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“Books Are More to Me than Food”:

British Prisoners of War as Readers, 1914–18

At the end of March 1918, within a few days of being captured in the German Spring Offensive, Captain John Guest of the 16th Battalion, Manchester Regiment, arrived at Karlsruhe officers’ lager.¹ Given access to postal facilities for the first time since capture, he wrote immediately to his parents in Wigan, outlining his material wants:

I hope by the time this letter reaches you that you will have been informed that I am safe & sound though a prisoner of war in Germany ... First of all let me give you a list of what I want sent out to me. A pair of grey flannel slacks + my brown shoes. Socks (... khaki or blue) thick. 1 change of under clothes ... Handkies, soft khaki cap & badge ... Later on if this war is not over you can send me my British warm but I do not need it now that Summer is coming along. Send books out but only through the publishers. You are not allowed to send them. Please send the April issue of Nash’s magazine & the following months.

Reflecting on the somewhat demanding tone of this first communication, he added, “This letter seems to be all ‘send’ but I know you will understand that I am not asking needlessly.”² Six weeks later, he wrote again. Trying to give his parents a taste of the listless and static life in the officers’ camp at Karlsruhe, Guest drew a quick verbal sketch of his immediate surroundings: “Everybody in the room is endeavouring to write home but all seem to be failing miserably. There is so little to talk about.” However, he added, “There is a library here & so we pass the time reading.”³ Another letter reinforced the theme: “Here everything is a very lazy life. Nothing at all to do,” he wrote, “except read & eat.”⁴ The prominence that

¹ I want to thank Shafquat Towheed and two anonymous reviewers for *Book History* for offering constructive comments on earlier versions of this article. I also owe debts of thanks to Rosalind Crone, Peter Grant, Aaron Pegram, Carolyn Spooner, and archivists at the National Library of Wales, the Australian War Memorial, Tameside Local Studies and Archives Centre, and the State Library of South Australia for their advice and assistance.

² Captain John Guest to Mr and Mrs Guest, 30 March 1918, Manchester Regiment Archives, Tameside Local Studies and Archives Centre, Ashton under Lyne (hereafter MRA), MR3/16/72.

³ Guest to Mr and Mrs Guest, 12 May 1918, MRA, MR3/16/72.

⁴ Guest to Mr and Mrs Guest, 6 April 1918, MRA, MR3/16/72.

Guest gives to books and reading in his letters is by no means unusual in accounts of prisoner of war life during World War I. Some surviving POW diaries contain occasional lists of “books read,” interspersed with other lists—loaves of bread received; letters read and sent—showing the place that books occupied within the wider textual and material cultures of captive life.⁵ Books, and the camp libraries that housed them, are also a regular motif in British memoirs written by former prisoners of war.⁶

The traces of prison reading experiences recorded in these accounts, however, raise a number of questions. Where did the books in prison-camp libraries come from? Who paid for their assembly and what were they hoping to achieve by doing so? Finally, what part did the books they contained play in structuring the day-to-day experience of captive life? This article will discuss two charitable schemes that set out to collect books for World War I prisoners of war: the Camps’ Library and the Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational). After tracing the schemes’ administrative histories and ideological underpinnings, it will then describe the logistical challenges each faced in collecting and distributing books, before examining the conditions and practices of reading that existed behind the wire in German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish prisoner of war camps. How did prisoners of war *use* their books? To what extent—if any—did these usages accord with the book charities’ belief that they could “redeem the time spent in captivity” by giving prisoners access to reading material?⁷

Prison Libraries on the Eve of the First World War

World War I British prisoners of war entered captivity at a time when both the constitution of the armed forces, and assumptions about the role and function of prisons themselves, were in a state of large-scale change. The mass volunteering of 1914–15, combined with the eventual introduction of conscription under the Military Service Act 1916, meant that the prisoners of

⁵ See, for instance, L/Cpl. Edward Jones, 1917–18 Notebook, Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, University of Birmingham (hereafter CRL), MS 216/2.

⁶ Two of the most striking examples are, not coincidentally, memoirs by prisoners who were also published authors: Alec Waugh, *Prisoners of Mainz* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1919), and Hugh Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines* (London: Morley and Mitchell Kennerley Jr., 1930).

⁷ Alfred T. Davies, “Light through Prison Bars: Some Wartime Adventures in Education,” unpublished typescript, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth (hereafter NLW), GB 0210 ALFTDAVIES, 134.

war held in German, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian camps during the First World War were unlike any previous prison population, civil or military, yet assembled in the nation's history, both in terms of sheer numbers and in their social diversity. The ranks of the pre-war British Army had been overwhelmingly drawn from the least-educated and most-deprived sectors of the working-class population. Soldiers in peace-time had typically signed on out of economic desperation—a 1909 report concluded that well over 90% of new army recruits had been unemployed prior to enlisting.⁸ The huge expansion of the British armed forces between 1914 and 1918, however, changed the social and educational complexion of military service completely. The “man in uniform” had effectively become “the man in the street.” Prisoners taken from the ranks of the “new” British army of the First World War now resembled the male population at large much more closely than had the captives of previous conflicts. No longer marginal figures, these men possessed lines of familial support and a degree of social capital that made their mental and physical well-being a matter of pressing political concern.⁹

Beliefs and assumptions about the role of prison—and prison education—in the lives of their inmates had also been evolving in the years immediately prior to 1914. A reformist tendency to see prisons as potential sites of “social rehabilitation,” in which prisoners could be prepared for life after their release through educational programmes, had started to gain traction in British official circles.¹⁰ Library provision was central to the reformist agenda, and contemporary observers agreed in attributing to reading almost miraculous powers to transform the behaviour and moral character of prison inmates. In a major report written for the Home Secretary in 1911, the Prison Library Committee declared that:

in the selection of ... books ... for use in prisons ... the reformatory object of modern prison discipline must be kept in view. Books are an instrument of the first importance in the attainment of that object. Their influence is even stronger in the life of a prison than elsewhere, because of its limitations. The absence of all the ... distractions of ordinary existence allow the incidents of the world of fiction to impress themselves

⁸ Edward M. Spiers, “The Regular Army in 1914,” in Ian F. W. Beckett and Keith Simpson, eds., *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 44.

⁹ For a parallel example, see Jonathan F. Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 39–43.

¹⁰ Janet Fyfe, *Books Behind Bars: The Role of Books, Reading, and Libraries in British Prison Reform, 1701–1911* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 213.

with peculiar force upon the [captive] imagination; until the life lived in the novel comes to have a more vivid reality to the prisoner than the actual daily round of [prison] labour.

“Moreover,” the report’s authors continued, “many prisoners never read at any other time than during their terms of imprisonment. Such favourable conditions,” they advised, “should be used to the best advantage by those who direct prisoners’ reading.”¹¹ As these remarks suggest, it was not sufficient that books simply be *available* to inmates through the prison library. Instead, reformers emphasized the active role that prison library staff played in selecting books and carefully administering them to individual prisoners. If the contents of prison libraries were tending increasingly towards secular titles and away from the Bible by the beginning of the Edwardian period, the Prison Library Committee’s remarks betray the influence of older, religiously-based assumptions about the power of the written word to “convert” readers.¹² While novels may have largely replaced scripture in the prison reading diet, they were expected to exert a no less powerful transformative influence in their readers’ lives.¹³

The First World War prisoner of war camp witnessed the convergence of these two lines of historical development. The Edwardian prison reform movement had reinforced the belief that prison inmates could be *mentally* as well as spiritually reclaimed through the act of reading. These expectations would, in turn, influence prisoner of war relief efforts, despite the obvious demographic differences that separated prisoners of war from the inmates of pre-war civilian prisons. As Heather Jones observes, “the First World War established the precedent of the [prisoner of war] camp as a site of educational experimentation,” where inmates were actively encouraged to learn and develop themselves during their captivity.¹⁴ Just as the governors and chaplains of local and convict prisons were advised to exploit the

¹¹ *Report of the Departmental Committee on the Supply of Books to the Prisoners of H.M. Prisons and to the Inmates of H.M. Borstal Institutions* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1911), 8.

