

## Vera Brittain and the First World War – Julie Barham

“When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans”

Start of Testament of Youth, great account of a woman called Vera Brittain’s experience of 1 WW. So why do we think about this spiky, uncomfortable, passionate and sometimes angry woman, when even one of her biographers said she hadn’t got much of a sense of humour?

For me, what she wrote, some of the choices she made, sheer determination to survive. And now, well she is local, and as we approach the centenary of the end of the 1WW which changed and shaped her life – a woman’s account of the war which she and so many of her generation believed was the War to end all wars.

Together with her other writing, including her existing diary – Chronicle of Youth – one of most devastating real and meaningful account of the War

Not only did she write about her own feelings and actions, but uses the letters and other accounts of four men who fought to tell a story of what it was like beyond the poetry, posters and propaganda.

Because she was a real person, with her own insights of life on Home front, being torn between her life and war effort, her family’s demands, and the dirt, danger and death of nursing on the front line at Etaples.

She would lose much, experience much, but essentially manage to go on.

So who was she?

Well, born in Newcastle –under – Lyme Dec 29<sup>th</sup> 1893 child of late Victorian era – move on to Macclesfield, then Buxton at about thirteen, of which she was not a great fan. (Plaques photos)

Despite it being our local spa town, she saw it as exemplifying a “mean, fault finding spirit” later, seeing it as somewhere that she could not progress from.

Not that she was there the entire time – at a school run by a relative of Father’s the sort of education to fit her for an advantageous marriage, decorative, with servants – not a career or even living an independent life own admission couldn’t boil an egg until started nursing – not really even then

Family solidly middle class – father owned and ran a prosperous paper mill, and was expected that Vera would return to Buxton, go to parties and dances and eventually marry.

Not like her brother Edward – very close as no other siblings - more like twins he was at Uppingham school, then expected to go to Oxford, probably take over business or enter one of the respectable professions. But he was sensitive, and an excellent musician, so perhaps not run that smoothly.

We don't know why Vera felt so strongly that her planned life was not for her- she had attended one suffrage meeting while at school, and was considered brighter than other women – maybe it was extension lectures, or life long determination to be writer above all things. Or awkward. Or just determined.

Either way fought to go to Oxford like her brother and his friends who she had met – Roland Leighton and Victor Richardson at Uppingham – with no tutoring and arguably little support from parents – do not underestimate the achievement, no school pushing or well trod path – still very small number of women college places – also got into Somerville, most academically demanding of Oxford colleges. Accusations of being a bluestocking, unmarriageable. She said that could not progress from Buxton, but could from Oxford.

But when due to go up, after all her work, challenging tasks still ahead - the 1<sup>st</sup> WW declared on August 3<sup>rd</sup> . Inconvenient? Ruining her plans? Her attitude at time? Irrelevant as Boer war had been? Or was she carried away like so many?

Remember immense feeling of war over quickly, by Christmas – no one knew it would turn into the Western Front or other huge battle grounds. It was seen popularly as a huge adventure, that young men must rush to join before it was all over, especially if they had been to a military school with an OTC like Uppingham. Remember also that these were very young men in many ways, 18, 19, 20, willing to fight for what they were told to believe in. Not conscription yet, that would come later, and remember what a poor treatment that those who would not join up got – conscientious objectors. Benefit of hindsight, we can see the rush to join up at best misguided, at worse nearly suicidal. But that was not the view then. It was said that Vera urged her parents to allow Edward to join up – and certainly that is borne out by her diary in August of 1914 when Edward is shown keenly trying to volunteer. Alternatives seem dreary, everyone in their social circle trying to join up.

Vera wrote of that time in a letter to Roland

“I am quite sure that had I been a boy I should have gone off to take a part long ago; indeed I have wasted many moments regretting that I am a girl. Women get all the dreariness of war and none of its exhilaration”

Also in her diary of 6<sup>th</sup> August 1914, the lament of many women and girls, including probably myself at this point:

“Today I started the only work it seems possible as yet for women to do –the making of garments for the soldiers. I started knitting sleeping helmets, and as I have forgotten how to knit& and was never very brilliant when I knew, I seemed to be an object of some amusement. But even when it one is not skilful it is better to proceed slowly than to do nothing to help”.

