

NOTHING TO DO BUT SERVE: BRITISH OFFICERS AND THEIR SERVANTS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Blake McGready graduated from SUNY New Paltz in 2013 with a degree in history. Blake was inspired to study soldier-servants in the war through the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien, who served in the British Army and used the batman-officer relationship to inform his writing and express a sense of deep camaraderie between characters in his stories.

Graham Seton served as an officer of the British Army in the First World War, receiving both the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross. Like many officers of the British Army, Seton enlisted the aid of a soldier-servant, commonly called a batman, while in the trenches. Moved by the friendship and memory of his servant Peter, he revisited their combat experiences in a short memoir entitled *Biography of a Batman*, published over a decade following the 1918 armistice. He wrote:

Peter became my batman, a faithful servant, a friend and counsellor, an ever-present companion, to give me confidence in the darkness of a dangerous night, and good cheer, when fortune favoured a visit battalion headquarters, and a quick run along the disused tramway from Houplines to Armentières to refresh the company mess-box and perchance a bath.¹

Peter's obedience and amity profoundly affected Seton, providing not only the necessities of a servant, but also a comrade.

Wilfred Owen rose to fame as a tragic figure of the First World War and British literary history. Like Seton, he served as an officer in the British Army and utilized a soldier-servant. "My servant has nothing else to do but serve, so that is satisfactory," wrote Owen.² Later in the war he wrote to a friend, "I have nothing more to tell you except that I'm rather glad my servant was happily wounded: & so away from me."³ Compared to Seton, Owen was remarkably less genial, and expressed a cold,

¹ Graham Seton, *Biography of a Batman* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1929), 5.

² Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 395.

³ *Ibid.*, 582.

utilitarian attitude toward his servant. Officers' opinions of their batmen roughly fell into these two categories, one of warm praise and another of distant detachment. However, these divisions manage to communicate important similarities.

A batman was a working class soldier, assigned servant to an officer in every respect. He executed assigned tasks and may have acted as a companion or confidant. Responsibilities were numerous, demanding a wide range of abilities. Former British officer Denis Oliver Barnett wrote of his batman, "In the morning he brings me cocoa or tea when he wakes me, takes my clothes and brushes them, cleans my boots and equipment, and looks after all my stuff. ...I shout for him if I want anything, and altogether he is a very useful little man."⁴ A batman would perform physical, laborious tasks too, including cleaning trenches and roofing dugouts.⁵ Acclaimed British First World War writer Siegfried Sassoon recollected in *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*, his semi-autobiographical novel that "my faithful servant Flook always contrived to keep me supplied with oranges when we were up in the trenches."⁶ These duties and others fell into the realm of what was expected of a batman at war. In addition, officers and batmen provided an intimate look at the effects of social class in the British trenches.

Already divided by military rank, British social order also separated officers and their soldier-servants. Enlisted soldiers and servants hailed from the poor working classes, urban lifestyles and such low educational standards that at the time eleven percent of the British Army was classified illiterate.⁷ Officers were of much higher social classes, well educated, and relatively wealthy. Historian Jay Winter wrote,

⁴ Denis Oliver Barnett, *Denis Oliver Barnett in Happy Memory: His Letters from France and Flanders, October 1914-August 1915* (England, 1915), <http://ebooks.library.ualberta.ca/local/denisoliverbarne00barnuoft>, 61.

⁵ C. F. Hitchcock, "*Stand To*": *A Diary of the Trenches 1915-18* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1937), 37.

⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929), 375. This novel, as well as Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and *Sherston's Progress* tell the story of fictional British War officer George Sherston and his service during the war. Although they are not purely autobiographical accounts, they reflect Sassoon's experiences in the British Army. For the purposes of my paper, Sherston's experiences will be used as substantial source base and should be understood although fictitious, an accurate depiction of the war and the relationship between officers and their batmen.

⁷ G. D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale, and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 1.

Social class position determined military rank in the early days of the war. Men from upper and upper middle classes were likely to enlist earlier than men of more modest means; elites passed rudimentary medical examinations at greater rates and joined the officer corps largely because they were deemed the right sort of people to do so.⁸

Before even arriving at the front, officers and batmen were already products of the immense disparity in British society.

The war voices of officers were readily available, while the writings and memoirs of batmen were virtually non-existent. Officers from well-educated backgrounds were more likely to be able to write and have access to publishing options, compared to poorly-educated enlisted soldiers.⁹ As a result, the voice of the batman was almost inaccessible. Complicating this analysis is a lack of distinct historiography, as historians have yet to examine the day-to-day lives of soldier-servants during the First World War.

