

# Goodbye Old Man?

*The Evolution of the Soldier–  
Horse Relationship in Myth  
and Memory, 1880–1939*

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**Abstract:** On the battlefield, it was the soldier–horse relationship that formed soldier and horse into an effective weapon against the enemy. At home, portrayals of this relationship enabled the British people to imagine the realities of war. Reality and representation co-existed in a blending of past and present that combined traditional notions of warfare with the modern battlefield. Increasingly, this imagery represented the many soldiers and horses of the ranks who, although humble, were striving every day to win the War. Images, such as Fortunino Matania’s *Good-bye, Old Man*, allowed those at home to imagine their own loved ones in the soldier’s compassion for his horse’s plight. These messages of humanity and compassion would prove equally valuable when the process of national mourning and reconciliation began.

**Keywords:** *The Great War; Soldier–Horse Relationship; Memory; Mythologization; War Illustration; Portrayal; World War One*

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“According to regulations, it was for a veterinary officer alone to decide whether a horse should be killed straightaway or whether it should be kept alive for hospital treatment. But such was the concern of the British soldiers for their horses that in many cases [...] a soldier himself performed this merciful office with his rifle. [...] Men who in times of shortage or danger had shared rations with their horses, or even risked their lives to save them from danger—as had many British soldiers—could not come to this tragic parting without real sorrow. One of the most human pictures of the war represented a British soldier on the battlefield holding up the head of his wounded horse and saying “Good-bye, old pal!” It was no mere flight of imagination on the part of the artist, for that scene occurred over and over again in actual fact.”<sup>1</sup>

On 15 July 1916, *The War Illustrated* led its one hundredth edition with a front-page illustration entitled “‘Good-bye Old Man!’—The Soldier’s Farewell to His Steed. A Touching Incident on the Road to a Battery Position in Southern Flanders” (fig. 1). Published when British forces on the Western Front were fighting in the succession of battles that would later be remembered collectively as The Somme, it told the story of a young artilleryman whose horse had been mortally wounded. Although torn by the urgency of the situation, and the shouts of his comrades, the soldier knelt with the dying horse’s head cradled in his arms. With the horse’s harness removed and hitched over his shoulder, he wept as he said a hurried last good-bye to his faithful friend.

Drama, and a sense of danger and urgency, was created by the image’s composition: the road drawing the eye backwards and forwards between the dying horse and back into the picture where we see what remains of the team struggling together to push the gun limber up the hill and away from the danger of the falling shells. The force of the shell and the true horror of the incident are only suggested. It is the destruction of the nearby building, the smoke and

1 Clarke, “British War Horse”, 467.

15th July, 1916.

No. 109. Vol. 4.



A PICTURE-RECORD of Events by Land, Sea and Air. Edited by J. A. HAMMERTON



"GOOD-BYE, OLD MAN!"—The soldier's farewell to his steed. A touching incident on the road to a battery position in Southern Flanders. (Drawn by F. Matania.)

**Fig. 1**

Fortunino Matania, "Good-Bye, Old Man!"—The soldier's farewell to his steed. A touching incident on the road to a battery position in Southern Flanders." *The War Illustrated*, 15 July 1916.

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flying debris, the crater made in the road near to the horse, and the torn bark on the trees bordering the road that indicate the full force of the blast which has wounded the dying horse. In the foreground, debris is scattered around man and horse. Pieces of broken and hurriedly cut harness, and a forgotten mess tin, not only suggest the shell's destructive power, but also their hurried departure. This was a "language" of war reporting with which the Great War's audience would have been familiar; the bodies of dead horses were used to imply war's consumption of "useful life".<sup>2</sup> That this visual metaphor was so well understood suggests how, as Paul Fussell has observed, the War was "relying on inherited myth" as "it was generating new myth, and that myth is the fiber of our own lives".<sup>3</sup>

The soldier and his horse in *Good-bye, Old Man* were figures in a story that, although it had evolved to encompass the evils of modern warfare, had been told many times before. This is not to say that portrayals of the military horse were mere tropes, but rather that as long as horses were necessary in warfare, those stories would "occur over and over again in actual fact".<sup>4</sup> The horse was a living, breathing equine agent in a history formed amidst other human and non-human agents, but it did not participate by choice. Indeed, as soldiers of the Great War complained that they were mere "slaves" to the British Army, it is not surprising to find that they often expressed sympathy for the horses who, having even less agency than they had themselves, struggled and suffered on their behalf.<sup>5</sup> Soldiers who had gone to great lengths to care for their horses as best they could were well aware that the horses relied on them to "voice" what they endured. Perhaps this was sometimes rather too anthropomorphic for modern tastes, but it was a language that enabled soldiers to express the attention to their horses' well-being that lay at the very heart of the soldier-horse relationship. Thus, it has been

2 Wilkinson, *Depictions and Images of War*, 127.

3 Fussell, *The Great War*, ix.

4 Clarke, "British War Horse", 467.

5 R.G. Flowerdew, Sergeant, 175 Machine Gun Corps, Transferred from Suffolk Yeomanry, "Personal Diary, Western Front 1916-1917". Liddle Collection, Leeds University Special Collections, Gs0562.

the duty of the human half of the “Centaurian Pact” to express their guilt at the suffering horses have endured in war.<sup>6</sup> As Anna Sewell’s old war horse, Captain, so patiently explained when asked by Beauty whether war was the “fine thing” people seemed to suppose: “‘Ah!’ said he, I should think they never saw it. No doubt it is very fine when there is no enemy, when it is just exercise and parade, and sham-fight. Yes, it is very fine then; but when thousands of good brave men and horses are killed, or crippled for life, it has a very different look.”<sup>7</sup> Just as Sewell’s novel addressed the “downward spiral” that was the inevitable fate of Britain’s civilian and military horse population, war illustrations (and most notably Matania’s *Good-bye, Old Man*) reveal not only how the military horse was portrayed, but something of the very real soldier–horse relationship that inspired them.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, moreover, portrayals that changed attitudes to the treatment of horses in civilian life had an influence not only upon how the military horse was portrayed, but on military animal management and supply practices, and upon the soldier–horse relationship itself. Indeed, there was a palpable tension between the necessary use of horses in war and the moral responsibility incumbent upon those who did so.

