



How the King's Scout Fared in the Great War

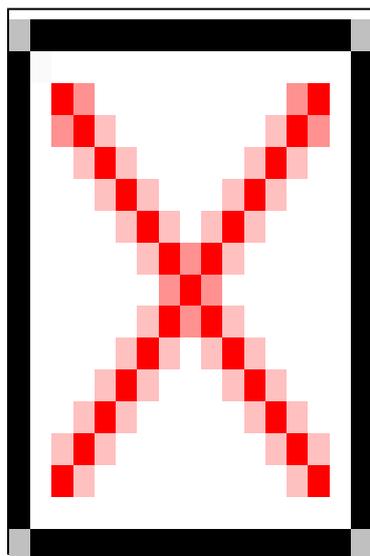
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Geoff Fox on texts for children published during the Great War.



In the second of his articles about little-known texts published for young readers between 1914 and 1918, **Geoff Fox** introduces the novel, **How the King's Scout Fared in the Great War** by Margaret Smith-Masters, published by Wells Gardner, Darton in 1916

The dedication page foreshadows the values at the heart of Margaret Smith-Masters' novel: 'To my friend, Lady Mary Fitzmaurice and to my cousin, George Herbert Swinton of Swinton, Berwickshire, this book is affectionately dedicated. To be linked with great traditions is to be pledged to great undertakings'. That motto is repeated on occasions within the narrative, reminding the nation's old families of their responsibilities to King, country and those who rely upon their leadership. The surname Swinton also recurs. In an early chapter, John Bardolph, cousin of the young hero of the novel, Dick Bardolph, invites him to Kingsthorpe, the family seat, ('My cousin is an awfully good sort and the place is ripping,' says Dick). In the chapel of the old house, John urges Dick to read Walter Scott's 1822 account of the Battle of Halidon Hill, near Berwick. Its central character is a Scottish knight, Sir Alan Swinton, 'a man great enough and strong enough to lay aside all personal feuds, even the bitterest, and to sink all selfish considerations when the welfare of his country was at stake.' The Bardolphs are descended from Swinton's squire, Reynald; and Bardolphs have fought, and died, for their country down the centuries. Here, fiction interweaves with fact, for records show that Margaret Smith-Masters' older son was christened 'Bruce Swinton'. As we shall see, there are poignant reasons to believe the book draws upon further autobiographical elements.

Margaret Smith-Masters had published **The King's Scout** in 1912, in which a younger Dick Bardolph is awarded the 'proudest end a Scout could have in view, the winning of the red Ribbon of Valour'. The novel was republished in 1914 and must have done well enough to warrant its sequel in January, 1916. In its turn, **How the King's Scout Fared in the Great War** was reprinted in 1918; the listings on the web sometimes ascribe the novel to 'Félicite Lefevre', a pseudonym Smith-Masters preferred for several of her 16 books, usually those for younger readers. The best known of these, **The Cock, the Mouse and the Little Red Hen** went through 29 editions, the latest in 2012.

My copy of **How the King's Scout Fared**, with its 8 plates by Rowland Wheelwright, a prolific illustrator of classic

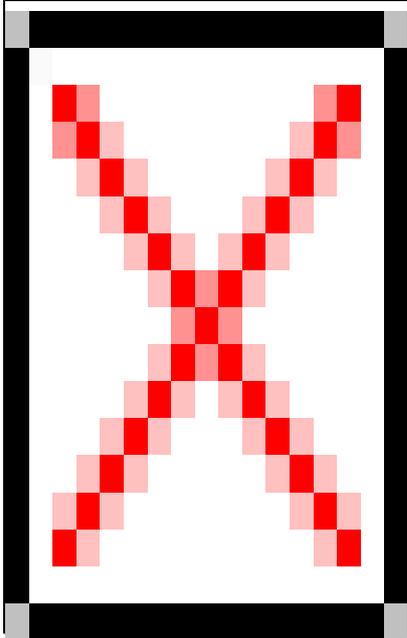
texts, was a Sunday School prize as late as Christmas 1922. Given the book's unshakeable commitment to a just and necessary war, any post-1918 notions of 'futility' and 'disillusionment' were presumably not shared by the prize-giving elders of the Methodist Chapel in Tavistock.

'It was the June of 1914 - the last June of the old order of things.'

The novel begins deep in rural England: 'In the air was the pleasant murmur of the country - the song of the wild bee, and the hum of the dragon-fly, the lowing of herds, the clank of the wheel at the well, as the buckets wound slowly up and up, and down and down again. Above and beyond all these there lay peace, a peace deep and profound. It was the June of 1914 - the last June of the old order of things.' Rumble, the ageing village postman, grumbles his way through the lanes, bearing a letter to one of his 'heroes', Dick Bardolph, now an Oxford undergraduate but still serving as the village Scoutmaster. The plot, which is triggered by the letter Rumble is carrying, is ambitious in that its alternating theatres of action are separated by the English Channel. The early focus is mainly on the local Scout Troop; in the second half of the book, as Dick gains his commission and joins his older brother Walter on the Western Front, more time is spent with the Army.

