Abstract

A View of War and Soldiering in the Carey Novels of Ronald Welch

Ronald Welch’s novels featuring the military adventures of the young men of the Carey family were first published between 1954 and 1976 and have recently been reissued. They were uniquely representative of historical military adventure for children in the Britain of this period; and were the last example of a vigorous century-old genre in respectable children’s publishing, particularly intended for boy readers, which honoured warrior virtues and regarded war as a crucible of male character. Children’s fiction since then has generally shied away from depicting soldiering, but where it has done it has focused mainly on the First World War and shown soldiers largely as victims. Welch’s work melds a model of heroic military adventure, inherited from the previous century, with a perception of the horrors of twentieth-century war derived from two world wars and his own experience of professional soldiering. While significantly amending the notion of war and soldiering as a heroic adventure, which he inherited from his predecessors, his work nevertheless retains the idea of combat as a character-forming male experience and implicitly offers military virtues as a model of manhood. While the attitudes expressed in his work were rejected by his publishers towards the end of his career, his views were perhaps an expression of more widely held beliefs at the time. And, for some of his original readers, the republication of his books is seen as a welcome re-affirmation of old values.
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From the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth, war stories were an acceptable part of children’s, particularly boys’ lives, whether in books, story papers, or, later, comics and films. They were part of what one author has called a “pleasure culture of war” (Graham Dawson, quoted in Paris, 2000, p. 8). Nowadays it is rare to find a novel for young people that celebrates warrior virtues, although such attitudes continue in comics and other popular publications and many video games. Novels about war for young people are likely to see combat more as tragedy and waste than a source of heroism and pride (Fox, 2001, pp. 178-9). In children’s books a new orthodoxy has replaced the old. In what follows, I will explore an aspect of this change through the work of Ronald Welch, a writer of historical military adventure for children in the third-quarter of the twentieth century.

Ronald Welch’s career spanned the years from 1950 to 1976. Although he earned some early critical recognition, winning the Carnegie Medal in 1955 for Knight Crusader (Cleaver 1983, pp.1023-4), his books generally went out of print a quarter of a century ago. But recently there has been a revival of interest. Knight Crusader and an earlier novel, The Gauntlet, were reissued by his original publishers, Oxford University Press, in 2013 and 2015 respectively. And a reprint publisher, Slightly Foxed, in 2014 began to reissue all of the twelve titles in his series about the martial adventures of the young men of the Carey family.

In genre, Welch’s novels belong with those written by authors as C. S. Forester, Patrick O’Brian and Bernard Cornwell, and read by a predominantly male adult audience. In a recent survey of historical fiction, Jerome De Groot characterises these works as a hybrid of adventure narrative and military history: “Their models of heroism are largely straightforward, dutiful, resourceful, violent and homosocial. They present a process of history in which the central character is repeatedly tested in some way before achieving some form of martial success” (2010, pp.78-9). This broadly fits Welch’s work, and he shares with these writers not only an attention to historical detail, but also, through the Carey novels, “a sense of serial and authorial brand coherence” (De Groot, 2010, p.81). Indeed, novels like Welch’s call into question the separation of adult and children’s versions of this genre. It may have been nineteenth-century children’s military adventure that was a source of inspiration for early writers in the adult genre; and young readers of Welch’s books may well
have become adult readers of writers like Cornwell. However, while the adult genre continues to flourish, Welch’s work was the last of its kind in mainstream children’s publishing.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, while there continued to be many historical novels for young people about war, they were largely narrated from the point of view of children and families caught up in conflict, rather than those young men engaged in it (Fox, 2001, p.178). By then, most of the titles that offered a view of soldiering to young people were concerned with the First World War and, in line with the prevailing view of that conflict, generally showed soldiers more as victims than warriors; the most representative titles, perhaps, are Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse* (1982) and *Private Peaceful* (2003).

More recently, there has been renewed public interest in soldiering, particularly in the light of anniversaries of the First and Second World Wars and concern about the fate of soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. There has also been a limited revival of the soldier as action hero in the children’s novels of former SAS soldiers Chris Ryan and Andy McNab. The reappearance of Welch’s books may be related to this renewed interest in combat. Certainly their republication has provided an opportunity to consider some aspects of the history of British children’s military adventure. In what follows, I will explore the changes that Welch made in the legacy of nineteenth century military adventure in the light of two world wars and his own experience of military service; what his version of military adventure offers to young people as a representation of professional soldiering; the circumstances in which his work, and incidentally the genre that it represented, was eventually rejected by his publisher; and, finally, the significance that Welch’s work retains for some older male adult readers.

**Welch and the Literary Heritage of G.A. Henty**

In hindsight, military history was the obvious choice of subject for Welch. A history teacher by profession, he was a lieutenant in the Officer Training Corps at Bedford Modern School, where he was teaching when war broke out in 1939. He served in the Tank Corps in the Second World War, attaining the rank of Major, and continued in the Territorial Army afterwards. For much of his writing career, he was also headmaster of Okehampton Grammar School. His given surname was Felton...
and he adopted as his pen-name the name of the regiment in which he and his father had served (Cleaver, 1983, p.1023; Holland, 2006).