¹² Cf. Daniel Allington, “On the Use of Anecdotal Evidence in Reception Study and the History of Reading,” in Bonnie Gunzenhauser, ed., *Reading in History: New Methodologies from the Anglo-American Tradition* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 25–27.

¹³ On the “triumph of the novel” behind bars in the late Victorian period, see Jenny Hartley, “Reading in Gaol,” in Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland, eds., *A Return to the Common Reader: Print Culture and the Novel, 1850–1900* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 97.

¹⁴ Heather Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 361.

“favourable conditions” of imprisonment to reform inmates through the application of literature, so too were prisoners of war seen as an ideal “captive audience” for books, whose supposed “enforced inactivity” could be put to good use for the purposes of personal improvement through reading and education.¹⁵

Supplying Books to Prisoners of War, 1914–18

The institutional response to the problem of getting books to soldiers and prisoners of war was, initially at least, dispersed and poorly coordinated. Whereas the American Library Association was to take a leading role in assembling troop libraries when the United States entered the war in April 1917, the Library Association in Britain struggled to exert any influence on events. Debilitated by budget cuts and drained of personnel due to mobilization, the British library profession effectively ceded responsibility for creating and administering soldiers’ libraries to the voluntary sector.¹⁶ Charities, by contrast, responded quickly, and a variety of amateur bodies soon emerged offering book provision programmes for those on active service. Within a year of hostilities commencing, the Red Cross and St John’s Ambulance War Library was collecting reading matter for the wounded and sick, the Fleets Library was supplying books to sailors, and the YMCA was operating a string of mobile lending libraries and reading huts in Britain and France, while the Camps’ Library distributed book-stock for use in training- and base-camp libraries. The Prisoners of War Help Society, the Camps Library, and the various national divisions of the Red Cross and YMCA, meanwhile, endeavoured to supply books to prisoners of war.¹⁷ In 1916, this multiplicity of existing agencies would be joined by the Fighting Forces Book Council and the Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational).

The sheer profusion of bodies involved might suggest that there was a degree of organizational chaos in the voluntary sector’s book provision services for soldiers. However,

¹⁵ Cf. Jane Potter, “For Country, Conscience and Commerce: Publishers and Publishing, 1914–18,” in Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed, eds., *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12.

¹⁶ See Daniel F. Ring, “Some Speculations on Why the British Library Profession Didn’t Go to War,” *Journal of Library History* 22, no. 3 (1987): 259–62.

¹⁷ “Supply of Books to the Camps’ Library,” Board of Education, draft circular 929, 30 November 1915, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA), ED 10/83.

most of these charitable schemes possessed an internal skeleton of experienced personnel (some of them former or serving bureaucrats) with wide networks of social, familial, and institutional connections, and each was capable of drawing upon a range of outside expertise and professional contacts. The Fighting Forces Book Council, for instance, operated with the “approval of the War Office, Colonial Office, and Board of Education,” while also liaising with the Society of Authors, the Publishers’ Association, and the Home Reading Union. Its Treasurer was King’s College London literature professor and British Academy secretary, Israel Gollancz (1863–1930).¹⁸ Mary Elizabeth Chomley (1872–1960), who ran an informal book scheme for Australian prisoners from the Red Cross offices in London, was the cousin of the editor of the *British Australasian* journal, whose London bookstore furnished much of Chomley’s book-stock.¹⁹ After 1915, the ability of war charities to exploit the bureaucratic support structures of the state became still greater. With the appointment of the Director General of Voluntary Organizations in November 1915, the War Office began to actively intervene in and coordinate voluntary relief efforts.²⁰ Using the War Office’s influence, charities were able to solve basic logistical problems, such as arranging discounted postal rates for sending parcels to prisoners of war, which had previously threatened to stymie their operations.²¹ In the months immediately prior to the formation of the DGVO, for instance, the Prisoners of War Help Committee had found its comforts scheme for POWs in Germany (which included the dispatch of 48 boxes of books weekly) essentially paralysed by an outstanding invoice for £2625 owing to American Express for freight charges.²² Backed by the War Office’s institutional muscle, however, relief organizations were in a much more favourable position to negotiate terms, making the systematic supply of prisoners’ material wants through parcels financially sustainable.

The Camps’ Library and the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational), the two main charities supplying books to British POWs, epitomize these working arrangements. Both owed much of their pre-eminence of the Defence of the Realm Act Regulation 24B, which banned the non-licensed export of “certain ... printed matter” to enemy and neutral

¹⁸ “Books for Our Fighting Men,” *Scotsman* (19 January 1916): 8.

¹⁹ M. E. Chomley to 2nd/Lt Jack Ingram, 5 July 1918, Australian War Memorial, Canberra (hereafter AWM), AWM/1DRL/0428/100/5.

²⁰ Peter Grant, ““An Infinity of Personal Sacrifice’: The Scale and Nature of Charitable Work in Britain during the First World War,” *War & Society* 28, no. 2 (2008): 69.

²¹ Peter Grant, “Mobilizing Charity: Non-Uniformed Voluntary Action during the First World War,” PhD thesis, City University, London, 2012, 1:318–19.

²² C. P. Lucas to Foreign Office, 7 September 1915, 128277, TNA, FO 383/44.

countries.²³ Before the passage of this regulation, families of prisoners had been free to send books and magazines through the post. Afterwards, however, only license-holders—publishers or government-approved schemes—could do so, forcing families and POWs to conduct these textual exchanges through more official channels. The Camps’ Library, which took over the provision of “light literature” for POWs from the Prisoner of War Help Society in July 1915, had as its Chairman the Director General of Voluntary Organizations himself, Sir Edward Ward (1853–1928), a former Permanent Secretary of the War Office.²⁴ Reliant on public donations for the bulk of its book-stock, it reached an agreement with the Postmaster General to collect books through local post offices, which would then be warehoused and sent out using the postal service. In this way, the Camps’ Library was able to receive and distribute a truly staggering 16,660,000 books and magazines for soldiers and prisoners of war before its closure in March 1919.²⁵ It also maintained close connections with the publishing industry through its Director of Operations, poet and author Eva Anstruther (1869–1935). Using its high profile and Anstruther’s book-trade contacts, the Camps Library was able to solicit free remainders from a number of British publishers for its depots.²⁶ Although it was the largest scheme of its kind in operation, prisoner-of-war supply made up only a small part of its activities. Of 76,193 titles sent out in the week ending 23 October 1918, for instance, only 1593 were bound for prison camps, far outnumbered by the 44,400 books and magazines distributed for active-duty soldiers in 888 “trench boxes.”²⁷

The British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational) originally had a slightly different remit from the Camps’ Library: it was initially established to create a library for civilian internees at Ruhleben camp in 1914. Eventually expanded to include *all* British war prisoners, civilian and military, two years later, the scheme aimed to send “books of an educational nature”—particularly technical titles—free of charge to any inmate who requested them. A sample taken from three days’ worth of correspondence illustrates the diversity of titles requested. A former miner asked for books on coal-mining, another prisoner texts allowing him to resume a University of London degree in English and French, and a third, a “cooper in the herring industry,” books on barrel-making and “senior poetry,” along

²³ See *Defence of the Realm Manual*, 5th ed. (London: HMSO, 1918), 110.

²⁴ “The Camps’ Library,” *British Prisoner of War* 1, no. 9 (September 1918): 101.

²⁵ Grant, “Mobilizing Charity,” 1:326.

²⁶ *Report of Work of Camps’ Library* (London: Harris and Sons, 1919), 6.