At the outbreak of war, Baden-Powell had urged his Scouts to 'do their bit' in guarding installations, raising funds to provide ambulances at the Front and, in due time, to enlist in the Armed Services. The Scouts of the Eagle Patrol in Rowland Walker's **Oscar Danby VC** (1916) waste no time at all. As luck would have it, they were camping on the Norfolk coast when war broke out on August 4th. By the 5th, they have caught the most dangerous German spy in England (popular belief held that there were many spies among the alleged 80,000 German waiters, taxi drivers, barbers and musicians in oompah bands already in the country). Within days, after no more than an exchange of letters from their parents, the Eagles are in Flanders busy with bullet and bayonet (they are all crack shots), claiming even the fearsome Prussian Uhlans among their victims.

More realistically, Smith-Masters' village Scouts are guarding three bridges, one over a railway line carrying troop



trains. There, they thwart the local spy - rather too easily, it might be, for the appetites of her readers. The spy's language is easily identified by the diminutive Scout, Fred Wynne, on hand in the shadows to hear him exclaim, 'Ze Eengleesh tong, it ish ze tong of svines'. Opportunities for physical action were limited on the Home Front, so the author devises three attempts to catch the spy before the boys get their man; her subsequent celebration of the Scout movement emphasises discipline and team work - an old feud, caused by a poor umpiring decision in a cricket match, must be resolved in the interests of the greater good. Within the troop, the village boys know their place (their dropped aitches confirm their station), since all responsibilities are shouldered by the public school educated Bardolphins. Even Bob, Dick's high-spirited and occasionally irresponsible younger brother, is always addressed as 'Sir' by Fred and his pals.

?Walter is fighting in the cause of Right and Justice. Come what may, I ask for no braver calling for any son of mine.?

Walter is the first to leave for France. As the widowed Mrs Bardolph bids him farewell, ?she turned away with a heavy heart. She had seen something of the pomp and glory of a soldier?s life, and her heart had burned within her as she read of warlike deeds, for she came of a fighting race. But now the glamour faded and she felt only at what a price that glory might be won. Other thoughts followed. ?Walter is fighting in the cause of Right and Justice. Come what may, I ask for no braver calling for any son of mine.??

The accounts of the Great Retreat, the Battle of the Marne and the first Battle of Ypres do not flinch from bloodshed and death. Dick is recommended for the VC (?Awfully decent of the Colonel, isn?t it??). When he is wounded trying to rescue one of his men, Dick is concealed behind enemy lines by the widow of a farmer and two nuns who themselves have had to seek refuge as their House has been destroyed. He is restored to health through their care, their prayers and healing water from the well at the Nunnery, procured at some risk, with which they bathe Dick?s wounds.

Back home, Cousin John brings the news that Dick has been reported missing to Mrs Bardolph. ??I can?t tell you how warmly everyone spoke of Dick,? said John Bardolph, speaking in low tones. ?His care for his men was wonderful and they will never forget him.?? Dick?s friend and fellow Scoutmaster, Major Carmichael weeps as he prays in the parish church for Dick; there is something in their relationship of the ?David and Jonathan? love between men which features not only in popular literature of the time (most famously in Ernest Raymond?s 1923 best-seller **Tell England** set during the Gallipoli Landings), but arguably in the poetry of Wilfred Owen. The only love which surpasses this relationship in its purity is that between Mother and Son. When she hears the news, ?Dick?s mother did not weep. For to her, it seemed as if, secure from war?s alarms, her little son lay cradled at her breast.?

The novel ends in late Autumn, the war still only months old, when the wounded brothers are reunited at Kingsthorpe. Walter had escaped from a German prison to crawl to safety over the border into Holland; and Dick and the nuns had been relieved by the advancing British troops. As they talk, Mrs Bardolph holds up a crucifix and observes, ?whether a man realises it or not, the real inspiration of all that is noble in life, or in his death, is that great tradition of self-sacrifice and courage handed down to us throughout the ages.?

A novel by a woman about boys and men on active service was uncommon

Few novels were written by women for young readers about the war. Among the best remembered are Brenda Girvin?s **Munition Mary** (1918) and Bessie Marchant?s **A Transport Girl in France** (1918/9) which, as their titles suggest, were about young women playing an active role in the war effort. A novel by a woman about boys and men on active service was uncommon ? as indeed were female characters in such novels. Apart from Mrs Bardolph and the nuns (fulfilling a mothering role in her absence), the only female characters are Dick?s sister and cousin, briefly appearing as fanciful, if charming, companions (??Cecily replied with feminine inconsequence?).

Like Mrs Bardolph, Margaret Smith-Masters (wife of John Ernest Smith-Masters, Vicar of Stewkley in Buckinghamshire) had two sons old enough to serve. Both boys had been boarders at Haileybury. Like Dick Bardolph, George had interrupted his undergraduate studies at Oxford where he was reading Theology at Keble, to take up arms. Military records show that George arrived in Flanders with the Bedfordshires in late July, 1915 ? perhaps when his mother was at work on the novel. The report reads, ?while digging early in the morning of the 19th August, 1915, Second Lieutenant Smith-Masters ventured out of the trenches and was shot dead by a sniper?. The record reports that he was the first casualty from his battalion to die ?in combat? ? possibly this was the only combat he saw. His older brother, Captain Bruce Swinton Smith-Masters of the Essex Regiment, holder of the Military Cross, died in France on July 1st, 1916, aged 24.

Their mother unveiled the war memorial at Stewkley in 1922.



about literature and drama, including reviewing regularly for **Books for Keeps**. With Kate Agnew, Geoff wrote **Children at War** (Continuum, 2001).

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