During Welch’s childhood, military adventure was a ubiquitous form of boys’ story. Its immediate progenitor was G.A. Henty, a former war correspondent who had produced over a hundred novels before his death in 1902 and had many imitators well into the twentieth century. His typical hero was a young man in his teens, swept up in conflict, whose growth to manhood was enabled and justified through combat. For Henty, war was the driver of history and the maker of the character of men and of nations (Paris, 2000, pp.58-65). The notion of war as a patriotic adventure also appeared in military histories for boys like Henry Newbolt’s *The Book of the Thin Red Line* which recounted the lives of real soldiers of the nineteenth century: ”Certainly these battles and sieges are History now, but…to the men who fought in them they were Adventures [sic]” (1915, p. v). War as patriotic adventure, both in fiction and fact, was also a staple of the popular story papers of Welch’s youth.

All of this feeds into his work. Most of his novels are about the exploits of the young men of the fictional Carey family, the descendants of Philip D’Aubigny, the hero of *Knight Crusader* (1954) and, as the series develops, his work provides a selective military history of Britain from the Middle Ages to the First World War. It includes battles that have patriotic and imperial significance: Crecy, Blenheim, Quebec, Sebastopol, and the Somme. And it features the leaders that are associated with them: Richard the Lionheart, The Black Prince, Marlborough, Wolfe and Wellington. For the most part these are tales of victory, if won at a cost, except for the conflicts that Welch chose for his last two published novels, which show British forces in a more ambivalent light, fighting in the Anglo-Zulu War and the Indian Mutiny (the First Indian War of Independence).

But, while Welch’s debt to Henty is clear, there are marked differences between them. Welch’s books are faster paced stories and there is much less of the imperial arrogance characteristic of Henty’s work. And, in contrast to Henty and some of his followers, Welch did not write about contemporary wars. For most of his career, he avoided all twentieth-century conflicts. In this, he was part of a general movement away from the depiction of modern warfare in serious children’s fiction: a hiatus that marked the beginning of the change in the way that war was presented to children.
The First World War, and the adult literature that followed it, called into question the whole idea of war as a noble and heroic enterprise. While that did not immediately silence the writers of military adventure, the form of such stories changed (Paris, 2004, pp. xii-xiii, 157-161). The airman, the spy and the detective began to replace the soldier as protagonist, a movement reflected in the fictional career of James Bigglesworth (Biggles), the most popular boys’ action hero of the time (Carpenter and Prichard, 1984, p.61; Paris, 2000, p.160). In a parallel development, beginning in the 1930s, there was increasing criticism of the jingoism and glorification of violence in older style boys’ adventure (Trease, 1948, pp.91-110). Thus, by the 1950s, Henty and his followers had largely faded from young people’s reading. Writers then tended to retreat to previous eras when the notion of war as heroic and chivalric might still apply. Rosemary Sutcliff and Henry Treece, for instance, write about earlier warrior societies like the Romans and Vikings; while Welch himself recreates soldiering in later periods, but not reaching the twentieth century until the publication of Tank Commander (1972) late in his career, possibly the first novel for young people to depict the carnage of the First World War.

The reluctance to tackle twentieth-century soldiering was shared by most writers of serious fiction for young people following the Second World War. This reluctance applied only to the young person’s novel, however, for in boys’ comics and the cinema the Second World War was a preoccupation well into the 1960s. This division between the treatment of war in popular and serious fiction was emphasised by changes in the comic or story paper format. Until the 1930s, story papers had been predominantly text based with interspersed illustration, but by the 1960s comics were largely in illustrated strip form (Riches, 2009, pp.156-7). In all but the most skilful hands, the comic strip emphasised the formulaic narrative, characterisation and dialogue to which the traditional war story was always vulnerable. In contrast, Welch’s more recognisably literary work retained some of the attraction of the old story paper format. Nearly all of his OUP novels featured illustrations as chapter headings with occasional half-page spreads; and, with Williams Stobbs as his usual illustrator in the 1950s and 60s, his novels had some of the appeal of a series publication.

The Romantic Hero and the Professional Soldier

For both Welch and the creators of comics, war was about soldiering. There are few women in his stories and the impact of war on civilians plays almost no part.
That soldiering can be regarded as adventurous is shocking when we consider the violence that is in the nature of combat and the slaughter and atrocity that accompanies it. Of course, Welch was working within a well-established narrative convention; but, like McNab and some other authors of military adventure, he had been a soldier himself, and that professional commitment and experience can also be felt in his work. It offers an endorsement of the importance of the armed forces in national life and perhaps an implicit support for recruitment to the services. It also reflects the motives in writing about war identified by Kate McLoughlin (2011, p.7) in her recent general study of war writing for adults: a desire to report on the nature of battle, and to give it meaning. In Welch’s case, to give it meaning not only for himself but for an audience of young people.

