

**THE GREAT WAR,
1914-1918; A
BRIEF SKETCH**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649217786

The great war, 1914-1918; a brief sketch by C. R. L. Fletcher

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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C. R. L. FLETCHER

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1914-1918

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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PREFACE

I FEAR that this little book may be found to contain many mistakes. It is far too early for any history of the war, official or unofficial—perhaps even for such a slight sketch as is here submitted. I can only plead that it was tempting to have a try at one. While I was writing the first lines the boys at Eton were decorating the statue of Henry VI with Allied flags. Since that time I have added, altered, cut out, and rewritten much of it. I have continually been gleaning fresh information which often upset what I had written, and yet may not be true after all. But substantially the sketch stands as it was made in the six weeks following the armistice.

Many friends, including all those whose opinion I most value, have given me another reason, in addition to the difficulty of obtaining information, for deferring publication. They say 'The war is not yet over, we have not won peace, our politicians are going to throw away the fruits of victory.' This may be true, but it does not concern me for the moment. There may be new bitternesses, new complications, which may quite conceivably rob us of some of those fruits. The Allies may be led, by

their politicians and their 'profiteers,' to quarrel in such ways that they will try to rob each other of those fruits. *Soit*; but I should not like to stand in the shoes of such men when

Liber scriptus proferetur
in quo totum continetur
unde mundus judicetur.

There may even be a new war with the old enemy, reborn from the agonies of hapless Russia and in alliance with her worst elements, and such a war would undoubtedly rob us of some of the fruits of our recent victory. But it can never, and nothing can ever, rob us of the deeds which Britain and France have done in the war that began in 1914. That war (*the* war it must ever be to us old people, some of whom lost in it all that made life worth living) is over. It ended on November 11, 1918. I grant that it ended, as the months that have since elapsed have proved, a little too soon. It was a pity that Marshal Foch was not allowed to have 'his battle,' that the armistice was granted before the southern arm of his giant pincers could close upon the Rhine from Lorraine, and before Germany had been made to suffer at least some fraction of what her insensate arrogance and cruelty made the rest of Europe suffer. But with that also I am not concerned; it is not within the sphere of operations which I planned for this little book.

'Again,' say the same friends, 'you don't know what the internal condition of Britain may be two

years hence. One of the quite possible results of the war is sheer economic ruin, probably followed by a revolution.' Well, I shall be very sorry if such things happen, but I can't help it. It won't affect the story of the great things we did in those four years. The hills, and the fields, and the rivers, and the seas of Britain will be there all right at the end of it, whatever ruin may overtake the generation that survived the war. Change, beyond and beside our wildest contemporary expectations and estimates, is a law of nature. Perhaps the changes that will come will breed a better, more humane, more sober and serious race ; it is difficult to believe that they will breed sons more enduring and more virile than the heroes of the Great War. When I was an undergraduate our Oxford tutors used to tell us that there was no such thing as 'national character.' What absurd nonsense it was ! Upon my soul, I believe it must have been a bit of *camouflage* spread abroad by the Germans (our tutors in the seventies were all steeped in German *Kultur*) in order to sap our belief in ourselves. For it was essentially the veriest 'hard-shell' national characters of France and Britain that won the war. My friend Sir Walter Ralcigh said to me, in one of the darkest hours of 1917, 'I found my optimism on the conversations that I invariably hear when I travel in a third-class railway carriage.' We now hear a vast amount about the disputes between capital and labour and about the chaos that must inevitably result from them ; we hear far less about

the immense good feeling between all classes of the British people that lies at the root of our national character. It was this that manifested itself so splendidly, on the sea and in the field, during the war. Nay, it was this which enabled us to endure to the end.

It is a thing quite independent of Governments or forms of government. We hear a great deal about the war having been 'a great struggle to make the world safe for democracy.' I think that, in plain English, much of this is what the soldiers call 'hot air.' I prefer the word 'freedom.' I have no greater opinion of democracy as a form of government than Aristotle had; if it could ever be completely put in force it would show itself intensely hostile to true freedom, for it would prohibit intelligence and energy from coming to the top or reaping its due reward if it got there. It was not because they were governed democratically, or any-other-critically, that France and Britain won the war. It was not their Governments, or their forms of government, that won it; it was the national character of their peoples. 'There never was a Government with so much power and so little authority' as our Cabinet in 1914. But the nation took charge and compelled the Government to wake up and, having woke up, to stand firm. It was the same in France. 'We shall be all right,' said the *poilus*, '*pourvu que les civils y tiennent.*' The two nations did this because each had the spirit of true freedom, and the long inheritance of a glorious