²⁷ Camps’ Library, weekly report, 23 October 1918, TNA, ED 10/83.

with a French grammar.²⁸ Most of the books distributed under the Scheme were donated by the public, but there was also money available to buy new titles in response to particular requests. Much of the initial capital was provided by Lady Alice Maria Tylour, Countess of Bective (1842–1928), with additional monetary donations collected from the public under the War Charities Act 1916. However, some support for the Scheme also came from central government, where its founder, Alfred T. Davies (1861–1949), was employed in the Board of Education. Although the Board did not allocate it any official funding, it did provide the Scheme with one major financial advantage: rent-free office accommodation in London for the duration of the war.²⁹

No central repository for Camps' Library records survives. Similarly, although Davies lodged the Prisoners of War Book Scheme's once-considerable archives of requests and dispatches with the Board of Education after the war, these were apparently destroyed during an office move in 1940. Nevertheless, a revealing picture of the Camps' Library and Prisoners of War Book Scheme's operations can still be pieced together from what survives of their papers and correspondence. A postcard retained by the Camps' Library Secretary, Kilmeny Symon, illustrates the close and informal nature of the two schemes' working relationship by war's end. Following a request for books to stock a new officers' library at Griesheim in March 1918, Davies' staff wrote to the Camps' Library offices, suggesting a division of labour: "we have a request from the Librarian [at Griesheim] 2 Lt. Gerald Jay ... for books 'helpful as well as amusing'. We will deal with the 'helpful', if you can deal with the 'amusing.'"³⁰ On being informed of the destruction of the Prisoners of War Book Scheme's archives in 1940, Alfred Davies began writing a memoir, clearly wanting to preserve as much of the Scheme's remaining institutional memory as he could. Although this was never published, it survives among Davies' papers at the National Library of Wales. This account, along with a small selection of statistics, book-lists, and correspondence deposited alongside the manuscript, provides a vivid insight into the moral and cultural motivations that underpinned the initiative.³¹

²⁸ "British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational): A Selection from Three Days' Requests," Alfred T. Davies papers, NLW, GB0210 ALFTDAVIES.

²⁹ Marquis of Crewe to Alfred T. Davies, 20 September 1916, TNA, ED 23/975.

³⁰ British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational) to Kilmeny Symon, 8 March 1918, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide (hereafter SLSA), PRG 249/6.

³¹ For a description of the Davies holdings, see the National Library of Wales catalogue: http://www.archiveswales.org.uk/anw/get_collection.php?inst_id=1&coll_id=528&expand=, accessed 2 August 2012.

Despite the Prisoners of War Book Scheme's somewhat flippant suggestion that it provided "helpful," and the Camps' Library merely "amusing," books, both organizations took the improving powers of literature seriously. In doing so, they shared the assumptions of Edwardian prison reformers, who saw in the prison library the key to the reformation of character. The Camps' Library sought "books of a ... solid character" for prisoner-of-war camp libraries, particularly "Historical and scientific works, poetry, essays ... pocket dictionaries and grammars (particularly French and German)," and "pocket Shakespeares."³² An article profiling the Library late in the war revealed that Secretary Kilmeny Symon would use fiction as a way of leading individual prisoners to other genres of writing. A prisoner reading his way through the Dickens canon, for instance, might be sent a Dickens biography. In this way, Camps' Library personnel sought:

not only to supply to supply to these ... men a means of recreation and amusement ... but also to try and inculcate or gradually cultivate in many of them a love for good literature, and a taste for wider and more general and varied reading, which may be of pleasure or benefit to them later in life.³³

Davies' volunteers were similarly committed to giving prisoners of war "opportunities for self-improvement" during their captivity.³⁴ The Prisoners of War Book Scheme maintained a card index of all inmates who had requested reading material, accounting for each request and the titles dispatched in response. The aim was not only to prevent duplication, but to build a comprehensive database of every prisoner who contacted the Scheme, which would enable Davies and his volunteers to document each individual's reading tastes and educational ambitions, so that they could direct their development over subsequent requests.³⁵

An account of the Scheme published in 1917, and clearly intended to encourage public donations, drew a somewhat sentimental picture of the prisoner of war's essential

³² "Supply of Books," draft circular 929, TNA, ED 10/83.

³³ "Camps' Library," 102.

³⁴ "Self-Education by British War Prisoners," *Morning Post* (25 September 1916), cutting among Alfred T. Davies papers, TNA, ED 23/975.

³⁵ Davies, "Light through Prison Bars," NLW, GB0210 ALFTDAVIES, 80.

helplessness, and the way in which books sent from Britain could help defend him from mental—and moral—deterioration:

Can those of us at home ... imagine what it must be to have days and months of time in enforced inactivity and never a line to read? Can we picture to ourselves the state of the energetic young man, working hard to rise in his calling, leaving the books and classes, on which depended all his hopes, in order to join the colours, and now condemned to eat his heart out, day after day ... in some far-distant Camp, surrounded only by the enemies of his country? In such circumstances what a priceless boon books must be! Well might one prisoner write: "*Books are more to me than food.*" The prisoners are for all practical purposes like shipwrecked mariners ... Send them food, certainly ... but let us not forget that starvation of the mind may have ... results as grievous as starvation of the body.³⁶

The phrase Davies used to describe captive life—"enforced inactivity"—reflects a common concern among charities collecting books for the armed forces. A 1916 press report announcing the formation of the Fighting Forces Book Council referred to "young men ... who have had to break off their studies ... and who are rightly desirous of continuing their reading during periods of forced inactivity."³⁷ A letter sent out to newspapers by the Camps' Library committee later that year noted the approach of winter, and the role of books in alleviating the "enforced leisure" of weather-bound troops.³⁸ These observations reflected long-standing anxieties about the power of boredom to demoralize troops, and the corresponding ability of reading matter to distract soldiers from immorality. Nearly sixty years earlier, Florence Nightingale wrote that, if only soldiers were provided with "a book & a game & a magic Lanthorn ... they [would] leave off drinking."³⁹ Similar assumptions no doubt informed Davies' suggestion that books could guard against the "grievous" effects of "mental starvation" in the First World War prisoner-of-war camp. Alcohol—usually strong

³⁶ Alfred T. Davies, *Student Captives: An Account of the Work of the British Prisoner of War Book Scheme (Educational)* (Leicester: Stevens and Son, 1917), 17.

³⁷ "The Fighting Forces Book Council," *Athenæum*, no. 4602 (February 1916): 89.

³⁸ "Books and Magazines for the Fighting Forces," *Scotsman* (11 October 1916): 6.

³⁹ Quoted in Michael D. Calabria, "Florence Nightingale and the Libraries of the British Army," *Libraries & Culture* 29, no. 4 (1994): 369.

and often of poor quality—was available in many camp canteens, and memoirs and contemporary diaries suggest that drinking to achieve temporary psychological release was a not-uncommon feature of captive life.⁴⁰ Hugh Kingsmill Lunn remembered that the ready supply of “awful,” yet effective, canteen wine made the question of “how much or how little to drink one of the chief problems of captivity” for an officer POW.⁴¹

In depicting prisoners of war mired in a morale-sapping state of “enforced inactivity,” Davies, a pre-war temperance campaigner, was engaging in a deft piece of moral entrepreneurship.⁴² However, this image seriously misrepresented the experiences of the vast bulk of Allied captives, many of whom spent at least part of their captivity in forced *labour* rather than forced “inactivity.”⁴³ This failure to fully appreciate the conditions under which most non-commissioned prisoners of war were held seriously threatened the effectiveness of charitable book-provision programmes by war’s end. Publicity materials sent out to the prisoners themselves were much less likely to focus on the spectacle of imprisonment, and the moral and bodily susceptibility of its subjects, than copy written for home consumption. Instead, one Prisoners of War Book Scheme leaflet, designed to be “posted up in a conspicuous place in the Camp,” exhorted prisoners to: “Seize this opportunity to cultivate your mind, improve your knowledge, and, at the same time, alleviate the tedium of your captivity.”⁴⁴ Both the Camps’ Library and the Prisoners of War Book Scheme’s literature explicitly encouraged prisoners to regard their captivity less as a state of passive suspension than as a chance to exercise mental agency. Reading, it suggested, could be a way of exerting some element of control over life behind the wire. Whether books would reach camp in sufficient quantities, and whether captivity could offer the physical and psychological spaces necessary for reading, were, however, other matters.

The Conditions of Prisoner of War Camp Reading

⁴⁰ For the pervasiveness of alcohol abuse in one Turkish work-camp, see Greg Kerr, *Lost Anzacs: The Story of Two Brothers* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), 147; 157–59; 162–63.

⁴¹ Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines*, 120.

⁴² On “moral entrepreneurship,” see Howard B. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963; New York: Free Press, 1997), 147–48. For Davies’ background in the temperance movement, see “Temperance Notes and News,” *Quiver* (January 1904): 540–1; and “Sir Alfred T. Davies [obituary],” *Manchester Guardian* (22 April 1949): 6.

