

Duty and Honour: The Importance of Notions of Masculinity During The First World War

As the research project at Swansea University uncovered contemporary first-person testimony generated by Welsh soldiers during the Great War, many questions have been raised regarding the soldiers' experiences and feelings. This document will explore one aspect that appears as one 'reads between the lines' of this evidence: the importance of masculinity and the expectations put upon men to behave in a certain fashion during the First World War. Much of the evidence gathered can be read in this way. It is arguable that while a major war is being waged is the time when men are required to be at their most masculine, and this can be seen in the way that they are expected to 'do their duty' and accept notions of honour and self-sacrifice as they obey orders from above, whatever those orders mean for their own personal safety.



Cpl Hopkin Joseph Thomas,
from Bryncoch, of 1/5th Btn,
The Welsh Regiment

Perhaps we can get a glimpse of the way they saw themselves from the way in which they appear in their portraits. In these photographs they stand firm looking straight at the camera, proudly dressed in their regimental uniform.



Brothers James Pugh Richards ("B" Co., 13th Btn, Royal Welch Fusiliers) and John Richards ("F" Co., 7th Btn, RWF), of Dyffryn Ardudwy. John was killed at Gallipoli in August 1915

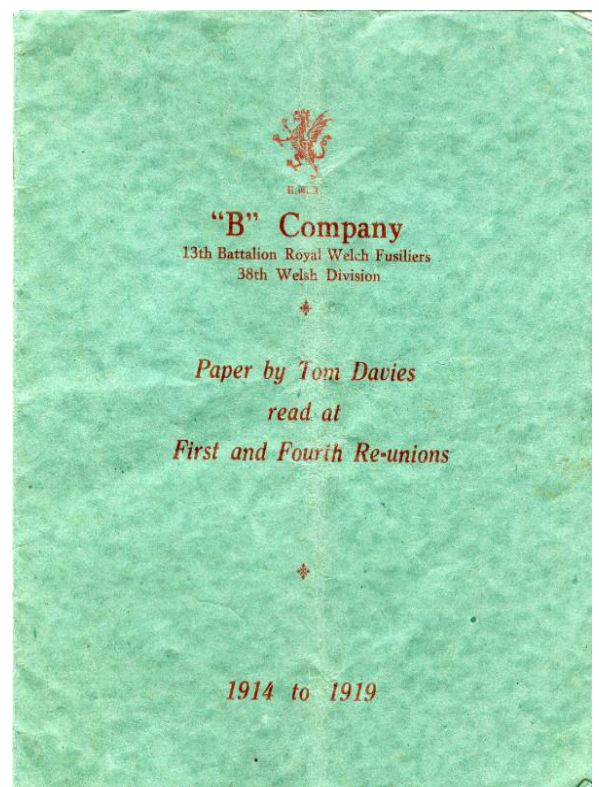
Photograph from 1915, most probably of men of
“B” Company, 13th Btn, Royal Welch Fusiliers



When you view a photograph of a group of uniformed men smiling at the camera, some with their arm on a friend's shoulder, you can sense their pride and the way in which they regard their comrades-in-arms as 'a band of brothers' (to use a phrase popularised by a fact-based drama about the Second World War).

Another aspect is the way in which they talk of other men, be they comrades or higher-ranking officers. Serving with other men, be it on the frontline, on the sea or in the skies builds a sense of character, affection, admiration and camaraderie. This idea of masculinity, and the faith in what it could produce, arguably provided the soldiers with that spirit, and morale in order to overcome the conditions, as well as the enemy. Many argue that the First World War created a socially approved masculine role, and it is interesting to see how this runs through the ranks by those who served, acknowledged this service and remember those who made the sacrifices.

This paper, written by Tom Davies of “B” Company of the 13th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers gives a fascinating insight into the importance of masculine ideas of duty and honour to those serving on the front-line. Davies writes very highly of his commanding officer, a Major Bell, and of the way the troop learnt to 'love and respect him'. He describes the character of Major Bell in terms which stress his masculine qualities.



formed under the command of COL. DUNN, NORTH WALES.

