

## Unbridgeable differences

### Barbusse's *Le Feu*

John Taylor



John Taylor revisits a neglected account of life 'under fire' during the First World War.

As the centenary of the First World War enters its fourth year, it's difficult for us, in a softer age, to understand the resilience of people at home, confronted with continued military failure and never-ending lists of dead and wounded. The question turns in part on what they knew about the reality of the fighting, and the incompetence of the military command. War reporting was largely mendacious. The memoirs of Graves and Sassoon and others appeared only from 1928, the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1929.

In early 1917 there appeared the only contemporaneous book to tell the truth about the war, as experienced by ordinary fighting men. It was the English-language version of Henri Barbusse's novel *Le Feu*. The author, already an established writer aged 41, had enlisted for front-line service in August 1914. He saw fierce fighting in 1915 and was awarded the Croix de Guerre before being invalidated to the rear, suffering from dysentery.

*Under Fire*, to give it its English title, started appearing in August 1916 *en feuilleton* (serialised) in the daily *L'Oeuvre*, subtitled 'notes of a combatant'. Untroubled by the censor, the work was published in book form in December, and went on to sell 200,000 copies by 1918. En route it won the Prix Goncourt. That seems extraordinary, so resolutely does it stand out against the prevailing tide of patriotic rhetoric. This 'journal of a squad', (its new subtitle) – perhaps 'platoon' might be a better translation – follows the fate of the unit's 17 members. Led by Corporal Bertrand, a factory foreman, they are mainly farm labourers and workers from all over France; officers hardly ever appear. We first see them emerge from their dug-



outs, 'beneath the long desolation of dawn', muffled like Eskimos in blankets and sacking, lino and animal-skins, all individually described as they flounder in the mud like bears.

The narrative is episodic, as befits its origin, building up to one major offensive two-thirds of the way through. We follow one man's account of his home leave, most of it disrupted journey; when he arrives for one night with his wife they end up with company, having given shelter to four other rain-soaked itinerants. Another man gets through enemy lines to his hometown, and glimpses his wife smiling up between two Germans. Most of the chapters consist in large part of collective discussion and argument. They have plenty of time. 'In war we are forever waiting. We have become waiting machines.' They are in a reserve trench, impatient for breakfast to arrive.

That morning a party of civilians appear on a tour of the trenches, two in overcoats and carrying canes, one in a hunting outfit with a plush hat. A fourth, wearing a bowler and a white cravat, timidly extends his hand to one of the *poilus* (infantrymen) – awkwardly, 'as if offering a piece of bread to an elephant'. Learning afterwards they were journalists, one of the men puts on a falsetto to mime reading a farrago of press nonsense.

The following day the squad passes a depleted company moving back from the front line, their uniforms stiff with ochreous mud, their faces haggard and blackened, their eyes big and fevered. And yet they are merry, and through their dirt and their spasms of weariness they are triumphant, as if drunk. They have survived, survived for another six weeks – until their next tour of duty.

These incidents give a glimpse of the subversive perspective of the novel. Barbusse is vivid on such details. It's in the off-duty scenes that he is perhaps most touching. There's a fine description near the beginning when the post-orderly arrives with news and mail, and the men settle down to read and write replies. It's the moment, writes Barbusse, when they are the most and best they ever were.

Later, in the cavern-like barn where they are billeted before the big offensive, one man lays out and inspects the contents of his pockets, all itemised. The others join in to compare and explain, discuss and argue. One shows a little whistle his wife sent him saying, 'if you're wounded in battle, blow it so your mates can come and save your life'. The others laugh at her simplicity.

The conversation is difficult, since much is in argot and hard to translate well. To me at least, the men, after the initial introductions, are not on the whole well differentiated. Perhaps Barbusse intended to present them as a collective. Yet he does so with great human warmth. Their humanity



comes across partly via these discussions and arguments, partly through the empathy of the author with the intimate practical life of the men. He's there as a participant narrator, part of the squad, using *nous* as often as *on*.

It's the off-duty scenes too that must have caused most offence to *bien-pensant* patriots – for example, in the depiction of the grasping peasantry. After a long route march through the night, the men arrive at midday at a village for a period of recuperation behind the lines. A woman, very reluctantly, rents them a wash-house to eat in. She grudgingly sells them some wine at above the regulated price. She serves them coffee so thin you can see the sugar in the glass. 'What bastards these people are,' mutters one man. The others chime in,

- 'These fine folk of the North.
- Who welcome us with open arms.
- With open hands, more like.'

The small son of the family gives the game away. His pa is happy for the war to continue, he tells them, because we're getting rich. 'He says: by the end of May we'll have made 50 thousand francs.' The message is so much for the 'union sacrée', the sacred unity of a people under arms.

A chapter entitled 'La grande colère' depicts the extended rage of one man, returning from two months' convalescence, against the army of shirkers he has encountered behind the lines: all those departments and sub-departments and managements and centres and offices and committees – all those types trotting about and pushing paper. 'I would never have thought there were so many men sitting on chairs with a war going on.' Characteristically, Barbusse does not leave this indignation to stand as a propagandistic set-piece, but uses it to start an argy-bargy of discussion: 'But that's not new. We know all that.' The others listen, feed in their own experiences, yet laugh at his anger – 'these men who were paying for the security of others with their strength and their lives'. Even in a line regiment there are skives and inequalities, says somebody. Yes, says the corporal, 'you're always a shirker to someone else'. So the discussion continues.

