When Death Gave Way to Glory: Philip Gibbs, RMS Titanic and the Western Front

Introduction

In late July 1914 the English journalist Philip Gibbs disembarked from a ferry in Calais and began the journey to Paris. Though he was in many respects an unlikely rebel, Gibbs joined 200 of his professional colleagues who in defiance of the British War Office were making their way to the Continent to report on the deteriorating political situation. The journalists who saw in the War Office's recent release of *Regulations for Press Correspondents Accompanying a Force in the Field* as encouragement to wait for official accreditation passed the time exercising their horses in Hyde Park. They were still there when the German Army stormed into Belgium on 4 August 1914. What followed for Gibbs, however, was almost four years on the Western Front, first as a freelance journalist and then later as one of the five accredited British war correspondents. From the very beginning of the conflict, the British Army did everything in its power to obstruct the Press. Backed by the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), a severe and often petty censorship regime, and a network of relationships between the government and the Press Barons, they drew the correspondents into a complex web of propaganda based on the control of the news at its source. Beyond even the official limitations imposed on them, the correspondents contrived to censor themselves, traduced as they were 'by a sense of duty, patriotism, and front line bonding'.[1] They were an elite group,

[1] P.L Moorcraft & P.M Taylor, *Shooting the messenger: The political impact of war reporting*. (Washington, DC., 2008), p. 43

capable of vivid prose, but they were not able or willing to question an army with whom they came to identify 'absolutely'.[2]

The British war correspondents have attracted considerable criticism in the years since 1918, some of it deserved, some of it less so. Little of it, however, shows any empathy for the stress and pressures they confronted on a daily basis, often for months on end. 'Psychologically numbed by the vast landscapes of horror caused by total war', a reality that Gibbs himself acknowledged in 1920, these five civilians in uniform, subject now to both the Army and their employers, inevitably struggled to report on 60 Divisions spread along a front of anywhere between 20 and 120 miles.[3] It is disingenuous for critics such as Philip Knightley to argue that more deliberate lies were told between 1914 and 1918 than in any other period of history, and that a 'large share of the blame for this must rest with the British war correspondents'.[4] Far less polemic and much closer to the truth is Martin Farrar's observation that their work gave 'legitimacy to what was actually a policy of suppression' and in doing so they 'conformed to the great conspiracy, the deliberate lies and the suppression of the truth'.[5] Gibbs' standing in the eyes of officialdom and the wider public in 1918 was, however, a very different matter. By then he was able to work and travel as a freelance journalist and author, and was respected enough in 1921 to be invited to conduct the first interview with a pope. The official imprimatur had come the previous year when he received a knighthood, a recognition characterized by fellow war correspondent Hamilton Fyfe as a bribe.[6]

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[2] P. Taylor, 'The Press, Propaganda and Passchendaele 1917', in S. Badsey (ed.), *The British Army in Battle and Its Image 1914–1918* (New York, 2009), pp. 163–183; P. Gibbs, *Adventure in Journalism* (London, 1923), p. 248.

[3] Moorcraft & Taylor, *Shooting the messenger*, p. 43; P. Gibbs, *Realities of War* (London, 1936), p. 70.

[4] P. Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London, 1989), p. 81.

[5] M. Farrar, *News from the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front* (Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire, 1998), p. 73.

[6] H. Fyfe, *My seven selves* (London, 1935); M. Kerby, 'A shared rhetoric: the Western Front in 1914/15 as reported by Henry Gullett and Philip Gibbs', *Media, War and Conflict*, 10: 2 (2017), 208-21.

As Gibbs boarded the train for Paris, he gave every indication to a casual observer that he was painfully ill-suited for the task ahead. The amateurism of the reports that appeared in the British press during the first months of the war, his included, would hardly have surprised anyone who shared a carriage with this frail and gentle man in late thirties, clad in a lounge suit, carrying a walking stick, and as was his habit, engaging his fellow travellers in conversations which would later end up in his articles. For though he had worked as a war correspondent in the Balkans in 1912, Gibbs had no knowledge of the military on which to draw; indeed, the correspondents' inexperience was regularly exposed even after accreditation by staff officers who amused themselves by intentionally passing them false information. During a tour of the First Army in 1916, Brigadier-General Charteris, who later as head of military intelligence became the correspondents' commanding officer, described them as 'amazingly ignorant'.[7]

As he travelled to Paris, was unaware of just how outmoded his approach to journalism would become. During the rush to gain official accreditation over the previous few days, Gibbs observed at the War Office a procession of 'literary adventurers…lost somewhere between one war and another [with] claims of ancient service on the battlefields of Europe when the smell of blood is scented from afar; and scores of new men of sporting instincts and jaunty confidence eager to be in the middle of things'.[8] These men were the dying echoes of the golden age of the foreign correspondent, whose dispatches prior to the war, 'though they hinted at travels through "dangerous" and "exotic" landscapes …were frequently scripted

[7] J. Charteris, *At GHQ* (London, 1931), p. 79.
[8] P. Gibbs, *The Soul of the War* (London, 1915), p. 5.

from a position of moral and physical distance'.[9] This age of the journalist as spectator rather than observer was dominated by men such as William Howard Russell of *The Times*, George Warrington Steevens of the *Daily Mail*, Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling. Gibbs had honed his craft in this world, and acknowledged that 'I have been an onlooker of life. Since I was a very young man I have been watching, listening, recording, among many people in many scenes, but never as one of the actors in its drama'.[10] He was therefore both a 'voyeur and voyager … whose writings were the product of embodied proximity and disembodied detachment'.[11] This detachment was impossible to maintain during a world conflict that drew on the entire resources of the nation, during which newspapers made extensive use of the telegraph to write reports from London, all the while leaving the correspondents at the mercy of their new employer, the British Army.