Here the 13th Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers was recruited and, it was in about the second week of October, 1914, that "B" Company was formed. From the commencement, it was evident that this was a company of men possessed of fine physique and high mental training; imaginative young men coming from the free atmosphere of the Secondary Schools and Universities, and other Public concerns, and having an unusual amount of INDEPENDENCE.

The great thing about this new "B" Company was their youthful, sane, strong and aggressive spirit, to "do" or "dare."

There was appointed to the charge of it a gentleman, who had himself received a Public School education, one who had an unusual amount of tact and patience as well as other qualities that appealed to this unique Company—MAJOR BELL.

We learnt to love and respect him. Gentle though he was, he was never familiar. He would be humble without loss of dignity. He was keen that his men should do their best and act worthily of their Battalion and Regiment (23rd Foot). I will further add that nothing pleased us as much as that smile of his.

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Davies also refers with admiration and pride of the Battalion, highlighting the qualities of those serving in the unit.

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In spite of the Battalion's small numbers, its quality was second-to-none, and as he describes the action in which this small company of barely 70 men was the first in the whole of the Welsh Division to repel an enemy raid, his words glow with pride.

Battalion. In spite of a terrific enemy bombardment every man stood up at his post and no one flinched. No Man's Land was swept by our Lewis Gun fire and a German raider was captured, whilst our line was not entered by the enemy. Though

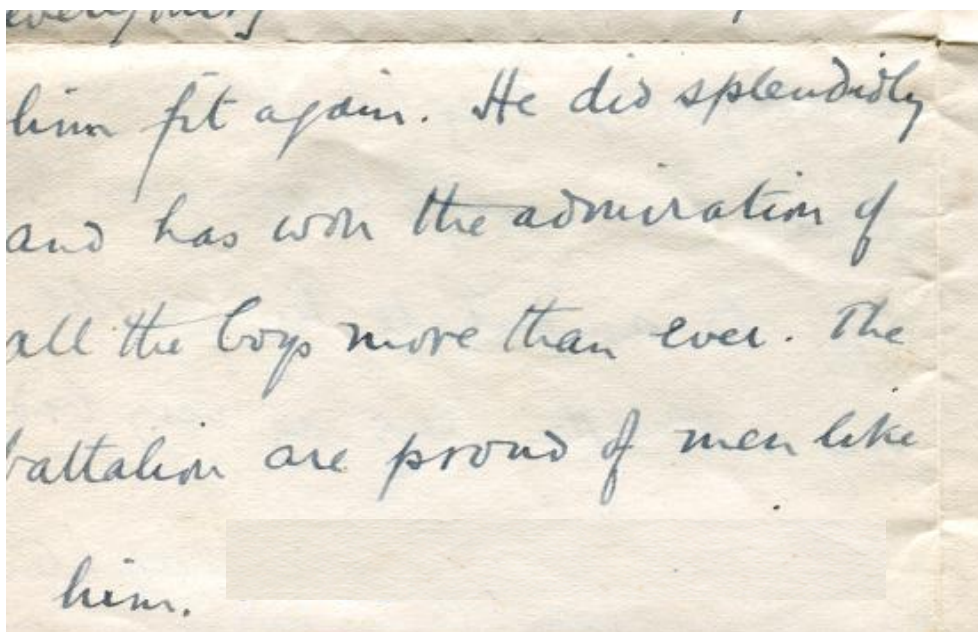
'In spite of a terrific enemy bombardment every man stood up at his post and no one flinched. No Man's Land was swept by our Lewis Gun fire and a German raider was captured, whilst our line was not entered by the enemy.'

Germans lay within ten yards of one another, and foremost amongst the fallen was a lad from Pontypool who had attained his 19th birthday a day or two before. Never did men acquit themselves better than these, and what more can I say than they worthily upheld the tradition of the OLD COMPANY.

