

World War I and its Effects on Vera Brittain's Life

World War I was the first war that brought a substantial number of countries to take arms against even their neighboring countries. Within a month of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire were at war against Serbia, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Belgium. The citizens of all the countries involved had their lives changed dramatically because of the events of the war: many lives were lost, homes destroyed, and life courses changed directions because of the loss of a loved one or because it was no longer possible to live with the same perspective as one had before the war. One such British citizen who suffered the devastating effects of the First World War was Vera Brittain.

World War I (WWI) affected Vera Brittain's life in numerous ways: it gave her a sense of duty to join the war effort, put her in new situations that she would never have known if not for the war, and affected her mental wellbeing. The only people she held dear to her heart were her immediate family; however, shortly before the war began she met her brother's three close friends: Roland Leighton, Victor Richardson, and Geoffrey Thurlow. Vera kept in contact with Roland, and they became fast friends, both hoping to become something more than friends in the future. This new friendship caused Vera to look forward to going to neighboring schools at Oxford with Edward, her younger brother, and Roland. WWI made Vera want to contribute to the war effort. To fulfill the need to help Vera became a nurse, which forced her to live in situations that a woman from her class was not accustomed to. The war forced Brittain to deal with the loss of four soldiers, among them her brother and her fiancé. Before the war, Vera Brittain was a carefree individual who did not have any other goal besides going to college and

becoming an academic. Whereas WWI actually gave her more freedom than she had before the war, it nevertheless caused her depression and stress over the well-being of her brother and three close friends, and it pushed her to new limits physically, and emotionally.

The First World War is an event that is greatly documented, recorded, and revisited. There are countless books, articles, movies, and primary sources that depict the life of soldiers, generals, mothers, leaders, and nurses, and their thoughts and experiences towards the war. Among all the documentation of such an impactful event it is hard to find sources on ordinary individuals, but thanks to Vera Brittain's diary-keeping and passion for writing, there are sources that demonstrate how she, as an individual, felt throughout the War. *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* was written by Vera Brittain based on her diary and her reflections of what occurred during a 25-year period. *Letters from a Lost Generation: The First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* is a collection of the letters of Vera Brittain, Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson, and Geoffrey Thurlow to and from Vera and each other. These two works reveal much about how the War affected Vera's life.

Prior to the war the Brittain family did not struggle financially because Thomas Arthur Brittain, Vera's father, was a paper manufacturer. Because of the family's financial status, they were able to employ servants, and thus Vera and Edward were able to occupy themselves with outings such as attending orchestras, partaking in theatrical plays, and playing tennis. In her autobiographical study, Vera recalls that "even in childhood we [Edward and Vera] seldom quarreled... [he was] the dearest companion of those brief years of unshadowed adolescence."¹

¹ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Virago Press, 1978), 27.

Until the start of the war, going to school had always been a dream of Vera's, but because it was unconventional for a girl to go to school, her parents tried to satisfy her craving for knowledge by sending her to St. Monica's, a school that would teach her how to become a "marriageable young female."² However, her experience there only made her want to further her education at Oxford even more. Vera's dream was finally realized when she won a scholarship to attend Somerville College, Oxford, in 1914.³ She envisioned herself attending Somerville College and her brother and suitor attending the neighboring school. She believed this would allow her to see her esteemed brother and Roland even while away from home. Yet these dreams were made impossible by the start of the war and the interest in enlisting by Edward and their three mutual friends.

The immediate impact WWI had on Vera's life was that it caused her to abandon her studies to become a nurse in order to fulfil her sense of responsibility to contribute to the war effort. Vera Brittain was 21 years old when World War I began and she had found herself at Oxford by herself instead of with her brother and potential love interest; she questioned whether she was making the right decisions or if she was wasting her potential on a "secluded life of vegetation" (the words Roland used to describe college after the start of the War in a letter to her on September 29, 1914). Ultimately, Vera came to the conclusion that she would not live a secluded life while her brother and friends were off fighting in the war. She wanted to contribute to the war, so during a break from school she took a job darning socks at a church in Matron. Vera reflected in her diary that this job allowed her to feel "one step nearer to Roland and the

² Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 39.

