

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:                    MAKING MEANING TOGETHER:  
   INFORMATION, RUMOR, AND PROPAGANDA  
   IN BRITISH FICTION OF THE FIRST WORLD  
   WAR.

Rebecca Borden, Ph.D., 2012

Directed By:                            Associate Professor Peter Mallios, Department  
   of English.

Through an examination of fiction by H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and John Buchan, this dissertation examines information as a category as it exists under conditions of modernity, and how the contours of and changes in definitions and understandings of modern information become more visible, and are likely accelerated by, the complex information challenges brought about by the disruptions of the First World War. Given that “information” is a key building-block in understanding systems of knowledge in modernity, this dissertation incorporates theoretical constructs describing information drawn from a variety of disciplines, all of which circle around the problems and concerns of the increasingly saturated, complex, and untethered nature of information as experienced by an individual in modern life. This project also highlights the role that rumor plays in modernity. The war years bring an expansion of government-directed information control, both in the form of actively produced propaganda and in the form of censorship, disrupting the conduits along which information travels under normal conditions. Rumor, generally considered a pre-modern form of communication, remains

a part of modern information systems and provides a mechanism for making meaning when other sources of information begin to fail.

This dissertation also considers how “wartime” fiction, as a category distinct from pre-war and post-war fiction, is a revealing domain of literature in its own right, and one that has been overlooked in scholarship on literature of the First World War. This project focuses on once popular but long understudied wartime fiction by Wells, Conrad, and Buchan. It also compares the wartime fiction of these authors to their own pre-war fiction in order to trace how the category of information was a concern for these writers from the beginning of their careers. Further, this project explores how wartime texts contain significant elements that can be understood as pre-modern, as modern (and modernist), and as incipiently post-modern, which highlights the existence of both residual and of emerging forms and ideas during the war years, disrupting a dominant understanding of the First World War as a period of cultural and intellectual rupture.

MAKING MEANING TOGETHER: INFORMATION, RUMOR, AND  
PROPAGANDA IN BRITISH FICTION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By

Rebecca Borden

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Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Peter Mallios, Chair

Professor Brian Richardson

Professor Elizabeth Loizeaux

Professor Kate Macdonald

Professor Jonathan Auerbach

Professor R. Gordon Kelly

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To Charles, my husband.  
And to Nook – the best “best friend” a girl could have.

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## Making Meaning Together: Information, Rumor, and Propaganda in British Fiction of the First World War

Scholarship on the years between 1914 and 1918 has traditionally viewed the war as a moment of rupture, a distinct break with the culture of the pre-war world. In recent years, however, an alternative perspective has emerged among scholars of the First World War arguing that previous understandings of the war have overemphasized change at the expense of noticing important strains of cultural continuity across this period. In this project, I engage this new orientation in scholarship by examining the broad category of “information,” looking at how individuals and groups interact, evaluate, and disseminate the various sources of information available to them given the special conditions of the war years. Since “information” is a broad category, I focus particularly on that portion of information that circulates among people as rumor. Although much previous scholarship classifies rumor as a “pre-modern” form of communication and as something that has ceased to be an important part of information culture by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, I aim to demonstrate that rumor, and pre-industrial forms of information more generally, maintain a central role within the complex and shifting landscape of information in modern life. Rumor has been present on the fringes of First World War scholarship under various guises, such as in studies of propaganda and of wartime atrocity stories, but studies of rumor as an independent category of information during the war years have not emerged.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Historical research on specific rumors has been done, most notably a First World War rumor known as the “Angels of Mons.” I look specifically at this rumor later in the introduction.



Since rumors are particularly hard to mine from the historical record, fiction offers a useful window on actual patterns of information circulation during the war.<sup>2</sup> In this project I focus on three writers of wartime fiction, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and John Buchan, who incorporate rumor into their wartime texts and use rumor as a mechanism for narrative construction. Wells, Conrad, and Buchan are all interested in the status of information in modern life in the years before the war, writing pre-war texts that explicitly investigate the way that people interact with information in their daily lives. During the war, each author returns to information as a topic of inquiry and explores the role of rumor within the complicated environment engendered by both the limitations and the excesses of available information during the war years.

The oppositional categories “pre-war” and “post-war” are often used as shorthand in scholarship of this period to emphasize cultural changes that happened as a result of the war. In general, the borders of literary periodization are often determined by factors that have little to do with the aesthetic or compositional characteristics of individual texts that sit near the border and more to do with the predispositions of those seeking to draw lines of demarcation *post hoc*. Yet, such periodization remains hard to escape. In this case, a consequence of such periodization allowed for the group of works commonly referred to as “literature of the First World War” to more accurately deserve the moniker “literature of the decade after the war.”<sup>3</sup> A further result has been that literary texts

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Joachim Neubauer argues that rumor is both “social chatter” and “its reflection in texts and images.” With this understanding, research on rumor can extend to a wide array of cultural artifacts, including not just fiction but “innumerable other media.” Hans-Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumour: A Cultural History* (London: Free Association Books, 1999) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Consider those works most often included in scholarly examinations of the war (or on the syllabi of college courses on war literature), such as Robert Graves’ memoir *Goodbye to All That* (first published in 1929), Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (first published in 1925), Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (first published in 1929), and Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (first published in 1929).

falling between these two categories – texts that are neither “pre-war” nor “post-war” but rather “wartime” – have been largely overlooked. While there exists a popular mini-canon of wartime poetry by soldier poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Rupert Brooke, wartime fiction – fiction written after August of 1914 and before the Armistice in November of 1918 – is often entirely absent from studies of the literary impact of the war.<sup>4</sup>

The privileging of this “post-war” canon has occurred for a number of reasons, but I would argue that the most significant has been a tendency in scholarship of the First World War across all academic disciplines to see the war as a moment of great cultural change, a watershed moment in cultural history. Richard Schweitzer defines this “modernist” model usefully as “the hegemonic paradigm which emphasize[s] change over continuity in studies of the Great War experience.”<sup>5</sup> Samuel Hynes has called this tendency the “myth of the war,” stating, “We may think we know the First War’s story, but it is the hangover we remember.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars such as A.J.P. Taylor, Michael Levenson, Andreas Huyssens, Peter Faulkner, Malcolm Bradbury, J. McFarlane, Paul Fussell, and Modris Ekstein adopt a basic orientation toward privileging discontinuity.<sup>7</sup>

There is very good reason why the war appeared as such a clear break to those who lived through it and to the later scholars exposed to the personal stories of these

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<sup>4</sup> A good test of this is to look at Paul Fussell’s foundational work *The Great War and Modern Memory*. In it, Fussell does not meaningfully discuss one work of fiction written during the war itself. Another example is the collection of Ford Madox Ford’s wartime writing *War Prose*, edited by Max Saunders. It does not include, even as an index reference, Ford’s bestselling work of war fiction *Zeppelin Nights*. There have been some attempts to elevate the importance of texts written during the war, for example, Claire Tylee’s feminist counterargument to Fussell *The Great War and Woman’s Consciousness*. However, Tylee’s work examines wartime prose by women serving in the nursing service. These texts are memoir rather than fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport: Praeger, 2003) xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 105.

<sup>7</sup> A concise and useful description of this position can be found in Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

individuals. Wyndham Lewis, a co-founder of the Vorticist art movement who spent the war as an artillery officer on the Western Front and later as a war artist, explains this tendency, stating, “The War is such a tremendous landmark that locally it imposes itself upon our computations of time like the birth of Christ. We say ‘pre-war’ and ‘post-war’ rather as we say B.C. or A.D.”<sup>8</sup> Vera Brittain, well-known author of the war memoir *Testament of Youth*, frames it similarly, stating, “It seems to me that the War will make a division of ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the history of the world, almost if not quite as big as the ‘B.C. and ‘A.D.’ division made by the birth of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> In literary scholarship, this orientation has tended to favor works of fiction that explore discontinuities and ruptures in the experience of modern life. Therefore, post-war texts that have made it into the canon of war literature exhaustively explore these ruptures, focusing on what is altered, strange, new, or rendered incommunicable, lifting these themes to the surface of our attention.

One early proponent of rethinking the modernist thesis of discontinuity was George Orwell. Writing in his 1940 essay “My Country Right or Left” about his experience as a child during the First World War, he gives an important piece of advice to those who look back on earlier events and try to make meaning from them:

Contrary to popular belief, the past was not more eventful than the present. If it seems so it is because when you look backward things that happened years apart are telescoped together, and because very few of your memories come to you genuinely virgin. It is largely because of the books, films and reminiscences that have come between that the war of 1914-18 is now supposed to have had some tremendous, epic quality that the present one lacks.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 27.

<sup>9</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Penguin, 1994) 317.

<sup>10</sup> George Orwell, “My Country Right or Left” in *In Defense of English Cooking* (London: Penguin, 2005) 1.

He attempts to render his own memories of the 1914-1918 war with more accuracy, stating,

But if you were alive during that war, and if you disentangle your real memories from their later accretions, you find that it was not usually the big events that stirred you at the time.<sup>11</sup>

Orwell's advice is applicable to this study because canonical (and, therefore, usually post-war) texts tend to telescope the war years with the decade, and sometimes even two decades, that followed when creating a vision of the war. It is important to understand post-war literature and the tremendous upheavals in taste, style, and form expressed in these post-war texts. These works have had a major influence on literary trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is also useful to see if we can get back to a period where the impact of the war is more immediate, in Orwell's words, "genuinely virgin," so that we can see clearly the impact of the war before "later accretions" turned it into epic.

Recently, this alternative orientation has gained momentum. For example, Jay Winter posits an important reevaluation of the modernist position in his work *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. He argues, "the rupture of 1914-18 was much less complete than previous scholars have suggested" and it makes the "history of modernism much more complicated than a simple, linear divide between 'old' and 'new' might suggest."<sup>12</sup> While Winter focuses his critique of the modernist position on the theme of mourning, a number of recent works have concentrated on other aspects of the war with the same goal in sight. These include recent collections on wartime literary production, *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History*, edited by Mary Hammond and Safquat Towheed, and *Outside Modernism*, edited by Lynn Hapgood and Nancy Paxton. Both

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<sup>11</sup> Orwell 1.

<sup>12</sup> Winter 3.

works expand the critique beyond an examination of the commonly accepted canon of war literature to a larger canvas of early century texts.<sup>13</sup> Fundamentally, this project agrees with these recent developments and also resists the temptation to see the First World War as one necessarily defined by its discontinuities.

Following Orwell's advice, I propose a kind of literary archaeology, digging up novels and short stories written during the years of the war. Though the range of texts in this dissertation is necessarily much wider, including both pre-war and wartime texts, this project concentrates in important ways on H.G. Wells's novel *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (published in 1916), Joseph Conrad's short story "The Tale" (published in 1916), and John Buchan's short story "The King of Ypres" (1917) and his wartime thrillers *Greenmantle* (published in 1917) and *Mr. Standfast* (written in 1918 and published in 1919 before the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.) It is interesting to notice that many of these texts were bestsellers when first published – H.G. Wells's novel, for example, went through thirteen editions in its first year.<sup>14</sup> And all of these authors were well known to the reading public at the time – already popular pre-war novelists and all three writers of wartime propaganda. For that matter, all of these authors enjoy enduring literary reputations – Wells mostly for his early science fiction, Conrad as the author of such works as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, and Buchan as an originating voice in modern adventure literature and the thriller. In short, the archeological project I propose yields up a good cache of works that were important in their own historical moment by writers who were working within the literary mainstream while also implicating the wider

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Hammond and Safquat Towheed, eds. *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Lynn Hapgood and Nancy Paxton, eds. *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-30* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Coren, *The Invisible Man: The Life and Liberties of H.G. Wells* (New York: Atheneum, 1993) 141.

arc of each author's engagement with problems of information before, during, and after the war.

### Section I: Theorizing Information in the Modern World

Since the way in which individuals experience information is one of the cultural elements often premised as having changed utterly because of the new conditions of modernity engendered by the war, I concentrate in this project to how the privileging of the modernist thesis of discontinuity has played out around the category of information. Therefore, this study starts with a look at the tradition of scholarship concerning the circulation of information in modern life that begins in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, most notably by Walter Lippmann and Walter Benjamin.<sup>15</sup> These scholars share an understanding that the information environment of modernity is one in which individuals are overwhelmed by the volume of information reaching each person from distant and copious sources. Such a situation leads an individual to construct a useful, but necessarily incomplete and inaccurate, working understanding of the world. The model developed by Lippmann and Benjamin engenders a kind of tunnel vision among scholars for most of the rest of the century. Therefore, I also examine the more recent scholarship of Mark Wollaeger, who builds on the foundation laid by Lippmann and Benjamin to reach a similar understanding of information in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Individuals come into possession of the information they have to share through their lived experiences, and thus discussion of the nature of information in modern life

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<sup>15</sup> This tradition is continued by Edward Bernays and Jacques Ellul, both of whom I mention later.

often start with a discussion of the nature of *experience* in modernity.<sup>16</sup> In the 1920's, Walter Lippmann, a young American journalist and scholar who spent the First World War working for the American Information Service as part of the government's propaganda effort, articulated his understanding of the state of experience in the modern world.<sup>17</sup> Starting from the idea that the information available to a person about the complex world of modernity is necessarily incomplete, Lippmann uses as an epigraph to his 1926 book *Public Opinion* an excerpt from Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." In Plato's well-known fable, individuals are chained from childhood in a cave with their backs to the entrance. Because there is a fire behind them, they are able to see the images of things moving across the plane of the fire behind them only as shadows cast on the wall in front of them. Since they have known no other existence, they believe those shadows to be reality and they speak to each other as if those shadows were such.

In Part I of *Public Opinion*, Lippmann expands on Plato's story, telling an allegory of his own. He imagines an island occupied by a handful of individuals in the summer of 1914, some of them English, some French, and some German. In September, the isolated group receives information via mail steamer that their picture of Europe at peace has been wrong and the men have been citizens of enemy nations since August. This anecdote draws attention to the fact that in almost all circumstances there is some temporal gap between an event and one's learning of it. While his example may be extreme, Lippmann's point is that we have little direct knowledge of the world in which

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<sup>16</sup> Later in this introduction I discuss Benjamin's distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, both of which translate to "experience." Benjamin uses these two terms to differentiate "experience" in pre-modern life (*Erfahrung*) from "experience" in modernity (*Erlebnis*).

<sup>17</sup> According to Michael North, Lippmann's work "was not groundbreaking or original, but rather it enunciated in an influential way ideas that were already widely accepted in 1922." In coining the term "pseudo-environment of mediated fact," Lippmann articulates the dominant understanding of the information environment in the postwar years. Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 67.

we live. We receive news about it in various ways and at various times, but such news is never complete, fully contextualized, or delivered without being altered by the very act of transmission. To use Lippmann's words, between a person and the world around him, there exists a "pseudo-environment of mediated fact" and "[t]o that pseudo-environment his behavior is a response."<sup>18</sup> In absolute terms, an individual experiences the world through the distorting lens of his or her pseudo-environment.

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann considers how rumors operate in relation to the pseudo-environment. Using the word "fictions" as a catch-all category for any circumstance that influences a person's understanding of the world around him, he states,

For it is clear enough that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond [...] Let him cast a stone who never passed on as the real inside truth what he had heard someone say who knew no more than he did.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Lippmann specifically references rumors circulating during the recently concluded war to bolster his argument, reminding his readers, "Let him cast the first stone who did not believe in the Russian army that passed through England in August, 1914, did not accept any tale of atrocities without direct proof, and never saw a plot, a traitor, or a spy where there was none."<sup>20</sup> Lippmann stresses that by "fictions" he does not mean lies. Fictions are a necessary part of human culture because "in order to traverse

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922) 15.

<sup>19</sup> Lippmann 14-15. Lippmann imagines the category of "fictions" to encompass a wide range of fictions that can influence a person's understanding of the world. First, there are "the artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally the fear facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives." Secondly, there are the internal limitations of each individual, "the trickle of messages from the outside is affected by the stored up images, the preconceptions, and prejudices which interpret, fill them out, and in their turn powerfully direct the play of our attention, and our vision itself." Lippmann 30.

<sup>20</sup> Lippmann 15.



the world men must have maps of the world.”<sup>21</sup> In this way of thinking, rumors – just as other mediums such as newspapers, political slogans, memoirs, and speeches – act as a building block in the construction of a person’s pseudo-environment.

Writing a decade after Lippmann wrote *Public Opinion*, Walter Benjamin expresses a similar view of the place of *experience* in modern life while placing a greater emphasis on the difference between information circulated orally and that which is written down. In his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin explains that there has been a “change in the structure of experience,” describing this change using two German terms for experience, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*.<sup>22</sup> Benjamin describes the way a person experiences the world prior to the development of the modern city – which according to Benjamin occurred in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – using the German word *Erfahrung* to indicate pre-modern experience imbued with the continuity of “tradition.” Storytelling, which Benjamin describes as “one of the oldest forms of communication,” is an example of *Erfahrung* since a story “embeds [itself] in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening,” thereby bearing “the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand.”<sup>23</sup> Benjamin differentiates *Erfahrung* from *Erlebnis*, a modern person’s experience of the disorienting “shock” of the city in which he or she “is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him.”<sup>24</sup> Newspapers are a quintessential expression of *Erlebnis* since a newspaper aims to isolate rather than integrate the information contained within it to a person’s own lived experience, meaning that such

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<sup>21</sup> Lippmann 16. Lippmann’s language here comes close to the language of cognitive maps developed by Frederic Jameson that I use in my discussion of Conrad later in this project.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969) 163.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin 159.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin 158.

information does not form a connection between readers and, therefore, “does not enter ‘tradition.’”<sup>25</sup> In his essay “The Storyteller,” Benjamin makes a similar distinction using a slightly altered vocabulary, arguing for a difference between “intelligence” spread by personal contact, such as that traditionally imparted by an oral storyteller, and the more modern category of “information” spread by mediated forms, such as a novel or the newspaper, to describe the changed way that individuals experience “news” or “facts” in modern world. Benjamin argues that storytelling is, at its core, “the ability to exchange experiences” – the word here indicating *Erfahrung* – and, as “experience has fallen in value,” the act of storytelling has become “even more distant” from modern life.