As the position of foreign correspondent was now rendered obsolete, it is hardly surprising that the tools they had once used led to a 'collision between events and the language available – or thought appropriate – to describe them'.[12] This language was framed by a 'set of abstractions that expressed traditional martial and patriotic values'. The words, the images, and the conventions employed by the correspondents proved woefully inadequate when called upon to describe a 'valueless, formless experience' such as trench warfare.[13] By continuing to operate within this 'prescribed set of possibilities, embedded in a system of conventions and limitations' even when it was demonstrably misleading, the correspondents

[9] M. Farish, 'Modern Witnesses: Foreign Correspondents, Geopolitical Vision, and the First World War', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 26:3 (2001), pp. 273-87.
[10] P. Gibbs, *Life's Adventure* (London, 1957), p. 9.
[11] Farish, 'Modern Witnesses', p. 276.
[12] P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 2000), p. 169.
[13] S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1991), p. 108.

gave the war an undeserved 'meaning, dignity, order, greatness'.[14] The 'graphic, theatrical, action and actor focused dispatches' the correspondents wrote hid the dreadful reality that all too often, it was futile, undignified, disordered and petty.[15]

Given how enthusiastically Gibbs continued to employ pre-war literary conventions, readers would have found little to surprise them once his war reports began to appear in the *Daily Chronicle*. He had well and truly established a template two years before when writing *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, one of the most influential print reports of the sinking.[16] In the course of its 40 pages Gibbs established most of the mythological conventions of the tragedy. This article will analyse how one of the most famous and widely read British war correspondents in history adopted a rhetoric grounded in pre-war attitudes and conventions and how this shaped how the war was communicated to readers in Britain, the United States and across the Empire. It will explore four major themes that dominated Gibbs' writing: danger reveals and invigorates a national spirit, glory is always greater than tragedy, and that there is honour in facing danger like a gentleman and if need be, dying like a Briton. This provides a valuable insight into the language used by the war correspondents, how it reflected peace time pre-occupations, and the impact that this had on how the war was understood, both at the time and later.

The Titanic Mythology

On April 14-15, 1912 the RMS Titanic collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Two hours and 40 minutes later it sank with the loss of 1501 lives, more than two thirds of its passengers and crew. From almost that moment, it has inspired a staggering array of cultural

[14] J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Ma., 1990), p. 6; Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 108.
[15] Farish, 'Modern Witnesses', p. 276. Kerby, 'A shared rhetoric'.
[16] P. Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic* (London, 1912).

artefacts, ranging from the initial newspaper reports, to books, plays, films, songs, and works of art. For most people today their history of the Titanic is firmly grounded in film.[17] *Saved from the Titanic* (USA, 1912), *Titanic* (movie, 1953), *A Night to Remember* (movie, 1958), *Raise the Titanic* (movie, 1980), and *Titanic* (movie, 1997) have played a central role in encasing the story in layers of cultural understanding. As Geoffrey Marcus laments, the 'luxuriant growth' of myth threatens to 'submerge the true facts of the affair altogether'; indeed, there are now two *Titanics* – the *Titanic* of history and the *Titanic* of literature and film - and it is the latter that has exerted the most enduring influence on the collective memory.[18]

The movies are, however, the product of earlier imaginings, whatever the claims to veracity made by their creators. Long before James Cameron's blockbuster in 1997, the mythological conventions of the *Titanic* were already well entrenched – the luxury of a ship believed to be unsinkable, insufficient lifeboats, women and children first, the band playing *Nearer, my God, to Thee*, the failure of a nearby ship, the SS *Californian*, to respond to distress signals, and the heroism of the doomed passengers. Gibbs played a central role in establishing this imagining of the sinking. *The Deathless Story of the Titanic* is hardly a masterpiece of investigative journalism. Gibbs wrote it in London, where the first edition was released just two weeks after the sinking. The survivors only arrived in New York on 18 April 1912 so Gibbs must have based his account on press or telegraph reports, though this hardly impacted sales. Published by *Lloyd's Weekly News*, which had a circulation of close to one and a half million, it ran to three editions.

Danger reveals and invigorates a national spirit

[17] R. Howells, *The Myth of the Titanic* (New York, 1999).
[18] G. Marcus, *The Maiden Voyage: A Complete and Documented Account of the Titanic Disaster* (London, 1969), p. 7.

