

**The Lost Generation of the First World War:  
The Suicide of the Military Caste**

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This essay is part of the Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park *Company of Ideas Forum*, which invites practicing scholars to deepen the understanding of the work of Jeffrey Rubinoff.

Rubinoff has argued that the warrior classes of the large imperial powers were the first to reach the limits of total war. With the advent of strategic bombing and nuclear weapons in World War II, any previous expectations of the positive rewards of war were nullified. This is fundamental change in the relationship to war, for both the warrior class and for civilians, is what Rubinoff has termed the "End of the Age of Agriculture".

He contends that this "End of the Age of Agriculture" began in Europe with the Renaissance and reached its last stage in the mid-twentieth century.

This paper will present the argument that this historical turning point should be understood to have begun with the devastating casualties of the Great War of 1914-18, which constituted the unintended suicide of the agricultural military caste which had waged war and profited from it for centuries.

Among the highly developed imperial powers of Europe, this military caste, underpinned by the ownership and control of agricultural land, were educated to see war as an ennobling and profitable enterprise. However, the loss of a generation of elites during the first fully industrialized world war, had the effect of unmooring the power of this agricultural-military caste; its remaining power was finally dislodged and destroyed during and after World War II. War, which had given birth to this caste, ultimately destroyed it.

This essay tries to establish the force of this argument through an analysis of what constituted 'the Lost Generation' of the Great War. When we use that phrase, to whom do we refer? The men of 1914-1918, and in particular those who died on active service, are those we call the 'Lost Generation'. They did not have the luxury of dying one at a time. They died by the tens of thousands, and their loss changed both the institution of war and the societies that waged it, in ways which are still evident today.

One under-appreciated consequence of that war was the decimation of social elites, and the elimination of the agrarian caste as the breeding ground of those who effortlessly occupied political and economic power in Europe and in the dominions under European rule. The Great War saw a massacre of rural elites, in part because of its character as an industrialized, assembly-line war of attrition. Officers led from the front, and were killed at rates much higher than those of men in the ranks. The demographic history of the 1914-18 conflict had consequences far beyond the outcome registered in the peace treaties at its conclusion.

In much of the imperial world, it was not the atomic catastrophe of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which divided into a before and an after the history of the agrarian caste from which military elites were drawn. It was the battles of Verdun and the Somme, 29 years earlier in 1916. They were the longest, most murderous battles in history, before or since, with casualty totals reaching and surpassing one million men. And they did not end the war; two more years of slaughter followed, more or less of the same kind and with the same staggering results.

The Great War was the bloodbath which changed the face of the world. That fact has eluded many in part because of the force of the screen memories of the Second World War, which for some have occluded the devastating memories of the First World War. Regime change hid this fact too; in Russia the Bolshevik revolution wiped the First World War from the face of their historical map; the same was true until recently in eastern Europe, in Turkey and in Ireland.

It is difficult to overestimate the culture shock of the Great War in Britain and Western Europe, as well as in countries of white settlement Europeans created and populated. The bloodbath was a signal event in their history, casting a shadow over national life for generations, including our own. In Britain and in other European countries, as well as in countries further afield, remembering the Lost Generation is still one essential way of knowing and feeling what it means to be British or Canadian, or Australian.

I have spent most of my life in Britain, teaching this subject and learning about it. In small villages and towns, all you need to do is to stroll around these places to see the shadow of the Great War. It is everywhere, and it has not faded over time. Being British means wearing a red poppy on your lapel on Armistice day. It means hearing the cadences of the war poets. It means images of long lines of white headstones in Commonwealth War cemeteries. It means remembering the Great War. In France, the same shock waves still persist. Verdun is a holy place; 11 November is a sacred moment. To understand European integration there or elsewhere in Europe today, a century after the Great War, you need to feel the force of European dis-integration, and that means returning to the moment when an older Europe, an agrarian Europe, with its warrior class, committed suicide.

These elites did not die alone. They stood alongside nine million other men, who died with them. The Great War democratized suffering in war. Now nearly 100 years later, we need to see that coming out of the war were codes of grief still alive today. Decades of living in Britain; raising my family in Britain, led me to a simple conclusion. No one today can understand many of our present cultural forms without attending to this practice, this evocation of a 'Lost Generation', the absence of which defines in one significant way, what Britain was and what she has become since 1914 opened the era of total war and closed the era of warfare waged by a warrior class which came from the land and returned to it, enriched, ennobled, and entrenched.