During the Great War, we might argue that the soldier–horse relationship became as powerful an agent in its representational form as it was on the battlefield. This interplay of the real and the representational, or the real and the imaginary, was nowhere more fraught than in the body of the military horse. As Garry Marvin has explained, horse and human enter into a cyclical relationship whereupon representations and constructions create the context for relationships with animals; the relationships themselves then generating representations, and representations out of relationships. He notes that these systems are not mechanical, and nor are they fixed in time. Thus, it is necessary to consider how and why social, economic, political, and cultural changes within human societies change the place of humans and horses within them, and thus

6 Raulff, *Farewell to the Horse*, 9–10.

7 Sewell, *Black Beauty*, 180.

8 Edwards, *Thy Servant the Horse*, 39.

the relationships and representations that come out of this change.<sup>9</sup> It is this fluid interplay between the real and the representational that, once the influence of memory and myth are brought into the process, I refer to as “remembering and forgetting”. Of course, it would be simplistic to argue that the soldier–horse relationship was one day remembered and the next forgotten. Rather, this article traces the real and representational soldier–horse relationship’s changing place in British society before, during, and after the Great War. To this end, this article takes its earliest representations of the soldier–horse relationship from the Victorian period, exploring examples from the Crimean, Mahdist, and Boer Wars in the process. Its later examples tentatively reflect the complexities of social change in the interwar period, and the soldier–horse relationship’s real and representational place in a nation unalterably changed by the Great War. Indeed, even Dorothy Brooke, who, sixteen years after the War’s culmination, would become the saviour of the old war horses in Cairo, admitted that she too had “hated to remember but could not forget”.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the soldier–horse relationship’s evolution is a microcosm of the wider process events undergo in order to become history, and which, once myth and memory combine in their telling, ensure that some stories survive when others fall by the wayside.<sup>11</sup> This, then, is a process of telling and re-telling, and of remembering and forgetting, that relies upon a story’s (or concept’s) continued relevance, and therefore also upon its ability to capture the imagination.<sup>12</sup> Images like *Good-bye, Old Man* appealed to the British public because they created a sense of continuity within a shared national history, a strong feature of which was a (largely imaginary) connection to the heroic and chivalric.<sup>13</sup> During the Great War, these associations were re-worked to suit the demands of modern warfare, with the soldier

9 Garry Marvin, “Wolves”, qtd. in Landry, *Noble Brutes*, 13.

10 Dorothy E. Brooke, “British war horses’ sad plight”, *Morning Post* 16 April 1931. Available on the website of the Brooke Hospital for Animals: <https://www.thebrooke.org/about-brooke/history-brooke/dorothy-brookes-letter-morning-post>

11 Barthes, *Mythologies*

12 Flynn, *Soldiers and their Horses*, 6–7.

13 Girouard, *Return to Camelot*, 260.

and his horse playing a crucial role in this re-imagining. In the post-war period, however, social change, increased mechanization, and a move towards modernity that eschewed these traditional associations combined to place both the real and representational soldier-horse relationship under increasing strain.<sup>14</sup>

*Good-bye, Old Man* enables us to explore the soldier-horse relationship's evolution in myth and memory, an approach that allows this important portrayal of the soldier-horse relationship to do more than simply illustrate a point.<sup>15</sup> Rather, considering the period in which the image was produced, and the people it was produced for, enables us to trace changing attitudes to the soldier and his horse. In a sense, *Good-bye, Old Man* becomes an example of how myths come into being and how they endure. In fact, the soldier-horse relationship has undergone a mythologization in parallel with that experienced by the Great War itself. This being to a large extent a process of simplification: as Roland Barthes put it, myth's function is "to distort not to make disappear".<sup>16</sup> Thus, when the soldier-horse relationship's mythologization is referred to in the context of this article, it is as two extremes. These are, first, that *every* British soldier loved his horse to the extent that he would have put his own life in danger to save him or her from harm, and second, that *all* the British Army's horses were routinely treated with culpable carelessness. As with most myths of the Great War, the reality of the situation — i.e. the war as it was experienced first-hand — is rather less easily compartmentalized. As Jay Winter puts it: "To array the past in such a way is to invite distortion by losing a sense of its messiness, its non-linearity, its vigorous and stubbornly visible incompatibilities."<sup>17</sup>

14 Rae, "Double Sorrow", 260.

15 *Goodbye Old Man* appears in numerous popular and academic texts, and websites, on the subject of war animals. In 2006, the painting (originally commissioned by Our Dumb Friends' League to head their wartime Blue Cross campaign) appeared at an exhibition entitled "The Animals' War" at the Imperial War Museum in London. See, for example, Gardiner, *The Animals' War*, 36.

16 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 31.

17 Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 4–5.



## Portraying the Soldier–Horse Relationship: The Victorian and Edwardian Legacy

The horse had long been an important figure in the “imagined community” that was British national identity.<sup>18</sup> At the time of the Great War, just as today, where and how the horse fitted into this “imagined” nation depended considerably upon the context in which the horse and the human encountered each other.<sup>19</sup> There was a significant difference in the relationship between horse and human when the horse was kept as a working animal, and when this was extended to include military uses and equestrian pursuits.<sup>20</sup> There was, and is, a difference in attitudes towards a thoroughbred produced for horse racing and a top-level show horse, as there is a hunter, a leisure horse, a heavy draft horse, or a horse that is produced solely for meat.<sup>21</sup> We need to think only of the different spaces inhabited by, and discourses concerning, companion animals and livestock animals to get a sense of the vast incongruities in the ways that particular human and nonhuman animal bodies are constructed within these different contexts, or “apparatuses”.<sup>22</sup>

Just as attitudes to the well-being of living horses evolved throughout the Victorian and Edwardian period, so too did concerns about what happened to horses at the end of their lives. As Kendra Coulter has noted, “across space and time, horses have been valorized, loved, worked, exploited, and slaughtered.” However, the “dirty work” was usually the responsibility of working-class people.<sup>23</sup> At the very centre of this debate were the soldiers and horses who, as Sandra Swart has identified, experienced at first-hand “an uneasy friction between the growing view of horses as comrades and their official designation as military property.”<sup>24</sup>

18 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6–7.

19 Fudge, “A Left-Handed Blow,” 16.

20 Dashper, “Tools of the Trade”, 360–61.

21 Endenburg, “Perceptions and Attitudes”, 40.

22 Thierman, “Apparatuses of Animality”, 93.

23 Coulter, “Herds and Hierarchies”, 135.

24 Swart, *Riding High*, 128.

The Victorian and Edwardian period saw mechanization, humanitarian and legal reform, and social change combine to challenge any conviction that God's purpose in creating the horse had been solely that the species might serve mankind. For a growing number of the British people, it was becoming difficult to accept horses' abuse in a society where, we must not forget, the horse was still a prime means of transport and of providing power for manufacturing.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, the British populace was encouraged to treat their animals as they themselves would wish to be treated. By the turn of the century, animal cruelty was becoming socially unacceptable.

Reflecting this social change, by the time the fifth edition of Lieutenant-General Frederick Fitzwygram's "bible" of horse management, *Horses and Stables*, was published in 1901, it had evolved since its original publication in 1869 to more strongly emphasize the moral duty incumbent upon the human in the human-horse relationship. Whereas in previous editions it had been implicit that there was a duty of care (expressed through the act of managing horses appropriately and with consideration), now the moral and humane reasons for this good practice were spelled out very clearly. Fitzwygram's text had always imparted sage advice on practical matters of horse management, but new sections of the book focused on the humane horseperson's moral responsibility to prevent and alleviate suffering:

[S]urely no creature stands more in needs of this aid than the horse. His life is often one of continual slavery and in many instances of perpetual discomfort. He alone, or almost alone, of all creatures is doomed to never-ceasing labour. [. . .] [T]he horse

25 For example, F.M.L. Thompson suggested that because there was such demand for local transport to and from the railway stations, the "railway age" was "the greatest age of the horse". Richard Moore-Colyer agrees, arguing that "[f]or all the triumphant articles in the contemporary agricultural and engineering press applauding the achievements of steam and mechanization, the horse remained the fundamental unit of power in Victorian Britain and was to retain its pre-eminence into the first decade of the Twentieth Century. Agriculture, the extractive and manufacturing industries, urban and rural transport systems, and the civil and military authorities all relied, to a greater or lesser extent, on the draught power or carrying capacity of the horse." See Thompson, "Horses in European Economic History", 13-14; Moore-Colyer, "Aspects of Horse Breeding", 47.