Batmen were part of a larger group of common enlisted soldiers, and historians have argued over exactly how officers and their other ranks comingled. Some historians describe officers or rankers as symbiotic and cooperative, characterizing subordinate ranks as awe-inspired under the command of an officer or 'real gentleman.' Historian John Baynes argued there was little to no tension between officers and enlisted ranks, claiming between the groups there was 'remarkable harmony.'¹⁰ Likewise, British social historian David Cannadine wrote, "In the trenches, the owners of great estates and the bearers of illustrious names lived side by side with their men in novel circumstances of easy camaraderie and extraordinary squalor."¹¹ Baynes and Cannadine, acknowledged distinct class differences, yet maintained that fighting the First World War made these differences less important. Other historians have refuted these ideas, looking narrowly at social disunity in the British Army. In *Leadership in the Trenches*, G.D. Sheffield examined the disparity between officers and rankers. Sheffield wrote how the ethos of the officers derived from "landed interest" and "country house values."¹² The rank and file soldiers

⁸ Jay Winter in Laurence Housman's, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (Philadelphia: Pine Street Books, 2002), v.

⁹ Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁰ John Baynes, "The Officer-Other Rank Relationship in the British Army in the 1st World War," *The Quarterly Review* 304, (1966): 443.

¹¹ David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 83-84.

¹² Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 2.

were of a different world, with little to no social contact among upper classes. And now, rank and file soldiers received orders directly from these unfamiliar, upper class elites.

A combination of these two schools of thought can be found in Eric Leed's *No Man's Land*, an analysis of soldiers' identities in World War One. Leed's analysis reached further than Sheffield, discussing how the erosion of class differences was an illusion. Cross-class harmony, according to Leed, was a product of "pre-war naivety and nationalism."¹³ The war opened the gentile classes to the "common burdens of never ending labor" and the "spontaneous expression of a self-sacrificing sense of community."¹⁴ Leed reestablished the idea that the wartime community was one where the barriers previously imposed by higher classes were suddenly lost.

Social class also played out in the day-to-day experiences of officers and their batmen. In fact, the officer-batman relationship allows historians to reexamine the debate about class in the trenches and explore questions about social divisions at war. What does the officer-batman relationship tell us about the role of social class on the front during the First World War? Did the relationship reveal that the experience of the trenches reinforced class barriers or somehow broke them down?

Despite the varied ways in which officers described their relationship with batmen, the master-servant relationship pervaded these accounts. The officer-batman connection reinforced domestic class-based attitudes in the trenches, constantly demanding servitude and reverence of elites. Beyond the subjection of social class, this master-servant bond also reinforced national identity, strengthening Britishness by adhering to traditional, time-honored values about class superiority. Regardless of the ways that officers treated their batmen, either as a friendly companion or a submissive necessity of warfare, both parties expressed themselves through a class-based system.

At the heart of the officer-batman relationship lay ingrained values of class superiority. Wartime obituaries, correspondence, journals and even published novels and autobiographies by some of Britain's best-known war writers reveal themes that demonstrated the social class supremacy officers exploited over their servants. Those themes are a batman's reverence, passion for work and resourcefulness, domestic background, simplistic kindheartedness, and the officers' paternalism over their batmen. No matter the officers' opinion of his batman's work or

¹³ Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 81.

¹⁴ Ibid, 83- 91.

personality, each discussed his servant with strict, class-based dialogue that perpetuated the domestic social order. In turn, strict adherence to social class was essential to maintaining British identity. Cannadine wrote,

Britons generally conceived of themselves as belonging to an unequal society characterized by a seamless web of layered generations, which were hallowed by time and precedent, which were sanctioned by tradition and religion, and which extended in a great chain of being from the monarch at the top to the humblest subject at the bottom.¹⁵

When officers discussed their servants, the weight of British history and social discipline pervaded their outlook.

Reverence

Reverence implies a deep respect continuously owed to superiors, and an admiration and respect for a system larger and much more powerful. An individual is revered when they represent an institution greater than themselves. Britons revered their officers not only because of their military status, but also because they represented the officer corps, which in turn symbolized an assembly of upper class individuals destined to lead the British army to victory. Soldier-servants transplanted the domestic class ideology onto the image of their officer, and maintained a strong sense of British identity at the front.

Leadership, the outcome of the war, and wartime pressures on the upper classes all burdened British officers. Many Britons believed that to win the war the upper class sons had to lead the lower class rabble. A *National Geographic* article published in 1918 claimed Britain provided the war effort with, “moral leadership, the instant courage, the true perception of the underlying issues,” characteristics that were perceived to be reflected in the British officer corps.¹⁶ Officers had to distinguish themselves from the men they commanded, or risk their reputation. A wartime officers’ handbook authored by former officer B.C. Lake, stressed the importance of treating soldiers with decorum, stressing that “men must be treated justly and with absolute firmness: never with familiarity.”¹⁷ Connections and relationships with lower soldiers undermined an officer’s credibility and authority. Officers maintained separation from their

¹⁵ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁶ Judson C Welliver, "What the War Has Done for Britain," *National Geographic*, October 1918, 279.

¹⁷ B.C. Lake, *Knowledge for War: Every Officer's Handbook for the Front* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1916), 7.

subordinates, adhering to a code that discouraged informality between the ranks and symbolized a strict division that was not to be interrupted.

