

Reviews

Local lads, distant vistas

Review by Toby Thacker

Tell Mum Not To Worry: A Welsh Soldier's World War One in the Near East

Rhys David

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On his seventeenth birthday in March 1915, Dewi David, a young Post Office worker in Cardiff, volunteered to join the British Army and serve in the First World War. He joined the Signals Company of the 53rd (Welsh) Division, and after six months training was shipped out with his new comrades to the Mediterranean, to join the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign. On 22 October he landed at C Beach, Suvla Bay, where for the next eight weeks he endured the worsening weather on the peninsula before being evacuated, taken briefly to Salonica, and then to Alexandria. For the next three years Dewi served with the Welsh Division in Egypt and Palestine, taking part in the gradually growing British and Allied offensive that pressed at first slowly through the Sinai desert towards Gaza, then with gathering momentum on to Bethlehem and Jerusalem in December 1917, before ending with the capture of Damascus in October 1918 and the complete defeat of the Turkish armies facing them. In March 1919 Dewi was demobilised in Egypt, and made the long journey back across the Mediterranean, to Italy, then through France, and eventually from Southampton back to his native Cardiff. During his four years of service, Dewi never had any home leave, and did not rise above the rank of Sapper. Most of his time was spent working with signals and communications. This then is not the usual narrative of the First World War, the story of journeying out to Flanders and fighting in the mud and blood of the trenches that has been so tragically and lyrically told by writers such as David Jones and Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, or more prosaically by a private soldier like Frank Richards. It is not really a story of fighting, as Dewi spent most of his time behind the lines and saw little actual combat. It is the record of an innocent and ordinary lad whose war service took him far from his home, and exposed him to other worlds, geographically, culturally, and emotionally. He dealt with this, as so many other soldiers did, by writing home, frequently and at great length. This book is based around the large collection of surviving letters from Dewi to his family, and from them out to him in his odyssey through the Eastern Mediterranean and Palestine.

From these letters we learn that Dewi's main preoccupations, which he evidently shared with other soldiers, were with food, drink, shelter, and with diversions from the monotony of army life. And although he was far from home, he – again like his comrades – spent much of his time dreaming of the world he had left, of Cardiff, of holidays at Porthcawl, and of cycling and walking in the green valleys of Glamorgan.

The greatest strength of the book lies in its local detail and colour. Rhys David has worked meticulously to reconstruct the domestic life of Dewi's family in Splott, and to find out about the many different places Dewi spent time in while in the army. The often obscure references in his letters

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to books he had read, to poems he knew, to contemporary music hall songs, or to local characters known to his family are all carefully explained. We learn precisely which brands of cigarette Dewi and his comrades favoured, and how much they relied on food parcels from home for variety in their otherwise terribly monotonous diet. Intriguingly, there is also some exploration of issues which historians of the larger British experience of the First World War are now addressing: how did the local and regional identities of soldiers sit alongside the larger shared identity of being part of the British army? How did volunteers – like Dewi – feel about their contemporaries who did not volunteer, or who became conscientious objectors after conscription was introduced in 1916? How did soldiers in a comparatively neglected theatre of war – like Palestine – feel about the public focus in Britain on the horror of the Western Front? Did the experience of military service change their attitudes about gender roles and in particular, towards women? And how did soldiers returning from what David Jones called the ‘parenthesis’ of wartime experience readjust to post-war Britain? In Dewi's case, it appears that he resumed where he had left off, re-joining the Post Office and living in domestic peace in Cardiff until his death in 1963. Rhys David

tells us that Dewi's military service had a 'profound effect', 'perhaps persuading him

to value all the more a quiet domestic life in the city he loved'. So this is not a narrative of trauma, and the persistence of trauma, like those which have come to occupy a dominant place in the collective British memory of the First World War.

In terms of identity, we do learn a great deal. As Dewi grew up in the army, he wrote his letters very largely in the common language of the soldiers, often rendering slang words and phrases phonetically, and confirming David Jones' observation that a Cockney idiom was the default language for the ordinary British soldier. But Dewi was also self-consciously Welsh, and proud to serve in a Welsh Division. He liked to use Welsh phrases and words, and to comment on differences between people from different parts of Wales. He does not appear to have experienced a tension between these dual Welsh and British identities, and his letters would seem to confirm the recent work of scholars who have examined how soldiers in the British Army, whether they were from Wales, Tyneside, Scotland, or the Home Counties, shared strong senses of local and regional belonging while at the same time feeling themselves part of a larger collective, and rubbing shoulders with comrades from all over the UK, and indeed from the far flung British Empire. This carefully researched book will be of interest not only to readers interested in the local history of Cardiff and in the Welsh experience of the First World War, but to those looking for detailed evidence about how ordinary lads experienced this huge conflict. I suspect Dewi David himself would have been very pleased to think that it would help bring to wider attention the experiences of Welsh soldiers in what he ironically described as 'petty side-shows' like Suvla, Egypt, Palestine, and Salonica.

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