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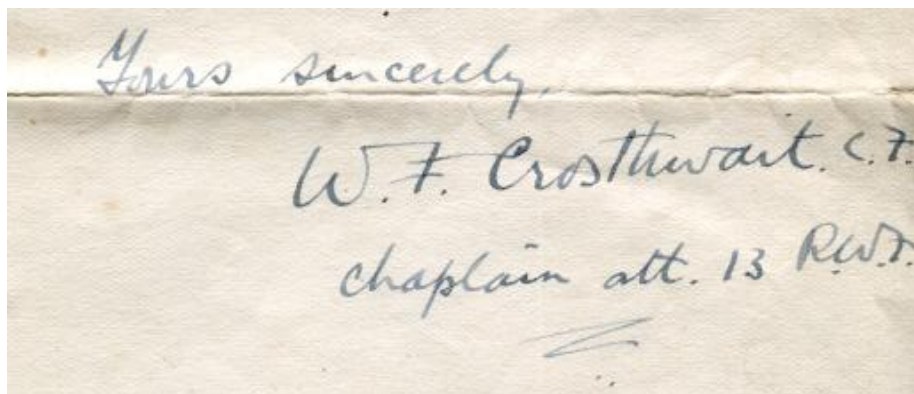
The language used here is key when we consider the idea of masculinity, because it is in the way in which Davies describes his peers that we can see the admiration for these men as what could be argued is a masculine identity. Many works on masculinity highlight this idea that it is a man's fate, his destiny, to go out and face the dangers like a man. Certainly, as Davies describes the life-threatening situations faced with resolve and courage by his comrades, one gets a sense that it is a test, which they passed with flying colours.

James Pugh Richards, one of the soldiers in Company "B" 13th RWF, was badly wounded in a raid on the German trenches (on the border between France and Belgium) in November 1917. As one reads the letter sent by the unit's chaplain to his parents, many of these ideas of duty, and the expectation that men will behave in the proper manner under pressure, are present. There is clearly an admiration for those who have managed to do the difficult job that is asked of them.



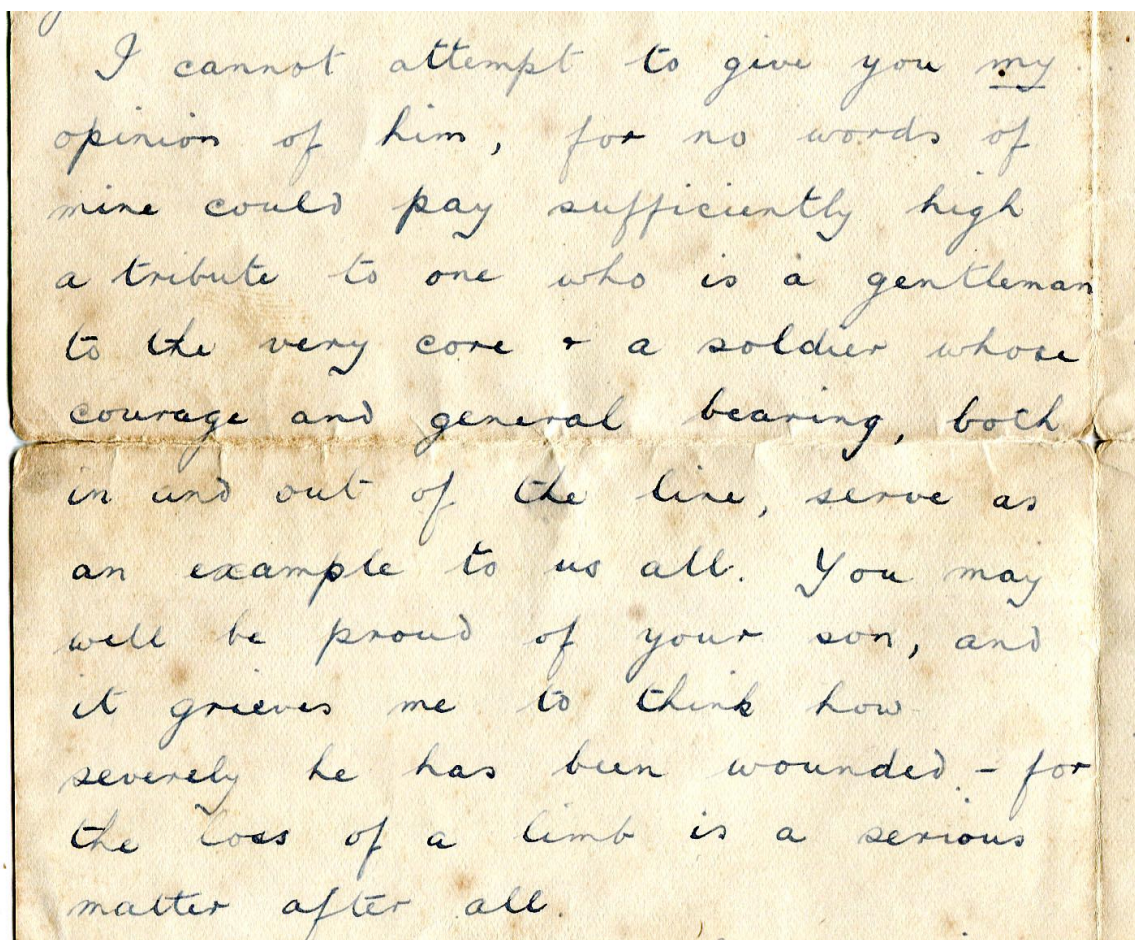
him fit again. He did splendidly and has won the admiration of all the boys more than ever. The battalion are proud of men like him.