The fact that Gibbs' language choices were equally relevant to peace time correspondence and trench warfare highlights the extent to which Victorian society possessed a 'marked appetite … for conquest, combat and heroism'.[19] It was a predilection that the Edwardians subsequently adopted with an uncritical enthusiasm.[20] In this construct, war was considered inevitable, and indeed, desirable. Without it, as Lord Roberts, British military hero and commander in chief until 1905 warned, 'a nation is at risk of running to seed'.[21] James Mangan went even further, and argued that war was worshipped as a 'sacred path into moral purity, ascendancy and domination'.[22] It would act, many believed, as a corrective to the waning of the 'extraordinary racial energy that had carried imperial Britain to pre-eminence in the nineteenth century'.[23]

To many of Gibbs' contemporaries, there was a plethora of evidence to support their fears of a racial decay: the indifferent performance of the British Army during the Boer War, the Peers versus People constitutional confrontation of 1909-11, urban poverty, the suffragette movement, industrial unrest, a flagging industrial sector, a falling birth rate, and the most intractable of them all, potential civil war in Ireland. Gibbs was not alone in being concerned at the obvious contrast between an increasingly plutocratic and industrialized England and an idealised view of the past dominated by a vision of a lost, rural England with a simplicity and decency that was somehow more authentic. As Samuel Hynes observes, war [and presumably in Gibbs' view, disasters at sea] with its discomfort, its male asceticism and its sacrifice was

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[19] J. Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2005).
[20] A. Summers, 'Militarism in Britain before the Great War', *History Workshop Journal* 2 (1976), 107.
[21] H. Reynolds, 'Are Nations Really Made in War?', in M. Lake, H. Reynolds, & J. Damousi (eds.), *What's Wrong with ANZAC?" The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney, 2010), p. 34.
[22] J. Mangan, 'Duty unto Death: English Masculinity and Militarism in the Age of the New Imperialism', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27 (1-2), (2010), 127.
[23] R. Soloway, 'Counting the Degenerates: The Statistics of Race Deterioration in Edwardian England', *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1982): 137.

considered the physical and spiritual opposite of Edwardian luxury.[24] War and disaster promised to cleanse and purify an England that had lost its way.

Gibbs made his views on this decay clear when he criticized the 'new man' because words such as 'Empire, Patriotism, Duty, Honour, Glory, and God', those touchstones of chivalry, did not give him 'that thrill in his bosom and the lump in his throat experienced by his father when these words were uttered'.[25] Gibbs was reassured, therefore, to see revealed in the courage of the doomed passengers on the *Titanic* the 'old qualities of nobility, which for a time seemed sleeping'.[26] It was an 'affirmation of faith' that had 'gained and held victory over death itself'. Gibbs believed that when danger came, as it did in April 1912, the 'great virtues of the soul … leapt forth, as though to the call of God, like a sunburst in the storm of death'.[27]

The 'menace of a great bloody war' in 1914 also showed that 'death and the judgement are very near, and that all the rottenness of [man's] being will be tested in the furnace of a spiritual agony'.[28] Ten years later Gibbs still believed that it was 'as though the nation had been shaken by a great wind in which the voice of God was heard'. For the nation's sacrifice had shown a 'nobility of purpose' deeply rooted in its past.[29] It was this heritage that sustained the nation and its people during times of trial: 'for the 'love of the Old Country was deep down in the roots of their hearts … the smell of the fields and the barns, the friendship of familiar trees, the heritage that was in their blood from old yeoman ancestry, touched them with the spirit of England, and it was because of that they fought' (Gibbs, 1936: 81).

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[24] Hynes, *A War Imagined*.
[25] P. Gibbs, *The New Man – A Portrait Study of the Latest Type* (London, 1913), p. 6.
[26] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 2.
[27] Ibid, p. 1.
[28] Gibbs, *Soul of the War*, p. 1.
[29] P. Gibbs, *Ten Years After* (London, 1924), pp. 18–20.

Greater than the tragedy is the glory

If, as Paul Heyer would have us believe, the sinking of the Titanic was the twentieth century's first collective nightmare, then the Great War was undoubtedly the second.[30] In any case, Gibbs reported on them as though they were different parts of a single nightmare, both marked by tragedy but both redeemed by courage. In the weeks after the loss of the *Titanic*, Gibbs felt 'haunted by the death ship', for he could still 'hear the great chorus of human agony which rose into the silence of that night of doom'. Though the sinking stood 'alone in its awfulness, supreme in its tragedy', he offered his readers the consolation that 'greater than the tragedy is the glory'. [31] Richard Howells believes that this claim is the single most significant sentence ever written about the *Titanic*.[32] For Gibbs, it was at the core of a remarkably resilient belief system that was to find its fullest expression in his war correspondence:

> The glory Gibbs described, which revealed itself in the nobility of the doomed passengers, was not merely a means of assuaging the grief of the bereaved. It was an affirmation of faith which he believed was a victory over death itself. Even when confronted by the ineptitude on the Somme in 1916 or the agony of Flanders in late 1917, Gibbs saw the glory of courage, patriotism and self-sacrifice as an effective counterweight to the tragedy of wholesale death.[33]

Gibbs' newspaper articles during the Battle of the Somme, which were almost immediately reproduced in book form, are strikingly similar to his description of the *Titanic's* final moments. In a report written on 5 July 1916, Gibbs argued that an attack launched on the left

[30] P. Heyer, *Titanic Legacy: Disaster as Media Event and Myth* (London, 1995).
[31] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 1.
[32] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic*, p. 116.
[33] M. Kerby, *Sir Philip Gibbs and English journalism in war and peace* (London, 2016).

