REVIEW


Though nearly a century has passed since the last shells fell on the Western Front, World War I continues to hold a place in our collective consciousness. In Scotland, this is evident not only in the well-known National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle, but also in the existence of less conspicuous, though equally solemn monuments in towns and villages throughout the country. Through such memorials, it is clear to the outsider that ‘The Great War’ greatly affected the whole of Scottish society. In this light, it is little wonder that this conflict invokes scholarly attention to this day.

In the preface, Trevor Royle’s *The Flowers of the Forest* states that his work sets out to tell ‘The story of the role played by Scotland and Scots in influencing the British management of the war and of how the country was changed irrevocably as a result of the experience of over four years of warfare’ (p. xiii). In tracing this involvement, an underlying theme is revealed - the first ‘total war’ - and Royle examines how it impacted upon the lives of Scotsmen and women from all walks of life. His subsequent twelve chapters are organised in roughly chronological fashion, from Scotland on the eve of war, to the nation in the aftermath of armistice.

The initial chapter discusses notable pre-war political and socioeconomic trends such as devolution, crime, and growing economic inertia. From this evidence, Royle argues that ‘there were signs which suggested that Scotland, or at least Lowland Scotland, was enjoying one of its periods of economic success and social well-being’ (p. 17). To many Scots who followed
developments, ‘the declaration of war was accompanied by a mixture of relief, anticipation and excitement’ (p. 23). Royle believes the country witnessed a surge of patriotism ‘which often bordered on hysteria’ (p. 25), yet there existed segments such as the Independent Labour Party that viewed Britain’s entry into the war with deep suspicion, suggesting that Belgian sovereignty was merely a convenient excuse to go to war. Despite these reservations, war led to a rush to mobilize, disrupting summer camps and exercises. Equally hectic were mass enlistments; in the case of Glasgow, ‘on one day in October 35,000 men enlisted, as many as had been recruited during the whole of 1913’ (p. 30). The author cites, among other reasons, the traditional Scottish respect for military institutions, patriotism, peer pressure, and the escape from poverty and squalor as major contributing factors towards the proportionally high levels of recruitment throughout the country.

Chapter two takes as its focus the structure, composition and function of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). In addition to his description of the BEF’s Scottish contingent, Royle draws attention to key socioeconomic dynamics. For example, while most of the rank-and-file came from the urban poor, officers were largely derived from the upper classes (p. 46). Yet class considerations were overshadowed by community ties, as most regiments were affiliated with a particular locality. Indeed, the typical Scottish regiment of the period was ‘part family and part fighting formation.’ (p. 50) Having discussed both regular and territorial armies in his second chapter, Royle devotes a portion of chapter three to a unique phenomenon of the First World War - the ‘New Armies.’ Drawn from appeals to patriotism and the desperate need for manpower, the author considers Lord Kitchener’s brainchild to have ‘a true citizens’ army with the men coming from every walk of life and representing every social class’ (p. 67). Those joining New Armies were eager to serve their country, but underestimated the level of carnage which awaited them. ‘It would take the great killing battles of 1915 and the first heavy losses … to change any idea that it was a romantic adventure’ (p. 77). The bulk of ‘First Blood’ is devoted to Royle’s description of such battles, including Neuve Chappelle, Aubers Ridge, Festubert, and Loos. On account of poor leadership and planning, ‘all failed to achieve the Allies’ objectives and all produced large numbers of casualties’ (p. 79). In the case of Loos, ‘hardly a community in Scotland was left unaffected’ by
the action there (p. 93). Scottish soldiers learned valuable lessons from these setbacks, such as the use of creeping artillery and sustained machine-gun fire. These tactics, combined with an enduring will to fight, would undeniably factor in later victories. After Loos, Scottish forces would not be as great a participant in massed attacks; however, they would still play leading roles at the Somme and at Arras. The aftermath of Loos and accounts of Scotland’s role in the aforementioned battles are Royle’s focus in chapter four—‘End of Innocence’, while chapter five shifts the reader’s attention away from the Western Front to Scottish participation elsewhere, including Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, Salonika and Palestine.

