Taneli Hiltunen

The Voice of a Lost Generation

Vera Brittain: *Testament of Youth. An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925.* Virago, London 2014 (first published in 1933). 612 p.

Vera Brittain: *War Diary 1913–1917. Chronicle of Youth*. Edited by Alan Bishop with Terry Smart. Victor Gollancz Ltd, Southampton 1981. 382 p.

***Letters from a Lost Generation.* Edited by Alan Bishop and Alan Bostridge. Virago, London 2008. 427 p.**

Vera Brittain (1893–1970) was born into an era steeped in Victorian/Edwardian values, but she nevertheless became an independent thinker who wanted more from her life than what was expected. Her experiences as a volunteer nurse in the First World War and the personal losses she suffered transformed her world irrevocably and played a crucial role in making her one of the most important pacifists, internationalists and feminists of the 20th Century.

Testament of Youth, Brittain's lauded autobiographical study of the years 1900–1925, is not the only book under review here, as she constantly refers to her war diary and correspondence, especially with the four friends she lost in the war: fiancé Roland Leighton, little brother Edward, and their closest friends Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow. The said diary and the letters have been published posthumously[1], and they truly complement *Testament of Youth*. In the case of the diary, that has been achieved with the 'sympathetic editing' by Alan Bishop (reducing its length by half), but with *Letters from a Lost Generation* the intention is different, the emphasis being on the letters from the frontline and behind it. Those sent by Vera Brittain are reduced in length, while those by her four soldier friends are kept pretty much intact. Especially after Roland's death, the latter ones take the center stage. While the diary stops permanently in May 1917, the letters bring the tragic story up to Edward's battle death in June 1918.

One of the biggest assets of *Testament of Youth* is that it does not end with the Armistice but continues to chronicle in length the immediate post-war years, revealing the manifold effects the war had on the British populace (although seen from Vera's middle class perspective). Contrast this with the relative brevity of the chapters concerning her pre-war years, the time of 'provincial young-ladyhood', which provided very few opportunities for intellectual growth. Luckily, Vera's path crossed with a couple of helpful individuals, like a liberal curate and Professor Marriott, who supported her literary inclinations and the decision to try and get accepted into the Somerville College of the University of Oxford in order to read English. She took two entrance examinations and, much to her astonishment, passed them. But on 2 July 1914 she still had time to write a characteristically vivid diary depiction of her home landscape in Buxton:

To-night I stood by the open window & looked right out into the great wide space before me. I felt more alone than tongue can tell, but I felt a kind of bitter exaltation too, & the dreamer part of me overcame the student part. It was a sultry night; thunderstorms had been about all day & the air was hazy with steam from the damp hot ground. The lights from the houses were mingled with the still vapour, so that everything seemed to be wrapt in a kind of luminous mist. The only impression I could gather, so far as I tried to translate it into definite ideas, was a vague darkness, in which the trees stood out in black, uneven groups, casting strange shadows on the ground, their outlines melting into the haze. I longed as I gazed into the dim expanse for something to worship, & respect with all my soul, something to which I can turn for counsel, before which I can kneel in reverence. I spend much time wondering whether I, who so desire to stand alone, shall ever find that something or someone the reverence of which is not dependence.

Just a couple of weeks before she was to take her first courses (in Greek and Mathematics), the underlying tensions between the European great powers reached a point of no return, rapidly leading to troop mobilisations and war declarations. Vera's first year in Oxford was thus eventually shadowed by her beloved Roland's going to northern France to serve as a second lieutenant in the Worcestershire Regiment. Her almost daily diary remarks communicate palpably the continuous distress she felt – especially when several days had passed since Roland's latest letter. Perhaps the most touching moments in their correspondence occured when Vera had scolded Roland for being

too immersed in the frontline reality. In essence, what transpired between the two could be summarized as follows:

Roland to Vera (France, 3 November 1915): […] *I wonder if your metamorphosis has been as complete as my own. I feel a barbarian, a wild man of the woods, stiff, narrowed, practical, an incipient martinet perhaps – not at all the kind of person who would be associated with prizes on Speech Day, or poetry, or dilettante classicism. I wonder what the Dons of Merton* [College] *would say to me now, or if I could ever waste my time on Demosthenes again.* […] *Have been very busy lately as Adjutant, during the absence of the latter. It is a job I like very much; but it doesn't give you much time for anything else.*

Vera to Roland (1st London General Hospital, 8 November): *Most estimable, practical, unexceptional Adjutant, I suppose I ought to congratulate you on the attainment of the position, even temporally. But I don't know that I do. I suppose also I ought to thank you for your letter, since apparently one has to be grateful now-a-days for being allowed to know you are alive. But all the same, my first impulse was to tear that letter into small shreds* […].

Roland to Vera (France, 22 November): *Dearest, I do deserve it, every word of it and every sting of it.* […] *Oh, damn! I have been a perfect beast, a conceited, selfish, self-satisfied beast. Just because I can claim to live half my time in a trench (in very slight, temporary, and much exaggerated discomfort) and might possibly get hit by something in the process, I have felt myself justified in forgetting everything and everybody except my own Infallible Majesty.* […] *No, I don't deserve to get any letters at all – only to be ignored as completely as I have ignored you – and Mother.*

Vera to Roland (1st London General Hospital, 27 November): *Your letter of the 22nd was brought into my ward this morning, & when I read it, it nearly made me – even me – cry. And I wished then that I hadn't written quite as I did. Not that, I must confess, I didn't mean every word I wrote. I am often unkind to people in general, but I never have any temptation to be unnecessarily cruel to someone whom I love as I love you.* […] *I was so very angry that day. And now I am so sorry – not exactly that I was angry, but that I have really hurt you.*

Roland answered a week later that Vera's letter had the same effect on him, and thus the 'argument' was over. But the long-awaited leave in December they had discussed in several letters did not materialize, as Roland was fatally wounded just one day before he was to cross the Channel. From then on, the three remaining friends did their best to support and comfort Vera with their more or less frequent letters.

In her diary, Vera manages to communicate her own sorrow – and that of others near and dear to her dead fiancé – very acutely just a few days after receiving the tragic news. While she for example writes in length about the circumstances of Roland's death, perhaps the most telling entries are the shortest ones, like that of January 9: 'Wandered about Camberwell alone, extremely miserable.' In *Testament of Youth*, the day of the shattering phone call from Roland's sister Clare and the weeks that followed are produced as fragmentary moments, like Vera failing to drink a cup of coffee, or listening to Edward playing melancholy organ tunes in a country church. These pages bring real memories and literary style together in a way that is every bit as haunting as her diary entries.

Vera became fond of Oxford and her few close friends there, but the mental strain of studying – while the frontline conditions and tragic news brought suffering to many others – proved too powerful. Thus, in late June 1915 she put her studies on an indefinite hold and started as a V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse at the Devonshire Hospital in Buxton. That way Vera wanted to be able to share at least some of the pain the soldiers were going through. Depending on her personal situation she wrote she either took a keen interest in her work or hated it, but nevertheless saw quitting it as even more hateful. As the months went by and the war seemed to get no closer to ending, Vera extended her six-month contract and ended up serving almost continuously for four years, the only substantial breaks being caused by her falling sick and family emergencies.

Whenever a major offensive began, the nurses and medical staff had to push themselves beyond the limits of endurance. In *Testament of Youth*, Vera gives her most detailed description of the usual chaos and agony that followed, in this case, the first days of the Battle of the Somme (1 July–18 November 1916):

On that morning, July 4th, began the immense convoys which came without cessation for about a fortnight, and continued at short intervals for the whole of that sultry month and the first part of August. Throughout those "busy and strenuous days" the wards sweltered beneath their roofs of corrugated iron; the prevailing odour of wounds and stinking streets lingered perpetually in our

nostrils, the red-hot hardness of paths and pavements burnt its way through the soles of our shoes. Day after day I had to fight the queer, frightening sensation— to which, throughout my years of nursing, I never became accustomed — of seeing the covered stretchers come in, one after another, without knowing, until I ran with pounding heart to look, what fearful sight or sound or stench, what problem of agony or imminent death, each brown blanket concealed.