I want to dwell today on the multiple meanings of that phrase 'the lost generation'. For particular reasons, that term has helped shape notions of national identity in the twentieth century and after. The term has a life history, one which started in the war years, was enshrined in commemorative ceremonies in the decade after the Armistice, and over time has wound up in normal language, in the notions that school children pick up from clichés, from comedy, from many sources obscure and mundane, about what being British or French is all about. In other words, different generations have constructed their own 'Lost Generation' of the Great War, and by attending to these cultural configurations, we can understand much about how in Britain, France and elsewhere, perhaps in Canada too,

the 1914-18 conflict was converted from a victory into a disaster, or more precisely, into the iconic debacle of the twentieth century.

To be sure, the term the 'Lost Generation' describes something particular, something inescapably linked to the personal tragedies of three-quarters of a million truncated lives. But there is a second level on which the term operated in the two post-war decades. It was a phrase at first associated with the commemoration of the victory these men had paid for with their lives, with the obligation the living owed to the dead, and the need for some kind of symbolic exchange to mark that irredeemable debt. Soon enough, though the term took on bitter taste, linked to the disappointments of the survivors as to the kind of world they had fashioned after 1918. What was lost to this generation was their sense of a better future. The inter-war depression and the renewal of international conflict in the 1930s put paid to such hopes. Then for what, if anything, did the 'lost generation' die? This use of the term 'the lost generation' suggests a lack of closure, an unhealed wound in the survivors, a betrayal of trust between the living and the dead, an unbuilt future for their children. Here the second cluster of meanings of the term emerges, locating it in the divided, embittered post-war history of those who survived the war.

Paul Fussell and Samuel Hynes have captured this ironic turn in the remembrance of the 'Lost Generation'. Both have spoken not only of monuments, but of anti-monuments, of the literary and visual forms through which the war was remembered. What marks these works is a sense of anger, of the betrayal of the young by the old, who sent them off to fight and who stayed on to ruin the post-war world. Fussell has privileged the term 'irony' as the emblem of this literary moment, when millions entered the long wartime journey from anticipation to outcome, from innocence to experience, from beauty and hope to ugliness and disillusionment. In the memoirs of Graves, Sassoon, Blunden, Mottram, Ford, and in the poetry of Owen, Rosenberg, Sorley, Gurney, this 'ironic' vision has been preserved as the property of the nation as a whole. Theirs is an enduring achievement.

The third level of usage for the term the 'Lost Generation' brings us to more recent times. Here the term moves away from the initial stages of mourning, and from the tone of post-war disillusionment, to take on a more general, metaphoric coloration, of a kind Benjamin would have recognized. The 'Lost Generation' is a term that has enabled people born long after the conflict to see the Great War as the moment when grand narratives broke down, when -- in the words of '1066 and all that', British history came 'to a full stop'.

The sting in the tail of the joke should not be missed. Yes, these authors are having fun with the tendency of school textbooks to grind to a screeching halt in 1914, for purposes of convenience alone. But the authors of this comic classic -- veterans themselves of the Great War -- have disclosed something else about British cultural history. They suggest that what matters most about a nation's past is often concealed in its humour. And here it is a very special kind of gallows' humour which has entered the language of everyday life, in the form of a set of jokes about insane generals, and sardonic officers, and trapped infantrymen going over the top. Everyone growing up in England today knows this scene -- immortalized in the BBC comedy series 'Blackadder'.

Why does it matter so much? Because it takes a tragic use of the term 'the Lost Generation', located in collective mourning early in the twentieth century, and turns it into an emblem of a shared catastrophe that defines what it means to be British in the late twentieth century, an emblem, in the form of paper poppies, that people – I am one of them -- wear in their lapels for a few days in November every year. This elision brings the loss of life in 1914-18 into contact with the loss of power and national independence in recent decades. The early disaster somehow stands for what was to come after. What Samuel Hynes has called the 'myth' of the war -- its narrative character -- thus has become the 'myth' of the decline of Britain in this century as a whole.