of the British line was 'one of the greatest revelations of human courage ever seen in history'.[34] He acknowledges that it was, however, a tragedy, for the 'loss of many brave men makes it tragic'. Yet as he had done in 1912, he offers consolation to the bereaved, for the mass martyrdom was 'brightened by the shining valour of all these splendid soldiers, to whom death, in those great hours, had no kind of terror'. Courage and sacrifice did not necessarily need to be legitimised by tangible results, for Gibbs encouraged his readers to 'not think, just now, of the ugliness of battle, but rather of the beauty of these men of ours, who were forgetful of self and faced the cruel fire with a high and noble courage'. Like the Titanic's passengers, all were ennobled in death; they 'were all heroes … and when many of them stood in the very presence of death, it was to the cry of no surrender'. That they then 'went forward again to meet their fate' was 'tragic as well as wonderful'.[35] Despite offering himself as an observer and witness, it is worth remembering that the perception that the correspondents "were in the thick of things" has been rightly derided by writers such as John Williams as 'another variety of Great War falsehood, since the danger faced by closeted pressmen on the Western Front was such that no French of British-empire correspondent was lost there to enemy action in the war'.[36] At best, Gibbs would have seen this action through a telescope or binoculars. Yet he was certain that as was the case with those who followed the call for women and children first, they 'advanced upon the enemy with a spirit of marvellous self-sacrifice, beyond the ordinary courage of men'.[37] Glory had indeed triumphed over tragedy. This was far from being a personal quirk. As was evident when word of the death of Scott of the Antarctic reached Britain in February 1913, exemplary conduct, or the perception

[34] P. Gibbs, *The Battle of the Somme* (London, 1916), p. 63.

[35] Gibbs *Battle of the Somme*, p. 60.
[36] J. Williams, *Anzacs, the Media and the Great War* (Sydney, 1993), p. 3.
[37] Gibbs *Battle of the Somme*, pp. 59-60.

of it, could transform defeat or tragedy into noble sacrifice.[38] Glory such as this was, in Gibbs' view, no fleeting thing. Standing on the battlefield north of Ovillers-la Boisselle in July, 1916 he was so moved that he predicted that 'a hundred years hence men of our blood will come here with reverence as to sacred soil'.[39]

Dying like a man

If maritime disaster and war revealed the spirit of a nation, the manner in which a passenger or soldier faced death was equally revealing of what kind of man they were. The myth of first cabin male heroism, which Gibbs helped cement in the public imagination, firmly posited that the male should be both lord and master, even in times of disaster. To face death like a man was to obey 'to the last letter the great code of honour'.[40] It was equally important to die like someone from the upper class, so 'whatever their condition' they 'died like noble gentlemen and ladies of quality', so much so that their names were now 'written in gold' (Gibbs, 1912: 28). Indeed, for Gibbs, the whole catastrophe was redolent with a sense of nobility, though in his word choice he reveals a pervasive class consciousness; gentlemanliness, gallantry, chivalry and nobility share a 'chain of connected meanings, with class as the common link, especially by birth, rank, title, breeding and, occasionally, simple wealth'.[41] Gibbs chose to ignore the evidence that there was a clear correlation between class and survival, reflecting not only how entrenched the class system was, but also the new reality that wealth had become virtue for the Edwardians (Taylor, 1982: 2). This was personified in the example of the American millionaire Benjamin Guggenheim who having

[38] M. Jones, 'What Should Historians Do With Heroes? Reflections on Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Britain History', *Compass* 5:2 (2007), 439–454.
[39] Gibbs *Battle of the Somme*, p. 194.
[40] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 2.
[41] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic*, p. 82.

declined a place in the boats, changed into evening wear, and went to his death dressed in the uniform of his class.[42]

Gibbs also took the opportunity to explore his views of gender. He saw the *Titanic* as a 'shrine of many miracles', one of the greatest being that 'a man should lay down his life for a friend'. A greater miracle was that the same peril would see 'weak women … suddenly uplifted from their weakness, and become strong to suffer and to dare'.[43] This view was informed by what was then a conventional understandings of gender roles that characterised them as binary opposites: strength versus weakness, independence versus dependence, intellect versus emotion, and public versus private.[44] Gibbs' unashamedly romanticised treatment of women was grounded in a world view that observed a clear divide between women in their natural environment, the home, and the outside world, the domain of men. The home was, as Janet and Peter Phillips observe, 'a shrine to this Goddess of the hearth'.[45] When Gibbs found some of these goddesses sheltering in the rubble of their homes in Rheims in 1914, he imagined them 'preserving their dignity, and in spite of dirty hands [eating] their meagre rations with a stately grace'.[46] This approach merely replicated the one he adopted when reporting on the *Titanic*. For though they came in many shapes and sizes on the *Titanic*, 'these delicate women, these young brides, and American heiresses, and English emigrants, women made of the same clay as their sisters in all the streets of life … subdued their fears and were quiet and calm in those awful hours … there went up no shrieks of despair, no wild hysterical wailing, no madness of grief'.[47]

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[42] Kerby, *Sir Philip Gibbs.*
[43] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, pp. 1-2.
[44] S. Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (New York, 1997), p. 24.
[45] J. Phillips & J. Phillips, *Victorians at Home and Away* (London, 1978), p. 98.
[46] Gibbs, *Soul of the War*, p. 153.
[47] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 2.

