, the 'handful' of survivors became a 'last' survivor, and the press sought to draw readers' attention to the dwindling number of veterans:

'Just 27 WWI Veterans Keep Memory Alive...' (Wills, 2003: 32)

'Today, just four survive...' (Express, 2005: 39)

'Of the five million men and women who served in the First World War, three remain alive...' (Mirror, 2008: 14).

As Bavidge (2009) observes in her anticipation of a once-mooted state funeral for the last veteran, available data made the identification of the number and nature of veterans of the Great War a problematic task. Indeed, this issue was borne out in counts which varied between and even within publications – in November 2005, for example, *The Mirror* (Simon, 2005), counted ten veterans against four in the *Express* (2005). Furthermore, Bavidge questions the determination of who counts as the 'last' of any generational group, problems arising from within a tradition amongst veterans themselves concerning who qualified as part of their band. 'Who should be the Last Veteran? Which of the armed services should he be from? Must the veteran be male? Must he or she be British-born, have seen live action, completed training, be resident in this country?' (Bavidge, 2009: 233). The contentiousness that Bavidge outlines was in part sidestepped by a growing realisation of the dwindling band of possible candidates for the Last Veteran, a point driven home by reports of Remembrance Day, 2003:

Among the military brass and the dark-suited politicians lined up to pay tribute to our war dead today, three elderly men will gaze out from a car on a world

they never believed they would live to see... Remembrance Day with all its emotion is especially poignant for them, as this may be the last time they will ever experience it... this could be, literally, their last parade' (Wills, 2003: 32-3).

As Bavidge also notes, the concentration on the individual enforced by the passage of time shifted attention from the generalised address of Cenotaph to a personalisation of history. This point is noted in poet Andrew Motion's characterisation of how Remembrance Day parades and ceremonies serve to commemorate the dead of all wars, yet 'they invariably revolve around images associated with the trenches - the heart-jolting pictures of people like Harry floundering in the mud, or scrabbling over the lip of a trench and being shot down. That's why Harry and the few other survivors are so important to us' (Motion, 2008: 14).

Constructing Harry Patch

To the refrain of time's passing, then, we were transported by the press through the closing years of Patch's life, towards his death in 2009 as the last *accessible* British veteran of the war. As noted, Patch did not begin to talk about his experiences publicly until 1998, at which point he was 100 years old. Yet by the time of his death, just 11 years later, he had been transformed from an unknown old man into a war veteran, a now heroic figure defined by his veteran status. He stood as a totemic representative of the lived experience of the Great War, recounting what had become well-rehearsed stories of this part of his life, and his views on the war. Patch's stories were *familiar* stories; the context and details perhaps new, but reprising the same themes and sense of horror which had accompanied the accounts of other veterans. His stories, told in his voice or his words, became part of, and briefly all of, the text of trench warfare experience, recited tirelessly by the press as other veterans fell around him. Through Patch, and through the media representation of Patch, the public were able to connect, therefore, with a moment of history.

Although this persona for Patch was in many ways constructed by the media, it was more than a piece of cynical rhetoric. The Patch of the press reflected and complemented human responses to events like the Great War. We should note that, as Vincent Trott has suggested, the published testimonies of the last of the veterans were not untouched by the mythologies of the Great War, even though 'Patch's ... memories were not always in alignment with popular narratives'. Trott identifies potential resistance in such accounts 'where these veterans counter popular myths. The critical and popular reception of their books also suggests a varied and inconsistent engagement with the mythology of the war' (Trott, 2013: 340). The Great War was an unprecedented shock for Britain in particular; the vast losses attendant on an industrialised war far outstripped any previous understanding of its impact. Perhaps as a consequence, even today something of the British understanding of war as a human calamity is tied to the Great War in a way that even World War 2 could not supplant. The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior and the Whitehall Cenotaph, both inaugurated on 11 November 1920, are characteristic of responses to the war – this was something new, and hard to grasp, and new approaches were necessary to comprehend and accommodate it. As a veteran, Patch was an important part of this

practice of public memory; the mediation of his and other soldiers' lives, through the lens of modern ideals, made them fitting support for the ongoing and almost vitriolic (re)assertion by the more conservative press that *veterans are important*. As Patch became the final remaining veteran in Britain, he came to represent the horrors of the war as history; history is, after all, about people. Through the stories they produced and the imagery they deployed, therefore, we can see the popular press constructing Patch in response to this representation, not only to convey their own perspectives on the history of the war, but also to fulfil a perceived public need for a focus for interest, grief and imagination.

