
Opening Extract from...

Testament of Youth

Written by Vera Brittain

Published by Virago Press Ltd

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925

Vera Brittain

With an Introduction by Mark Bostridge and a Preface by Shirley Williams

virago

VIRAGO

First published by Virago Press in 1978
This edition published by Virago Press in 2008
Reprinted 2008

First published by Victor Gollancz Limited in 1933

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-86068-035-2

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Virago are natural, renewable and recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests and certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council.

Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SGS-COC-004081
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Virago Press
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

www.virago.co.uk

Foreword

For nearly a decade I have wanted, with a growing sense of urgency, to write something which would show what the whole War and post-war period – roughly, from the years leading up to 1914 until about 1925 – has meant to the men and women of my generation, the generation of those boys and girls who grew up just before the War broke out. I wanted to give too, if I could, an impression of the changes which that period brought about in the minds and lives of very different groups of individuals belonging to the large section of middle-class society from which my own family comes.

Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War. It is true that to do it meant looking back into a past of which many of us, preferring to contemplate to-morrow rather than yesterday, believe ourselves to be tired. But it is only in the light of that past that we, the depleted generation now coming into the control of public affairs, the generation which has to make the present and endeavour to mould the future, can understand ourselves or hope to be understood by our successors. I knew that until I had tried to contribute to this understanding, I could never write anything in the least worth while.

The way to set about it at first appeared obvious; it meant drawing a picture of middle-class England – its interests, its morals, its social ideals, its politics – as it was from the time of my earliest conscious memory, and then telling some kind of personal story against this changing background. My original idea was that of a long novel, and I started to plan it. To my dismay it turned out

a hopeless failure; I never got much further than the planning, for I found that the people and the events about which I was writing were still too near and too real to be made the subjects of an imaginative, detached reconstruction.

Then I tried the effect of reproducing parts of the long diary which I kept from 1913 to 1918, with fictitious names substituted for all the real ones out of consideration for the many persons still alive who were mentioned in it with a youthful and sometimes rather cruel candour. This too was a failure. Apart from the fact that the diary ended too soon to give a complete picture, the fictitious names created a false atmosphere and made the whole thing seem spurious.

There was only one possible course left – to tell my own fairly typical story as truthfully as I could against the larger background, and take the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private, however great its public significance and however wide its general application. In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavour to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women.

I have tried to write the exact truth as I saw and see it about both myself and other people, since a book of this kind has no value unless it is honest. I have also made as much use as possible of old letters and diaries, because it seemed to me that the contemporary opinions, however crude and ingenuous, of youth in the period under review were at least as important a part of its testament as retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge. I make no apology for the fact that some of these documents renew with fierce vividness the stark agonies of my generation in its early twenties. The mature proprieties of 'emotion remembered in tranquillity' have not been my object, which, at least in part, is to challenge that too easy, too comfortable relapse into forgetfulness which is responsible for history's most grievous repetitions. It is not by accident that what I have written constitutes, in effect, the indictment of a civilisation.

The task of creating a matrix for these records has not been

easy, for it is almost impossible to see ourselves and our friends and lovers as we really were seven, fifteen or even twenty years ago. Many of our contemporaries of equal age, in spite of their differences of environment and inheritance, appear to resemble us more closely than we resemble ourselves two decades back in time, since the same prodigious happenings and the same profound changes of opinion which have moulded us have also moulded them. As Charles Morgan so truly says in *The Fountain*: 'In each instant of their lives men die to that instant. It is not time that passes away from them, but they who recede from the constancy, the immutability of time, so that when afterwards they look back upon themselves it is not themselves they see, not even – as it is customary to say – themselves as they formerly were, but strange ghosts made in their image, with whom they have no communication.'

It is because of these difficulties of perspective that this book has been so long delayed; even to be wise in my generation and take advantage of the boom in War literature, I could not hurry it. Now, late in the field and already old enough for life's most formative events to seem very far away, I have done my best to put on record a personal impression of those incomparable changes which coincided with my first thirty years.