Batmen scarcely wrote in the First World War; however, some batmen wrote after their officer was killed in action and paid tribute to his memory. "Lieutenant Vance, who was in charge of two platoons, directed the men to leave the trenches, and gave the command to charge," wrote one servant.¹⁸ "His words were, 'Come on, men! Charge the bounders!'" Taking the lead, he was shot through the abdomen. The action had a victorious result."¹⁹ According to this soldier-servant, leadership was crucial to the final moments of his officer's life. Another recollection from the same collection read, "...he was a brave officer and a gentleman, he led his men into action without any fear, and his heart was at the right place."²⁰ Important qualities of an officer in the eyes of his batman were bravery and reputable gentility.

Other servants remembered their officers in similar ways. William Binning was an officer who perished in 1916, and upon his death his parents received a letter from his batman. His soldier-servant J. Dyce recalled memories of Binning defending his soldiers when they were accused of disobedient behavior.²¹ The soldier-servant keenly remembered Binning's relationship with the men, recollecting a character who, while clearly their superior, developed a favorable reputation among his soldiers. Dyce measured Binning's character by this integrity and charity toward the lower ranks, reinforcing class-based attitudes.

When batmen failed to perform their duties they regretted failing to meet their officers' established expectations. In *Good-Bye to All That*, Robert Graves recounts an experience with his soldier-servant named Tottie, a man discharged from the company for drunkenness. Graves wrote, "I shall never forget the look my quiet, respectful, devoted Tottie gave me. He wanted to tell me that he regretted having let me down, and his immediate reaction was an attempt to salute."²² Tottie, shamed of his action and fearful of Graves's discipline, reacted with a salute, acknowledging his officer's superiority, and departed with no further

¹⁸ Colonel L. A. Clutterbuck, *The Bond of Sacrifice: A Biographical Record of all British Officers Who Fell in the Great War, Volume 1 Aug-Dec, 1914* (London: The Anglo-African Publishing Contractors, 1914), 415.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 49.

²¹ "Letter to William Binning's parents from his army 'batman'," *The Great War Archive*, University of Oxford, June 2, 1916, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa/document/9628/8669>.

²² Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 176.

discipline. Tottie's reverence seemed to have spared Tottie punishment, satisfying his commander who was content to see himself as the superior in the relationship.

Military power was almost always the supreme method to controlling social power at home as well as at the front.²³ Divisions at home generally translated to divisions in the trenches and vice-versa. Batmen writing of their officers demonstrated adherence to traditional upper class perceptions of virtue – acknowledging an officer's bravery, gentility, and kindness to their inferiors. Officers adhered to traditional upper class values in the field, and in turn, demanded respect from lower class subordinates. Within this structure that required absolute obedience and conformity, soldier-servants were powerless.²⁴ The batman was a prime example of a subordinate lower class individual who willingly submitted to these traditions that had an entire history of adherence to class leadership; the officer corps personified that leadership.

Passion for Work / Resourcefulness

The duties of officers varied all across the front, determined by an officer's rank, the position of his command, and the specifics of the situation. Paul Fussell described several of these duties in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, noting that while leadership was one of the objectives of officers, a large part of their job was clerical – such as “censoring letters” and having to sift through “quantities of official inquiries.”²⁵ Enlisted men endured the mud and anguish of the front lines, while a significant portion of the officer's tasks removed him from the worst of the trenches for less strenuous deskwork. His batman performed the menial duties of cleaning, clothing, and calling on the officer, and other tasks most British officers viewed beneath their purpose at war.

Despite the tedious nature of these tasks, officers expected their servants to appreciate their duties and approach them with enthusiasm. An article in *The Times* published in December of 1917 entitled “The Perfect Batman” made several references to the batman's obligation to his duties. The batman, simply referred to as H was quoted as saying, “I was never afraid of hard work,” and to the officer, “H always represented an

²³ Bernard Waites, *A Class Society at War England 1914-1918* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 11.

²⁴Anthony Fletcher, “Patriotism, Identity and Commemoration: New Light on the Great War from the Papers of Major Reggie Chenevix Trench,” *The Journal of the Historical Association* 90 (2005), 545.

²⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 50.

unattainable ideal.”²⁶ The anonymous officer described H as having a “devouring passion for work.”²⁷ What separated H from the average soldier or soldier-servant was his commitment to his responsibilities. The readiness and steadfast appreciation of his job characterized H as admirable in the eyes of his officer.

