The Poetry of Henry Newbolt

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IN 1912, the year Newbolt turned fifty, Poems New and Old was issued. This was the complete collection of his published poetry from 1897 to 1912. It was generally well-received, although one critic complained that while the poetry expressed “most vigorously the religion of sportsmanship and loyalty,” it could not be called true patriotic poetry in the great English tradition of Henry the Fifth because such patriotism was extinct:

True patriotic utterance is only inspired at its best by the antagonism of terrible odds. It is only in forlorn hopes that men need the passion of the patriot to sustain them... Our patriotism has declined because the possibility of it is gone. We are not—not yet at least—fighting an implacable foe for hearth and home. Our wars for the past century have been concerned... with keeping what we have taken. The true Boadicean spirit of patriotism has fled: we fight for the preservation of a vast Imperial business concern. Our deeds are often deeds of splendid courage, of surpassing valour; but the face of the earth must change before we can again be patriotic.¹

One might argue with the critic, Basil Watt, about his definition of patriotism (Newbolt himself felt that Watt had confused patriotism with chivalry),² but he was undoubtedly accurate in his assessment of the perception of war as it had come to be seen in England over the past
century. What no one then could have foreseen was that, although this did not bring about a return to Shakespearian, heroic patriotism, the face of the earth was indeed about to change.

World War I acted as a seismic shock that changed not only the face of modern warfare, but attitudes, philosophies and even the basic make-up of society. At the start of his study of how the war transformed the English imagination, *A War Imagined*, Samuel Hynes writes:

> Even as it was being fought the war was perceived as a force of radical change in society and in consciousness. It brought to an end the life and values of Victorian and Edwardian England; but it did something more fundamental than that: it added a new scale of violence and destruction to what was possible—it changed reality. That change was so vast and so abrupt as to make the years after the war seem discontinuous from the years before, and that discontinuity became a part of English imaginations. Men and women after the war looked back at their own pasts as one might look across a great chasm to a remote peaceable place on the other side.³

The new scale of violence and destruction of which Hynes speaks had simply not been dreamed of, much less experienced until now; people were both stunned and terrified by the sheer magnitude of the war and with the unexpectedness of that magnitude.

One possible reason for this tremendous shock is that in spite of both the Crimean and the Boer Wars, and in spite of the lessons that might have been learned from them and from the Franco-Prussian and the Russian-Japanese Wars, many British people may well have perceived the scale of war, and particularly land war, as actually having decreased during the century since Waterloo. If such was the case, it would go some way towards explaining both pre-war attitudes to the whole business of what fighting for one’s country meant and post-war revulsion towards those attitudes.

To begin with, it is perhaps pertinent to remember that Victorian Britain had never aspired to be a land power in the style of Germany or France, seeing war instinctively in terms of naval supremacy. By 1914, therefore, of the European powers, Britain had the smallest army, no conscription, and the largest navy, the latter being seen as an impenetrable defense against invasion and a barrier behind which to buy time to raise, train and equip a larger army, as well as to draw reinforcements from the Empire, should it ever become necessary to do so. Thanks to
an arms race with Germany that in Britain's case had meant above all the retention of naval superiority, the Royal Navy was well-equipped to fight a war at sea; in addition to a great increase in fire power, there had been a significant conversion from coal-fired to diesel propulsion, and, unlike most army units, ships had wireless communication from the outbreak of hostilities.

Many people were thus led to believe that Britain was not merely ready for a European war, but, with such superior sea power, likely to emerge victorious. Colin Nicolson, in an essay about the coming of World War I, states categorically that the most important fact that we have to understand about the Edwardian attitude to war is that very few people realised just what sort of war they would be entering. Misled by the popular media, many believed that a future war "would either be a spectacular naval contest culminating in a 'new Trafalgar' or a land war that would be brief and explosive; the 'spirit of the race' would at last test itself in a contest in which bravery, elan and physical superiority would be the deciding qualities." There was a tragic tendency, it would appear, to view war in terms either of Trafalgar or of Waterloo.

Waterloo was the last great battle fought so close to home, and the last to result in such great loss of life during a single day's fighting—over a quarter of the combatants were killed. Spelling as it did the effectual end of Napoleon's "reign," it came to be seen as a watershed, a symbol of peace in Europe. On 18 June 1815, troops exhausted by two days of marching, fighting or retreating with little food and virtually no sleep fought all day until seven in the evening amidst blinding smoke, thick wet mud and the most appalling volume of noise that any of them could ever remember hearing. Most of the survivors slept the moment the battle was over, their accumulated exhaustion ensuring that nothing was done for the wounded until daylight the next morning. Over the years, the battle came to have almost mythic proportions and to represent a kind of massive warfare that nineteenth-century Britons could be forgiven for thinking was obsolete.

The Crimean war was certainly an unqualified disaster, but it was a disaster whose humiliations were buried to a large extent under the subsequent successes of the smaller-scale wars that founded, built, and maintained the largest contemporary Empire in the world. To many people during the second half of the century, war meant the Colonial
wars that not only brought land, power, and wealth to Britain, but that also underlined those very qualities in which the British so prided themselves that they wished to endow as much of the rest of the world as possible with them:

The generation before 1914 dreaded a European war between the great industrial powers with their mass armies, and for those who survived the Great War, this dread became revulsion. Colonial wars were different. They were the means by which civilization was advanced and ignorant savagery tamed. They were the testing grounds of the nation's virtue as represented by its fighting men. . . .

Pluck, gallantry, selflessness and determination were the manly virtues prized by the Victorians, and they were truly mirrored in these wars.5

The wars that Lawrence James is talking about here were those fought in Egypt and the Sudan, and in Southern, West, East and Central Africa from the 1870s onward. These campaigns seemed to epitomise those notions of war as heroic and Empire as glorious that so stirred people's imaginations during the late nineteenth century. Basically, these were wars in which African tribal warriors, armed sometimes with firearms (of a mostly old-fashioned and inadequate kind), but often with spears, clubs, bows, and swords, faced British troops equipped with all that the considerable technology of the period could provide. In 1897, in Bida, Nigeria, between ten and fifteen thousand Nupe warriors, some in mail and armed with lances, were routed by five hundred infantrymen with machine guns and artillery that fired shrapnel. Zulus and Dervishes, if not so Medieval in appearance, threw equally large numbers of unprotected troops against the deadly power of British guns, British technology. At Omdurman, twenty-eight British and twenty other troops were killed, as opposed to 11,000 Dervish, who hurled themselves again and again at the Maxim guns and other small-arms fire coming from the British lines.