Vera Brittain
November 1929–March 1933

PART I

'Long ago there lived a rich merchant who, besides possessing more treasures than any king in the world, had in his great hall three chairs, one of silver, one of gold, and one of diamonds. But his greatest treasure of all was his only daughter, who was called Catherine.

'One day Catherine was sitting in her own room when suddenly the door flew open, and in came a tall and beautiful woman, holding in her hands a little wheel.

'"Catherine," she said, going up to the girl, "which would you rather have – a happy youth or a happy old age?"

'Catherine was so taken by surprise that she did not know what to answer, and the lady repeated again: "Which would you rather have – a happy youth or a happy old age?"

'Then Catherine thought to herself: "If I say a happy youth, then I shall have to suffer all the rest of my life. No, I will bear trouble now, and have something better to look forward to." So she looked up and said: "Give me a happy old age."

'"So be it," said the lady, and turned her wheel as she spoke, vanishing the next moment as suddenly as she had come.

'Now this beautiful lady was the Destiny of poor Catherine.'

Sicilianische Märchen, by Laura Gonzenbach.
(Included in *The Pink Fairy Book*, edited
by Andrew Lang.)

CHAPTER I

Forward from Newcastle

THE WAR GENERATION: AVE

In cities and in hamlets we were born,
And little towns behind the van of time;
A closing era mocked our guileless dawn
With jingles of a military rhyme.
But in that song we heard no warning chime,
Nor visualised in hours benign and sweet
The threatening woe that our adventurous feet
Would starkly meet.

Thus we began, amid the echoes blown
Across our childhood from an earlier war,
Too dim, too soon forgotten, to dethrone
Those dreams of happiness we thought secure;
While, imminent and fierce outside the door,
Watching a generation grow to flower,
The fate that held our youth within its power
Waited its hour.

V.B.
1932.

1

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.

To explain the reason for this egotistical view of history's greatest disaster, it is necessary to go back a little – to go back, though only for a moment, as far as the decadent 'nineties, in

which I opened my eyes upon the none-too-promising day. I have, indeed, the honour of sharing with Robert Graves the subject of my earliest recollection, which is that of watching, as a tiny child, the flags flying in the streets of Macclesfield for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Fortunately there is no need to emulate my contemporary's *Good-bye to All That* in travelling still further back into the ponderous Victorianism of the nineteenth century, for no set of ancestors could have been less conspicuous or more robustly 'low-brow' than mine. Although I was born in the 'Mauve Decade', the heyday of the Yellow Book and the Green Carnation, I would confidently bet that none of my relatives had ever heard of Max Beerbohm or Aubrey Beardsley, and if indeed the name of Oscar Wilde awakened any response in their minds, it was not admiration of his works, but disapproval of his morals.

My father's family came from Staffordshire; the first place-names bound up with my childish memories are those of the 'Five Towns' and their surrounding villages – Stoke, Hanley, Burslem, Newcastle, Longport, Trentham, Barlaston and Stone – and I still remember seeing, at a very early age, alarming glimpses through a train window of the pot-bank furnaces flaming angrily against a black winter sky. At an old house in Barlaston – then, as now, associated with the large and dominant Wedgwood family – my father and most of his eleven brothers and sisters were born.

The records of my more distant predecessors are few, but they appear to have been composed of that mixture of local business men and country gentlemen of independent means which is not uncommon in the Midland counties. They had lived in the neighbourhood of the Pottery towns for several generations, and estimated themselves somewhat highly in consequence, though there is no evidence that any of them did anything of more than local importance. The only ancestor of whom our scanty family documents record any achievement is a certain Richard Brittain, who was Mayor of Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1741. The others were mostly small bankers, land agents, and manufacturers on a family scale.

In 1855, when Victorian prosperity was flourishing on the

pinnacle represented by the Great Exhibition of 1851, my great-grandfather gave up his work at a private bank in Newcastle, and purchased a little paper mill in the Potteries from a Huguenot family of paper-machine inventors. Towards the end of the century, his growing firm, in which my father was now a junior partner, acquired another small mill in the neighbourhood of Leek. From this business – of which, in 1889, the weekly wages bill was under £12 – the greater part of the family income has since been derived. My father was one of the four chief directors until his retirement during the War, and even I am a capitalist to the extent of owning a few shares.