In order to be within call at night, Betty and I were moved from Denmark Hill to a ground-floor flat in a block just outside the Brixton gate of the hospital. Every evening, after managing by the complete sacrifice of off-duty time to finish the morning dressing;, just before supper and leave the night people to give the afternoon and evening treatment, we limped from the chaos of the wards into the grateful privacy of our flat, and fell on to our beds feeling as though someone had dealt a series of numbing blows to all our bones and muscles from knee to shoulder. It was an effort to make our aching arms go through the movements of taking off our clothes, a triumph of resolution to force our sore feet to carry us to the bathroom.

Our daily work was complicated and increased by the new V.A.D.s who were rushed to the hospital by Devonshire House to meet the emergency. Not having been broken in to a "push" by preceding weeks of ordinary routine, they went sick in shoals with septic fingers, heat strokes and chills. At the same time the orderlies were fast disappearing to take the place of stretcher-bearers wounded at the front, and the few that remained had constantly to answer the "Fall In" and were never available for work in the wards.

Although the field hospitals took the first shock of emergency surgeries, the preceding quotation describes what was happening in Camberwell, very near the administrative heart of London. But once a few miles behind the frontline in France, Vera had to cope with rapidly worsening weather conditions as well. Not only did the storm winds destroy her hut but blew open a window once – covering her bed with snow. This unfortunate episode likely contributed to her case of 'trench fever' which coincided with Edward's rare leave from the front. It should be noted that the months in Étaples are mainly recorded in *Testament of Youth*, as Vera had stopped keeping her diary and had time to write very few letters, mainly to her mother and Edward.

No doubt partly because of the nature of her war work, Vera included in her diary and letters disturbingly graphic descriptions of how her soldier friends got wounded – and died. She strived to

parse together realistic accounts of their last moments from the information she received and managed to gather from the commanding and closest officers, other comrades-in-arms and priests. In a sense she seems to have sought any evidence that could indicate the men had died for some real purpose. Judging from her writings, Vera evidently took pride in the tributes paid to their leadership[2] and their care for those serving under them[3], but all the same she could not convince herself that they had not died in vain. In Roland's case, an additional trauma was caused by a parcel, sent to the Leightons from the front, containing his blood- and mud-soaked uniform and under-clothing. Vera's diary, letters and autobiography all mention the 'charnel-house' smell that filled the room and necessitated the burning of everything except the vest and the belt. Such details bring the personal tragedies of the First World War painfully close to the modern-day reader.

Yet another aspect that shines through Vera's writings is how much poetry and music meant to her, especially in the bleakest of times. When it comes to classical composers and popular songs of the period, *Testament of Youth* in particular reads like a veritable catalogue of them. Music brought solace to her, and the anxiety about British offensives made certain pieces, like Cowper's hymn *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, especially touching. In fact, Vera and her V.A.D. friend went to hear Brahms' *Requiem* just a few hours before the Battle of the Somme began. Equally poignant is the list of pieces Vera would find too painful to play on piano if her brother, a gifted violinist, would fall. In the surgical ward of 1st London General there were 'blaring, blatant gramophones' that gave wounded men consolation, but to Vera, the songs like *If You Were the Only Girl in the World* added 'a strident grotesqueness to the cold, dark evenings of hurry and pain'. Nevertheless, writing and reading poetry, including war poetry by the likes of Rupert Brooke, helped her to cope with physical and mental pain. This shows the invaluable importance of different art forms in both public and private life during the long war years.