According to Benjamin, the First World War does not cause this change in the “structure of experience.” In fact, he argues that the decline of *Erfahrung* – and of storytelling specifically – took centuries. However, the war made this change more “noticeable” and brought the loss of shared communicable activities to the immediate attention of living people. He writes,

Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that [experience] has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned home from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was *anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth*. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin 159.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin 84.

What is interesting here is that Benjamin frames the problem with communicability as a post-war problem. He is concerned with what happened “at the end of the war” when “men returned home” silent and unable to share their experiences with others. In terms of literary production, he notices only that the books written “ten years later” did not reflect “experience that goes from mouth to mouth.” But, considering only the difficulties encountered by returning soldiers in talking about their war experiences does not adequately account for how British citizens who lived through the war in many other capacities shared information by word of mouth. And, describing difficulties with communicability ten years post-war does not adequately describe the different, but just as important, difficulties that existed during the actual war years.

Like Lippmann in *Public Opinion*, Benjamin touches on the category of rumor in “The Storyteller” without actually using the term. Benjamin’s description of a pre-modern “story” shares a number of qualities with rumor. According to Benjamin, a “real story,” the kind offered up to the audience by a storyteller, is one that “contains, openly or covertly, something useful...the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers.”<sup>27</sup> According to Benjamin, “stories” carry meaning as “intelligence,” which possesses such authority from its source is considered valid “even when it [is] not subject to verification.”<sup>28</sup> As I will outline later, giving counsel is much like rumor’s ability to “construct a ‘meaningful’ interpretation” in an ambiguous situation.<sup>29</sup> In this way, rumors have a use value much like “stories” and someone who participates in the circulation of rumor is serving a similar purpose in the community as a “storyteller” once

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<sup>27</sup> Lippmann 86.

<sup>28</sup> Lippmann 89.

<sup>29</sup> Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966) 17.

did. While focused on other issues, Benjamin misses that fact that rumor, a form of communication that, like storytelling, “is passed on from mouth to mouth,” is very much still apart of the modern world.

In her introduction to Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt points out Benjamin’s use of extensive citation in his work, a facet of Benjamin’s writing that helps to elucidate why he does not see the possibilities inherent in rumor as a modern form of storytelling imbued with the tradition-forming properties of *Erfahrung*.<sup>30</sup> As Hans-Joachim Neubauer explains in this recent monograph *The Rumour: A Cultural History*, rumor can be understood as “what ‘people’ are saying; it is mediated, dependent talk, the citation of a citation.”<sup>31</sup> As such, rumors are a way of using citation, of quoting what others say or write, in a way that preserves a connection to tradition, preserves the “marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand.”<sup>32</sup> Benjamin’s understanding of the role of citation is quite different than the malleable chain of quotation present in a circulating rumor. All of Benjamin’s writing contains extensive use of cited text and Arendt explains that Benjamin’s “ideal” was to produce a work “consisting entirely of quotations, one that was mounted so masterfully that it could dispense with any accompanying text,” although such a work was never written.<sup>33</sup> According to Arendt, Benjamin’s affinity for citation is a way to deal with his belief that there had been an irreparable break with tradition and authority in modern life. She writes, “he discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its

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<sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Introduction” to *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969) 38-51.

<sup>31</sup> Neubauer 4.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin 159.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin 47.

citability.”<sup>34</sup> Throughout his life, Benjamin was an avid collector of books, but for him collected objects had “only amateur value.” This type of noncommercial collecting “can fasten on any category of objects” as long as the objects are “removed from the everyday world of use objects because they are ‘good’ for nothing.”<sup>35</sup> In addition to books, Benjamin was also an obsessive collector of quotations, writing them down in notebooks that he carried with him everywhere, turning quotations into collectible objects in their own right. Benjamin did not worry that he was actively removing these quotations from their contextual connection to the world because an *a priori* break in tradition “relieved him of this task of destruction and he only needed to bend down, as it were, to select his precious fragments from the pile of debris.”<sup>36</sup> For Benjamin, citations are the inert detritus of modernity, objects that can be sifted through, collected, and arranged for private consideration. However, rumor offers the possibility of an active, useful form of citation in modern life.

The model for understanding modern information developed by Lippmann and Benjamin is still the dominant model in contemporary scholarship on information, and especially in the sub-field of scholarship on modern propaganda. For example, Mark Wollaeger’s 2006 work *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda* builds on Lippmann’s understanding of information, and that of Lippmann’s intellectual descendants Edward Bernays and Jacques Ellul, to theorize a connection between modernism and the kind of information that circulates in modern societies as propaganda.<sup>37</sup> Wollaeger argues that the

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin 38.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin 42.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin 45.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Bernays, a rough contemporary of Lippmann, tries to frame propaganda more clearly as a positive force within the information environment. In his 1928 work *Propaganda*, he argues, “society consents to have its choices narrowed to ideas and objects brought to its attention through propaganda of all kinds.” He proposes that there are “invisible governors,” not an organized group, but a set of people in key

scope and variety of information in the emerging information landscape of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made a clear understanding of public events beyond the capacity of the individual; therefore, it became necessary to rely on specialists for information.<sup>38</sup>

Professional propagandists and modernist writers emerged in different ways to fill this role. In this line of scholarship, professional propagandists come in a wide array of guises, from political propagandists, advertising executives, trade association policy wonks, public relations directors, or any of the other “special pleaders” whose job it is to carry out the “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses.”<sup>39</sup> Much of Wollaeger’s argument is compelling but, as with Lippmann and Benjamin, his emphasis on what is new, i.e. new mechanisms of propaganda and modernism, causes him to overlook rumor, the coping mechanism of earlier eras for dealing with situations where ambiguous information caused anxiety.

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positions whose decisions determine the way that the mass of people think and “[p]ropaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.” Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (Brooklyn, New York: IG Publishing, 2005) 39 and 48. According to Michael North, Bernays “repeats Lippmann’s description of the vastness and complexity of the human environment and then makes the resultant need for mediation seem like a happy necessity for the press agent.” For Bernays, the emerging fields of public relations and advertising are propaganda in another form. North 74.

In the next generation of scholars, Jacques Ellul posits that propaganda is something that is created by and dependent on modern life, arguing that “[t]rue modern propaganda can only function within the context of the modern scientific system.” Ellul’s concept of “integration propaganda” extends the definition of what constitutes propaganda to that which surrounds people “by all possible routes, in the realm of feelings as well as ideas, by playing on his will or on his needs, through his conscious and his unconscious, assailing him with a complete system for explaining the world, and providing immediate incentives to action.” Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) 3 and 11. Building on Ellul, John Mackenzie reframes Ellul’s idea, calling it a “self-generating ethos,” and arguing that imperial propaganda, directing the British public towards ideas of imperial patriotism, was both directly carried out by government institutions and embedded in the messages sent out by non-governmental and business interests for whom such messages were profitable. The concept of “integration propaganda” or “a self-generating ethos” extends the idea of propaganda to cover even more completely the experience of the individual, universalizing the idea of the “pseudo-environment of mediated fact” in which an individual is immersed. John Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 3.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Bernays 161 and 37.

Using different but ultimately commensurate vocabularies, Lippmann, Benjamin, and later, Wollaeger, argue that the manner in which an individual interacts with information has undergone a profound change by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a change often caused, or at least significantly accelerated, by the First World War. This view of the state of information in the modern world is built on the acceptance of a few central tenets. First, it requires a belief that the information environment surrounding a modern individual is so complex and overwhelming that one's understanding of it can never be complete. Second, it requires a belief that meaningful oral communication is a thing substantially relegated to the past and not a part of the modern experience. Third, it requires a belief that an individual, divorced of immediate agency, must rely on a whole host of "special pleaders," individuals who have greater access than others to information in a given field. By accepting these tenets, one misses the fact that alternative and/or pre-modern forms of information engagement like rumor, forms of oral communication in the sense that Benjamin understands them, as "living immediacy" and as "[e]xperience that is passed on from mouth to mouth," are very much still a part of the modern world. Rumor allows an individual to make meaningful sense of the world around him, even though his understanding must be incomplete, without turning to experts or opinion leaders, but rather relying on other equally situated members of the wide social network within which he is located. I propose that a close examination of the extensive use of rumors in wartime texts provides evidence that rumor communication is an important component of the way that information was experienced and circulated during the war years. Further, considering the role of rumor in fiction of this period opens up a wider field of inquiry into the complex, multi-faceted information environment of the modern period.

## Section II: What is rumor?

Rumour is a pipe  
Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures,  
And of so easy and so plain a stop  
That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,  
The still-discordant wavering multitude,  
Can play upon it.

Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part II*

Rumor, as a form of communication, has a reputational problem. Like Shakespeare's assessment of rumor as a "pipe blown by surmises, jealousies, [and] conjectures," the word tends to make people think of secret information that can ruin a person's standing in society – for example, rumors of a politician's indiscretions that lead him to resign – or of information that sweeps through a crowd like a wildfire stirring up unrest – for example, the rumors that cause a riot when people in a hungry city hear that bread is available at a certain location.

This negative understanding of rumor dominates the foundational scholarship on the role of rumor in the First World War. Perceiving rumor as something fundamentally pre-modern and outdated that resurfaces in the modern world as a result of the unique conditions of the war, Paul Fussell describes the war years as "a world of reinvigorated myth" in his work *The Great War and Modern Memory*.<sup>40</sup> According to this argument, the war brings with it "[a] plethora of very un-modern superstitions, talismans, wonders,

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 115.



miracles, relics, legends, and rumors.”<sup>41</sup> Instead of recognizing the on-going presence of these forms of cultural expression, Fussell argues that it is anomalous for “such a myth-ridden world [... to] take shape in the midst of a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism.”<sup>42</sup> In essence, his framework demands that this “myth-ridden world” be resurrected from a historical epoch well in the past.

Similarly, in *Rumour: A Cultural History*, Hans-Joachim Neubauer repeats Fussell’s position and situates rumor as a fundamentally pre-modern mode of communication. He argues that the war creates an environment of danger and insecurity in which rumors are particularly rife, leading the soldiers back “to a time before modern communications, to a time before the newspaper, the book and other printed media,” creating a “massive renewal of the oral tradition, the antique mother of legends and myths.”<sup>43</sup> Fussell and Neubauer conflate rumor and myth, relegating this amalgamated category to the pre-modern world, and categorically deflating its purposiveness by failing to recognize rumor’s continuing role as a tool for group communication.

However, a countercase for rumor can also be asserted. Rumors can and do make a positive contribution to collective meaning making that is often overlooked. In circumstances where information is lacking, or even when abundant information proves unreliable, rumors have the capacity to create coherent, if not always accurate, narratives. In fact, the coherency of a rumor is often much more important than its accuracy in reducing anxiety and uncertainty both for an individual and within the larger community that circulates the rumor. Tamotsu Shibutani with his 1966 text *Improvised News: A*

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<sup>41</sup> Fussell 115.

<sup>42</sup> Fussell 115.

<sup>43</sup> Neubauer 99.

*Sociological Study of Rumor* began a reorientation of the study of rumor toward this thesis, arguing,

[r]umor is a collective transaction whose component parts consist of cognitive and communicative activity; it develops as men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a “meaningful” interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, rumor is a form of group problem-solving that arises when the demand for information cannot be met through other channels.<sup>45</sup>

This understanding of rumor provides a way in which the culture of rumor that existed during the First World War, and the exploration of this culture in the fiction of that period, can be discussed as an independent form of communication that both carries information and documents the manner in which this information spreads and circulates within a society. As a cognitive act, the creation and modification of a rumor is empowering to the individual, giving him or her an active role in the creation of narrative meaning. As an act of communication, rumor creates or reinforces community and empowers that community to engage in the purposive act of group problem solving.

While rumor is a part of every information environment, it serves an especially powerful

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<sup>44</sup> Shibutani 17.

<sup>45</sup> More than two decades ago, Patricia Meyer Spacks provided a new consideration of the category of gossip in her monograph *Gossip*. While gossip and rumor are not interchangeable categories, Spacks’s effort to rehabilitate the image of gossip is similar to the efforts of scholarship on rumor to do the same. Spacks aims to look at the “counter-case” to the standard negative arguments about gossip, acknowledging that “the ‘counter-case’ does not counter allegations of gossip’s destructiveness and danger; it only suggests that even malicious gossip may possess positive value.” For Spacks, gossip is a mode of communication carried out between a few, closely connected people and, therefore, she understands the pay-off of gossip to be private and emotional instead of rumor’s more public and social pay-off. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 34. Hans-Joachim Neubauer reinforces the difference between rumor and gossip, arguing, “rumors are not a mature form of gossip. Gossip is definable in terms of both form and content; it is founded on the finely balanced relationship and often apparent proximity of gossipers and gossipees, whose roles, in principle could be swapped.” Neubauer 3-4.

role in the absence of reliable information from a trusted source – or when trusted sources become unreliable.<sup>46</sup>

Rumor has a number of defining characteristics: it is up-to-date, it is easily repeatable, it is difficult if not impossible to trace back to a specific source, and it is not interchangeable with “lying.” Neubauer’s recent monograph attempts to provide a definition for rumor, even as he argues that rumor is “a convention that changes through history, and one that can signify extremely diverse phenomena.”<sup>47</sup> Neubauer argues that rumor can be described broadly as “an up-to-date piece of information that circulates in a group in the medium of hearsay or some other, related form of communication.”<sup>48</sup> Since rumors must be “up-to-date,” they cannot be solely about events in the distant past. For example, a rumor that Herbert Hoover was a tax cheat will not catch on and start circulating unless, of course, one ties the implication of the rumor to some current topic of debate. With evidence, such an assessment of Herbert Hoover might fall into the category of historical research. Without evidence, it would be a wild supposition that no one cares about. But, start a rumor that a current politician is a tax cheat and it will likely gain ground, at least among the grassroots whispering gallery of the opposite political party. The whispering gallery component of rumor circulation is important. Neubauer points out that “what everyone says is not necessarily a rumour.” Rather, a rumor is only “that about which it is said that everyone is saying it.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it must have a

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<sup>46</sup> H.G. Wells himself acknowledged that *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* was both about an individual and about a community at war. He wrote, “I have contrived in that book to give not only the astonishment and the sense of tragic disillusionment in a civilized mind as the cruel facts of war rose steadily to dominate everything else in life, but also the passionate desire to find some immediate reassurance amidst that whirlwind of disaster.” H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography, Volume II* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967) 573.

<sup>47</sup> Neubauer 3.

<sup>48</sup> Neubauer 3.

<sup>49</sup> Neubauer 3.

repeatable quality, itself not referable to any necessary truth concerning the object under discussion. In this way, rumor operates in the medium of hearsay. For a rumor to continue to spread, the perpetuating individual is usually interested in both the content of the rumor and in the fact that other people are interested in talking about the content of the rumor. According to Neubauer, “Whoever hears a rumour and passes it on joins the linear sequence of ‘people’ who constitute the ‘they,’ the agents of collective speech.” Finally, rumors are not necessarily lies. Whether true or untrue at the level of material fact, they are communications that arise when “knowledge and conditions combine.”<sup>50</sup> The reasons and motivations of the people who participate in the circulation of the rumor are more important than the content of the rumor itself.

Rumors are not often universal in scope; rather they circulate within specific, if loosely defined, populations. The community that exists around a specific rumor has many of the characteristics that Michael Warner ascribes to “a public.”<sup>51</sup> In his text *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner proposes the existence of a “text public,” a type of public that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation,” although one must take an expansive view of what qualifies as a text in this context.<sup>52</sup> The most important characteristic of this type of public is that it is self-organized. Warner argues that a public is “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, this public comes into existence by being addressed as if it already has

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<sup>50</sup> Neubauer 4.

<sup>51</sup> Warner points out that “a public” can mean a number of different things depending on the context. For example, there is “the public,” a kind of social totality that seems to include everyone within a demarcated social space, such as “the public of national discourse,” but also smaller publics, such as those that organize around state and local affairs. There is also a sense in which “the public” can indicate a concrete audience assembled in one place, bounded by the specifics of an event. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> Warner 66.

<sup>53</sup> Warner 67.

existence. Warner acknowledges the “chicken and egg circularity” of such a public, stating, “the reality lies in the reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.”<sup>54</sup> Becoming a member of such a discourse-driven public only requires a person to pay attention to the circulating discourse. People can drop in and out of this public at will. In this way, a public is “as much notional as empirical.” Warner argues further that this “autotelic circularity” is what makes this form of public so important to modern life by allowing for publics to be self-organizing. Such a public “organizes itself independently of state institutions, laws, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church,” and, therefore, members of this public can “produce a sense of belonging and activity [...] through discourse rather than through an external framework.”<sup>55</sup> A rumor community certainly fits the criteria of “autotelic circularity” since membership only requires that one attends to the content of the rumor, not even that one participate in the production, alteration, or circulation of the rumor. A rumor community is also clearly self-organizing since one of the hallmarks of a rumor is that it spreads flexibly from person to person based on contingent contact instead of preordained hierarchies or relationships.

This updated understanding of rumor moves the debate about the role of rumor in the First World War in a number of ways.<sup>56</sup> First, it displaces earlier pathological understandings of rumor that view it as a form of communication that infects truthful narratives with misinformation.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, it moves it away from issues of

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<sup>54</sup> Warner 67.

<sup>55</sup> Warner 68.

<sup>56</sup> Rosnow and Fine’s 1976 work *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* is a good history of the field up to that date. Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York: Elsevier, 1976).

