
OUP at War: The Impact of the First World War upon a University Press

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Abstract

The Great War ravaged Britain's industries from 1914-18, and publishing was no exception. One hundred years on from the war to end all wars, this article looks at the effects of total war on one of the world's most prestigious and well-known publishers, Oxford University Press. Originally known as Clarendon Press, the war hit OUP from all sides. Management, production and ultimately the collective conscience were all damaged in a way that shook the organisation to its foundations. However, the war also revealed the cultural importance of the Press and its far-reaching cultural weaponry. This article analyses the impact of war on all parts of the Press, considering aspects beyond the printing operations.

Keywords

Great War; OUP; Oxford; Publishing, University, War, Printing.

Introduction

The First World War tore Britain apart on many levels, but possibly the most significant impact of destruction was on the family. Whether biological, location-based, or work-based, the sense of family was challenged during the war years. Fathers, brothers, uncles and cousins went to war, as did neighbours and colleagues.

Oxford University Press (OUP), like the rest of the British publishing industry, was troubled by issues of both material and manpower shortages. However, the industry suffered the most in terms of its collective conscience, which was damaged by its members going to war and never returning. Established publishers of the time were often family run affairs, such as Heinemann, who lost his cousin and heir (Potter 2007, 22). However, it was OUP that suffered the most.

Several key figures played a big part in the running of OUP during the war years. Chief among them was Secretary Charles Cannan, who oversaw the organisation. Cannan was an Oxford philosophy scholar with a silent but strong personality and a stiff upper lip, and he worked in the Secretary's office above the Clarendon Building entrance arch. His Printing Manager, Horace Hart, was another figure at the core of the OUP leadership. The war impacted him to the point that he committed suicide in 1916, due to stress and overworking. Living in the printing manager's quarters did not help, as it meant he rarely left the site. This was not Cannan's fault – simply Hart's perfectionist approach and commitment to the company. Cannan and Hart were the two main individuals at OUP in 1914.

When analysing the position OUP found itself in at the beginning of the war, it is important to consider the company's origins as well. Originally situated in the Sheldonian Building basement, printing moved to the Clarendon site in 1830, whereby the grand arch and quad were built on what had been empty land. Soon after the district of Jericho sprang up around the offices – the origins of a community. It is not unreasonable to see the Clarendon site as a castle, dominating the landscape and the lives of the people who lived within its reach.

From 1830 onwards, the Press grew and grew, in terms of both community importance and the physical manufacture of books. By 1914, the fact that OUP had been printing for such a long time, and in a castle-like fortress of an office block, gave the impression that it was a solid, immovable entity. It seemed immortal. The war reminded staff and families that this was not the case.

Community and Leadership

At OUP, there was a sense of community unmatched across publishing houses and businesses in general. The Press was a source of employment for 700 men, providing them with lifetime careers straight from the nearby Jericho schools in which they grew up. This was incredibly important as there was no welfare state at the time, and the Press provided what can be described as a social safety net. In a sense, the thriving community centred around the Press was almost a utopian ideal. Horace Hart was seen as the unofficial “village elder”. He took great care in the treatment of his print workers and knew many of them personally.

However, the war “drove a juggernaut” (Maw 2017) through this idealistic arrangement. Firstly, there was the immediate impact of the initial outbreak of war. On the first day, 63 men of the Territorial Army walked out under the arch to go to war, followed by 293 in the weeks that followed (Cannan 1976, 83). Half the workforce had essentially been taken away, and with it half of the community was taken as well.

Charles Cannan was moved by this commitment to King and Country, and it is not hard to imagine him looking out below his office as his loyal workforce set off for the war. By the end of the war, 45 Press men did not return. This was only 12 percent of the total number who went to war, perhaps because most Press soldiers ended up in Greece and Northern Africa, and not the bloodbath that was the Western Front (Maw 2017). Nevertheless, each of those men most likely had family in Jericho.

An example of the community and family feel at the Press can be found in Cannan's reaction to his men going to war. He brought in his daughters to work for the Press, although it was initially more of a volunteer role as they and other women were not paid. One of his daughters, May Cannan, wrote poetry and memoirs about her time working at the Press, and states this about her father:

My father collected a cousin who had done social service work and put her in charge of the families of the men who had gone. Their army pay was made up to their weekly wage if it fell below it and she went every Saturday to call on them all and reported back to my father so he knew at once if any of them needed help or were in distress. (Cannan 1976, 83)

Furthermore, she goes on to say that the trade unions were never an issue because her father was not a "faceless boss" and the workers genuinely felt lucky to be there (Cannan 1976, 107). Charles Cannan was clearly very concerned about the welfare of his workforce and their families, and his actions demonstrate the outreach of the Press in the local community. The general trend was for a small separation allowance for the families of men who went to war (Winter 1985, 33), but Cannan defied the trend, proving his compassionate leadership. The fact that the trade unions, instead of clashing with the company, were getting on just fine also reinforces the friendly workplace within the Press. As well as highlighting this, May Cannan also captures the unique atmosphere at the Press and the local area. She describes the eerie sound of troops singing in the wind from the railway station as they went off to war, painting a ghostly picture.