seems to be haunted by the demon of labour and fatigue almost from his earliest years, and generally increasing to the hour of his death—to be haunted by a demon whose power to torment seems to increase as the horse becomes older and more worn.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, and if as Emotionology suggests society does indeed influence and shape what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and thus too the emotional life of the individual, then it would appear that Fitzwygram's wishes were beginning to be borne out.<sup>27</sup> The growing influence and respectability of humane organizations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA),<sup>28</sup> and especially once allied with the Christian message that “The merciful man shows mercy to his beast”,<sup>29</sup> tells us that ill-treatment of animals was becoming more than the “pseudo sentimentality”<sup>30</sup> of a minority. However, neither would it have required a great flight of the imagination to visualize the horrors of war when Britain still harboured every conceivable abuse of the horse, “the most precious of gifts which God bestowed upon man”.<sup>31</sup>

Part of living in a horse-drawn age was that its realities were often all too visible. As such, while the visible role of horses (and their abuse) helped the British public to reconcile themselves with the necessary use of horses in war, it also ensured that they were never entirely innocent of its horrors. When the disposal of Britain's unwanted horses and the abuses inflicted upon them were there to be seen with one's own eyes, it is difficult to maintain the modern fiction that the British before 1914 were entirely naïve to the horrors of

26 Fitzwygram, *Horses and Stables*, 520.

27 Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions”, 836–37.

28 “The final aid to progress was the receipt of a letter, dated 4 July 1835, from Kensington Palace, saying: ‘I have laid before the Duchess of Kent your letter of the 2nd inst. And its enclosure, relating to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Her Royal Highness very readily acceded to your request that her name and that of the Princess Victoria be placed on the list of Lady Patronesses.’ The Princess was to become Queen Victoria, whose encouragement of the Society's activities, and Royal Patronage from 1840, did so much to help its progress during the next half century.” Moss, *Valiant Crusade*, 29.

29 Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, 45.

30 Ainsworth, review of *A Lashing for the Lashers*, 550.

31 Macmillan, “God's Beautiful Creatures”, 974.

war. Perhaps they did not fully anticipate modern warfare's capacity for destruction, but they by no means ignorant of what war entailed. The British people were evidently aware that horses suffered and died in battles, but war was no longer thought of as an excuse to treat animals in any manner one wished. For example, in an article published by The Humanitarian League in 1912, Ernest Bell and Harold Baillie Weaver argued that although the British were considered to be more "actively enlisted on the side of humaneness to animals than [...] any other country of the world", this humanity still fell short once a horse became a war horse and was thus exposed to the particular hardships of a military campaign. The fact that this question was raised at all, however, shows how far attitudes to animals had in fact come.<sup>32</sup> It also goes a long way to explaining the British Army's much improved approach to horse supply and management during the Great War. Bell and Weaver wrote:

Whether we have the right to force these docile and confiding animals to take part in our unholy quarrels against their natures and their wills may be for some people a debatable question, but everyone must admit that if we do so, the very least that should be expected of us is to see that they shall be subjected to no more suffering than is absolutely necessary. It certainly cannot be said that this is the case now. On the contrary, it must be admitted by anyone who will take the trouble to enquire into the facts, that horses and the other animals employed in war, are treated with culpable carelessness and indifference, resulting in severe suffering, a great part of which is avoidable.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902) was an important milestone in the practical utilization of horses in warfare, and certainly for how the public thought about the use of horses in war, the imagery used to portray them would have been familiar. For example, when in 1904 the committee represented in England by Mr Albert Holt of Messrs Holt and Holt, South African merchants, chose to commemorate "the

<sup>32</sup> See Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 125.

<sup>33</sup> Bell and Weaver, *Horses in Warfare*, 3–4.

services rendered to our gallant soldiers in the late war in South Africa by that most faithful of all servants the horse".<sup>34</sup> The Port Elizabeth memorial took the form of "a rough-hewn pedestal with a cattle trough at the foot" (fig. 2). The bronze sculpture depicted a soldier kneeling before his horse to offer him a much-needed drink of water. The inscription carved into the stone base reads: "The greatness of a nation consists not so much in the number of its people or the extent of its territory as in the extent and justice of its compassion."<sup>35</sup>

This image of a soldier offering water to his horse, but for some timely alterations to uniform and equipment, bore more than a passing resemblance to a Stanley Berkley illustration of English cavalrymen watering their horses during the Mahdist War in Sudan in the 1880s. During the Great War, the motif would appear again; because of the simple fact that man and horse likewise felt thirst, the soldier and his horse were drawn together in the public imagination. Moreover, these inherited images appeared again and again. As long as horses were used in war, and as long as soldiers had to ensure their horses were watered, they would always have a basis in actual experience. Images which portrayed the horse's suffering and the soldier's endeavours to relieve it, while emphasizing the British soldier's capacity for compassion, spoke also of the humanity imagined to be inherent in all those born of the nation he served. It may merely have been an illusion, but such images helped to reinforce a belief that the British were a people of "justice" and "compassion".

The Port Elizabeth memorial reflected how attitudes to the soldier's horse were changing. It was no longer thought that humanity could be entirely dispensed with "in the heat of great battles", and it was no longer only "raving anti-cruelty people" who thought so.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the memorial sought to recognize the horse's necessary role in the Army's service. While the memorial's primary purpose was to remember the 400,000 horses killed during the Boer War, many also

34 "War Memorials." *The Times* Monday 28 March 1904 (issue 37353): 6.

35 Brereton, *The Horse in War*, 133.

36 Julian Ralph, correspondent at the front for the *Daily Mail*, in Pike, "The Cruel Case of the Wounded War-Horses," 916.



**Fig. 2**

“The Horse Memorial,  
Port Elizabeth”

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Stock Photo.

hoped that it would “inculcate acts of kindness to animals” and remind “the rising generation [...] of the part taken in that historical struggle by man’s best friend”. Its epitaph, while the sceptical might accuse it of hypocrisy, was certainly not lacking in integrity.<sup>37</sup>

Portrayals of the soldier–horse relationship were not confined only to the civilian world, to poets, or to the imaginations of artists and war illustrators. The National Army Museum’s collection contains sufficient examples to suggest the British Army was itself keen to recognize the horse’s contribution to its history. Neither did paintings commissioned by the regiments themselves shy away from sentimentality. There may have been little place for emotional indulgence on the battlefield, but when expressed after the event such images provided an opportunity for remembrance, and thus recovery and reconciliation. In this way, the stories these images told, and their portrayal of the soldier–horse relationship, would become immortalized, preparing the ground for their evolution through memory and myth. For example, Richard Caton-Woodville’s 1882 painting, *Cruel to be Kind*, portrayed “a moment full of pathos” as an officer reluctantly raised his pistol ready to shoot his wounded horse. It was as if Caton-Woodville had captured a memory:

In the harsh conditions on the North West Frontier of India, there was no means of treating a sick or wounded horse. To save it from a lingering and painful death, the officer has to resort to shooting his own mount. It is a moment full of pathos. As he prepares to fire, the injured animal raises its head to look at its master. It seems to know what he is going to do. [...] The subject was meant to be seen as heroic as well as tragic, to show that fulfilling duty can sometimes be difficult.<sup>38</sup>

37 “This was a war of almost unprecedented brutality, in which the British beat the Boers by burning down their homes and herding them into the world’s first large-scale concentration camps, where over 40,000 people died. [...] This is a worthy index, on which Britain would have been placed close to the bottom; unless we were judged by compassion—or sentiment—for animals. These monuments, perhaps, permit us to see ourselves as kind people, even as unspeakable acts are committed on our behalf.” Monbiot, “Cult of the Heroic Animal”.