I want to trace elements of these three moments in the difficult, painful process whereby men and women ascribed 'meaning' to the losses of the First World War. The first enters the households of the bereaved during the war itself. The second moves from the familial to the social, and examines collective forms of commemoration in the inter-war period. Some of these lasting monuments are literary. In the third section I want to examine Paul Fussell's justly celebrated portrayal of the ironic character of these literary commemorations, and suggest that there is another and even darker register in them, that of trauma and re-enactments of the war. It is this traumatic message, of the absence of closure and the permanence of injury, which has given the notion of the 'Lost Generation' its enduring power and continuing presence in British cultural life.

In the Great War, losses were so high as to constitute a universal experience. Every family in Britain lost someone in the war -- a close relative, a friend, a workmate. But it was also an experience with a different social incidence among social elites. This dysgenic nature of military service -- its tendency to spare the least fit -- was a matter of intense discussion at the time. But whatever its long-term effects on the nation as a whole, the war's differential social incidence helps explain why in Britain the notion of a 'lost generation' has always had both universal and particular meanings.

This is of great importance in the cultural configurations which followed the war. Initially the surge to remember those who died in the war was democratic. Ninety-five per cent of the war memorials that dot English villages and towns list the dead not by rank but alphabetically or by date of death. The iconography of these monuments is overwhelmingly plebeian. The men who stand there at village commons or crossroads are not officers; they are the men in the ranks, who are no longer in the ranks of the living.

This commemorative surge can be charted in the years 1919-25. By then most villages and towns had created their own sites of memory. Taken together, they constitute a unique set of monuments: a democratic constellation in a profoundly undemocratic nation.

Towards the end of the 1920s, though, the underlying elitism of English cultural life resurfaced. By then, the phenomenon of 'war literature' managed to reconfigure the 'Lost Generation' less in national than in class terms. The lost generation of elites, of artists, poets, philosophers, and leaders, was de-coupled, as it were, from the lost generation of the masses.

Why did this happen? Probably because everything in English history is inscribed in the language of class; why should the 'lost generation' have been any different? In effect, the elites who ran British society mourned their *own* 'Lost Generation', and as in any orderly country estate, they assumed that their losses stood for those of the nation itself.

And there was something for them to mourn. The carnage of the Great War stripped British elites of the confidence that their power could be passed on effortlessly to a new generation, just like them. The slow and steady development of British institutions, in industry as in politics, was taken by virtually all observers to be the key to her remarkable political stability throughout the period of industrialization. In 1914 family firms and not corporations still controlled most of British business life. Lines of succession were clearly marked out, despite the restriction of talent they entailed. Those who ran the country knew who the apprentices were. They were sons of the middle class, many educated in public schools and in Oxford or Cambridge. They would enter business or (more likely) go into the public service in a variety of ways -- as administrators, teachers, elected officials, and after a period of preparation, they would take over the reins of power. Even the injection of new men into politics, like Asquith and Lloyd George, not from prominent urban families or old landed gentry, but from modest urban or rural backgrounds, made little difference to the way the country was governed and its prosperity assured.

The war challenged this orderly progression of generations. What was the British way ahead if the apprentices were no longer there, but lay in Flanders fields? The Prime Minister's son Herbert Asquith was there. So were the sons of the Conservative Leaders Bonar Law and Stanley Baldwin, and the son of the secretary of the Labour party Arthur Henderson. So were thousands of the sons of the powerful and the wealthy throughout the land. While we must not ignore the fact that Britain's 'Lost Generation' was overwhelmingly working-class, it was nonetheless true that elites suffered disproportionately heavy casualties. This was largely because the class structure of British society was reflected in the social selection of rank, and because officers, and in particular junior officers, suffered casualties well above the average for the army as a whole.

The slaughter of subalterns shook the confidence of the British ruling class that its hold on power was enduring, if not eternal. To a degree, Britain has never recovered from that shock.

The evocation of the 'Lost Generation' in inter-war Britain was a veiled way of indicating that a particular section of British society was crippled by the war. The warrior class, based on landed society, its customs, its schools, its direct pathway into imperial armies, lost its hold not only on the institutions of war, but also on the land itself.