Extract from the letter of W.F. Crosthwait to the parents of James Pugh Richards, 16 November 1917: '...He did splendidly and has won the admiration of all the boys more than ever. The battalion are proud of men like him'



Yours sincerely,
W.F. Crosthwait. C.F.
Chaplain att. 13 R.W.F.

His parents also received a letter from Sgt Harry Rees of Swansea, one of J.P.'s friends in the battalion. Again as one reads this the comradeship of the men is crystal clear: a bond forged from their shared experiences and how they, as individuals, have responded to the challenges.



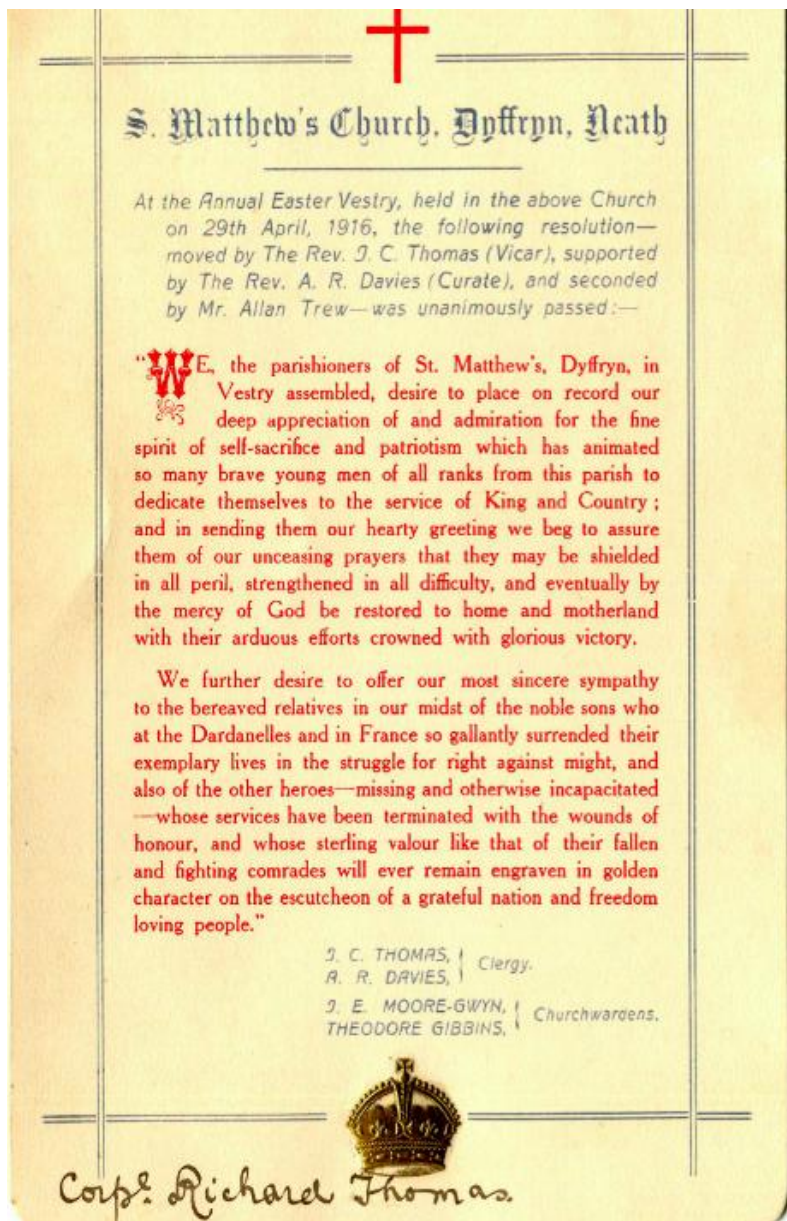
I cannot attempt to give you my opinion of him, for no words of mine could pay sufficiently high a tribute to one who is a gentleman to the very core & a soldier whose courage and general bearing, both in and out of the line, serve as an example to us all. You may well be proud of your son, and it grieves me to think how severely he has been wounded. - for the loss of a limb is a serious matter after all.