As we have summarised, a range of scholars like Roper have explored personal narratives of soldiering, of the processes and nature of telling, in which re-remembering is treated as a conjunction of the weight of the past and the needs of the present. Roper (2000), for instance, draws on a psychological framework in order to explore the personal aspects of narrative, contrasting this with and critiquing a 'popular memory' perspective in which accounts emphasise the power of public language at the expense of the role of the private and unconscious. It is difficult here to engage with the history of Patch's re-remembering as his entry into public life placed his experience as the acme of all experience in which his individuality, guaranteed by his *sui generis* status, is denied him by his synecdochal status as representative of so many others. The stories presented about Patch, then, combined the ideas of human connection with the received understanding of the war proffered by the historians of the 1960s and since mythologized. Patch's life was reduced to key moments of trauma from his war experience, told and re-told, which are summarised below:

An encounter with a badly wounded Cornishman pleading for a mercy killing:
'We came across a lad ripped open from his shoulder to his waist by shrapnel. He looked at us and said, 'Shoot me'. He was beyond all human help and before we could draw a revolver he was dead. The final word he uttered was 'Mother'" (Patch in Shahanahan, 2009: 11; see also Daily Mail, 2002: 46-7).

Close combat with a German soldier
'I had just changed a magazine when one of them came out of the trench and came straight for us with fixed bayonet. He couldn't have had any ammunition, otherwise he would have shot us. I drew my revolver and shot him in the right shoulder. He dropped his rifle but still came stumbling on... I gave him his life. I shot him above the ankle and above the knee and brought him down' (Patch in Blundell, 2007a: 58; see also Ellam, 2007: 40, Sun, 2009: 8).

The shell explosion which killed his machinegun team and left him injured, and his resultant treatment without anaesthetic:
'A shell burst over us on Pilkem Ridge. Bob got away with it, I got some shrapnel in my groin and my three mates were blown to pieces... The next day the doctor asked me if I wanted him to take the shrapnel out, although he had no anaesthetic. I asked him how long it would take and he said: 'Two minutes.' Four fellows got hold of me, or else during that two minutes I could have killed

that bloody doctor' (Patch in Daily Mail, 2002: 46-7; see also Ellam, 2009: 8-9, Van Emden and Blundell, 2005: 22-3).

The manner in which Patch's stories were appropriated and presented by the press gave him the appearance of a reductive caricature, packaged for the consumption and comprehension of the readership, broadly ignoring the majority of the rest of his 111 years, his service as a fireman in WW2, his family and working life, etc. Set against the myths of the Great War, this caricature became even more successful – as the last Tommy, the last of the lions, Patch became a kind of everyman, and the readership were invited to not only venerate him, but to see themselves within him. Patch's totemic nature was highlighted in two significant ways here: through notions of touching and thanking, and through more general sentimentalisation.

Physical contact is widely associated with veneration and authentic experience. Here, we saw the importance of such contact in the human link to the past. 'I shook his hand, then held it for a moment. I had expected to be moved, but not this much. The fingers felt fragile as twigs; 91 years ago they had picked up a machine gun and aimed it across No Man's Land' (Motion, 2008: 14). 'You shake Harry by the hand and touch history'; 'there are up to 10 requests a day from people who want to meet him, shake his hand, touch this last living link to history' (Ellam, 2007: 40; 2008: 34).