In criticism of popular, nineteenth-century military adventure, the terms heroic and romantic are often coupled together (e.g. Paris 2000, pp.144-5). But the recognition that there is heroism in war does not require a romantic view of combat. The figure of the individual romantic hero is the most significant legacy that Welch inherited from Henty and, in Welch’s own time, was still the way in which writing about war was generally expected to be presented to young people in fiction. But in Welch’s work the figure of the romantic hero is amended and grounded in various ways, perhaps most significantly in terms of the experiences of the professional soldier. Part of that professionalism is to be clear-sighted about what to expect in combat; and while Welch’s books are not written to warn about the horrors of war, it is quite possible to take such a warning from them.

Nearly all of his novels are tales of adventure focused on a lone protagonist: a youth who grows into a man by surviving danger and displaying his force of character. The young Careys possess imposing physical features, exceptional sporting talents, and remarkable abilities with either their fists or weapons. In nearly every novel (where there is some historical justification) the hero takes part in a duel or some other form of single combat in which his courage, skill and gallantry can be demonstrated. Also, in all but one of the novels, the protagonist is left at times to rely on his own cunning and courage. For instance, Charles Carey in Captain of Dragoons (1956) is recruited as a spy; Christopher Carey in Captain of Foot (1959) is involved in guerrilla warfare; and, in Nicholas Carey (1963), the eponymous hero is caught up in a terrorist plot.
These are recognisably romantic elements with the attraction of wish-fulfilment for boy readers. Yet these qualities are balanced by painstaking historical research, with Welch relying increasingly on first-hand accounts of the wars he wrote about, and of the use of weapons and details of contemporary life. He compiled copious notebooks of this information for each novel, a discipline that was noteworthy enough to be featured in an issue of *Children’s Literature in Education* in 1972 (Welch, 1972, pp. 30-7). Most of his novels feature a “Historical Note” as an afterword. *Captain of Foot* is typical, beginning with the statement, “Christopher Carey is an imaginary character, but much of the background of the story is true.” Welch adds, “I must apologize to one distinguished officer of the regiment. The right flank company of the 43rd at Sabugal was commanded by Captain John Hopkins, and he did all the things in the battle that I have attributed in this story to Christopher Carey” (Welch, 1959, p.231). He borrowed the exploits of real soldiers and attributed them to his heroes in at least three more novels (Welch 1958, p.vi; Welch, 1961, p.219; Welch 1963, p.211). In this way, the exploits of the Careys as much embody the heroic tradition of the British armed forces as they offer the invented exploits of an adventure story.

Although story papers and comics also featured the stories of real heroes alongside invented exploits, Welch’s research and his melding of fact and fiction gave a depth and apparent authenticity to his tales that these shorter forms could not achieve. This quality is highlighted in Pamela Cleaver’s retrospective appreciation of his work:

No other historical novelist for children is as good on battles as he is. His books are extremely well-researched, full of authentic detail and always excitingly plotted…. He never glorified war but made it clear that mud and discomfort, wounds and death were part of soldiering as well as comradeship and adventure. (1983, p.1024)

Battles form a significant part of all but one of the Carey novels, often providing the climax to the books. Welch’s depiction of campaigning and combat takes the point of view of the individual soldier, and calls attention to the discomfort, unpredictability and terror of the experience. Soldiering is constantly uncomfortable, whether it is riding in heavy armour through blistering desert heat, a forced march
through Spain to meet the French, shivering in the winter squalor of the trenches in
the Crimea, subsisting on meagre rations, or enduring the noisy, sweaty confinement
of a First World War tank. Sometimes the hero is conscious of his place in a battle
and what is happening around him; sometimes he is only barely aware. Neil Carey’s
perception of close quarters fighting in For the King (1961) is typical:

Before he had quite realized that they had charged he was in the middle
of the melee, the confused, untidy struggle that he now knew a battle to
be, the same chaos of rearing, frightened horses, riders hacking
desperately at each face they saw, the shouts and screams, the clatter
and clang of swords on metal, a wild nightmare of faces that appeared
and vanished. (Welch, 1961, p.124)

Death and injury are a constant presence. In Knight Crusader, Philip is advised
by his father that “You will get used to seeing your friends killed before you’re much
older. I’ve become hardened to it” (Welch, 1954, p.116). This conversation follows
the death of Philip’s uncle and cousin during the harrying of the Crusader’s march by
the Muslim army, and, in the battle of Hattin that follows, Philip witnesses the death
of his father too. Welch’s descriptions of these deaths are often brutally direct. Here
is the death of Joscelin, Philip’s cousin, as he lies trapped beneath his horse and
surrounded by enemies:

Then the Infidels dismounted and Philip turned his eyes away. He could
bear the sight no longer. Joscelin would be hacked to death like a piece of
meat on a butcher’s stall, lying defenceless on the ground, with no
Christian there to lend a hand to help him. (Welch, 1954, p.110)