<sup>57</sup>As a foundational text in this tradition see Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, *Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947).

sanity/insanity that have dominated the study of rumor in relation to the war. A large body of work on the First World War relies on the vocabulary of madness, a useful theoretical orientation given the emergence of shell shock as a significant medical condition and the presence of shell shock in fictional treatments of both soldiers and civilians after 1914. However, one effect of this trend has been to categorize “rumor” and “gossip” as symptoms of the diseased mental state produced, or at least exaggerated, by the war.<sup>58</sup> Thirdly, it decouples the categories of rumor and propaganda. Propaganda is now the dominant framework used to discuss the way that information is controlled and distributed in modern technological societies. During the war, the censorship of news from the Front and the restrictions placed on speech in such legislation as the Defense of the Realm Act (DORA), made the public more aware of institutional manipulation of the information environment and the word “propaganda” began to move toward its more negative connotation as an activity associated with the spreading of tainted information.

In the postwar period, the emerging field of propaganda, and its close relatives public opinion and public relations, became the topic of significant research and debate. Early works in this tradition included Sir Campbell Stuart’s 1920 memoir of his wartime work in the British Ministry of Information, *Secrets of Crewe House*, which had a significant impact on public beliefs about governmental involvement in spreading wartime rumors.<sup>59</sup> In 1928, Arthur Ponsonby published his influential study, *Falsehood*

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<sup>58</sup> For example, Celia Malone Kingsbury proposes the term “peculiar sanity” as a condition that “cloaks rabid behavior in the garments of normalcy” during times of war and posits “gossip, atrocity stories, and propaganda” as a tangible symptom of this “rabid behavior.” While there is much to be admired in Kingsbury’s work, by relying on the framework of “madness,” she cuts off the wider understanding of rumor available under a different theoretical framework. Celia Malone Kingsbury, *The Peculiar Sanity of War: Hysteria in the Literature of World War One* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002) 4.

<sup>59</sup> Sir Campbell Stuart, *Secrets of Crewe House* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920).

*in Wartime*, a work that catalogues the numerous untruths circulating during the war.<sup>60</sup> Ponsonby's term 'falsehood' helps to point out the negative valuation of both the categories of rumor and propaganda in the years after the war. Both works were foundational in the study of propaganda by later scholars and much recent scholarship that explores how rumors were spread during the First World War similarly interpenetrates the categories of rumor and propaganda so that they become largely interchangeable terms.<sup>61</sup> While historians have carefully mapped the details of government propaganda as a source of rumor, they have not drawn careful definitional distinctions between concepts such as "propaganda," "rumor," "gossip," "legend," or looked extensively at non-governmental sources of rumor production.

The alternate understanding of rumor I outlined above provides a way in which the culture of rumor that existed during the First World War, and the exploration of this culture in the fiction of that period, can be discussed as an independent form of communication that both carries information and documents the manner in which this information spreads and circulates within a society. As a cognitive act, the creation and modification of a rumor is empowering to the individual, giving him or her an active role in the creation of narrative meaning. As an act of communication, rumor creates or reinforces community and empowers that community to engage in the purposive act of group problem solving. There is an opportunistic element in rumor that makes it particularly interesting to examine given the unique information conditions of the war years. These years bring an expansion of government-directed information control, both

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<sup>60</sup> Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in Wartime* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928).

<sup>61</sup> See M.L. Saunders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914-18* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982); Cate Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War*. (London: Penguin Books, 1977); Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda 1914-18 and After* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1987).

in the form of actively produced propaganda and in the form of censorship, and a disruption in the conduits along which information travels under normal conditions. Rumor takes advantage of weaknesses in “official” information pathways, stepping in to provide meaning when other sources begin to fail.

### Section III: The Angels of Mons: A Case Study in Wartime Rumors

On February 14, 1918, Sir Charles Oman, Oxford Professor of History and newly elected President of the Royal Historical Society, gave the keynote speech at the Society’s annual meeting. Titled “Rumours in the Time of War,” he began:

And so to my particular subject of to-day, one that was suggested to me by the sphere of part of my work in Whitehall, where every morning I take up my blue pencil, as one of the much-cursed tribe of censors. I am not going to talk of the ‘secrets of the prison house.’ When the war is over it will be time enough to say what one thinks of war-correspondents and war-orators, publicists, journalists, and propagandists, domestic and foreign, enemy and ally, their psychology and their methods. To-day I am intending merely to give you a few notes on a subject of general historical interest, which has been repeatedly brought up during the present war, though one had thought that the times and conditions were so changed that it would never emerge again as a practical phenomenon worthy of serious notice. I allude to the genesis and development of Rumour, Reports, and Legends of a false or exaggerated sort, during times of military or political crisis.<sup>62</sup>

In his remarks, Oman realizes that rumor, a mode of communication generally considered unworthy “of serious note” in the modern world, is a significant factor in the information environment engendered by the war. While large parts of British society had been changed by the war, especially in terms of communication technologies, the counterpoint

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<sup>62</sup> Professor C.W.C. Oman, “Presidential Address” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4<sup>th</sup> Series 4:1, 1918.



is also true – that the “times and conditions” were not, in actuality, as changed as they were often understood to be by Oman’s contemporaries. In fact, the historical record of the First World War contains evidence of rumors that are remarkable in their scope and imaginative dimension. By examining these sources, it is possible to gain a preliminary glimpse into both the content of rumors and the process by which rumors originate, the manner in which they spread, and the way in which they interact with other sources of information.

Most rumors circulating during the war dissipated quickly, but some were oft repeated and quite resilient. During the autumn of 1914, a rumor spread throughout Britain that Russian soldiers had been spotted at railway stations in rural areas of England heading to the aid of British troops in France with the snow of the Russian winter still clinging to their boots. This rumor, perhaps originating in the actual arrival of repatriating Russian nationals stopping in England on their way home from Canada or perhaps caused by confusion when Scottish Highland regiments from “Ross-shire” were misunderstood on railway platforms in England as they were transported to the southern coast, was exposed as untrue within weeks of its original emergence. After an initial frenzy of speculation, the failure of anyone to produce hard evidence coupled with vigorous denials from official sources meant these reports were quickly dismissed by most as idle talk.<sup>63</sup> Such is the fate of most rumors springing from unverifiable sources. They fill a temporary need within the population either to explain the unknown or to bridge a momentary gap in reliable information and they fall out of the public’s interest when disproved by credible evidence or made irrelevant by changing events.

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<sup>63</sup> John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire* (London: Leo Copper, 1980) 20.

Of more longevity and impact, however, was the widely circulated and very resilient rumor that came to be known as the rumor of the “Angels of Mons,” a loosely coordinated set of stories about supernatural intervention on the side of British forces fighting near the Belgian town of Mons in the first weeks of the war. The rumor of the “Angels of Mons” is useful in examining the importance of rumor at this historical moment since it is both typical and extraordinary. While fairly standard in its content, the rumor has been uniquely preserved in written records due to the fact that its origins *as a rumor* were fiercely contested in newspapers, pamphlets, religious magazines, and even from the pulpits of Anglican churches at the time of its initial circulation. While versions of this rumor individually were often absurd, the rumor propagated widely because it did provide a meaningful interpretation of an ambiguous event.

The rumor of the “Angels of Mons” emerges not from the long stalemate of trench warfare on the Western Front but from the frantic early engagements when a swift and decisive end to the war was expected by all combatant nations.<sup>64</sup> The retreat of the British Army from Mons was recounted for the British public in the newspapers a few days after it happened. *The Times* wrote in a special Sunday War Edition on August 30:

The German attack was withstood to the utmost limit, and a whole division was flung into the fight at the end of a long march and had not even time to dig

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<sup>64</sup> Under the ambitious Schlieffen Plan, the German army planned to march north, violating the neutrality of Belgium, and then swing south behind the French lines and take Paris before the onset of the winter. The quick German advance was only momentarily stopped by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at the battle of Mons on the 23rd of August 1914. At Mons, a British force of “Old Contemptibles,” professional soldiers hardened in the colonial wars in Africa, spread out along the Mons-Conde canal north of the small coal-mining city in southern Belgium. A failure in communication left the British unaware that the French had begun a retreat toward Paris, leaving the British army exposed on both sides. Over the course of August 23rd, German troops successfully crossed the canal, took the town and threatened to cut off British lines of retreat. When a ceasefire was called at sundown, Sir John French called for full retreat. Mons itself was not a decisive battle. It would take the bloodbath of the Marne several weeks later to significantly undermine the Schlieffen Plan and dash the hopes for a quick end to the war.

trenches [...] The army fought its way desperately with many stands, forced backwards and ever backwards by the sheer unconquerable mass of numbers.<sup>65</sup>

A final paragraph was added by the government censor, asserting, “England should realize, and should realize at once, that she must send reinforcements...we want men and we want them now.”<sup>66</sup> These accounts contain the official version, passed by the censors, and already shot through with appeals for enlistment by the Press Bureau, the nascent propaganda arm of the wartime government. There is no report of supernatural phenomenon, either official or unofficial, reported in the weeks following the battle.<sup>67</sup> The newspaper reports did make the retreat sound like an improbable, perhaps even miraculous, escape from superior forces and this may have prepared the collective imagination of Britons at home to accept later rumors of divine intervention on the battlefield at Mons.

It is virtually impossible to fully untangle the web of circulating information at the core of the “Angels of Mons” story, but parsing out an exact timeline is not really necessary. David Clarke, in his monograph *The Angels of Mons*, argues, “It was the *idea* of angels at Mons that quickly caught the imagination of the British public, who longed for a miracle to bring them a swift victory and an end to the war.”<sup>68</sup> His word ‘*idea*’ could be more aptly replaced with the term rumor. The source of the idea of the angels is impossible to pin down, but the mechanism for spreading this rumor is possible to follow

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<sup>65</sup> David Clarke, *The Angel of Mons: Phantom Soldiers and Ghostly Guardians* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2004) 87.

<sup>66</sup> Clarke, *The Angel of Mons* 88.

<sup>67</sup> There is one extant diary, written by Brigadier-General John Charteris, that mentions the “Angel of Mons” in an entry dated September 5, 1914. However, David Clarke has convincingly proven that Charteris heavily edited this diary prior to its publication in 1931. The next mention of the phrase “Angel of Mons” does not appear until April of the following year, so it seems clear that Charteris added this reference in his later revision. David Clarke, “Rumors of Angels: A Legend of the First World War” in *Folklore* (115:1) 2004, 99.

<sup>68</sup> Clarke, *The Angel of Mons* 1. Emphasis in original.

in the historical record. Several very good attempts have been made to trace the history of the “Angels of Mons” story, but perhaps the most interesting and most important attempt was done very early on by Arthur Machen, the man most likely responsible for “starting” the rumor of the “Angels of Mons.”<sup>69</sup> In the preface to a 1915 collection of his stories, including a reprint of his story “The Bowmen,” Machen details his understanding of how the story he created in “The Bowman” turned into the rumor that was still widely circulating at that date. He writes:

This affair of “The Bowmen” has been such an odd one from first to last, so many queer complications have entered into it, there have been so many and so divers currents and cross-currents of rumour and speculation concerning it, that I honestly do not know where to begin. I propose, then, to solve the difficulty by apologizing for beginning at all.<sup>70</sup>

According to Machen, he felt it was necessary to issue such an apology because his story had inadvertently been taken as fact by many of its readers. He remembers that he was approached within a few days of the story’s publication in *The Evening News* by an editor of the *Occult Review*, a publication that would become a staunch defender of the truth of angels at Mons, and asked if the story was drawn from fact.<sup>71</sup> He remembers responding, “I told him that it had no foundation in fact of any kind or sort,” and adds, “I forgot whether I added that it had no foundation in rumour, but I should think no, since to the best of my belief there were no rumours of heavenly interposition in existence at the

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<sup>69</sup> David Clarke’s article “Rumors of Angels: A Legend of the First World War” and his subsequent book *The Angel of Mons* are based on Clarke’s extensive survey of newspapers and parish magazines. The rumor of the “Angels of Mons” is also examined in John Terraine’s *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War 1861-1945*.

<sup>70</sup> Machen 10. Arthur Machen places the conversion of his story “The Bowmen” into the rumor of the “Angels of Mons” in direct relation to the earlier “Russian” rumor, stating, “It is all somewhat wonderful; one can say that the whole affair is a psychological phenomenon of considerable interest, fairly comparable with the great Russian delusion of last August and September.” Arthur Machen, *The Bowmen and other Legends of the War*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., 1915) 22.

<sup>71</sup> The subtitle of the *Occult Review* is “A magazine devoted to the investigation of supernatural phenomena and the study of psychological problems.” Given this orientation, it is not surprising that the magazine was biased toward believing the rumor.

time.”<sup>72</sup> Machen believed that he had “stifled the ‘Bowmen’ mythos in the hour of its birth.”<sup>73</sup> However, within a month or two, Machen began to get requests from the editors of parish magazines to reprint the story and also to provide a short preface giving exact sources for the story. When Machen repeats his denials, one priest writes back that Machen “must be mistaken, that the main ‘facts’ of ‘The Bowmen’ must be true, that [Machen’s] share in the matter must surely have been confined to the elaboration and decoration of a veridical history.”<sup>74</sup> It was around this time that Machen began to hear “variants” of his story “told as authentic histories.” He comes to the conclusion that he “had failed in the art of letters” but “succeeded, unwittingly, in the art of deceit.”<sup>75</sup> Of course, what Machen considers deceit is the transformation of the raw “information” in his story into the more useful form of information contained in rumor. If Machen’s timeline is accurate, the rumor was traveling through the British population with some considerable speed.

Machen’s claim that his story is the source of the rumor of the “Angels of Mons” is complicated by the fact that his story differs somewhat in the details from the version of the rumor that was popular by the summer of 1915, although the historical record offers good evidence of a connection. While Mons is never specifically identified by Machen in “The Bowmen,” the story was published on September 29, 1914, less than a month after reports of the miraculous escape of troops from Mons has been reported in the newspapers, likely priming the public to insert the name of this battle into subsequent retellings. The biggest difference between the short story and the subsequent rumor is that

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<sup>72</sup> Machen 17.

<sup>73</sup> Machen 17.

<sup>74</sup> Machen 17.

<sup>75</sup> Machen 17.

there are no angels in the former and no bowmen in the later. In “The Bowmen,” a soldier sees before him on the battlefield “a long line of shapes, with a shining about them,” appearing “like men who drew bow.” Intuiting that these were the ghosts of the English bowmen who fell at Agincourt, the soldier relates how their “cloud of arrows flew singing and tingling through the air toward the German hosts.” The English army retreats from the field and the German General Staff, finding their troops slaughtered but with no visible injuries, surmises that the British army used poison gas as a weapon in the battle, providing a plausible scientific rationale for the event.<sup>76</sup> In the circulating rumor version, Machen explains that the word “shining” is the link between the story and the rumor because in “the popular view shining benevolent supernatural beings are angels and nothing else.”<sup>77</sup> He adds, perhaps more convincingly, “We have long ceased in England to take much interest in saints [...] [b]ut angels, with certain reservations, have retained their popularity.”<sup>78</sup>

Machen’s story likely transformed from fiction to rumor for a number of reasons. Importantly, Machen did not turn a defeat into a victory for his readers, a change that would likely have prevented the story from crossing over into rumor because it would have contradicted verifiable facts. Rather, he preserved the same outcome but made the defeat an occasion for celebration. Further, the story, by virtue of appearing in the

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<sup>76</sup> “The Bowmen” was not Machen’s only story to mix the supernatural with military themes. Machen was an established, if not well-known, writer of stories weaving Celtic folklore with contemporary settings. In “Drake’s Drum,” British soldiers hear a familiar drumbeat as the German Navy surrenders at Scapa Flow, in “Munitions of War” Napoleonic sailors toil on the Bristol Docks, and in “The Dazzling Light” a lieutenant falls into a waking dream and finds himself in the midst of armour-clad soldiers marching in Wales. Two weeks before the publication of “The Bowmen,” the *Evening News* featured Machen’s short story “The Ceaseless Bugle Call”, in which men waiting to enlist hear a far-off bugle call that will ring ceaselessly “till it summon King Arthur and all his chivalry forth from their magic sleep in Avalon; that they may strike one final shattering blow for the Isle of Britain against the heathen horde.” Machen 101. David Clarke argues that for many people St. George was a more potent military image and was accepted by the church, explaining the greater effect that his latter story had over the former.

<sup>77</sup> Machen 19.

<sup>78</sup> Machen 20.

newspaper, is subject to easy conversion into the second-hand knowledge of rumor and its status as fiction is easily lost. When the anecdote contained in the story is repeated by people who read it in the newspaper, a framing device is added, something like “According to” or “I read somewhere” or simply “they say,” obscuring the origin of the information as fiction. Machen encourages this possibility for conversion himself at the beginning of the story by making the narrator’s sources deliberately vague. Machen situates his story for the reading public, “It was during the Retreat of the Eighty Thousand, and the authority of the Censorship is sufficient excuse for not being more explicit,” playing up the uncertain origins of information from the Front.<sup>79</sup> The publishing circumstances of “The Bowmen” are also significant. Machen was familiar to readers of the *Evening News* as a journalist and news reporter, so his by-line attached to “The Bowmen” did not necessarily indicate to a reader that what followed was a work of fiction. Also, on the same day the *Evening News* printed a fictional story by Alexander Cornford, but clearly labeled it “Our Short Story,” the singular giving the impression that it was the only one in the paper that evening.

This chain of belief, once set in motion, could not be derailed, even in the face of substantial proof of its origin in fiction and an inability to provide any evidence not based on hearsay. The most vocal advocates for the “truth” of the angels were Ralph Shirley, editor of the *Occult Review*, and Phyllis Campbell, a frequent contributor.<sup>80</sup> Shirley devotes his July 1915 column “Notes of the Month” to the controversy. He aims to prove

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<sup>79</sup> Machen 57.