See what I mean about her not having much of a sense of humour!

All 3 of Edward, Roland and Victor joined various regiments in order to get to the front quickly. Meanwhile Vera started in Oxford – English and enjoyed college experience despite chaperoning and other limitations. Possibly she didn't make lots of female friends – more involved in her brother's circle of friends. Now including Geoffrey Thurlow.

Has become very attracted to Roland Leighton – star of Uppingham, good at all the manly stuff but also interested in literature especially poetry. Had been to stay with Brittain family in Buxton, but soon obvious that he was more keen to spend time talking to VB. Had some difficulty getting into a regiment compared to the others, (poor eyesight) but like the others didn't take up his place at Oxford. Writing to Vera, exchanging ideas, became close . Only actually ever spent 17 days together, and then usually in company with others –aunt would chaperone!

If you are able to watch either the recent 2015 film or the classic series from 1979, - a lot about VB's life at this time. Unconventional love story – didn't always see eye to eye. The 1979 series has a lot to answer for – shown on tv when I was trying to get into Cambridge, and probably made me try harder! How different history would have been etc.

It emerges that Roland made every effort to move regiments so that he could get into a regiment going to the front line asap – a move that VB is shown in the dvd as being virtually suicidal. He probably had a high regard for honour, and all the stuff people like Rupert Brooke wrote about –swopped poems etc.

We don't know precisely what made VB determined at the end of her first year at Oxford to become a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse. (picture of Banner from Kings Lynn) Middle class option – had to be able to work without pay, afford uniform etc. Nicknames – Very Adorable Darlings. Etc. Why she didn't go for clerical work – easier, but possibly felt that nursing may be nearer to the Front, or that she may end up seeing her brother, Roland friends. Initial training, long hard days and nights, rules and regulations – some irony that it was her leave restrictions that limited her time with Roland – became engaged of a sort – partly to meet conventions of spending time together also met Roland's family – parents both writers, Mother was devoted to him. She was doing hard nursing of men brought back to London badly injured or ill, not neatly convalescing. She is shown as doing what she claimed that she wanted to “Confronting the real” of war.

They did not see each other for months at a time, but their letters went backwards and forwards, some showing disagreements as they didn't always understand each other. Was this the love of her life? Difficult to appreciate from this distance what their relationship was, even though we have many of their letters. While they did send poems, including their own compositions and people like Rupert Brooke's, also a lot from Roland about the landscape and surroundings. Not always great passion, but intensely descriptive. He send hers back for her to keep safe, which is why we have correspondence of both sides. Not likely today!

It is probable that when Roland was due home on leave for Christmas 1915 they intended to marry, but instead the awful news arrived that he had died of injuries. It emerged that he had been leading a wire mending party by moonlight when he had been shot. But before that information came through there was just silence. There was no record of his last words that made sense. There were many letters from other soldiers and chaplains that were standard phrases. He was also very anaesthetised on morphine, the battlefield drug, especially when operated on. It also emerged that he had been received into the Catholic church a few months previously, which no one knew. It was not the death, the great heroic action that anyone expected, but it was enough. His clothes and equipment is sent back, not his body, full of mud and blood. She discovers some of his papers and poems.

There was a high death rate among the junior officers in the army – more so than the army as a whole. Why? Leading hopeless attacks by physically going

over top of trenches first, not well armed themselves, setting standards, example? High proportion of Uppingham's old boys died – officer class. (Blackadder funny but also so very, very sad stick or handgun?)

