

A Brass Hat in No Man's Land

reviewed by Robert Graves²

DOUGLAS JERROLD, in his *The Lie About the War*, notes that the authors of the most successful recent war-books have nearly all chosen plots which turn on particular rare instances of war-brutality, and that the new popular view of war as a sequence of barbarous horrors, which these books have encouraged, is no less false than the former popular idealization of it as uniformly heroic. I agree that war-books with novelist plots have small documentary value, but that is because they are offered as drama, not as history. I would have agreed with Mr. Jerrold had he decided, from the batch of war-books which he chose as a basis for criticism, that too few of them were straightforward detailed accounts of war-experience, giving dates, naming units, places, persons in a way that could be checked, and recalling contemporary states of mind by diary or letter quotations. But he is not content with so simple a critical comment; he is convinced that men behave in war very much as they behave in peace, and ends his examination by declaring dogmatically 'The truth of war is unromantic, unchivalrous, unadorned by the marvellous, the epic or the obscene,' and by asking for all future books to be written according to this formula.

I am aware of the strength of the Jerroldian argument when it shows that the authors of these war-books were all particularly sensitive persons, mere boys when the war broke out, with no pre-war background of political thought, that war-experience deranged their sense of values; and suggests that they became liable to grotesque exaggeration in their later account of it. Mr. Jerrold complains further that they can only regard the war as a futile waste of life, fought to no purpose except to prove its own futile wastefulness, that they blame the pre-war generation as a generation of callous fools playing with fire, and that in their fashionable post-war cynicism they make patriotism synonymous with stupidity. Can the accounts given by such witnesses be accepted? he asks. What interest have they in keeping the truth within modest bounds?

But this argument fails completely when it is applied to *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land*, written by none other than Brigadier-

¹ *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land*, by Brig.-Gen. F. P. Crozier, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. (Large crown 8vo. 7s. 6d. net)

² Author of *Good-Bye to All That*, etc.

General F. P. Crozier, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., a professional soldier, the son and grandson of professional soldiers, a South African veteran, even an ex-Ulster Volunteer adjutant, gun-runner and extreme patriot. I first heard of General Crozier during the war from a sergeant of the Bantam Battalion of my regiment, which was in his brigade in 1917. 'He was a mad gentleman,' said Sergeant H—— reverently. This was praise usually applied only to young platoon commanders, and it surprised me. 'Gentleman' meant a man who was not too much on his dignity with the troops under his command, and expected nothing from them that he would not be prepared to do himself. 'Mad,' a term still in use in the R.A.F., meant 'recklessly brave.' When a platoon had a mad gentleman in command it responded by relaxing its own dignity (the dignity of the ranks could exceed that of the officer-class) and by proving that it could be as reckless as he. 'Yes, sir, a general; and used to do his own patrols like a second-lieutenant!' A brass hat in No Man's Land was something to boast of having seen.

As if in answer to Mr. Jerrold this same Crozier writes: 'My experience of war, which is a prolonged one, is that *anything* may happen in it from the highest kinds of chivalry and sacrifice to the very lowest forms of barbaric debasement.' He speaks of his own war-mentality with a candour that compels the greatest admiration. He confesses how he deliberately taught blood-lust to his recruits and fed them with lying propaganda, knowing it to be lie, 'to corrode their kindly minds with bitter-sweet vice and keep them up to the vicious scratch.' He writes that 'the Christian Churches were the finest blood-lust creators which we had and we made full use of them.' He tells of three courts-martial on men under his command for cowardice in the field; how he cursed the president of one of them for merely awarding a life sentence; how from another he secured the death penalty on a 1914 volunteer, and saw it publicly carried out, having first mercifully doped the man with drink. He tells of trench suicides which he saw, of a murder by two privates of their bullying N.C.O. with a bomb put into his trousers, of self-inflicted wounds, of men unjustly sentenced, of over-drinking in the trenches by officers with the resultant loss of men's lives; of prisoners murdered by their escorts; of prisoners tortured to get information from them; of stragglers in battle rallied by himself and others with machine-guns and revolvers.

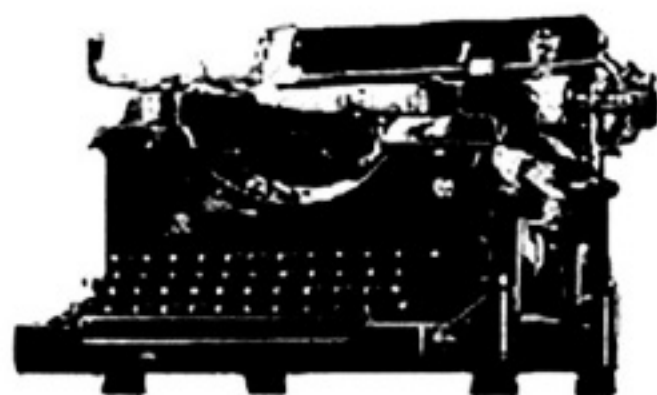
OldMagazineArticles.com

As a junior officer, he complains of the rarity of good battalion-commanders, of the unenterprising inefficiency of the average staff officer, and of the favouritism which withheld decorations from the fighters and gave them to the talkers and routine-soldiers. And on the other side, of course in equal proportions, of the epic, the chivalrous, the devoted, the humanly magnificent – natural complements of brutality, obscenity, vileness. It is a record without the novelist's evasions; with names, dates, places, given wherever possible, from August 1914 to the Armistice.

In spite of occasional clichés of phrase and sentiment, or even not in spite of them, for they are so obvious that they save the book from being judged too strictly on its literary merits, it is the only account of fighting on the Western Front that I have been able to read with sustained interest and respect. General Crozier never spares himself, takes his share of the blame as a pre-war soldier and politician for bringing the war about, and even has the courage to write:

'Here is an instance of my own narrow-minded mentality in 1918. Sir William Birdwood (the General commanding the Australians) issued orders that the city of Lille was not to be bombarded. I received the orders with mixed feelings. "But," I said, "there are Germans inside. What of them? Are they to escape?" I was bent on destruction.'

After a book of this sort has appeared no one need bother to write more 'startling war revelations' of the Western Front. Crozier has done the job once and for all; and nobody can challenge the authenticity of Crozier as a witness.



OldMagazineArticles.com