We can see this need to touch as dually important: through the expressed desire of the public to touch Patch, and through the desire of the press to tell us about it. The handshake is also symbolic of closure in Patch's narrative: he recounted a 2004 event wherein he shook hands with a surviving German veteran, Charles Kuentz, with a sense that they put the war behind them: 'he is very nice and all for a united Europe and peace and so am I', said Patch (in Lakeman, 2004: 20. See also Blundell, 2006: 16; 2007a: 58).

In British culture, thanking is clearly related to this idea of the handshake, and in the press this is evinced through two mechanisms: articles instructing the public to thank war veterans, in some cases using Patch's own words ('Thank them before it's too late'; Blundell, 2007b), and the publication of letters carefully chosen to chime with the sentiment that the papers express. One Sunday Mirror story, for example, was supplemented by readers' letters headed 'A Big Thank You, Harry' in the following week (Blundell, 2006; Sunday Mirror, 2006). The handshake serves, both literally and metaphorically, as a motif of this reportage, a visual and physical link of meaning and sentiment.

Indeed, the notion of sentiment is central to press representations of Patch, and to our understanding of those representations. Patch's heavily reduced story is designed to be emotional, backed by imagery which situates and summarises: we are confronted by an old, old man, whose expression we read as one of sadness or perhaps distance; he is frail and weak, and yet dressed and presented as a hero. Patch's memories, as conveyed, speak of suffering and horror; we are invited to conclude that it is this suffering, this horror, and not his many years of life, that have produced the melancholy and increasingly solitary figure before us. Important, also,

are Patch's views – his pacifism, his hatred of war, the difficulty in seeing the Great War as 'worth it'; this latter, of course, supported by the revisionist framework we have summarised. He is constructed not as a simple hero in some Herculean mould, but as a more complex being – we are reminded in particular of Diana Spencer, the flawed doer-of-good, constructed by the press as representative of all of our flaws and all of our goodwill. As the distillation of war-as-person – the last accessible soldier – Patch not only stands as synecdoche for all Great War soldiers but in some way for all Britons, for those who fought but also for those who did not (and who did or would not want to). When he died, we were told, hundreds queued to try to obtain the limited free tickets to his funeral, and thousands attended the event; 'even the heavens, it seemed, were in mourning' (Smith, 2009: 10; Crick, 2009: 15). Much like Princess Diana upon her death, he was the focus of tremendous sentiment from a massive audience who never knew him, but for whom the press had made him a friend (see Brown et al., 2003).

It is ironic that the very views and imagery that helped the press to construct Patch as a palatable hero for all were at odds with the underlying principles which these stories often sought to convey. Patch told us to thank our veterans, and was used as a way to direct attention to the plight of 'our boys' in Afghanistan or Iraq, who by analogy were also lions, also led by donkeys, needing to be brought home (see, for example, Shanahan, 2009; Blundell, 2007). Some commentators sought to reap political capital from such declarations, suggesting that Patch and those like him fought two world wars because the country was 'fighting for its life', asking what freedom in the Middle East has to do with us, and opining that 'the millions of Great War dead and the casualties of Helmand are all victims of Left-wing idealist governments, blundering into war out of weakness and vanity' (Parsons, 2009: 13; Hitchens, 2009). But Patch, in his thoughts for the soldiers of today, was not reflecting on the political, legal or 'just' nature of the Afghanistan war: he was concerned for the veterans of modern wars because, like the veterans of the Great War, 'they come back bloodied and broken just the same' (Ellam, 2009: 8). If war had made Harry Patch the figure that he was, it would do the same to these soldiers. This contradiction is paralleled in the deployment of Patch as a form of moral marker for a previous generation. Modern celebrities were measured against the hero and found wanting, modern teenagers even more so (see, for example, Hennessy, 2007: 55). But Patch's views, his 'cowardice', might themselves have been frowned upon by many of his contemporaries in his own youth: an unwillingness to fight, dissatisfaction with the war, and the bald statement 'I never knowingly killed a German' (Ellam, 2007: 40). He functions as a moral marker, therefore, entirely because of his *modern* sensibilities.