Officers highly prized resourcefulness in their batmen. Graham Seton discussed his servant Peter’s resourcefulness and wrote, “Peter with complete unconcern, borrowed a great wooden mallet with which to drive the baulks of timber destined to hold a flimsy parapet; and he returned it, too.”²⁸ In this example, the batman was not only handy and inventive, but also honest and responsible. “He is of thrifty temperament,”²⁹ wrote the poet William Noel Hodgson of his batman, Pearson. Resourcefulness was a major theme of Hodgson’s biography of Pearson, who was upheld as an exceptional example of a soldier-servant. Of all Pearson’s qualities, Hodgson’s piece fervently acknowledged Pearson’s ingenuity. The poet wrote in conclusion, “A good soldier-servant is one of the greatest marvels of our modern civilization. To possess one is better and cheaper than living next door to Harrods.”³⁰

Beyond resourcefulness, officers expected thriftiness as well. “A Company’s servants were scroungers of the first order,” wrote Captain C.F. Hitchcock, “and not the risk of the severest penalties would keep them from getting firewood—even had it meant looting the A.P.M.’s very bed!”³¹ Likewise, Wilfred Owen alluded to similar characteristics, noting that his soldier-servant, “...thieves me wood with much cunning.”³² In *The Good Soldier*, Archibald Wavell references similar qualities in his servants, quoting his batmen who was able to obtain shaving mugs, “There they are sir, that’s all you need to know, and you needn’t be afraid to find your friends missing them.”³³ Wavell remarked that the best soldiers had a keen sense of ‘devilry.’³⁴ Officers viewed batmen as thieves, an unfortunate necessity to surviving life in the trenches, stealing items on the

²⁶ “The Perfect Batman,” *The Times*, (London, England) 13 December 1917.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 4.

²⁹ William Noel Hodgson, *Verse and Prose in Peace and War*, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1916), 61.

³⁰ Harrods was a famous department store that provided everything to shopper, with no manual labor required. Hodgson, 61-62.

³¹ Hitchcock, “*Stand To*”: *A Diary of the Trenches 1915-18*, 219.

³² Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 426.

³³ Wavell, *The Good Soldier*, 48.

³⁴ Ibid.

front. Officers frequently defamed theft, a lower class activity, and noted when items were obtained righteously or by robbery.

Batmen were passionate for the work that the officers were not willing to do. Clerical work and valiant leadership were primary directives; cleanliness and order were beneath the jobs performed by an officer. The work demanded that batmen were constantly in the presence of the officer's world. An officer was not complete without his batman just as a batman was not complete without his officer. In addition, resourcefulness and thievery were attributes associated with the lower classes. Sons of the upper classes hardly knew poverty, and thus had never been required to develop the same kind of ingenuity. The thrifty qualities of batmen served as links to their lower-class activities and background.

Domestic Background

Officers regarded the duties of their batmen with condescension, avoided the menial tasks of daily trench-life, and instead chose to focus on their primary duties of leadership. Hindsight demonstrates how misplaced this focus was, yet does not clearly describe why officers were so convinced that batmen would excel at their tasks. Officers regarded batmen as low-working class, the type of people who came from similar tedious duties. Upper-class Britons not only discussed their servants as lower working class, but also officers overwhelmingly were able to identify their batman's pre-war profession or employment. In addition, officers frequently highlighted their servants' lower class activities, in contrast to the sophisticated pastimes of elites. Domestic background connected batmen to the type of work they performed, establishing a direct connection between their life before the war and their duties at the front.

When discussing their servants, officers constantly named precisely what job they performed with impressive specificity. Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon recollected their servants worked in factories, on the railway, as barbers, and as skilled metal workers.³⁵ Graham Seton described the pre-war origins of several of his servants, "All good fellows, my batmen in other walks had been an insurance clerk, a foundry worker, a gas-meter collector, and a silversmith."³⁶ Wilfred Owen wrote in a letter that "...my new servant, who has been a chemist's assistant, has turned out not only clean & smart, but enterprising and inventive."³⁷ With a few exceptions, namely Owen's chemist's assistant

³⁵ Graves, 110, 176; Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 91; *Fox Hunting Man*, 354.

³⁶ Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 9.

³⁷ Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 426.

and Seton's insurance clerk, these soldier-servants were from working-class professions.

Identification of a servant's domestic job strengthened his working-class identity, reinforcing what his position was in pre-war society. Graham Seton lauded his servant Peter and complimented him on his work and character. However, when he spoke of his batman's mother, Seton wrote that "she is stricken with poverty," and was careful to mention that Peter was a "man of humble origin."³⁸ Seton chose to emphasize Peter's domestic background in the midst of a biography that applauds his work ethic at the front. Seton in connecting his batmen's lower-class past to his exceptional work at the front, called attention to the fact that perhaps his achievement on the front was not something to be expected of someone so low in society. Pre-war origins were an effective caveat with which an officer could compliment his servant and applaud his noble virtues, while ensuring no confusion that the servant was noble himself.

In their writings, British officers often made strong associations between batmen and lower class activities. Two predominant negative lower class characteristics of batmen were drunkenness and lust. In multiple memoirs, officers reprimanded their batmen for drinking to excess on the front. Captain C.F. Hitchcock wrote in his journals how servants at Ypres were intoxicated.³⁹ Graves discharged his servant Tottie due to 'drunkenness in the field.'⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that Graves himself drank to excess at the front multiple times, including enough at the Battle of the Somme to impair his memory of the fight, and suffered no similar discipline.⁴¹ The British army held soldier-servants to a different standard, where batmen were punished more severely and officers were exonerated for similar missteps.

