


Long war, shorter diary

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Taneli Hiltunen

Goode, Michael (ed.): *The Lengthening War. The Great War Diary of Mabel Goode* Pen & Sword History, Croydon 2016. 196 p.

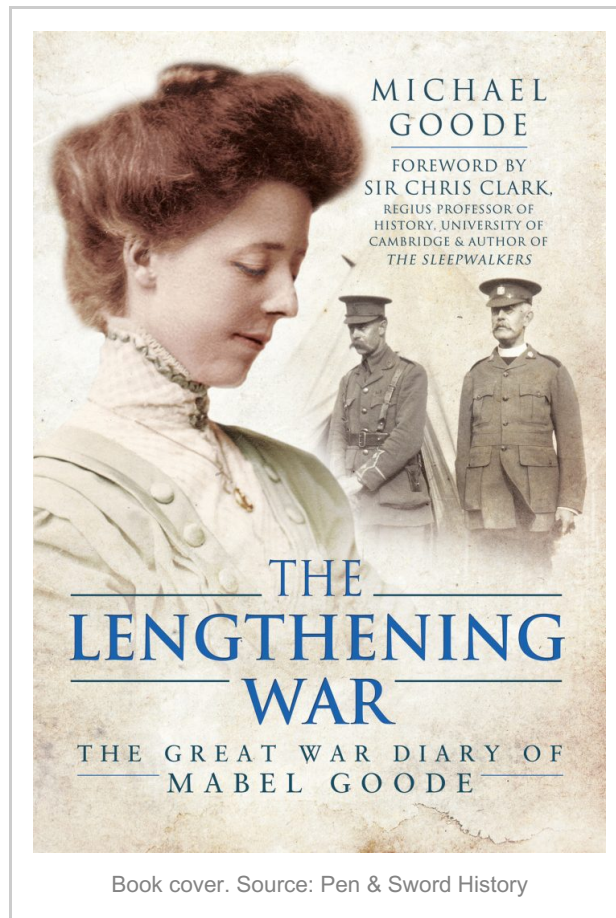
It is not every day one finds a war diary of a long since deceased relative in an envelope at the bottom of a dusty trunk, but such luck befell on Michael Goode and his grandfather as recently as 2011. Michael Goode, who graduated from Cambridge University with History as his major subject, originally meant to type it up for his family to read, but along the way the project expanded considerably. The end product is the book at hand here, published in the middle of the ongoing centenary commemorations of the First World War, complete with contextualising chapters and notes as well as some beautiful black-and-white photographs, most of them taken by the author of the diary.

Mabel Goode (1872-1954) is not someone whose name is etched into the British 'national memory'. In fact, before the publication of her diary she was practically unknown outside the Goode family. The First World War time frame notwithstanding, our knowledge of her life story is fragmented at best, and her diary, some other writings, photographs she took, and her paintings are almost the sole physical evidence of her existence. The diary under scrutiny here may not have the same level of literary merit as that of Vera Brittain, but nevertheless it provides informative glimpses of everyday life during the first three years of the war and sheds light on which kind of news the public was allowed to get about the frontline events and to what degree they differed from the actual reality and rather alarming bits of information hinted at the letters from their relatives and loved ones who served in the midst of those physically and mentally horrific conditions.

Mabel was born into a middle-class household with two elder brothers, Stuart and Henry, the latter playing a central role in her war diary. While Henry trained as a doctor and became a qualified surgeon, Mabel clearly had an eye for artistry and finished her course in The Slade School of Fine Arts in 1895, and landscape painting would remain an integral part of her life. As the war broke out, her family was living in York, and Mabel recorded the troops going in and out of the city. The excited atmosphere caught her up, as it seems to have done for most Britons, and when Stuart's attachment to some regiment or other got delayed by several weeks, Mabel was becoming quite concerned about his degree of patriotism. The family even sent some inquiries to the High Command, but finally Stuart got his commission. Contrast this with the anxiety Mabel clearly felt as Henry was operating a burgeoning ambulance service in and behind the trenches, where any bullet or shell landing too close could have meant serious injuries or death.

Those civilians that stayed on the British soil – instead of joining for example the Voluntary Aid Detachments and thus possibly going overseas at some point – were not exempt from physical dangers either. The spreading news about night-time airship attacks caused much anxiety, although the amount of actual damage and casualties caused by them varied. Mabel describes how she waited with her maid in the kitchen for a Zeppelin raid to end, this

being one of the very few occasions mentioned in the diary when the Victorian/Georgian mental wall between a servant and her employer seems to have somewhat broken down – for a moment.



Mabel writes much about frontline events, including major offensives and battles, and political moves, which shows her avidness for reading local and national newspapers. Alongside official news she tells about household matters and how war complicates them. Of course, she worries about the safety of her brother Henry as casualty lists mounted and quotes from his letters. This combination is what one would expect from a diary written during those extraordinary times, and Mabel sensed right from the beginning that the unfolding tremendous conflict would be the biggest event in her lifetime. She dealt with it by recording all sorts of details, first on a daily basis, but then her enthusiasm started to fade and gave way to disillusionment and criticism. Personal life also had its own effects, as the death of Mabel's mother caused a gap of several months in early 1916.

As the war prolonged, the food shortages became an acute problem and the prices rose correspondingly, leading to rationing. At the same time more and more workforce was needed, and thus the extraordinary circumstances and some instilled sense of doing one's duty drove many middle (and upper) class citizens to help the war effort in ways they hardly could have imagined before the outbreak of the war. Mabel was no exception and participated in agricultural labour on the fields of a nearby farm.

The most surprising thing about this particular diary concerns Mabel's past. After her father died, Mabel and her brothers spent a few years of their childhood and youth in Germany, but as Michael Goode points out, this did not make her any less susceptible to the endless flurry of news concerning the atrocities of the German troops. Truly, nothing in Mabel's

diary gives indication of some personal insight into the mindset of the Germans, although one probably assumes those years would have had some effect on her attitude during wartime. Perhaps the prevalent patriotic spirit made it almost impossible for her to see through the news coverage that was part factual, part propaganda. This gives a chance to see concretely, via one individual's remarks, how powerful a hold the press had over the mood of the Britons, at least up until 1916.

While the diary itself ends abruptly, the book does not, as Mabel had put some poems and a novel-like post-war 'love story' in the same trunk – and Michael Goode uses them as an appendix to a brief outline of Mabel's later life events. Despite their shared interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, Mabel's feelings towards this man proved to be one-sided and she remained unmarried.

According to Michael Goode, Mabel may have decided to stop keeping her diary abruptly in December 1916, long before the war ended, partly because of her frustration with the way it was going against the British troops. This seems a likely explanation, as Mabel was expecting a short war with a string of decisive victories. The lengthening war, however, evolved into something completely different, and Mabel gradually lost her desire to record it. What she had written in two and a half years offers valuable insight into the changing mood of the home front and the realities of everyday life shadowed by total war. Although the chapters by Michael Goode are written with a general readership in mind, Mabel's diary is a useful addition to the shelves of the First World War researchers as well. The information she gathered from newspapers, relatives and friends, and her personal experiences make for an authentic and rewarding journey through the months and years when the outcome of the war was anything but certain.

Taneli Hiltunen is a post-graduate student at the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies (major: World and European History) at the University of Turku, Finland. He is currently working on doctoral dissertation about the Victorian battle accounts of the Mahdist War.