Out of my great-grandfather's experiment has now grown a large and flourishing concern which produces some exquisite fine papers from the most up-to-date plant and machinery, though the outlook of its directors – honourable, efficient business men, like the shrewd North-country manufacturers in a Phyllis Bentley novel – is still tinged with the benevolent commercial feudalism of the later nineteenth century. The collective psychology of the neighbourhood in my childhood may be deduced from a saying once proverbial in Staffordshire: 'Let us go to Leek out of the noise.' In those days my father, who even now regards my membership of the Labour Party as a strange highbrow foible, used often to boast to chance visitors that his firm 'had never had a Trade Union man on the place'.

When my father, who was the best-looking and the most reasonable of a large and somewhat obstinate family, married my mother in 1891, his relatives disapproved, since she was without money or pedigree, and had nothing but her shy and wistful prettiness to recommend her. Instead of being the prospective heiress of 'county' rank which my prospering grand-parents doubtless thought appropriate for their eldest son, she was merely the second of four daughters of a struggling musician who had come from Wales to take the post of organist at a church in Stoke-on-Trent. Since the remuneration brought in by this appointment was quite insufficient for the support of a wife and six growing children, he gave music and singing lessons, which paid a little, and composed songs and organ voluntaries, which did not pay at all.

As a young man my father fancied his voice and so took a few singing lessons from the kindly organist; thus he met my mother, then a graceful and exceptionally gentle girl of twenty-one, dominated by her more positive mother and sisters. After they were married – rather quickly and quietly at Southport, owing to the sudden premature death of my charming but impecunious grandfather – my father's family showed no disposition, beyond a formal visit on the part of his mother to hers, to see any more of these modest in-laws, and for some years the two families continued to live within a few miles of each other, but hardly ever to meet.

When I reached an age of comparative intelligence, I deduced from various anecdotes related by my young and pretty mother the existence of this attitude of initial disdain on the part of my father's people towards her own. For some years it puzzled me, since to my hypercritical youth the majority of my paternal relatives, with their austere garments and their Staffordshire speech, appeared uncongenial and alarming, while my mother's sisters, all of whom made their way in the world long before independence was expected of middle-class women, were good-looking and agreeable, with charming musical voices and a pleasant taste in clothes. But after I left school, I soon learnt from my brief experience of the fashionable 'set' in Buxton that a family's estimate of its intrinsic importance is not always associated with qualifications which immediately convert the outsider to the same point of view.

2

During the early years of their marriage, my parents lived at Newcastle-under-Lyme.

They began their life together with a series of misfortunes, for their first child, a boy, was still-born, and shortly afterwards my father developed appendicitis, which proved a baffling mystery to the rough-and-ready provincial surgeons of the time, and left him prostrate for nearly twelve months. Eventually, however, I made my appearance at the decorous little villa in Sidmouth Road, arriving precipitately but safely during my father's absence at a pantomime in Hanley.

In the early stages of that urge towards metropolitanism which I developed with adolescence, I used to believe that such a typically provincial suburb as Newcastle could never have produced any man or woman of the smallest eminence, and with the youthful confidence that characteristically prefers to dwell on the fruits of success rather than to calculate their cost, I made up my mind as quickly as possible to repair that omission. But a few years ago I strangely discovered, through a chance meeting in a *wagon-lit* on the way to Geneva, that the small Staffordshire town – or rather, an adjacent village known as Silverdale – was at least the birthplace of Sir Joseph Cook, a former High Commissioner for Australia, who during our brief acquaintance at the League that summer habitually addressed me as 'Little Newcastle'.

I must have been about eighteen months old when my family moved to Macclesfield, which was a reasonable though none too convenient railway journey from the Potteries. Here, in the small garden and field belonging to our house, and in the smooth, pretty Cheshire lanes with their kindly hedges and benign wild flowers, I and my brother Edward, less than two years my junior, passed through a childhood which was, to all appearances, as serene and uneventful as any childhood could be.