Technology, in fact, was becoming increasingly important to modern warfare, though this importance was much played down by traditional army pundits in England, who failed to equate British experience in Africa and India with that in any European war. Hence, we have, for instance, the ironic situation of serving officers such as Lord Chelmsford, Sir Charles Beresford, and Sir Garnet Wolseley, all of whom had gained their considerable reputations fighting in Colonial wars, urging the increased use of the machine gun on the regular army at home but having
their views virtually (and tragically) dismissed. Imperialist campaigns were deemed peripheral to an army preparing for a European war, and what was useful for mowing down savage tribesmen could hardly be appropriate in a regular European encounter.\textsuperscript{6} It was this kind of attitude that helped to fuel the shock of what was to prove a war of high technology. Yet all the signs were there. By the Boer War, industrial technology had not only produced the machine gun, reliable breech-loading rifles, and much lighter field guns, but also made the mass production of both weapons and ammunition possible on a scale hitherto unknown.

In fact, many more lessons could have been learned from the Boer War than were, for the Boers were equipped with all the same technology as the British, and, in some cases, more:

\[T\]he Boers employed a handy, quick-firing gun which came to be called a pom-pom because of the sound it made. This gun spewed out one-pound shells from a belt, and the British officers, who had never seen such a gun, were impressed with its effectiveness. It was made by Vickers in England, and originally designed for naval use, but as the army and navy rarely spoke to each other, the pom-pom appeared on the velt as a secret weapon as far as the army was concerned.\textsuperscript{7}

The Boers also fortified their trenches with a new, improved kind of barbed wire that had been developed by a farmer from New Hampshire in 1874—it had never occurred to the British to use the wire for military purposes.

So although the British were again not fighting another disciplined, professional army, but groups of farmers and civilians whose favoured fighting unit was the commando, they found themselves unprepared, particularly for the extremely accurate shooting of Boer riflemen. Troops had to sustain intensive onslaughts of rifle fire from marksmen who were usually concealed, and along with some incredible bravery came several reports of loss of nerve. Tactics had to change; the classic square was no defence against a commando, and much smaller units of men would therefore advance across a battlefield, strung out so as to present the smallest possible target but, of course, much farther removed from their officers and the security of their fellow soldiers. Eventually, when they either chose or were forced to fight in the mass, the Boer armies were beaten by the sheer numbers of the British, but from 1900 to 1902, a
campaign was waged in which British troops occupied and held strongholds while they scoured the countryside for the commandos, engaging in an endless round of small skirmishes, which had little of the much-vaulted sportsmanship to them, and a fair amount of savage brutality. The face of modern warfare was rapidly changing, and yet it had not impinged either on the general public, or upon regular army officers back in the faraway peace of England exactly what this change would mean if a large-scale conflict should occur.

Of those who did prophesy changes, only a handful of civilian writers (Erskine Childers, Albert Robida, H. G. Wells, and Conan Doyle, for instance) really took into account the technological advances that were happening. Military and naval writers before World War I, the ones who should have benefitted from their insiders’ viewpoints, and thus been best able to alert the public, almost without exception failed to guess what might happen.

There was also active hostility in many military quarters towards the use of modern weapons such as the machine gun, which was seen (as so much machinery of the nineteenth century had been seen by conservatives) as undermining tradition and subsuming the role of the individual. Not only was the use of such a weapon not “playing the game”—many of the old guard still truly believed in the prime effectiveness of horse, lance and sabre, and charge. “It must be accepted as a principle,” stated the British Cavalry Training Manual for 1907, “that the rifle, effective as it is, cannot replace the effect produced by the speed of the horse, the magnetism of the charge, and the terror of cold steel.” With Waterloo still held up as the last great European Battle, cavalry lore maintained that at the outbreak of the next European war, events would speedily be decided by “a great opening cavalry clash.” Discussing this faith in the continuation of cavalry tradition, Brian Bond notes that

in the cavalry’s unavailing resistance to the inexorable development of modern mechanized warfare may be discerned a spirit of true pathos. Although the motives were perhaps subconscious, such phenomena as the cult of the horse and the arme blanche may now be seen as a last desperate effort to withstand the de-personalization of war. . . .

In spite of the tactics that had been adopted in the second Boer War, then, and in spite of the growing European arms race and continued improvement of mechanised weaponry, the officer-hero leading the charge
gallantly across the field, or rallying the troops to tighten the square, remained the figure behind many of the early mistakes of the war.

One obvious result of this kind of blinkered, traditional thinking was that High Command entered the war having no idea at all of what it would mean to fight an enemy equipped with automatic weapons, so that simply pouring in more men seemed the only solution to many. The mechanisation of war was a harsh lesson for High Command, for the unfortunate soldier at the Front, and for those at home trying to adjust to a war that would eventually roll its tanks right over the chivalric ideal.

It has been estimated that Napoleon had a total of about 20,000 rounds of artillery ammunition with him at Waterloo. For the Somme bombardment, the British would bring 2,960,000 rounds forward. The scale of war in Europe, far from having decreased since 1815, as many may so easily have been lulled into thinking, had been building a potential so vast, and yet so unimagined, that the shock of it stripped away not only all the old concepts of war, but also the very foundations upon which these had lain.

Despite many, much written about and discussed concerns over the outbreak of war, and despite a small but strong anti-war movement, an extraordinary number of people were favourably inclined towards the war in its early days. Not unusually, perhaps, at the start of a conflict believed to have a righteous cause, a wave of patriotic sentiment swept the country and united the majority of its people. Their commonly shared feelings are interesting because part of the eventual revulsion against the war was directed at just such feelings, which were later viewed as either simply naive or based on outmoded and even reprehensible ideals enshrined in a public school code that was itself outdated and open to attack.