Much later, on leave in a small town, the depleted squad meet various gushing patriots. 'A charge must be superb, eh? Masses of men marching as if on display! With the bugle ringing across the landscape.' As the men walk the darkening streets, a sort of discontent tenses and sours them. The sight of the home-going throng, writes Barbusse, reveals to the men the reality of an unbridgeable difference in the population: between those who



profit and those who strain and suffer, between those who are called upon to sacrifice everything and the others who advance over them, smiling.

The abominable conditions at the front are a constant theme, as is the desolation of the landscape – cold, wet, glutinous with mud and stuffed with corpses. As the novel proceeds, the intimate lives of the squad are progressively swallowed by this landscape as they die in the great offensive, and in the horrors that follow. Barbusse certainly piles them up. He writes with a descriptive and narrative power reminiscent of Zola, but the novel might have been better if it had ended more shortly after the offensive.

*Le Feu* concludes with a chapter entitled The Dawn in which a discussion about the reality, communicability and justification of war coalesces into a vision of the future. Crouched on a outcrop of rock overlooking the waterlogged battlefield, the narrator becomes a political commissar *avant la lettre*, and the men are inspired, ‘dimly seeing some Revolution they don’t yet know, but greater than the other, and springing from themselves...The entente of democracies, the entente of multitudes, the people of the world rising up, the brutally simple faith’ – quite some prophecy for 1915-16. ‘If this war has advanced progress one step,’ adds one of the men, ‘then its miseries and slaughter will count for little’. On this Leninist note the black sky divides into two masses of cloud and a tranquil gleam shines out – proof, says Barbusse, that the sun exists.

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Nothing in *Le Feu* can have been congenial reading for the Official Press Bureau in Whitehall, which would have recognised that it had the potential to undermine civilian support for the war. Yet an English translation by W. Fitzwater Wray appeared in early 1917 with, apparently, no official hindrance. Why this was so is a mystery. It was, to repeat, by far the most savagely realistic picture of the war to appear during the First World War itself. Rather than speculate, let’s try and follow the book’s impact.

Reviews were slow to appear. The first, published in the *TLS* in April 1917, was based on the French text. The anonymous reviewer – John Middleton Murry, in fact – called it a remarkable book, unlike any of its English counterparts in that its author demonstrates a deep loathing of war, yet takes part ‘with passion and conviction’. However, he rather fudges the author’s revolutionary vision, reducing it to ‘a war to end all wars’, a commonplace of British propaganda.

The much shorter *Scotsman* review of 9 August 1917 is more superficial, but it identifies better than Murry does one of the novel’s most distinctive qualities.

‘The peculiar characteristics of the squad are related with an intimacy that we seldom see in English... There are really excellent descriptions of the daily scenes witnessed ...’

Reviewers writing in the *Manchester Guardian* and *New Statesman* the following month were both powerfully impressed. M. Barbusse writes with a fierce sincerity and a pitiless imagination, said ‘WPC’ in the former.

‘It is a poignant and arresting work with its tale of simple-minded men bound to an endless chain of suffering. Some parts are pitiful in the extreme. Some are horrible and gruesome to the last degree. Some march as in a nightmare...’

Such relief as M. Barbusse gives is to be found in the sympathetic handling of his characters, the very human victims of the fire.

He says the things that in our polite world of spectators are suspected but not said. His picture is of another existence than that drawn by the eloquent war correspondents, who cannot describe the soldier’s life because they have not lived it, and would not be allowed to describe it if they had.’

In the *Statesman* Gerald Gould, its regular reviewer of novels, devotes the whole of his space, unusually, to this one work. He quotes extensively from the discussion in the final chapter because it is there, he feels, that the author sums up the thought and passion that inspired him to write the novel. For the rest,

‘I feel that to “review” such a book in the ordinary sense of the term would be an impossibility, and would be an impertinence, were it possible. A tribute can be paid to the extraordinary power and poignancy of it all, to its horror, its humanity, its tenderness, its humour; to the art with which the sameness of personality induced by long sameness of circumstance is suggested, while yet the infinite variety of character live before us; to the heart-rending pathos of incident after incident, each standing out clear and yet all merged with grey and ghastly monotony. A tribute can be paid, but no estimate can be made.’

Throughout, Gould goes on,

‘there is passionate insistence that the people set to the filthy business of slaughter are not those who *ought* to be so engaged.

They are not soldiers, they are men. They are not adventurers, or warriors, or made for human slaughter, neither butchers nor cattle. They are labourers and artisans whom one recognises in their uniforms. Throughout there is a long desire for “the end”.

Everybody should read this book; but, most of all, politicians and journalists who advocate at their ease the compulsion of other people into unimaginable suffering.’

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The powerful endorsements of the novel in the last two reviews would have been particularly influential, one would think. *Le Feu*, as one might expect, was not reviewed in the 'patriotic' press; but nor was it reviewed, as far as I can see, in either *The Nation* or *Labour Leader*, the ILP weekly. The absence of any notice in the latter, the leading title in the anti-war campaign, is surprising and hard to explain.

World events had moved on, of course, by September 1917: hopes for an end to the war were now fixed on Petrograd. The suffering of the fighting men, meanwhile, continued undiminished, through Ypres and beyond. Yet, even with its revolutionary message, *Under Fire* was not taken up by the anti-war campaigners and did not make an impact on the wider public imagination.

**Postscript**

Barbusse bore a certain haggard resemblance to Orwell – but moved after the war in entirely the opposite direction. He joined the French Communist Party and, while publishing more novels, became an energetic but always orthodox party intellectual. He published a hagiographic biography of Stalin and died in Moscow in 1936. His was a bad case of intellectual treason. But that in no way detracts from his vivid exposé of the human reality of life and death on the western front.

*Henri Barbusse*