**HM4411 Portfolio - Shannon Mcmillan**

**Letters from WWI, 1916-1918: trenches**

- ‘a veritable maze’: Gilbert Williams, 6th April 1916

- ‘it is a warm shop’: William Charles Davis, 15th March 1916

- ‘there is Somme noise’: Hugh Andrew Skilling, 5th January 1917

The letters by Williams, Davis, and Skilling all discuss the conditions on the Western Front during World War One giving the readers an insight into ‘a partial life in the trenches’ and to the extent of government censorship during WWI. Miriam Dobson mentions ‘the power of existing discourses and their reproduction in personal writings’, WWI caused ‘a discourse of ‘sacrifice’’ to emerge within published government correspondence. One could argue, the lack of in-depth detail of life in the trenches was caused by discourses of power and territory within Britain, and the drive of Allied governments to maintain hope via censorship[[1]](#footnote-1).

Ross Wilson discusses the connotations of the trenches of WWI, that of ‘mud, waste, atrocious conditions and dejected, suffering soldiers’, used as a symbol of patriotism and almost dehumanises them which is reflected within the discourse of sacrifice[[2]](#footnote-2). Scholars of front-line correspondence have debated on the efficacy of wartime censorship during World War One, and the extent to which it inhibited soldiers’ freedom of expression. Yet one could argue that the focus on sacrifice over the conditions within the trenches can be considered censorship due to the distorted image that was presented to the public. However, this discourse’s reality is seen in Davis’ letter as soldiers lay in “snow and mud” for two days without food. This positive outlook on the war ‘eroded the distinction between combatants and non-combatants’ as both the soldiers and public had distorted representations of the others’ situations as Williams asks if it’s a fact that “one [Zeppelin] dropped in the Thames?”, suggesting that the soldiers didn’t have much clarity towards home affairs[[3]](#footnote-3). This parallel between the government’s portrayal of the war and the lived experience, reinforces the idea of government censorship during WWI. However, one could argue that the government didn’t mention the fast spread of disease, amputations, infections, etc, to maintain morale and a positive attitude towards their army’s abilities. Which supports historians’ debate about removing the popular memory of the war being a tragic, futile waste instead, in order to reassert the success of the Western Front.

Martyn Lyons’ ideas on censorship are demonstrated within the letters written by Davis and Skilling with the reoccurring motif of weather. Andrea McKenzie’s concept of ‘self-censorship: Fussell (1975)’ can be found in the letters from WWI, with mention that the soldiers sometimes experience “a warm time”, and “hoped the weather would be alright” [[4]](#footnote-4). One could argue that Davis and Skilling are not referring to the French weather, but rather implying the intensity of the warfare in a restricted way to not worry anyone with the details of their life in the trenches, reinforcing the idea of self-censorship complying with government censorship. This hesitancy could also be argued to be due to forced compliance with the limits set by government censorship, which affirms the ideas of Lyons. As the ‘boundaries between private and public correspondence were often blurred’ due to front line correspondence often being scrutinised by many high-ranking officers before delivery which caused a delay of letters[[5]](#footnote-5).

We learn that Skilling received a letter “January 1917” which was sent “August 1916”, this not only suggests the control higher-ranking officials had over communication but perhaps the difficulty in locating a soldier as by the markings the letter was with “various regiments and officers,”. This letter suggests that Skilling and “Davies” had regular communication due to the dates mentioned and the mention of Skilling’s Regiment and his new responsibilities in the formal, yet friendly tone of this letter. This system alongside the ‘threat of a week or two in confinement as punishment for epistolary indiscretions,’ may explain Davis’ hesitancy to “enlarge” on certain details in the letter on the war effort to loved ones[[6]](#footnote-6). Historians have debated on the existence and extent of wartime censorship in personal correspondence and government published updates on the Allied troops’ status, and usually focusing on the positives in order to maintain control over morale and the war effort back home.

