Interdisciplinary Approaches to Interpreting Life-Writing:

History, Literature, Social Theory, Psychoanalysis

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This paper explores how an interdisciplinary approach to life-writings enables historians to advance understanding of such key questions as the formation, maintenance and fracturing of national and other political identities. It uses a case-study of upper-middle-class British men involved in World War One to interrogate the ways in which they variously supported, participated in or came to oppose the British war effort. Their life-writings (contemporary and retrospective) are analysed textually to identify (sociologically) how the structures of their upbringing within the imagined communities of family, school, and university formed the basis of their attachment to the wider imagined communities of nation and empire; and to uncover (psychoanalytically) how national and imperial ideologies of masculinity, and the contradictions within and struggles between them, were internalised psychically – operating not simply as cognitive frames through which the world was perceived, but emotional frames through which it was embraced. Textual analyses of letters, diaries, travel narratives and poems illuminate the concept of the war as a liminal experience, allowing disruption of conventional norms and formation of different patterns of belonging. Life-writings give access to the contradictory voices at work within individuals, such as rupture with dominant values or silencing of inner doubt.

My book *Fractured Loyalties: Masculinity, Class and Politics in Britain 1900-30* (London: RiversOram, 2007) had as its research question: what are the processes of *formation*, *maintenance* and *fracturing* of national and other *political identities* at the level of the individual citizen/subject. (The formation of political identities needs also to be addressed at other, more collective levels, which help to explain the epochal emergence of, or shifts within, national, religious, or ideological [socialist, communist, liberal, etc.] patterns of affiliation.)

The book came to centre round the impact of the First World War. In 1916, Sir Edward Carson – a prominent pre-war Unionist politician, and soon to be a member of the War Cabinet – stated in a speech that: "The necessary supply of heroes must be maintained at all costs". This phrase is revealing because it suggests that the state regarded "heroes" as part of the *matériel* of war, as much as ordnance or munitions. (It was to be sardonically quoted to each other by the wartime junior officers, poets and friends Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves.) Hence the research question could also be reformulated as: how does the state maintain the necessary supply of heroes, and at what costs.

I approached this question through a case study of upper-middle-class British men, who supported, participated in or came to oppose the British war effort in the First World War. The core of the case study comprised biographical accounts of four men: Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Scott Macfie (a Liverpool businessman, pioneer Gypsiologist, and member of the pre-war Territorial Army), and Alick West (a student when the war broke out, later a Communist teacher and literary intellectual). These detailed studies were supported by reference to the lives of a further seven contemporaries, used to support, modify or test parts of my analysis: W. H. R. Rivers, Leonard Woolf, Noel Chavasse, Julian Grenfell, Graeme West, Gerald Brenan, Charles Sorley.

The title of this conference is "First-person writing, Four-way reading". The theoretical resources I drew on to "read" my case-study lives and their texts could be grouped under four headings, which overlap with those shaping the conference:

- *Social history*
  - (of family, school, career, imperialism, masculinity, army)
- *Social theory*
  - (imagined community – B. Anderson, R. Poole;
  - liminality – V. Turner, E. Leed)
- *Gender & Sexuality theory*
  - (masculinity – R. W. Connell; gay identity – A. Sinfield)
- *Psychoanalysis*
  - (Freud, Erikson, object relations)

The book aims to establish a reciprocal relationship between its research question (the maintenance/fracturing of political identities) and its textual analysis (reading "first-person writing"), a relationship mediated via the theoretical framework indicated above which informs those readings and enables comparisons of the life courses of the men concerned.

Within the life-cycle of upper-middle-class men, I was concerned to trace the transfer of (patterns of) affiliation formed within (what, drawing on, critiquing and extending the work of Anderson and Ross, I analysed as the "imagined communities" of) family/school/university/vocation through what I termed triple dynamics of provision/coercion/recognition to (the wider imagined communities of) class/nation/empire.

Understanding the nature of such structures of attachment to institutions, and the patterns of their transfer, made it possible to analyse how national and imperial ideologies of masculinity, and the contradictions within and struggles between them, were internalised psychically – not simply as cognitive frames through which the world was perceived, but emotional frames through which it was embraced.

The primary sources for my study were a wide variety of "First-person Writings" (or egodocuments, to use Jacques Presser's concept, which has been widely employed by Dutch, German and other historians). Textual analyses of autobiographies, letters, diaries, travel narratives and poems illuminate the concept of the war as a liminal experience (here using Leed's development of Turner, and linking it to Erikson's concept of moratorium), which allowed disruption of conventional norms and formation of different patterns of belonging. Such readings give access to the contradictory voices within individuals, e.g. rupture with dominant values, or silencing of inner doubt.

