



Carved oak lectern –
memorial to Lt R J Selbie

Mansfield College and the Great War

David Seymour (History, 1973) surveys the College community's response to the war.

When war began, Mansfield was a small, non-residential, Congregational theological college preparing men, and one woman, for theological degrees and ordination. The College was not part of Oxford University, but insisted that its students were.

Some students were already members of other colleges when they embarked on their Mansfield courses; others became Non-Collegiate students on arrival from other universities. Arts students were admitted to complete non-theological degrees at colleges of the University before their Mansfield course. In Michaelmas 1914, returning and new full members of the College comprised 18 theologians, all graduates, and four arts men. Some external students had the privilege of attending lectures. Mansfield's student numbers were small; Exeter and Trinity each mustered 50 freshmen a year.

In October the College received a request from the YMCA for 'expert workers' for the huts they were providing wherever British servicemen were stationed. Mansfield's Board of Education authorised the Principal to release men for short periods to the YMCA, a decision amended in June 1915 to include any form of 'approved national service'. Men left during Michaelmas 1914 for YMCA work at White City and Portsmouth. Two men arranged leave until the end of Hilary Term 1915, serving the YMCA at Havre, Rouen and in Cairo. During Hilary 1915, two more left for Havre, returning in April.

Of those alumni and current students who served, most opted for pastoral work appropriate to their calling and experience. As well as the YMCA they worked for the British Red Cross Society, the Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU), the Friends' Relief Fund in Serbia, and many, mostly alumni, became army chaplains. Augustus Cullen, at Havre YMCA, reported:

'Tired and cold and hungry, the first thing these men see on landing is the YMCA Recreation Room. There they can get such things as tea and cake, tobacco and cigarettes, chocolate and matches – all English; there, after their long and inevitably uncomfortable journey they can rest, play games, read the latest English papers or join in a sing-song; there they find facilities for writing letters.' They enjoyed

'the comradeship that they find there; and many of them stay for the short prayers at the close.'

In November 1916 Clifford Lawson applied to become an army chaplain. In his application he drew attention to his three months, frequently under fire, in charge of a YMCA hut within 4000 yards of the German front line. His agreement to serve as a chaplain was countersigned by Mansfield's Principal. He embarked for France in January 1917 and renewed his contract in December. In February 1919 he caught influenza while chaplain at the 4th Stationary Hospital at St Omer. On recovery he took three weeks of sick leave at home in Mexborough and returned to France on April 19th. On demobilisation in November 1919 he was chaplain to the 62nd Labour Group.

Reflecting their spiritual calling, several of those who chose to volunteer for the army found this a difficult decision. Writing in the College magazine about George Haydock's death, in 1956, his friend Noel Whitfield remembered the difficulty of Haydock's decision to serve in a military capacity: 'Only those who knew him could understand what agony of soul he suffered before deciding that his duty lay in the direction of Military Service.' Although initially declared fit, Haydock was later discharged as medically unfit and returned to Mansfield as JCR president. At the term's first JCR meeting Whitfield, the secretary, recorded Haydock speaking of those already at war doing so in loyalty to faithfulness and freedom. 'They have responded to the highest call of duty and sacrifice. What of ourselves? If we believe we have chosen the better way then it was for us to justify our choice.'

Completing his BLitt in June 1915, Haydock finally secured a commission. Transferring from the infantry to the Royal Flying Corps he joined 34 Squadron in France in February 1917. Here he was severely injured when his aircraft's machine gun malfunctioned, causing parts of the propeller to fly into the wing. In landing the machine he suffered



Mansfield College 1914

Eight of the men mentioned in the article are pictured here:

Back row: Noel Whitfield (2nd from left), Clifford Lawson (3rd from left), P G Simmonds (5th from left).

Middle row: C J Cadoux (1st from left), George Haydock (2nd from left), Augustus Cullen (9th from left)

Seated: Nathaniel Micklem (1st from left), the Principal (5th from left).