⁴³ See Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64–65, 68; and John Yarnall, *Barbed Wire Disease: British and German Prisoners of War, 1914–19* (Stroud: History Press, 2011), 136–37.

⁴⁴ Davies, *Student Captives*, 19.

What happened to the book parcels sent by British charitable schemes once they left local post offices? Under what conditions were they available to prisoners, and how did these conditions affect prisoners' reading practices? The most immediate constraint imposed on books once they arrived in prisoner of camps was censorship. Incoming parcels were routinely inspected for political content, and these inspection regimes could severely restrict the circulation of books within camp. Eventual escapee H. G. Gilliland, for instance, recalled that the censorship of book parcels at his lager could take months and that the camp commander would arbitrarily withhold even completely uncontroversial titles, such as Dickens novels.⁴⁵

Gilliland was an officer and thus, to a large extent, sheltered from some of the harsher aspects of captivity in Germany.⁴⁶ Letters of complaint sent to the Prisoners of War Book Scheme from enlisted men suggest that ordinary soldier-prisoners could experience much greater difficulties in accessing book parcels. One private from the Lincolnshire Regiment wrote from Sennelager to inform Davies that a package of educational books from the Scheme had arrived safely, only to be abruptly confiscated, ostensibly so the censor could examine it. Not having heard anything for five months, the prisoner enquired about his books, only to be told outright that Sennelager was "not a school."⁴⁷ Another soldier at Sennelager sent Davies a postcard telling him that books ordered under the Scheme in October 1917 had still not arrived by March the following year. He then made a reticent, but revealing, addendum: "It is no use writing for more books, for myself or anyone else."⁴⁸ A long letter from a Corporal J. McDonald, who had managed to secure transfer from Germany to an internment camp in neutral Holland, set out the difficulties encountered by non-commissioned prisoners in more detail. "German authorities," he wrote, had by no means "encouraged" reading and study in his camp. Prisoners could expect to be transferred at any moment to forced labour camps: "in fact," he observed, "those known to be studiously inclined" could expect to have the most "inconveniences" of this sort placed in their paths.

⁴⁵ H. G. Gilliland, *My German Prisons: Being the Experiences of an Officer during Two and a Half Years as a Prisoner of War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918), 119–20.

⁴⁶ On the social divisions within the First World War prisoner experience, see Amanda Laugesen, *'Boredom Is the Enemy': The Intellectual and Imaginative Lives of Australian Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 107, 110.

⁴⁷ Private F. C. Monk to A. T. Davies, 28 February 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁴⁸ Private R. Harding to A. T. Davies, 3 March 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

“Three and a half years” as a prisoner of war, he concluded, was “a sure loss of one’s brain power.”⁴⁹

These calculated attempts to starve individual prisoners of reading material accord with Heather Jones’s observations about the “heterogeneous nature of First World War violence.” Violence against prisoners, she writes, could be psychological as well as physical, and could vary in its application according to the effect its perpetrators wanted to exert.⁵⁰ Davies certainly regarded the deliberate denial of reading matter described in Corporal McDonald’s letter as a form of psychological violence. Forwarding a copy of it to Lord Newton at the Foreign Office, Davies wrote that,

It is surely the refinement of cruelty for the German authorities, after allowing books for prisoners to enter the country, to deprive the recipients of them in the way to which the writer of the letter testifies was done in his case.⁵¹

Other forms of violence were aimed at the books themselves rather than the minds of their readers. British officers at Mainz found that any volumes sent to them would have their covers stripped off by the camp censor before being made available for reading. The justification for this was the precedent of “maps and poison” allegedly hidden in the bindings of books sent to French prisoners earlier in the war.⁵² By 1918, it was apparently official practice in at least eight German camps for bindings to be removed from all books arriving through the mail, regardless of who had sent them. In addition, pages from within might be ripped out if censors believed their contents were problematic. Particularly vulnerable to this kind of treatment were atlases, books printed in languages other than English, and history books with unfavourable accounts of pre-war German military policy.⁵³ Books mutilated in this way would often begin shedding pages before sometimes falling apart completely. Foreign Office correspondents clearly regarded this as a deliberate attempt by German camp authorities to disrupt the circuits of textual exchange taking place among prisoners. Without

⁴⁹ Corporal J. McDonald to A. T. Davies, 16 April 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁵⁰ Jones, *Violence*, 164, 162.

⁵¹ Alfred T. Davies to Lord Newton, 4 May 1918, 82440, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁵² Waugh, *Prisoners*, 124.

⁵³ Captain A. N. Olfert, “Report on the Mutilation of Books,” 12 June 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

their bindings, they observed, prison-library books had short life-expectancies and would inevitably be difficult to read and circulate.⁵⁴ Davies seems to have been particularly upset that books sent by the Prisoners of War Book Scheme were receiving this kind of “wanton injury,” especially since, he noted, many of them were “of an expensive character.”⁵⁵

These acts of censorship contributed to another overriding condition of textual culture among British prisoners of war: scarcity. Long supply lines and a lack of cooperation between relief agencies added to these difficulties. These problems became particularly acute after the jump in British prisoner numbers brought about by the German Spring Offensive of 1918. Early that year, the Danish Red Cross suggested that it could assist the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme by distributing the scheme’s request forms in Germany. In June 1918, it further proposed establishing a book repository in Berlin specifically to cater for the growing population of British prisoners of war. Referring to the many requests they received independently from help committees in various camps, Danish Red Cross officials stressed “that it is absolutely necessary that a book depot is established for English prisoners of war in Germany,” as ordering books for them “from their home country would take too long altogether.” Red Cross personnel noted that they had satisfied one request for “light literature” to stock a camp library by ordering “500 different books from Bernard Tauchnitz, Leipzig,” which had taken only a week to reach the camp, and suggested converting this initiative into a more official operation, underwritten by British funding.⁵⁶

The Danish Red Cross proposals precipitated a flurry of correspondence between various agencies in London. The minutes of one Foreign Office meeting record that it “was to be expected” that Tauchnitz would attempt to benefit financially from the presence of a new, if involuntary, audience of British readers in Germany, as the firm “has no doubt a large and unsaleable stock on hand.” However, the minutes observed, “British authors will be done out of their royalties if the books required [were] purchased from Tauchnitz,” and Foreign Office personnel predicted opposition from the Society of Authors and “public protest” generally if the deal went ahead.⁵⁷ Davies and the Prisoners of War Book Scheme also objected to any intervention by the Danish Red Cross into its operations, claiming that they were “closer” to

⁵⁴ “Memorandum for communication to the Netherland Legation (British Section) at Berlin,” 29 June 1918, 108050/1218/P, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁵⁵ A. T. Davies to Secretary, Prisoners of War Department, 27 June 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁵⁶ Lehrbach to C. van Rappard, 11 June 1918, 108587, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁵⁷ “Books for British PP/W in Germany” [minutes], TNA, FO 383/470.

the prisoners and more aware of their needs than the Red Cross.⁵⁸ The requests were duly refused by the War Office on the grounds that the proposed depot and alternative request-form distribution scheme would duplicate existing arrangements.⁵⁹ These decisions ignored the fact that it was the manifest *inadequacy* of those “existing arrangements” that had led prisoners to by-pass British relief schemes and negotiate instead with an agency closer to hand.

Despite the decisions to reject the Danish Red Cross proposals, meeting minutes show that there was considerable sympathy for the prisoners’ plight at the Foreign Office, and a degree of scepticism of Davies’ claims to be “in close[r] personal touch” with them than other agencies. Although they noted that the Danish Red Cross were apparently “prone to bring their activities into conflict with other organizations,” Foreign Office staff astutely observed that Davies’ objections probably betrayed his “fear” of losing “kudos” were the Danish Red Cross to gain a more prominent role in supplying books to British prisoners of war.⁶⁰ Despite the supposed centrality of the prisoners in these arguments, their needs were by no means the only consideration at stake. The agglomerative nature of First World War British charity meant that prisoner-of-war relief involved the interplay of a complex set of competing interest groups, both state and private. The Foreign and War Offices had to balance prisoners’ wants against the commercial interests of publishers (both British and German), while taking care not to offend public opinion by being seen to do business (however indirectly) with an enemy company, and not alienating moral entrepreneurs like Alfred T. Davies.⁶¹ Although the Foreign Office agreed that it would be “a great thing for the prisoners to have the books,” British authorities evidently judged that the commercial and institutional risks involved outweighed this immediate benefit.⁶²

For many prisoners, these logistical problems meant that books were scarce commodities behind the lines, and their supply unreliable. For those in Turkish hands, meanwhile, reliably accessing the circuits of textual exchange offered by book charities could be practically impossible. These problems were often exacerbated by a lack of access to the conditions—light, reading spaces, leisure time—necessary for sustained reading. H. G.