Likewise, officers believed that lust, sexual drive and comparable characteristics permeated soldier-servants. Siegfried Sassoon described 'a rank animal healthiness' among his servants who constantly sought the attention of French women, in what he referred to as a "primitive courtship."⁴² Sassoon was careful to emphasize the driving lust behind the servants' intentions. In another one of his memoirs, he described servants who vied for women's affections trying to impress ladies with 'stammering' French.⁴³ Graves described his soldier-servant's experiences

³⁸ Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 11, 2.

³⁹ Hitchcock, "*Stand To*": *A Diary of the Trenches 1915-18*, 42.

⁴⁰ Graves, *Good-Bye to All That*, 176.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 163.

⁴² Sassoon, *Infantry Officer*, 41-42.

⁴³ Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1936), 167.

in a brothel, claiming his batman returned so often, he had memorized the prices for admittance.⁴⁴ However these attributes of drunkenness and lust were not exclusively lower-class behaviors. Officers identified these qualities in their batmen for two reasons. One, association between batmen and these lower class pastimes demonstrated that a servant's class-based behavior was not only linked to their previous domestic employment. Social class was a broader personality problem, not merely a professional one. Secondly, officers themselves often fell victim to similar characteristics, and were more than willing to heap the disgust on their servants while failing to criticize their own shortcomings in combat.

Although officers began to understand the experiences of the lower classes fighting side by side in the trenches, they were always careful to point out lower class shortcomings. The continual acknowledgement of domestic employment and the distasteful pastimes of their servants demonstrated how officers were quick to identify their servants' lower class status. In the filth and pain of the trenches, all soldiers, regardless of class or background faced the same daunting presence of the war. Domestic employment and lower class activities were already existing connections to pre-war 'British-ness.' The war challenged conscripted upper classes to reassert their identity, principally their privilege over others, in a world where all soldiers faced the same horrible dangers of war. Furthermore, since officers were more likely to be killed in combat than enlisted men,⁴⁵ it may have been appealing for officer to hearken back to a life in which privilege did not indicate a greater chance of death.

Simplistic Kindheartedness

The officer corps regarded themselves as mannered gentility and the lower ranks as meek and docile persons. Many officers discussed their servants as unassuming, kindhearted folks, and used traditional lower class stereotypes to describe the men who served them directly. Simplistic kindness was inherent in a class-based view of the war, along with other characteristics described by historian David Cannadine:

A Briton's place in this class hierarchy is also determined by such considerations as ancestry, accent, education, deportment, mode of dress, patterns of recreation, type of housing, and style of life....it is these formal and informal hierarchies of prestige and status that

⁴⁴ Graves, *Good-Bye to All That*, 120.

⁴⁵ J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1986), 85.

people often have in mind when they speak of the British class system.⁴⁶

Simplicity alluded to lower class characteristics. The ‘informal hierarchy’ of the British class structure during the war was partly expressed in the simplistic kindheartedness of the lower class.

A batman who failed to perform assigned duties was described as simplistic. Wilfred Owen was notorious for complaining about his servants and mentioned that his batmen failed to respond promptly to his orders, clean his clothes, cook him an adequate meal, or provide him a cup of tea.⁴⁷ “Socks most specially valuable,” wrote Owen, “as my servant forgot to put any spare in my Trench Kit.”⁴⁸ Owen was not the only officer to point out his servant’s shortcomings. An excerpt, from a Canadian war propaganda pamphlet said, “Moreover, the Army Commander had an attack of cold feet, owing to his batman having mislaid his footwarmer.”⁴⁹ “I was surprised and annoyed to find my buttons unpolished and only cold water for shaving; it made me late for breakfast,” wrote Graves.⁵⁰ These excerpts demonstrate that batmen could be forgetful, tardy and often-times poor servants to their officers. What was more damning, however, was that batmen failed to meet the standards of punctuality, obedience, and discipline respected by the officer corps. Essentially, batmen were no more forgetful or tardy than any other soldier at the front. Yet in the eyes of the officers, soldier-servants could not live up to their high standards. Unlike any other lower rank enlisted man on the front, a batman’s quality was exclusively measured in light of officer expectations..

In addition, superior officers often mocked ineptness. Siegfried Sassoon recollected a story concerning his batman Flook and wrote,

While we were sitting there, my servant Flook (who has been a railway signalman in Lancashire) blundered in at the door with a huge sack of firewood, which he dropped on the tiled floor with a gasp of relief and an exclamation, in the war jargon is difficult to remember, which made us all laugh.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, 23.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 434.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 439.

⁴⁹ “The Message from Mars,” *The First World War: Propaganda and Recruitment*, (London: The Carlton Studio, 1918), 22.