³ Brittain refers to this as being awarded an exhibition which is a financial scholarship awarded to students

war.”⁴ In a letter to Roland written on April 11, 1915, Vera conveyed her feelings: “It is better to do work where one is less skilled but more needed than where one is more skilled but less needed.”⁵ On May 26 Vera wrote yet another letter to Roland stating that she planned on becoming a nurse and that she would not return to school until the war ended.⁶ By the end of June, Brittain had successfully become a Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) nurse. Before the war’s end in 1918, Vera had lost the desire to read books, even novels, and her “recurrent hopes had at last died of ever fulfilling those ambitions which had inspired the long-ago passionate fight to go to Oxford.”⁷ However, when the war ended and she had lost everyone she cared for, she decided to continue her studies at Oxford because college seemed like the one thing she had left from the past.⁸ The war had not only taken away Vera’s early ambition to graduate from college, but it caused Brittain to change her major to history; Brittain believed that studying history would help restore her faith in human nature, and she “never regretted the decision.”⁹

Not only did World War I change Vera Brittain’s perspective towards her education, but it also exposed her to aspects of life she would have never encountered had she not joined the war. Prior to World War I, Vera Brittain had led a comfortable life that did not prepare her for the challenges she would face as a V.A.D. For example, on her first day as a volunteer she was ordered to boil an egg, but she failed to do so properly, leaving the egg undercooked. Vera noted in her diary that her “colossal ignorance of the simplest domestic operations” humiliated her.¹⁰ Also, because she was used to a life of comfort, the long hours took a toll. It did not take long for

⁴ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 140.

⁵ Bishop, *Letters from a Lost Generation*, 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 399.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 468.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 473.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 165.

her to learn that even when she was tired “to the limits of human endurance,” she had to carry on with her work.¹¹

Her career as a V.A.D. also contributed to Vera’s exposure to male nudity. She reflected that as a nurse she did everything: “short of actually going to bed with them [the wounded soldiers], there was hardly an intimate service I did not perform.”¹² To this knowledge of the male anatomy, she expressed gratitude, as it released her from the sex-inhibitions of “Victorian tradition...[which] up to 1914 dictated that a young women should know nothing of men but their faces and their clothes until marriage pitchforked her into an incompletely visualised and highly disconcerting intimacy.”¹³

However, she did not think back positively on all of the aspects she faced while serving as a nurse. While traveling the Mediterranean Sea to get to Malta, Vera encountered a lack of comfort and privacy in the ship that she had never encountered in her life. In *Testament of Youth* she documented the situation and how she came to overcome it:

Privacy, however great our need of it—and a few of us had begun inexplicably to suffer from headaches and acute diarrhoea[sic]—proved equally inaccessible, for each ward had only one washhouse, a rough annex containing several tin basins in a row, and one privy, with five tin commodes side by side and sociably free from partitions. To young women delicately brought up in fastidious homes, it was a perturbing demonstration of life as lived in the publicity of slums....

[Vera became sick, and semi-delirious.] When I did have to visit the communal

¹¹ibid., 280.

¹²ibid., 165.

¹³ibid.

lavatory, my soaring temperature rendered me equally indifferent to the altruistic friends who helped me there, and the strangers already in occupation.¹⁴

Brittain further discusses how they attempted to solve the privacy issues by using the privy one at a time, but they quickly came to realize that it was not a practical solution.¹⁵ Through this excerpt it is clear that Brittain was not accustomed to living in harsh conditions; she was only able to overcome her discomfort of using the privy in front of others because she was half delirious with fever. Because of the war and the fact that she knew that Edward, Roland, Geoffrey, and Victor were facing harsher conditions, she pushed herself to handle it in order to feel connected to them and keep on contributing to the war effort.

Furthermore, World War I changed the social rules and expectations that women were expected to follow. The first example of this is found when Vera began to work at a hospital a few miles away from her home and she was allowed to walk to and from work on her own, even though her shift ended after the sun had set, something that would have been scandalous previous to the War. Vera realized that her situation was changing when no one suggested that she take a chaperon to go see Roland when he got leave from the War for a few days. Brittain noted in her autobiographical study that “already the free-and-easy movements of girl war workers had begun to modify convention.”¹⁶ After Roland wrote to Vera that he would not burden her with the gruesome stories and details of what he was facing in the trenches, Vera wrote back that “Women [are] no longer the sheltered & protected darlings of man’s playtime, fit only for nurse’s & drawing rooms.”¹⁷ The response that Vera sent to Roland shows that she used her new status

¹⁴Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 300-301.

¹⁵Ibid., 300.

¹⁶ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 177.

¹⁷ Bishop, *Letters from a Lost Generation*, 88.

to shut down any attempts to set back the social advancements that had occurred. World War I exposed Vera Brittain to social changes but also altered her mental well-being.