Given that most people had no real idea of what this war was going to entail, the general enthusiasm for it was nevertheless intense and prolonged. War was actually declared late on Tuesday, August 4, but by Sunday, August 2, the war hysteria had started (certainly in London). It was Bank Holiday Weekend, which heightened the festive feeling, as many people looked forward to this annual jaunt all year. Working people often saved throughout the year and took their money out for this occasion, and in 1914, the combination of this withdrawal coupled with more wealthy people’s concern for their savings produced such a strain
on the Bank of England that the Bank Rate rose from four percent on Thursday, July 30, to ten percent on Saturday August 1.11 People turned out into the streets in force, dressed in their best, full of patriotic fervour, many excited beyond measure at the prospect of war. On returning to Downing Street after a dinner party on the Sunday evening, the Prime Minister, Henry Asquith, encountered this enthusiasm, noting: "There were large crowds perambulating the streets and cheering the King at Buckingham Palace, & one could hear the distant roaring as late as 1 or 1.30 in the morning. War or anything that seems likely to lead to war is always popular with the London mob."12 Two days later, when the British declaration of war was issued at the Foreign Office, both the Daily News and the Daily Mail for August 5 reported "round after round of cheers." People flocked to enlist with huge patriotic enthusiasm, 750,000 of them in the first eight weeks and another million in the next two months.

If this fervour seems alien to us now, we should remember that not only did people have no conception of the kind of war for which they were enlisting, but furthermore, as Colin Nicolson suggests, in England attitudes to war at that time were still very much coloured by "the popularisation and diffusion of the codes and values of the Victorian public school. Because they were identified with success, and with those heroes who had made Britain pre-eminent, it is possible to detect their influence at all levels of Edwardian society."13 With the massive amount of popular reading material that had accompanied Imperial progress, people from all walks of life would have accepted gladly that the spirit that had built the Empire was one of loyalty, self-sacrifice, duty, courage, and sportsmanship. And now, here was a chance to show that those values could be held by everyone, and held not merely in order to conquer, but for the purpose of defending the weak and upholding the right. This was an intoxicating kind of patriotism to many then, reinforced in some quarters by the feeling that it was high time that Britain showed her mettle and proved her honour once again.

It was not just the crowds in the streets who were enthusiastic, either. Margot Asquith, wearily waiting in the Cabinet room at Downing Street with her husband, and with Lord Crewe and Sir Edward Grey (the Foreign Secretary), described in her autobiography the moment following the expiration of the ultimatum to Germany (at 11:00 p.m. British time, midnight German time), the moment that meant Britain was at war:
"I left to go to bed, and, as I was pausing at the foot of the staircase, I saw Winston Churchill with a happy face striding towards the double doors of the cabinet room."¹⁴ Later, in her diary for May 1915, she recorded Lloyd George’s recollections of what happened when Churchill strode through those double doors: "Winston dashed into the room, radiant, his face bright, his manner keen, one word pouring out on another how he was going to send telegrams to the Mediterranean, the North Sea, and God knows where. You could see he was a really happy man."¹⁵

Churchill’s reaction is interesting in that it reveals a man whose mind, like Newbolt’s, was formed before the shift in outlook that occurred at the turn of the century and who also believed in the forward progress of history, in the traditions enshrined in institutions, and in past glories and acts of individual heroism. "Mr. Churchill," wrote Isaiah Berlin in 1949, "for all his extrovert air, looks within, and his strongest sense is the sense of the past."¹⁶ In this essay ("Mr. Churchill"), Berlin paints Churchill, with his "clear, multicolored vision of history" and his formal, flowing eloquence, as a basically Victorian figure, endowed with all the driving force and moral convictions of that age: "His world is built upon the primacy of public over private relationships, upon the supreme value of action, of the battle between simple good and simple evil, between life and death; but above all, battle. He has always fought."¹⁷

For Churchill, and for like-minded men such as Newbolt, this idea that life was a fight was quite natural, stemming as it did from the belief in the efficacy of a chivalric code in the struggle against moral wrongdoing and evil. One only has to think of some of the more famous nineteenth-century hymns—Monsell’s "Fight the Good Fight," Baring Gould’s "Onward Christian Soldiers," and Ada R. Greenaway’s "Rise at the Cry of Battle," for instance—to realise how common was this figure of speech, this view of life, at the time. This does not mean that men or women lived their entire lives spoiling for a fight, but it does mean that there was less sitting back and waiting for "them" to do something, and more readiness to act and to serve a cause. It means also that if it appeared that the only way to combat a morally opposing force was to engage it in war, then war would be seen as inevitable, as honourable, and as right. And so it was possible for men like Newbolt to believe that the motives for this war were of the highest, and possible for Churchill to embrace wholeheartedly the prospect of the fight to
come. Having been responsible for much of Britain’s naval build-up of strength and not, of course, foreseeing the war of attrition that was to follow, Churchill felt that the country was fully prepared for war, and he was not just sanguine, but truly happy at the prospect.

The prospect of war was also welcomed by a large number of young public school men, who had been trained for service by their schools, but often with no actual end in sight, as T. C. Worsley explains:

The comparative lack of emergencies between the Boer War and the Great War left the training, so to speak, hung in the air, without the completion of the act. So that the Great War was welcomed and was embarked upon with a shortsighted and insecurely-founded enthusiasm by that great mass of Public School men who had so far had no opportunity to use their training.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, Worsley suggests, because public schools had increasingly failed to provide any really valid system of belief, any goal other than loyalty to the House and the school, there was a generation that fervently welcomed an event which gave them something to believe in, to live for—and to die for. We touched on this point earlier, with David Newsome’s observation that the public school ethos of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods had the effect of holding boys back from becoming men, to the point where the schools’ “code for living became so robust and patriotic in its demands that it could be represented as reaching its perfection in a code of dying.”\textsuperscript{19} Whether or not one can really accuse the public schools of inventing a code of dying in this way, it is quite certain that they fostered a spirit of volunteering in eighteen-year-olds who, having no practical experience of life, were particularly susceptible to the romantic view of battle, which included a vision of death that was, in terms of what was to come, almost unbearably innocent. We can see this ethos at work, for instance, in the 1906 public school novel, \textit{The Hill}, when Vachell has his Headmaster preach to the boys of Harrow on the death of one of their number in South Africa:

Henry Desmond died on another hill, and died so gloriously that the shadow of our loss, dark as it seemed to us at first, is already melting in the radiance of his gain. To die young, clean, ardent; to die swiftly, in perfect health; to die saving others from death, or worse—disgrace—to die scaling heights; to die and to carry with you into the fuller ampler life beyond, untainted hopes and aspirations, unembittered memories, all the freshness and gladness of May—is not that cause for joy rather than sorrow?\textsuperscript{20}
And such a view of death stayed with the boys to whom it had been shown. Newbolt himself, talking about the explorer as hero in *The Book of the Blue Sea*, which was published at the very beginning of the war, wrote: “Whether [these explorers] come back or not we envy and admire them, because they invade the territory of death, and that is where life is freest and keenest.” His son-in-law, Ralph, who served in the cavalry throughout the war, once told one of his daughters that “a soldier’s business is not to kill, but to die.” For him, the “code of dying” was more simply the Christian code by which he lived his life. For others, particularly for younger public school men at the start of the war, there seems to have been a desire to reach out beyond the muddle and materialism of life towards what appears to have been viewed as the clean glory of dying.

