



Life, Death, and Growing Up on the Western Front by Anthony Fletcher.

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Historian Anthony Fletcher (Univ. of London) is best known for his work on early modern England.¹ His latest book, which was inspired by his grandfather's First World War correspondence, is an engrossing and useful foray into the history that war. But *Life, Death, and Growing Up on the Western Front* is not just yet another account of life in the trenches. Rather, it focuses on soldiers' emotional experience and their personal and professional maturation. Many soldiers were quite young when they entered service, still "raw from school or the workplace." How, then, did they "create a personal identity as soldiers before they had properly found themselves as professional and working men at home?" (2). And what kind of people did they grow up to be in the context of war and military service?

The book's dramatis personae comprise seventeen British soldiers. Skillfully tapping their voluminous correspondence, Fletcher reconstructs the internal worlds of these men during the war, weaving them into the fabric of a larger story. The thematic chapters address discrete aspects of military life. They proceed roughly chronologically through the events of the soldiers' lives. They concern, successively, the outbreak of war, recruitment, and training; life at the front and subjects like home leave, morale, and shell shock; and, finally, how soldiers remembered and made sense of the war.

Following a growing historiographical trend, Fletcher deemphasizes the "mud, blood, and futility" of the standard narrative, in which soldiers' early enthusiasm gives way to disillusionment and cynicism. Instead, he reveals a very different kind of transformation.

Fletcher's subjects were fundamentally patriotic to begin with. In the days after the outbreak of war, they came to believe that their love of country required them to fight for its victory. A "new moral order" (13) rapidly fused the interests of the individual with the goals of the national struggle.² But the men's patriotism was initially colored by childish notions of glory and adventure. The author recounts the story of one young man who, fired by both love of country and youthful bravado, set out for France in August 1914, motorbike in tow, determined to become a dispatch rider in the French army. Such childishness soon fell away, however, as raw recruits confronted the sheer difficulty of wartime existence. They had to learn how to act, to fight, and to care for themselves in a world where nothing ever went according to plan. At the same time, they were forced to keep their emotions under control in the face of fear and bereavement. They had to comfort loved ones at home and, most difficult of all, preserve some "normal" part of themselves that could function back in the civilian world.

Fletcher's characters strove manfully to meet these challenges. Chapter 7, "Care for the Men," describes the countless small ways in which junior officers tried to improve the lives of the men under their command. Resourceful and determined, they set about enlarging the company dugout, varying the daily menu, and organizing local sporting matches, among a thousand other improvements.

1. E.g., *Growing Up in England: The Experience of Childhood 1600-1914* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2010) and *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1995). An earlier study examined *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (NY: NYU Pr, 1981).

2. Fletcher draws heavily here on Catriona Pennell's *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012).

A particularly interesting chapter, “Discipline in Morale,” describes how officers labored to create systems of discipline that both acknowledged the strains of war and ensured good order in their units. In these taxing circumstances, young soldiers quickly developed into confident, capable men. This, Fletcher suggests, gave the BEF the resilience to defeat the Germans in the end. British soldiers became better fighters and leaders, from a purely tactical perspective, as their officers’ evident concern for them fostered high morale: “Close personal relationships developed through working together, always cut across the officer-ranks divide” (123).

Fletcher presents so much biographical detail about his subjects that his larger argument sometimes fades into the background. It is hard to fault him for this, because the rich character portraits are a great strength of the book. His readers will spend so much time with each soldier as to feel they know them personally. Almost every page features evocative vignettes and memorable details that engage our interest and vividly convey the intensity of the men’s emotional lives. The following passage, for example, describes the reflections of one of Fletcher’s leading characters on the eve of the Somme offensive:

In a diary entry on 17 June, he [Charlie May] expressed his ultimate thoughts on the sacrifice of his life, in words that reach out to us with his longing to survive: “I do not want to die, not that I mind for myself. If it be that I am to go then I am ready. But the thought that I may never see you or our darling baby again turns my bowels to water. I cannot think of it with even the semblance of equanimity.” “My conscience is clear,” he continued, “that I have always tried to make life a joy to you.” It was the idea of being “cut off from each other which is so terrible, the babe not knowing me or me her.” Her upbringing was his wife’s “greatest charge,” for “she is the hope of life to me.” The two of them, she must know, “are all the world to me. I pray that I may do my duty, for I know, whatever that may entail, you would not have it otherwise.” (213)

This touching passage illustrates Fletcher’s knack for selecting the most memorable passages in his primary sources.

The author’s interpretations of his characters are entirely convincing. Three hundred pages of detailed narrative leave the reader in little doubt that they were patriotic and dutiful men, who strove to be the best soldiers they could be as they grew into capable adults. Fletcher invites us to think of them as undergoing more than feelings of terror and disillusionment. But what is the broader significance of his findings? Were the emotions and attitudes he highlights pervasive in the British army as a whole, affecting its overall performance? Though Fletcher claims he was “deliberately diverse” (5) in assembling his cast of characters, they are not, in fact, especially representative of the make-up of the British army. Fourteen of the seventeen men he follows were officers. Most came from upper- and middle-class backgrounds (several from grand aristocratic families), and one was the son of a liberal MP. Only one of them could properly be described as a “worker”—Will Streets, a miner from Derbyshire. And he was an autodidact who read philosophy, wrote poetry, and quoted from Milton, that is, hardly a typical specimen of his class.

In short, these men were mainly from the upper layers of the British army, both socially and professionally. Duty, patriotism, honor, fatherly concern for the men in their charge—these did not typify the broad masses of British society; they were, rather, traits of those in positions of relative privilege and power. Fletcher’s thesis thus applies best to junior officers—young men out of the public schools, from “respectable” families. Factory workers and farmhands (or middle-aged conscripts) did not react to the war in quite the same way. Nonetheless, Fletcher has written an important, salutary study of the

cohort of junior officers who played so critical a role in sustaining the morale and effectiveness of the BEF.³

Life, Death, and Growing Up on the Western Front offers a fascinating, novel inquiry into the interior lives and aspirations of British soldiers of the Great War. It will intrigue and instruct both specialists and casual readers.

3. See Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2008).