CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN CONTEMPORARY
BRITISH POPULAR CULTURE*

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Faced with the terrifying maelstrom of the Western Front, with apocalyptic artillery barrages and seemingly endless battles of attrition, it was natural enough for the soldiers of the First World War to consider their place in history and the war’s effect on subsequent generations. If one reaction was traumatized pessimism, another was resigned humor. In 1917, a British medical officer recorded his reactions to a music hall show put on for the troops:

It is a kind of divisional follies, but none the less good for all that. A sort of Panto, all done by men who have been over the top, or at least done front line work…The plot is laid in 1967, and is really awfully clever. War still progressing, and the men’s grandsons were rolling up. Leave only granted once in 21 years.¹

The idea that the war would resonate down the ages was clearly present at the time. It is hard to believe, however, that this 1917 audience would have predicted the march across the battlefield of the Somme in 2006 by a party of living historians dressed as members of the British Expeditionary Force, several of whom were seeking relatives’ names on the Thiepval monument to the missing of the battle of the Somme. This march was just one of a number of activities and diversions arranged to mark the ninety-first anniversary of the battle. Around the battlefield itself, this included commemoration ceremonies, a cycle tour and a marathon. The wider commemorative effort in Britain included television documentaries, exhibitions at national and local museums

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and on the World Wide Web, and theatrical performances, all of which received extensive coverage from the news media.2

As this attention illustrated, the First World War remains a key reference point in contemporary British culture. Its public visibility is perhaps more intermittent than in the period around the fiftieth anniversaries when so many of the texts central to its modern mythology were constructed, but actual participation in commemorative events such as the two minutes silence on 11 November has increased rather than fallen in the last ten years. The ninetieth anniversary of the Somme received more extensive newspaper coverage than its predecessor ten years earlier.3 This does not seem to be a war that is fading away.

Most Britons share a set of received beliefs about the First World War—that it was a muddy, horrific, futile disaster in which a generation of young heroes was senselessly sacrificed by its foolish elders. These beliefs are so strong that they can survive almost any amount of exposure to different historical interpretations, internal contradictions and partial alteration. It is quite possible, for example, for individuals to celebrate their ancestors’ achievements whilst at the same time believing that the war was without purpose. The idea of the First World War as a victory is still foreign to most Britons: according to the title of a recent BBC Radio 4 series, it is one of those ‘Things We Forgot to Remember.’

This view plainly reflects much of the pain and horror felt at the time in reaction to Britain’s only experience of taking, briefly, the principal role in a land battle between major powers. Yet reducing the war to a few images of useless mud and pain simplifies the variety and complexity of contemporary responses. The war also meant, to different people at different times, comradeship, shared purpose, triumph and survival as well as death, horror and futility.

How and why the modern version of the war emerged—by no means inevitably—in the eighty-five years after 1914 was the subject of my 2005 book, *The Great War: Myth and Memory.*4 This chapter will take the arguments developed there and apply them to representations of the war produced since 2000, in the process testing the hypotheses put forward about the probable future of remembrance.

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2 For lists of events see Osprey (2006); Department of the Somme (2006).
3 Todman (2006a).
4 Todman (2005).