Gibbs had been particularly disturbed at the increasingly militant approach adopted by the suffragettes from 1912 onward, one which challenged the sexual divisions upon which Edwardian society was based. He supported the suffragettes, but nevertheless linked militant political action with sexual promiscuity. For he found the methods employed by the militants 'loosened … some of the decent restraints of the social code, for which we had to pay later in a kind of sexual wildness of modern young women'.[48] In his book *The New Man – A Portrait Study of the Latest Type*, Gibbs argued that the weakness he observed in pre-war politics, social customs and home life was 'due to man's admission to the women's point of view, or at least to his lack of resistance to it. Many of the virtues of the time and some of its vices are caused by the conquests of the women's spirit over the mind of man'. Far from being modern, the New Man's 'acquiescence in the emancipation of women has upset the balance of human nature in which, after all, man should be still the lord and master'.[49]

To Edwardians, the differences between men and women were more than just biological. They included a woman's 'special' traits, which, in Martin's view, included benevolence, compassion, humility, modesty, morality, patience, sensitivity and tact. The combination of 'maternal capacity, physical frailty and sexual vulnerability placed women in need of care and protection and, to this extent, the feminine ideal became a metaphor for the social patterning of gender'.[50] On the *Titanic*, Gibbs enthusiastically portrayed women as the beneficiaries of male nobility, which he celebrated as the supreme validation of the male's role as protector and the woman's role as the protected. Gibbs' descriptions support widely held views about the place that men should occupy, both in peace and war, on land and water.

[48] P. Gibbs, *Since Then* (London, 1931), p. 368.
[49] Gibbs, *The New Man*, p. 87.
[50] J. Martin, *Women and the politics of schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1999), p. 15.

For ‘if men under stress and in danger accepted death as a holy sacrament was it not evident that gender roles were natural and eternal? That nothing should or could alter them?’.[51]

In 1914, German soldiers usurped this natural order, for far from offering women their protection, they ‘would have their kisses even though they had to hold shrieking women to their lips’.[52] Acting outside the norms of civilised behaviour, particularly in their treatment of women, served only to emphasize their degeneracy. There was a darker side to Gibbs’ idealised image of women, however, for he was dismissive of a woman raped at gunpoint in front of her mother in law and eight year old child. She lacked, in his view, sufficient pride or courage to resist. He contrasts her failings with another woman who had fought like ‘a wild thing’. Her courage is not rewarded, however, for ‘no one would court her after the lesson they had given her’.[53] For Gibbs, death was preferable to this defilement, for it was ‘better for women and children to be in Arras under continual shell fire than in some of the villages along the valleys of the Marne and the Meuse … it was a nicer thing to be killed by a clean piece of shell than to suffer the foulness of men’.[54] Better too, for a man to drown than take a seat in a lifeboat before a woman or child. For Gibbs believed that the ‘old faith’ dictated that there are ‘many things worse than death – national dishonour, national decadence, or individual dishonour and individual decadence’.[55]

Dying like a Briton

Gibbs’ language was part of a broader process that had seen a revival of the mediaeval code of chivalry, and which gave particular prominence to the metaphors of Camelot and the

[51] Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe*, p. 26.
[52] Gibbs, *Soul of the War*, p. 141.
[53] Gibbs, *Soul of the War*, p. 141.
[54] Ibid, p. 139.
[55] Gibbs, *The New Man*, 6.

knightly virtues of honour, bravery, service, and self-sacrifice. As Mark Girouard observes, it not only pervaded art and culture, but also exerted considerable influence on the political life of the country.[56] Though he was repulsed by violence, Gibbs bought into the upper-middle class construct of a 'self-sacrificial warriorhood - a small elite of sacrificial subalterns conditioned to accept the responsibility, if necessary, of martial martyrdom'.[57] In his construct, however, it was not a small band of warriors, but a national type. For example, Captain Edward Smith, 'a calm, grave figure', urged his crew and passengers to 'be British' (though there is little evidence that this is what he said, and though most of the crew were British, the same could not be said of the passengers).[58] Stoic endurance and a fidelity to chivalric notions such as this defined a people in Gibbs' view as much as it was the measure of an individual. The absence of it marked you as foreign, for these British traits were constructed in juxtaposition to a demonised 'other', a process informed by powerful notions of sexual and racial difference.[59] For though danger and suffering brought out the best in a civilised nation like Britain, for others it had the opposite effect. Gibbs relates the story of an Italian passenger who failed to act like a Briton, or a man for that matter, by disguising himself as a woman in order to find a place in a lifeboat. He also recounts a description of the 'Italians and Latin people … glaring and ready to spring' as the lifeboats began to leave the doomed liner.[60] This was a racial image that was familiar to Gibbs' readers, for it was one often employed to justify Imperial expansion. As Philippa Levine observes, colonised people were perceived by imperialists as either weak, thus positioning their lack of masculinity as a cause and a justification for their subjugation, or as unable to control their sexual appetite,