⁵⁸ A. T. Davies to Prisoners of War Department, 10 May 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁵⁹ War Office to Prisoners of War Department, 30 July 1918, 110117, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁶⁰ “Educational books for prisoners of war” [minutes], 14 May 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁶¹ On the Tauchnitz firm during the First World War, see William B. Todd and Ann Bowden, *Tauchnitz International Editions 1841–1955: A Bibliographical History* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2003), 609–10.

⁶² “Books for British PP/W in Germany,” TNA, FO 383/470.

Stoker was taken prisoner by the Turkish Navy when his submarine was sunk near the Dardanelles. His captors confiscated all the books and letters he had with him on his first day in captivity. Stoker later described his initial, bookless period of solitary confinement as,

a competition between mind and body as to which would outlast the other ... Lying in darkness, in utter idleness all day, no exercise, no proper nourishment—what must be the natural result? A diseased body or a diseased mind ...⁶³

Even after Stoker's books were eventually returned to him, he found that the mental and physical conditions of captivity militated against reading. The lingering psychological effects of solitary confinement had left him "so accustomed to day dreaming" that he found "difficulty in concentrating ... on anything." In any case, the perpetual dimness of his cell frustrated most attempts at sustained engagement with his books. A small-print Bible was "quite impossible" to read in the semi-darkness, and Stoker ultimately found that all he was capable of absorbing were a few passages in Francis Marion Crawford's novel *Paul Patoff* (1887). However, since by a "rather curious coincidence" Crawford's narrative took place in Constantinople, he found the book "quaint"—if not heavily ironic—"when read in these circumstances."⁶⁴

Alec Waugh also discovered that the conditions of scarcity endemic in prisoner of war camp affected his ability to read. Continually hungry, he and his fellow inmates were largely preoccupied with making their bi-weekly bread rations last four days. Even books, he recorded, were "no escape" from this overriding preoccupation with food. Explaining this situation in his captivity memoir, *Prisoners of Mainz*, Waugh gave the example of trying to read Émile Zola's *La Débâcle* (1892) while in camp. Coming on a passage where Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte shuts himself in his quarters, passing up a succession of meals brought up by his servants, Waugh found that,

⁶³ H. G. Stoker, *Straws in the Wind* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1925), 196.

⁶⁴ Stoker, *Straws*, 212–13.

because of [my] perpetual hungriness the whole effect of the incident was spoilt. I could not get into the mood necessary to appreciate the effect Zola had aimed at. All I could think was, “Here is this appalling ass Louis Napoleon, surrounded with meats and fish, entrées and omelettes, and the fool does not eat them. If only they had given me a chance!”⁶⁵

In Waugh’s account, most aspects of textual culture in Mainz were coloured by the experience of hunger. One officer “hoarded” grammar books like food and traded them in the camp canteen to prisoners enrolling in language classes. Another sat “dipping ... in turn” into copies of *Lorna Doone*, *The Pickwick Papers*, and Ethel M. Dell’s *Knave of Diamonds*, and when asked why, responded that he was reading them chiefly for their depictions of “big meals and luxury.”⁶⁶

For one large group of prisoners, logistical and supply problems multiplied to turn textual scarcity into outright famine. Although the Camps Library and Prisoners of War Book Scheme’s publicity material referred to the “enforced inactivity” of captive life, this was generally true only of the officers, who were exempt from prison labour under the Geneva Conventions. Private soldiers and junior non-commissioned officers, on the other hand, were forced to work for their captors in an increasingly hazardous array of industrial, agricultural, and military-support roles as the war progressed.⁶⁷ In 1916, over 90% of prisoners held in Germany were in forced labour; by 1918, 16% of all coal miners in the Ruhr Valley would be prisoners of war.⁶⁸ Social class, in other words, was the overriding factor in determining the prisoner of war experience, including the availability of reading spaces and reading material.⁶⁹ Documents from late in the war illustrate the on-going scarcity of books available to working parties and the near-impossibility of adequately supplying this need from Britain. In August 1918, for instance, the librarian at Stendal lager contacted the Danish Red Cross,

⁶⁵ Waugh, *Prisoners*, 53–54.

⁶⁶ Waugh, *Prisoners*, 67–68; 54–55.

⁶⁷ On the escalatory nature of POW forced-labour policies, see Jones, *Violence*, 124; 127–222.

⁶⁸ Alan R. Kramer, “Prisoners in the First World War,” in Sibylle Scheipers, ed., *Prisoners in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.

⁶⁹ Heather Jones, “The Final Logic of Sacrifice? Violence in German Prisoner of War Labor Companies in 1918,” *Historian* 68, no. 4 (2006): 772.

saying that one of the working “commandos attached to [the] camp” had 1200 men and “no books at all.”⁷⁰

The Danish Red Cross forwarded the British authorities a number of similar requests from commandos in Germany and occupied Belgium, in some cases attaching lists of books wanted by individual prisoners. These requests show that even the most basic kinds of reading material—let alone the technical titles the Prisoners of War Book Scheme were trying to distribute—were not getting through to vast swathes of the prisoner population. Inmates attached to one agricultural working party wrote asking for titles by Hall Caine, Ethel Dell, and Charles Henty, as well as Goethe’s *Poems and Ballads*. Prisoners on labour detachment near Loos asked for Ernst Haeckel’s *Evolution of Man*, but also *Treasure Island*, *The Sign of Four*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and books by Nat Gould and Marie Corelli.⁷¹ The brief list of authors and magazines wanted by a working party attached to Engländerkommando XVII at Fort Englos reveals both the reading horizons of one small group of British male “common readers” in 1918, as well as the degree of textual scarcity that accompanied the day-to-day lives of many prisoners:

Ian Hay.

Conan Doyle.

Baroness Orczy.

E. Phillips Oppenheim.

George Elliot. [sic]

Sir Walter Scott.

John Oxenham.

H. Rider Haggard.

Max Pemberton.

Hallwell Sutcliffe.

A. C. Askew

Nash’s Magazine.

London Magazine.

⁷⁰ British Help Committee, Stendal to Danish Red Cross, 24 August 1918, TNA, 114496, FO 383/470.

⁷¹ Netherland Legation, Berlin, “Note Verbale,” 27 September 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

Red Magazine.⁷²

A meeting held to consider these requests concluded that, “There is no likelihood of these books ever reaching ... prisoners” on commando, partly due to the lack of adequate post-handling facilities outside the main camps, but mostly because working parties were “always being shifted about.”⁷³ The Foreign Office’s official response to the Netherland Legation held that it was simply “useless taking any steps in the matter of the despatch of the books in question.”⁷⁴

One prisoner’s diary, kept surreptitiously in 1917, describes what it was like to work on one of these commandos. Private Jack Ashley of the London Regiment was attached to an iron foundry near Gelsenkirchen, doing what he described as “very hard manual work carrying loads which ... nearly double us up,” with working hours that often stretched from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.⁷⁵ Only once does Ashley mention having access to books during this stage of his captivity. Put in solitary confinement for a minor infraction, he was given a blanket with a book hidden inside by a fellow prisoner, only to find that it was “too dark to read it” the next day in his cell.⁷⁶ Despite the logistical problems involved in supplying them, however, not all men on commando detachments were totally without books. Rifleman E. B. Dean wrote to the Camps’ Library from an agricultural working party in Bavaria in April 1918, thanking them for the successful delivery of a book parcel. “The books arrived in good condition, ten in all,” he reported. “My three comrades & myself are out on Detachment, working on the land & living alone with the peasants ... you can imagine how welcome a book is for the evenings when work is finished.”⁷⁷

In the final part of this article, I will examine evidence recorded by the prisoners themselves—in diaries, letters, and memoirs—describing their own engagements with books, magazines, and newspapers during their captivity. What were the *practices* of reading in First

⁷² List of books wanted by prisoners attached to Englaenderlager XVII, Fort Englos, enclosed in Netherland Legation, “Note Verbale,” 27 September 1918, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁷³ “Books for British PP/W in occupied territory” [minutes], 23 October 1918, 115791, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁷⁴ Robert Vansittart to Netherland Legation, Berlin, 25 October 1918, 115791/1250/P, TNA, FO 383/470.