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fractures to the base of his skull and both arms, as well as deafness in his right ear and double vision in his right eye. He was declared permanently unfit for pilot duties, and relinquished his commission in September 1918. In Hilary 1919 the JCR president wrote: 'We were glad to have Haydock – an ex-President of the House – with us for the term.'

PG Simmonds, a year from ordination, wrote of 'prayerfully and deliberately' coming to his decision to take a commission in the army, 'to safeguard the interests of a Society of which I am a member, and which has in it so much good that I dare not let it go; the cry of generations unborn has called me to do what I can to prevent Germany from realising her dreams.' C J Cadoux, the only member of the SCR to gain experience under fire, did so as a pacifist serving with the

FAU in Dunkirk and Poperinghe for three months in 1915. The manciple, Charles Symonds, since 1910 an officer in the Territorial Force, began the demanding job of Quartermaster of the 3rd Southern General Hospital, based in the Examination Schools, on August 5th 1914, and with him went three men he had trained as kitchen boys. Bursar's clerk, Alfred James, and JCR servant, William Buckingham, also joined the army.

As men left for 'approved national service' numbers declined. In 1915 four theological students and two Arts men were admitted, but one soon joined the army and another the FAU. At Michaelmas 1916 only eight men were in College. In 1917 two men, one prevented from service by serious illness, joined the College and in 1918 two, discharged wounded from the army, arrived. Mansfield House

University Settlement (now Aston-Mansfield) saw a gradual decline in the number of volunteer helpers from the College. The Settlement's magazine noted the turning point in January 1916: 'The beginning of the Christmas term usually brings us several visitors from Oxford. This year, of course, there have been hardly any.' From those associated locally with the Settlement about 200 men joined the colours, of whom 36 were lost.

Although not taken over by the Government, as some colleges were, Mansfield found wartime uses for its site. After an initial decline in numbers, resulting from the absence of many undergraduates, attendance at Chapel services improved with the presence of those stationed in Oxford and of wounded soldiers. In 1917 the United Army Board introduced a Parade Service at Mansfield for trainees from the Royal Flying Corps, with the Principal as Honorary Chaplain. In the summer of 1916 the Wounded Soldiers' Garden Club had a marquee erected on the upper lawn, using the large lecture room the following winter. Mansfield provided heating, lighting and help from College servants, and local people donated the teas. Between 400 and 500 men attended every afternoon, and in three years 250,000 'very ample teas' were served. For a short time the Serbian Relief Committee used two classrooms to educate refugees. Mansfield also opened its lectures to men and women from other colleges and provided a venue for conferences.

Following the Armistice, Chapel congregations revived. College chaplain, alumnus Nathaniel Micklem, recently returned from YMCA work, described them as 'unusually

large', despite the discontinuance of the Parade Services. 'During the two terms that I have been here', he wrote in June 1919, 'Oxford has been filling up and reviving.' The decline in student numbers reversed in 1919 when 14 theologians and four Arts men, many returning from service, were admitted. In Trinity Term, 14 external students, mostly Allied servicemen, joined. The College Reports maintained a positive tone throughout the war, speaking of work being 'steadily carried on in all departments, notwithstanding the depletion of numbers and the distractions of the present time'. The 1920 Report mentioned the encouraging revival in numbers. The war, however, still influenced College organisation. The 'great diversity of attainment' possessed by the ex-servicemen, 'owing to the exigencies of the war', obliged the College to offer modified theological courses. When, in June 1922, the men departed who had swelled the student body in the first post-war session, the College felt the last consequence of the war on its numbers.

In 1918 the Principal presented a lectern to the Chapel in memory of his son, Lieutenant RJ Selbie (Wadham, 1910), killed in action near Ypres on June 13th 1916 with the 13th Canadian Battalion. During Hilary Term 1921 two memorial inscriptions were placed on a pillar in the Chapel to commemorate the deaths in action of two students: 2nd Lt PG Simmonds, killed on the Somme on July 1st 1916 with Queen Victoria's Rifles, and 2nd Lt EA Claxton, killed at Hollebeke on July 31st 1917 with the King's Royal Rifle Corps. The memorials in the Chapel reflect the enduring effect of the war on the College community.