[56] M. Girouard, *The return to Camelot chivalry and the English gentleman* (New Haven, 1981).
[57] Mangan, 'Duty unto Death', 131.
[58] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 9.
[59] Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities*; Hall, C., *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, 2002).
[60] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 12.

thereby posing a threat to Western women, as they did here by threatening the 'women and children first' command.[61]

Gibbs nevertheless had to confront the awkward reality that some of the most celebrated acts of heroism were by American passengers. For example, Benjamin Guggenheim, who posed a double challenge by also being Jewish, displayed, in Gibbs' view the 'same spirit' as Lord Nelson. Not merely an 'honorary Anglo-Saxon' or an 'honorary Briton', but one, who when facing certain death, was capable of displaying qualities of character possessed by one of the culture's greatest heroes.[62] This was an approach also extended to other wealthy passengers, such as Ida Straus, who chose to remain on the ship and die with her husband Isidor rather than save herself.

Positioning the British in the forefront of discussions of chivalry and honour was an approach which Gibbs easily adapted to suit the needs of wartime. During its advance through Belgium in 1914 the German Army was responsible for the deaths of 5000 civilians who were shot as guerrilla fighters, real or imagined, or as hostages, or 'simply because they got in the way of a victorious army in which not every soldier was a saint'.[63] Though some of the more outlandish claims about German barbarism were fabrications, German savagery in Belgium was all too real for those who endured it. In Gibbs' view, there was no moral regeneration possible for the Germans, for their 'passions had been unleashed by drink and the devil and the madness of the first experience of war, and by fear which made them cruel as beasts'. Their behaviour had 'stained the honour of their race … These bald headed officers in pointed helmets, so scowling behind their spectacles, had fear in their hearts and concealed it

[61] P. Levine, 'Introduction', in P. Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, pp. 1-13.
[62] Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe*, p. 48; Howells, *Myth of the Titanic*, p. 110.
[63] Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p. 83.

by cruelty'.[64] In contrast, in the British army, the hell of war led not to barbarism but 'comradeship, a cleaner spirit, a finer morale'.[65]

Yet it was heroism of a very particular type that most attracted Gibbs. In his reports on the *Titanic* and later on the Western Front, Gibbs celebrated what was in effect a passive rather than an active heroism.[66] This was consistent with how the character, or perceived character, of imperial heroes were valued and celebrated more than their actions. As Stephanie Barczewski argues, the occasional glorious failure, such as the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879, Gordon at Khartoum in 1884, or Robert Scott in the Antarctic in 1912, helped to sustain the illusion that the Empire was benevolent and just rather than a tyrannical rule inspired by a desire for conquest and underwritten by military might:

> A key component of this identity was a commitment to sportsmanship and fair play, with good manners and magnanimity transcending the mere achievement of victory; playing the game graciously and well came to be seen as more important than winning.[67]

This code of honour was an important feature of British national identity and importantly, was one acknowledged and valued across class lines.[68] In his descriptions of heroism, Gibbs displayed a keen awareness that his readers were pre-disposed to value character over achievement. For the *Titanic's* male passengers Gibbs offers an 'imperceptibly smooth transition between praise for action, praise for behaviour and praise for manner'. In this construct, it was possible to display manly heroism simply by 'taking it well' and 'dying with

[64] Gibbs, *Soul of the War*, p. 87.
[65] P. Gibbs, *The Pageant of the Years* (London, 1946), pp. 226-228.
[66] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic.*
[67] S. Barczewski, Heroic Failure and the British (London, 2016).
[68] P. Langford, *Englishness Identified* (Oxford, 2020).

dignity'.[69] Only for Captain Smith, for whom there are five competing versions of his final minutes, does Gibbs present a more active and 'sublime heroism'.[70] The same is true of his description of the band playing *Nearer, my God, to thee*, that 'hymn of faith and pleading, which went up to the Eternal Father', played while the band members were 'waist high in water'.[71] This poignant story has been conclusively disproved.[72] It is, however, the epitome of dying well, for these passengers were easily imagined, in the words of the hymn, to be 'like the wanderer, the sun gone down, Darkness [over them]' but drawing comfort from the presence of 'Angels to beckon me nearer, my God, to Thee'.

This celebration of passive heroism was easily transferable to the Western Front. On the second day of the Battle of the Somme, an attack on the Gommecourt Salient failed. Gibbs assured his readers that 'great honour is due to the valour of those men of ours who fought as heroes in one of the most glorious acts of self- sacrifice ever made by British troops'.[73] It was here during a battle now synonymous with futility that the men 'suffered all that war can make men suffer' and they met this ordeal in a spirit of 'stoic endurance'.[74] Heroism was, however, always more than just a physical act; for Gibbs, it was a moral test. A man could either rise to the occasion or he could fail. For a week in 1914 Gibbs worked with a 'flying column,' even accompanying it into Dixsmuide, then under heavy shell fire to retrieve wounded. To Gibbs it seemed the 'open mouth of hell', an impression no doubt reinforced when a piece of shrapnel narrowly missed his head.[75] Gibbs always felt that he was an

[69] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic*, p. 69.
[70] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 16.
[71] Ibid, p. 14.
[72] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic.*
[73] *Daily Chronicle*, 5 July, 1916.
[74] Gibbs *Battle of the Somme*, p. 64.
[75] Gibbs, *Soul of the War*, p. 180.