In the aftermath of war, there occurred the greatest transfer of landed property in Britain since the Henrician reformation. Part of the cause was inflation, which made holding extended acreage financially crippling. Long-term leases on pre-war terms produced returns on capital which were wiped out by inflation. Then there were death duties to pay, and given the fact that rates of death on military service among elites were roughly twice those of the population as a whole, those death duties sounded the death knell of a substantial part of the landed gentry. There were so many deaths on active service among this section of the population, that many estates had no heirs to carry on.

Here was a pyrrhic victory if there ever was one. A landed class which had dominated military affairs for centuries had effectively committed suicide during the Great War. And what had happened in Britain was repeated all over the Continent. Some poets could see through the turmoil of the post-war years to capture this extraordinary moment in European and world affairs. Perhaps the greatest of them all was the French film maker Jean Renoir, whose classic film 'La grande illusion' is an unmatched elegy for the world of the warrior class, a world swept away by the Great War.

I want to show you two clips from this film, and then explore further the way that the demise of a ruling military caste provided the survivors with the perfect excuse for every policy failure and every missed opportunity of later years. Cabinets foundered because the new blood which would have reinvigorated them was spilt in France and Flanders. The old carried on because the young were not there. Neville Chamberlain and Pétain dotted into appeasement and collaboration out of the weight of their years and the limitations of their aged imaginations.

And what of the men who came back from the trenches? Those who were there, it

was said, were adrift, rootless, without a sense of where they came from and where they were going. Again, we can see how cultural forms developed in parallel, with resonances both pointing to a particular elite and to the nation as a whole. On the elite level the uprooted, the unsettled, the restless men and women of the 1920s and 1930s constituted what Gertrude Stein termed a 'lost generation', young men and women without moorings or morals. But as always, cultural life operated on two registers, and a more general, more complex notation appeared in the inter-war years which has lasted to this day. Here the critical concept is that of the 'Lost Generation' as the bearers of a new kind of memory, which we now call 'trauma'.

But let us pause for a moment to take in the genius of Renoir's art. He could say with a gesture of the camera or the turn of a phrase in the script infinitely more about my theme today than I can provide in a score of lectures. For my theme is the end of the agrarian class, the end of the Rauffensteins and the Boeldieus.

[show clips]

Perhaps the world has no further need of us? What more elegant formulation could there be of my theme today? Industrialized war massacred the pre-industrial elites whose lives had been braided together with the profession of arms and the waging of war for centuries. The Great War brought their world and their power to an end.

So far, I have tried to explore notions of the 'Lost Generation' as imbedded in a certain narrative about the warrior class and its destruction during the Great War. The story, or 'myth', as Hynes would have it, is one about the terrible losses of the Great War, at one and the same time suffered by the nation as a whole, and also and especially by elites, whose privileges were purchased, as it were, by the shedding of blood. This medievalism encapsulated the war in an older discourse about manhood and military service, one easily configured in classical or romantic rhetoric.

But what makes the Great War so fertile a moment in cultural history is that it both

produced both this evocation and restoration of traditional motifs and subverted them. A story widely circulated about the war -- the myth of the lost generation -- was undermined because linear narratives of any kind seemed ruled out by the testimony of many of the men who came back from the war.

Theirs was a vividly personal set of memories to be sure, but they were memories of a different kind, memories we now call 'trauma'. Their history of the war was frozen history, and it is that broken narrative, that discordance, that has made their story, arising from the Great War, an emblem of other stories and other calamities, echoing to our own generation.

What the 'Lost Generation' provided was less what Paul Fussell has called ironic memory than traumatic memory. Let's consider the nature of that kind of recollection. The encoding and revision of 'scripts' or narratives about the past are usually voluntary or deliberate acts; we learn through story-telling and its echoes in our own lives. But some events are harder to introduce into a script than others. There is a threshold of density of experience; when passed, that experience is usually referred to as a '**trauma**' or 'traumatic'. There are many different usages of this terms, but for our purposes, it is possibly best to consider the term simply to connote a serious and enduring shock, usually but not always triggered by exposure to an overwhelming, lengthy and life-threatening set of circumstances.