Even as late as 1917 (and two days before he was killed), a young Tank Corps lieutenant, Paul Jones, who had been educated at Dulwich College, could write:

Have you ever reflected on the fact that, despite the horrors of the war, it is at least a big thing? I mean to say that in it one is brought face to face with realities. The follies, selfishness, luxury and general pettiness of the vile commercial sort of existence led by nine-tenths of the people of the world in peace-time are replaced in war by a savagery that is at least more honest and outspoken. Look at it this way: in peace-time one just lives one’s own little life, engaged in trivialities, worrying about one’s own comfort, about money matters, and all that sort of thing—just living for one’s own self. What a sordid life it is! In war, on the other hand, even if you do get killed you only anticipate the inevitable by a few years in any case, and you have the satisfaction of knowing that you have “pegged out” in the attempt to help your country. You have, in fact, realised an ideal, which, as far as I can see, you very rarely do in ordinary life.

This ideal of death in the service of one’s country swept a vast quantity of middle and upper class, well-educated young men into the war right from the start, and sustained them, often for surprisingly long periods, through the brutal realities of what they were asked to face. But it was not, in general, an ideal that survived the war, for the moral vacuum that it was filling was itself punctured beyond repair not just by the appalling number of war-dead, but by the sordid, mechanised, unheroic anonymity of the way in which so many of them died.
Feelings at the start of the war, however, both from public school men and from people across all classes and incomes were generally those of acceptance, even welcome, and this apparent embracing of war is one of the things that exposes the depth of the chasm between 1914 and post-war views. Combined with a hatred of the German Kaiser and his people, which, fuelled by propaganda, grew rapidly after the outbreak of war, there was "a mighty sense of righteous exaltation," as Arthur Marwick puts it, "the one clearly reinforcing the other." He goes on: "It must be stressed that the exaltation was based on a deeply felt sense of moral purpose: it is this which, despite the unexpected grimness of the test, held aloft British enthusiasm till nearly the end of the war, then plunged it into a well of emptiness." Eventually, any moral gain there might have been was seen by many as far outweighed by the numbers slaughtered, the families bereaved. The moral purpose of the war became an almost irrelevant question. In place of the shared belief came cynicism, irony, loss of faith, and nihilism.

Newbolt was not one of those who stood out in the streets and cheered for war on that Bank Holiday weekend in August 1914. On July 30, he was the guest of honour at the Speech Day of St. Olave's Grammar School, Bermondsey, where he gave an address "remarkable for its lack of platitudes which were the normal ingredients of prize-giving ceremonies." Far from stirring the boys' imaginations with uplifting allusions to England's glorious history, he quietly warned them that their prizes were likely to seem very small in the face of the world-shaking war that would probably be upon them in a very few days. The next day, Saturday, he was writing to Alice Hylton:

These days are very like days before death—one doesn't know what may be the other side Armageddon, but it can't be the same world again. For the young of course it's more like an operation—they'll have a life of some kind, and everything will pass in time, as the war of 1870 passed for us and the new Europe became familiar. But for a man over fifty I feel there's a risk of the operation being too severe—it may well be that we shall not recover our happiness in the years that are left to us.

Even if, with countless other millions around Europe, Newbolt could not yet quite visualize the eventual enormity of this war, he obviously had a good idea that something catastrophic and outside his own experience was approaching. He was fifty-two at the start of the war, a difficult age
for the sort of intellectual and active man that he was, for he was too old
to enlist and yet just the right age to have his son, Francis, and his
son-in-law, Ralph, in the war from the beginning.

Francis almost immediately joined the Oxford and Buckinghamshire
Light Infantry, while Ralph, who had married Newbolt’s daughter,
Celia, only in June 1914, was already in a cavalry regiment, King
Edward’s Horse, at the start of the war. Newbolt was not to have a rest
from anxiety for the next four years. On the day in April 1915 that Celia
gave birth to her first child at Netherhampton, Francis was sent to the
front trenches at Ypres, and Ralph was ordered to Flanders, and Newbolt
confessed to feeling fearful and “bruised from head to foot.”26 Almost
as if to justify these fears, Francis remained in France for only another
two weeks before he was badly wounded, and invalided home, eventu­
ally to spend the rest of the war as an instructor. Ralph went through the
whole war without a scratch, succumbing only to a nasty bout of
influenza at the very end of it, but Newbolt suffered with and through
Celia, whose “four years of clenching teeth and paying the price before­
hand”27 must have been very hard for him (or indeed for any father such
as he) to live with.