There are many debates surrounding censorship during WWI, the letters by Williams, Davis, and Skilling allow us an insight into censorship during the First World War. One could argue that there was censorship during the WWI, in terms of government correspondence and government publication/propaganda in order to maintain a strong, united Front against the Central Forces. Perhaps influenced by the discourse of power. Did this censorship restrict the soldiers’ freedom of expression? Or did these soldiers’ use self-censorship in order to reassure others of their safety?

# Bibliography

Dobson, Miriam and Benjamin Ziemann. Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretations of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History. Taylor & Francis Group (2008)

Horne, John. 2014. "The Global Legacies of World War I", *Current History*, v113, n766

Lyons, Martyn. 2003. “French Soldiers and their correspondence: towards a history of writing practices in the First World War”, *French History*, v17 (1), No. 1

McKenzie, Andrea. 2001. "Correspondence, Constructs, and Qualification in World War I", *Canadian Journal of Communication*, v26, No.2/3

Wilson, Ross J. 2009. "Memory and trauma: Narrating the Western Front 1914–1918", *Rethinking History*, v13, No. 2

**Memory and Trauma: Narrating the Western Front 1914-1918 by Ross J. Wilson (2009)**

Ross J. Wilson’s argument that the trauma caused to the soldiers and the public at that time in history as well as modern audiences of World War One media is being ignored, in order to retain that ‘discourse of sacrifice’ within the Western Front and the soldiers being the ‘heroic victim’ of the war is convincing due to the economic success publishers have when developing films, television shows etc about this dismal, yet integral part of history. Arguing that this failure to ignore this ingrained national trauma ‘stems from the narratives employed by historians of the war, which fail to accommodate or acknowledge the trauma still felt by contemporary society.’

Wilson argues that the use of ‘official documents, personal memories, private papers, or oral testimonials’ are essential in explaining and narrating life on the Western Front, these sources are the backbone to wartime research and contributes personal and government experiences. Suggesting that when these sources are constructed into a chronological order helps to achieve a clear narrative of events, individuals and battles that occurred on the Western Front and that this rigid structure prevents consideration of how these events have affected contemporary society. Arguing that it neglects the overwhelming public response to continue to discuss these events which closes off the past, creating an uncertain and strict narrative by restricting contemporary exploration of WWI. Therefore, Wilson’s suggestion that the use of a rhizomatic narrative over a linear one in order to assess the trauma associated with World War One is appealing due to the discourse with history of the Holocaust being denied by some as they believe the evidence was fabricated, due to Historians’ attempts to return to how the Nazi regime had maintained it. The author’s argument for a move away from linear narratives when discussing the Great War will provide clarity and closure as well as a clear insight to the events of the war, with the varying time periods linking to one another creating a broader view of its history.

Wilson’s argument is particularly convincing due to the continued media representation of the war being in line with the discourse of soldiers’ sacrifice is prevalent within society and its media, as cited by Wilson, in television shows such as ‘Blackadder’ and 1990s novels by ‘Barker and Faulks’ perpetuate this image of suffering, contributing to this popular image of WWI within British culture. This post-war media supports and reinforces Wilson’s idea of the adamant nature of government and historians in order to continue economic growth from this publication. The writer discusses how these continued images of suffering have led to ‘cultural trauma… [which] has not been considered by historians’ and the need to focus on this as the contemporary socio-political climate develops. The collective memory of WWI and Wilson’s claim of national trauma can be supported by Freud’s psychoanalysis in that a narrative representation is key for a group’s history, memory, pain and torture to be recognised and accepted[[7]](#footnote-7).

Using the idea of Roth, that history is a ‘service of the present… and therapy’ and way to engage with trauma, and the historian’s task is therapeutic, and to exorcise these troubling aspects of history, reinforces Wilson’s view on the role of the historian and is interesting as one can view that historical research and theories have a large impact[[8]](#footnote-8). For example, key historical events such as conquest and the telling of these events has an impact on society depending on which “side” they were on and how their government portrays it. WWI is seen as a British Triumph among the Allied Powers, while at the time this was a tragic loss to the Central Powers, and this contributed to their socio-economic and political climates differently, however causing trauma to all involved. These ideas of the role of the historian to almost control the media output of the Great War and Wilson’s belief for it to be adaptable is restricted by the popular image and media surrounding the conflict, along with personal connections to the war via genealogy.

