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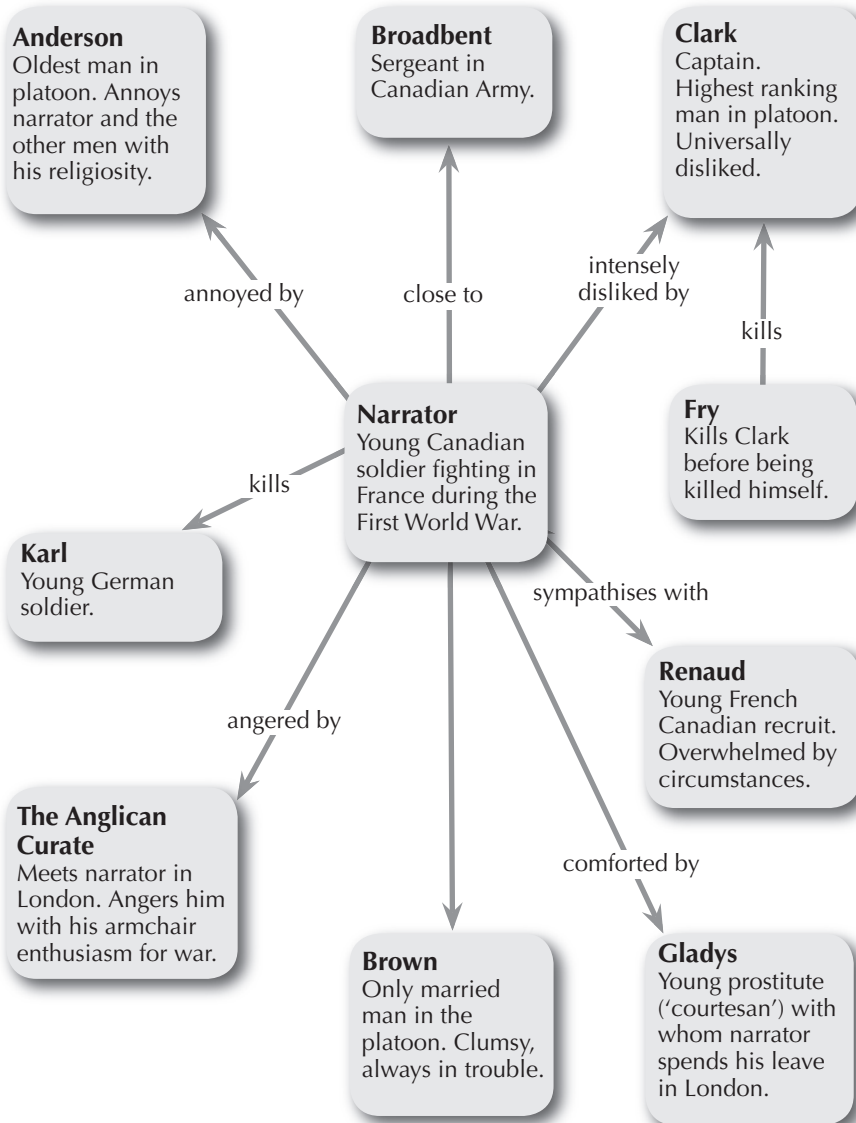
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## CHARACTER MAP



## INTRODUCTION

First published in 1930, more than a decade after the conclusion of the World War I, *Generals Die in Bed* draws its inspiration from the ordeal of the author, Charles Yale Harrison, as a young Canadian soldier serving in the trenches on the Western Front in France and Belgium. It describes his experiences from the time of his departure from Montreal, Quebec, to the time when he was wounded at the Battle of Amiens, on 8 August 1918, his wound granting him release from the war. The main body of the narrative relates uncompromisingly the horrors of the war itself: the filth of the trenches, the misery of the men in them, the savagery of the fighting. It confirms the truth that this war was one of the most disastrous events of the twentieth century. And there is a special sadness in remembering that the lives of so many young men, many still teenage boys, came to an end in terrible circumstances, thousands of miles from their homes in countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

At about the same time as the publication of this memoir, a spate of other works by writers who had served in World War I appeared. Among them were *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque; *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves; *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway; *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* by Siegfried Sassoon and *Her Privates We* by Frederic Manning. All these now classic memoirs of the war appeared in the year 1929. We may surmise that the authors needed that decade-long distance from the events they had experienced before being able to bring themselves to put them down in writing. The same was true of veterans of the Vietnam War, much later, whose memoirs appeared at a similar distance from the end of that war. We can well imagine that the general public, too, at the time of both wars, would have been thoroughly sick of the news and the stories of war and would have been unwilling to read further about the war until long after its end. Even now, nearly a century after its conclusion, the brutality and extraordinary waste of human life of World War I remain shocking, and *Generals Die in Bed* provides an unflinching testament both to its horrors and to its utter futility.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### The author

Charles Yale Harrison was born in Philadelphia in 1898. At the age of sixteen he took a job with the *Montreal Star*, and shortly after enlisted with the Royal Montreal Regiment and fought as a machine-gunner in France and Belgium in World War I. He was wounded at the Battle of Amiens in August 1918, was repatriated, and settled down in Montreal where he married and had a son. His first wife died, but he remarried twice. He moved back to the country of his birth and lived in New York, where he died in 1954. His third wife survived him. Harrison wrote other books, both fiction and non-fiction, but none were as successful as *Generals Die in Bed*. Apart from writing, Harrison worked in a range of jobs, as a theatre manager, a reporter and a public-relations consultant.