Chapter six, ‘The Land, the Sea and the Clash of the Battle Fleets’, is comprised of a variety of themes: the experience of leave, military discipline, conscription, and naval warfare. Leave was considered by soldiers to be enjoyable, yet dislocating since home was ‘far removed from the harsh realities of front-line life’ (p. 153). The recurring sight of a kilted Scottish soldier was not the only indicator that the nation was ‘engaged in a long and increasingly arduous war. By far the most visible presence of the war effort was provided by the warships of the Royal Navy’ (p.157). Defensive considerations led to Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands being designated the navy’s primary war station. Although ideal for this purpose, sailors did not view the area in such a favourable light on account of its harsh climate. Returning to his notion that WWI had an indelible impact upon the whole of Scottish society, Royle turns his attention to fishermen. ‘During the war 675 fishing boats were sunk by enemy action while fishing or flying the colours of the Royal Naval Reserve’ (p.175). A major factor in the sinking of ships both military and civilian was German mines. The untimely death of Lord Kitchener at sea serves as a powerful example of danger presented by these devices. And while peril existed at sea, Royle notes that ‘the Scottish mainland did not suffer any major German assault during the war’ (p.178).

Issues on the homefront take centre-stage in chapters seven through nine. ‘The Workshop of War’ shows that the demands of war proved especially beneficial to Scottish industry. The Clyde shipyards experienced a boom, while sectors such as steel-working, munitions, jute and coal also profited. The industry-heavy Glasgow indeed flourished, while the same was experienced elsewhere, as Dundee and Edinburgh too witnessed
heightened economic fortunes: ‘All this was progress and it brought employment and wealth’ (p. 193). Yet, as the author shows, while manufacturing prospered, other aspects of industrial society were adversely affected, particularly already-strained labour relations. Wartime price and rent increases led to strike actions, often led by women (pp. 188-9). Additional topics such as food supplies and alcohol consumption form the remainder of this chapter.

Changing perceptions of gender roles and the steps taken to address manpower shortages are the subjects of chapter eight. With able men required at the front, women filled their places in workshops and factories throughout Scotland. This process, called ‘substitution’ proved effective. Although the munitions industry was the single biggest employer of female labour, women took on jobs across a broad spectrum of industries and public services (p. 207). Two areas examined in detail are the Women’s Police Service (p. 213) and women’s hospital work (p. 221). The effect of wartime demands on Scottish labour and individual liberties are studied in chapter nine, ‘Red Clydeside and Opposing Armageddon.’ Paying particular attention to the series of strikes (and subsequent government over-reaction) that occurred between the summer of 1915 and January 1919, Royle argues that this event ‘was central to Scotland’s experience during the First World War’ (p. 231). The forces of ‘Red Clydeside’ - anti-war protestors and trade unionists - were united by an overlapping series of grievances (strikes deemed illegal, growth of unskilled/female labour, mandatory leaving certificates, etc). Despite jail sentences and a failure to bring about an immediate effect, in the long-term their movement was successful in shaking the existing political structure. In addition to trade unionists, groups such as anti-conscriptionists, conscientious objectors and suffragettes are also shown to have faced the government’s wrath throughout these years.

Chapter eleven returns the reader’s focus to the front-line and Scottish involvement in the war’s final phase. Here, one is treated to Royle’s skillful narration of the series of operations that would ultimately produce German surrender. Because of his impact on the prosecution of the war, the controversial General Douglas Haig is the principal subject of this chapter. Here Royle assesses his leadership and legacy, concluding that Haig was a man characterized by his professionalism and loyalty to his soldiers, but also his stubbornness and inflexibility. The end result
was that he ‘was slowly transmogrified into an incompetent and stupid figurehead who had on his conscience the lives of thousands of men’ (p. 272). This image, the author suggests, was the result of a dedicated smear campaign among Haig’s contemporaries.

The remaining two chapters centre on how Armistice and the aftermath of the Great War affected Scotland. Gratitude and satisfaction accompanied German surrender, but the problems associated with caring for wounded/disabled/homeless ex-servicemen were yet to be fully appreciated. In addition, Scots continued to see action in other conflicts, particularly in the Russian Civil War and the Irish War of Independence. Furthermore, death continued to have its presence felt, most notably in the 1918-19 flu pandemic and through accidents such as the Iolare disaster in which 205 ‘men who had survived the war only to be drowned in home waters.’ (p. 281). The topic of memorials is also explored, with the author providing a list of front-line cemeteries (p. 283). The final chapter ‘Aftermath’ examines how broader UK developments pertained to Scotland. Here Royle discusses a variety of themes, including: the fall of the Liberals and rise of Labour and Conservative, the decline of Scottish industry, reforms in land, housing and the military, emigration, and the Anglicization of the Scottish economy.

