CHAPTER TWO

HIDDEN COURAGE:
POSTWAR LITERATURE AND ANGLICAN ARMY
CHAPLAINS ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914–1918

Edward Madigan

For Anglican Regimental Chaplains we had little respect. If they had shown one-tenth the courage, endurance, and other human qualities that the regimental doctors showed, we agreed, the British Expeditionary Force might well have started a religious revival.¹

Robert Graves was perhaps the most scathing postwar critic of the Anglican army chaplains who served with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) during the Great War, but he was by no means the only one. The memoirs of Siegfried Sassoon, C. E. Montague and Guy Chapman, the fiction of C. R. Benstead and the lexicographical writing of John Brophy and Eric Partridge all present Anglican chaplains in a mediocre light. They are portrayed as being, at best, well-meaning but out-of-touch, and, at worst, cowardly and hypocritical. Yet in his fifth dispatch, Field Marshall Sir John French wrote that he could not ‘speak too highly of the devoted manner in which all chaplains, whether with troops in the trenches or in attendance of the sick and wounded in casualty-clearing stations […] have worked throughout the campaign.’² When introduced to a senior chaplain on a visit to the Headquarters of the Chaplains’ Department, French’s successor, Douglas Haig, famously said ‘a good chaplain is as valuable as a good general.’³ First World War generals, however, are a much-maligned group themselves and remain, despite recent revisionist scholarship, highly controversial.⁴ The memoirs of veterans like Graves and Sassoon,

¹ Graves (1960), p. 197.
² Winnifrith (1917), p. 87.
³ Blackburne (1932), p. 115.
on the other hand, have become classics of twentieth century literature and continue to be reprinted.

As no scholarly study has yet examined Anglican chaplains as a group, the negative picture put forward by a handful of memoirists has become the received knowledge concerning their performance on the Western Front. Using personal narrative material and statistical information relating to a representative group of Anglican chaplains, this chapter will contrast the postwar image of the Anglican padre with the realities of his war performance. It will be seen that the negative picture posited by postwar writers, while possibly rooted in real experiences, is unrepresentative and far from complete, and that Anglican chaplains played a significant, valuable and often valued role in the BEF from 1914 to 1918.

The Postwar Criticism

Robert Graves

Robert Graves’ Goodbye to All That was first published in 1929, the year that also saw the publication of Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms and the first English translations of Ernst Jünger’s Storm of Steel and Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front. Goodbye to All That does not begin and end with Graves’ war experience; events from the author’s childhood, adolescence, and postwar adulthood are also included in the narrative, but his time spent in the Royal Welch Fusiliers emerges as the defining formative experience of his young life. Graves’ encounter with war was traumatic and indeed the writing of Goodbye to All That was a conscious attempt to deal with this trauma, putting it behind him by literally saying ‘goodbye’ to it. In view of this, it is perhaps understandable that the narrative is often quite bitter in tone, and that those individuals or groups who are deemed to have made a

5 ‘Anglican’ in this context will refer to all clergymen of the world-wide Anglican Communion. This encompasses not only the clergy of the Church of England but also those of the Episcopal Anglican Church in Scotland, the Church of Ireland and Anglicans from the Dominions and colonies. As the Anglican Church in Wales was not formally disestablished until 1920, Welsh Anglican clergymen were members of the Church of England during the period in question.