I will illustrate these claims with examples from Robert Graves's mid-life autobiography, *Goodbye to All That* (1929). It falls into three parts, dealing with the pre-war years of childhood and schooling, his wartime experiences, and his life in the first decade after the war. He opens the story of his school days with a framing device which undercuts/distances himself from the hostile account he is about to give (which itself prepares the ground for and foreshadows the critical account he will later give of the Army).

> About Charterhouse. Let me begin by recalling my feelings on the day that I left, about a week before the outbreak of war. I discussed them with a friend [Nevill Barbour, then Head of the School] who felt much as I did. First we said that there were perhaps even more typical public schools than Charterhouse at the time, but that this was difficult to believe. Next, that there was no possible remedy, because tradition was so strong that if one wished to break it one would have to dismiss the whole school and staff and start all over again. But that even this would not be enough, for the school buildings were so impregnated with what was called the public school spirit, but what we felt as fundamental badness, that they would have to be demolished and the school rebuilt elsewhere and its name changed.
> (Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That: an Autobiography* [1929], 61)

> But when we had said our very worst of Charterhouse, I said to him or he said to me, I forget which: "Of course, the trouble is that in the school at any given time there are always at least two really decent masters among the forty or fifty, and ten really decent fellows among the five or six hundred. We will remember them, and have Lot's feeling about not damning Sodom for the sake of ten just persons. And in another twenty years' time we'll forget this conversation and think that we were mistaken, and that perhaps everybody, with a few criminal exceptions, was fairly average decent, and we'll say: "I was a young fool then, insisting on impossible perfection", and we'll send our sons to Charterhouse sentimentally, and they'll go through all we did."
> (ibid., 62)

Thereby, he sardonically acknowledges the power of institutions to instil and evoke loyalty which cuts right across any individual's actual experience of them.

Attention to the literary structure of the autobiography reveals how form can modify content. Graves aligns himself (as an aspiring poet) with the intellectuals against the boorish philistinism of the sporting "bloods" who dominated the pupil hierarchy within the school.

> The social code of Charterhouse was based on a very strict caste system; the caste-marks were slight distinctions in dress. …. very peculiar and unique distinctions were reserved for the bloods. These

included light grey flannel trousers, butterfly collars, coats slit up the back, and the privilege of walking arm-in-arm. So the next Sunday [three sixth-formers] did the bravest thing that was ever done at Charterhouse. ....

[At this Sunday morning chapel service], when the bloods had come in with their usual swaggering assurance, an extraordinary things happened. The three sixth-formers slowly walked up the aisle magnificent in grey flannel trousers, slit coats, First Eleven collars, and with pink carnations in their buttonholes. It is impossible to describe the astonishment and terror that this spectacle caused. Everyone looked at the captain of the First Eleven; he had gone quite white. .... After this ... the school, particularly the lower school, which had always chafed under the dress regulations, made heroes of them, and began scoffing at the bloods as weak-kneed. (ibid., 72-3)

But the form of this moral exemplar mimics that of the popular public school story, reproducing precisely the values which the public school code supposedly promoted: the marrying of physical courage with moral and intellectual strength, and the willingness of a brave few to stand up to bullies – thus ensuring triumph of those values (and the institution which inculcates them) within the narrative.

Graves volunteered at the outbreak of the war, and served on the Western Front until seriously injured. His treatment of the particular regiment in which he (accidentally) enrolled parallels that of the school. His text combines a sharp critique of many aspects of the regiment, and especially of the legacies of its (now seemingly archaic and cruel) pre-war practices, with both an explicitly positive valuing of it as a framework for survival in the war, and an attention to its history, rituals and comparative status which partly reproduces the very structure being criticised. In terms of my theoretical frame, the regiment as a military unit *coerced* its members into a situation of danger; it also defended and *provided* for them once there; and it afforded them *recognition* as brave soldiers loyal to their fellows. This very immediate collectivity (to a considerable and increasing degree, one comprised of men thrown together by the demands of war) also became an imagined community through the diachronic stress on its history and traditions.

For most of the men in my case study, the war began a process of fracturing national and religious ideologies. Graves was torn between three possible nations. His family was half-Irish, half-German. He recounts how he repressed his German identity at school (since Germany was then very unpopular as a trade and imperial rival). Six German family members were killed during war. And in 1919 he fled the army so as not to have to serve with Black and Tans during the war of independence in Ireland.