At first, Newbolt himself had no very direct role to play in the affairs
of the war, for the government was much slower than they would be in
World War II to find work for its writers and academics. C. F. G.
Masterman, running the Department of Information, did include New­
bolt in a group of established writers whose mission was to create
inspiring literature (or what might more accurately be termed propa­
ganda) to uphold the strength of the British cause, and both this commit­
ment, and to a certain degree his own inclination, led to Newbolt’s
lecturing on “Patriotism and Poetry” all over the country and writing
the series of tales for boys that began with The Book of the Blue Sea in
1914, ended with The Book of the Grenvilles in 1921, and included Tales
of the Great War (1916), which began with “The Adventures of a
Subaltern,” an account of Francis’s experiences before he was
wounded.28 He was also commissioned to write a history of Francis’s
regiment, The Story of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light
Infantry (1915); he gave a series of lectures for the Royal Society of
Literature (the first of which were published as A New Study of English
Poetry in 1917); and he wrote the libretto for an opera, The Travelling
Companion (1916), which, set to music by Stanford, was well received
and attended, and continued to be performed into the thirties. In July 1915, he was made a Captain in the Wiltshire National Reserves, commanding 100 men of the Wilton Company, but he has left us no clue as to whether this may have seemed a poor substitute for the real thing. What we do know is that although he enjoyed writing about Francis’s experiences, he found his series of tales for boys a poor substitute both for the poetry and novels that he wished to write, and for the harsh reality of the present war. While writing *The Book of the Thin Red Line* in 1915, he wrote to Alice Hylton that the present book and the one before it (*The Book of the Blue Sea*) “fall so wearily short of everything that a book should be.” The letter continues:

I feel so strongly about the war that I can’t do anything at all in the way of expression—to spend words on the Peninsular heroes seems—at times—a kind of frivolity or insincerity. When I’m in that mood I simply can’t write: when it leaves me for a day or half a day I have to rush at a chapter like a shaky horse at a jump.29

Circumstances changed in 1917 when Lloyd George, needing to improve public morale in an increasingly difficult political and military climate, brought into his government the press lords, Rothermere (Minister of Air), Beaverbrook (Minister of Information), and Northcliffe (Director of Enemy Propaganda). H. G. Wells worked for Northcliffe, Arnold Bennett became Beaverbrook’s deputy, and Newbolt and John Buchan were to work together at the Ministry of Information. Initially, in August 1917, Newbolt was asked to join the Intelligence Department at the Admiralty, where he was to write accounts of events not yet to be generally released, and also a certain amount of propaganda, but where his primary directive was to write about the Navy for the general public, so that his first major commission was to write his book, *Submarine and Anti-Submarine* (1918). Twice a week, however, he also chaired the Departmental Committee at the Ministry of Information on the Distribution of Books Abroad, and in August of 1918, Newbolt moved permanently from the Admiralty to the Ministry of Information to become Controller of the All-World Cable Department, where his suggestion to Beaverbrook that a Wireless Service of Imperial News should continue to broadcast after the war was taken up with interest, and eventually went through in 1922.
Newbolt’s was not an idle war, then; neither did he sit around mourning the past or despairing about the future. Walter de la Mare remembered later that

Throughout the War, however dark the day and louring the prospect, he remained a steadfast optimist. He refused the easy refuge of despair, either on behalf of his own country, of the causes he had at heart, or of others in adversity. And if England was not inscribed upon his heart, then the scroll was blank.30

And Percy Lubbock, writing to Ella Coltman much later in 1940, told her:

[T]he only person I wanted to hear talking about the war was H.N. . . . There was something about his tone so perfectly just & sane & right—cheerful with seriousness, confident with gravity, plain & matter of fact with a sort of nobility—a tone—(I can still hear it so plainly)—different from that of anyone else.31

Newbolt was aware of his role as optimist and giver of encouragement, and it cannot always have been an easy one. To Ella Coltman, in whose house he had a room for the increasing amount of days that he had to spend in London, he wrote in April 1918:

London is exceedingly dreary, cold, rainy, and full of rumours of bad news. . . . I keep my end up, and I manage to chirp, for the sake of the country generally and my friends in particular. But I need support as much as anyone, and you have given it. You can hardly have realised what a refuge 29 [Campden Hill Road] is after a day of overwork and worry—and chirping.32

Newbolt never cavilled at the immense amount of work he was asked to do from 1917 onwards—indeed, he enjoyed feeling properly involved with the war effort—but there must have been moments when to be living a rather bleak life of paperwork at home, while at the same time aware that Francis and Ralph, and many of his closest friends’ children were shouldering the physical dangers of the war, cannot have been easy. Something that tends to be forgotten when we look back at the events of 1914–1918 is the vast number of people who stayed at home while the war was in progress, getting on with their lives in whatever way they were best able, helping with the war effort if they could, sometimes against the fighting, but often very supportive of it, believing that England was doing the right thing in combating the German wish for European dominance. Such people did not know first hand what the war
at the Front was like, and indeed the horror of it must have been hard to grasp, especially as many of those returning were unable through inhibition, inarticulacy or shock to describe it in any detail. The experience and the views of the civilians, however, particularly when there was a burden of guilt over unavoidable non-combatant status, cannot be ignored or invalidated simply because these civilians were not participating directly in the fighting.

Nicholas Hiley, in a 1988 review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of three books concerned with the imagery of World War I, discusses this idea, often taken for granted, of what he terms a "hierarchical view of reality":

An image of war as destructive and barbaric can easily exist alongside another of war as noble, just and heroic.

Yet most people today prefer to see war not as an abstraction, but as something tangible and concrete about which there can be no doubt; an affair of fighting and suffering which must be seen in terms of mud, blood and death. But if war is simply this discrete series of actions and activities, how are we to regard those who neither fight nor suffer during wartime? How, for example, are we to regard fiercely patriotic civilians, whose optimism may contrast strongly with the mood of the fighting soldiers? Are they not part of the same war? What has happened in practice is that some wartime experiences have come to be seen as less important and even as less real than others. Fighting and suffering have become "the reality of war", to which civilians are blind, and against which the whole range of wartime experiences and emotions has to be measured.33

This has a particular bearing on the way that we have come to view World War I poetry, which we usually accept as being an accurate expression of the "reality" of that war, and it affects also, therefore, the way that we view poetry that expresses sentiments antithetical to the war poets'. To Newbolt and many of his generation, there was still an abstract side to the war (to use Hiley's term), in that it still fitted into a bigger picture of inviolable, objective values, of right and wrong, of the strong defending the weak, of tragedy in a wide, historical sense. War poems such as Wilfred Owen's, which laid bare the suffering of the individual soldier and those close to him, but not in terms of a larger whole, had little appeal for Newbolt, who would have been even more distressed had he realised that such poems signalled a permanent shift away from a shared value system and a corporate identity. The gulf that lies between Newbolt’s
generation's confidence in impersonally held values and the post-war
generation’s uncertainty and personally held values is a gulf into which
understanding between the two belief systems has perhaps inevitably
tumbled. A good illustration of this, in fact, is Newbolt's initial response
to Owen's poetry, written in a letter to Alice Hylton, dated 2 August
1924, in which he was looking back to the same weekend, ten years
before, when the war was about to break out:

Much as I hate the idea of war and waste, and clearly as I see the obvious crash,
still I imagine we are we, and if next time came we should just should shoulder it again.