⁵⁰ Graves, *Good-Bye to All That*, 176.

⁵¹ Sassoon, *Fox Hunting Man*, 338.

In another one of his Sherston memoirs, Sassoon wrote “He [Flook] had come treading in with clumsy embarrassment...announcing in a hoarse undertone, ‘Ah’ve brought the stoof’.”⁵² Sassoon adjusted the writing to accommodate Flook’s folksy, rural accent. Bumbling, clumsy charisma was all part of the simplistic kindness of soldier-servants.

Music was another way that soldier-servants were seen to express their ‘simplicity.’ “An officer’s servant is whistling cheerfully,” wrote Siegfried Sassoon, “probably to a pair of brown shoes.”⁵³ He later described his servant singing ‘Dixieland,’ and later notes that when nighttime came at the front he could hear, “...the servants singing by a bright shell-box fire in the gusty twilight.”⁵⁴ In the same Canadian propaganda pamphlet, there was a passing reference an officer made to “...the melodious voice of his batman.”⁵⁵ The melodies Sassoon described were far more likely singing drinking tunes than Handel. In the context of the officer-servant relationship, music alluded to an unsophisticated form of self-expression.

Officers also emphasized a batman’s connections to his folksy past, conjuring strong images of rural Britain. Nowhere is this sort of connection more apparent than in an account of “The Perfect Batman” in *The Times*. The anonymous author described his servant as a Hampshire man, and wrote, “There is something horsy about him,” further noting that he occasionally “may be seen as smoking a pipe, but with a shamefaced air, as if he thought that it impaired his working powers.”⁵⁶ “He is a dark, medium-sized man,” wrote Denis Oliver Barnett of his batman, “with a face like a goat, and a heart of gold.”⁵⁷ This description was typically rural in its reference to Hudson’s ‘face like a goat.’ Likewise, Seton wrote that as a child his batman was, “...sent to a school, set amid green fields and rolling hills on the outskirts of the city.”⁵⁸ The imagery was palpable; officers associated these servants with a simple, rural attitude. This pastoral connection is not to be construed as the batmen being seen as wealthy landowners – but rather as an extension of their peasantry.

Kindness was one of a batman’s most admired characteristics. Officers emphasized how caring, gentle, and harmless their servants were. Second Lieutenant Arthur Conway Young described his servant O’Brien,

⁵² Sassoon, *Infantry Officer*, 91.

⁵³ Sassoon, *Fox Hunting Man*, 313.

⁵⁴ Sassoon, *Fox Hunting Man*, 370, Sassoon, *Infantry Officer*, 82.

⁵⁵ “The Message from Mars”, 13.

⁵⁶ “The Perfect Batman,” *The Times*, (London, England) 13 December 1917.

⁵⁷ Barnett, *Denis Oliver Barnett in Happy Memory*, 58.

⁵⁸ Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 2.

as a "...cheery, optimistic soul."⁵⁹ Graham Seton wrote of his batman that "his belief in human charity was both astonishing and profound,"⁶⁰ and Graves described Tottie as an 'admirable servant.'⁶¹ Seton also listed several qualities for which batmen were chosen, namely, "...cheerfulness and an unassuming friendliness which took complete possession of the necessary, though often inconvenient, affairs of life."⁶² Half of what officers required of a soldier-servant amidst total war in the army of the world's largest superpower was a batman's charm and pleasantry. "Darling Julian is so constantly beside me," wrote Lieutenant the Hon. Gerald William Grenfell, "and laughs so debonairly at my qualms and hesitations. I pray for one-tenth of his courage."⁶³ In these examples, batmen are characterized as 'darling' and endearing, characteristics of the lower orders of society, not of reputable elites.

"He was an intelligent man, a marksman, and had a clean character sheet, so I asked him why he had not gone in for promotion. Too much trouble and responsibility was his only explanation," wrote the Earl Wavell on his batman in *The Good Soldier*.⁶⁴ Wavell's lower class batman characteristically avoided responsibility. Sassoon, in *Sherston's Progress*, concentrates a substantial portion of the book admiring the work of his servants:

That sort of reminds me of my servant and the numberless small worries and exasperations he has saved me from in the past few weeks. Nothing could be better than the way he does things, quiet and untiring. He is simple, humble, patient and brave. He is reticent yet humorous. How many of us can claim to possess these qualities and ask no reward but a smile?⁶⁵

Important qualities were a batman's humility, simplicity, humor, and patience. Their folksy attitudes, clumsy ineptness, associations with music and kindness further contributed to this reputation. These qualities were all part of a larger umbrella of characteristics commonly associated with the unsophisticated lower classes, not the refined upper classes.

Paternalism

⁵⁹ Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, 312.

⁶⁰ Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 4.

⁶¹ Graves, *Good-Bye to All That*, 175.

⁶² Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 9.

⁶³ Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, 116.

⁶⁴ Wavell, *The Good Soldier*, 49.