However, these actions only demonstrate the initial impact of war on a tight-knit community. The real impact of the First World War on the Press is best observed towards the end stages and in the years after the war ended. For a few Press soldiers the war did not end until the early 1920s, as they found themselves participating in the Russian revolution.

Press Soldier Experiences

The main source of information about how the Press handled the aftermath of the war is *The Clarendonian*, a staff magazine that went to press from 1919 onwards. As previously established, there was a sense of near-immortality at the Press, given its long history and pillar status within the local community. The war disrupted this ideal, and it dawned upon members of staff to make a record of the Press's existence: "It is desired primarily to make the magazine a chronicle of passing events" (Clarendonian Institute 1919, 1). However, due to the horrors that the men experienced, few were willing to talk, especially in the form of a magazine article. As J.M. Winter states, "traditional forms of language seemed unsuited to transmit the images of surreal nightmare" (Winter 1985, 291).

The reluctance to talk can be seen in the content of the few *Clarendonian* war articles, and when they were published. It is interesting that the editors of the *Clarendonian* seem to be papering over the cracks, when in the first edition they state that "it must at least be remarked that the Press has come through the severe ordeal of war-time astonishingly well" (Clarendonian Institute 1919, 1). There is the impression that they wanted everything to carry on as normal, and pretend that nothing had really happened, when in reality the Press had been rocked to its foundations.

The recollections did not actually start until the third issue, with the magazine stating that:

Those who have returned to the Press have not yet manifested any decided inclination to write their reminiscences, even for *The Clarendonian*...but if we must wait a little longer for testimony from the silent ones themselves, there is no need to be silent about them. (Clarendonian Institute 1919, 38)

This is an unusual way of explaining the situation. It is as if the editors of the magazine were desperately encouraging the soldiers to open up about the war, even though their continued silence was a clear indicator that they did not want to. From this, there is a repetition of the feeling that the Press was trying and failing to repair the damage that the war had done.

When the recollections finally start being published, in the third issue of the magazine, they begin with one titled “The End of The Italian Campaign”, which details the winding down of the war in Italy and enemy troops being rounded up into POW camps. This is interesting as the content is not about the horrors that men faced, but simply the end of the war and standing around guarding prisoners.

Recollections became a regular section after this opener, but they were more focussed on war as a grand adventure and not what happened at the front lines. HR Goddard writes: “Could there be a more perfect spot on Earth? For us, that journey along the Mediterranean shore was a tonic, refreshing, exhilarating” (Clarendonian Institute 1920, 109). He was showing the enjoyable face of war. Furthermore, HR Goddard seems to be the only writer creating these recollections for the magazine.

What can be deduced from the delay in recollections, the lack of true war content, and lack of writers, is that members of the Press returning to civilisation were deeply affected by their experiences. It seems there was an element of survivor’s guilt, particularly amongst those whose friends had not come back. Robert Lifton writes: “Such a state of mind is nearly intolerable, because it is infused with a burden of guilt which makes like a type of walking death.” (Cited in Winter 1985, 302). Clearly, the men who returned to the Press after the war were not the same men who left in the summer of 1914.

This sums up the general aftermath of the war on the majority of Press employees. But the effects of war went beyond survivor’s guilt, which in itself was a widespread phenomenon amongst surviving soldiers nationwide. It created division within the organisation. Printing was a highly specialised profession, which meant that some employees went to the war on the battlefield whilst others went to war in Whitehall, assisting the government in printing operations. This meant they never saw active service.

At a time when male and female roles were much more separated and defined than they are today, for one man to be serving his country in battle and the other in the office had the

potential to create tensions. This effect is best exemplified through the case of John Johnson and RW Chapman.

John Johnson was an Oxford graduate who worked under Charles Cannan before the war, and was supposed to go and fight, but was rejected on grounds of a heart condition. He stayed at the Press during the war, and ended up marrying Cannan's daughter. On the other hand, RW Chapman was deployed to Greece, and when he returned to the Press after the war, he was made Secretary after Cannan died in 1919. Chapman and Johnson were two rather different men, and thus Chapman made Johnson printing manager, a position in which he had virtually no experience. He struggled in the early years, but later on became one of the most accomplished publishers in the industry.

This shows is that the war influenced decision-makers within the Press. There was an element of "you were not there, you do not know what it was like" from those who went to the fronts, particularly within the officer classes. Chapman was typical of this class regarding the fact that he had no need for a Greek interpreter, having studied classics in higher education. Officer classes had a higher casualty rate than average, partly because they had to lead their men into battle, an action which often meant being first "over the top" (Winter, 1985, p. 64).

However, it is important to focus on what was included in *The Clarendonian* as well. Rather than war stories, a lot the of pages are filled with day-to-day activities. For example, fruit and veg shows in the quad, bowls and cricket matches, dates of upcoming events, gardening, and other menial community notices can all be found in the magazine. This demonstrates the Press staff had a desire to record the simple facts of their existence, an existence which had been put into question by the war due to the hundreds of employees that left in 1914. The war had been a wake-up call that the institution was not immortal, and triggered an urge to record life.