In assessing the scholarly qualities displayed by Trevor Royle, mixed judgments are on offer. Compared to more academic works, The Flowers of the Forest offers comparatively little in terms of original research and conclusions. Yet there is significant value to be found nonetheless. Although he may not have intended such, Royle’s work can be seen as forming a solid synthesis of current scholarship pertaining to Scotland and the First World War. As indicated in both his preface and in his notes, for much of his information, he turns to a host of well-established scholars and their respective studies; for example, Tom Devine, Richard Finlay, Arthur McIvor, Ian S. Wood, and Catriona Macdonald. Furthermore, his exceptional talents at narration produce a work that is both thought-provoking and engaging, reflective of his professional experience as the Diplomatic Editor at the Sunday Herald. In sum, this is vivid, solidly-written book, drawing upon the best in recent scholarship.

As The Flowers of the Forest shows, the First World War was a deeply personal experience, one which affected not only those who fought, but countless others on the homefront as well.
Derek Young’s *Forgotten Scottish Voices from The Great War* is built upon this concept, as it relies heavily upon firsthand accounts - diaries, letters, and other correspondence - of the conflict. In his preface, Young states he does this as ‘it is for others to recall the events which had an impact upon all sections of Scottish society’ (p. 6). His book consists of sixteen chapters, which form three distinct sections: mobilization, trench warfare, and other facets of life as a Scottish soldier in the First World War.

The first four chapters ‘Mobilise for War,’ ‘Awa’ for a Sodjer,’ ‘Training,’ and ‘Ower the Sea tae...’ focus on reactions towards the outbreak of war as well as how the nation prepared for conflict. Although some sections of society viewed the start of hostilities with apprehension, the general sentiment was one of enthusiasm. Letters and diaries reflect the varied experience of mobilisation, as for some it brought forth a ‘party atmosphere’ as men rushed to war stations. For others, their departing was a much less festive affair, especially if travel was done at night. (pp. 11-13) Overall, the rush to war was more pronounced in Scotland, as she provided by proportion more manpower (by Young’s figure, 690,235) than any other home nation. A variety of reasons compelled men to enlist: appeals to Scottish tradition, local government inducements, peer pressure, and, in the case of Highlanders, clan ties. Such factors, combined with the opportunity for adventure, proved a powerful attraction to serve. In terms of training, circumstances dictated that it be ‘as short and practical as possible’ (p. 30). Young’s third chapter details how soldiers dealt with the staggering volume of recruits coupled with overstretched resources. Chapter four details Scottish experiences in travelling to war. For many soldiers who had never been able to venture far from the locality of their birth, the opportunity for distant travel and encounters with foreign peoples was itself an adventure. However this was also a process characterized by cramped conditions, poor accommodation, on occasion painfully slow rates of speed (in the case of some French trains, as little as four miles per hour!), and the change in mood as soldiers drew closer to the front-lines (pp.55-56). Also featured are accounts of the tragic 1915 Gretna rail disaster. (p. 49)

Understandably, the core of Young’s work centres on the subject of life and death in the trenches. ‘In the Beginning’ describes initial battles, capturing ‘the confusion, if not the desperation, of the initial weeks of the war’ (p. 61). The means by which soldiers reduced the risk of being maimed or killed is an
important theme of this chapter. Indeed, the very nature of trench warfare was borne out of necessity. With the advent of machine guns and high-explosive shells, one officer, Captain R.H.W. Rose (Scottish Rifles) wrote: ‘Entrenching is most necessary ... without trenches you would stand no chance’ (p.62). Although Young concludes ‘In the Beginning’ with Scottish accounts of the 1914 Christmas Truce (p. 68-71), much of this chapter serves to introduce the reader to the filth, discomfort and sheer horror experienced by many of Scotland’s men; such forms a central theme in the ensuing chapter.

‘Trench Warfare’ depicts the evolution of the trench system. According to Young, ‘Life in the early trenches of 1914 and 1915 can best be described as one of squalor with, at worst, a complete disregard for the welfare of the soldier’ (p. 75). By the winter of 1915-16, trench warfare became more organized, even systematic. However, much of this would escape the attention of the common soldier, as he ‘had no conception of the overall plan ... His life revolved around a limited world consisting of his immediate locality’ (p. 79). Under these circumstances came a particular routine a soldier had to learn quickly in order to survive. Central was that ‘the front-line soldier could never relax his guard.’ (p. 81). With a single careless move one could fall victim to German snipers who constantly scanned Allied lines. Night and its cover of darkness was the only time in which safety could even be partially guaranteed. Above all, despite the various precautions, there was the realization that death could occur at any moment. Further intricacies of trench warfare are also revealed in this chapter, such as the resentment held by infantry towards artillery, as any fire sent would be returned in kind - with infantry being the primary recipients (p. 91). Also, as warfare on the Western Front became more static, siege tactics were more heavily relied upon and here the skills of Scottish miners as sappers and demolitions experts were in high demand (p. 97). Although battles were a common feature of life at the front, equally present were long uneventful periods spent keeping watch, doing maintenance and preparatory work, and simply waiting for the next battle to ensue.