⁶⁵ Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress*, 179.

Paternalism, the restraint of the liberties or freedoms of one for the advantage of another, effectively highlighted the class-based attitudes of officers and batmen throughout the First World War. Officers as the superiors constantly acted in what they deemed the best interest of batmen, their subordinates. This behavior restricted servants' liberty of choice. The previous themes were concerned with the idea that officers understood themselves as their batmen's superior in every sense of the word. Paternalism was a distinct category on its own, one that specifically focused on an officer's pride and a batman's submissiveness.

Officers selected their batmen like items, hoping to claim the servant who would prove most useful at the front. Sometimes officers were unable to contract the soldier-servant they desired. Owen wrote,

My new servant has just gone on leave this afternoon, carrying with him some books and binoculars of mine, with instructions to call on you as he passes through Shrewsbury... This Howarth is a 'scratch' servant not my choice; but I rather hope he'll call on you & tell you what he can.⁶⁶

The phrase 'scratch servant' was used to mean a disposable servant, one an officer did not expect to be with for too long.

Choice was important when considering a batman's assignment to an officer. Officers had the right to select which servant they wanted, sometimes out of an entire pool of enlisted soldiers. Owen described how he chose a batman handy with a bayonet, hoping this servant might protect him in close combat.⁶⁷ Graham Seton used even greater possessive language describing the selection of his servant, and wrote, "I claimed him."⁶⁸ A servant could likely belong to several officers. In fact, one servant could belong to as many as ten officers.⁶⁹ These situations demonstrate that servants were objects, and some objects were valued higher than others. The objectifying of soldier-servants manifested itself through possessive language used by officers.

Paternalist language ran throughout many British officers' accounts throughout the First World War. Captain Hitchcock wrote of his servant Jackson, "My former batman, 8243 Jackson, had been temporarily looking after an officer in D Company, however, Poole got him back for me."⁷⁰ Siegfried Sassoon in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* was detached

⁶⁶ Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 581.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 422.

⁶⁸ Seton, *Biography of a Batman*, 5.

⁶⁹ "Officers' Servants," *Hansards Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 107 (19 June 1918), cc. 337-38.

⁷⁰ Hitchcock, *"Stand To": A Diary of the Trenches 1915-18*, 134.

from his servant Flook for a portion of the memoir and wrote, “Poor Flook will be awfully worried about not being with his officer bloke, I though, imagining his stolid red face puffing along under a box of ammunition.”⁷¹ Sassoon declared he knew how Flook felt detached from his officer. Granted, it was possible that a servant experienced disorientation upon returning to the front lines without his officer in the face of battle, yet it is just as possible that a servant felt liberated detached from his officer without the weight of his commander’s daily needs and assigned tasks. Paternalism fit right into the class-based dogma of many elites.

Paternalism also reared its head when the lives of soldier-servants were on the line. Captain Hitchcock describing soldiers selected for a raid, wrote of his servant, “Jackson had not been included in the actual raiders, much to his regret. I did not want to risk him being killed, and also, selfishly, I felt that if I was to come back he would still be there to look after me.”⁷² Wilfred Owen wrote on the fatal casualties in his platoon, noting that “one of these poor fellows was my first servant whom I rejected. If I had kept him he would have lived, for servants don’t do Sentry Duty.”⁷³ Owen blamed himself for this soldier’s loss of life. When a servant’s life was in question, and the stakes were highest for survival in war, paternalism was most visible.

Paternalism also existed within the minds of the batmen to a certain degree. Several servants assumed protective roles over their officers, modifying the traditional master-servant relationship, in the face of the incredible daunting weight of the war. The First World War was an incredible moment of vulnerability for upper class elites that shattered illusions about British superiority and more distinctly, upper-class British superiority.⁷⁴

A batman’s protectiveness aided upper class vulnerability. Captain Edward Gerald Venning, on why his servant rejected a promotion, wrote, “My servant also refused because he would not be able to look after me.”⁷⁵ The batman insisted this particular officer-batman relationship continue. Unlike in a previous example in which Captain Hitchcock demanded his servant return to him, Captain Venning’s batman refused to be severed from his officer. “I’m feeling full of buck and looking after myself well,” wrote Captain Barnett, “besides being looked after by a jolly good servant.”⁷⁶ Had Barnett not provided adequately for himself, his

⁷¹ Sassoon, *Infantry Officer*, 59.

⁷² Hitchcock, “*Stand To*”: *A Diary of the Trenches 1915-18*, 243.

⁷³ Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 428.

⁷⁴ Cannadine *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, 84.

⁷⁵ Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, 282.

⁷⁶ Barnett, *Denis Oliver Barnett in Happy Memory*, 72.

servant Hudson ensured the captain's necessities were met. The actions of these servants represented the vulnerability of upper class sons, now relying on their batmen for support and comfort in the presence of war.