Printing Output and Material Shortages

As well as the damage to OUP's collective conscience, the war also impacted the physical printing operations of the Press, and what kind of content was produced. To analyse this, it is a good idea to look at the initial mission statement of the Press, to see how far the war made it deviate from its original aims. According to their website, the mission is "to support Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education" (OUP 2017). This suggests a scholarly approach to publishing, with the main aim being the spread of knowledge.

The printing operations of the Press, like many other publishers, were greatly hindered by the paper rationing restrictions in place. May Cannan writes in *Grey Ghosts and Voices*:

It was also quiet at the office. Paper and other things were very short and it was difficult to see how production could go on at its current scale for much longer. More learned works had to be laid aside and with all the restrictions I began to worry how long we should really all be needed' (Cannan 1976, 120).

The message here is that production had to be scaled down, but also that "learned" works, or intellectual scholarly pieces had to be put to one side. If the mission statement of the Press is taken into consideration, this indicates that there was a huge deviation, as these highbrow books would have been paramount to the sense of prestige and knowledge that Oxford University represented. Cannan goes on to state that "you couldn't get gold for the edges of India Paper Books or the lettering on book spines" (Cannan, 1976, p. 107), demonstrating that it was not just paper that the Press was short on – it was materials like gold and brass as well. It must have been damaging and frustrating for academics and printers alike to not be able to produce works that had potentially been a life's work in a way that justified the effort that went into them.

However, despite the material shortages, the Press went ahead with a number of series including new editions of Shakespeare and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). Such was

the importance of the dictionary, that the philosopher W.W. Skeat claimed that the dictionary was not a dictionary of English words but a dictionary of the “English nation” (Whyte 2013, 73). This is the first evidence that the Press went beyond its physical properties as a publisher, and was intertwined with high British culture in such a way that its output had become part of the defence of the British Isles.

War Content

In terms of content related to the war, the Press’s war pamphlets were a standout item. A few weeks into the war, the History department produced *Why We are at War: Great Britain’s Case*. Written by six historians, the argument for war was sound and well thought through, unlike other hysterical pieces of the time. The Government ordered the pamphlet to be translated into a number of other languages, whereby the Press did so and then distributed them abroad. This leads Peter Sutcliffe to argue in *Oxford University Press: An Informal History* that the Press fulfilled a similar role to the BBC overseas service in the Second World War (Sutcliffe 1978, 172). Perhaps the Press was not just important to the immediate local community, but the national community as well. As the *Oxford Magazine* stated in 1922, “the Press is run [...] for the national benefit” (as cited in Whyte 2013, 73). The Press was now much more than just a university press.

The truthful nature of the Press’s war pamphlets can be summarised in the *Times Literary Supplement’s* view on the *Oxford University Roll of Service*, stating that “probably no European Press did more to propagate historical and ethical truth about the war” (as cited in Sutcliffe 1978, 189). It was not raw and rough propaganda being produced by the Press, but expertly crafted pro-war messages. This seems appropriate given the highly esteemed academic practices of the University. Furthermore, the profits from *Why We are at War* did not go back into the Press, they went to the Belgian Relief Fund (Chapman 1926, 35).

Other houses were paid a nominal fee by the Government for their services (Potter 2007, 21), but the waiving of the profits by OUP makes sense when considered alongside Charles Cannan's caring leadership and the Press's community feel. It seems that Cannan was desperate to personally make a difference to the war as "he hated staying behind and seeing the young men go" (Sutcliffe 1978, 188). This conjures up images of a wistful father saying goodbye to his sons. OUP was a publisher on the side of patriotism, not profit.

As well as pamphlets, the Press did more direct war work for the Government, consisting of the printing of naval code books. Naturally, this was a secretive operation, and the Clarendon Building proved to be an ideal construction for preserving these secrets. With its high walls, central enclosed quad, divisional structure, and imposing main gates, it was well suited to the handling of military secrets. In fact, the Press did such a good job that no one really knew about the naval printing until Admiral Reginald Hall unveiled the Press War Memorial after the war (Maw 2017).

The analysis of the Press's wartime output demonstrates that it did switch from its original aims to an extent by publishing government naval books and pamphlets. However, it did continue to publish classic books and dictionaries, despite material shortages limiting the production levels and quality. But the continuation of this production, particularly in relation to the OED, helped the war effort not in terms of physical military purposes, but in terms of the national psyche. What the OED represented was the English culture, and by continuing production it was a way of barricading against the threat from Europe. Incidentally, in 1916 a Delegate protested the publication of *The Oxford Book of German Verse* due to the fact that patriotic citizens would be outraged (Whyte 2013, 75). The Press was a cultural cornerstone, and in some ways, it had more impact on the war than the war had on it.

Conclusion

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this analysis of the war's impact on the Press. The war ravaged the workers, the leaders, and the collective conscience of OUP. It

made the Press take a look at itself and ponder its mortality. And although the output of the Press was heavily reduced, it endured and managed to produce material important to the government and the morale of the nation as a whole. It was not just a pillar of the local community, but a pillar of the entire nation.

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