That's really what [Siegfried] Sassoon said to me on Tuesday—he would go
again, and if he then everybody. He has sent me Wilfred Owen's Poems, with
an Introduction by himself. The best of them I knew already—they are terribly
good, but of course limited, almost all on one note. I like better Sassoon's
two-sided collection—there are more than two sides to this business of war, and
a man is hardly normal any longer if he comes down to one. S.S. says that Owen
pitied others but never himself: I'm afraid that isn't quite true—or at any rate
not quite fair. To be a man one must be willing that others as well as yourself
should bear the burden that must be borne. When I looked into Douglas Haig I
saw what is really great,—perfect acceptance, which means perfect faith. Owen
and the rest of the broken men rail at the Old Men who sent the young to die:
they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart—they haven't the
experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony—'Who giveth
me to die for thee, Absalom my son, my son.' Paternity apart, what Englishman
of fifty wouldn't far rather stop the shot himself than see the boys do it for him?
I don't think these shell-shocked war poems will move our grandchildren
greatly—there's nothing fundamental or final about them—at least they only
put one figure into a very big equation, and that's not one of the unknown but
one of the best known quantities.34

Here is perfectly expressed Newbolt's belief in a shared value system,
in the collective English character, and in an external world lying outside
the individual. "To be a man one must be willing that others as well as
yourself should bear the burden that must be born": this is an unusual
and interesting point that also reflects his view of anima mundi, and the
way that he felt it shaped, or should shape, our individual lives. In a letter
written to Ella Coltman three years earlier, he was reflecting on how it
affects our notion of pain, for instance:
The more the individual identifies himself with his country, the less his own pain weighs upon him. This is infinitely truer of life and happiness. I cannot doubt that the Soul of the World enjoys its life. We are that life, & though there are pangs which to us as isolated beings must seem cruel & tragic, they cannot really be so, because in some way which we obviously cannot see at this moment, they are part of the life, which is the creative experience of the divine happiness. The horrors of this war show I think that we are too much hit by physical pain & the sight of it. Probably it is far more limited than we realise.... If you think it out, pain is a thing of Time. In Eternity we shall find that it is only part of the pattern.  

This reflects a view of pain and suffering that may seem alien, even harsh, to us now, but which stems quite naturally from Newbolt's belief in corporate life and his strong Christian belief in an afterlife. With such a concept of the relative unimportance of any one man's life when set against the Spirit of the World, his attitude to Owen becomes easier to understand, perhaps. He sees Owen's poetry as having too narrow a perspective on the war and too great an absorption with his own suffering—with self.

Bernard Bergonzi (in his book *Heroes' Twilight*), although he has the usual easy, dismissive epithet for Newbolt ("the Drake-boosting Edwardian Imperialist"), does have some sympathy for this view, seeing it, however wrongheaded, as a genuine and honest expression of "the pain and bafflement of those older civilians who were a regular target for the wrath of the soldier-poets." And Bergonzi agrees that Owen's range is narrow, that he never really contemplates the suffering of those at home, of the bereaved, of women, for instance. But, having acknowledged Owen's limitations, Bergonzi goes on to point out that

he gave the poetry of the anti-heroic attitude . . . as absolute an expression as the traditional heroic attitude had received in countless epics and dramas of the Western tradition. And this reflected a basic change in human sensibility. It was the inability to realise that such a change had taken place that caused the bafflement of Newbolt. War was no longer the same; modern technology had seen to that; and Owen ensured that it could no longer be seen as the same.  

That does not, however, make Owen "right," and Newbolt "wrong"; it simply points up the change in sensibility that had taken place, from an heroic attitude that saw the individual as part of a greater whole, to an
anti-heroic attitude that saw the individual as cut off from everything other than him or her self.

Newbolt’s rather negative response to Owen’s poetry is often held up to demonstrate just what a rigid conservative he was, but it is not so far away from that of another critic who, forty years later, would mourn the lack of the heroic attitude in the majority of World War I poetry. John H. Johnston, in 1964, wrote:

Although we no longer subscribe to rigid literary hierarchies, we still admire—perhaps the more profoundly because we find them so difficult to attain—the classic qualities of epic narrative, whether Greek or Germanic in origin: comprehensiveness, objectivity, and a sense of proportion and restraint, together with a positive, assertive attitude with respect to the values upon which motivation and action are based. In reading the poetry of World War I we are inevitably impressed by the absence of these qualities. We see a body of verse limited to a rather narrow range of personal experience, subjective and impressionistic in mode, marked by emotional excess, and motivated by disillusion, anger, or pity.38

And ten pages later, he adds to this: “Since the modern war poet can discern no significant relationship among the phenomena that confront him, he cannot positively relate his experiences to the moral whole of which they are necessarily a part.”39 It was this fragmentation of personal experience, and thus “one-sidedness,” that Newbolt could neither understand nor ever really come to terms with, and not simply the move away from more traditional forms or themes that modern poetry was taking, for he continued to be excited by much new poetry, being exhilarated by the poems of Roy Campbell, for instance.

There is no doubt that the system of values espoused by Newbolt and much of his generation was altered by the movement of history, and most especially by the chasm opened up by World War I. This alteration in the system of values was not a change in basic moral values, but a shift in the forms in which values were expressed, different ideas as to what they should be invested in, and also by the beginning of a widespread move towards personally held values, rather than a shared system.

Clearly one of the difficulties in dealing with World War I lies in locating the changing thoughts and trends within it, without over-generalizing so as to make it appear that the whole population suddenly did an about-face, and all began to think a certain way at a certain time. There
are a number of key concepts (for this study), about which feelings changed as a result of the war, but not necessarily unanimously, and not simultaneously. All that we can be sure of is that the central thread of thought that runs through the heart of any society, allowing us to say "this age believed" or "that age thought," had altered in its basic make-up, and that in some areas this alteration was so fundamental as to preclude any universal return to pre-war sentiments. Patriotism, duty and service, and heroism were areas particularly affected, and affected in ways that would inevitably inform subsequent responses to Newbolt's poetry.