onlooker of life's dramas. For once, at least, he was a participant, and he both revelled in it as a moral test and suffered because of it, as his description of the hospital attests:

> That courtyard in the convent at Furnes will always haunt my mind as the scene of grim drama … I used to look up at the stars and wonder what God might think of all this work if there were any truth in old faiths … I helped to carry (a) body out, as everyone helped to do any small work if he had his hands free … It was the saving of one's sanity and self-respect. Yet to me, more sensitive perhaps than it is good to be, it was a moral test almost greater than my strength of will to enter that large room where the wounded lay.[76]

Two years later on the Somme Gibbs saw his countryman prove themselves worthy of their ancestors. Many thousands of them 'advanced upon the enemy with a spirit of marvellous self-sacrifice, beyond the ordinary courage of men'. They had faced 'hellish fires, but without faltering'.[77] Even abject failure did not detract from the value of any sacrifice. In April 1917, Gibbs witnessed a cavalry attack, surely one of the war's great anachronisms, and making use of the same rhetoric he had used in 1912, he argued that it had been one of the 'greatest acts of sacrifice to the ideals of duty'.[78] Defeats, such as the one suffered at Lombartzyde in July 1917 were tragic events certainly, but they were still 'great in spiritual value and heroic memory'. Gibbs found it 'wonderful to think that after three years of war the spirit of our men should still be so high and proud that they will stand to certain death like this'.[79] Apparently, they too were the kind of men who would sing a hymn while waist deep in frozen water

[76] Gibbs, *Life's Adventure*, p. 9.
[77] Gibbs *Battle of the Somme*, p. 59.
[78] *Daily Chronicle*, 13 April, 1917.
[79] *Daily Chronicle*, 14 July, 1917.

Even as the war dragged on and offensive after offensive stalled in the mud, Gibbs continued to see glory in the seemingly endless sacrifice. As the Third Battle of Ypres ground to a bloody stalemate in late 1917, Gibbs and the other correspondents 'spoke of the angelic patience of the men and of their great sufferings'.[80] The men were passively stoic, accepting of their suffering, enduring it rather than exerting agency. It was the same spirit which had inspired men to obey the 'women and children first order' as the end of the *Titanic* neared, and three years of war had not completely stripped Gibbs of his romanticised view of a glory powerful enough to conquer death. The same reverence for self-control pervaded Gibbs' reports from the Western Front. At one point during the second week of the Battle of the Somme, Gibbs informed a wounded English soldier, bandaged about the head and face and returning from the frontline, that there had been a breakthrough: 'When I told him a great light came into his eyes and he said "By jove! That's pretty good!" A wounded officer raised himself up on a stretcher at the good news and exclaimed "Oh, splendid"'.[81] In celebrating this passive heroism, Gibbs regularly emphasized the value of sang-froid or 'British Phlegm' whereby passengers and soldiers show themselves to be entirely unflappable, even when facing certain death.[82] Death and danger are normalised, a point emphasized by the use of everyday language to describe them. When the American millionaire John Astor IV farewelled his wife on the *Titanic*, Gibbs described it as 'affectionate but no more affectionate that that of a couple separating just for a week instead of eternity'. He called out a final farewell, 'Good bye dearie. I will join you later' and then 'turned calmly and lit a cigarette, and leaned over the rails, staring through the darkness'.[83]

[80] N. Lytton, *The Press and the General Staff* (London, 1920), p. 114.
[81] Gibbs *Battle of the Somme*, p. 111.
[82] Fussell, *The Great War*, p. 181.
[83] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 11.

This style was antithetical to the grandiosity of some of his other language use, but it was a vital component of an approach that was honed during Gibbs' pre-war career. Later when describing the German offensive in March 1918 as 'a pageant of heroic youth,' he notes that it 'is their bodies and their spirit which stand between us and a German victory. It is their courage which will break down the enemy's onslaught'.[84] This description was typical of an approach dominated by what Fussell saw as an 'atmosphere of euphemism as rigorous and impenetrable as language and literature skilfully used could make it'.[85] Even his final report of the war did not find another tone. Writing on 11 November, 1918, Gibbs sought to articulate what he had witnessed in four years of war. Again, he saw passive heroism as a virtue worth celebrating. As he did when celebrating manly heroism on the *Titanic*, there is a jarring note of class consciousness. He congratulated the officers 'who went over the top at dawn and led their men gallantly, hiding any fear of death they had, and who in dirty ditches and dug outs, in mud and swamps, in fields under fire, in ruins that were death traps, in all the filth and misery of this war held fast to the pride of manhood'. For the sake of Britain they had sacrificed their lives 'and all that life means to youth, as a free, cheap gift'. The enlisted men had 'been patient and long suffering and full of grim and silent courage, not swanking about the things you have done, not caring a jot for glory, not getting much, but now you have done your job, and it is well done'.[86] The grim and silent courage had been celebrated six years before and despite the evidence of war's disregard for outmoded notions of chivalry and honour, nothing had changed for Gibbs in the intervening years that had lessened its value.