Vera plunged into despair, but continues to see something of Edward, (wounded at Somme) and Victor and Geoffrey. Having applied to be posted abroad, she is sent to Malta, where conditions are good and the work is manageable – but trip there dangerous. While she is in Malta she receives letter from Geoffrey concerning his fear, then the news that he has been killed. When the news comes through that Victor has been badly injured, blinded, she resolves to return home and breaks her contract, travelling overland. She returns to discover Victor in reasonable spirits, and resolves that her life will be well spent in marrying and looking after him. Before she can make this clear to him, he takes a turn for the worse and dies. She is therefore deprived of all purpose, having given up Oxford and her nursing contract. But Edward survives, and is sent back to the Front.

She manages to persuade the authorities that she as she came back to marry Victor, she deserves another chance. She is sent to Etaples, and meets an inspirational nurse "Faith" when she is sent to nurse on the German Ward. The strange notion that she is nursing injured German soldiers when her brother is trying to kill them is not lost on them. (Gareth on the anniversary of DDay being nursed by a German) She was to write about the danger of nursing virtually on the front line, when supplies were short and many hundreds of men were brought in grievously wounded. This was not nursing as a clean and antiseptic process of moving around the ward laying a gentle hand on a fevered brow, but basic, dangerous, life saving. I suppose one of the admirable things about VB is that she didn't do things by halves – tough nursing and later tough devotion to writing and peace. She only gives up the sleeping under canvas and nursing in huts when she is summoned home by her father after her mother collapses. She breaks her contract once more to return to London where her parents now live.

Within a short time she is told that her beloved brother, Edward has been killed in Italy, where he was leading an attack. This is the last hope, gone. She had been so close to her brother.

She was to write "I have only one wish in life now and that is for the ending of the war... and wonder if, when there war does end, I shall have forgotten how to laugh"

What must have been so difficult is that where there had been so many letters from Roland, from Victor and Geoffrey, then at least from Edward – now just silent – with no graves or particular spot to mourn them.

A terribly sad scene in the original series is when her mother tries to tell her when the war is over and peace is declared that she must get out. “With whom?” she answers.

She did go back into nursing as a VAD, but had to go back to the start, and in TV series she is shown polishing wheelchairs as a menial task, and angrily refusing to go to tea with the Bishop’s wife, as she would probably have said something most regrettable to her. When the war finished, when some got the women got the right to vote, still stuck in St Thomas’ hospital and in her mid twenties probably though her life was over.

So she decided to go back to Oxford, where life wasn’t easy – she went back as an older and definitely more experienced woman, whereas most of the women students were younger, too young to have experienced love and loss in the War. One woman did become an extremely close friend – Winifred Holtby – and Vera and Winifred left University together after they graduated and became writers. Vera had trouble writing about her experience of war – fictionised, idealised, not until wrote and this book published did she really make her mark. They had long become feminists, but Vera became an official Pacifist in the 1930s. Big decision signing peace pledge, but as always completely committed to it. As such she was much criticised when Britain declared war, and when she criticised the heavy bombing of German cities. She was actually found to be on Hitler’s list of those to be killed first in the case of invasion. She married George Catlin in 1925, though remained close to Winifred. One of her two children is Shirley Williams, who I have met briefly, who has been involved in maintaining the story of her mother.

So there it is. In many ways Vera Brittain’s is a sad story, typical of her generation in many ways, yet it is true that she was unfortunate in losing so many. Population experts argue that there wasn’t actually a “lost generation”, as many more died in the Spanish flu epidemic for example, but there was a disproportionate loss in certain areas and for certain people, - pals regiments, officers. We went to a 1WW display in a church in Chesterfield on Sunday – 88 names on 1WW memorial. Not sure of area – but much research had been done by local history group to put face and details to every name – so knew age and family of each man., frequently miners. Some in late thirties, not so

many as young as Vera's loved ones. Vera Brittain is important because her most famous book – Testament of Youth – presents vivid account of a war not only from a woman's point of view, but details the real lived experience of men in the front line as well. Books have been written about what she did after that war- but it is her great war book which was her greatest achievement.