38 Richard Caton-Woodville, “Cruel to be Kind, North West Frontier, 1878–1882,” London: National Army Museum, NAM 1960-05-50-1.

Set on a snowy road, overshadowed by rugged mountains, this small act of kindness brought the experience of war down to a single moment; its intimacy perhaps foreshadowing what would make Matania's *Good-bye, Old Man* so successful some thirty years later. In the painting's background an artillery team struggle with the difficult terrain, the gunners on foot pushing the gun limber, as the drivers, whips raised, urge their horses to even greater effort. This is a detail intended to remind us that the prosecution of war must always take precedence over the soldier's personal feelings. In the drawing's centre, the officer's iron-grey horse raises his head and seems almost to thank him for what he is about to do. The officer's body language suggests the emotions he feels at that moment. He does not weep, or show obvious distress, but he slightly turns his body away. It is as if he is torn between the necessity that he shoots accurately, and his reluctance to see the horse die. Caton-Woodville's message was that sometimes it took bravery to be compassionate. Portrayals of the soldier-horse relationship that conveyed the soldier's capacity for compassion would prove ever more valuable during the Great War.

### **“Stirring Visions of Reckless Cavalry”: *The War Illustrated***

*The War Illustrated* emerged in 1914 as an illustrated newspaper dedicated solely to coverage of the War's events. Photographs and illustrations enabled the magazine's readers to see war. War photography still had limitations, but while it was difficult to capture the action as it happened, the technology made it possible to imagine what life behind the lines was like. Similarly, photographs taken after a battle conveyed the ferocity of the fighting that had gone before. What was and was not shown was important for morale, but this was not simply a matter of propaganda. Indeed, Stephen Badsey reminds us that propaganda had not been widely used before the Great War and had not yet acquired its largely negative connotations. Nevertheless, there was a strong desire to avoid bad news, and there was a limit to what could be shown. As Badsey explains it, “no news was better for the military than the good news desired by



the politicians, and bad news was what all wanted to avoid”.<sup>39</sup> However, this “absence of news” does not suggest that the period’s newspapers simply delivered pro-war propaganda. What was and was not said was decided as much by the people who bought the newspapers as it was by those who produced them. Publications like *The War Illustrated* reflected the tastes and views of their readership, and this in turn encouraged the publication’s coverage.<sup>40</sup>

There was an acknowledged subtext to the military horse’s portrayal which would not have been lost on those who read *The War Illustrated*. Indeed, the riderless horse, the horse alone in No Man’s Land, or the horse standing patiently over the recumbent figure of his sleeping (or deceased) master, were inherited images of battle which carried with them the assumption that horses were part of this landscape. New drama was created, however, when modern warfare impinged on these old imaginings. In October 1917, for example, *The Illustrated London News* carried on its front cover a full-page illustration by Wallace Coop entitled *Fidelity*. In the image, a horse stood over the body of his dead master. His ears were pricked and his eyes wide with fear as shells exploded behind him and a tank rumbled towards the brow of a hill in the distance. The text read:

Nothing could be more pathetic than the sight of a terrified horse left alone on the battlefield. During one of the recent battles before Ypres, a machine-gun officer acting in a forward capacity, who had been reconnoitring, informed an artillery officer that there was a riderless horse standing beside its dead rider, to whom it was evidently still faithful. The artillery officer went to the place indicated, and found the horse, which was apparently one of a gun-team. It was evidently in an exhausted state and had become entangled in wire near its dead master.<sup>41</sup>

In her work on the British Army in art prior to the Great War, J. W. M. Hichberger points out that the very success of an image often relied to a large extent upon “the imagery and clichés of newspaper war

39 Badsey, *The British Army in Battle and Its Image*, 164.

40 Wilkinson, *Depictions and Images of War*, xi.

41 Coop, “Fidelity”.

journalism,” and that because of this it was also assumed viewers would imagine the events that had led to that point.<sup>42</sup> Thus, when *The War Illustrated* used photographs and images of horses, their readers would have looked far beyond what was printed on the page. They would have imagined the ferocity of the fighting, and also the experience of the other horses and humans who had been with them.<sup>43</sup>

John Singleton has rightly indicated that study of the soldier’s horse gives “scope for considering the relationship between human beings and animals and their suffering in early twentieth century warfare.” He also argues that when the horse was pictured in the early months of the Great War it was as a “dashing romantic” cavalry mount ridden “in pursuit of an ever-fleeing foe”. In the War’s later years, however, the horse came to be revealed in “less glamorous, but equally gallant, roles”. According to Singleton, this was an evolution that concluded once the War was won and the illustrated press were able to return to a more “traditional imagery of the war-horse”.<sup>44</sup> Singleton is correct when he identifies an evolution in the portrayal of horses that mirrored wider social feeling. But this process was in no way linear, and was often contradictory and convoluted in nature. Even though early portrayals of the soldier’s horse did exploit the excitement and glamour of the cavalry charge, these never disappeared entirely. Rather, their persistence suggests a powerful desire to present war as it had always been imagined, whilst reluctantly acknowledging what it had become. In 1915 Colonel Mark Lockwood, presumably frustrated by public ignorance regarding the importance of horses to the ongoing war effort, challenged these misconceptions in order to emphasize the horse’s vital place in modern warfare:

Since the beginning of the age of chivalry, when first knights spurred into battle, the horse has been always associated with the romantic pageantry of warfare. Until the last few months, to think of war was to conjure up stirring visions of reckless cavalry charges, of foam-flecked chargers, imagine the thudding

42 Hichberger, *Images of the Army*, 91.

43 Wilkinson, *Depictions and Images of War*, 127.

44 Singleton, “Britain’s Military Use of Horses,”: 179.

of hoofs, and the fierce shouts of maddened men on no less maddened steeds. Of late the opinion seems to be held among civilians that horses are no longer a very important factor in the success of a campaign; this is a fallacy.<sup>45</sup>

Coverage in *The War Illustrated* both supported and disputed Mark Lockwood's argument. That horses were absolutely essential in modern warfare was made abundantly clear by their sheer proliferation. Horses were everywhere in almost every edition, whether as the subject of a photograph, illustration, article, or just because they were part of the War's landscape. However, the drama and romance of "the reckless cavalry charge" was almost as persistent. Indeed, so popular was this collective imagining that the leading war illustrators were kept very busy nourishing it. Cavalry charges and heroic (preferably mounted) acts of great heroism and daring appeared on a regular basis throughout the War. Even though long-range weapons had made war a far less personal affair, in terms of applying the "moral to the material" individual bravery remained just as important as it had before the Great War. As David Englander explains:

Industrialized mass warfare had, if anything, rendered traditional conceptions of the human-oriented battlefield more rather than less useful. Intelligence, initiative and élan were never more relevant and the scope for personal valour was wider than ever.<sup>46</sup>

Wartime images of the soldier and his horse focused on their bravery, undiminished stoicism, kindness, and good humour in the face of danger and adversity. Thus, tales of modern chivalry bore more than a passing resemblance to their traditional forbears.<sup>47</sup> In the October of 1914, for example, *The War Illustrated* published an advertisement for the first in a series of "thrilling and fascinating"

45 Lockwood, "How the Horse is Cared for at the Front."

46 Englander, "Discipline and Morale in the British Army," 125.

47 The attributes of the English gentleman were alleged to have descended from medieval chivalry. There were various key traits this modern-day chivalry encompassed, such as: generosity of spirit, being a good sport, amateurism over professionalism, a rejection of ruthlessness and cruelty, self-control and restraint, and modesty mixed with self-assurance. See Collins, "The Fall of the English Gentleman", 93–95.

romances. In this instance, Guy Standish had rescued a nurse during the British Expeditionary Force's retreat from Mons, an act of chivalric heroism worthy even of King Arthur's knights. An excerpt from the forthcoming publication read:

“We'll never get through Lucy — but we can die together!” hoarsely shouted Guy Standish as his horse, scorning its double burden, charged gloriously into the band of astonished Uhlans. Those supreme and thrilling seconds seemed like an eternity to Guy, and to the brave but trembling girl whom he was attempting to rescue from a fate far worse than death. Only a miracle could carry the lovers unscathed through that insensate, hate-filled group of Prussian fiends — and the miracle happened! For weeks afterwards the story of how Guy Standish won the Victoria Cross was proudly told wherever British and French soldiers were gathered together.<sup>48</sup>

In the illustration accompanying this extract (fig. 3), the brave Guy Standish is pictured mounted upon his equally heroic steed. In his right hand he holds aloft a cavalry sabre, while in the left he aims his revolver at a “Prussian fiend”. Somehow, he has managed to ride his white horse through the mass of German cavalymen without a hand on the reins, or any other obvious means of control. This is a detail which reminds us perhaps of Donna Landry's “silken thread” connecting human and horse: his horsemanship and the bond he has with his horse being so innate that any more obvious form of control is unnecessary.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile “the brave but trembling girl” clings to Standish as he carries her to safety. The overall impression is more akin to the Pre-Raphaelite's revival of the romantic and chivalric, or to the work of writers like Sir Walter Scott and Alfred Lord Tennyson, than to the modern battlefield, or indeed to any real experience of taking animals into war (fig. 4).

What had changed, however, was *who* was portrayed. The glamour of the cavalryman had now extended to encompass the humble transport driver, artilleryman, and trooper, and the draught horses

48 Edgar, “How Guy Standish Won His V.C.”

49 Landry, *Noble Brutes*, 69.



**Fig. 3**

“How Guy Standish Won His V.C.”  
*Answers*, a supplement to *The War Illustrated*, 1, no. 7 (3 Oct 1914), 151.

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**Fig. 4**

“A Cavalry Engagement”  
Postcard published by Reinthal  
& Newman, New York; C. H. Ltd.,  
London. Undated.

Author's Private Collection.

and pack mules who worked alongside him. Thus, existing associations of Englishness with equestrian heroism became further entwined, not only with romantic notions of the chivalric virtues, but with the stoicism of the working man and the industry of the working horse.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the various attributes of the officer class were increasingly applied to the soldier of the ranks, and significantly also to his horse. Ulrich Raulff describes the transformation of the civilian horse into a war horse as the “Centaurian Pact”, an action that transformed the “terrified prey animal” into a military asset.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the human element of the “pact” was also altered. This was a process that transformed human and equine “innocents” into warriors. While the horse truly was an innocent in the process, soldiers tended to be rather more conscious of the improved status their association with horses provided; one article described “how quickly the feeling of superiority gains ground in Thomas Atkins’s mind directly he is put on horseback”.<sup>52</sup> In reality, soldiers reported how the horses regularly put these newly trained horsemen firmly back in their “place”. For example, A. Whiteley remembered how he, having started learning to ride only very recently in the Royal Field Artillery, was publicly humiliated after just one moment’s misplaced overconfidence:

I was billeted with a plumber and his family. So I am proud as punch going through Great Baddow and the plumber’s family were looking through the window and the greengrocer had stopped and there were some cabbage leaves on the floor and I had the reins that tight that he bends down to pick up the cabbage and I slide down his neck and sit on my behind in front of the window. The next thing was when I got up the horse had gone. It went on the parade ground and got in position before I did.<sup>53</sup>

50 On Englishness see Landry, *Noble Brutes*, 2–3, and on English gentleman and chivalry see Collins, “The Fall of the English Gentleman,” 93.

51 Raulff, *Farewell to the Horse*, 9–10.

52 Denman, “The Future of Mounted Infantry,” 389.

53 A. Whiteley, Royal Field Artillery, Transcript of Taped Interview, Liddle Collection, Leeds University Special Collections, TR/08/59.

Representations of the soldier–horse relationship still relied heavily on traditional, inherited notions of warfare. The cavalryman may no longer have been quite the military force he had once been, but this did not stop the nation’s people from invoking him, and all that he represented. What changed was that the artilleryman, the mounted infantryman, and the horse transport driver were increasingly imbued, like the cavalryman before them, with the positive chivalric virtues of the mounted knight. Likewise, the heavy and light draught horses, who along with mules bore the brunt of the work in modern warfare, were now also recognized for the “spirit with which they take up guns and shells”. An article, published in *The Times* in December 1917, described the horses in glowing terms:

I am sure you would like the Army horses in Flanders. They are the most beautiful things in the country, especially the light and heavy draught horses, for they have to recommend them the fact that they do a job of work. Saddle horses are lovely to look at, of course, but they, like the cavalry, are simply not in it in this war, and this fact robs them of their charm just now, when every one and everything is judged by his job of work. Unspoilt by blinkers, they are not robbed of the beauty of eye; and their winter coats—innocent often of clippers—only add to their looks.<sup>54</sup>

No longer was it necessary to be a gentleman (or a Thoroughbred) to be possessed of all the most positive attributes of the British race, and nowhere were these qualities better illustrated than in the soldier’s kind and sympathetic treatment of his horse:

Not for honors alone will the British soldier risk danger, but with that fine chivalry which is ever at the services of the weak and oppressed, he will, whether a simple private or a commissioned officer, extend his aid to creatures of lesser usefulness.<sup>55</sup>

David Sobey Tamblyn describes the feeling of the British soldier for his horse as having been akin to an act of chivalry bestowed upon a “creature of lesser usefulness”. An odd choice of wording, given that

54 “Army Horses: Animal Sufferers from Shell Shock”, *The Times*, Friday 28 December 1917 (issue no. 41672), 9.