In addition to exposure to difficult living conditions and male nudity, as well as gaining greater freedom, she also suffered depression as a result of the war. Four individuals who Vera held close to her heart took part in the war as soldiers, and all four of them perished in the war. Before any of the four individuals had reached the front lines, Vera was so filled with stress and dread because of the dangers that they faced that she even came to wish that she would wake up and find that the war was only a dream.¹⁸ When Vera had to say goodbye to Roland when he was first sent out to the front, she confessed that even though she was a non-believer she had begun to pray again so as to leave “no remote possibility unexplored,” thus showing how deeply the possibility of losing him, and the three others, to the war affected her. On December 26, 1915, little more than a year after Roland first joined the war effort, Vera received a call from his sister Claire during which she was told that he would not be arriving home that morning, as expected, because he had died at a Casualty Clearing Station on December 23.¹⁹ Weeks after the news of his death, and once again working at the 1st London General Hospital as a nurse, Vera wrote, “I felt as though I had gone down to death with Roland and been disinterred as someone else.”²⁰ Another clear instance of Vera’s despair can be found in a diary entry, where she wrote, “Everything I loved and love, everything I lived for, worked for, prayed for, seems to be slipping away.... Oh, God! How unhappy I am!”²¹ Roland’s death led Vera to become even more worried about losing her brother and friends, Victor and Geoffrey. A clear depiction of the state of mind

¹⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 100.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 236

²⁰*Ibid.*, 245.

²¹*Ibid.*, 263.

Vera was in can be found in her diary entry after receiving news that Victor had been dangerously and seriously wounded:

Waiting, watching, suspense, mourning—will there never be anything else in life? I am so weary of it all—but I bow my head before the storm now, I don't try to fight it anymore. I no longer expect things to go well for me; I don't know that I even ask that they shall. All I ask is that I may fulfill my own small weary part in this War in such a way as to be worthy of Them[sic], who die and suffer pain.²²

Similarly, after Geoffrey and Victor died, Vera fell deeper into depression. Edward's death was the final blow. After learning of his death, she realized that death really was the end, and she found herself feeling alone because the only people she had left were her parents, but they were no replacement for the bond she shared with her brother.²³ In the span of three years (1915-1918) Vera had lost her fiancé, her closest companion, and two dear friends. Vera Brittain, the person who had religiously read any news about the war to find out what was going on, what side was receiving the attacks, and who was on the casualty list, stopped caring about the war altogether because she had lost all hope. Suddenly her only goal was to finish the rest of her contract to get “release from the suddenly unbearable monotony of nursing,” yet she did not wish to be idle either because she did not know how she would handle her solitude.²⁴

Vera consistently wrote in her diary during the war that she kept busy past the point of exhaustion in order to keep her mind from brooding because “of all futile occupations, [brooding was] the most important to avoid.”²⁵ From the very beginning of her service in the V.A.D.,

²²Ibid., 340.

²³Ibid, 466.

²⁴ Ibid, 457.

²⁵ Ibid, 364.

Brittain was always willing to do the dirty or hard work; she did not shy away from doing her duty. She prevailed even when doing her job meant that she had to nurse a ward of German P.O.W.s, even though she found it “disconcerting to be pitchforked, all alone...into the midst of thirty representatives of the nation which, as I had repeatedly been told, had crucified Canadians, cut off the hands of babies, and subjected...females to unmentionable ‘atrocities.’”²⁶ Vera used her work as an outlet to keep her body and mind equally exhausted and therefore have no remaining energy to spend over stressing about the dangers that the people she cared for were facing. During a particularly stressful time when she had not heard from Roland after an attack, she noted that “if it weren’t for the nursing I do not know how I could bear this.”²⁷ During an interview with the head of a hospital, Vera confessed that she preferred to be “where there was heaps to do and no time to think.”²⁸ In her reflections written after World War I, Vera stated that she thought of the War as “a tragedy and a vast stupidity, a waste of youth and time; it betrayed my faith, mocked my love and irremediably spoilt my career.”²⁹ This opinion shows how vastly her attitude had changed towards the war, because at its start she had declared that if England did not honor their alliance then they would be guilty of treachery.³⁰ Not only did World War I cause Vera to lose four individuals whom she loved, but it also pushed her emotions to the point of experiencing depression and hopelessness.

It is impossible to say what course Vera Brittain’s life would have taken had World War I not occurred. However, based on her recordings of the events, her thoughts and feelings, the war had a devastating effect on her life. Because of the war, Vera temporarily abandoned her studies

²⁶ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 374.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 367.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

at Oxford, she worked hard to become a nurse, was exposed to difficult working and living conditions, and experienced the loss of four loved ones, depression, and a change of perspective towards life. The few positive gains she acquired because of her experience in the war were that she experienced greater freedom as a woman and embraced social changes. Through all that Vera Brittain experienced in World War I, it dramatically changed her life.

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