He had received a strongly moralistic Christian upbringing; both his parents were devout believers. But *Goodbye to All That* presents his wartime self as retaining only a shattered edifice of religious belief: fragments used for immediate and temporary purposes of survival. These included phrases from religious anthems which he repeated over and over in his head as charms:

- "He that shall endure to the end, shall be savèd"
- "Through faith unto salvation, Ready to be revealèd at the last trump" (Graves comments: "This, the soldiers always sang as "crump' ... 'The last crump' was the end of the war and would we ever hear it burst safely behind us?" (ibid., 251-2)

Graves's conflicted and shifting attitude to the war can be traced through his friendship with Sassoon. In autumn 1916, they had joint doubts about the war, but:

We decided that it was no use making a protest against the war. Every one was mad; we were hardly sane ourselves. Siegfried said that we had to "keep up the good reputation of the poets", as men of courage, he meant. The best place for us was back in France away from the more shameless madness of home service. Our function there was not to kill Germans, though that might happen, but to make things easier for the men under our command. (ibid., 290)

But by the summer of 1917, Sassoon's revulsion had grown, and he made his famous protest against the continuance of the war, refusing to return to active service. Graves intervened to help protect his friend from a court martial; but thereafter, in their conversations and exchanges of letters, their attitudes towards the war diverged. Graves criticised the likely effect of Sassoon's protest by writing to him that:

> … the exact people whom you wish to influence and save by all your powers, are just the people whose feelings you are going to hurt most by turning round in the middle of a war, after having made a definite contract, and saying "I've changed my mind"; they'll only think it "bad form" and that you're "not acting like a gentleman" which is the worst accusation they can fasten on a friend.
> (Graves to Sassoon, 27 October 1917, *Letters 1914-46*, 85-6)

"Behaving like a gentleman" was of course precisely what the public school code was designed to inculcate – an attitude Sassoon vehemently rejected..

The final section of the book deals with Graves's efforts to rebuild his life after the war. During the 1920s, he struggled to build a family of his own on less patriarchal lines than those he had himself experienced as a child, and to establish himself as a professional writer. His failure to achieve financial independence in the latter role meant he was still subject to dynamics of provision/coercion/recognition from his family of origin; while supporting him, they also continued to try to shape his life decisions.

A recurrent theme of Graves's post-war writing – in poems and letters as well as the autobiography – is his uncertain existential status: he felt himself to be 'dead but alive'. During the Battle of the Somme (1916), Graves had been very severely wounded by a shell fragment; he was declared dead on his 21st birthday, although in fact he survived and gradually recovered. A post-war poem, "A Letter from Wales" (*c*.1924), takes the form of an address to Sassoon expressing the disruption of continuous identity through the sequence of near-deaths (from wounds, reckless actions, the flu pandemic) which each had suffered. Graves "died, poor fellow, the day he came of age"; and, he continued, "I don't know for sure, but I suspect / That you were dead too ….". It was merely two doppelgangers which had replaced the two dead friends. "So these two substitutes, yours and my own …. / Came up to Wales pretending a wild joy / That they had cheated Death" This erasure of the living self, its replacement by a mere simulacrum, was countered by their performing, on the mountainside in Wales, a joint parody of Christ's Transfiguration.

> A glamour spread about us, the low sun
> Making the field unreal as a stage,
> Gilding our faces with heroic light ….
> … and someone said
> (Was it I or you?) "It is good for us to be here."
> The other said, "Let us build Tabernacles."
> (In honour of a new Transfiguration;
> It was that sort of moment) ….
> ("A Letter from Wales" [*c*.1924], Graves, *Poems about War*, 72-6)

Once again, a fragment of Biblical imagery and Christian belief is invoked to counter the fragmentation of both body and identity inflicted by the war.

Goodbye to All That is a text permeated by deaths: before, during, and after the war. But the text itself is precipitated by, and in turn (through its considerable financial success on publication) enables, a death-defying leap into the unknown. (Its writing was indeed Graves's way of saying goodbye to England and all it stood for; on completion he moved to Spain, where he was to live from most of his remaining life.) This leap occurs *hors-texte*, only very obliquely and fleetingly alluded to in the autobiography itself. In 1929, Graves, his wife, his lover Laura Riding and others were attempting an alternative form of living within a proto-commune. During the emotional crisis which heralded the collapse of this venture, first Riding and then Graves leaped from windows in the house they were occupying; both survived (though Riding was seriously injured).

This leap can be read as a highly condensed and overdetermined symbolic act.

- It embodied Graves's identification with George Mallory (a mountaineer who as a teacher had encouraged him at school, and taught him rock climbing), and via him with Christ (Mallory had once "improvised" a foothold in mid-air to save himself from falling, thus outdoing Jesus who had not thrown himself down from a high place)
- It reversed Graves's own "death" at the Somme from the shell fragment.
- It restored to him the command of motility, central to masculinity, which was lost by those front-line soldiers immobilised in the trenches.

- It recuperated the sense of meaning lost in religious fragmentation; Graves, like his mentor Mallory, now outdoes Jesus (the blasphemous undertone being part of his repudiation of the world he was brought up in).

Such an action testified to the strength of the rupture needed to loosen the bonds of attachment tying him to family, religion and nation, so as to say "Goodbye".

My book uses readings of first-person writings, informed by a range of theoretical perspectives, to contribute to the historical exploration of key questions such as the formation, persistence or rupturing of individual investments in national, imperial and religious identities.