The first memories of my generation are inevitably of an experience which we all share in common, for they belong to dramatic national events, to the songs, the battles and the sudden terminations of suspense in a struggle more distant and more restricted than that which was destined to engulf us. Like the rest of my contemporaries, I began to distinguish real occurrences from fables and fancies about the time that the South African War broke out at the end of 1899. Before 1900, though animate and assertive, I could hardly have been described as a conscious observer of my background.

From the unrolling mists of oblivious babyhood, the strains drift back to me of 'We're Soldiers of the Queen, me lads!' and 'Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you'. An organ was triumphantly playing the first of these tunes in a Macclesfield street one cold spring morning when I noticed that banners and gay streamers were hanging from all the windows.

'It's because of the Relief of Ladysmith,' my mother explained in response to my excited questioning; 'Now Uncle Frank will be coming home.'

But Uncle Frank – a younger brother of my father's who had been farming in South Africa when the War began and had joined the Queen's forces as a trooper – never came home after all, for he died of enteric in Ladysmith half an hour before the relief of the town.

I had quite forgotten him on a grey January afternoon nearly a year later, when I sat snugly in our warm kitchen, drawing birds and dragons and princesses with very long hair, while the old lady whose Diamond Jubilee had made such an impression upon my three-year-old consciousness sank solemnly into her grave. In front of the fire, the little plump cook read the evening paper aloud to the housemaid.

'"The Queen is now asleep,"' she quoted in sepulchral tones, while I, absorbed with my crayons, remained busily unaware that so much more than a reign was ending, and that the long age of effulgent prosperity into which I had been born was to break up in thirteen years' time with an explosion which would reverberate through my personal life to the end of my days.

It seemed only a few weeks afterwards, though it was actually eighteen months, and peace with South Africa had already been signed, that Edward and I were assiduously decorating with flags the railing which divided the lower lawn from the hayfield, when my father came hurriedly up the drive with an anxious face and a newspaper in his hand.

'You can take down your decorations,' he announced gloomily. 'There'll be no Coronation. The King's ill!'

That night I prayed earnestly to God to make the dear King better and let him live. The fact that he actually did recover established in me a touching faith in the efficacy of prayer, which superstitiously survived until the Great War proved to me, once for all, that there was nothing in it. To those who were twenty or more at the time of Victoria's death, the brief reign of Edward – to whatever extent that indefatigable visitor to Paris and Biarritz may have been a factor in the coming of the deluge when it did

– must have seemed merely a breathing space between the Victorian age and the German invasion of Belgium. To us, the War generation, it was much more than that, for in those nine years we grew from children into adolescents or adults. Yet of the King himself I remember nothing between his untimely attack of appendicitis, and the pious elegy in the best Victorian manner which I produced at school when my form was told to write a poem in memory of his passing.

3

Not only in its name, Glen Bank, and its white-painted semi-detachment, but in its hunting pictures and Marcus Stone engravings, its plush curtains, its mahogany furniture and its scarcity of books, our Macclesfield house represented all that was essentially middle-class in that Edwardian decade.

Following the long-established example of my father's parents, we even had prayers before breakfast, during which performance everybody – from my mother, who perturbedly watched the boiling coffee-machine on the table, to the maids who shuffled uneasily in their chairs while the postman banged at the front door and the milkman thundered at the back – presented an aspect of inattentive agitation. The ceremony frequently ended in a tempestuous explosion on the part of my father, since Edward was almost always late, and could never say the Lord's Prayer as rapidly as the others. As a rule he was still patiently pleading with the Deity to lead him not into 'tation, while the rest of us were thankfully vociferating 'Amen'.

Although my father, as a self-willed young man in his thirties, was somewhat liable to these outbursts of irritation, they never really alarmed me, for he was always my champion in childhood, and could be relied upon as a safe bulwark against the bewildering onslaughts of his practical-joke-loving younger brothers and sisters, who regarded a small girl as fair game for their riotous ingenuity. Far more disturbing to my peace of mind was the strange medley of irrational fears which were always waiting to torment me – fears of thunder, of sunsets, of the full moon, of