⁷⁵ Jesse Ashley, ed., *War-Diary of Private R. S. (Jack) Ashley 2472 7th London Regiment 1914–1918* (Brighton: Philippa Stone, 1982), 73.

⁷⁶ Ashley, *War-Diary*, 80.

⁷⁷ Rifleman E. B. Dean to K. Symon, 21 April 1918, Kilmeny Symon papers, SLSA, PP 249/6.

World War prisoner of war camps? When prisoners could get access to reading material, which texts did they choose to engage with and why? To what extent did the reality of reading behind the wire accord with the ideals of character development and intellectual transformation through text that underpinned the book charities' activities?

The Practices of Prisoner of War Camp Reading

As the lists of book requests sent to the Danish Red Cross in 1918 indicate, what prisoners seem to have wanted most was popular and “middlebrow” fiction.⁷⁸ In doing so, they followed the patterns of consumption seen elsewhere in the armed forces and, indeed, in the British reading public at large during the conflict. As Jane Potter has observed, both mobilized and civilian audiences during the First World War displayed an almost insatiable appetite for fiction, particularly “romantic tales and detective thrillers.”⁷⁹ The primary attraction of these books was the “distraction” they offered from more immediate concerns. Potter records that even Wilfred Owen was no exception to this rule. At training camp, Owen’s brother discovered him in the midst of reading Maurice Hewlett’s *Rest Harrow* (1910). When asked if he liked it, Owen responded casually, “It distracts me most pleasantly.”⁸⁰ In an article written shortly after the war’s end, James Milne offered some further reflections on the ordinary soldier’s appetite for novels and romance. Generalising somewhat condescendingly, Milne wrote that the average soldier expected simple narratives with happy endings—“he says, in effect, ‘Tell me a story.’”⁸¹ Milne also suggested that most soldiers did not plan their reading in advance—they were happy simply to “take what comes along and like it or ‘lump’ it.”⁸²

Milne’s observation that much military reading was essentially *happenstance* reading is confirmed by many soldiers’ diaries and letters. In prisoner of war camp, however, this reliance on circumstance or chance to provide reading matter became proportionally much

⁷⁸ For a discussion of “middlebrow” in the Edwardian period, see Rosa Maria Bracco, *British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War 1919–1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 10–13.

⁷⁹ Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women’s Literary Responses to the Great War 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7, 54, 89.

⁸⁰ Potter, *Boys in Khaki*, 89.

⁸¹ James Milne, “The Soldier as a Reader,” *Fortnightly Review* (May 1919): 755.

⁸² Milne, “Soldier,” 755.

greater. Accordingly, one of the most striking features of many prisoners' reading experiences in captivity is their random and eclectic nature. Australian prisoner of war George Bell (16th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force) was provided with an 1894 issue of the *Strand* while in hospital in Stettin. Despite its old date, he recorded that he "devoured every word" and that "the diversion had a most pleasing effect."⁸³ In November 1915, another Australian prisoner, Corporal George Kitchin Kerr, noted his comrades' happiness in receiving a new cellmate: a British ordinary seaman who had just been captured by the Turkish navy. He was, Kerr wrote, "someone fresh to talk to and a new face to look at," but what made him especially welcome were the "two magazines" he had with him, which Kerr managed to borrow "before he had been in the room three minutes."⁸⁴ The endemic scarcity of books in camp combined with chronic boredom ultimately led many prisoners of war to sample books they might have avoided in peace time.⁸⁵ Alec Waugh, whose captivity memoir *Prisoners of Mainz* frankly records the "grey depression" he grappled with in camp, refers to "the extreme lengths of subservience" he went through to borrow Gene Stratton Porter's *Freckles* (1904) from another prisoner.⁸⁶ The diary of Lieutenant William Thomas, Cheshire Regiment, describes the course of one day in Paderborn lager, where the only distraction available, a slightly obscure nineteenth-century novel, did nothing to lighten his mood: "Monday [25 January 1915]. No letters ... Walked about. Read Handy Andy by Sam Lover. Irish rot."⁸⁷ The mixture of omnivorousness and discontent that Thomas records mirrors other prisoner responses to the reading matter they encountered in camp. Many described seizing on a book as soon as it became available, devouring it in one sitting, and then quickly returning to a state of mental hunger. Lieutenant A. K. Steel's 1918 prison diary contains a number of instances of this pattern:

29 May 1918 Kinder lent me a book of Galsworthy's plays, "Strife", "Joy" & the "Silver Box". Spent all day reading it.

30 May 1918 Nothing to do today. Very fed up & very hungry.⁸⁸

⁸³ George W. D. Bell, "Diary. Thirteen Months Captivity in Hunland 14/4/17–14/5/18," Mitchell Library, Sydney, ML MSS 893, 1 August 1917.

⁸⁴ Kerr, *Lost Anzacs*, 113.

⁸⁵ Cf. Laugesen, *Boredom*, 111.

⁸⁶ Waugh, *Prisoners*, 142, 50.

⁸⁷ Lieutenant William Thomas, "Diary 1914–15," NLW, GB 0210 WILMAS, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=32125, accessed 27 July 2012.

⁸⁸ Lieutenant A. K. Steel, "1918 Diary," Imperial War Museum, London, IWM 77/163/1.

These descriptions of textual bingeing, accompanied, as in Steel's case, by physical hunger, accord well with Alfred T. Davies suggestion that the prisoners were like "shipwrecked sailors," although in Steel's case books seem to have provided only temporary relief from the symptoms of mental starvation.

Lance-Corporal Ernest H. Jones's captivity notebook contains similarly suggestive associations between books and food. Jones, a member of the Second Royal Fusiliers who had been captured in February 1917, meticulously recorded the date and condition ("good," "bad," "mouldy") of every loaf of bread he received in camp. These obsessive lists appear alongside others recording the receipt of additional relief supplies—including clothing, toiletries, and parcels of books—and show how books were embedded within a wider material culture of objects and consumables circulating within the prison camp. On 10 September 1918, for instance, he noted receiving a parcel of 12 books, although he did not record which charity had dispatched it. At the end of his notebook, there is a list headed "Books read from Feby 16th/18," which indicates the kinds of titles available to a non-commissioned prison-camp reader when not on commando. Among the nineteen titles recorded, thirteen are popular fiction, including Marie Corelli's *Fisken*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Vixen*, and H. G. Wells's *Food of the Gods*. Also on the list, however, are four Shakespeare plays (*Richard II*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry VIII*, and *As You Like It*) and *Don Quixote*, suggesting that one prisoner, at least, shared the Camps' Library's belief that prison camp could be an environment conducive to consuming classic literature.⁸⁹

[Fig. 1. Cpl. E. H. Jones, list of books read in captivity in 1918, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, MS 216/2]

While books could be a way of occupying time in captivity, they could also be a way of controlling *space* in prison camp, although they rarely offered a complete or uncontested solution. One of the most frequently mentioned qualities of prison-camp life recalled by

⁸⁹ Jones, CRL, MS 216/2. The notebook records that Jones was on "Kommando" from 5 November 1917 to 28 February 1918, suggesting that some, at least, of these titles were read while on labour assignment.

memoirists was its sheer, incessant *sociability*. Virtually all living accommodation was shared with other inmates and there were few physical barriers separating them. As Alec Waugh recalled, any form of privacy within barracks was practically impossible: “there was no escape from ... the continual conversation of the ten other members of the room. For not one moment was it possible to be alone.”⁹⁰ For the occupants of Malcolm Hay’s room at Wurzburg, the problems of “conversation” were heightened by national differences. The English-speaking officers found themselves exasperated by a circle of French prisoners, who they felt talked too much while playing cards. As a result of what Hay referred to as this “conspiracy of noise,” the room divided into two camps, each taking issue with the other’s language and behavioural norms.⁹¹