55 Tamblyn, *Horse in War*, 63.



soldiers were more inclined to describe their horses as friends, or comrades, than as something “lesser” than themselves. In fact, in reality, the British Army’s approach to the management of its human and equine resources differed very little, to the point that many soldiers felt the horses had been better cared for than they had themselves. Far from being “lesser creatures”, the horses represented a valuable “asset” to the Army, and woe betide any soldier who failed in his responsibility for their well-being. As W. E. Theakston recalled one of his sergeants as saying: “We can get plenty of you for a shilling a day, but the horses cost £40 each.”<sup>56</sup> This is not to say that the soldiers only cared for the well-being of their horses for fear of reprisal. When a soldier was assigned a horse he liked and trusted (and who hopefully liked and trusted him in return) he would do everything he could to protect him or her from unnecessary harm. This, however, was “the tragedy when casualties occurred”.<sup>57</sup>

### **Goodbye, Old Man: The Great War**

The reality of working with horses on the front line was that it was often dangerous and difficult. This, however, did not prevent many soldiers from forming a bond with their horses akin to the comradeship which existed between men. The British Army was keenly aware that the horse’s physical condition deteriorated more slowly when it was treated with sympathetic consideration and that the relationship this same sympathy engendered made the soldier and his horse a far more useful tool in warfare. This mindset was simply an extension of the attitude the Army had to the welfare of its human resources. Indeed, the old adage, “no foot no horse”, was as easily applied to an infantryman who could not march as it was to a horse.

Nevertheless, soldiers assigned the task of working with horses day in day out, and expected always to put the horse’s welfare before their own, found circumstances dictated what relationship was created between horse and man. Whether this was always one of love

56 W. E. Theakston, Non-Commissioned Officer, Royal Field Artillery, Transcribed Interview, IWM16710.

57 James T. Capron, 2nd Lieutenant, Royal Field Artillery, Transcribed Interview, Western Front 1914–1918, Liddle Collection, Leeds University Special Collections, GS028.

is debatable, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that when Basil Clarke described some soldiers' reactions to the death of their horses as a "tragic parting" he was not entering the world of myth. Similarly, Lieutenant Colonel A. W. Walmsley, who had served as an officer in the Army Service Corps during the Great War, recalled the terrible conditions at Passchendaele. He described how a team of mules had struggled in mud so deep their drivers were unable to save them, how he had been unable to get near enough to shoot them and how, because of this, they had eventually drowned. Indeed, even when interviewed in 1978, his regret was still palpable. Soldiers did not always say what had happened to their horses, but there were many who remembered vividly:

Six mules were trying to pull an ammunition wagon up. Had gone on struggling until they definitely sank in the mud and had been suffocated. [...] Their drivers were trying to the very last moment most desperately at the risk of their own lives to get them out. I went to try and help and was completely useless because I found the mud was so deep I couldn't even get near.<sup>58</sup>

Soldiers may have been restricted as to what they could or could not write about in their letters, but they certainly knew when what was being reported at home did not tally with the realities of their own experience. In his diary, Sergeant R. G. Flowerdew often referred to newspaper articles sent to him by his wife and to topics raised in them. On one occasion, he described how a Transport Officer had been reported as saying, "I shan't want my horse tonight I will walk". In the article, this had been used to imply that the officer was either selflessly going without his horse, or so brave that he did not feel he needed one. Flowerdew clearly had been entertained by this misrepresentation of what was for him his wartime reality. In his diary he wrote: "When I saw that I said I take it they have the wind up and are afraid to ride".<sup>59</sup> What we are reminded of here is that news travelled in both directions.

58 A. W. Walmsley, Lieutenant-Colonel, Royal Army Transport Corps, Transcribed Interview, Liddle Collection, Leeds University Special Collections, Tape 513.

59 R. G. Flowerdew, Sergeant, Leeds University Special Collections, GS0562.

Interestingly, *Good-bye, Old Man* appears to have appealed to the soldiers themselves, suggesting that it had not in fact strayed too far from their lived experience. Indeed, while serving in the Hussars at Arras, Corporal Jack May chose to commemorate the day his horse was killed by meticulously copying down Henry Chappell's homage to *Good-bye, Old Man*: a poem entitled "A Soldier's Kiss". That he did so tells us not only that soldiers also saw these portrayals of war, but that they were at times sufficiently in tune with their lived experience to be able to offer some comfort. Indeed, soldiers' recollections sometimes hinted at the reality behind the image. For example, an ex-troop sergeant of the Nineteenth Hussars described a trooper's reaction to the death of his horse during a withdrawal under fire in 1918:

I was riding with the Squadron rearguard when one of the troop horses was badly hit by MG fire. Horse and rider crashed down in front of me. The horse lay on its side and the trooper, unhurt, had rolled clear. Kicking one foot out of the stirrup, I ordered the trooper to mount behind me. Instead, he crawled towards his horse which had raised its head and was looking at him. He reached the horse, gently lifted its head onto his knees, and stayed put. I again ordered him to mount, and drew my pistol, saying I would shoot the animal. He said nothing; just looked up at me, then down to the horse, and continued to stroke its head. I think he knew it was the end, and I also think it understood its master was trying to give it what comfort he could. I didn't shoot. The squadron was almost out of sight. I said something to the effect "Well, it's your funeral" and trotted on to rejoin my place. The trooper caught up with the squadron later: he had stayed with his horse till it died. By all the law of averages, he should have stopped one too.<sup>60</sup>

The reason *Goodbye Old Man* proved so popular was perhaps because it contained more than a grain of truth.

It may be a seemingly obvious point, but the Great War looked very different when viewed from the inside out and without the gift of

60 Brereton, *The Horse in War*, 129–30.

hindsight. Wartime portrayals may seem naïve, or downright sentimental, but they were produced when those who created these images, and those for whom they were created, did not know how events would unfold. It is certainly no accident that already familiar imaginings of the soldier–horse relationship were reworked during the Great War. There was, after all, more comfort to be found in the sense of continuation these images created than in dwelling too much on the present. This was not because the British public wanted to hide from war’s reality, but rather because they needed to be able to root their imaginings in something familiar: in this case, the familiar was the horse. That the soldier and horse in *Good-bye, Old Man* were really very “ordinary” was another feature of the image which surely lay behind its lasting appeal. That both could at once be *any* horse and *any* soldier allowed its audience to identify with their story, and perhaps see in them the bravery and undiminished compassion of their own loved ones. It meant they were also able to see in the soldier and his horse the human and equine lives that had been sacrificed to the war effort.

The most popular of these portrayals would become central to the soldier–horse relationship’s evolution in myth and memory. Central to this evolution is the cycle of relationship and representation that changes over time. Hence what a wartime audience saw when they looked at *Good-bye, Old Man* in 1916, what a postwar audience saw, and what we might see today, are all slightly different. In effect, the horse changes little, but the contexts in which we encounter one another change far more.

### **Remembering and Forgetting: After the War**

The familiar images of the soldier and his horse that had allowed the British people to imagine war from a safe distance were equally valuable once the process of national mourning and reconciliation began. Although horses rarely featured in official memorials to the War’s dead, the British people nevertheless found ways to remember them. There may have been little overt remembrance of their contribution, but the horses and mules were remembered by the men with whom they had shared the hardships of life on campaign.