This harsh theme of the loss of friends and relatives continues in the subsequent
novels. In two books, Captain of Foot and Ensign Carey (1976), the protagonists
themselves die in combat at the close of the story. Tank Commander (1972), about
the First World War, is a relentless catalogue of death: by machine-gun fire,
desperate bayonet charges, by being buried alive in collapsed trenches, picked off
by snipers, by shell fire and by shrapnel.
Unsurprisingly, fear is a soldier’s constant companion. In *Mohawk Valley* (1958), a novel set in the late eighteenth century, Charles Carey, himself a retired soldier (Charles Carey in *Captain of Dragoons*), tells his son Alan: “If any man ever tells you that he was not afraid under such conditions, then he is a liar! I’ve seen really brave men shake with uncontrollable fear when they heard a cannon ball scream over their head for the first time. I did myself, and not for the first time only” (Welch 1958, p.28; for examples in other novels, see Welch, 1959, p.10-11; Welch 1960, p.87; Welch, 1961, p.45-6; Welch, 1972, p.2). The key to quelling this fear is discipline, carrying out your orders, remembering your training and accepting your responsibility for your comrades and those under your command. Alan Carey, faced with an attack from a French frigate during his passage to America preoccupies himself with gun drill: “That was what the Earl had said during the long drive to Bristol. If you are under fire, do something; don’t stand and listen to the bullets and imagine the next one will hit you.” In *Tank Commander*, John Carey comes under an extraordinary artillery barrage. But he stands up and, with shaking hands, lights a cigarette: “he didn’t want to smoke, but the sight of him smoking calmly would impress his men” (Welch, 1958, p.58; Welch, 1972, pp.66-67). In Welch’s stories, heroes are not fearless. They rely not only on their own skill, endurance and bravery but on their training and discipline.

**The Community and Ethos of Soldiering**

Like Alan Carey, every one of the young Careys is aware of the military exploits of the older male generation which he must emulate. In most novels, an older relative with a successful career in the armed forces acts as an exemplar and mentor. There are mentors, too, from the lower ranks. That familiar figure, the veteran non-commissioned officer who takes the young officer under his wing, appears in three novels. In *Knight Crusader* it is Llewellyn, “a veteran soldier, tough reliable and imperturbable, his equipment immaculate and shining”. Llewellyn is reincarnated as Owen Price in *For the King* and as Sergeant “Slosher” Jones in *Tank Commander*, another battle-scarred veteran, this time of the South African wars. Jones’s “grandfather had been the Regimental Sergeant Major of the 110th in the Indian Mutiny when John’s grandfather was his Colonel, and his father had served with General Sir Peter Carey in the Regiment” (Welch, 1954, p.13; Welch, 1961,
pp.30-31; Welch, 1972, pp.12-13). Here the bonds of manhood intersect with those of family, social hierarchy and, particularly, the Regiment, which comes to embody the Carey’s family loyalties.

The Careys are all learning to be leaders in battle, and the books promote a possibly anomalous version of a “democratic” style of leadership, which is shared by the Careys across the generations. They know and care for their men, endure the same privations and celebrations, and lead by example. In Tank Commander, when two new young subalterns join the line and neglect to take care of their men before themselves, John reprimands them and incidentally provides the reader with the Carey philosophy of leadership: “In action you eat, fight and die with your crew. Men watch their officers in battle. They obey orders and follow them if they respect them and think [you've] got guts and look after them” (Welch, 1972, p.142; see also Welch, 1956, p.3 Welch, 1958, pp.12-13).

Welch’s novels are about young men who, in the course of the story, are inducted into an inter-generational soldiering community that supports, shapes, and, finally, honours them; it is one to which they give their loyalty and for which they risk their lives. In his novels, Welch provides a template of good soldiering for his boy readers much as he might have done for the recruits to his school cadet force or the volunteers under his command in the Territorials.

The Ruthlessness of War and the Shadow of the First World War

The notion of a soldiering community can extend in certain circumstances even to the enemy. In many of the novels, relationships between regular armies on the battlefield are governed by chivalry and notions of respect for the enemy as fellow soldiers. When Philip is captured by Saladin, his life is spared because of Muslim respect for his fighting prowess. Captured by the French in Captain of Foot, Christopher Carey is treated well and even dines with Marshal Ney (Welch, 1954, pp.134-5, 220-1; Welch, 1959, pp.20-31). But Welch acknowledges that sometimes ruthlessness can be necessary for survival, and the mark of a professional. Even in the early novels, there is no place for chivalry in unconventional warfare.

When Christopher Carey is rescued from his French escort by a Spanish guerrilla band, he watches in dismay as the French officer who has become his friend is cold-bloodedly slaughtered. When Chris joins the band in subsequent
ambushes, it is policy not to take prisoners: “This was not war as he knew it, but murder” (Welch, 1959, pp. 31-2, 38). Recruited as a spy, Charles Carey is tutored by the spymaster Colonel Henshall in the realities of the kind of war he is now fighting: “There’s nothing but treachery and lies and ruthlessness. You don’t pat your enemy on the back when you’ve captured him. You find out what he knows and then put him in front of a firing squad. If you are fighting him, you don’t wait until he faces you. You shoot him in the back” (Welch, 1956, pp.98-9).

In *Tank Commander* this ruthlessness is to be found on the battlefield itself. When they are behind German lines, John orders Private Thomas to shoot a member of a German patrol who, unhorsed, is reaching for a rifle: “It was cold blooded murder…but what else could they do? This was war, John told himself.” Early in his time in the trenches, John Carey accepts that Sergeant Jones and Private Thomas, who had already seen battle, know more about it than he does: “war was not a football match…and if a man tried to kill you in battle you tried to kill him first. How you did it didn’t matter very much” (Welch, 1972, pp. 52-3, 56-7).