One solution to this problem was to wield a book as a kind of shield against social interaction. Hay recalled that one of his fellow-inmates dealt with the conditions in Wurzburg by ignoring his companions and reading almost continually, “in spite of the continual noise.”⁹² In the claustrophobic social space of the prisoner of war camp, a book could be what Leah Price calls a conveniently “repellent” object for negotiating privacy. An implement for carving out a small, personal space in an unfamiliar social and linguistic environment, it could be a shield against the unwanted attention of others, or a “prompt for interiority” within the self.⁹³ Royal Flying Corps Lieutenant Gerald Featherstone Knight, describing life in Clausthal lager as “one long queue,” also hinted at how prisoners could use books to segment these shared spaces. In the afternoons, he wrote, “it was customary to see the more patient individuals already lining up chairs and settling down to their books, to wait for hot water which was sold at tea time.”⁹⁴ However, “repulsive reading” had its own attendant dangers when wielded within mixed socio-economic environs of the First World War military camp. R. H. Kiernan, a grammar-school-educated private, discovered during basic training that, “if one read at all one was soon noticed.” What Kiernan saw as the harmless pursuit of interiority his working-class hut-mates interpreted as an attempt to inscribe class boundaries through a conspicuous display of educational advantage.⁹⁵ Similar tensions could arise even within

⁹⁰ Waugh, *Prisoners*, 138.

⁹¹ [Malcolm Hay], *Wounded and a Prisoner of War* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1916), 244–48.

⁹² Hay, *Wounded*, 245.

⁹³ Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 47.

⁹⁴ Gerald Featherstone Knight, “*Brother Bosch*”: *An Airman’s Escape from Germany* (London: Heinemann, 1919), 56–7.

⁹⁵ R. H. Kiernan, *Little Brother Goes Soldiering* (London: Constable, 1930), 25.

officers' camps. Hugh Kingsmill Lunn found himself branded a "high-brow" by his officer room-mates for reading three books "in quick succession."⁹⁶ It was not the *contents* of these books that Lunn's companions objected to. (They were the usual random prison-camp assortment of Edwardian middlebrow fiction—Ethel M. Dell's *Bars of Iron*, Gene Stratton Porter's *Girl of the Limberlost*, and Charles Garvice's *Fair Impostor*.) Rather, it was his *practice* of reading silently to avoid social interaction (and, perhaps, not sharing his books afterwards) that appears to have annoyed them. Later, Lunn implies that relations improved in his hut when roommates began to get access to their own books and read passages aloud to each other.⁹⁷

A similar dynamic of reading as social practice seems to have underwritten the most visible mode of book-use in camp—educational reading. Prisoners read amongst themselves both to cement relationships within camp and to claim membership of social collectives *outside* it. H. G. Gilliland remembered camp life as a "Tower of Babel," consisting of a cacophony of language classes, each group studying grammars and primers and reciting among themselves, leading to "a continuous babble going on on all sides."⁹⁸ French foreign legion soldiers might study Arabic together, for instance, as a way of asserting group solidarity, or British and Russian prisoners might tutor each other as a form of cultural exchange. Learning at least some German was a practical necessity for those imprisoned in Germany, although, as Simon Constantine notes, British prisoners seem have been notably reluctant to attend formal classes in the language.⁹⁹ Australian prisoner William Cull suggested that this failure represented a form of resistance, and described how he and his fellow inmates justified it to their captors with the sly comment that "there would be very little use for [German] in the outside world after the war."¹⁰⁰ Outside officer-lagers, scarcities of texts and time meant that social reading practices tended to be more informal, if no less collegial. Jack Ashley recorded that he and other inmates used to crowd around one multi-lingual prisoner of the Royal Scots Regiment, who would read out his own translations of communiques and articles taken from German papers in his hut most evenings.¹⁰¹ These

⁹⁶ Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines*, 83–84.

⁹⁷ Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines*, 87.

⁹⁸ Gilliland, *My German Prisons*, 51.

⁹⁹ Simon Constantine, "War of Words: Bridging the Language Divide in the Great War," *War in History* 18, no. 4 (2011): 520.

¹⁰⁰ William Cull, *Both Sides of the Wire: The Memoir of an Australian Officer Captured During the Great War*, ed. Aaron Pegram (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), 179.

¹⁰¹ Ashley, *War-Diary*, 93.

informal reading groups could sometimes even extend to include prison guards. R. E. Sanders of 14th Battalion, Australian Infantry Force, used to obtain “copies of a certain German Socialist newspaper forbidden to the camp” from “one old German sentry,” in exchange for cigarettes.¹⁰² Networks of this kind hint at how the exchange of texts in prison camps could potentially sustain political or ideological collectives beyond the merely national or linguistic.

Professional reading and study groups also existed in many camps, each of which centred upon a small library of vocational texts exchanged among members. Prisoners joining these associations evidently wanted to reclaim a degree of civilian identity—to regain contact with a pre-war (and implicitly post-war) self. As its publicity material suggests, this was the mode of textual engagement that the Prisoners of War Book Scheme was most anxious to encourage. Yet, some prisoners—particularly those of uncertain class status—could find these groupings alienating. Second Lieutenant H. T. Ringham of 16th Battalion, the Manchester Regiment, had been promoted from the ranks before his capture and was ultimately imprisoned in Mainz alongside Alec Waugh. A draper’s assistant from Stockport, he signed up for French study classes, but found himself unsettled by the professional reading groups, with their assertion of a class identity more secure than his own. “I haven’t a good opinion of myself at all just now,” he confided in his diary:

I’m not good at any particular thing or subject. There’s not much opportunity here of getting in touch with the drapery business. The Bankers, the Architects, Surveyors and Accountants—in fact most of the professions—have a kind of class each week. A sort of preparation for civilian life—but of course one’s not able to do anything like that with drapery and I shall have to go back to that.¹⁰³

The social reading and study practices of the officers’ lager evidently reminded Ringham of school, and his own relative lack of educational attainments compared with some of his companions. Instead, Ringham’s diary points towards another mode of textual engagement

¹⁰² R. E. Sanders, “Radio Scripts,” AWM, 2 DLR 417, 43.

¹⁰³ Second Lieutenant H. T. Ringham, “Diary,” MRA, MR4/3/2/42, 28 June 1918.

that prisoners employed to stave off boredom—undirected reading as a form of simple escapism.¹⁰⁴ The following day's description is typical:

Very hot again today—it takes all the energy out of one. Have read “Forest Lovers” by Hewlett and “Stella Fregelius” by Haggard. I hear the Germans are going to stop supplying us with vegetables which will be a great blow to us ... I have no inclination for study or anything. I hope I get some letters next week.¹⁰⁵

Books were clearly an important component for Ringham in structuring his time in camp. Yet his consumption of them was inseparable from the wider set of bodily concerns also recorded in his diary—the insomnia caused by the nightly disturbances endemic in barracks life, chronic diarrhoea, and his perpetual hunger and physical weakness.¹⁰⁶ As we have already seen in Waugh's account of reading Zola in Mainz, Ringham's diary shows that the *practice* of reading was often inextricably bound up with the *conditions* of material scarcity under which books were available in camp. While the charities supplying books may have wanted to rescue prisoners' minds from “embitterment and despair” with study and “useful” reading, the reality of captive life placed clear limitations on these ideals.¹⁰⁷ As Ringham's diary shows, even in officers' lagers the constants of camp life—sickness, exhaustion, hunger, and depression—often militated against serious study. Dipping into an old Rider Haggard novel in between bouts of anxiety about food and illness might be all that a prisoner-of-war-camp reader was capable of on a given day.

Despite the seeming passivity involved in “escapist reading,” however, the act of reading *itself*—in English—in prison camp, may have had a wider set of resonances for British prisoners of war. As S. P. MacKenzie has recently noted, escape was a preoccupation—even an ethical responsibility—for many First World War British prisoners,

¹⁰⁴ On military reading and “escapism,” see Amanda Laugesen, “Australian Soldiers and the World of Print During the Great War,” in Hammond and Towheed, eds., *Publishing*, 99–100.