[84] *Daily Chronicle*, 28 March, 1918.
[85] Fussell, *The Great War*, p. 175.
[86] P. Gibbs, *Open Warfare: The Way to Victory* (London, 1919), pp. 551-552.

The fact that John Astor calmly farewelled the second Mrs Astor, who was nineteen and pregnant, did not warrant a mention, any more than the fact that Guggenheim, the archetypal gentleman, was travelling with his mistress. Clearly, even when operating free from censorship and the demands made on one's patriotism by a world war, Gibbs was singularly adept at choosing what details were helpful to his agenda and which needed to be ignored, or shaped to fit the narrative. Anything that contradicted his desired construct was explained away or ignored. Joseph Bruce Ismay, managing director of the White Star Line, was among those saved. To Gibbs, he was a 'tragic figure … who went up and down the decks, hiding his despair by helping the women to the boats'.[87] When a lifeboat was being readied for lowering, and in the absence of any other passengers on deck, he claimed an empty seat. His subsequent treatment was interesting. The Americans were eager to attribute blame for the sinking, and were generally scathing of his actions. In contrast, the British were 'grimly determined to play up the heroism of all concerned. It had, after all, to be a triumph, and not a tragedy'.[88] Similarly, American commentators raised the issue of women and children first in the context of the battle over women's suffrage, while the British were silent: an 'uncomfortable comparison of 'Votes for Women' with 'Boats for women' would have spoiled the story'.[89]

Gibbs' justification of Ismay's quite legitimate actions and the ignoring of the links with the suffragette movement was the same approach he adopted on the Western Front when confronted with any challenge to the desired rhetoric – manipulate or ignore. It was, as Charles Masterman so memorably characterised it during the Great War, a propaganda of facts. A case in point is the Press Bureau under Frederick Smith, later the First Earl of Birkenhead, which censored news reports before disseminating them to the domestic and

[87] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 13.
[88] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic*, p. 73.
[89] Howells, *Myth of the Titanic*, p. 75.

international press. It exerted a more pervasive influence by instructing newspaper editors on the attitude they should adopt towards important issues, what needed to be emphasised and what needed to be downplayed or ignored. Most newspapers remained committed to the war as the supreme patriotic endeavour and were quite prepared to suppress reports about air raids, food riots, and labour disputes to instead focus on upbeat stories that better reflected the official narrative.[90] Indeed, speaking on behalf of the correspondents, Gibbs boasted that in time the Army came to understand "that we were loyal … and had its ideals, its interests, and its hopes at heart".[91] In private, however, Gibbs questioned whether the uncensored truth about a battle such as Loos (25 September–8 October 1915) would have been any more appropriate, given that it would have inevitably led to "party fighting party over it—a lot of division and strife and internal discussion at home".[92]

Conclusion

Gibbs believed that the 'plain story' of the Titanic was 'a poem of the old and high ideals of the great traditions of human courage and duty; a poem of brave lives snatching victory out of death, and going to their God with a hymn of faith, which will go echoing for ever across the eternal seas'.[93] This construct worked well enough for a description of a maritime disaster, but just two years later it proved woefully inadequate to describe modern industrialised warfare. Gibbs and the British press as a whole, operated in a 'linguistic no man's land in

[90] M. Kerby, M. Baguley, & A MacDonald, 'Write propaganda, shut up or fight: Philip Gibbs and the Western Front', in M. Kerby, M. Baguley, & A. MacDonald J (eds.) *The Palgrave handbook of artistic and cultural responses to war since 1914: the British Isles, the United States and Australasia* (Cham, Switzerland, 2019), pp. 219-236.
[91] Gibbs, *Realities of War*, p. 70.
[92] C. Bean, Diaries, Notebooks and Folders. Diary January–February 1916. Series 38 3DRL 606/37/1. *Australian War Memorial. Official History, 1914–18 War: Records of C E W Bean, Official Historian.*
[93] Gibbs, *The Deathless Story of the Titanic*, p. 28.

which the forces of high diction skirmished with a more modest and concrete rhetoric'.[94] In time, Gibbs adopted what Samuel Hynes characterised as an 'alternate rhetoric'. Many writers, after 1916, but particularly in the mid to late twenties, adopted what might be best described as a 'soldier's style'. It was 'stripped' of 'abstract values' and instead was 'plain, descriptive [and] emptied of value statements'.[95] Yet in 1912, and across almost four years of war, Gibbs celebrated Glory's triumph over tragedy; it was in this confrontation that a person proved that he was both a man and a Briton. As Gibbs' rhetoric showed, gentlemen 'not only knew how gentlemen should behave, but knew how to describe that behaviour'.[96] Gibbs' descriptions exerted a considerable influence on how both tragedies are remembered. For like the Great War, the *Titanic* has proved to be 'indestructible in memory'.[97] The world to which both belonged, however, was far more vulnerable. Much of it was destroyed in the mud of the Western Front.

[94] T. Bogasz, 'A tyranny of words': language, poetry, and anti-modernism in England in the First World War', *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1968), 652.
[95] Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 106.
[96] Girouard, *The return to Camelot*, p. 13.
[97] J. Maxtone-Graham J, 'It Was Sad When That Great Ship Went Down', *New York Times Book Review* (13 December, 1992), 9.

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