The word which recurs in Welch’s accounts of the ruthlessness of war is “murder”. His use of it suggests an acknowledgement by the narrator, and his protagonists, that this is behaviour which is outside the norms of honourable conduct in combat. However, it is accepted as necessary in the circumstances and, in the figures of Sergeant Jones and Private Thomas, even seen as a mark of an experienced soldier.

*Tank Commander* is a departure from Welch’s earlier work in its complete concentration on the battlefield and its emphatic acknowledgement of the innate ruthlessness of warfare. It probably reflects the greater freedom of expression that was granted to writers for young people in the 1970s than Welch had experienced at the beginning of his career. Yet most of what he brought to that novel can be found in his earlier work, if entangled with the conventions of heroic boys’ adventure stories. And we might speculate that his attitude to armed combat is informed not only by his experience in the Second World War but by reactions to the First World War and the literature that it inspired. This is most apparent in his resistance to sentimentality about death on the battlefield, or the notion of the nobility of sacrifice. This is clear as early as *Knight Crusader*. When Philip’s cousin Joscelin is killed, Philip’s father seeks to reassure him that Joscelin died well. Philip, in tears, shakes
his head and, in his response, it is difficult not to hear echoes of Wilfred Owen’s 1918 poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

What honour or virtue was there in a filthy death like that he wondered, lying under your horse, squirming like a trapped animal while two men slashed you to the bone, and then bent down and cut your throat in cold blood. (Welch, 1954, p.110)

Justification for War

It is hardly surprising that two of the Careys are driven to consider the futility of war. Here, too, there is the shadow of the Great War. The notion of the First World War as a futile tragedy gathered momentum in the twentieth century to the point that it could become a reference point for any war (Dan Todman, 2005, pp.121-152). It seems to function in this way in present day children’s literature. It is in these terms that Neil Carey and Chris Carey, both reluctant soldiers, consider their own wars. Lining up for his sixth major battle at Marston Moor, Neil Carey feels that the war against the Parliamentarians has become a “futile tragedy” and it is only his loyalty to his comrades that keeps him campaigning (Welch, 1961, p.162). Chris Carey In Captain of Foot, contemplating the opposing French removing their dead and wounded as he commands a small force defending a river crossing in Spain, has much the same thought. Yet he does not entertain it for long.

His orders were to hold this bridge and he would carry out those orders. At the back of his mind he realized that this small and remote little action was all part of the vast struggle going on all over Europe. Until Napoleon’s furious ambitions were smashed there would be no peace, no hope at all for anyone, including the Spaniards themselves. (Welch, 1959, pp.205-6)

In subsequent books there are no such clear statements of the necessity of any war. One reason for this absence might be Welch’s shared assumption with his readers at the time of writing that England, or Britain, would generally be in the right. Many of the novels feature wars of resistance to the domination of Europe by a foreign power, a situation that parallels the First World War and, crucially, the
Second. This was the war in which Welch fought and which is generally regarded as a justified war of resistance to dictatorship.

The notion of justified resistance that runs through the novels is conveyed most strongly by the portrayal of the Careys themselves as individual fighters for right. This is one of the narrative functions of the duels which take place in most of the books (Welch, 1954, pp.42-59, 265-71; Welch, 1956, pp.31-57, 126-30, 182-184; Welch, 1958, pp.11-18, 40-45, 124-7; Welch 1960, pp.15-16, 84-97, 177-8; Welch, 1961, pp.103-6; Welch, 1967, pp.95-100). In many of the duels, opponents are villains, bullies or braggarts. For instance, Philip D'Aubigny challenges and defeats a boorish Norman knight after he questions the friendship of Philip's family with Muslims. And Neil Carey disposes of the arrogant courtier Sir Ralph Pitchford, who bates Neil with the fact that his uncle and cousin support Parliament (Welch, 1954, pp.42-59; Welch 1961, pp.14-15, 103-6). There is moral justification in these single combats and victory is a vindication of right over might: a conviction that colours the novels while being rarely made explicit as a justification for war. In these two examples, it is also significant that Philip and Neil are defending themselves against accusations of friendship with the enemy, so that their triumph also vindicates the idea that a professional soldier can recognise an opponent's common humanity.

