INTRODUCTION: UNTOLD WAR

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If we had come back in 1916 we could have unleashed a storm out of the pain and intensity of our experiences. If we go back now we shall be weary, broken-down, burnt-out, rootless and devoid of hope. We shall no longer be able to cope. No one will understand us [...] ¹

Perhaps we have misunderstood the First World War. However, this is not for want of trying. Over the past twenty years there has been intensive historical study of the conflict which has provided a rich variety of new assessments and debunked older myths. The staple teachings about the war, which had become established ‘truths’ by the 1970s, have largely been revised. To cite but some examples: it has been conclusively shown that German atrocities did happen in Belgium and France in 1914; that the European response to the outbreak of war in 1914 was not one of unmitigated enthusiasm; that the conflict was not seen as futile by civilian populations at the time who were often prepared to go to great lengths to support their country’s war effort; and that the Treaty of Versailles was not the principal cause of interwar Germany’s economic problems.² In addition, the belief in a rigid separation between the world of the front line and the home front has been radically revised—the interaction between the two has been shown to be far greater than previously thought. Although civilians’ and soldiers’ actual physical movement between the two spheres was limited, letters, parcels, newspapers, photographs and the system of leave meant that a constant cultural exchange occurred. Our view of the war’s impact on gender relations has also become far more nuanced. For example, women’s entry into previously male-dominated

spheres of employment during the conflict is no longer seen simply as a straightforward process of emancipation.\(^3\)

It may, therefore, seem churlish to describe the First World War as ‘untold,’ given the range of new research taking place and the significant historical interest in the conflict. Yet the idea of the war as ‘untold’ is indeed fitting. Not only does the ambiguity of the term express the dramatic scale and unprecedented nature of the 1914–1918 conflagration, it also aptly captures the reality that much of what we know about the war is still partial or based upon old assumptions which would benefit from new examination. There are still many questions that have yet to be answered. In this sense, historians continue to work within the initial postwar problematic, first posed by those who lived through the conflict, summed up by Vera Brittain as ‘a desire to understand how the whole calamity had happened.’\(^4\)

This desire continues to inspire historical study and new interpretations. Major historiographical debates about the nature of the war have taken place in the past fifteen years and have opened up vast new areas for research. Principally, the shift towards a cultural investigation has led to a dynamic cultural history of the conflict and has also revitalized the diplomatic, social, economic and military histories of 1914–1918. This book is testimony to the vibrancy of this process—each of the contributions in different ways has integrated elements of the new cultural analysis. In addition, however, each of the chapters is loosely linked by a broader question which emerges throughout this volume: how to locate the war in terms of a specific, coherent 1914–1918 cultural-historical space, given the problematic scale of the conflict and the shifting, plural nature of the global war experience. The range and diversity of the war experiences that emerge in this collection illustrate both the inner and outer limits of the conflict’s parameters. The sheer variety of war experiences revealed here challenges the very definition of any unitary ‘war’ of 1914–1918: its location, its functions and its principal agents emerge as more far flung, diverse and inchoate than the keywords often used to describe it—catastrophe, total, great—can convey. Perhaps what this volume offers is, in some regards, a series of ‘wars’ each with their own very different relationship to the traditional, historical paradigm of the Western Front fulcrum. Michael Howard has already suggested

\(^3\) On women and the war, see Macmillan (2003) and Grayzel (2003).

\(^4\) Brittain (1999 [1933]), p. 471.