Although *Generals Die in Bed* is not one of the best-known memoirs of World War I, it sparked considerable controversy in Canada when it first appeared. Many veterans there were outraged at the allegations that members of the Royal Montreal Regiment had pillaged the town of Arras and killed prisoners. Some considered these to be complete fabrications. One ex-soldier argued that 'though claimed by some advertisements as a genuine record of service, [the book] is obviously fiction of the blood-curdling type', while another member of Harrison's battalion maintained that at least half the incidents described in the book never occurred.<sup>1</sup>

### Relevance to contemporary readers

Living as we do in a nuclear age, we may question the value of reading about events in a war which ended almost a century ago. I suppose that to many teenage readers today, the World War I must seem like ancient history. Almost all the returning veterans of that war are now dead. But the impact of this war on the rest of the twentieth century was immense.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Vance, *The Formulation of Historical Consciousness: a case study in literature*, University of British Columbia, 2001, p.5, <http://www.cshc.ubc.ca/pwias/viewpaper.php?11>.

The seeds of World War II, the most destructive war in all of human history, were planted in World War I. The disarray in which Europe was left after World War I, and especially the Treaty of Versailles, which heavily punished and further humiliated the defeated Germany, paved the way for the rise of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, whose outrageous conduct was instrumental in sparking off World War II. The effects of that war continue to be felt in the present day.

The World War I helped to shape future attitudes to war itself. The strong enthusiasm with which the participating countries greeted the coming of the war gradually dissipated as the horrendous nature of the slaughter became known. This became so terrible that it was deemed to be 'the war to end all wars' and, while that hope has clearly not been fulfilled, Western countries have never again marched so enthusiastically into war.

The fact that war persists as a feature of human life to the present day, however, adds to the relevance of this memoir. It sometimes appears that every new generation needs to be reminded of the words of the American Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman: 'I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. War is hell'.<sup>2</sup> Just as war itself has been a common thread in human life down through the ages, so too has opposition to war. Fifty years after the outbreak of the World War I, during the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, in his poem 'Condemnation', spoke out 'to denounce this dreadful war,/this murder of brothers by brothers!' He went on to ask: 'If we kill our brothers and sisters, what will we have left?/With whom shall we live?'<sup>3</sup>

Harrison's memoir leads us to speculate about why humans continue to resort to war in response to international disputes, while being fully aware of its destructiveness. The questions posed by an American soldier in Vietnam – 'My God, what do we do to ourselves? Why do we hate

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<sup>2</sup> *Bloomsbury Thematic Dictionary of Quotations*, Bloomsbury, London, 1991, p.436.

<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names*, Parallax Press, Albany, California, 1999, p.39.

<sup>4</sup> Edelman, Bernard, ed., *Dear America – letters home from Vietnam*, Norton, London, 2002 (first published 1985), p.198.

ourselves so much that we have to kill each other?’<sup>4</sup> – are implicit also in *Generals Die in Bed*. If we compare the poetry of veterans of the World War I with that of veterans of the Vietnam War fifty or more years later, we find a common sense of outrage over being lied to by the political leaders who led – or misled – them into war. We find, too, a common sense of shock at the cruelty of war and the utter misery it causes to sensitive human beings. The literature of anti-war protest, given immense impetus by soldiers’ responses to World War I, continues to this day. Shortly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, an anthology entitled *101 Poems Against War* appeared throughout the English-speaking world.

## Relevance to Australian readers

The World War I is still a vital part of our national story. While our role in the war still tends to be associated with the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and with the subsequent fighting there, the fact is that most of our many casualties from the war occurred in France. Of the nearly 60,000 Australians who died in battle, 48,000 died there. Streets named after the various battles on the French fields – Amiens, Passchendaele, Ypres – can be found in every state of Australia. Almost 65 per cent of all Australian soldiers in this war were either killed or wounded. Such a massive death toll from a country with such a small population greatly harmed the growing nation.

The political disputes which precipitated the war in Europe in themselves had nothing to do with Australia. Our involvement in the war can be seen as one link in a chain of Australian military involvements in the wars of other countries. But we need to remember that the Australia of 1914 was very different from the Australia of today. As a part of the British Empire, and as a country whose citizens were mostly of British descent, our ties to Britain were very strong. It was assumed that Australia would come to the assistance of the ‘Mother Country’. The Prime Minister at the time of the outbreak of war, Andrew Fisher, declared that Australia would

fight 'to the last man and the last shilling' in support of Britain. Young Australian men in their droves volunteered for overseas service, and those who did not were often sent white feathers, a symbol of cowardice, in the mail. The same occurred in Britain.