<sup>80</sup> In the July 1915 volume of the magazine, Shirley addresses Machen’s claims that “The Bowmen” is fiction directly in his column “Notes of the Month.” In the August 1915 volume, Campbell writes an article titled “The Angelic Leaders,” which is so popular it is reprinted in the September 1915 volume “due to public demand.” Many of the volumes stretching across this period contain letters from readers in the “Correspondence” section that aim to provide evidence of the angels. However, names of actual witnesses are generally not included.

that Machen's claims to origination are incorrect and that the rumor comes from independent, verifiable sources. While Shirley does provide pages and pages of "evidence," he is never able to get all the way back to the names and particulars of eye-witnesses who are willing to come forward and go on the record with their experiences. For example, he claims, "it was confidently affirmed that several officers had witnessed a curious phenomenon" and "another account emanating from other witnesses of the same occurrence is quoted in the Worcester Herald of June 19, from a letter received by a Hereford clergyman from one of his relations."<sup>81</sup> When Shirley does give specific names, it is to cite someone who got their information from an uncited source. For example, he writes, "The story appears to be the same as that narrated by Dr. F.R. Horton in a recent sermon at Broughton Church, Manchester, which he describes as repeated by so many witnesses that, if anything could be established by contemporary evidence, it must be true."<sup>82</sup> Here, Shirley attempts to persuade his readers of the veracity of the angels by providing copious details of the *retelling* of the rumor. But, he is never able to provide a stable source for the *original telling* of the account.

In his study of rumor, Neubauer argues that a rumor is always a "citation of a citation."<sup>83</sup> For Shirley, and for others trying to establish the truth of information circulating as rumor, this quality of infinite citation is the most challenging obstacle. However, this quality is also the reason that rumors are so helpful to people looking for answers, or for hope in a desperate situation, or a narrative to serve as a mental placeholder until more information arrives. This quality allows the story to be flexible, to change with the needs of the group, and to incorporate new information coming into the

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<sup>81</sup> Anon., "Notes of the Month" *Occult Review* 22:1 (July 1915) 8.

<sup>82</sup> Anon., "Notes of the Month" *Occult Review*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Neubauer 4.



system. In the debate over the “Angels of Mons,” Machen wants to prove that the rumor is false and Shirley and his followers want to prove that the “story” is true. However, for the vast majority of British citizens who were exposed to the rumor, who added to and subtracted from the rumor as they reworked it to fit their own anxieties, and who helped to spread the rumor by passing it on to others, the original facts were beside the point. It quickly became popular and endured for years after the war because it allowed people to collectively develop a “meaningful” understanding of the war in its first confusing and disorienting months. The creation and propagation of other rumors during the years of the war shows that the need for rumors within British society was not entirely displaced even as other conduits for information developed or adapted to the new information needs of wartime Britain.

#### Section IV: Wells, Conrad, and Buchan

My primary purpose in this project is to pick up Oman’s challenge and examine why and how rumor played an important and independent role in communication during the First World War. To this end, I examine the fiction of several writers prominent during the war years, with chapters on H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and John Buchan. Through fiction, each writer engages with the category of rumor and investigates the role of rumor within the information environment of the war. Several factors draw these writers together. All were directly involved with the British propaganda effort, writing and publishing propaganda and, in the case of Wells and Buchan, holding official government offices within the propaganda service itself. Each chapter is focused on fiction written by the author as a private citizen during the war years. This position as

both insider and outsider in the organized communication environment of the war allows each to participate in the formal control of information in their propaganda work and also comment in their fiction on the real difficulties inherent in attempting such control. Additionally, by looking at the pre-war fiction of each author, it is possible to see that these writers were interested in the parameters of information control well before 1914. The war accelerated and intensified impulses already a part of each author's body of work. Examining the wide sensitivity of these authors to the shifting landscape of information allows for a reexamination of each author's body of writing. Taking a broad view of each author's career makes possible an examination of the changing dynamics of information across the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This broad view also draws attention to a number of previously underexamined texts in which the authors make a first foray into considerations of the changing characteristics of information in the modern world.

The first chapter begins with an examination of *The Chronic Argonauts* (1888), H.G. Wells's first, and ultimately unfinished, work of fiction. Often considered simply as an early draft of *The Time Machine*, the text is important in its own right because in *The Chronic Argonauts* Wells introduces a set of terms to describe storytelling – exoteric and esoteric – that are useful in understanding much of Wells's later fiction, particularly *Tono-Bungay* (1910) and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916). For Wells, exoteric narration occupies a perspective outside of the events being narrated, often sitting at a considerable narrative distance, and relies on suppositions, rumors, and gossip to organize observed data into meaningful and coherent stories. Esoteric narration, on the other hand, generates stories that have access to privileged, private information, gained

by intimate knowledge of people and situations, and often corrects or contextualizes information generated by more distant exoteric versions. In *Tono-Bungay*, published in 1910, Wells grapples with the information challenges of modern life through an examination of modern advertising, arguing that commercial entities manipulate individuals through carefully crafted and often deceptive advertisements. This environment strips the individual of an ability to produce a narrative representing an accurate understanding of the circumstances being narrated – in other words, to generate esoteric stories based on personal experience. The lack of an adequate understanding of the world becomes a more urgent concern for Wells during the years of the First World War. In *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, Wells gestures to the way that information slips from firsthand accounts to circulating rumor as stories pass along from person to person within a community. In these wartime information counterpublics, both firsthand accounts and rumors are presented as possible sources of privileged, esoteric knowledge, and as possible sources of community-generated narratives capable of supplementing and/or circumventing the flawed information contained in newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and other “official” sources of information.

The second chapter examines how Joseph Conrad contends with the changing information patterns of modern life through the way he structures and combines competing versions within his fiction. Because Conrad’s fictional universe is a transtextual one, organized as a series of overlapping, palimpsestic narratives, it is well suited to the narrative properties of rumor. By their very nature, rumors mutate and multiply, allowing overlapping versions of a story to exist simultaneously. Rumors circulate widely in Conrad’s early texts - for example, there are rumors of Kurtz in *Heart*

*of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim* and “Falk” are built around rumors of past actions by the title character. But, these early texts read like lonely, solitary stories pieced together by the frame narrator who acts as the story’s weaver. “Obscured narratives” and alternative versions are present, but often remain barely perceptible due to the frame narrator’s organizing and excluding mind. In this chapter, I argue that in Conrad’s later texts these alternative versions move from the barely visible background to form a narrative mosaic of competing stories vying for supremacy. This chapter begins by examining the role of rumor in *Victory* (1915) and its companion short story “Because of the Dollars” (1915). The middle section of the chapter takes a closer look at Conrad’s propaganda essay “The Unlighted Coast.” The final section covers *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and “The Tale” (1917), the later text serving as a restaging of the final scene of *Heart of Darkness* between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended. In “The Tale,” the plot of the story re-enacts the earlier scene. Unlike the failure of communication that happens in *Heart of Darkness*, in “The Tale” the storytelling process is a collaborative effort between a man and a woman, in which the pair deliberately builds up a new version of a story and slants it in a certain direction through an act of mutual and collaborative storytelling.

The third chapter explores the work of John Buchan, a popular and prolific writer during his own lifetime, if lesser known than Wells and Conrad to audiences today. During the war, Buchan was an official in the government’s official propaganda service and this chapter examines role of rumor in official propaganda, the problems faced by governments in containing rumors once they are created, and the tendency of rumors to slip from the confines of official propaganda to become an independent source of information. Unlike the slimmer output of Wells and Conrad, Buchan’s productivity

makes feasible an examination of his work at various points *throughout* the war, instead of limiting the scope of inquiry to an examination of the more static categories pre-war, wartime, and post-war. While this chapter focuses largely on Buchan's fiction, an examination of his ongoing role in the production of official government propaganda makes visible a significant reorientation in the government's attitude toward the scope and purpose of propaganda from the beginning to the end of the war. This chapter begins with an examination of Buchan's short story "The King of Ypres" (1915). This small work provides the reader with a condensed look at many of the issues surrounding the circulation of information more extensively considered in his wartime novels. It then examines Buchan's thrillers, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, written before the war and published in 1915, *Greenmantle*, published in 1916, and *Mr. Standfast*, written before the end of the war and published in 1919. This chapter also examines the way rumor was used in the production of the Bryce Report, published by the government in 1915 and detailing alleged atrocities committed by German troops during the invasion of Belgium. An examination of the rumors created by the Bryce Report reinforces the fact that once unleashed, rumors are unpredictable forms of communication.

This project argues that rumor plays an important role in the modern information environment, a fact that highlights the role that rumor plays in the highly charged information environment of war. Rumor is difficult to capture, both in fiction and in the historical record, but efforts to unearth it are rewarded with a glimpse into this complex mode of communication, one that offers a way to resist the limits imposed on an individual by the information saturated environment of modern life. Rumor may start out as propaganda in the hands of the powerful, but once loose may move and change

according to its own direction. Rumor can challenge and disrupt the historical narratives that coalesce around an event, molding which narrative is ultimately embedded in the historical record. Tracing the role of rumor in the fiction of Wells, Conrad, and Buchan is a necessary part of revaluating the continuities that stretch across the chasm of the First World War. It is also important in repositioning the fiction written during the war itself within the category of “war literature,” a category too often eager to push these texts aside in favor of their post-war counterparts.

## H.G. Wells and Information: Exoteric/Esoteric Storytelling and the Search for “Truth”

[The stranger] came without a solitary premonition out of the vast unknown into the sphere of minute village observation and gossip [...] Of these conflicting reports, the [commonplace] was the first to be generally circulated, but the [incredible], in view of the bizarre presence and eccentric ways of the newest inhabitant, obtained wider credence.

H.G. Wells, *The Chronic Argonauts*, 1888

H.G. Wells is not generally thought of as a writer interested in detailing “the sphere of minute village observation and gossip” or in documenting the “conflicting reports” that swirl around the arrival in town of a mysterious stranger. Rather, modern readers tend to know H.G. Wells as an originator of the genre of science fiction and the author of some of the most significant and seminal “scientific romances” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Works such as *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) demonstrate Wells’s talent for mixing scientific themes with deep considerations of the social and moral complications engendered by the advent of new ideas and new technologies. Wells’s first novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), is considered one of the finest examples of Wells’s ability to write captivating science fiction and is credited with beginning that genre’s long engagement with the theme of scientific time-travel.<sup>84</sup>

But a different orientation, or perhaps a different emphasis, in Wells’s fiction becomes visible when one starts an investigation not with *The Time Machine*, but with the first extant version of this time-travel narrative, titled *The Chronic Argonauts*, published in 1888 when Wells was only twenty-one. *The Chronic Argonauts* is not just

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<sup>84</sup> Time travel based on the idea of extended sleep that transports one to another time was already in circulation, such as in Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*.

an unpolished or unfinished version of Wells's more famous later novel.<sup>85</sup> It is important in its own right because in this short, unfinished work Wells introduces a set of terms to describe storytelling – exoteric and esoteric – that are useful in understanding much of Wells's later fiction. *The Chronic Argonauts* establishes Wells's interest in the narrative difference between an *exoteric point of view*, referring to versions of a story told from a perspective external to the events, created and spread by a public with no access to specialized knowledge, and an *esoteric point of view*, referring to versions of a story that spring from private, confidential access to restricted information.

The exoteric/esoteric binary structure of *The Chronic Argonauts* calls attention to the category of *information* generally, and particularly to the processes by which a population generates, ignores, privileges, misappropriates and/or manipulates information to create versions of a given story able to meet the community's particular informational needs. While Wells relies on the terms “observation” and “gossip” to refer to these competing narratives, the disparate versions can more accurately be understood as competing *rumors*, given that the narratives are proffered by members of this community in order to “construct a ‘meaningful’ interpretation” of events and to reduce the anxiety produced by a stranger's ambiguous position.<sup>86</sup> Given the existence of multiple,

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<sup>85</sup> While *The Chronic Argonaut* contains a nascent version of *The Time Machine*'s scientific thesis for the possibility of time travel – the existence of four dimensional geometry – it is only secondarily interested in scientific rationales. And while *The Chronic Argonauts* touches on the narrative possibilities of depicting a past or future time, it contains only a handful of references to temporally displaced events and lacks the political and sociological commentary present in *The Time Machine*'s Eloi/Morlock vision of the future.

<sup>86</sup> I am, once again, using Shibutani's definition rumor as “a collective transaction whose component parts consist of cognitive and communicative activity; it develops as men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a ‘meaningful’ interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources.” Shibutani 17. Wells's use of the word “gossip” here does not comport with modern understandings of the word. According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, gossip is a mode of communication carried out between a few, closely connected people and, therefore, she understands the pay-off of gossip to be private and emotional instead of rumor's more public and social pay-off. Neubauer reinforces the difference between rumor and gossip, arguing, “rumors are not a mature form of gossip. Gossip is definable in terms of both form and



competing rumor versions, the text grapples with the problematic nature of establishing an empirically accurate version of any experience given that a whole range of alternate versions are just as capable of satisfying a population's needs for answers that reduce ambiguity.

Across Wells's career in fiction, the categories exoteric/esoteric have a complicated relationship to two important categories of information: rumor and the first-hand account. In *The Chronic Argonauts*, Wells equates rumor with exoteric storytelling – the villagers create rumors to explain a stranger's odd behavior – and he equates first-hand accounts with esoteric storytelling – a clergyman tells what he saw when circumstances make him the stranger's time-traveling companion. According to the logic of the text, rumors produce flawed or false versions while first-hand accounts produce versions that are close to, if not objectively verifiable as, the truth. Consequently, the text privileges the esoteric. The villagers' rumors are outrageous and occasionally idiotic, while the clergyman's firsthand account is presented as reasonable, detailed, and surprisingly probable. In later works by Wells, the sharp distinctions between exoteric/rumor and esoteric/first-hand account give way as he grapples with the fact that firsthand accounts, when retold by a recipient to another audience, transform into secondhand rumor. Further, Wells realizes that, in general, rumors have significant productive functionality. Wells probably abandoned writing *The Chronic Argonauts* before it was finished for a number of reasons, but the fact that he had boxed himself into a position where the majority of the text could only have presented the clergyman's

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content; it is founded on the finely balanced relationship and often apparent proximity of gossiper and gossipee, whose roles, in principle could be swapped." Neubauer 3-4.

version of the story as if it were the one “true” version was likely a contributing factor. When Wells reworks his time-travel narrative in *The Time Machine* a few years later, the incredible tale of the time traveler at the center of the story is balanced against the measured skepticism and reasonable alternatives presented in that text’s corresponding opening frame.

While Wells does not return to the exoteric/esoteric vocabulary in later texts, the distinction between exoteric and esoteric storytelling introduced in *The Chronic Argonauts* provides a useful framework for understanding a number of his later works and their relationship to the circulation of information. I am particularly interested in how such a reading opens up a fresh understanding of *Tono-Bungay* (1910), perhaps Wells’s most highly regarded novel, and how it creates new interest in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916), a once popular and now little remembered text. In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells grapples with the information challenges of modern life through an examination of modern advertising, arguing that commercial entities manipulate individuals through carefully crafted and often deceptive advertisements in order to strip the individual of his ability to distinguish the “true” from the “false.” Wells does not structure the novel as a contrast between exoteric and esoteric points of view. Instead, he focuses mainly on the limitations of esoteric storytelling, particularly on how difficult it is to acquire esoteric knowledge. *Tono-Bungay* confronts the fact that it may not be possible to acquire adequate specialized or privileged information from which a storyteller can produce a narrative representing an accurate understanding of the circumstances being narrated. The novel’s protagonist George Ponderevo is attempting to write a true and accurate narrative of his life, but is never able to get outside of all the factors limiting his understanding to

produce a reliable narrative even of his own life story. By the time Wells writes *Tono-Bungay*, he has abandoned the clear correspondence between firsthand accounts and esoteric accuracy that he argues for in *The Chronic Argonauts* and is seriously considering whether firsthand accounts can ever possess the ability to produce a narrative version of a given story that is accurate and complete. This is a phase of Wells's career where he consequently begins to explore the exoteric, both critically in its potential for distortion but also functionally in the coping mechanisms for collective meaning making that it offers.

Difficulty in determining what version of a story best approximates complete understanding in a given situation becomes a more urgent concern for Wells during the years of the First World War. Due to limitations placed on the production and circulation of information after 1914 – stretching from logistical difficulties in obtaining information to official restrictions on what information could be publically distributed – the traditional hierarchies of information production become increasingly unreliable. Further, Wells displaces a pursuit of truth, since deeming the truth is so obviously difficult and so obviously unreliable in a world dominated by mass media, toward discovering functional ways to navigate in a hyper-mediated culture. In *Mr. Britling's* early pages, newspapers – the main conduit for circulating both the amalgamated information of corporate newsgathering and “official” government news – replace *Tono-Bungay's* focus on advertising as the central vocabulary for describing the means by which information that purports to be esoteric, to have privileged access to the facts, turns out to be inaccurate. While Wells reiterates many of the same issues surrounding information circulation he explored in *Tono-Bungay* in the opening pages of *Mr. Britling*, the novel's later pages

focus on the flexible conduits of rumor and the informal rumor communities that these conduits create in response. This represents a return to the “minute village observation and gossip” that forms the first part of *The Chronic Argonauts*, but in *Mr. Britling* Wells finds a use value in secondhand rumors that he does not embrace in the earlier text.

Wells also gestures in *Mr. Britling* to the way that information slips from firsthand accounts to circulating rumor as stories pass along from person to person within a community. Both firsthand accounts and rumors are presented as possible sources of knowledge, possible ways for the community to get around the flawed information contained in newspapers. However, the novel culminates when a soldier thought to be dead arrives home very much alive. News of the soldier’s death initially arrives in the form of an official military telegram and is double-checked through multiple firsthand witness accounts and a rumor circulating at the Front. The soldier’s miraculous reappearance establishes that there is no source of information capable of producing a completely accurate narrative. In short, at the end of *Mr. Britling*, Wells concludes that the esoteric is inaccessible. While Wells is more muted in his consideration of the problems of representation and the self-referential nature of language than many of the high modernists writing around the same time, the fact that he blurs the distinction between esoteric and exoteric storytelling to the point of interchangeability indicates that Wells shares with modernism a concern over questions of epistemology, accessibility, and unreliability.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> See Brian McHale’s definition of modernism as “fiction organized in terms of an epistemological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the accessibility, reliability or unreliability, transmission, circulation, etc., of knowledge about the world.” Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992) 146.

