
Private Grief and Public Propaganda: An Analysis of the Authorship of Rudyard Kipling during the First World War

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of propaganda and authorship during the First World War. To a great extent the contribution of Rudyard Kipling to the production of propaganda mirrored that of the publishing industry. His desire to play a role in the war effort through his work ran parallel with that of many leading authors, who were in high demand at the first official government propaganda organisation, Wellington House. However as the war progressed, Kipling's work was to alter in tone considerably after October 1915, when he and his family were informed that his beloved only son John was missing believed dead, following the Battle of Loos the previous month. Kipling would continue to manufacture propaganda, but the underlying tone of his work and the themes he explored were to change. Kipling's key works which best demonstrate this will be explored. By 1918, as the importance of Wellington House dwindled and the media-men headed by Lord Beaverbrook controlled the use of propaganda, Kipling was of the opinion that the role of literature as a means of propagating had passed. His attentions, like those of many other individuals in the publishing industry, had turned to peace and commemoration.

Key Words

Rudyard Kipling, First World War, propaganda, Wellington House

Introduction

Rudyard Kipling's published work during and after the First World War evolved from exquisite examples of imperial propaganda, to insightful glimpses into the private grief and the disillusionment of a mourning father. Birkenhead (1978), Bergonzi (1972), Bilsing (2000), and Lycett (1999) all provide in-depth accounts of the life and works of this great literary figure. The importance of Wellington House in the production of literary propaganda which influenced the tone and role of authors during the war has been skilfully covered by Buitenhuis (1989), Haste (1977), and Sanders (1975). The aim of this article is to unite these works in their various stances in order to analyse the extent to which Kipling complied with the overall theme of authorship as a means of propaganda during the First World War. Combining a range of first and secondary sources alongside an analysis of the changing focus of propagandist methods, could provide a new perspective on this topic. Kipling, one of the most renowned authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was pivotal in promoting a change in propaganda methods from tours and pamphlets, to newspaper articles, cinema and finally, remembrance.

The Great Imperialist

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 heralded a new period of British history. This was to be total war where civilians were called to arms. The subsequent conscription drive required propaganda to be rationalised and modernised on an official scale (Haste 1979, 2). From the launch of Wellington House in September 1914, headed by C.F.G. Masterman, it was evident that literary figures, with Kipling at the forefront, were to play a vital role in the production and distribution of wartime propaganda. The primary aim of the propagators during this time was to subtly perpetuate an image of the Germans as the enemy, whilst portraying Britain as the imperial protector of her allies, to justify the war and encourage mass army recruitment. Kipling's private letters reveal his deep hatred of the Germans and his grim acceptance that his prediction of war had come to fruition (Bergonzi 1972, 136). He saw it as his duty to draw upon his immense literary prowess and fame to compel Britain and her allies to rise up and defeat the Germans in glorious battle. His poem "For All We Have and Are" (1914) demonstrates this: "For all we have and are/ For all our children's fate/ Stand up and take the war/ The Hun is at the gate!"

An imperialist through and through Kipling detested political compromise and cowardice (Birkenhead 1978, 263), he believed the Germans to be a barbarian race who threatened the Great British Empire and her subjects.

In a private letter he wrote:

I confess I feel rather proud of the way England has bucked up at this pinch and tho' not an optimist by nature I can't help feeling cheerful over this. When Liege falls the German army will make such a ghastly 'example' of it (with a view of striking terror), as will send every available male in England scuttling into the ranks in order to get a gun and have a pot at the Germans (The Kipling Papers, Birkenhead 1978, 259).

Masterman believed that writers of Kipling's stature were crucial in swaying opinion, particularly of neutral countries (with America of particular importance), by reporting the war in an individualist, not too obvious partisan style (Lycett 1999, 616). Kipling was selected due to his strong imperialistic views and because he had written propaganda during the Boer War (Bilising 2000, 75). His works, particularly those that were written during the first year of the war when his personal views were of high anticipation, had great impact in spreading the desired message.

Masterman's Approach: Pamphlets, Tours and Public Propaganda

Pamphlets were an excellent way of spreading propaganda. Cheap and easy to produce on a mass scale, they were the first major implementation by Wellington House. Kipling's immensely successful pamphlet *The New Army* (1914) was written to support the government's desperate need for army recruits. It focused on his visits to Indian and Canadian troops who were stationed in Britain, awaiting their call-up to the Front to replace the ever increasing casualties. The pamphlet portrayed a glamorised and wholly fictional version of the army, and perpetuated the view that those who refused to fight should be mocked for their cowardice and reluctance to do what was 'right' for their country. One of the concluding lines states "What will be the position in years to come of the young man who has deliberately elected to outcast himself from this all-embracing brotherhood?" The pamphlet did not reflect the realities of the training camps. For instance, some army bases where troops were stationed had, fifty years previously, been deemed unfit for habitation. As observed by Buitenhuis "Kipling ignored the real conditions, the inevitable frustrations, sickness, annoyances, eruptions that all men, especially new recruits, endure in training. He wanted to see the war as a crusade and so managed to endow every soldier and sailor whom he saw with his own spirit" (1978, 37). Bilising too supports this stance stating that his "emotionally charged rhetoric fired the imagination of the country whilst muffling its

sensibility through the manipulation of civil emotion” (2000, 76). But pamphlets were not the only means by which Kipling displayed his gift of the written word¹.

