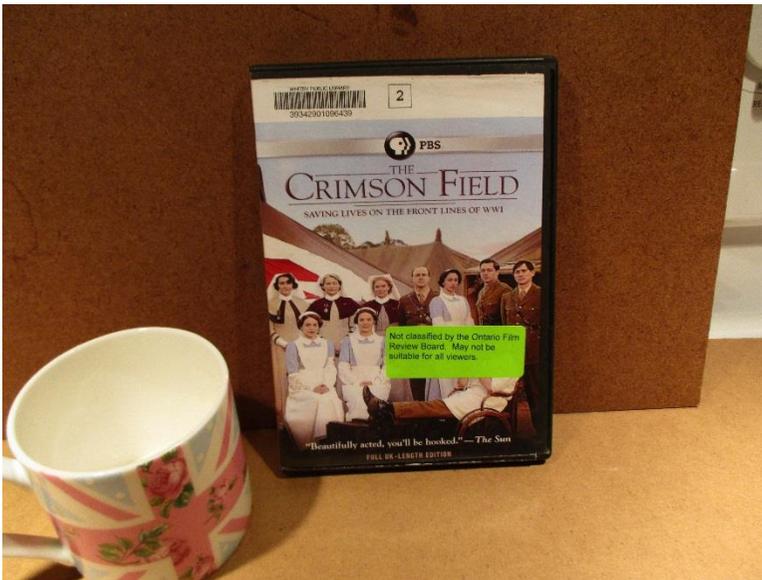


The Great War: Remember its History, Enjoy its stories . . .

By Rod Fraser



WITH THE 100TH anniversary of the Armistice which ended World War One coming up on November 11, 2018, I recently watched a couple of worthwhile films on those interesting years, both of which are BBC dramas. They capture the rich details of those eventful times.

In this article, I intend to review the above films—entitled *The Crimson Field* and *The Wipers*

Times. In my next book review, I plan to write about *Regeneration*, the first (and best) of three interesting novels on the Great War, written by a woman by the name of Pat Barker. This book was later made into a film of the same name in 1997.

Then I will move on to review other books and films on the Great War, hoping my choices will be useful to those interested in remembering the war in an intelligent and thoughtful way.

I was able to find these two videos at my local library, so perhaps your library has copies as well. If not, you might ask about the inter-library loan program. If that doesn't work, buy them on Amazon. You can acquire them used for \$25 in total (plus delivery). Then pass them along to your nephews, nieces, children and grandchildren. Often DVDs are a more accessible way for young people to learn history. And Christmas is right around the corner.

MY INTEREST IN WWI is more than casual. Like Pat Barker, who was born in 1943, I also had a grandfather, William George Garfield Armstrong, who was a veteran of the Great War. He enlisted as a Private in the 7th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles in early 1915 at the age of 33, survived the war and returned home in mid-1919.

Although married with two children, William was

separated from his wife and estranged from his children and family prior to the war. Faced with an opportunity to participate in the biggest adventure of his life, he felt the army and France was the spot for him. He had no other place to go.

I will have more to say about Grandpa in a future article, but at this point, I wanted to introduce him, to show my familial and personal interest in this great conflict.

THE CRIMSON FIELD is a story of a British army field hospital somewhere in France during WWI. It is close to the sea, but the location is unimportant to the story.

It consists of a community fashioned from a number of large tents, which contain sick wards for wounded soldiers, accommodation for the staff, and a number of other large tents for dining, surgical facilities and so on. I recall one or two smaller wooden buildings, but these had no special significance.

The story opens with three young volunteer nurses arriving from England in 1915 (Kitty, Flora and Rosalie) to help with the never-ending work of caring for the wounded. The older, more experienced nurses look on these new arrivals with some derision. In their view, they need women with proper

nursing experience.

Initially the volunteer nurses are given menial tasks to complete, removed from patient care, but as the story develops and their skills improve, they become a valued part of the hospital staff. Unlike the television series MASH, which some of my older readers will remember, this is a more serious drama, free of the salacious and bawdy humour of that earlier American television series. I suspect this might reflect the cultural norms of these two very different wars and their respective times.

The Crimson Field is extremely well done. Amid the backdrop of tending to the seriously and minimally wounded at the hospital, each episode focuses on a particular story that reveals what it might have been like to be alive and wounded at that particular time. I recall in one of the episodes, a wounded soldier is suspected of a self-inflicted wound. He shot himself in the hand, hoping it would be seen as a real wound which would take him home to England.

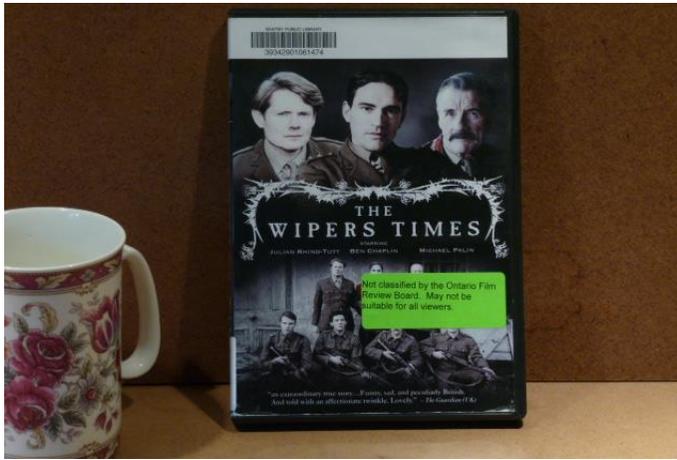
As the story develops, it is clear this man was not cut out to be a soldier and enlisted in the army, only when his girlfriend gave him a 'white feather'—this being a way of shaming men who were 'shirking their duty', a way of pressuring them to join the army. Young women were particularly effective with this enlistment technique.