The militant patriotic fervour which greeted the outbreak of war slowly and inevitably withered in the face of the reality of what had been unleashed. Moreover, while the more pastoral strand of patriotism, love of the land and of the countryside, continued to exist after the war (for patriotism is usually in evidence in some form or another), there were those who used the more heroic patriotism as a scapegoat, accusing it of being among the causes of the war. For such people, the very word "patriotism" became distasteful. Between the wars, angry young intellectuals and political activists dramatically changed, some might say damaged beyond repair, Victorian and Edwardian concepts of patriotism, severing all connections, as it were, with the pre-war position. Patriotism, in fact, became confused with the more dangerous phenomenon of nationalism and became seen, therefore, as a political mobilizing tool of the far right, a symbol of the kind of militant aggression so disastrous to world peace. By the 1930s, it was a concept that was being actively campaigned against, as Jessica Mitford remembered in *Hons and Rebels*:

Old concepts of patriotism, flag-waving, jingoism, were under violent attack by the younger writers. The creed of pacifism, born of a determination to escape the horrors of a new world war, swept the youth. Students organized demonstrations against the Officers' Training Corps.

The Oxford Union vowed [in 1931]: "Under no circumstances will we fight for King and Country." This action by a small handful of Oxford undergraduates produced electrifying results. The Oxford Pledge, as it came to be known, was taken up as a rallying cry by youth of all countries. We read of student meetings in France, Germany, far-off America, where the Oxford Union's message was discussed and adopted.40
The Oxford Pledge seems about as far away from Newbolt and his generation as one could get, and indeed, in some ways it is, for this was the era in which reaction against the war, and anti-war feeling in general, reached its height, and it was now that much of the best known anti-war (or, at the very least, critically reflective) literature was published: R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man* (1928) and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929), Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929), and many others. Often thought of being as much a reflection of its own age as it was of the war years, such literature nevertheless helped considerably to widen the chasm between the generations on either side of the Great War, and if patriotism was again a word that could be spoken, and a concept that could be embraced by the start of World War II, there was no longer any sympathy with the pre-1914 expression of it as an overt rallying cry to a war fought to defend the right and to win honour and glory. War was no longer generally viewed as a matter of winning in that way, and the pride in Britain's strength in Empire that had produced Newbolt's kind of robust, Elizabethan/Chivalric mix of patriotism was viewed down the wrong end of a 1918-1914 telescope as being very small, very far away, and wrong.

Newbolt's brand of patriotism automatically included within it the notion of serving one's country to the best of one's ability. Indeed, the Victorian and Edwardian middle-class moral code held that service to others always came before interests of self, and, as we have seen, this notion of service was an integral part of the public school ethos of the time, stemming as it did from the chivalric ideal of sublimating the individual will for the good of the brotherhood. The highest form of service was, of course, to one's country in times of need, and in England, duty was historically bound up with patriotism and with national identity. The Empire had been carved out by men who served their country, and so duty could be seen (by all classes) as a concrete value, an objective, external value. However, service and duty were two words towards which attitudes were also altered by the war.

As the war went on, the whole notion of duty narrowed, as the overriding purpose of it slowly slipped away under the misery of the reality of service. Men became more concerned with immediate physical
and mental survival than with the larger issues of serving their country in her defence of civilization. Duty narrowed down to the regiment and to comrades; ideals were often replaced by practical concerns. And there was an acceleration of this narrowed view after January 1916, when compulsory service was introduced in Britain, with the perhaps inevitable result that less was it a case of fighting out of a sense of duty, as so many volunteers had done, and more and more was it a case of simply doggedly surviving till the end came. Facing personal fear and not letting oneself down—hoarding reserves of individual moral strength—was of supreme importance. The responsibility was to self first, or to those immediately around one, for beyond that, most things seemed precarious and abstract. And so the value of duty, in the Victorian sense, was severely undermined by the brutal consequences of actually performing that duty, as it and other values like loyalty and patriotism came up against the reality of modern war.41

For those at home, too, it became more and more difficult to retain the clear vision of what was being fought for that most had had at the start of the war. It was one’s duty to fight for one’s country, to uphold the cause that he or she espoused. But doubts began to creep in, and there were many who became increasingly troubled by the lack of progress, the lack of recognizable victories, and the steadily mounting flow of casualties. On both sides, young men were dying by the tens of thousands, and for many people, their deaths obscured pre-war notions of loyalty and duty, making it hard to define any longer exactly what such notions meant.

If patriotism and service and duty to one’s country had altered as concepts by the end of the war, then perhaps it is not surprising that the whole notion of the hero should also have undergone some radical changes. Heroism is not something that goes in and out of fashion—the hero or the heroine has value for every society in every age—but what particular virtues, what kinds of deeds, and what people go to make up the heroes of any given time do change, and nowhere more noticeably than during and after World War I. One of the reasons for this is that before the war, heroic virtues (coming under the umbrella of patriotism) were seen in terms of the chivalric ideal—courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice, service, etc.—and were therefore invested mainly in men and women who served their country and brought glory and honour to her name. But in spite of many acts of conspicuous and incredible bravery
by officers and men alike, the chivalric ideal became lost in a war not of more traditional battles against foes whose courage might be honoured afterwards, but of attrition, of defence, of an often unseen enemy, of random and massive shelling, and of the horrors of gas. For more people than T. S. Eliot, the only image from chivalry still left intact after the war was that of the waste land.