Ever-present to the Scottish soldier ‘was the stench of death and decay – rotting flesh and waste matter’ (p. 82). Although numbness to such misery was necessary for one’s survival, acknowledging such was unavoidable; as one soldier remarked: ‘it is not pleasant to see a ragged cross section of a man you were
working with a day before’ (p. 94). Nearly as dominant a feature was that of mud and water, the subject of chapter seven, ‘Better Slush than Slaughter’. All too often for both sides trenches became drainage ditches, or simply could not be dug as water tables were too high. In addition to flooding, mud was a constant feature. This chapter is filled with accounts similar to that by General Gough, Fifth Army Commander, who observed that: ‘The broken earth became a fluid clay ... and every shell-hole a dismal pond; hills and valleys alike were but waves and troughs of a gigantic sea of mud’ (p. 106). In these conditions, men and horse risked drowning, guns became useless as they sank in the mud, and shells could not explode, but instead were ‘swallowed’ by the earth. This resulted in an either/or proposition - men could cope with the mud and water, but it proved nearly impossible to fight at the same time. Yet despite the danger and discomfort of water and mud, many understandably preferred water to rain down upon them than German shells (p. 109). The longest chapter of Young’s work is ‘Over the Bags,’ which describes the time of maximum peril for Scottish soldiers: going on the offensive. Here, diaries and letters serve powerfully to narrate a series of high-profile battles: Aubers Ridge, Gallipoli, Loos, the Somme, Arras, and Ypres.

The following chapters, though not entirely, remove the reader from the bullets and shells, addressing various other facets of life for Scottish soldiers in the frontlines. Compared to the previous three chapters, the latter sections of the book offer short, yet fascinating glimpses into their day-to-day existence. In chapter 9 ‘Conditions’, soldiers’ letters and diaries describe the use (and occasionally overuse) of alcohol, the attempts to obtain various creature comforts (cigarettes, gifts from family members), and the mixed blessing of leave - the joy of returning home, followed by the desperation of having to leave again. Young also discusses more unfortunate tasks, such of writing letters notifying families of deaths, dealing with theft, and coping with the main problem facing the average soldier, basic hygiene (p. 175). Descriptions of makeshift latrines, the search for potable water, and coping with vermin further illustrate the innate squalor faced by those who fought.

Chapter 10 – ‘Work’ – focuses on the various tasks assigned to soldiers in both calm and battle. Firsthand accounts support Young’s assertions that a soldier’s work entailed ‘inspections and training during the day and work parties at night’ (p. 189). In
addition to laying wire and retrieving fallen comrades, night-time
work detail also included carrying food and materiel, constructing
dugouts and other fortifications, as well as burying the dead.
All too often, those who took on these tasks were exposed to
machinegun and artillery fire. Lastly, although hard work, cook
detail did carry its meagre benefits, namely access to the best
available food.

‘After a period of time served in the front line and reserve
trenches, battalions would be withdrawn for a period of rest,
usually equal to the time spent at the front’ (p. 197). Such is the
subject of chapter 11 ‘Rest’. The rejuvenating effects of football
and other athletic pursuits are Young’s focus in ‘Play’, while
‘Food,’ though equally brief, provides a sense of the average
soldier’s diet. Treatment of the wounded is discussed in chapter
12 – ‘Who Pays the Piper.’ Young includes a number of private
letters and correspondence in his chapter ‘Letters from...’ as they
‘played a major part in sustaining individual resolve’ (p. 229).
Captain Patrick Duncan’s uniquely Scottish reflection towards the
armistice concludes the book in the aptly-named final chapter
‘The End?’

Much like Royle, Derek Young writes in a compelling,
easy-to-read style. However, it is the collection of firsthand
accounts, rather than Young’s composition that gives Forgotten
Scottish Voices its particular force. In matters such as the build-up
to war, day-to-day survival in the trenches, and the spectacular,
horrific battles that marked the First World War - when told in
the words of the soldiers themselves - which is most compelling.
The major issue one may take towards this particular work is
that aside from listing names and regiments of each soldier cited,
and scattered hints in his preface, Young offers no citations what-
soever. For those eager to explore new avenues of research based
on Young’s work, this aspect of his book is indeed frustrating.
Yet, if one is viewing Forgotten Scottish Voices to simply learn
more about how the nation’s First World War soldiers lived and
died, they too will find this a rewarding, stimulating read.

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