### The Soldier as a Model of Manhood

Above all, it is a soldier's professionalism and sense of duty that explicitly absolves Welch from a need to discuss the merits of any war. Neil Carey, who dislikes both sides in the English Civil War, decides to follow his father in fighting for the King. His father's decision is based on where he feels his "most lawful" duty lies, a decision to which Neil acquiesces. Their decisions are a summary of the entire Carey history of duty to crown, country and family. But Neil’s story reveals the more fundamental impediment to any questioning of war which is embedded in Welch’s narratives. The underlying assumption of each story is that conflict provides adventure and challenge, and a test of male character. So, in *For the King*, while the narrative does not contradict Neil’s assessment of the Civil War as unnecessary, produced by the intransigence of both sides, the story is about Neil’s part in the fighting and how the experience teaches him “much that would be of value to him” Welch, 1961,p. 57, 218).
Through soldiering, the young Careys learn not only about war and leadership but about themselves: and it is the steady martial virtues of discipline and duty that define them on and off the battlefield. In some novels, the hero is twinned narratively with a childhood friend and relative, whose lack of discipline or restraint endangers the hero or leads to an eventual separation. Neil Carey is estranged from his arrogant brother Denzil, who is part of the fashionable set at court, and from his cousin and childhood friend, Francis, because of Francis’s decision to support Parliament and because “Francis held to his convictions with an intensity and narrowness that made him intolerant of the opinions of others” (Welch, 1961, p.4, 55). In Captain of Dragoons, Charles Carey’s cousin John has a gambling habit which leads him to betray Charles and his country; and in Nicholas Carey, Nicholas has to extricate his reckless cousin Andrew from an association with an Italian terrorist plot (Welch 1956; Welch 1963). In these novels, the young reader is shown questionable character traits that are contrasted with the hero’s sense of duty and responsibility, associating the hero’s opinions and behaviour with the achievement of maturity. It is only in his final novel, Ensign Carey (1976), that Welch separates the notions of good character and military prowess. William Carey, the ne’er-do-well anti-hero, proves himself as a soldier during the Indian Mutiny only to die during a looting spree.

**War as a Test of Character**

Even within the restricted arena of soldiering that Welch sets himself, the notion of war as a character forming experience seems from the vantage point of half-a-century later to limit the effectiveness of his books as war reports. His novels recognise the appalling conditions of battle, the fear that can be induced in soldiers, the professionalism needed to survive, and the determination and courage that can be shown in the face of danger and degradation. But there is no acknowledgement that otherwise good soldiers and men of character can be broken, scarred and haunted by their war experiences.

Cowardice is not a word used often by the general public about any soldiers these days. To the contrary, being a front-line soldier and being prepared to risk your life is generally seen as heroic. The recognition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a condition has placed emphasis on the extreme situations in which soldiers find
themselves, which are accepted as sometimes placing unbearable strains on them, rather than their own failure of resolve. Nevertheless, cowardice and desertion remain offences punishable under military law, although no longer, as they were until the mid-twentieth century, punishable by death.

Examples of cowardice are unusual in Welch’s tales of bravery. The general effect of his novels is to bolster his readers’ self-confidence and show that fear can be overcome. But, where men are shown deserting their comrades or failing to carry out orders, the blame is placed on an endemic weakness of individual character rather than the extreme circumstances in which the men find themselves (e.g. Welch, 1958, pp.134-8, 145-7; Welch 1961, pp.94-5, 119-22, 167-8, 192-3, 206-17). His most extensive treatment of cowardice is in *Tank Commander*, where a chapter deals with the now relatively familiar case of the court martial and execution of a soldier at the front for desertion in the First World War.

This situation is familiar because it fuelled subsequent political campaigns: first, to remove the death penalty from military courts for any crime except treason, which was accomplished in 1930; and then, more recently, to gain a posthumous pardon for those who had been executed, on the grounds of the extraordinarily testing battle conditions and the possibility that, unacknowledged at the time, many of the condemned men may have been suffering from shell shock (Taylor-Whiffen, 2011). A conditional pardon was approved by Parliament in 2006. The fate of the executed soldiers has been dramatised in novels, plays, and films from the 1950s to the present (Simmer, 2010). Michael Morpurgo’s novel for young people, *Private Peaceful*, also made into a film, is possibly the best known recent example: in which Charlie Peaceful’s execution for cowardice and disobeying an order confirms the inhumanity both of the military hierarchy and of the war.

In the light of these campaigns and fictional treatments, Welch’s account of the trial and execution of a deserter now appears troubling (Werry, 2014), since it does not highlight the possible injustice of the sentence or evoke sympathy for the victim who, although shown apparently displaying some of the symptoms of shell shock, is characterised as a pathetic pariah, of “low intelligence” and duplicitous. The account, while emphasising John Carey’s distaste for the whole procedure, suggests that, while Private Tyler’s fate is cruel, military justice must take its course. Welch even supplies an explanation for Tyler’s lack of character: that he comes from a broken home in a slum district (Welch, 1972, pp.24-5, 43-4, 67, 69-77).
It might be argued that Welch is representing the historical situation when shell shock was not widely understood; and that John Carey's attitude to desertion might have been typical of many officers, and possibly other ranks, at the time. However, when Welch served in the Second World War, shell shock was a recognised medical condition and so it might be expected that his account would be more sympathetic to Tyler. Welch does, at least, tackle the question of desertion, which was the charge levelled against the majority of those executed. Michael Morpurgo in *Private Peaceful* avoids it. Charlie is not a deserter. His crime is that he refuses the order of a bullying sergeant to continue a hopeless advance on the enemy's lines and to leave his wounded brother alone in no-man's-land (Morpurgo, 2004, pp. 172-3). Indeed, Charlie has the courage, steadiness and leadership abilities that characterise Welch's heroes, which is perhaps an indication that, while the attitude to war in modern books has changed radically, the characteristics of the ideal soldier remain much the same.