Trench warfare was one set of circumstances. The oddity of that experience was noted by virtually all survivors. It was a world both terribly familiar and completely bizarre, one in which the commonplace and the ghoulish appeared side by side. Flat, unadorned language could begin to describe this environment, but there were subterranean features of it that lay beyond immediate recall, perhaps beyond language itself.

Those hit by this shock could not register the experience in a direct or even mediated manner. Instead, the memory trace, while deposited somewhere in the brain,

took on a subterranean character. It went underground; overwhelming feelings were submerged.

It is important to distinguish this state of mind from what Freudians call 'repression'. Trauma, in this sense, is not repressed memory, but rather it is latent or delayed memory, and is especially marked by its sudden recurrence whatever the individual's will to recall (assisted or unassisted) may be.

How do traumatic memories return? Basic neurophysiological research is just now tracing these pathways. It seems that 'traumatic memories' are memory traces in the neurons of the brain. Their imprint is accompanied by the secretion of a particular chemical -- noreadrenalin -- which can transmit long-buried impulses as if they were happening again. A 'traumatic memory' may be triggered by extrinsic contexts, i.e. similarities of ambience, noise, smell, mood. For instance, an individual walking through an American city during a particularly steamy summer may feel the anxiety of jungle combat, though it is only the heat and humidity which the two contexts share.

What triggers the memory is the traumatic nature of the encoded experience. Under specific conditions, and occasionally long after the initial set of 'traumatic events', these extrinsic context can produce overwhelming recall. At this point the memory crowds out everything else; it is potentially paralytic.

At this point, we can see what is so odd, so uncanny about 'traumatic memory'. It bears little resemblance to nostalgia or reminiscence. It is a kind of re-enactment. Consider the case of the war poet and former fox-hunting member of the rural gentry, Siegfried Sassoon. He was hospitalized in 1917 at Craiglockhart, near Edinburgh, for a brief period of 'treatment' not for shell shock but for what he called his 'anti-war fixation'. While there he noted that whatever treatment the men received, 'each man was back in his doomed sector of a horror-stricken front line, where the panic and stampede of some ghastly experience was *re-enacted* among the livid faces of the dead'. This is a common formulation. Men suffering from traumatic memory do not simply remember; they re-live

the moment. As Wilfred Owen put it in one of his poems written during his stay at Craiglockhart: 'In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning'.

For the worst off, re-enactment is a life-long morbid condition: Doris Lessing wrote about her father in these terms: 'His childhood and young man's memories kept fluid, were added to, grew, as living memories do. But his war memories were congealed in stories that he told again and again with the same words and gestures, in stereotyped phrases'. These were what she called 'the dark region in him'.

This frozen mental posture has been called many things. In the United States Civil War, it was called Soldier's heart; in the Second World War, combat fatigue; after Vietnam, PTSD. But the iconic moment when traumatic memory was born, was the moment when industrial warfare arrived on the Western Front. And it is a sense of the nature of that war and of the trauma it left in its wake which is the most long-term, lingering legacy of the 'lost generation'.

There is a paradox here. The 'lost generation' could never lose their memories of the war. In fact, the memories tended to take over the story-teller. Re-enactment is less story-telling than the repetition of a fragment of a story which has escaped its context of before, during, and after to exist in a kind of eternal present. The detail of horror in the story never goes away; it is replayed as if it were happening again. Time has no hold over it.

The stories describe a kind of stricken helplessness to alter history, or to change the fate of others, or of the witness to bear it in his or her mind eternally. Most of these re-enactments are strikingly visual. They are flashbacks of a pathological kind. Normal flashbacks show the otherness, the pastness of the incident, as in a film recollection. Traumatic memory is a flashback that exists outside of time, outside of a narrative that can tame it. They exist in an eternal present. They have as Lawrence Langer has put it 'a durational integrity that exists outside the flow of normal time'. Thus traumatic memories

are more 'accurate' than others, since they are fixed on small details endlessly repeated, and therefore do not fade, as other 'normal' memories do.