The Popular Press and History

In the construction of Patch we have suggested, then, we can see a complex figure deployed in fairly simplistic ways, in keeping with the reductionist histories described by Todman and others. The Patch we have here fitted well into the received wisdom of the war, serving to convey conservative and nationalistic themes in which the individual role is divorced from wider analysis, and used as a basis to demonstrate antagonism to government policy around the Middle East, and to evince concerns with the state of British society. We are mindful of the complexity of the uses of

memory: in this political employment, our distance from the horrors of the war allows the act of remembrance to reshape the past, as those very horrors set the stage for a celebration of heroism – as Hodgkin and Radstone observe, memory here is both salt and salve (2003: 237). This coverage also gives us an insight into contemporary attitudes to history. From the outset, it produced and reproduced the images, narratives, reference points and materials from which cultural memory is made, couched in the expressive forms of modern culture – the confessional, the witness view. This kind of oral history was brought together with the notion that something important was happening *right then*, which allowed the populace at large to connect with a moment of history. In its account of the rush to buy tickets for Patch's funeral, *The Sun* story 'Our Hero Harry' (Crick, 2009: 15) suggests the way in which this moment is on a par with other cultural experiences, defined by 'being there', to be witness to actual events. In a heavily mediated age, this coverage speaks of the quest for authentic experience.

In cementing Patch and other veterans as totemic figures, and reinforcing this aspect of the public discourse, the press added strength to the public history of World War I, as conceived, and as retold every Remembrance Sunday: memory in rehearsal, as Todman indicates. This was, in simple terms, a familiar type of 'bottom-up history', but the foundation was the story of, in the end, just one man, standing in for millions who experienced the Great War in some manner. Problematically for the historian, these figures have been placed beyond criticism, by sentiment that reflects the precarious nature of the heavy weight of history and belief balanced upon the celebration of a decreasing number of individuals, ultimately extinguished and existing only in iconic form. There is a clear distinction here between public and other kinds of historical discourse, perhaps best conveyed through stories in the *Daily Mail* about the British state's perceived unwillingness to grant the last few veterans a knighthood, 'provoking fury from politicians' and 'cross-party dismay' (Allen and Drury, 2009; Hardman, 2009). Calls 'for the men to be recognised on behalf of their fallen comrades, and to honour a generation of "incredible sacrifices"' (Allen and Drury, 2009) seemingly fell on the deaf ears of a state which had already awarded the veterans medals for their service and was perhaps not prepared to honour them again simply for their longevity. The proclaimed shortcut, from one veteran to all veterans, was grounded in public perception and not historical fact, but the *Daily Mail* journalists found the 'snub' incomprehensible. The veterans of the Great War and the popular interpretation of their lives had become sacrosanct; to deny either was to deny, churlishly, all who fought.

Important also was the narrative of loss, the 'last stand the like of which we shall never see again' (Smellie, 2003: 34). The group of those who had fought inexorably dwindled and, as the commemoration of 1914 approached, an audit of those still alive became ever more pressing and audible as a part of public discourse. This itself reveals a modern reflection on the nature of time, mortality and memory in which so much public discourse is invested in categorizing a social group and marking its passing, one by one. Article titles such as 'We'll (not) meet again' (Smellie, 2003: 34) and related comments – 'their memories captured here, for what must be the final time' (Simon, 2005: 39) – alert us to this ongoing project, but even as they do so they imply an

attention to this process that seems to go beyond the loss of that very human link to the history of the war. And thus is revealed here the ultimate problem of history for the press, in seeking to connect the readers of the present with the events of the more distant past. For not only does this reportage reflect the movement towards a future where no veterans survive, it also reflects a principal concern of the authors of news themselves: where is the news and human interest when all of the veterans are dead?