As a relatively “safe” topic, veterans talked about their horses and told stories of their shared adventures and exploits. Veterans wrote about their horses in their memoirs and shared these memories with their families. Local communities celebrated their veteran war horses and took great pride in each individual’s exploits and longevity well into the 1930s. However, these positive associations with the soldier’s horse were to come under increasing strain during the interwar period.

Increased mechanization meant that the horse was starting to disappear as a prominent participant in military endeavour. When the Army mechanized its cavalry, artillery, and logistics regiments, the soldier and horse were severed from one another for the first time in British military history. Britain’s contribution to the allied victory was still widely attributed to the excellence of its horse supply and management. Nevertheless, horses were becoming a “less serious subject” than they had once been. It was not that the horse had disappeared, but rather that it was becoming increasingly disassociated from work and war. R. H. Smythe, for example, recalled how attitudes to the horse had changed during his career as a veterinary surgeon:

After the advent of peace in 1918 [...] [p]eople who hitherto had lived with horses, talked of horses and dreamed horses, suddenly lost all interest in them as living creatures and regarded this as a suitable moment to be rid of them. [...] Within a few years the only horses remaining with us in any number were those which played an essential part in various sports, more especially those which provided an incentive to gambling.<sup>61</sup>

It must have seemed that the military horse was slipping from sight and mind. That the soldier–horse relationship was remembered just as it was starting to become forgotten is testament, not only to the British people’s desire for reconciliation, but to the complexity of their relationship with the horse. It was as much a matter of what *was* remembered as what was *not*. As Major R. Archer-Houblon observed when he looked back on his experience of the soldier–horse

61 Smythe, *The Mind of the Horse*, 12–13.

relationship: “How prehistoric all these reflections will seem, only a few years hence! Yet to us such subjects were as bread and meat, and the horses and their wants occupied as large a share of our thoughts as ever did the movements of the enemy!”<sup>62</sup>

After the War, the British people concentrated on the horses who had been fortunate enough to find their way home.<sup>63</sup> These few became the representatives of the many thousands who had not returned, and they were duly accorded veteran status. In 1919, *The Times* reported on a class at Aldershot Command Show for military horses that had seen active service. Among these was a brown gelding called B30, whose Army service had begun in 1912 when issued to the Fifth Dragoon Guards as a troop horse. B30 had seen service throughout the War:

He was at Mons, and took part in the great retreat: was in every action in which the cavalry was engaged including the battle of the Marne, Aisne, Ypres, Loos, the Somme, Cambrai, and Arras. He was the first horse to jump the Hindenberg Line, in full marching order, after the infantry had broken through. Although wounded on several occasions, he never went into the sick lines, and was never “excused duty”. He was ridden throughout the war by Lieutenant-Colonel W. Q. Winwood, C. M. G., D. S. O., commanding the 5th Dragoon Guards, in whose name he is entered at the Aldershot Show. The horse was looked after throughout the war by the same groom, Private Glare.<sup>64</sup>

Horses retained by their regiments, and especially those who had been ridden by a person of significance, often became war heroes in their own right.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the evident affection with which certain individuals were remembered and revered by their regiments suggests this acted as a form of displacement or distraction when that soldier’s own horse had not returned. The Leicestershire Yeomanry

62 R. Archer-Houblon, Major, Liddle Collection, Leeds University Special Collections, GS0040.

63 Seago, “A Memory of the Veteran War Horses at Olympia.”

64 “A Veteran War Horse”, *The Times*, Thurs 31 July 1909 (issue no. 42166): 18.

65 See for example, Tambllyn, *Horse in War*, and Seely, *My Horse Warrior*.

had a horse called Songster, who not only became the object of his regiment's affection, but also something of a local celebrity. He was photographed, painted,<sup>66</sup> and appeared in the Leicester and Loughborough press on numerous occasions (figure 5). Today he is remembered in the regimental museum as Loughborough's very own war horse. When he finally died in January 1940 (at the ripe old age of thirty nine), his final resting place was marked with a cross and his numerous medals were buried with him. Squadron Sergeant Major Harry Poole recalled the "luck" attached to Songster, the horse's cheeky character, and his, "proverbial ability to avoid wounds or worse", all of which had won him a special place in the Yeomanry's hearts.<sup>67</sup> He was purchased at an Army dispersal sale soon after the War, after which Poole provided him with a home for life and the well-deserved retirement of a veteran war horse. As Poole recalled:

when the authorities dismounted us there was not an officer or man who failed to bid Songster "goodbye" for he was the pet of the regiment. He went to the 3rd Hussars, and when we were given our horses back [...]. Songster was speedily reclaimed. [...] He was always as artful as a barrow-load of monkeys, and tales of Songster are told wherever Leicestershire Yeomanry gather. The majority are true.<sup>68</sup>

Debate raged throughout the interwar period as to whether mechanical alternatives to the horse really were viable, or whether the horse was still the more reliable and versatile option.<sup>69</sup> Mechanization of

66 "Songster. Painted from Memory by Sergeant Fred Schepens", Loughborough Carillon Museum Archive.

67 "Mr Poole once said of Songster 'He had an uncanny knack of sensing danger, and his luck in escaping wounds or worse was proverbial. Our horse lines were heavily shelled on one occasion. We lost a number of horses killed and wounded, and Songster was found to be missing. Soon afterwards he came trotting up as if nothing had occurred. There is no doubt he had freed himself and galloped out of the danger zone.'" "Famous War Horse Dead", *The Loughborough Echo*, 17 January 17, 1940, Loughborough Carillon Museum Archive.

68 "Leicestershire Claims the Oldest War-Horse. Rejected in 1914 on Account of Age: But went to France— Now Pulls a Milk Float," Newspaper cutting, date etc. unknown, Loughborough Carillon Museum Archive.

69 "The horses were used to haul cannons, ammunition and so on and a horse does not get stuck the same way as a truck does in the mud." Leonard Sebastian, Interview with Griff Williams. Greg Krenzelok, U.S. Army Veterinary Corps Historical Preservation Group, YouTube 11 August 2014, [https://youtu.be/lyFvPrQ5Vqk?si=94x-5m493uBGw2\\_7](https://youtu.be/lyFvPrQ5Vqk?si=94x-5m493uBGw2_7).



**Fig. 5**

Photograph of Mr Harry Poole and Songster. (Songster is on Mr Poole's right.)

Courtesy of the Loughborough Carillon Museum.



the Army promised to free the horse and mule from the suffering they had hitherto endured, but many people feared they would be pressed into service when the country again found itself at war. General Jack Seely believed it was the horse above all animals who had the greatest cause to wish for peace. He wrote: “Truly the horse might cry out more loudly than any other creature, ‘Give peace in our time, O Lord’”.<sup>70</sup> Fortunately for horses, the Great War was to be the last conflict where they would be utilized on such a scale.