The most poignant example of this phenomenon comes from the Sherston memoirs of Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon wrote, "Somehow Flook with his rough and ready devotion, had seemed my strongest link with the Battalion. When I shook his hand and said goodbye, he winked and advised me, confidentially, not to be in too much of a hurry about getting back. A good rest would do me no harm, he said."⁷⁷ Flook is the same batman whom George Sherston mocked for ineptness in a previous memoir, and by the time of this piece, Flook embodied Sherston's 'strongest link to the Battalion.' Flook advises Sherston to rest, and in this case the traditional role of an officer and his servant reversed. Flook's care for Sherston demonstrated familiarity between the ranks to such an extent that the officer is heeding advice from the servant.

Batmen's protectiveness was not an overhaul of the class system; in fact it was the greatest acceptance and recognition the class system. A batman cared for his officer out of obligation, which distinguished him from the paternal motivations of an officer. Soldier-servants were compelled to care for the needs of their officer the exact same way officers required servants to clean their dug out or serve them tea. Batmen recognized the strict obligation to their officer, and demonstrated that obligation by a protective care of their officer's interests. Soldier-servants acted with a fierce loyalty, which persisted even under the pressure of war and a restrictive class system.

At the dawn of the First World War paternalism was entrenched in what it meant to be British. A poem printed in the opening pages of B.C. Lake's manual for officers, entitled "Freedom" and written by British poet William Wodsworth, reads:

In our halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible Knights of old
We must be free or die
Who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake⁷⁸

These imperial attitudes exemplified British paternalism. The nation embraced an elitist superiority, in which the only way to live was the British way. The truly British way was epitomized in the lives of the upper class. Officer corps' paternalism reflected everything that British

⁷⁷ Sassoon, *Infantry Officer*, 91.

⁷⁸ William Wodsworth in B.C. Lake, *Knowledge for War: Every Officer's Handbook for the Front*, xxi.

class based society meant to its citizenry. Upper class superiority permeated not only the officer-batman relationship, but the entire concept of British identity. Hugh Montagu in Housman's collection of *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, wrote "...they'll [enlisted soldiers] go like lambs as long as they've got an officer with them. The curious thing is that in civilian life they probably cursed us out as plutocrats, out here they look fairly to us."⁷⁹ A batman experienced the war as a working-class soldier, forced servant to an upper class officer, who adopted an attitude of protective care over an elite individual.

Conclusion

For upper classes, the First World War was the dramatic national conflict they had so desperately desired in order to prove their worth as Britons, and as privileged elites. The war was the moment when the weight of British tradition, a weight based on social class, was to be harnessed to achieve its full potential. "They knew how to lead, how to command, and how to look after the men in their charge," wrote Cannadine.⁸⁰ "Here, then, was their chance to demonstrate conclusively that they were...the patriotic class of knightly crusaders and chivalric heroes, who would defend the national honour and the national interest in the hour of its greatest trial."⁸¹ These noble sons would soon learn the shortcomings of their interest, when faced with the daunting burden of war.

For working classes, the war was quite different. Combat experience continued to instill the strict British social hierarchy, even in the face of horrific conflict. It was not until after the war the working classes in Britain began to win successes. It was not until after the First World War that British working classes achieved major victories, with a sudden increase in trade union membership and the establishment of the Labour Party in 1918.⁸² As the party grew, awareness about the great gulf between the working and upper classes began to substantially increase. It took a war, and upper class recognition about the plight of the lower classes, to make this realization come to fruition.

Following the realization of war's cruelty, officers failed to avail themselves of the fundamental human companionship of a batman. The batman was a vehicle of support, almost as if British military tradition predicted that the landed elites would feel powerless and vulnerable in

⁷⁹ Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, 55-56.

⁸⁰ Cannadine in *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, 73-74.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, 7.

combat, and required an individual to lean on for camaraderie. As proven, even when officers did befriend their servants, they failed to see their batman as an individual, but instead as a lower class object. To elite Britons, hierarchy was more than a way of life; it was a vehicle of self-perception and worthiness. Lower class Britons owed allegiance to hierarchy, and even in fierce combat demonstrated fierce loyalty to their duty and place in British society.

The master-servant relationship pervaded British modes of self-expression, even in fundamental understandings of British identity. All individuals had a place, and that societal position was inextricably related to layers of British society, from prime ministers to working classes. “And one learns to be a servant. The soul is disciplined,” wrote Captain Charles Hamilton Sorely of the war, but the same holds true for British identity.⁸³ Servitude is fundamental to understanding British thought.

Class has consistently been central to a Britons understanding of their history, from the bourgeois revolution of the English Civil War towards twentieth century Thatcherism.⁸⁴ This relationship between an officer and his batman has significant weight with regards to that social class understanding. At a time when the vulnerability of the upper classes was surging, and the stakes for survival had never been greater, Britons still fell on the crutch of their hierarchy to provide them the stability needed to endure the disaster of total war.

⁸³ Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen*, 202.

⁸⁴ Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, 5-7, 19-20.