Masterman was eager to supply the public with a highly selective portrayal of the Western Front once it became clear that the war would be won or lost in the trenches. Writers were to sustain the illusion of glory whilst ignoring the brutal realities within which the armies fought grimly on (Buitenhuis 1978, 79). Kipling embarked on his own tour of the French battlefields in August 1915, which consisted of an utterly surreal mix of visiting the trenches one day and dining with statesman Clemenceau at the Ritz in Paris the next. Kipling was filled with an excitement for the war and his hatred of the Germans only intensified when he witnessed the destruction to a country he so revered. Writing to his son, who within a few short weeks would die in battle, Kipling noted, “I don’t mind trenches half as much as going in a motor along ten or twelve miles of road which the Boche may or may not shell[...]It’s a grand life though and does not give you a dull minute” (Birkenhead 1978, 266). The degradation of the trenches became the best kept secret of the war (Buitenhuis 1989, 79). Kipling’s articles detailing his tour appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*, demonstrating the gradual departure from literature and the increasing use of newspapers as a means of engaging the public with the propagandist message of the First World War.

During this initial period of the war Kipling’s fervour, combined with his imperialist stance, manifested in a great number of works he produced. He was especially passionate about the navy and wanted to bring attention to its plight. His interest was highlighted in a letter from E.Y. Daniel of the Ministry of Defence to Sir Claud Schuster, the director of Wellington House:

Kipling is bubbling over with enthusiasm for what he has already seen. He has been to Dover, Harwich and Grimsby and seen the submarine work, trawler work, etc., and arrangements are being made for him to visit the Grand Fleet in about a fortnight. Meanwhile he is going to work hard at his first articles which will probably be ready before he goes North (Lycett 1999, 620).

Published works produced during this time include *Sea Constables* (1915) which criticised neutral countries, including America, following the declaration by Germany for all-out war against the submarines of Britain and her allies. The booklet *The Fringes of the Fleet* (1916) further criticised America’s reluctance to join the allies, whilst *Swept and Garnished* (1915) continued the anti-German focus. The plot centred on an elderly German woman living in Berlin who is haunted by the ghosts of Belgium children killed by the invading Germans. This is a prime display of Kipling’s willingness to perpetuate the ‘little Belgium’ image that

¹ *France at War* (1915) and *Sea Warfare* (1916) are other such pamphlets written by Kipling.

became such a powerful propagandist concept used to encourage recruitment and promote pro-war feelings during the early stages of the war.

Private Grief in Public Work

The loss of his son in 1915, after Kipling had used his connections to secure John's enlistment, had a significant impact on his work. It was a "blow from which he never fully recovered, and it changed the current of his propaganda work and his fiction. Until that time, he was an indefatigable speechmaker at recruiting rallies and writer of recruiting pamphlets" (Buitenhuis 1978, 25). His bitterness about the war became pronounced in his writing with revenge becoming a leading theme (Bergonzi 1972, 137). Publically Rudyard maintained his propagandist campaign in accordance with developments of the war. For instance, following America's declaration of war on Germany Kipling displayed his pleasure through the composition of "The Choice" (1917).

Mary Postgate (1915) is perhaps one of Kipling's darkest titles and is a prime indication of the changing tone of his work. The plot focussed on Mary whose orphaned nephew is killed in the war. When a German plane crashes in her village she discovers its severely wounded pilot. Ignoring his plea for help, she walks away and experiences a vindictive pleasure in leaving him to die. It was written when German atrocities in Belgium had been widely reported and the first civilian deaths from air raids had occurred. The theme of such a tale, still heavy with anti-German hysteria, touched upon something more profound and obscure stemming from the turmoil of losing John (Bergonzi 1972, 139). However, it evidently was still written when Kipling's public commitment to promoting the war effort was strong.

Kipling's grief at losing John and his changing view of the war was revealed in several works produced post 1916. The hostile couplet "A Son" (1919): "My son dies laughing in some jest, I would I knew/ What it were, and it might serve me at a time when jests are few" and "My Boy Jack" (1916), written from the perspective of a grieving mother whose son has been lost at sea, are most telling. In January 1917 he began writing *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (not published until 1923), an historical account of the infantry in which his son fought and died. "Upon this work, which he intended partly as a memorial to his dead son, he lavished an immense amount of labour, recording the achievements of the Regiment down to Platoon level" (Birkenhead 1978, 271). He wanted to use literature to commemorate the fallen, not to propagate the war effort as had been his previous intention. This theme of commemoration would continue after the war. For example *The Gardener* (1925) is a tale of a woman searching for the grave of her illegitimate son. She is eventually led to his grave by a Christ-like figure. As Bilsing explains, "It explored the feminine experience of war which just as crippling as that of the men, as women attempted to find a place in a male-

dominated war-torn world” (2000, 81). Thus indicating a widening subject matter of Kipling’s work, that increasingly focussed on the lasting impact of the Great War concerning those whose loved ones did not survive the conflict.