Vera wrote about the Germans as well. On 24 September 1914 she began her diary entry by stating 'My Greek gets on at a fine rate', but what really caught her interest that day were the German prisoners she saw at a camp in Frimley Common. Although from time to time she records – with great indignation – the (alleged) war crimes she had heard or read about, her attitude towards Germans seems to have already been more neutral than was the case with many of her fellow Britons. After describing the ragged outlook of the men she concludes:

They all appeared to be well treated – better no doubt than our poor soldiers are being treated in Germany. We moved away at last, though I could have occupied myself all day looking at those unfamiliar types of face, and speculating as to what each one must have been through before getting there.

This was not the last time Vera saw Germans affected by the war. After serving for a year at the Devonshire Hospital and the 1st London General Hospital, she was transferred in 1916 to foreign service, first to Malta and, eventually, in August 1917 to Field Hospital 24 in Étaples (near the English Channel). For the first few weeks she worked in a ward for seriously or mortally wounded German officers. The experience moved her to write a poem called 'The German Ward ("Inter Arma Caritas")' which aptly sums up her empathy – enemy nationals or not. What is more, Vera even travelled to the occupied parts of Germany as part of a continental journey with her closest post-war friend Winifred Holtby in the early 1920s. This enabled her to see first-hand some of the disastrous effects the war had on German society and economy – especially the plight of the poor.

After the Armistice, Vera's mind was clouded with such darkness she even began suffering from hallucinations, all of which she depicts with absolute frankness. It is fair to say her decision to continue the studies at Oxford and, most importantly, befriending Winifred Holtby there, gradually pulled her up from the depths of despair. She took a new direction academically by changing her major subject into history and hoped this might lead her to understand the reasons behind the global calamity that had claimed millions of lives. After graduating as Master of Arts in 1921 – among the first women to officially receive a university degree in Oxford – she strived to combine her interest in international affairs with aspirations of becoming an author. Vera's plan started coming into fruition when the League of Nations Union accepted her as a traveling lecturer, which in turn led to opportunities to cover the Assembly meetings at Geneva with Winifred for several newspapers.

Simultaneously, they took the first steps on their literary careers, inspiring each other in the process of writing *The Dark Tide* and *Anderby Wold*. These debut novels went from publisher to publisher – until finally deals were achieved. Although the path had proved to be a rocky one, especially to

Vera, both she and Winifred were determined to continue as authors and shared two flats in London to facilitate their endeavours. In a way, this section of *Testament of Youth* lays the groundwork for *Testament of Friendship* (1940) which Vera wrote after her premature death.

Considering how much personal suffering the war brought to Vera, it is a feat of literary brilliance that the final chapter of *Testament of Youth* culminates in her courtship, mainly via letters, with George Catlin. Vera writes that after the initial reluctance of letting another man into her life, she slowly became accustomed to the idea that George could be the 'stranger' Roland had 'prophetically' mentioned in one of his poems sent from the frontline. Thus, from the ruins of a lost world emerges a new one that, albeit fraught with its own complications, momentarily promised a new hope after the years of calamity.

Even at the outset of the First World War, Vera wrote about her anti-militaristic notions, and when combined with pacifism, internationalism and feminism, her story gains universality. Effectively, it speaks for many others who also paid a heavy price for the war effort, and not just the Britons. The war diary, the letters and *Testament of Youth* paint the picture of a mainly progressive, deep-thinking woman who wanted to reveal war in all its ugliness. Additionally, Vera provides fascinating glimpses into the university life of female students as she draws endearing, amusing and sharp character studies of her teachers, describes spending evenings with her friends, traditional ceremonies, and so on. After the war, the beginning of her literary career and political activity takes the center stage and makes her a more public figure. In effect, she manages to capture the transforming Britain and seamlessly juxtapose international events with her own story. It is no wonder Vera Brittain was – and still is – considered 'the voice of a generation'.

#VIITTEET#

[1] It was Brittain's original intention to have the diary published, but the idea did not bode well with publishers.
[2] Edward was awarded the Military Cross for trying to lead an attack while wounded on the first catastrophic day of the Battle of Somme. Victor was given the same decoration posthumously.
[3] For example, Geoffrey's worries about his men sensing his fear, or Roland's fateful decision to personally check the wires in no-man's-land tell much about this.