This was in the earlier months of the war. As the death toll began to rise alarmingly, voluntary enlistments began to diminish and the fanatically pro-war Prime Minister, William 'Billy' Hughes, sought to introduce conscription for overseas service. He put before the public two referenda on the issue: each was narrowly defeated. The campaigns both for and against these referenda generated enormous bitterness as well as sectarian division. It was at this time that the then Roman Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, became known across Australia for his implacable opposition to conscription. The opposition of Catholics, as well as of soldiers at the front, helped to defeat the referenda.

## The literature of World War I

The war gave birth to a vast literature, much of it a literature of protest. The World War II, by contrast, generated far less literature. The awfulness of the war appears to have shocked many soldiers into print; without doubt, they needed to unburden themselves of the horrors they had witnessed. *Generals Die in Bed* can be placed within this body of literature.

It would be particularly valuable to study *Generals Die in Bed* alongside the works on life in the trenches by Hemingway, Graves and Remarque that were published in 1929, and especially alongside some of the excellent poetry that emerged from the war. Indeed, the changing treatment of the subject in poetry as the war dragged on reflected the changing attitudes to it. The poetry of Rupert Brooke, for example, an Englishman who died of disease before ever taking part in a battle, reflects a view of war as glorious and heroic: a view that rapidly became obsolete. Brooke's poem, 'Peace', speaks of the violence of war as cleansing; he

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<sup>5</sup> I. M. Parsons, ed., *Men Who March Away: poems of the First World War*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1987, p.40.

depicts soldiers going to the war as 'swimmers into cleanness leaping'.<sup>5</sup> It would be hard to find a more incongruous image than that one and many of the poems that followed, especially those by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, are filled with images which shock the reader with their descriptions of the horror of the war.

Both Owen and Sassoon spent time as patients in Craiglockhart psychiatric hospital in 1917, and you may be interested to read a fictionalised account of their experiences in Pat Barker's excellent work, *The Regeneration Trilogy*. A work such as *Generals Die in Bed* leads us to wonder about the psychological damage caused to veterans of the war, and Barker's trilogy of novels sheds much light on this.

## The causes of the war

Many millions of words have been written and spoken about the build-up to the World War I. My aim here is to give no more than a brief overview of this: there are countless books on the subject if you wish to read in greater detail.

The roots of the war can be traced to the formation of rival alliances between European nations in the years leading up to it. Hostility between France and Germany dated back to the Franco-Prussian War, which ended in 1871. The German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck, knowing that France wanted revenge for her defeat in the war, formed an alliance in 1879 with Austria-Hungary. This was known as the Dual Alliance. In 1882 Italy joined this alliance, although she was later to fight on the side of Britain and her allies during the World War I. In 1894, France formed an alliance with Russia, in which Russia agreed to go to war with Germany if France were attacked by Germany, or by Germany and Italy combined, and France agreed to support Russia if she were attacked by Germany or by Germany and Austria. Meanwhile, tensions between Britain and Germany were building up. One of the first instances of this was the proposal by Germany to England that the two nations should divide between them the large Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique.

Britain rebuffed Germany, preferring Portuguese ownership to German and Germany did not forgive the rebuff. When the British began to falter in their war against the Boers in South Africa (the Boer War of 1899–1902), for example, Germany publicly congratulated the Boer leader.

## The importance of nationalism and militarism

At this point, it is worth commenting on the role of nationalism in triggering the war. A picture emerges of the Germany of this time as an aggressive, militaristic and nationalistic power on the European scene. Germany's militarism could be seen in its large-scale naval expansion after 1900. This made Britain nervous, as she feared that a powerful German navy could threaten her own navy, which had the task of defending the trade routes for her worldwide empire.

Not that nationalism was a powerful force only in Germany: it was certainly powerful also in Britain and in the other belligerent countries. Its strength was clearly shown by the enthusiastic rush of young men to enlist in the military after the declaration of war. Britain was not the strongly Europe-centred country that she is today as part of the European Union. She was, indeed, still a principal world power, in possession of a vast empire and a very powerful navy. Washington had not yet replaced London as the centre of the Western world.

## The formation of rival alliances

### **The Entente Cordiale (Cordial Understanding) of 1904: France and Great Britain**

France, like Britain, was worried about Germany's naval build-up, and as a result those two countries decided to resolve whatever differences remained between them. They came to a cordial 'understanding' (entente), by which France agreed to surrender all claims to Egypt and recognise Britain's 'historic rights' there, in return for Britain's recognition of French interests in Morocco. While this was not a military alliance, it had the potential to pave the way for such an alliance if events proved it necessary.