The treatment of information Wells develops in *Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* provides an interesting contrast to the model of information proffered by Walter Lippmann after the war. As a point of similarity, Wells shares with Lippmann a concern that modern individuals are increasingly distanced from a full understanding of their circumstances by the complexity of the world around them. The buyer of patent medicine duped by advertising in *Tono-Bungay* or the trusting reader of condensed and amalgamated newspaper stories in *Mr. Britling* have the kind of attenuated relationship to reality that concerns Lippmann. According to Lippmann, direct experience in modern life is rendered nearly impossible by the volume of information available and, therefore, people make decisions on the basis on “pictures in their head.”<sup>88</sup> Because of the distance between reality and such mental pictures created by the volumes of information left unprocessed or unknown, people in modern society are immersed in and make decisions in response to a “pseudo-environment of mediated fact.”<sup>89</sup> Therefore, each person lives embedded in a “representation of the environment” created by his or her own simplifications, substitutions and selections.<sup>90</sup>

Where Lippmann focuses solely on how this gap between objective reality and the “pseudo-environment” in which a person lives is a product of the new conditions of modernity, including new practices of circulation information, Wells offers a more nuanced look at what is new in modernity and what is left over, or “residual” to use Raymond Williams’ term, about the way that information is accessed from earlier periods. In both *Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, Wells outlines the many

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<sup>88</sup> Lippmann 31.

<sup>89</sup> Lippmann 15.

<sup>90</sup> Lippmann 15.

similarities between the way that modern information patterns prevent a person's full comprehension of the world and the way that such comprehension has always been limited by a person's socio-cultural position. In other words, the "pseudo-environments" created by advertising and propaganda endemic to the modern world are similar in kind to the "pseudo-environments" created by the traditional limitations of class, religion, or geographic location. For Wells, the times are modern – and changes in the capitalist/commercial/media/technological environment underpinning the information dynamics of modern life have changed – but the techniques and forms of information management and experience are not simply so. To the contrary, Wells is writing during a very hybrid cultural moment. Examining Wells's handling of the varied information environment of this period makes it possible to better note shifts in dominance between pre-modern and modern forms of information control.

In many respects, Wells's conclusion at the end of *Mr. Britling* that the "truth" is inaccessible marks the end of his fiction-writing career. Wells's post-war novels fall into two categories. The first category contains novels such as *Joan and Peter* (1921), written as Socratic dialogues and, therefore, representing closed systems of thought in which one side knows the "truth" already. The second category contains novels such as *Men Like Gods* (1923) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), rather poorly plotted novels in which Wells dogmatically explores the possibility of utopian ideals. The emphasis in these novels is not an exploration of the real conditions of the world, but rather an explanation of the philosophical ideas about a possible utopian future that Wells is increasingly enamored of after the war. His later work loses its dynamism as he moves away from an interest in the duality of exoteric and esoteric modes of narration that

stretches from the *Chronic Argonauts* to *Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, a preoccupation on which his career in fiction is built.

Section I: Setting the Record Straight - Exoteric Rumors and Esoteric “Accounts” in *The Chronic Argonauts*

In *The Chronic Argonauts*, Wells demonstrates an early understanding of the manner by which imperfect information produces multiple and competing versions of a single set of ambiguous events. The unfinished text was published serially in the *Science Schools Journal* from April to June of 1888 and contains two separately subtitled episodes that operate as if the two parts together constitute an opening frame to a longer, never completed work.<sup>91</sup> The first part of the text is titled “The Story from an Exoteric Point of View” and contains a compilation of the rumors that spring up and circulate among the local population in an attempt to explain “the bizarre presence and eccentric ways” of a mysterious stranger. The second part is titled “The Esoteric Story Based on the Clergyman’s Depositions,” and presents a version of the same events through the eyes of a local clergyman, an accidental participant in this stranger’s time travel experiments.

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<sup>91</sup> It was serialized from April to June of 1888 in *The Science Schools Journal*, a publication Wells helped found while a student at the Normal School of Science in South Kensington, serving as its first editor. Wells was twenty-one years old at the time. The story was probably started just after Wells left South Kensington and the Welsh setting of *The Chronic Argonauts* is most likely due to the fact that Wells was working as a schoolmaster at Holt Academy in Wrexham during the 1887 school year while writing the earliest draft of the story. The text ends with the statement, “The voyage of the Chronic Argonauts had begun,” followed by the paragraph:

How did it end? How came it that Cook wept with joy to return once more to this nineteenth century of ours? Why did not Nebogipfel remain with him? All that. And more also, has been written, and will or will never be read, according as Fate may have decreed to the Curious Reader. In fact, Wells never wrote the section that would have contained a time “voyage” in which Wells constructs an extended vision of either a past or future moment in the history of the world. H.G. Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine: A Critical Edition of H.G. Wells’s Scientific Romance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 152.

The first part of *The Chronic Argonauts* is not one straightforward narration. While titled using a singular noun, “The Story from an Exoteric Point of View,” it is actually a detailed accounting of various rumors circulating among the remote Welsh village of Llyddwdd. The first few pages of the text recount rumors that have long been circulating within the village, such as “the foul murder” of a local man named Williams by his two sons in the house at the center of the story. This incident spins out further rumors about how the house has been haunted by the ghosts of the all three Williamses for the past twenty years. Therefore, the text’s opening establishes that the town’s long-standing informational *modus operandi* is to create and circulate rumors to explain ambiguous events. The remaining pages of this first part of the text detail rumors that are circulating to explain the unexpected arrival to the village and subsequent bizarre behavior of a stranger named Dr. Nebogipfel.<sup>92</sup> For example, it is rumored that he arrived “by a certain train from London.” Then, the same “fertile source of information,” most likely a gossipy old woman named Mrs. Morgan ap Lloyd Jones, reports that “he was first beheld skimming down the slopes of steep Pen-y-pwll with exceeding swiftness, riding, as it appeared to the intelligent observer, upon an instrument not unlike a sieve and that he entered the house by the chimney.”<sup>93</sup> The less fantastic version of the story is the first to circulate but the more incredible version gains ground over time as the man’s behavior continues to titillate the locals.<sup>94</sup> Since there is something about him that the

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<sup>92</sup> The villagers only figure out his name by reading it on crates that arrive labeled “Dr. Moses Nebogipfel Ph.D., F.R.S., N.W.R.” Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 138.

<sup>93</sup> Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 136. The name given to the town’s biggest gossip, Mrs. Morgan ap Lloyd Jones, is composed of the most common and stereotypically Welsh surnames, creating an “everyman” quality to these rumors and pointing out that identifying a specific source is less important than noting their collective properties.

<sup>94</sup> Given that in “almost every circumstance of life the observant villagers soon found his ways were not only not *their* ways, but altogether inexplicable upon any theory of motives they could conceive,” the



villagers cannot naturalize into the world as they know it, the existence of multiple rumors work together to create a cognitively satisfying explanation of the man and his habits from the available evidence. This is an early seed of the kind of inquiry Wells will grow to emphasize in his fiction through *Mr. Britling* – though he cuts it off here after the opening section of *The Chronic Argonauts*.

When a man drops dead on the road in front of the doctor’s house, the rumor atmosphere of the village is suddenly amplified. The more improbable “exoteric” versions of the story, which have been kept in check by a “fear of ridicule” and a fear of Doctor Nebogipfel, are now “clad in the terrible majesty of truth.”<sup>95</sup> The rumors soon spawn an angry mob that swarms the doctor’s house, busting through the front door just in time to see the doctor and a second man vanish before their eyes. According to the text, “Some [witnesses] assert that this second-man – whom others deny – bore on his face the likeness of a local clergyman, the Reverend Elijah Ulysses Cook, while others declare that he resembled the description of the murdered Williams.”<sup>96</sup> For the villagers, there is no way to check one rumor against another, so the mystery of Dr. Nebogipfel “must now go unproven for ever,” remaining permanently in the realm of rumor.<sup>97</sup> The first part of the text ends with a brief section subtitled “How an Esoteric Story became Possible” that serves as a bridge to the second half of the text. This short section focuses on explaining how private knowledge of Dr. Nebogipfel’s “true” activities is available for

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“warlock notion of matters” quickly outpaces more terrestrial explanations to explain his odd behavior. Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 137. Emphasis in original.

<sup>95</sup> Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 141.

<sup>96</sup> Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 143. The Reverend’s three names all connect to the themes of the story. The Biblical Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind, vanishing much like the Reverend and Nebogipfel do in the eyes of the collected villagers. Ulysses, the figure from Homeric literature, and Cook, probably a reference to Captain James Cook, the eighteenth-century British explorer, reference the Reverend’s newly acquired position as an explorer and adventurer.

<sup>97</sup> Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 143.

circulation as a counterbalance to the rumors of the mob when the Reverend Cook suddenly reappears in another part of England several weeks ahead of the date on which he disappears with him from Wales.<sup>98</sup>

The second part of *The Chronic Argonauts*, titled “The Esoteric Story Based on the Clergyman’s Depositions,” contains, as indicated by the word “esoteric,” special knowledge gained by the Reverend. However, Wells does not include much esoteric information concerning the time traveling done by the Reverend, presumably because this esoteric thread was to comprise the remainder of the unfinished text. It seems likely that Wells does not write the rest of this version precisely because, in ways he probably was not fully aware of at the time, sidelining the exoteric cuts off the vitality generated in his later fiction by the collectivity of multiple perspectives. Rather, the text focuses on his special access to the Doctor’s activities right before the mob of villagers broke down his door and the two of them escaped on the time machine, called by Nebogipfel the “Chronic Argo” and giving the work its title.<sup>99</sup> Wells sets up this version to be a correction to the inaccurate rumor-versions spread by the villagers in the first part of the text. The story is presented as a deposition made by Cook on his deathbed, just weeks after his reappearance. He states that when he arrived at the doctor’s house, making “his way from the rumour-pelted village,” he let himself in and looked around at the doctor’s equipment.<sup>100</sup> After a series of shocks and reassurances between Cook and the doctor, Nebogipfel demonstrates how his machine works and dispassionately explains to the

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<sup>98</sup> The second part of the text is set in the Fens, or possibly in the South Downs, reflecting the fact that he probably revised the text after leaving his post at Holt Academy in Wales.

<sup>99</sup> It is likely that Wells intended to cover the time traveling adventures of the Reverend and Nebogipfel in the sections of the story left unwritten.

<sup>100</sup> Wells, *The Definitive Time Machine* 145.

Reverend the theory of four dimensional space that makes his time travel possible.<sup>101</sup> In order to avoid getting caught in the violence of the approaching mob, Nebogipfel brings Cook with him in the time machine and both men disappear just as the mob breaks through the door. This ending ties the narrative of the second part back to the various competing rumor-versions circulating in the village about the disappearance at the end of the first part of the story.

In *The Chronic Argonaut*, Wells examines how and why rumors get started, why they spread, and how terribly difficult they are to dispel even when more accurate information is available. Wells largely equates exoteric storytelling with inaccuracy and untruth and esoteric storytelling with accuracy and truth-telling, as esoteric versions have, by definition, greater access to the facts of a situation. However, the villagers who spin exoteric tales explaining the mysterious stranger's actions as supernatural and nefarious turn out to be correct on a macro-level. There is something unnatural, unusual, and possibly dangerous going on with Nebogipfel. He may not be a "warlock" as they conjecture, but his behavior is out of place in the environment. The villagers develop a narrative, or a series of equally satisfying competing narratives, to reduce the ambiguity and anxiety produced by this situation. Wells tackles the "truth-telling" properties of rumor in later texts, but the fact that such an interpretation is possible in *The Chronic Argonauts* helps to explain why Wells ultimately rethinks his initial position. Like all of Wells's science fiction, *The Chronic Argonauts* explores points of contact between modernity and the pre-modern at the level of content. At the level of narrative structure, the fact that his pre-modern villagers are able to construct a version of events that

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<sup>101</sup> Wells will keep this scientific rationale for time travel consistent when he revises the text as *The Time Machine*.

provides them functional value offers an incipient recognition that there is a place in modernity for the seemingly pre-modern storytelling practices of rumor.

It is likely that Wells abandoned writing *The Chronic Argonauts* because he felt that the narrative structure wasn't working. Wells wrote later in life, "Already the writer had made an earlier experiment in the pseudo-Teutonic, Nathaniel Hawthorne style, and experiment printed in the *Science Schools Journal* and now happily unattainable."<sup>102</sup> Part of the difficulty Wells may have encountered in trying to continue writing a time travel story from this beginning is that the two parts of the story are unnecessary to each other. The angry mob of villagers is not going to be persuaded by a dispassionate deathbed confession that provides an explanation of the events just as wildly improbable as the other versions. Their rumors already meet the informational needs on the community so there is no reason for them to go back and reconsider additional evidence. The text provides Reverend Cook's alternative version, but his death prevents any expansion or clarification coming from that source. Therefore, Wells does not leave himself a narrative option that allows for the insertion of further information. The narrator of the second part, the person who takes Cook's deposition, does not have access to any other "esoteric" storytelling source. The text could continue as a recitation of Cook's account, but the "esoteric" narrative would lose its dynamism of in the absence of any "exoteric" challenge. *The Chronic Argonauts* fails because it cancels out the exoteric, superseding rumor with first hand "truth," instead of exploring how the exoteric and esoteric are entangled, especially in this hybrid moment of emerging modernity. However, this failure provides a vocabulary for unlocking the narrative structure, the back-and-forth between the exoteric and esoteric, that describes much of Wells's later fiction.

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<sup>102</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, Preface (New York: Random House, 1931) ix.

Wells significantly revised the plot and structure of his time travel narrative before publishing *The Time Machine* in 1896. However, the two texts share a concern with the way in which scientific events that cannot be naturalized into a group's contemporary understanding of the world are managed through the collective process of rumor formation. By the time Wells writes *The Time Machine*, the overt concern with "minute village observation and gossip" is muted by setting the novel in a middle-class drawing room in Richmond, a setting unlikely to produce the kind of wild rumors produced in Llyddwdd. The story's frame sets up the storytelling situation as that of a group of men assembled in a "glorious after-dinner atmosphere" that helps the audience of listeners to suspend their natural disbelief. Wells wrote later, "I had realized that the more impossible the story I had to tell, the more ordinary must be the setting, and the circumstances in which I now set the Time Traveller were all that I could imagine of solid upper-middle-class comfort."<sup>103</sup> Instead of calling attention to the strangeness of the time traveler's behavior, as he does with the villagers in *The Chronic Argonauts*, Wells closes the distance between the exoteric and the esoteric versions that are put into circulation within the text.

## Section II: *Tono-Bungay* - Gaining "Esoteric" Knowledge When Trapped Inside a Pseudo-Environment of Mediated Fact

In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells makes several observations about the state of the information in pre-war Britain that he later complicates in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*.

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<sup>103</sup> Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* 516. John Hammond writes "It is a framing device in which an apparently fantastic narrative is placed within a descriptive frame of reassuring familiarity. This device is frequently employed in the nineteenth century novel, and Wells was writing in that respect within a long-established literary tradition." John Hammond, Introduction in *The Time Machine: A Reference Guide* (Westport: Praeger, 2004) 20.

*Tono-Bungay* places the individual in the midst of the highly saturated, highly mediated information environment that is conditioned by modern life. However, the novel meticulously presents the problems of modernity in reference to continuity between past and present. Like the juxtaposition of modern science and pre-modern cultural forms that marks Wells's science fiction, *Tono-Bungay* draws attention to changes that have taken place in the information environment of modernity by setting these new conditions in contrast to the information systems that marked pre-modern British life. While the novel makes constant reference to the distorting effects of modern advertising, driven by large commercial conglomerates, to create misleading narratives that benefit narrow business interests instead of the public good, these modern developments are framed in reference to more traditionally important categories – such as class hierarchies, established academia, the church, and the state – that have always shaped, and in many situations completely determined, a person's understanding of the wider world. On the one hand, an individual's imperfect understanding of the world may derive from the fact that he was born a tenant farmer on a large estate or from the fact that he is a modern urban dweller constantly bombarded with advertising messages. Either way, the individual's view of the world exists apart from the facts of objective reality. Therefore, such a "pseudo-environment" is not only a "modern" fate, but also an ahistorical human fate. On the other hand, the evacuation of traditional categories and structures means that the modern individual cannot take shelter from the constant onslaught of information within these relatively stable fields of reference.

In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells ultimately determines that it is possible for an individual to shrug off any specific frame, but it is not possible for an individual to remove himself

from the process by which such pseudo-environments are created. The narrator of *Tono-Bungay*, George Ponderevo, begins life limited by the social conditions of his lower-class upbringing, and works hard in his youth to extricate himself from both his circumstances and the arrangement of thinking engendered by those circumstances. This pattern is repeated in adulthood when George moves from his provincial life to modern business ventures in London. George and his uncle Edward Ponderevo initially find dizzying success in business through manipulative advertising. However, Wells demonstrates through the ultimate failure of their business scheme that, while it is possible for an individual to become a part of the system that creates and controls information, the macrosystems of information are ultimately bigger than even the most powerful individual manipulator.

The basic structure of *Tono-Bungay* is a novel-within-a-novel, constructed so that the frame narrator, George Ponderevo, writes a novel in which the protagonist is also named George Ponderevo. To use Walter Lippmann's phrase, the interior novel represents the "picture in the head" of the frame narrator. However, this "picture" is not stable. The plot of the interior novel follows the narrator through his life as he describes how he understood the world at a number of particular junctures. In this way, the novel is made up of a series of "pictures" constantly under revision. The frame narrator sets out specifically to write a novel instead of an autobiography. It is clear that, at the level of fact, the story he tells is a fabrication. Indeed, he argues that his goal in writing a novel is "to render nothing more nor less than Life ... my impressions of the thing as a whole."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (New York: Modern Library, 2007) 6. Jeffery Sommers argues that the frame narrator "promises to adhere to the 'spirit of truth-telling,' but where the truth in his tale will reside is in the impressions he will include, not necessarily in the narrative itself." Jeffery Sommers, "Wells's *Tono-Bungay* and the Novel Within the Novel" in *Studies in the Novel* (17.1) 1985, 73.