Wilson’s arguments that Western Front historians fail to make ‘inroads into the popular memory of the conflict’ as they don’t represent trauma in their work and the media perpetuating this dismal image of World War One is convincing as these outputs focus on the suffering on the Day of Remembrance and in education. Focusing on the effects of war within the period of 1914-1918, rather than post-war shellshock and anxiousness spreading world-wide from artillery and threat of warfare.

# Bibliography

Freud, Sigmund. 2003. *An outline of psychoanalysis*. Trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby. (London: Penguin)

Roth, M. 1995 *The ironist’s cage: Memory, trauma and the construction of history*. (New York: Columbia University Press)

Within this module I have been able to develop my skills with primary source analysis, via this portfolio with analysing personal writings of soldiers and recognising recurring motifs in language and implicit details when discussing censorship within the First World War. Also, this ‘Doing History’ module has enabled me to improve my secondary source analysis within this portfolio when discussing articles, journals, and book chapters in relation to World War One trenches on the Western Front. Developing my knowledge and research of the trenches from GCSEs.

‘How to Time Travel’ has also helped me develop my critical reading skills when deciding which parts of my research is relevant when researching and referencing and taking historical debates into account, such as the discourses among wartime historians. While questioning this research in constructing my arguments by identifying biases, prejudices and potential personal interests and agendas within these sources. Analysing these with my own ideas and arguments, considering historical debates, biases and potentially targeted propaganda such as satirical cartoons or political publication.

I need to develop my ability in constructing an argument and continuing that line of argument throughout my assignments and reducing my work into concise and relevant points that further support my thesis. Keeping focus on the question and extending my thesis is challenging as I often develop irrelevant tangents, so hopefully during this degree using the skills discussed in this module will help me to focus on and follow my line of argument throughout my essays. Writing of conclusions is something I also need to work on in order to enhance my debate within essays and portfolios, as well as developing stronger thesis’.

While practicing use of MHRA referencing in my history and religious studies assignments, I’ve been able to enhance my referencing and research skills from my A level coursework.

After this degree, I plan on potentially going on to do a master’s degree in the Classics or a specific religion to develop my knowledge on a specific topic and continue academics after my bachelor’s in History and Religious Studies. The academic skills from this module such as, formulating a thesis, critical analysis of sources, researching of relevant arguments and taking discourses into account are transferable which will allow academic development within my current and future modules, then potentially in future degrees and within my career in Humanities.

I have also had the opportunity to reflect further on possible career paths with the Future Plan, which affirmed my aspirational career in heritage or as an archivist within a museum, preferably with religious artefacts. The career path discussion also allowed me to bring different careers into consideration such as, a museum/gallery curator or an exhibitions officer. Your Future Plan’s Learning Styles assessment has helped me to understand my studying style and has provided helpful tips on how to build on my working style. Your Future Plan has also allowed me to see how to improve my employability skills and CV writing, while helping me to identify my strengths and weaknesses.

1. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann. Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 57-73, pp. 62-63 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ross J. Wilson. ‘Memory and trauma: Narrating the Western Front 1914-1918’, Rethinking History, v13, No. 2 (2009), pp. 252 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Horne. ‘The Global Legacies of World War I, Current History, v113, No. 766 (2014) pp.299-304 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Andrea McKenzie. ‘Correspondence, constructs and qualification in World War I’, Canadian Journal of Communication, v26, No. 2/3 pp. 255-275 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Martyn Lyons. ‘French Soldiers and their correspondence: towards a history of writing practices in the First World War’, French History, v17, No. 1 (2003), pp. 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, p.82 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sigmund Freud. *An outline of psychoanalysis.* Trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby. (London: Penguin, 2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Roth. *The ironist’s cage: Memory, trauma and the construction of history*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)