Desertion is a dereliction of duty. Surrender when the odds are too great is a decision that a professional soldier, particularly an officer, might be prepared to take. Yet it is a decision only two Careys are shown considering. When John Carey and his patrol are trapped behind enemy lines in *Tank Commander*, he tells his men: “I'm not surrendering. Not at the beginning of the war. If it's hopeless and we're certain to be shot at close range, or we run out of ammunition, then I'll surrender. We can always try and escape, and we can't do that if we're full of bullets” (Welch, 1972, p.50). Only Neil Carey, the reluctant soldier, lays down his arms, but even then:

> Neil was prepared to fight it out, for there was no hope of flight now. If he gave the orders, then Owen would stay there with him to the end, and so would the others, but Neil knew that he would never give such an order. He had brought these men here, and they were his responsibility. (Welch, 1961, p.202)

These are acknowledgements that bravery must be tempered by professional judgement and responsibility. Yet many more Careys are captured by the enemy without having to think about giving themselves up (Welch, 1954, p.129; Welch, 1956, p.148; Welch, 1958, p.149; Welch, 1959, p.19). Instead, they are taken by
force or when unconscious. As in the nineteenth century tales of soldiering, Welch’s manly heroes might die doing their duty but they almost never surrender.

Significant, too, is Welch’s silence on the effects on men of the ruthlessness that war may require of them. Ruthlessness without reflection or misgiving is rare in his books; it is portrayed most often as a “mad minute” of battle frenzy, suggesting that this behaviour is momentary and can even be cathartic, leaving no psychological residue when soldiers return to civilian life. So Philip d’Aubigny, after helping to defeat Saladin’s army at the battle of Arsuf, fighting in “a frenzy of hatred and fury”, once more returns to “the pleasant and happy person” of his youth, “no longer the serious and often grim knight of Outremer … whose one object in life seemed to be the killing of Infidels” (Welch, 1954, p.212, 214, 220. c.f. Welch, 1958, pp.153-5, 219; Welch, 1959, p.144; Welch, 1972, pp.85-9).

Welch’s assumption that men may give way to fighting madness, may kill brutally, particularly at close quarters, and yet emerge psychologically unscathed is questionable. Certainly, there were soldiers who fought in the First World War and soldiers from subsequent wars who were as haunted by what they did to the enemy as by what was done to them. Welch’s silence here is perhaps connected to the silence that many soldiers who returned from these wars, including the Second World War, maintained outside the circle of former comrades, perhaps incidentally preserving the myth that war forms and confirms character rather than causing psychological stress and sometimes breakdown.

**The Editorial Rejection of “Boys’ Adventure” and Social Conservatism in Welch’s Books**

Welch published only two books after *Tank Commander: Zulu Warrior* (1974) about the battle at Rorke’s Drift and *Ensign Carey* (1976) about the Indian Mutiny. Both of these were developed from short stories which Welch had been offering in different forms to OUP for several years, and which it had been reluctant to publish, partly because of growing misgivings about his work. In 1971, one of OUP’s publisher’s readers described Welch’s style as “cliché ridden at times” and suffering from “rather naïve character drawing in the boys’ adventure story vein” (P.R., 1971, p.4). Mabel George, the children’s editor at OUP, reporting on the novel length manuscript of *Ensign Carey* four years later, commented that passages in the book...
“crop up ad nauseum [sic] about the wealth and power of the Careys”. She felt that Welch’s work was now “ludicrously out-of-date, with its worship of title and family, physical beauty and strength and its deference to wealth. However, as we have published the previous Welch books with some success, there is a case for publishing this latest effort, especially as it has some value as background reading for the period” (George, 1975, p.2).

Welch’s aristocratic protagonists do allow Welch to give his readers insight into top-level discussions of political imperatives and military strategy (something that was possibly important for a history teacher). And, of course, army officers were indeed drawn from the upper-middle class, the gentry and the aristocracy for the historical periods that the novels cover. But that Welch chooses to focus on the officer class contrasts sharply with the appearance of intrepid lower rank heroes in stories of the Second World War in boys’ comics in the 1950s and 1960s: “The Lone Commandos” of the war story in Lion’s launch issue in 1952, for instance, were Sergeant Roy Tempest and Private Jack Steel (Riches et.al., 2009, p.129). Welch’s novels acknowledge that the real professional soldiers are men like Sergeant “Slosher” Jones and Private Thomas, but the sting in the tail is the implication that such men make the best soldiers because, unlike their officers, they lack the finer feelings to reflect on what they are doing. Owen Price is said to have come “unmoved” through the Religious Wars of the seventeenth century, such that “hardship and brutality were commonplaces to him” (Welch, 1961, pp. 31-2, 64).

For the most part, Welch’s novels are about military life, where there is necessarily little open questioning of authority. However, in the only novels where the established social order comes into question, the young Careys remain on the side of the status quo. Caught up in the Indian Mutiny, Ensign William Carey has little choice. However, in For the King, a sub theme in the novel is of the dangers of revolutionary idealism and class resentment, which are identified with the Parliamentary forces. Class resentment is represented particularly by James Tanner, Neil Carey’s former servant, or sizar, at Cambridge, who has risen to the rank of Captain in the Parliamentary Army.