¹⁰⁵ Ringham, “Diary,” MRA, MR4/3/2/42, 7 July 1918.

¹⁰⁶ For the importance of viewing the “reading experience” within the wider context of a reader's day-to-day activities and concerns, see Catherine Feely, “From Dialectics to Dancing: Reading, Writing and the Experience of Everyday Life in the Diaries of Frank P. Forster,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 69 (2010): 105.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. T. W. Koch, *Books in Camp, Trench and Hospital* (London: J. M. Dent, 1917), 18.

although very few had the opportunity to attempt it.¹⁰⁸ Escapist *reading*, on the other hand, allowed prisoners to enter a world of the imagination governed by the norms and ideals of their own literary cultures. Reading in one's native language could, in other words, be a form of practical nationalism. If the covers of books provided individual readers with a means of arrogating personal space, the libraries of English books in prison camps provided their patrons with a way of *collectively* withdrawing from the foreign geographical spaces surrounding them. Prison libraries—and in particular the English middlebrow fiction that made up the majority of their stock—could be cultural and linguistic bubbles within which prisoners could take refuge and negate their captive status. Escapist reading could also sometimes provide opportunities for minor, though no doubt emotionally satisfying, acts of resistance against captivity. Alec Waugh, for example, seems to have deliberately toyed with the camp censors at Mainz in his choice of books from the outside world. He requested Berta Ruck's *Khaki and Kisses*, a novel that was, as Jane Potter notes, “a didactic work and a strong piece of propaganda for the war effort.”¹⁰⁹ When this was confiscated, he attempted to bring into camp a copy of Ford Madox Ford's *On Heaven*. Trying to hide the collection's patriotic and anti-German sentiment behind the literary reputation of its author, he argued with the camp censor that the book was in no way “dangerous.” Although he was ultimately also unable to claim this book back from the camp authorities, Waugh's memoir suggests that the “valiant efforts” he made to save it provided their own emotional reward.¹¹⁰

Conclusion: The Impacts of Prison Camp Reading

In his recent account of British charities during the First World War, business historian Peter Grant has drawn attention to what he calls the “myth” of charitable ineffectiveness during the war. This “myth,” Grant argues, rests on the assumption that charities engaged in little more than “sock-knitting,” and survives because few historians have systematically examined the archives of charities to gauge the full extent of their activities. As a result, he writes, the huge volume of voluntary-sector activity in Britain between 1914 and 1918—and its considerable

¹⁰⁸ See S. P. MacKenzie, “The Ethics of Escape: British Officer POWs in the First World War,” *War in History* 15, no. 1 (2008): 1–16.

¹⁰⁹ Potter, *Boys in Khaki*, 111.

¹¹⁰ Waugh, *Prisoners of Mainz*, 111–12.

impact upon the course of the war—have been generally ignored.¹¹¹ The activities of the Camps' Library and Prisoners of War Book Scheme clearly fit within this framework. Neither organization has received a full-scale treatment in recent academic writing. Those scholars who have discussed them, meanwhile, have drawn upon the same small set of secondary works—particularly T. W. Koch's *Books in Camp, Trench and Hospital*—rather than archival sources in writing their accounts.¹¹²

Archival remains of these organizations, however, *do* exist, although they have been so far barely touched upon as sources of evidence for the history of reading. With them, it is possible to reconstruct the scope of charitable book-provision activities for prisoners of war and the challenges encountered in carrying them out. When combined with the scattered, though suggestive, evidence contained in diaries and prison-camp memoirs, a picture emerges of the centrality of books and reading to those on *both* sides of the exchange. For prisoners of war, books represented a line of continuity with their pre-war selves.¹¹³ Reading could bring them back in contact with interrupted careers or educations, or rekindle memories of home. Books could also be tokens of social intercourse, their exchange helping to smooth the often fraught relationships among inmates in the claustrophobic confines of the camp. For those organizing the dispatch of book parcels, wartime mobilization provided the opportunity to put into practice sincerely held beliefs about the improving power of literature, while combatting what they saw as the mental—and moral—depredations of “enforced leisure.”

At the same time, however, it is important not overstate the achievements of the Camps' Library and Prisoners of War Book Scheme. The schemes' geographical coverage could be extremely spotty and national rivalries (as well as personal pride) could interfere with attempts to improve their operations. Both organizations, meanwhile, were clearly unprepared for the effect that total war would have in mobilizing prisoners of war into a labour force for their captors. The “enforced leisure” the schemes believed they were combatting was, for the majority of British captives, nothing of the sort, making the relief of non-commissioned prisoners of war intensely problematic. Despite all of these difficulties, however, there is evidence that books supplied by charities could provide small moments of

¹¹¹ Grant, “Mobilizing Charity,” 1:52–54.

¹¹² See, e.g., Laugesen, *Boredom*, 15–16, 108–9; Jean Langdon-Ford, “Prisoners of War as Library Users,” *Canadian Military History* 6, no. 1 (1997): 95–96; Yarnall, *Barbed Wire*, 118.

¹¹³ Cf. Annette Becker, “Art, Material Life and Disaster: Civilian and Military Prisoners of War,” in Nicholas J. Saunders, ed., *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2004), 28–30.

comfort—or even lasting transformation—for prisoners of war. Many prisoners wrote asking to keep the books they had been sent by the Prisoners of War Book Scheme rather than returning them after the war, as Scheme notices requested.¹¹⁴ Davies recalled that he found these requests “impossible to refuse,” believing they were in themselves “the very highest tributes to the success of our efforts to meet their wants.”¹¹⁵ Some of these books remained in ex-prisoners’ families, eventually becoming heirlooms and material tokens of the prisoner-of-war experience.¹¹⁶

Soldiers arriving home from camps after hostilities ceased, meanwhile, sometimes found themselves permanently changed by prison reading experiences. Books encountered in captivity *could* be transformative objects—if not always in quite the ways envisaged by wartime book charities. Corporal George Kitchin Kerr, who became one of only a handful of Australian Imperial Force soldiers captured at Gallipoli to survive the war, used his period in captivity to learn French. After his release, he stayed for a time with former POW-colleagues in Paris. When asked where he had learned to speak French so fluently, people assumed he was joking when he replied, “Turkey.” Kerr evidently found that he could transfer the “repulsive reading” skills developed as a prison reader to his home life in Australia. His children remembered an often emotionally and physically distant figure, who had “a habit of retreating to a bungalow in the backyard ... where he would eat his evening meal undisturbed, in the company of a book.”¹¹⁷ When interviewed towards the end of his life, Bill Easton, one of Britain’s last-surviving First World War prisoners of war, remembered behaving similarly when he was finally repatriated. Describing the transition from work camp in Friedrichsfeld to home-life in post-war Kings Lynn, he said that one of the more difficult aspects of his homecoming was dealing with the constant social attention. Quickly tiring of being congratulated on the street by townsfolk for surviving his ordeal, or button-holed by curious neighbours, he took to spending more and more time indoors. “In the end ... I didn’t

¹¹⁴ See notice, “Directions as to the Return of Books on the Break-Up of Internment Camps,” Alfred T. Davies papers, NLW, GB 0210 ALFTDAVIES.

¹¹⁵ Davies, “Light through Prison Bars,” NLW, GB 0210 ALFTDAVIES, 119.

¹¹⁶ See, for instance, a copy of *A Text Book of Agricultural Zoology* sent to Lieutenant E. M. Cope at Schweidnitz in 1918, images of which were supplied by Cope’s family to the BBC Northern Ireland “Your Place and Mine” website in 2005:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/yourplaceandmine/topics/war/A754445_pics.shtml, accessed 31 July 2012.

¹¹⁷ Kerr, *Lost Anzacs*, 228; 247–48.

go out too much, I was sort of a recluse,” he recalled. “In those days I used to do a lot of reading, and that’s what I did. But it was a wonderful feeling to be home.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Richard van Emden, *Prisoners of the Kaiser: The Last POWs of the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2000), 206.