In this way, the importance of the interior novel is heightened because it is presented not as what happened, as is expected in an autobiography, but as what the frame narrator understood to be important about his experiences.

In the opening frame chapter, the frame narrator sets himself up as someone who has been exposed to a wider social landscape than the average person and, therefore, is in a stronger position than others to reexamine the boundaries of any particular pseudo-environment in which he finds himself. As the nephew of a self-made industrialist, George explains that he has been “jerked out of [his] stratum and lives crosswise for the rest of time.”<sup>105</sup> The world that George was jerked out of is one in which every individual has a definite class and a definite place. In such a world “they know what is becoming in them and what is due to them,” constituting, at least in appearance, a “closed and complete social system.”<sup>106</sup> From within this system, an individual cannot gain a view of the whole. However, because of his unusual social variability, George now stands outside this system and believes himself able to show the reader where the edges of the system exist. As an inventor of an experimental flying machine, George literally experiences a “bird’s eye view of the modern world” that makes him rare in the pre-aviation era. Intellectually, he believes he is a rare natural skeptic who resists the usual tendency to “take [his] world for granted.”<sup>107</sup> It is from this perspective that the frame narrator writes the “notes and inconsecutive observations” that constitute the interior novel. George’s “observations” are organized around various attempts to shrug off any limitation in his view of the world.

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<sup>105</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 4.

<sup>106</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 8.

<sup>107</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 18.



In the closing frame of *Tono-Bungay*, the financial ruin of the Ponderevo business empire has forced George down from the sky to become a builder of naval destroyers. Having acquired and then lost a whole series of social and financial situations, he believes that he has reached a vantage point of unfettered understanding from which to look back and comment on the world. He feels he can now see England in “the whole broad panoramic effect.”<sup>108</sup> Figuring this space of understanding through the figure of his destroyer, he describes the world as seen from the deck:

I and my destroyer tear out to the unknown across a great grey space. We tear into the great spaces of the future and the turbines fall to talking in unfamiliar tongues. Out to the open we go, to windy freedom and trackless ways. Light after light goes down. England and the Kingdom, Britain and the Empire, the old prides and the old devotions, glide abeam, astern, sink down upon the horizon, pass – pass. The river passes – London passes, England passes...<sup>109</sup>

As the destroyer makes its way clear of the shore, the categories that provide frames for the narrator seem to melt away – the geographic frames represented by “the unknown... windy freedom and trackless ways,” the political frames represented by “England and the Kingdom, Britain and the Empire,” and the social and religious frames represented by “the old prides and the old devotions.” Even the openness of the ending ellipsis denies the confinement of this boundary. The frame narrator George articulates his desire for a reality outside of socially constructed frames. Trying to put a concrete name to such an uncontaminated version of the world, he states, “Sometimes I call this reality Science, sometimes I call it Truth.”<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, he describes this space as “something we draw by pain and effort out of the heart of life,” referring, as an opposite, to the “heart of darkness” from Conrad’s more famous framed narrative. Like Conrad’s “heart of

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<sup>108</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 367.

<sup>109</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 371.

<sup>110</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 372.

darkness,” this revelation represents an indeterminate space, one in which George, like Conrad’s Kurtz, has “kicked himself loose of the earth.”<sup>111</sup>

However, the novel does not end with either George’s description of his destroyer, or with the description of the meaning of the destroyer as the “heart of life.” The final chapter denies the framelessness of this ending and reinscribes the novel within another pseudo-environment, one just as limited and incomplete as any he had previously shrugged off. He admits that on his revelatory trip into open water with his destroyer he had with him “four sick and starving journalists who had got permission to come with [him] up the shining river, and past the old grey Tower...”<sup>112</sup> This description recreates the previous description of the voyage, including the possibility of the open-endedness in the final ellipsis. It supersedes the revelatory power of the previous description by coming after it. But, instead of narrating the outward trip again, he jumps right to its conclusion, when the ship is back at dock and its passengers back on land. He remembers “the back views of those journalists very distinctly, going with a certain damp weariness of movement, along a side street away from the river.” Afterwards, he admits that these journalists “served me up to the public in turgid degenerate Kiplingese, as a modest button on the complacent stomach of the Empire.”<sup>113</sup> George is reintegrated into the frames and references of imperial Britain, digested through the language of imperial propaganda, the “turgid degenerate Kiplingese” of the empire’s most successful and propagandistic advocate.

The interior narrative of *Tono-Bungay*, George’s novel about “George,” is structured as an investigation into the series of nested systems from within which George

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<sup>111</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 83.

<sup>112</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 373.

<sup>113</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 373.

succeedingly attempts to extricate himself as he comes to doubt the efficacy of the worldview each produces. George claims a “certain innate skepticism” that makes him specially equipped to understand the limits of things, but his questioning only leads to tautological outcomes. Each moment of understanding is followed by his reinscription into another limiting system. The first system identified by the young George is the social structure of the English country estate into which he is born. As a youth, he believes that the British social system consists of identical units of a “wide park...[a] fair large house, dominating church, village and the countryside.”<sup>114</sup> Together such units make up the Bladesover System, named by George for the manor house in which he spends his childhood as the son of the housekeeper. Initially, George believes the Bladesover System to be “a complete authentic microcosm” and “a little working model ... of the entire world.”<sup>115</sup> Within the Bladesover system, the manor house sits atop the hierarchy and the end of George’s childhood is marked by his banishment from Bladesover for transgressing this order. He is sent away for fighting with a boy, and indirectly for kissing a girl, from the highest social stratum, the aristocratic family of Bladesover House itself.

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<sup>114</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 8.

<sup>115</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 7. Throughout his fiction, Wells uses the relationship that a character has to his house as a stand-in for the condition of his mind at a particular moment. This finds a tradition in 19<sup>th</sup> century novels, such as Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. According to Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, Wells’s description of domestic architecture in such works as *Kipps*, *A Modern Utopia*, *The World of William Cissold*, as well as *Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, “make the same connection between a style of life and a state of mind ... a particular application of the general way in which he used topographical details to make a psychological point.” This connection between housing and the basic condition of one’s life seems, at its heart, an autobiographical quirk of Wells himself. In his autobiography, his own originary home, Atlas House, a manor house in which his mother was a domestic worker, is figured as the place he spend much of the rest of his life trying to escape. In this, *Tono-Bungay* reads as an autobiography of the author himself. In his life, he moved to a new house with each new period of his career. *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* was written following a move to the Easton Glebe, and Britling’s home at Matching’s Easy is a closely autobiographical rendering of his own home during the early days of the war. Norman Mackenzie and Jeanne Mackenzie, *H.G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 265.

Although he is ultimately banished from Bladesover, the framework of Bladesover is clearly still the operative pattern in his mind when, as a young man, he first confronts the extraordinary system that is London in the late nineteenth century. He finds the “clue to the structure of London” in the basic structure of Bladesover. Passing the Natural History Museum on Cromwell Road, he realizes:

this is the little assemblage of cases of stuffed birds and animals upon the Bladesover staircase grown enormous, and yonder as the corresponding thing to the Bladesover curios and porcelain is the Art Museum, and there in the little observatories in Exhibition Road is old Sir Cuthbert’s Gregorian telescope.<sup>116</sup>

To the young man, London appears as an overgrown Bladesover, from “the proper shops for Bladesover custom” he finds along Regent Street, to the “doctor’s house of the country village” he finds “multiplied but not otherwise different” along Harley Street. London culminates in the Parliament building down by the Thames, standing like Bladesover House “out upon its terrace gathering the whole system together into a head.”<sup>117</sup> Even as he comes to doubt the truly all-encompassing nature of this system, he admits, “it remains one of those dominant explanatory impressions that make the framework of my mind.”<sup>118</sup> In fact, much of the rest of the text is structured around the increasingly grand houses into which the Ponderevo family moves as they ascend the social ladder. The lingering presence of Bladesover throughout the rest of the novel reinforces the very difficulty of extricating oneself from such a dominating mental framework.

As George grows older, he tries to substitute “Science” for Bladesover as his dominant universalizing system for understanding the world. After leaving Bladesover,

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<sup>116</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 91.

<sup>117</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 92.

<sup>118</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 57.

he is sent to stay with his uncle Edward Ponderevo in Wimblehurst, a sleepy provincial backwater in which his uncle runs a pharmacy. George studies assiduously for a scholarship, saying about himself during his youth, “I stood for Science; nobody [in Wimblehurst] seemed to have so much as I and to have it as fully and completely.”<sup>119</sup> George passes up a scholarship from the Pharmaceutical Society that would have given him a secure launch in that profession in favor of a minor scholarship in mechanics and metallurgy at the Consolidated Technical Schools because the latter promised “far more scientific work.”<sup>120</sup> Eventually, Science also loses its hold on George, shrinking back to “the dimensions of tiresome little formulae compacted in a book,” when he is exposed to the great variety of life available in London. He finds that London’s “vast impression of space and multitude and opportunity” does not fit neatly into the confines of his previous worldview. By the time his uncle proposes that he leave school and join him in business, he has lost his belief in the ability of Science to provide an explanatory frame in the face of the real complexities of life, having been superseded and overwhelmed as a useful analytic by the varied complexity of urban life. However, following the circular pattern of George’s life, he comes back to Science as a structuring philosophy after his adventures in business with “a man’s resolution instead of a boy’s ambition.”<sup>121</sup> He devotes himself to the nascent field of aeronautics and carries out some of the first successful experiments in aviation.

George’s uncle, Edward Ponderevo, entrepreneur and inventor of a pseudo-medicinal tonic called Tono-Bungay, represents a different model for understanding information within the novel. He believes that information systems are closed and finite,

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<sup>119</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 94.

<sup>120</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 94.

<sup>121</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 261.

making it possible for him to manipulate an entire field of information once he has mastered all of the relevant facts. He operates according to this belief in his many business ventures, initially building a powerful business empire. However, his ventures eventually fail because, in actuality, he does not, and cannot, have access to complete or perfect information. Edward's first attempt to control an entire field of information is his plan to make money by playing the "Corners" of the market. His plan is to find a commodity that is scarce, but necessary to the execution of modern life, then buy up all the supply and wait for the demand to push up the price. For example, he imagines this in terms of quinine, arguing, "Think of having all the quinine in the world, and some millionaire's pampud wife gone ill with malaria."<sup>122</sup> On this understanding of the market, Edward speculates on the stock of Union Pacific Railroad with both his own small wealth and every penny left to George by his late mother under a theory he calls "stockmarket meteorology." He maps the rise and fall of stock prices onto square paper, getting the idea from George's school work in mathematics, believing that his method is "absolutely scientific...verifiable" since all one had to do was "buy in the hollow and sell on the crest."<sup>123</sup> However, when the stock does not behave as he expects, he bankrupts his business and loses his nephew's inheritance. Later, when Edward launches his patent-medicine business venture, he employs the same method despite his earlier failure, but attempts to understand a much bigger field of information. Wildly successful for a time, his business empire ultimately fails for the same reasons that he lost his shirt playing the "corners" of the market. Ultimately, it is not possible to understand all aspects of a complex information system.

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<sup>122</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 61.

<sup>123</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 70.

While Edward and George technically become purveyors of patent medicine, the product at the center of Wells' novel is advertising. In advertising, a small group controls the production of meaning for mass consumption, a form of information manipulation in which the individual consumer has very little ability to fact-check the multitudinous claims with which he or she is confronted. When his uncle tells George about Tono-Bungay for the first time, it is not as a concrete or tangible reality, but rather as a small nugget of information primed for use in advertising. Edward says the phrase "Tono-Bungay" to George "slowly and distinctly," as if the word alone is a great treasure. When George asks what Tono-Bungay is, his uncle explains, "What *won't* it be?"<sup>124</sup> It is a concept, an idea that can be filled and molded for an audience, to bend their thinking in a certain direction. It is this quality of being a *tabula rasa* upon which meaning can be inscribed that makes Tono-Bungay initially so successful. Edward explains, "I grant you Tono-Bungay may be – not *quite* so good a find for the world as Peruvian bark, but the point is, George – it *makes trade!* And the world lives on trade."<sup>125</sup> After the initial success of Tono-Bungay, the Ponderevos launch Tono-Bungay brand hair stimulant, throat lozenges, mouthwash, chocolate nutrition bars, even "Tono-Bungay: Thistle Brand" for the Scottish market, strengthened by "eleven per cent. absolute alcohol."<sup>126</sup> Later, they take over other firms, specializing in household conveniences, such as soap and dustpans. George describes this sort of enterprise as "the giving of nothing coated in advertisements for money."<sup>127</sup> On the surface, it appears that the Ponderevos trade in commodities, but they really traffic in information.

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<sup>124</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 84.

<sup>125</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 125.

<sup>126</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 141.

<sup>127</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 208.

The specific ingredients in Tono-Bungay are unknown and, therefore, the product may be continually reinvented, rewritten, modified, or substituted. In fact, the reader is never clear about what components comprise the substance of Tono-Bungay since the recipe for Tono-Bungay, the textual equivalent of the substance itself, is not reproduced in the novel. Edward tells the formula to his nephew, but George reproduces the memory with the essential information left out because the formula has been sold to pay off the company's debts. It reads:

“it's nice because of the” (here he mentioned a flavoring matter and an aromatic spirit) [...] “Then there's” (but I touch on the essential secret). “And there you are. I got it out of an old book of recipes – all except the” (here he mentioned the more virulent substance, the one that assails the kidneys), “which is my idea. Modern touch! There you are!”<sup>128</sup>

While the exact formula of Tono-Bungay remains a mystery, advertising is widely reproduced in the text. Advertising campaigns are described in words, such as an advertisement for Moggs soap, describing one variety as, “a ‘special nursery – as used in the household of the Duke of Kent and for the old Queen in Infancy.’”<sup>129</sup> The text also reproduces advertising in visual formats, including three line sketches of early Tono-Bungay advertising campaigns and the reproduction of the front page of a literary magazine bought by Edward, complete with advertisements for “The Best Pill In The World For An Irregular Liver.”<sup>130</sup> Placing the substance of advertisements at the center of the text while pushing the physical substance of Tono-Bungay beyond the margins reinforces the importance of advertising in creating the pseudo-environment in which its users live. Its quality of being both anything and nothing at the same time is a literalized

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<sup>128</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 121.

<sup>129</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 201.

<sup>130</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 217.



manifestation of the way the “picture in the head” of a consumer is not dependent on the substance in its objective form.

Near the end of *Tono-Bungay*, Wells does make an attempt to break the frame of the existing pseudo-environment of English life by bringing in something new from the outside, a move that reinforces the novel’s interest in an escape from framing mechanisms to a place outside its existence. When the Ponderevo empire is collapsing, George makes an expedition to Mordet Island off the coast of Africa to retrieve a mysterious substance known as quap, described loosely as “a festering mass of earths and heavy metals, polonium, radium, ythorium, thorium, carium and new things too.”<sup>131</sup> Unlike *Tono-Bungay*, quap represents a substance of real, tangible value. George and Edward possess secret information about the value of one of the newly discovered elements, canadium, a necessary ingredient in the manufacture of light bulb filaments. This reverses the value paradigm of *Tono-Bungay*. Quap’s value derives entirely from its extant material properties and its value is enhanced because so few people know about it. And, Mordet Island is entirely removed from the closed systems that create and maintain the world of Britain on which George’s narrative has been focused.<sup>132</sup> He writes, “Mordet Island stands apart from all the rest of my life, detached, a piece by itself with an atmosphere of its own.”<sup>133</sup> The ship transporting George’s load of stolen quap sinks in the Channel before reaching the coast of England. Wells uses quap to highlight the edges of the closed information environment explored in the rest of the text but, ultimately, does not allow quap to penetrate the frame.

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<sup>131</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 212.

<sup>132</sup> The novel often uses America as a foil to the limiting nature of English society. George sees the expedition to Mordet Island “in American colours.” Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 296. In his Wimblehurst days, Edward wishes he had been born in America “where things hum.” Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 61.

<sup>133</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 304.

As a substance, quap is radioactive and, therefore, actively productive, representing figuratively the kind of self-generating energy that Wells will later find in rumor. George writes of quap:

radioactivity [...] is a contagious disease. It spreads. You bring those debased and crumbling atoms near others and those too presently catch the trick of swinging themselves out of coherent existence. It is in matter exactly what the decay of our old culture is in society, a loss of traditions and distinctions and assured reactions.<sup>134</sup>

In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells can only figure this uncontrollable spread of energy as a destructive force. In the above passage, Wells connects this destruction to cultural as well as physical decay. Wells's choice to figure the energy contained in quap as only destructive and as inherently foreign reflects the larger failure of the novel to articulate a viable route outside the framing tendencies inherent in any pseudo-environment. In *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, rumor represents another form of contagious energy, but Wells avoids figuring this energy in the language of disease or damage. Unlike quap, rumor is a reordering energy that arises from a native source and allows old frames to be circumvented or replaced without causing the destruction of the system altogether.