Conclusion: the future of World War I

In presenting, asserting, and reinforcing public historical discourse about the Great War, then, the popular press has played an important role in the process of constructing the memory and meaning of the First World War. These newspapers provide their readers with a link to a very particular past, mediating history while suggesting, through the use of oral history and witness testimony, that they are providing authentic narrative. As oral historians are well aware, such narratives exercise a strong emotional attraction on us: 'we crave evidence that the past endures in recoverable form. Some agency, some mechanism, some faith will enable us not just to know it, but to see and feel it' (Lowenthal, 1985: 14). In these accounts, this apparently direct and authentic access to the past is channelled narrowly; ultimately, through the representational status of Harry Patch, the synecdoche. Through its mediation of these stories, then, through the telling and retelling, the popular press situates one man's emotional (and emotive) record as a form of actuality: 'how it felt' becomes a touchstone for 'how it was'. And indeed, the emotional qualities of the record matters here for how contemporary audiences respond in affective ways and how they engage with the authenticity and representation of historical experience.

The veterans have thus functioned as embodied sites for struggle over meanings of heroism, nation, age, history and war – *that war* – with these newspapers providing one (very strong) view on those themes, ostensibly backed by iconic public figures and the weight of public opinion registered in the many millions of readers UK tabloids claim. These presentations reflect one perspective on the contested space of role of veterans' role in public life. As Bavidge wrote in her exploration of plans for the anticipated funeral of the 'last veteran': 'The veterans' reluctance and the politicians' determination expose the distinction between the feelings and the narratives of those who experienced the war and of those who wish to commemorate it.' (Bavidge, 2009: 227). By way of Ashplant et al (2004), she suggests that the needs and narrative demands of a contemporary audience may clash with the memory of survivors.

Yet, while the edifice of the public understanding of the war depends heavily on an understanding of the lives of these veterans, a sense of the implications of this relationship in the press is rare: indeed, it seems almost a condition of such publications that any detailed contextualization – of the Western Front or otherwise – is often foregone in favour of an instantaneous and mnemonic set of commonly-held reference points.

However, given Patch's death, and the deaths of all other known military personnel who served during the period of the war's prosecution, the centenary of the Great

War's outbreak shifts the struggle to a new and challenging terrain. This individualised perspective on the Great War has, for example, become hard to comprehend in light of increasing portrayals of German soldiers as innocents too. The myths surrounding the war may be subject to interrogation; perhaps not in terms of a wholly iconoclastic attack, but certainly thoughtful, reinforced by and reinforcing other contemporary concerns about the UK's place in the world and its role in Europe. At the outset of the centenary year, for instance, Simon Jenkins has complained of a 'sickening avalanche' of war-related material, 'flooding the television schedules before the date of its outbreak (in autumn 1914). History bestseller lists focus on little else: there are no fewer than 8,000 titles on the subject. War magazines cram newsstands. Churches will fill with candles for the fallen. Children carry flowers "of reflection and remembrance". The horror, the mistakes, the cruelty, the crassness of war will be revived over and over again, "lest we forget" (Jenkins, 2014).

Such complaints testify to the fact that the popular press is integral to any debate about the meaning of the war and its memory. McLeod's work for the *Daily Mail* cited earlier (see also Bingham, 2012), for example, indicates that newspapers are not entirely monolithic organisations and that revisionist perspectives may already have a foothold in the discussion, galvanized by the absence of individual witnesses who might gainsay any position. Indeed, we are prompted to wonder how history retains faith and memory in the absence of further living witnesses, those who 'make these things intimate' (Motion, 2008: 14), and how the discourse of public history is altered by this transition from news (with a living human interest) to history. Like Todman (2005), we wonder what the future of World War I might be. These questions are as much a matter for the public and press as they are for academic historians, and their implications go beyond this singular conflict to encompass the veterans and the memory of other wars. Similar processes will take place in the relatively near future around World War II, for example, an event arguably significantly more integral to the modern British psyche than World War I, with far-reaching implications – how, for example, will the public response to the Holocaust be altered when no survivors remain alive? John Keegan suggested that, with the deaths of the last veterans of the American Civil War, 'an urge to re-create its realities came to possess the writers of the great popular histories of the war' (2010: 357) – the human absence, then, filled by a flurry of emotive text. Thus, while the veterans of the Great War are no longer with us, their representation has its own cultural life, and an enduring role in the practice and politics of public memory.

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