An event illustrating the early chivalric feeling that did not survive the war has perhaps been inflated by history, but occurred nonetheless: the Christmas 1914 fraternization at the Front. Modris Eksteins, in his fascinating book *Rites of Spring*, suggests that this fraternization occurred because it exemplified the values that both sides were fighting for, and these of course were the chivalric values of pre-war years. As early as the eleventh century, when the first crusades were forming the basic code of chivalry, the Truce of God had been proclaimed to stop fighting on Sundays and holy days, and this idea that it was honourable to cease hostilities particularly on Christmas Day continued to crop up intermittently through subsequent ages. Fraternization occurred between the British and the French one Christmas during the Peninsular war a hundred years before 1914, and on Christmas Day during the Siege of Ladysmith in 1899, the Boers fired only six shells into the town, each one stuffed with Christmas pudding. At the start of World War I, “This notion of probity and decorum, of playing the game—leaving the enemy in peace on the holiest of holy days—was a central part of the British sense of ‘fair play’. The opponent was still an opponent rather than an enemy. . . .” 42 This is supported by Robert Graves’s straightforward account of this 1914 period in *Goodbye To All That*:

A professional soldier’s duty was simply to fight whomever the King ordered him to fight. With the King as colonel-in-chief of the regiment it became even simpler. The Christmas 1914 fraternization, in which the battalion [the Second Royal Welch] was among the first to participate, had had the same professional simplicity: no emotional hiatus, this, but a commonplace of military tradition—an exchange of courtesies between officers of opposing armies.43

But this “professional simplicity” did not last. There were truces in 1915, but only a few cases of active fraternization, while in 1916, there were only a handful of cases, and in 1917 and 1918, virtually none. The values for which the soldiers were fighting had lost their clarity, and the enemy could no longer be seen in personal terms, but merely as a sort
of vast maw into which not named heroes but a steady diet of "unknown soldiers" was fed. "The death of a hero!" mocks Richard Aldington's narrator, in the novel of the same name: "What mockery, what bloody cant! What sickening putrid cant! George's death is a symbol to me of the whole sickening bloody waste of it, the damning stupid waste and torture of it... The Army did its bit, but how could the Army individually mourn a million 'heroes'?"44

There seemed no doubt that the hero could no longer be seen in terms of the chivalric ideal alone, and yet the need to value heroism and to see it and be uplifted by it was still there. What appeared to occur was a shift in the view of the hero away from the chivalric (or epic) and towards the stoic. Determination and grit—stoicism—in the face of tedium, fear, horror and loss became, as we have seen, the valued virtues during this war, and thus the lowliest conscript in the trench could be seen to have "heroic" qualities if he could just stick it out long enough. There is a reversal of viewpoint here, in giving the hero's role to the common soldier, but despite acts of positive and aggressive heroism from many young officers, it is true that when World War I is looked back upon in a general way, it is the common soldier at the Front, more than the officer class, who is seen in heroic terms.

This does not mean, of course, that people would henceforth look for their heroes only in the common man, or only in the underclasses. But it does signal a shift in what they were looking for in a hero, and after the war, there was a further shift away from the chivalrous hero in public service, and towards the hero who could express individuality—who could rise above the herd for a variety of different reasons and through a variety of different deeds. One twentieth-century hero whom his biographer, John Mack, describes as being "a transitional figure in the history of heroism" is T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence certainly exhibited many of the qualities that we associate with the traditional, chivalric hero, constantly striving as he did towards ideals of courage, endurance, and a fighting skill that would raise him above others and allow him to lead an oppressed people to new freedom. But he also, as Mack tells us, felt a constant conflict between his duties as soldier-hero and his own personal feelings about the sacredness of human life. And "it is this conflict about human life, the inability to justify killing, the self-consciousness, guilt and exaggerated responsibility-taking that make Lawrence a valued example for the [twentieth] century, a contemporary
hero.” In other words, whereas the archetypal chivalric hero would have seen the fight as external to his individual self, Lawrence was highly introspective about war, internalizing it and assuming a degree of personal responsibility for his actions that he could not hope to shoulder for long without inflicting self-damage.

A post-war hero less transitional than Lawrence, perhaps, but who nevertheless appealed both to the conservative and to the new worlds, was Lindbergh, who was the first twentieth-century “star” in England (and France) to be mobbed, worshipped, and adored by crowds numbering hundreds of thousands who frantically tore relics from his person and his plane, who had their clothes torn in return, who screamed and fainted in the crush. Lindbergh had values that appealed to the older generation, in that he didn’t drink or smoke, wouldn’t take any financial rewards for his exploit, and was palpably imbued with courage, endurance, and good moral Christian virtues. On the other hand, Modris Eksteins suggests, Lindbergh appealed to the new generation because what he had done was to fly, a great symbol of freedom, and also, as a legacy from World War I, of an individual, cleaner kind of heroism.

Aerial combat was the one kind of combat in the war that continued to hold on to its chivalric metaphors; pilots still engaged in heroic one-to-one fighting, still remembered to salute their opponents’ courage, and generally felt that they remained above the brutal anonymity of the war on the ground. Newbolt himself noted this in his 1916 essay, “The War in the Air,” which appeared in Tales of the Great War:

[O]ur airmen are singularly like the knights of the old romances. They go out day by day, singly or in twos and threes, to hold the field against all comers, and to do battle in defence of those who cannot defend themselves. There is something especially chivalrous about these champions of the air: even the Huns, whose military principles are against chivalry, have shown themselves affected by it. More than once they have come back after a victory and dropped a message to tell of the safety of our captured airmen.

Among others who noted the chivalric spirit attached to flying was Cecil Lewis, then a young ex-public school boy from Oundle, who flew with the R.F.C. (and then the R.A.F.) from the autumn of 1915, when he was seventeen, till the end of the war:
To be alone, to have your life in your hands, to use your own skill, single-handed against the enemy. It was like the lists of the Middle Ages, the only sphere in modern warfare when a man saw his adversary and faced him in mortal combat, the only sphere where there was still chivalry and honour. If you won, it was your own bravery and skill; if you lost, it was because you had met a better man.48

So when Lindbergh flew the Atlantic from Roosevelt Field in New York to Le Bourget in Paris in May 1927, he was conjuring up those gallant pilots and a form of warfare that perhaps had less shame attached to it, and he was also becoming a symbol of the freedom that flying suggested and that many individuals craved. He was certainly conjuring up some of the virtues of the chivalric ideal, particularly courage and endurance. But there was a difference, and it is the difference that makes Lindbergh a modern hero. He was not flying the Atlantic for mankind, or for his country, or for any person save for himself alone, to prove to himself that he could do it. His virtues were not in the service of his country, but in the service of freedom and the individual: “Man had been set loose. Freedom was no longer a matter of being at liberty to do what is morally right and ethically responsible. Freedom had become a personal matter, a responsibility above all to oneself.”49 Individuals were taking responsibility for their own values, thereby helping to precipitate the shift from impersonal to personally held values. No longer could it be assumed that one code of moral values would be accepted and interpreted in a similar fashion by the vast majority of the literate population, and this was to have far-reaching effects on the arts and on attitudes towards much late-Victorian and Edwardian art in particular.