### Section III: *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* - Propaganda, Wartime Rumors, and the Failure of "Truth"

It is the war, and Wells' participation in government propaganda during the war, which provides the impetus for Wells to return to considerations of the modern information environment begun in *Tono-Bungay*. Wells's novel *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* is a rarely noticed text that well deserves a spot in the canon of First World War

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<sup>134</sup> Wells, *Tono-Bungay* 314.

literature. The novel was a popular success at its publication in 1916, running to twenty-three printings in the first year and earning more than 20,000 pounds from American royalties alone.<sup>135</sup> It was also an immediate critical success. *The Times* (of London) claimed, “For the first time we have a novel which touches the life of the last two years without impertinence” and the *Chicago Tribune* called it “not only Mr. Wells’ best book, but the best book so far published concerning the war.”<sup>136</sup> The novel’s stature was such that Ernest Hemingway’s embittered character Frederic Henry mocked its popularity in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), using the novel as a touchstone for criticizing what Hemingway felt was the general public’s misunderstanding of actual battlefield conditions during the war.<sup>137</sup> Despite its initial popularity, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* was out of print by 1920 and has not garnered much critical attention since, either as a significant aspect of Wells’s legacy as a novelist or within wider considerations of First World War literature.<sup>138</sup>

In addition to the general usefulness of reexamining wartime novels, revisiting *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* is essential to a full understanding of Wells as an important public intellectual, especially his status as such from 1914 to 1918. In opposition to his

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<sup>135</sup> Coren 141. Coren states the number at thirteen editions in the first year. Macmillan’s 1917 American edition lists twenty-three printings between September 1916 and March 1917.

<sup>136</sup> Coren 141.

<sup>137</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: MacMillan, 1986) 261. When listing books that Frederic might read about the war, Count Greffi mentions *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. Frederic replies, “No, he doesn’t [...] He doesn’t see through it.” John Buchan also makes a reference to *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* in his wartime novel *Mr. Standfast*. The American John S. Blenkiron says to the British protagonist Richard Hannay, “You’re never going to be a Piker. What’s dooty, if you won’t carry it to the other side of Hell? What’s the use of yapping about your country if you’re going to keep anything back when she calls for it? What’s the good of meaning to win the war if you don’t put every cent you’ve got on your stake? You’ll make me think you’re like the jacks in your English novels that chuck in their hand and say it’s up to God, and call that “seeing it through”... No, Dick, that kind of dooty don’t deserve a blessing. You dursn’t keep back anything if you want to save your soul.” John Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* in *The Complete Richard Hannay* (London: Penguin, 1993) 547.

<sup>138</sup> The novel may have been out of print as early as 1917. Odhams published an expensive leather-bound volume containing *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* and *The Day of the Comet* in limited release in 1935. Modern on-demand and digital publishing practices have made the novel once again widely available.

current obscurity as a wartime novelist, Wells continues to be well remembered for the works of propaganda that he produced with great passion and great frequency throughout the early years of the First World War. His most famous contribution to wartime propaganda was also his first effort, the article “The War that Will End War,” written on the evening of August 4, 1914, the first night of the war, and published a few days later.<sup>139</sup> In the essay Wells expresses a two-fold belief that the war must be waged as a crusade against German militarism and that such a victory would sow the seeds of a new, more promising world order.<sup>140</sup> Wells’s strong anti-German invective and strident support for the war alienated many contemporaries, including many of his former friends among the Fabians and within the Bloomsbury circle, some of whom refused to speak to Wells for the rest of his life.<sup>141</sup> Wells’s initial optimism about the war was short-lived.<sup>142</sup> *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, written at the end of 1915 and published the following year, is a novel that documents the evolution of Wells’s opinions about the war by exploring the thinking and writing of the novel’s fictional protagonist, Mr. Britling, a largely autobiographical character who, like Wells, makes his living writing pieces of propaganda for the London press.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> The essay was republished with several other pieces by Wells as a shilling pamphlet in September 1914 under the title of its lead article, *The War that Will End War*.

<sup>140</sup> Mackenzie and Mackenzie 298-9.

<sup>141</sup> Coren 134. Mackenzie and Mackenzie 301.

<sup>142</sup> According to biographers Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, “Wells [came] to regret his early and uncritical jingoism.” Mackenzie and Mackenzie 307.

<sup>143</sup> *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* is the only place where Wells brings the war directly into his fiction. Wells continued to write novels after the outbreak of the conflict, publishing *Bealby* and *The Research Magnificent* in 1915. *Bealby* is wholly unconnected to the war. Described by the *New York Globe* as “Wells on vacation, a vacation from the war,” it is a light-hearted novel about a young man trying to escape the confines of his upbringing. Coren 136. *The Research Magnificent* only touches on the war. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie argue that in this novel Wells “has begun to express a mood of bewilderment and to show signs that he was searching for a new mission.” Mackenzie and Mackenzie 307. Just after the war, Wells published *The Undying Fire*, published in 1919 and serialized in *The New Republic* that same year for American audiences. A rewriting of the Biblical Book of Job, many readers felt that it was a highly abstract allegorical gloss on the meaning of the war. Belonging to Wells’s self-described “resort to God”

In *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, advertising is initially replaced by propaganda as the central vocabulary for describing the modern information environment, but an alternative to this environment also becomes more fully articulated by the end of the novel. While Wells initially explores the way in which information is circulated through official news sources, most notably through newspaper coverage of the war, the novel documents how informal networks of rumor come to replace official sources as the key method by which individuals share information. Unlike official news sources, rumor does not replicate the top-down, centralizing tendencies inherent in both advertising and propaganda, offering a meaningful way for individuals to engage in communication networks of their own creation.

Evidence from Wells's early work in government propaganda suggests that Wells was not initially focused on the way in which wartime conditions impaired an individual's access to accurate and sufficient information. At the beginning of the war, Wells was a strong advocate for the positive role that propaganda could play in spreading pro-war aims. In "The War That Will End War," he argues, "By means of a propaganda of books, newspaper articles, leaflets . . . we have to spread this idea, repeat this idea, and *impose upon this war* the idea that this war must end war."<sup>144</sup> In the fall of 1914, Wells joined Wellington House, the newly forming government department organized by his good friend C.F.G. Masterman to produce official propaganda. He was joined in this work by dozens of prominent writers, including Arnold Bennett, J.M. Barrie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, G.K. Chesterton, and John Galsworthy. All of these writers concealed their associations with this secret department and published pro-

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period, *The Undying Fire* has been read in connection to the turn toward God that Wells makes in final pages of *Mr. Britling*.

<sup>144</sup> H.G. Wells, *The War that Will End War* (New York: Duffield and Company, 1914) 102.

government arguments under their own name.<sup>145</sup> As part of his work for Wellington House, Wells wrote prolifically for British newspapers, with much of his work being quickly reissued in pamphlet form.<sup>146</sup>

As the war progressed, Wells became frustrated with the failures and limitations of British propaganda for a number of reasons. Wells, along with many British citizens, could not reconcile official claims about the progress of the war with the increasingly bloody stalemate of trench warfare, especially following the start of the Somme offensive in July 1916. When Prime Minister David Lloyd George restructured the propaganda service in 1917, he brought into his Cabinet powerful newspaper barons, such as Max Aiken, later Lord Beaverbrook, as head of the newly organized Ministry of Information, and Lord Northcliffe as Director of Enemy Propaganda, formally fusing together the public and private instruments for manipulating public opinion. Wells accepted a position under Northcliffe as Head of the Committee for Propaganda in Enemy Country; however, Wells disagreed with Northcliffe over the use of threats in propaganda circulated behind German lines and grew increasingly frustrated with the inflammatory rhetoric of Northcliffe's newspaper *The Evening News*.<sup>147</sup> Wells resigned from the Ministry within months and spent the rest of the war as a private citizen advocating feverishly for the League of Nations and the possibility of new ideals coming out of the post-war peace.

*Mr. Britling Sees It Through* was written while Wells worked for Wellington House and offers an early glimpse into the reevaluation of propaganda's efficacy that

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<sup>145</sup> Buitenhuis 14-16.

<sup>146</sup> Pamphlets include *The Peace of the World* (London: The Daily Chronicle, 1915); *The Elements of Reconstruction* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1916); *What is Coming* (London: Cassell, 1916); *War and the Future* (London: Cassell, 1917). He also visited France and Italy in 1916 at the government's request and expense, although he saw very little of the real Front and his account of the visit, *War and the Future*, contained much that he later admitted was pure invention. Mackenzie and Mackenzie 309.

<sup>147</sup> Mackenzie and Mackenzie 316.

would later drive him out of government service. The novel is written as three separate books, and each book occupies a different relationship to information. In the first book, “Matching’s Easy at Ease,” Wells returns to many of the same coordinates as in *Tono-Bungay*, similarly drawing a detailed picture of the pseudo-environment that exists in England just before the war. However, instead of the powerful, all-encompassing environment Wells detailed in *Tono-Bungay*, in which individuals who escape one frame are trapped by another, the pseudo-environment sketched at the beginning of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* is fragile. Wells lingers over disconnects that exist between the surface reality of the pseudo-environment and counterrealities that exist beneath the surface, disconnects that threaten to disrupt the appearance of order in pre-war society and foreshadow changes coming as a result of the war. In Book II, “Matching’s Easy at War,” Wells examines how pre-war information conduits become unreliable and how available information is often at odds with lived experience. The novel explores the way that rumor moves in to occupy the space left by these gaps and provides a possible means by which an individual can successfully replace missing or damaged information. In Book III, “The Testament of Matching’s Easy,” Wells carefully examines the new information environment created by rumor, and ultimately determines that this new environment is simply another “pseudo-environment,” created from a different set of sources, but suffering from the same flaws of fragility and mediation. Rumor does not create an environment that is any more “objective” than the one that exists before the war.

Starting in the same place as *Tono-Bungay*, with the social structure of England organized around the ancient estate system, Book I of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, “Matching’s Easy at Ease,” is dominated by Wells’s effort to draw a clear distinction

between the tranquil, well-ordered surface of English society and the more aggressive, disordering tendencies that lie below, in order to demonstrate the fragility of the pre-war “pseudo-environment.” Wells suggests that the patterns of English life have lost touch with their original and authentic purposes, looking “orderly enough” on the surface but “just going on by habit.”<sup>148</sup> Wells draws out this argument by looking at how this disconnect between appearance and reality manifests in the ebb and flow of village life in Matching’s Easy and in terms of the disconnect between the efficient, hierarchical military establishment and the hints of military violence that exist just below the surface of everyday life. Wells also extends this argument to the information environment, showing how the seemingly dominant position of newspapers as conduits for information is gradually eroded under the stress applied to the information environment as the war begins.

The novel’s main character, Mr. Britling, and the universe he inhabits in his village of Matching’s Easy, are deliberately constructed to function as a miniature version of English society, situating the world within the basic coordinates of *Tono-Bungay*’s Bladesover paradigm. As in *Tono-Bungay*, Wells spends considerable narrative energy situating the character’s Englishness at the end of a long thread that stretches back into the past. Britling claims that his little corner of Essex is “the essential England still,” one that represents a “microcosm to the whole Empire.”<sup>149</sup> Unlike the more skeptical George Ponderevo, Britling does not question the all-encompassing nature of the system within which he lives, secure in his belief that England is going on much as it has in the past and with no worry of change in the future. When he looks around his home at the

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<sup>148</sup> H.G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (New York: Macmillan, 1916) 52.

<sup>149</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 30 and 119.



Dower House, an appendage property to the great estate of Claverings, he claims that facets of English life such as the estate system, the aristocracy, and even “the confounded constitution [...] so suited the climate and the temperament of our people and our island [...] that our people settled down into it [...] and it has never modified since.”<sup>150</sup>

Britling’s environment, really a “pseudo-environment,” appears to him as secure and unchanging.

Wells achieves the distanced perspective needed to comment on the state of English society in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* by narrating the pre-war section of the novel through Mr. Direck, an American who spends the summer of 1914 at Matching’s Easy. Like George Ponderevo, who is knocked out of place within the social system, Mr. Direck is not a part of English society and, therefore, can provide a critical perspective from which to challenge the assumptions behind Britling’s view of the world. Direck points out that the component pieces of the Britling home at the Dower House have not greatly changed in appearance, but the role they play in English life bears little relation to that of the past, telling Britling, “the barn isn’t a barn any longer, and [...] this farmyard isn’t a farmyard” since they now serve only as locations for dancing and games of field hockey.<sup>151</sup> Direck also points out that the domesticated nature of English life doesn’t reach some of the “back streets in London.” Britling dismisses this complexity, declaring these places to be “an excrescence.”<sup>152</sup> While Direck has the perspective to assess his surroundings critically, Britling can only see the undomesticated and disorderly parts of England as an ugly addition or a diseased growth that sticks out from the body of the country, not as something that exists within the well-ordered frame. Britling argues that

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<sup>150</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 32.

<sup>151</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 33.

<sup>152</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 37.

the English maintain their orderly system because the nation “excretes all its disturbing forces. Our younger sons go away and found colonial empires. Our surplus cottage children emigrate to Australia and Canada or migrate into the towns.”<sup>153</sup> Britling’s mistaken faith in the timeless stability of Matching’s Easy, and by extrapolation that of England as a nation, leaves him especially unprepared for the dislocations of the coming war.

Another way that Wells underscores the fact that Britling exists within a highly mediated pseudo-environment, created more from the “pictures in his head” than from a clear view of objective reality, is by highlighting the way that Britling’s view of England has been influenced by versions of “England” found in literature. It is Mr. Direck again who first brings the issue to Britling’s attention. When Direck arrives in Essex, he does not see the country on its own merits, but imagines himself to be “in the heart of Washington Irving’s England.”<sup>154</sup> Filtering his impressions of the land and its people through Irving’s fictional world of *Bracebridge Hall*, he claims that traveling in the real Essex of 1914 is “like traveling in literature.”<sup>155</sup> However, Direck quickly abandons this view, declaring at the end of his first day at Matching’s Easy that instead of the England of Washington Irving, “I find it is not even the England of Mrs. Humphrey Ward.”<sup>156</sup> Direck makes the observation that England “looks and feels more like the traditional Old England than any one could possibly have believed, and that in reality it is less like the

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<sup>153</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 32.

<sup>154</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 5.

<sup>155</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 6. *Bracebridge Hall* is the estate at the center of Washington Irving’s 1822 novel *Bracebridge Hall*.

<sup>156</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 33. Novelist Mary Augusta Ward, who often published under her married title Mrs. Humphrey Ward, was an advocate of conservative Victorian social and religious mores. She wrote the best-selling novels *Robert Elsmere* (1888), *Lady Rose’s Daughter* (1903), and *The Marriage of William Ashe* (1905). She is also well known as one of the founders of the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League, an organization founded in 1908 to oppose efforts to give women the right to vote.

traditional Old England than anyone would ever possibly have imagined.”<sup>157</sup> Much of the rest of the novel follows Britling’s attempt to come to terms with the implications of this revelation. Britling initially resists the idea of an alteration to such a central tenet of his understanding of the world, arguing, “Perhaps not Mrs. Humphry Ward’s John Bull, or Mrs. Henry Wood’s John Bull but true essentially to Shakespeare, Fielding, Dickens, Meredith...”<sup>158</sup> This conservative view of England is one “into which the comforts and prosperities of middle age had brought him” and it takes the violent reality of the war for him to grapple with an alternate picture of English life.

The novel positions the military in pre-war England as part of the well-ordered surface of society. Britling’s neighbor, Colonel Rendezvous, personifies the pre-war military as a model of efficient but directionless activity. Colonel Rendezvous is described as “a monster of energy and self-discipline; as the determined foe of every form of looseness, slackness, and easy-goingness.”<sup>159</sup> He walks fourteen miles every day and is greatly involved with the Boy Scouts, an organization dedicated to instilling the efficiency of soldiers into the nation’s youth. Mr. Britling declares this “Kitchenerism” a waste since he does not believe that war is a likely possibility. The main military threat discussed in *Mr. Britling’s Easy* is a possible civil war over Home Rule in Ireland. Such a conflict is characterized by the American Direck as turning British politics into “a system of bitter personal feuds in which all sense of imperial warfare was lost.”<sup>160</sup> Britling, beginning to gain some perspective on his own country under Direck’s influence, agrees and explains this tendency to treat the idea of war “like children in a nursery playing at

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<sup>157</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 33.

<sup>158</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 34.

<sup>159</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 76.

<sup>160</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 41.

rebellion” as one that comes from living “at the end of a series of secure generations in which none of the great things of life have changed materially.”<sup>161</sup> In the summer of 1914, talk of war seems to be constantly present in the life of Matching’s Easy, but it never penetrates deeply enough to crystallize for the community the real threats that are coalescing just over the horizon.

Below the surface, far less restrained military impulses circulate, foreshadowing the way English society will reorient when the war arrives. The Britling’s tradition of Sunday field hockey, an activity that is nearly compulsory while in residence at the Dower House, is described as a militaristic struggle of brilliant rushes and checked advances. Just like the soldiers who are later shipped off to the Front, Mr. Direck is thoroughly unprepared for the “game.” He is co-opted to play without being told the rules, and without being informed of the necessary level of violence expected of participants. The game is framed as a “struggle” between two sides, full of “violent convergence[s] of miscellaneous backs and suchlike irregulars upon the threatened goal.”<sup>162</sup> Unlike the “fourteen miles” walked by Colonel Rendezvous, this athletic endeavor is chaotic and presents a real risk of significant physical injury.

Militaristic undertones also exist in the wider community of Matching’s Easy. When the British declare war with Germany, it is on the day of the annual Matching’s Easy Flower Show. On the surface, the charming Flower Show and the nascent war seem to be so different and so unconnected that one cannot penetrate the other. As on the historically real August day in 1914, Wells writes the day of the Flower Show as bright and clear and the Britling family enjoys a day of lighthearted frivolity. But actually, quite

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<sup>161</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 46.