Mechanization of the Army’s cavalry, artillery, and transport regiments proceeded throughout the 1920s and 1930s, severing the soldier from the horse for the first time in British military history. Mechanization severely challenged the horse and horseman’s ancient place in the country’s military landscape. The result was to prove as much a dislocation of military horses and horsemanship from the national psyche as it was a physical detachment from work and war. Furthermore, mechanization of the Army threatened to sever the horse from military life, and with it the horse’s ancient relationship with the soldier. Inevitably, such dramatic change was met with resistance, not because the horsed regiments were technophobic or reactionary, but because the horse was at the very core of their individual histories and identities. As David French explains, this was a threat not only to their status as horsed soldiers, but to the continued corporate existence of the regiments that were their “professional home”.<sup>71</sup>

Such profound change threatened every aspect of a horsed regiment’s organization, and was certainly not a matter of simply replacing a horse with a machine. It affected each regiment’s daily routines, its rank structure and the specialist roles within it, its training and tactics, its history and customs, and even its social and recreational life. James T. Capron described how, during the Great War, each battery had its Farrier Sergeant (“Shoey”) who was accompanied by an assistant responsible solely for the horse’s feet. Each also had a Saddler Sergeant (“Waxey”) and a Quarter Master Sergeant

<sup>70</sup> Seely, *My Horse Warrior*, 108.

<sup>71</sup> French, “Mechanization”, 301–302.

(“Stores”) responsible for horse-related equipment, feed, and supplies.<sup>72</sup> With mechanization, these were all trades that would become as redundant as the horses themselves.

Colonel T. B. A. Evans-Lombe, who was commissioned into the 8th King’s Royal Irish Hussars during the Great War, believed that the officers and men of his regiment were genuinely attached to their horses and to horse sports.<sup>73</sup> The “genuine love of horses” Lombe described was cultivated because horsemanship mattered. Horse shows, competitions, and horse-based games and activities were an essential part of training the soldier and his horse for war. Shows and equestrian events encouraged soldiers to take pride in their horses, assisted in forging soldier–horse bonds, bolstered morale, and encouraged a healthy spirit of competition.<sup>74</sup> Officers may have hunted and played polo, but they were still vastly outnumbered by the horsemen in the “other ranks” of a horsed regiment.<sup>75</sup> It was essential that all horsed soldiers were able to manage their horses in any situation. Far from being a safe job away from the fighting, the life of the horsed soldier had always been difficult and often dangerous. It was the horseman’s unity with his horse in the face of danger that had lent the soldier–horse relationship its glamorous appeal.

There was certainly still interest in the military horse amongst the amateur and professional horse community. However, as Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr note in *The Horse in the City*, horses were becoming “a relic of pre-industrial times” unhelpfully associated with “amateur nostalgia”.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, horses came to be associated (albeit inaccurately) with the officer class.<sup>77</sup> Once the soldier of the

72 James T. Capron, Liddle Collection, Leeds University Special Collections, GS028.

73 T.B.A. Evans-Lombe, Colonel, IWM Sound Archive, 000985/0. In French, “Mechanization”, 305.

74 Blenkinsop and Rainey, *History of the Great War*, 60.

75 “Army Riding School,” British Pathé, ID 2328.22, Canister ON192K, 1915, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/70933/>

76 McShane and Tarr, *The Horse in the City*, 14.

77 It is notable that Mason and Riedi’s *Sport and the Military*, 78–79, removes the soldier of the ranks entirely from this sphere of military life and leaves a strong, but inaccurate, impression that it was only officers who rode.

ranks (who hitherto had represented by far the greatest part of the British Army's equestrian population) became disassociated from the horse, so the soldier–horse relationship's ability to capture the wider public imagination became diminished. This is not to say that everyone remembered the soldier–horse relationship and then suddenly forgot about it entirely. Such a simplification would indeed enter the realms of myth. Rather, the memories veterans recalled, or were willing to recall, the elements of the same memories that were altered, or left by the wayside as the years went by, the telling and the re-telling, all played their part in ensuring that some recollections survived in memory and into post-memory when others did not.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, personal experience and historical memory became mixed up.<sup>79</sup> As Alessandro Portelli explains, this is a process through which “personal ‘truth’ may coincide with collective imagination”.<sup>80</sup> Many veterans remembered the horses amongst themselves and their families, and many went on to record these recollections more formally in later life.<sup>81</sup> Sadly, however, few of their stories ever entered the public arena.

Instead, it was a handful of images, poems and stories, and those with the loudest voices (the animal charities, the influential, the writers, artists, and commentators of the period), who would propagate the mythologization of the soldier–horse relationship. Indeed, to fully appreciate the influence those few images had over the British imagination during and after the Great War, it is necessary only to consider *Good-bye, Old Man* (and the plethora of reproductions and other written and visual homages it inspired). For example, Henry Chappell's poem “A Soldier's Kiss” and Fortunino Matania's drawing became synonymous:

78 Johnston, *Riding into War*, 54.

79 Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,”: 99.

80 Portelli, “Peculiarities of Oral History,” 99.

81 In Britain, it became evident by the 1970s that the experiences of the Great War's veterans were in danger of being lost. The Imperial War Museum, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and private individuals, such as the military historian Doctor Peter Liddle, set about interviewing veterans, as well as obtaining donations of diaries, letters and other material from family members. The Liddle Collection is now housed at the University of Leeds, <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/collection/723>.

Only a dying horse— pull off the gear,  
And slip the needless bit from frothing jaws.  
Drag it aside there— leave the roadway clear—  
The squadron gallops on without a pause.<sup>82</sup>

So it was that the soldier–horse relationship entered a new era. By the 1930s, the war horse was increasingly becoming not a fact of military life but a relic of its past. The War’s culmination had already proved to be a turning point in how the British public saw itself in relation to the soldier’s horse. Just as a few named equine veterans would become living representatives of the many, the imaginings that had thus far been countered by reality now also started to gain a life of their own. Increasingly, the “real” became the imagined and the imagined became evidence that these events had been “real”. It was not that the events recounted in images made popular during the War had never happened, but rather that what remained was becoming increasingly detached from the War as it had actually been fought. In effect, the most appealing stories and images gained increasing power in the absence of any evidence that may otherwise have contradicted them. It was not that stories such as that told in *Good-bye, Old Man* were untrue, but rather that their influence began to distort, and be distorted by, a fading memory (real and imagined) of what the War had really been like.<sup>83</sup>

During the Great War, the horse’s innocence and selfless service of humankind had been used for patriotic gain that emphasized the soldier and horse’s combined stoicism, hard work, unstinting bravery, and spirit in the face of war’s untold horrors. The soldier–horse relationship had provided consolation, hope, and even opportunities for humour. By the 1930s, however, and even though the soldier and horse veterans of the soldier–horse relationship had long since returned to the daily business of ordinary life, it seemed they both still had work to do. Just as the soldier–horse relationship’s portrayal had evolved during the Great War, now its mythologization would come to embody the pitiable waste of war:

82 Chappell, “A Soldier’s Kiss”.

83 Flynn, *Soldiers and their Horses*, 133.

The cries continued. It is not men, they could not cry so terribly. [...] It's unendurable. It is the moaning of the world, it is the martyred creation, wild with anguish, filled with terror, and groaning. [...] One can no longer distinguish whence in this now quiet silvery landscape it comes; ghostly, invisible, it is everywhere, between heaven and earth it rolls on immeasurably. [...] We can bear almost anything. But now the sweat breaks out on us. We must get up and run no matter where, but where these cries can no longer be heard. And it is not men, only horses.<sup>84</sup>

84 Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 46–47.

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