

BRUCE CHERRY. *They Didn't Want to Die Virgins: Sex and Morale in the British Army on the Western Front, 1914–1918*. Wolverhampton Military Studies 15. Solihull: Helion, 2016. Pp. 325. £25 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.151

Robert Graves's assertion, in one of the relatively few frank contemporary statements about British soldiers' sexual lives during the Great War, that "they didn't want to die virgins" provides the vivid title of Bruce Cherry's fascinating and exhaustively researched monograph. Cherry undertakes the difficult work of mining sources most notable for their silence or opacity on the subject of sex, reading between the lines and "being alive to inference and subtle 'codes'" (29). Further obscuring the story he wants to tell are the myths lionizing Great War soldiers but robbing them of their full, flawed humanity; a traditional focus on events at the front rather than behind the lines; and Edwardian moral codes and restraint that eschewed open talk of sex. Cherry goes so far as to lament "an historical and yet subliminal cover-up" (289). Happily, his sensitive and wide-ranging historical detective work has turned up plenty of evidence to help round out our knowledge of the social and cultural aspects of British soldiers' lives on the Western Front.

The book is organized roughly into two halves, with the first several chapters exploring matters such as the British Army's approach to sex, the extent of sexual activity of the troops, how the prevailing moral code regulated what could and could not be done and what could and could not be said about it, and the relationship of sexual activity to soldiers' morale. Cherry finds that sexual activity was, in fact had to be, frequent and widespread among the British in France, given high rates of venereal disease and the army's ultimately more than tacit approval of regulated prostitution. Talk about all of this was infrequent and grudging, but the evidence is there for the intrepid and perceptive researcher, and it was clear that the army placed a priority on sexual activity as a way to maintain morale in a dehumanizing wartime environment. And despite the power of Edwardian moral codes among soldiers, attention to "actual behavior during the war illustrates that moral attitudes changed as a result of the environmental factors they encountered, and the ways in which the individual processed and internalized those new experiences" (122).

The second part of the book—seven of the eleven chapters—primarily explores the different kinds of sexual activity in which soldiers engaged. From casual meetings and "fraternization" in rear areas and billets (sometimes commercial exchanges, sometimes not) to regulated brothels ("red lamp" for the rank and file, "blue lamp" for officers), unregulated prostitution, pornography, masturbation, "sodomy" (homosexual sex), and rape, the picture that emerges is as complete as we are likely to have of soldiers' sexual lives. Cherry contends that, ironically, the regulated prostitution that sought to contain sexual activity and venereal disease via official monitoring and medical controls likely actually stimulated unregulated prostitution, since there were too few regulated establishments too far behind the lines to be readily accessible, many men found the conditions there "sordid" and dehumanizing, and some men may have had their sexual appetites stimulated by the existence and tolerance of the official brothels (209). Another stimulant to sexual activity of the kind that occurred was the static nature of the war and the predominance of conditions of occupation rather than rapid movement. This also contributed to the relatively low frequency, as far as the sources can attest, to rape and assault, which is generally more characteristic of wars of movement. Yet Cherry claims that the low incidence of sex crimes also stemmed from the soldiers' restrained Edwardian moral code and the sex policies of the army, which largely sanctioned consensual sexual activity.

This volume is mandatory reading for anyone wishing to understand the social and cultural history of the Western Front, and indeed any aspect of the British army experience in the Great War. Nevertheless, the author is often guilty of naturalizing sex and desire in a somewhat ahistorical manner. The work is rife with the uncritical use of terms such as sexual "needs," "relief,"

“release,” and “natural urges,” and indeed it seems as if all men’s behaviors and desires are the same across space and time. The author argues at one point that, “no matter the colour of the uniform, *khaki*, *fledgrau*, or *bleu horizon*, underneath was a man with similar sexual needs and desires” (20). And the book’s first paragraphs describe the sexual desires expressed by a British soldier in Iraq in 2003 (xii–xiii). Moreover, this is a tale told almost exclusively from male perspectives, with women largely confined to the role of object of male desires, “urges,” and so on. The nature and absence of sources may make this all too inevitable, though, and Cherry does not flinch from describing with equal parts detail and imagination the likely motives and experiences of women wearing themselves out as prostitutes who “served” the “needs” of a mass army. So he concedes the importance of and does not ignore what he calls “the woman’s story” (37), but admits several times how difficult it is to tell this story and resurrect the lived experiences. Finally, it is not clear why the author finds it so important to assess clinically himself the effect of sexual activity on military morale, rather than merely to explore, as much as is possible given typical reticence on the official record, the army’s and the soldiers’ assessment of this question. He even speculates that “such releases” may well have “helped prevent more men from getting nervous disorders, or assisted in early recovery from such” (230). These critiques aside, Bruce Cherry’s fellow historians of the Great War are lucky to benefit from his meticulous research and dogged pursuit of an important aspect of soldiers’ lives that all too often remains obscure.

Richard S. Fogarty
 University at Albany, State University of New York
rfogarty@albany.edu

MARK CONNELLY. *Celluloid War Memorials: British Instructional Films Company and the Memory of the Great War*. Exeter Studies in Film History. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2016. Pp. 339. \$93 (cloth).
 doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.152

Celluloid War Memorials, a new study by Mark Connelly, one of our best historians of war and popular culture, examines in detail the Great War films of one of the most important film producers of the interwar period. Neglected by many later commentators, the British Instructional Films Company’s battlefield reconstructions were significant in the memorialization of the Great War and in the cultural struggle to remember the contribution of Britain and the empire to final victory.

H. Bruce Woolfe, who had served on the Western Front as an infantry officer, established the British Instructional Film Company in an army hut at Elstree. The company’s reputation was made with the documentary series *Secrets of Nature*. These films pioneered new cinematographic techniques and were highly praised for their ability to combine educational elements with entertainment. But Woolfe soon turned his experience and the cinematographic skill of his team to the most important event in recent history, the Great War. His first project was a documentary reconstruction of the Battle of Jutland, based on the research of the historian Sir George Aston. Using models, maps, and a freeze-frame technique involving numerous tiny adjustments, *The Battle of Jutland* made sense of a highly confusing and contested battle for the general public. The film established itself as the definitive version of the battle and was highly praised by critics, audiences, and naval experts alike, who praised its educational value. Unsurprisingly, the film was also well received throughout the empire. Woolfe and Aston followed up their success with *Armageddon* (1923), a detailed examination of General Allenby’s Palestine Campaign. Unfortunately, like *Jutland*, this film is now lost.