At Cambridge, Tanner is a student from a “good family” that has fallen on hard times and has to work to pay his university fees and lodging. Later he is the officer who takes charge of Neil after he is captured at the battle of Marston Moor: “Captain Tanner now, my lord. No longer a sizar, and the boy who used to make your bed and
clear away your clothes. Or perhaps you have forgotten that? After all, a sizar was beneath the notice of Mr Neil Carey." Tanner, of course, makes a poor officer, "overbearing and curt," and is detested by his men. Later, he turns out to be a perjurer, joining with the coward Evan Powell, both men to whom Neil had shown kindness, to bring charges against Neil that could result in his execution (Welch 1961, pp. 9-10, 168-70, 210-7). Excepting the Indian Mutiny, this is the only occasion in the novels when the relationship of young Careys with the men in their care and under their authority turns sour; and it takes place at a time of general social upheaval, when a man like Tanner can turn from servant to officer. The overwhelming impression of the novels is of the responsible leadership of the upper classes, and the proper deference of the lower ranks, ensuring the stability of the social order.

Welch in Retrospect

The criticisms that OUP staff now made of Welch’s work marked the end of his career. The nature of his work had altered little in the more than twenty years OUP had been his publisher. Rather, the critical climate surrounding children’s books had changed. The rejection of the “boys’ adventure story” was a rejection of a literary cliché and the social assumptions embodied in it, those of warrior masculinity, and the whiff of imperialism and class condescension. The children’s literary world in the 1970s was engaged in a debate between the champions of literary quality and the champions of social equality (Lucy Pearson, 2013, pp.10-11, 70-1). For both of these camps, Welch’s work was, if not anathema, then outmoded. At the same time, the war story in popular publishing was a victim of falling sales in boys’ comics, with many publications folding in the 1970s and 80s (Riches, 2009, pp.186-8, 220). Nevertheless, Welch’s work retained some popularity. His titles were reprinted by OUP and by Penguin throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with one or two titles being periodically revived until the end of the century.

Today, remarkably for books of this relatively recent vintage, second-hand copies of the original editions attract high prices, and it is likely that Slightly Foxed’s decision to republish them reflects the enthusiasm of a large body of original readers who, grown older, are collecting the books. Gail Pirkis, editor at Slightly Foxed, said, “We decided to reissue Ronald Welch's Carey novels because they are well-crafted,
full of accurate historical detail and hard to put down once started. And of course they have some splendid illustrations." A year later, with eight books published, she added: "The books are selling very well. Of course many adults are happily indulging in nostalgia and rereading them, but it is also clear that a lot of copies are being given to children who love them and eagerly await the next in the series."

Looking at the reviews of the reissued books that have appeared on the Internet, it is clear that many older readers remember Welch’s novels with fondness. For some, the experience remains much the same and one that they are keen to share with their own children or grandchildren. Many credit Welch with stimulating their love of reading and interest in history. Others notice things they didn’t as children: the absence of women from the stories, for instance, or some extraordinary heroic exploits they now recognise as unlikely (Dilettante 2013; Smallman, 2013; Haque, 2000). For some, Welch shows the horror of war; others are shocked by the ruthlessness of his heroes (Goode, 2009; Farrow, 2014). Some believe that the stories may be seen as old-fashioned in their attitudes, “too unreflective on Empire, Class and War for modern tastes” (Zornhau, 2010); but, for others, being old-fashioned is not a bad thing:

It is the kind of old fashioned that made a generation of children admire integrity, nobleness of purpose, and the triumph of good over evil. It is a children’s book after all, and what we allow our children (or grandchildren in my case) to read should inculcate our values. (“Downlong Tom”, 2013)

This is a view that should be accorded some respect. There is much in Welch’s books that is disturbing at a distance of more than half a century. They have a conservative view of the British past. They pay tribute to a warrior Britain, led by a well-bred officer class, in which men prove themselves by courage in battle. The narrative form in which Welch was comfortable was inherited from the nineteenth century. Yet his work was also of his own time and marked by his experience as a professional soldier. Its view of war - “heroic myths of British valour and endurance with an overall depiction of the war in terms of horror and death” - can be found in the treatment of the First World War in school history textbooks in the 1960s (Todman, 2005, p.169). It can be recognised in the films about the Second World War which were watched by many young people in the 1950s and 1960s. And it
testifies to the persistence of military values in a society that had fought two world wars in which many adult males for two generations had, like Welch and his father, served in the armed forces.

In the welcome given to the reprinting of the books, we can sense both the power and limits of childhood reading in forming or, at least, reinforcing social attitudes. For some people, their re-reading of Welch is a re-affirmation of cherished values. For others, it is a revelation of how their understanding of war has changed. For some, the best thing about his novels is that they seek to preserve a sense of professional achievement and decency in the face of war’s cruelty. For others, that may be the worst thing about them: just another version of the “old lie”.

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