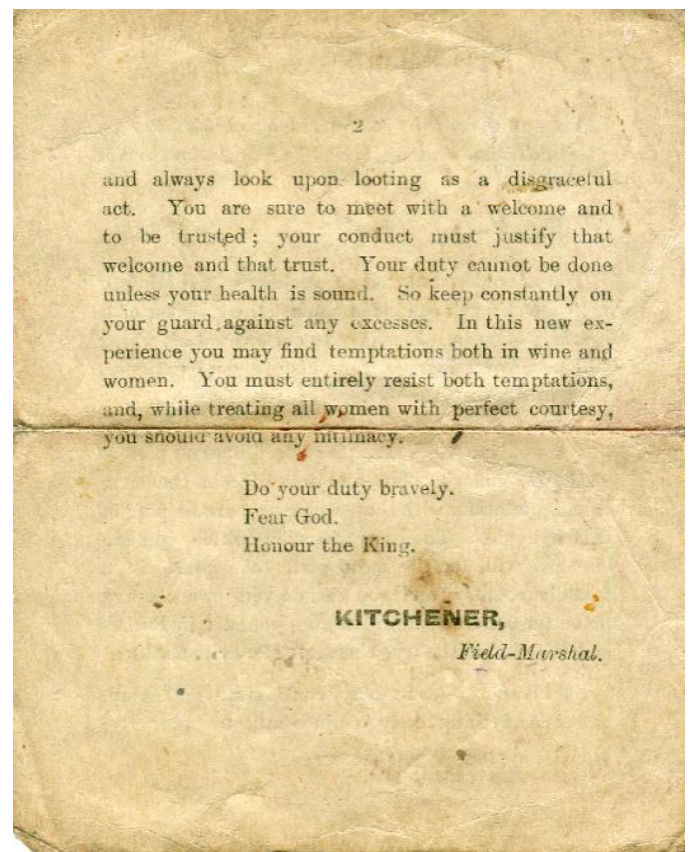
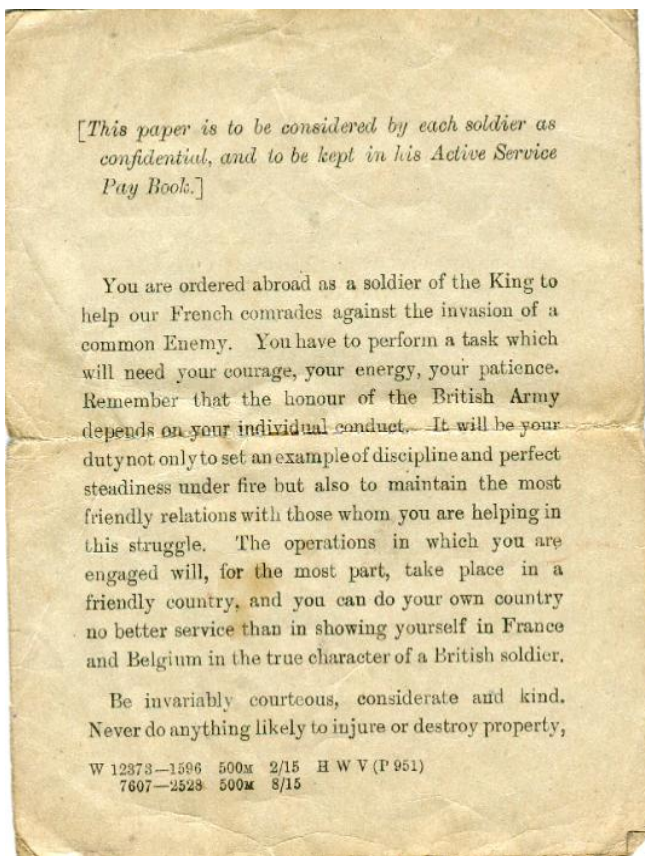
Extract from Sgt Harry Rees' letter to the parents of James Pugh Richards, 18 November 1917: '...I cannot attempt to give you my opinion of him, for no words of mine could pay sufficiently high tribute to one who is a gentleman to the very core & a soldier whose courage and general bearing, both in and out of the line, serve as an example to us all. You may well be proud of your son, and it grieves me to think how severely he has been wounded - for the loss of a limb is a serious matter after all'