And just as Sassoon noted, these flashbacks defy conventional therapy: they cannot be defused by being drawn to the surface: this is one of the reasons why both Freud and Rivers had trouble with seriously disturbed men. The talking cure has limits: it works with people who are in the hands of traumatic recall. For the worst cases, their minds are inhabited by an uninvited guest: the story that returns time and again to disturb the rhythms of life. It is a kind of 'possession', as 17<sup>th</sup> century popular culture would put it, or a 'Dybbuk' in the words of Yiddish folklore.

Here the testimony of war writers takes on a new meaning. In the presence of traumatic memory, writing memories, creating a kind of fictionalized history or historical fiction, as Barbusse, Graves, Jünger, and Céline did, is a way of take over the story again. Instead of the war telling the story through traumatized soldiers, some of these soldiers tried to put the story in a before, during, and after context. They revolted against the tyranny of the war, a war which ran their lives while in uniform, and for some, which continued to run their minds ever after.

War literature is a protest against traumatic memory. It is a reassertion of the author's right to his own story, one he can change and forget or even distort at will. But the revolt itself is a sign of its own futility.

For re-enactment of traumatic memory is non-voluntary. Re-enactment controlled and voluntarily shaped is poetry and war literature. They are attempts to restore the author to the centre of the story as its creator rather than as its creature. But both kinds of memory — traumatic and literary — are similar in character. Both return to a number of key themes: First there is the strangeness of the battlefield and the oddities seen there. Secondly, there is the distance between the personality of the story-teller before and after. Thirdly, there is a sense of familiarity, in the original usage of the term, connoting the ascriptive bonds of those who were there together, and who therefore became a kind of

fictive kinship group. Fourthly, there is a privileging of direct experience, and through it the redefinition of truth as the authenticity of the voice rather than the reliability of its account. As one Second World War veteran put it, :

‘Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth’.

War literature is therefore the language of a new kind of ‘lost generation’ a generation of men who had lost linear narratives and spoke in the language of trauma. By doing so, they constituted something special in the twentieth century. They fashioned a new category of witness: someone with access to the remoteness of traumatic history.

Older kinds of narrative history persisted, to be sure. But they dealt only with the surface of things. The navigators of the underground river of traumatic memory were a different breed of men. The truth they told is a different kind of narrative, the narrative of trauma. Only such witnesses can approach the truth about war; and we, even today years later, can see it darkly through his or her voice.

Everyone born and brought up in Britain or France over the last half century has been introduced to this notion of the ‘lost generation’. O-level and A-level syllabi are adorned with the work of the war poets and the war writers. The BBC dramatizes their stories. Fiction returns to it. Film and television deepen it. What they have to say is so deeply ingrained in European culture that the message is taken for granted, part of the unspoken assumptions of the end of the twentieth century.

Through the work of these writers, young people in Europe have come to know the lost generation as the ‘truth-tellers’ about the Great War. At one and the same time they were witnesses, ‘re-en-actors’, and explorers of the language of dissonance and discontinuity born under conditions beyond the limits of human endurance.

They have shaped a notion of the twentieth century configured as a long rumbling echo of the Great War. It is both narrative and anti-narrative. It is about a time long ago

when things were different; about innocence and experience; about anticipation and outcome. It is, as Paul Fussell has told us, intensely ironic. But the irony goes beyond even his reading of the war. For the traumatic character of the war dispenses with irony. Re-enactment is not distancing; it is total immersion in history, as Stephen Daedalus put it, understood as a nightmare from which today, in 2010, 90 years after the Armistice, we are still trying to awaken.

Let me return in closing to my central theme of the passing of the warrior class from the stage of history. The image of a group of men rooted in landed power being destroyed by the military culture they had nurtured for centuries is an arresting one. It makes sense to see the 1914-18 war as the beginning of a long and irreversible evolution of power which has produced a very different European world from that of 1914. The distinguished historian James Sheehan has recently published a book contrasting our world today with theirs. The title is a telling one: it is *Where have all the soldiers gone?* The answer is that they faded from the stage of power in a paroxysm of destruction driven by the first fully industrialized war in history, and completed by the second. 1914-18 was their nemesis; war finally came to devour not only those anonymous men in the ranks, but the social elites who had profited from it, until, that is, Pandora's box was opened in 1914. When they lost control of war, war took control of them, and relegated their class to that pantheon of men who devastatingly and irreversibly brought about their own demise.