It seems the penalty for a self-inflicted wound was—more often than not—death. So the story revolves around this young man, who everyone shuns at the hospital out of embarrassment and contempt. He attempts to come to grips with the fact that once his wound is healed, he will be court marshalled and then possibly shot. It seems the social isolation is even a more bitter punishment than his upcoming death.

Another episode deals with an officer who has lost both his legs. His wife comes to visit him at the hospital and is devastated to find the extent of his disability. The story involves this couple coming to grips with the changes that his wounds will mean to their lives.

Throughout this television series, we learn much about the lives of the volunteer nurses, why they came to France and their earlier years in England. Each has a story to tell and fond hopes for the future. And of course, one of the young nurses falls in love with a handsome Scottish surgeon. All in all, it is a wonderful series of six episodes and I highly recommend it. For some reason, the BBC did not opt for a second season. Mores the pity.

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A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT and fascinating film is a BBC video called *The Wipers Times*. This is a true story and a rather strange one at that. The main character is a mining engineer, Frederick Roberts, who is a Captain in the British Army at the time *The Wipers Times* is established.

The story opens in early 1916, with Capt. Roberts and the 12th Battalion, *Sherwood Foresters*, in the front line at Ypres, Belgium. One of his sergeants, a man named Harris, comes upon a printing press in an abandoned building. Since the sergeant was a printer in civilian life, and the battalion is on the defensive, he discusses his find with Capt. Roberts.

A short explanation might be useful at this point. In army life, there is often a lot of idle time. If there are no plans for an offensive and the enemy is similarly quiet, there is often a fair amount of quiet

and boredom. Morale can become a problem.

For a variety of reasons, including the issue noted above, Roberts encourages Harris to get the printing press operational. Although Roberts has no experience in journalism or writing, he puts together an editorial team with another officer, Lieutenant John Hesketh, with the view to printing a magazine, "hopefully weekly, but as often as possible", to entertain the troops in the Ypres salient during their down time.

The paper is initially called *The Wipers Times*, this being the term used by Belgians (and many British soldiers) to pronounce Ypres, the site of much fighting in WWI. One of the major contributors, Gilbert Frankau, was an artillery officer and later a prominent British novelist.

Many other contributors came from Roberts' own division (or elsewhere in the British Expeditionary Force). Some chose to write their articles or poems anonymously. One such 'Wag' humourously signed his poems, Mr. R. Tillery.

The material published by the paper was irreverent, cheeky and often lampooned the brass. Although there was some pushback from senior officers, a General Mitford was supportive and his opinion prevailed. He argued, "there was only one thing worse than keeping the magazine operating, and that was closing it down."

The Wipers Times continued for the duration of the war, often operating under different names as Roberts and his company moved with the ebb and flow of battle. It was very popular with the soldiers.

Roberts was at Ypres and the Somme (two times for each) and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry at the Battle of the Somme. At the end of the war, he quipped that rather than being "an army of occupation, we are to become an army of no occupation."

He was a very witty individual. To give you some idea of his writing, he wrote a piece called, "Do You Suffer from Optimism?"

It goes something like this. A soldier is being examined by a doctor because he was suffering from excessive optimism. The soldier believes the war is going well. He thinks the top brass know what they're doing. He certainly expects the war will be over by Christmas.

The doctor starts writing on his pad and the soldier asks if he is writing a prescription. "Yes," the doctor replies, "this remedy has always worked. I'm sending you to the front lines."

THE FILM OPENS (and closes) with Roberts applying for a job in journalism at the end of the war. He is being interviewed by a seasoned editor at a London

newspaper who wonders if Roberts' writing and editorial experience is relevant to a job as a newspaperman. He finds the writing in *The Wipers Times* promising, but unserious and amateurish.

He does allow that Roberts has some impressive references from Gilbert Frankau and R.C. Sherriff, both well-known British writers. Roberts replies, "Yes, I met them on 10th Avenue when we worked on *The Wipers Times*."

"Oh," said the editor, suddenly interested. "In New York?" Roberts looked at him carefully and replied, "No. It was the name of a trench in Flanders."

Changing the subject quickly, the editor said pompously, "it sometimes gets to be 'Merry Hell' in here when it comes to deadlines". Roberts thinks for a minute, then replies that he has experienced 'Merry Hell' as well. The editor nods, "well of course you have. I wasn't in the war, you know. Poor vision."

Roberts replies, "Well, that's too bad. You missed quite a show."

"Yes, it must have been hell."

Roberts continues with his thought, "Yes, well we had some bad times. But we had some good times too."

"I'm sure," said the editor.

At the conclusion of the interview, the editor tells Roberts he likes him and would like to start him off in the crossword department. "Writing crosswords?" Roberts asks. "No," says the editor, "assisting with the crosswords." Roberts slowly picks up the copies of *The Wipers Times* that he had shown the editor, puts them in his briefcase silently and walks out of the office. The editor asks loudly as Roberts exits the main office, "you haven't said if you want the job?"

ROBERTS SPENT THE rest of his life in Canada working as a mining engineer and died in 1964. He attempted to join the British Army during the Second World War, but was rejected because of his age.

Lieutenant John Hesketh (mentioned earlier as a member of the editorial team of the *Wipers Times*) moved to Argentina and worked as a railroad engineer and then later a hotel keeper. He died in 1966. The film closes with the notation that neither of their obituaries were published in the London Times.

I watched this film twice and highly recommend it. It is a great dramatization and an interesting look at the war and the kind of men that fought it.

I should point out that many of the above quotations attributed to the actors in the film are approximations of what was said. I didn't take the

time to ensure the quotations were exact. But still, it gives you a good idea of the dialogue in the film. I hope you take the time to watch it.

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