(Harry Rees was killed on 22 April 1918, near Bouzincourt, as the 13th Btn RWF resisted the German advance. He was described by Tom Davies as 'the finest man and soldier it was my privilege to know').

Another interesting piece of contemporary evidence discovered by the project was

this: a letter of appreciation sent to the Thomas brothers (Richard and Hopkin) by St. Matthew's Church, Dyffryn, three miles north of Neath. This can be seen as representative of the gratitude and admiration of the non-combatants towards those who served in the Armed Forces. The parishioners' resolution speaks of the way 'fallen and fighting comrades will ever remain engraven in golden character.' The message declares their great admiration for those making the ultimate sacrifice, who 'so gallantly surrendered their exemplary lives in the struggle for right against might'. Those incapacitated in combat suffered 'wounds of honour'. The entire tone of the piece reinforces this idea of the men bravely facing the dangers and trials of war.





This use of language, couching the message in terms of honour and duty, was of course common in official communiqués from the top brass. Looking at this message from Field-Marshal Kitchener, from the collection of James Pugh Richards (a Private who served in “B” Company of the 13th Btn, RWF) one can see the expectations put upon those who were to serve on the Western Front to behave in a certain fashion. Kitchener discusses how troops should behave when in France: to respect other people’s property and to resist the temptations of wine and women. On one plane, this could be seen as a very British idea, but it also suggests the importance of masculinity in the character of those serving on the Western Front. The ideals here can be seen as masculine: to behave like a gentleman, with courtesy and consideration, and also like a man, with ‘honour’ and ‘discipline’. ‘Do your duty bravely, Fear God, Honour the King’.

On the whole, this evidence says a lot about the expectations put upon men serving in the First World War, and how they were admired by others and their bravery acknowledged. When considering the creation and evolution of these men’s identity – that is, how they thought of themselves at the time and how those ideas changed – masculinity is one of the key ideas that is never far from the surface. They were caught in an age where men had to prove themselves in the most brutal of conditions. Looking at the evidence that has come to light in this project, we can see that many of those whose stories we can now tell passed the test.