Many of Kipling’s works post 1917 were not propagandist zeal, but explored and expressed his grief and disillusionment with the on-going war. For instance “A Song at Cock-crow” (1919) condemned Pope Benedict XV, whom Kipling believed had sided with the Germans, whilst the series of writings entitled *Epitaphs of the War* (1919) displayed Kipling’s ability to evoke loss. “Common Form” is the standout verse from this compilation. It revealed the deep turmoil of Kipling during this time: “If anyone questions why we died/ Tell them, because our fathers lied.” His work featured an introverted view of propaganda combined with the brutal realities of war, and the long-term effects it had on those who remained.

Beyond War

Kipling’s appointment to the board of the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917 would ultimately be his enduring propagandist focus. The commemoration of the war dead would occupy his time until his own death in 1936. He wrote many epitaphs of the war including the most prominent “Their Name Liveth For Evermore”. His aim was to “guarantee the dead a place in history as warriors of a glorious cause” (Bilsing 2000, 77). Kipling, like many of the Great War authors, questioned the impact of his previous propaganda. *On the Gate a Tale of ’16* (1926) for instance featured a chaotic heaven in which St. Peter has to cope with the huge crowds of war dead awaiting entry. The German deceased are not permitted. Published eight years after the war ended, it implies that Kipling’s opinion of the Germans had not altered. Furthermore it highlighted his disillusionment with many aspects of the allied military and political leadership (Buitenhuis 1975, xviii). His patriotism remained but his faith in the military elite had dwindled.

As Kipling’s work ebbed away from its pro-war stance towards creating an appropriate commemoration for the dead, the role of publishers and authors in the creation of propaganda also altered. They were no longer at the epicentre of the propagandist effort, for Wellington House was not the powerful directional hub of propaganda it once was. This loss of influence was partly due to the heavily critical reports composed by media magnate Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*. In 1918 Kipling believed that literature was no longer an appropriate method of propaganda, which reflected the popular consensus among authors. He was adamant that the future was visual (Lycett 1999, 649). The new Ministry of Information (MOI) headed by Beaverbrook now called the shots. Although Kipling refused the offer of an official position with the MOI, he provided advice on future propaganda methods. His opinions were judged with the highest reverence and were often

implemented in subsequent propaganda strategies. Writing to Beaverbrook in 1918 Kipling stated “I think Newspaper propaganda for the monition worker is dead[...]The spoken word and the picture is the game” (Lycett 1999, 651). He contributed to this new approach with several of his works produced as films: *Mrs Bathurst* (1904) and *The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat* (1917). In December 1918 the MOI was disbanded following the armistice of the previous month. Propaganda became the concern of the Foreign Office and Wellington House would play no further part. Publishers and authors alike, as Kipling demonstrated, were preparing for a post-war future. Indeed Hodder and Stoughton biographer John Attenborough writes of the publisher’s post war preparation: “one waited for peace and an adequate paper supply” (1975, 82).

The impact of Kipling’s work during the First World War is demonstrated in Ernest Hodder’s account of the July 1919 Victory Parade: “as I try to write of the vision splendid, half remembered lines from Kipling[...]riot round my hand” (Attenborough 1975, 85). Kipling was (and remains) synonymous with the published works of the Great War. His impressive wartime catalogue, varying in tones of war mongering, anti-German stories, mournful poetry, and subtle tributes to his late son, reflected the development and change in focus of First World War propaganda. At the outbreak of the war Kipling’s attentions were focussed on driving army recruitment for it was with regret that he personally could not take up arms. However, when his son became one of the countless casualties the horror and scale of the conflict propelled his work into a contrasting mix of propagandist aims. Consequently his writing consisted of works that supported the war, no doubt compelled by his imperialist nature, and works of contemplation that were committed to creating a worthy legacy of the war and its dead.

To summarise, as Buitenhuis states “the war, which had begun for Kipling in a gust of exultation and relief and continued in a barrage of revenge propaganda, fiction, and verse, concluded for him in artistic versions of emotions too deep for tears” (1978, 75). As the last poet to command a mass audience (Rutherford 1990, viii) Kipling revealed the haphazard relationship between authorship and propaganda. For him it was a contrasting mix between fulfilling his self-imposed imperial duty, combined with his altering opinion once the realities of total warfare became recognised. Kipling, having rightly acknowledged that literature was no longer the most effective tool of propaganda, strove desperately to produce a worthy and lasting tribute to the dead, by helping to create and propagate a legacy of the First World War to ensure that their names would indeed liveth for evermore.

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