<sup>162</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 85.

a bit of the war slips into Wells's description of this provincial fair. Throughout the day, Mr. Britling privately ruminates on the war, pausing amid the games to remember that hundreds of miles away the German army was pouring into France. Wells's description of the day is also laced with military references. The main activities consist of "shooting and dart-throwing," at which the younger members of the Britling household are "developing a quite disconcerting skill."<sup>163</sup> Wells heightens the disconnect between their behavior and its object by showing that the goal of all their military effort is to compile "a complete tea-set" from the available prizes. Even Britling's elderly aunt displays her "terrible prowess at the cocoanuts," a game involving throwing a ball at a stack of coconuts. In doing so she creates an army of children "impressed" into her service and forming her "retinue." The young farmers of Matching's Easy see their connection to the war more clearly, suggesting, "Let's have a go at the bottles [since we ought to keep up our shooting, these warlike times...]"<sup>164</sup> As the day ends, Britling looks down "across all the sunshine of this artless festival" and sees it "as if it were writing showing through a picture, 'France Invaded by Germany; Germany Invaded by Russia.'"<sup>165</sup> Playing on the novel's title, Mr. Britling sees the war leaking through into the peaceful world of Matching's Easy. The metaphorical membrane that had kept the well-ordered surface from the chaotic world beneath is unable to hold up under the pressure of the war.

Having established an instability with his description of pre-war English life, Wells replicates this disconnect in describing how information circulates before the war. Near the beginning of Book II, Wells encapsulates the project he is attempting in *Mr.*

*Britling Sees It Through:*

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<sup>163</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 172.

<sup>164</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 173.

<sup>165</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 174.

This story is essentially the history of the opening and of the realization of the Great War as it happened to one small group of people in Essex, and more particularly as it happened to one human brain. It came at first to all these people in a spectacular manner, as a thing happening dramatically and internationally, as a show, as something in the newspapers, something in the character of an historical epoch rather than a personal experience; only by slow degrees did it and its consequences invade the common texture of English life.<sup>166</sup>

Initially, members of the community of Matching's Easy view the war as "something in the newspapers," accepting official accounts of the progress of the war. The distancing effect of this method of circulating information prevents the war from becoming a personal experience, from invading "the common texture of English life." When the war breaks out, there is an expectation that newspapers will be the main conduit for circulating information, but "by slow degrees" the people of Matching's Easy must – and do – adjust to changes in how they acquire and process information about the war.

Newspapers, the most prolific source of official information about the war, initially take the lead in crafting how information is packaged and disseminated for the public. Wells uses an architectural metaphor to describe the textual experience of the opening days of the war:

From the point of view of Matching's Easy that colossal crystallizing of accumulated antagonisms was for a time no more than a confusion of headlines and a rearrangement of columns in the white windows of the newspapers through which those who lived in the securities of England looked out upon the world.<sup>167</sup>

The newspaper becomes a window through which every private citizen has access to the "accumulated antagonisms of war," the information cited to government and military sources. Mr. Britling, and indeed every English citizen, is cast in the role of spectator in

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<sup>166</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 210-11.

<sup>167</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 163.

relation to the war. Through the newspaper, Britling watches “amazed and incredulous,” describing the war as a scene that “opened like the rolling up of a curtain,” pushing aside the trivial distractions to reveal the drama of the main stage.<sup>168</sup> The war remains something apart from everyday life, something “looked out upon” every morning when the papers arrive. This orientation towards information plays on the title of the novel. When the war first comes, Mr. Britling sees it through the pages of the newspaper. The inclusion of the word “confusion” in Mr. Britling’s description gives another hint that, from the start, newspaper versions are neither clear nor convincing.

In Book II, “Matching’s Easy at War,” Wells shows how the pre-war pseudo-environment is altered as a result of the war, engendering a change in the form of communication that dominates the pages of the novel. As the information arriving in Matching’s Easy through the newspaper becomes more inaccurate, incomplete, and untimely, first-hand accounts gain a prominent place in the information conduits of Matching’s Easy. These first-hand accounts, coming most often as oral reports brought back by those who have been participants and witnesses on the battlefield and as reports embedded in the text of letters sent back from the Front, are ultimately given the greatest authority within the information environment back in England. These accounts, gradually stripped of evidence about their originating source and transformed into the “they say” currency of rumor, occupy an increasingly prominent place in the final two books of the novel. Rumors are present in Wells’s description of pre-war British society in Book I, but he indicates that they occupied a submerged presence within that information environment. Before the war, Britling is aware of “whispers from India, from Africa, from Germany, warnings from the past, intimations of the future” that had been

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<sup>168</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 159.

circulating for years about the possibility of a European war. However, the status of news filtered through the whispering gallery of international rumor is rather low. Mr. Britling recognizes of himself and his compatriots, “If the world were like a whispering gallery [...] We shouldn’t heed them.”<sup>169</sup> The process of replacing one paradigm for the circulation of information with another, for replacing newspapers with rumor as the most powerful conduit for information, is a gradual process. Mr. Britling’s first instinct is to put this new war in the context of the last war in British memory, the Boer War, wondering, “What similar story might not the overdue paper tell when presently it came?”<sup>170</sup> However, right from the start of the war, such official sources begin to prove inadequate. The “overdue” newspapers indicate that the new war will not be merely a repetition of the last.

Censorship makes information contained in newspapers less reliable than it had appeared in the pre-war period. Within days, newspapers began “to qualify, bit by bit, their first representation” of the progress of the war.<sup>171</sup> For the ordinary person, “[t]here was a keen demand for news, and for a time there was very little news” available from expected sources.<sup>172</sup> For example, due to the way newspapers covered the fighting at Liege, Britling assumes for some time that this battle had been a victory, “a mistake not confined to Matching’s Easy.” According to the newspapers,

the French were pushing into their lost provinces, occupying Altkirch, Mulhausen and Saarburg; the Russians were invading Bukovina and East Prussia; the *Goeben*, the *Breslau* and the *Panther* had been sunk by the newspapers in an imaginary battle in the Mediterranean, and Togoland was captured by the French and British.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 48.

<sup>170</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 189.

<sup>171</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 222.

<sup>172</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 215.

<sup>173</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 215.



The information brought in the newspapers creates a version of the war that is not accurate, but is backed by the authority of the newspapers. In this “newspaper version” of the war, the German ships are “sunk by the newspapers in an imaginary battle.”<sup>174</sup> In the real war, no such British victory has occurred.

As soon as the war begins, rumors begin to move from their submerged pre-war position to the surface of the information environment. Mr. Britling, however, first resists rumor as a source of information about the war. Mrs. Farber, Britling’s neighbor in Matching’s Easy, comes on the first morning after the declaration of war with concerns about imminent food shortages. Her claims take the form of rumors, fears such as “All the gold’s being hoarded too,” which imply the prefacing phrase “they say,” a statement that has no specific source and, therefore, cannot be refuted or disproved.<sup>175</sup> Rumor networks are also starting to form. Mrs. Farber tells Britling, “I came by here just for the sake of telling you.”<sup>176</sup> Mr. Britling, however, sends Mrs. Farber on her way, tells his wife that such preparations are not necessary, and continues to wait at his gate for the postman, the newspaper being late again. The inclusion of the views of Britling’s elderly Aunt Wiltshire, also make it clear that rumors have emerged from below the surface of the information environment. She claims about the Kaiser, “He is insane [...] I have felt it myself for years and said so in private [...] Now at least I can speak out.”<sup>177</sup> Aunt Wiltshire might have felt before the war that she could only engage in this postulating to “such friends as I could trust not to misunderstand me” but now she feels able to say such things in any company. Aunt Wiltshire’s statements contain the specific grammatical

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<sup>174</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 215.

<sup>175</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 191.

<sup>176</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 192.

<sup>177</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 207.

markers of rumor. For example, she claims, “They say [the Kaiser] has completely lost the use of his left arm, he carries it stiff like a Punch and Judy - and he wants to conquer Europe...”<sup>178</sup> What she says is “true” in the sense that the Kaiser does have a lame arm and the conquest of Europe can be generally supposed his goal. However, her authority for claiming these positions comes not from citing “information” from an official source, but from the “they say” construction of a rumor. In Book II, such rumors are still framed as frivolous rambling, but they are now given articulated space within the text.

The shift from newspapers to rumor as the dominant conduit of information about the war is a multi-stage process within the text. This change takes a curious half step when reading the newspaper is replaced by receiving information originally from the newspaper in the form of an oral account. On the day that the defeat at Mons is reported, Mr. Britling does not “see this” in the newspaper, echoing the earlier language of reader as spectator. His friend Mr. Manning “brought over the report of it in a state of profound consternation.”<sup>179</sup> The newspaper contains an important telegram “which spoke of a ‘retreating and broken army.’”<sup>180</sup> This is interesting in that the written communication is turned into a quasi-spoken act, with the telegram cited by the newspaper, the newspaper cited by Mr. Manning, and then Britling citing Mr. Manning in the text itself. Since rumor is “the citation of a citation,” this communication is beginning to approximate the information conduit of rumor. The source of this communication is not obscured, meaning that it has not lost its claim to “prompt verifiability,” and is not, by definition, a rumor. However, its layers of embedded citation are chipping away at its status as objective fact. It is growing unclear if such information is to be believed because it comes

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<sup>178</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 208.

<sup>179</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 223.

<sup>180</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 223.

printed in the *Sunday Times* or because it is transmitted from the mouth of Mr. Manning, a trusted friend.<sup>181</sup>

Later that afternoon, Manning calls on the telephone with a retraction of the earlier telegram because a “reassuring dispatch from General French had been published,” although it is not clear in what form this publication has taken place. Manning reads this dispatch over the phone to Britling who copies it down as dictation and then reads it aloud to the guests assembled at his home for Sunday field hockey, giving the information an indistinct position between written and oral communication. A few days later, Mr. Britling reads in *The Observer*, “fresh news from France,” but the information proves unclear because the newspaper’s map does not show the exact locations. The uncertainty is brought to a conclusion, but not in any way verified, when Manning arrives and “says they are at Rouen.”<sup>182</sup> Going back to Benjamin’s distinction between “information” and “intelligence,” newspaper “information” is still valuable, but the “intelligence” carried by word of mouth is starting to displace it in the lives of the citizens of Matching’s Easy.

In Book II, Wells explores two different information conduits by which rumors circulate “intelligence” about the war from the frontlines back to the home front, injecting rumors directly into the information gaps formed by the collapsing pre-war information environment and by the intensification of mass-media in the wartime information environment. First, rumors are carried in person by individuals who themselves travel from abroad and bring back to Matching’s Easy “news” of what they have seen and, more

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<sup>181</sup> This may help to explain the confusion surrounding the rumor of the Angels of Mons, which originates from Arthur Machen’s short story “The Bowmen,” first printed in *The Evening News* just after the Battle of Mons in 1914. During the war, people were genuinely confused about the authority and accuracy of information coming to them about the situation at the.

<sup>182</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 227.

often, what they have heard. Second, rumors arrive in letters from people who are abroad, most importantly the letters of soldiers at the Front. Mr. Direck, who is traveling on the continent after leaving the Dower House just before the outbreak of the war, is able to travel back to England through Germany and occupied Belgium because he is a citizen of a neutral nation. The return of Direck to Matching's Easy is marked as the first real check on the "excessive anticipations of victory" engendered by the overly optimistic, and sometimes absolutely false, version of the war that he had been receiving through the newspaper.<sup>183</sup> Once war is declared, all written communication from Direck ceases and his arrival back in England is the first chance to hear the news that he brings "directly" from behind the lines.

Some of the news Direck brings back with him to Matching's Easy has already been well established by official sources, but the fact that he brings the news as a first-hand account gives the information more urgency within the community and aids its transmutation into circulating rumors. For example, Direck tells the assembled party about the battle of Liege:

They have been raping women for disciplinary purposes on tables in the market-place of Liege. Yes, sir. It's a fact. I was told it by a man who had just come out of Belgium. Knew the people, knew the place, knew everything.<sup>184</sup>

Mr. Direck's news is authorized as "fact" because he heard it from a man who had been there and "knew the people, knew the place, knew everything." This represents the first step in the "citation of a citation" process by which rumors are formed. The content of Mr. Direck's news does not set it apart from information circulated by the government as propaganda. In the actual historical record of the war, newspapers carried reports of

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<sup>183</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 215.

<sup>184</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 217.

German atrocities in Belgium and such accounts formed the content of the well-publicized Bryce Report, officially known as the “Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages,” although Wells never includes such newspaper coverage of atrocities within the novel. In official sources, these stories are generally uncredited and second-hand; however, the “Bryce Report” presents itself as an evidence-driven document, even if the evidence is never produced. The Bryce Committee vigorously demands that its information is based on verifiable fact, stating about its sources,

Many [sources] hesitated to speak lest what they said, if it should ever be published, might involve their friends or relatives at home in danger, and it was found necessary to give an absolute promise that names should not be disclosed.<sup>185</sup>

While the Report states that the original documentation of these stories “remain in the custody of the Home Department, where they will be available, in case of need, for reference after the conclusion of the War,” no documents of this type were found at the Home Office after the war. Nearly identical accounts, when carried by Mr. Direck, do not require a promise of actual named sources. In fact, when Direck goes down to Cissie’s cottage, the home of the young woman he is courting, “his reports become even more impressive,” underscoring the unverifiable nature of this version of events.<sup>186</sup> The fact that Direck’s information is malleable does nothing to undermine the usefulness of the information in forming opinions about the progress of the war or stop Mr. Britling from passing it along to others.

The credibility of Mr. Direck’s information is supported by other stories carried to Matching’s Easy by word of mouth. Reports of this kind resemble Benjamin’s

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<sup>185</sup> See Introductory Observations to the *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2004) 5.

<sup>186</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 220.

description of a “real story,” the kind offered up to the audience by a traditional oral storyteller. According to Benjamin, a “real story” is one that “contains, openly or covertly, something useful,” one in which the storyteller “has counsel for his readers” and possesses such authority that the story is considered valid “even when it [is] not subject to verification.”<sup>187</sup> In addition to Mr. Direck’s accounts, the novel includes details of German atrocities brought by Belgian refugee Mr. Van der Pant, who “but a few days ago had been steering his bicycle in the streets of Antwerp to avoid shell craters, pools of blood, and the torn off arms and shoulder-blades of women.”<sup>188</sup> Van der Pant uses a high level of detail when relating his stories, which creates an aura of authenticity about his version of events. He tells of “men blown to pieces under his eyes, or fragments of human beings lying in the streets.”<sup>189</sup> He even produces a little tourist’s map of the city of Antwerp and shows Britling exactly where each shell had fallen. He includes things he himself had not seen but had been told by others, such as “one grim story” of a man killed by shrapnel while standing on his balcony. Of course, this information is unprovable, but it is also impossible to challenge without corresponding first hand authority of one’s own. And, the verifiability of such information is not central to its usefulness. According to Benjamin, a storyteller is most importantly “a man who has counsel for his readers.”<sup>190</sup> News of the war carried by Direck and Van de Pant connects with the residents of Matching’s Easy because these storytellers are able to give “counsel.” Recalling Shibutani’s definition of rumor, these storytellers are able to

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<sup>187</sup> Benjamin 86.

<sup>188</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 258.

<sup>189</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 257.

<sup>190</sup> Benjamin 86.

“construct a ‘meaningful’ interpretation” of uncertain events.<sup>191</sup> Such storytelling “counsel” is not possible when the same information is contained in newspapers and official reports.

First-hand accounts embedded in letters sent from the Front are also a source of “real stories” about the war within the novel. In the logic of the novel, having little real knowledge of the general progress of the war does not harm one’s credibility if a person has first-hand knowledge of any kind. The Britling’s eldest son Hugh enlists at seventeen and ends up in the trenches of France. His letters to his father quickly becomes the Dower House’s most important conduit of news about the war even as Hugh acknowledges his lack of any general picture of the war. His letters are full of phrases such as, “And now you expect me to tell of Germans and the fight and shelling and all sorts of things.”<sup>192</sup> Hugh does his best to oblige even while admitting, “I haven’t seen a live German; I haven’t been within two hundred yards of a shell burst...”<sup>193</sup> However, he tells his father, “with a little reading between the lines and some bold guessing, we fit our little bit of experience with a general shape.”<sup>194</sup> Hugh’s letters are full of specific, detailed descriptions of life at the Front, but also include hearsay evidence, phrases such as “They say we hadn’t got enough guns in the spring or enough ammunition.”<sup>195</sup> Wells makes it clear that Hugh is the most important influence on Mr. Britling’s thought and Britling quotes his son as “final and conclusive evidence to establish this or that.”<sup>196</sup> While this is not rumor, it is the raw material from which rumors are made. The stories Hugh tells his

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<sup>191</sup> Shibutani 17.

<sup>192</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 338-9.

<sup>193</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 339.

<sup>194</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 361.

<sup>195</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 362.

<sup>196</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 305.

father are retold and retold again by people increasingly distant from the original source. Multiply this process by the millions of British soldiers serving at the Front and sending letters to their families at home and it becomes easy to see how the whispering gallery that circulated rumors before the war is working at full capacity under the new conditions.

The result of this shift toward reliance on first-hand accounts, hearsay evidence, and rumor is that conversations about the broad implications of the war or the future of political structures in English life become impossible as the war progresses. Britling, and seemingly everyone else, can only fall back on repeating the “intelligence” sent by loved ones in France. For example, at a Claverings tea party a “little well-informed lady remarked abruptly that she had two sons; one was just home wounded from Sulva Bay.”<sup>197</sup> This woman’s claim on being well informed seems to hinge on the fact that she has a son just back from the Front. Considering herself well informed, she feels that “the public was still quite in the dark about the battle of Anafarta. It had been a hideous muddle, and we had been badly beaten.”<sup>198</sup> When the lady pronounces her son’s assessment of the likely failure of the Dardanelles project, Mr. Britling follows up with Hugh’s assessment on the same topic: “My boy in Flanders [...] says about the same thing.”<sup>199</sup> The basis of Mr. Britling’s authority or equity in this conversation is not that he is a leading writer on the topic of the war or that he knows of world affairs, but the fact that he can produce a son to match the son offered up by his conversant.

In Book III, “The Testament of Matching’s Easy,” first-hand accounts dominate the novel’s narrative structure. These alternative sources of information provide a detour

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<sup>197</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 356.

<sup>198</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 356.

<sup>199</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 357.



around the mediation of official sources, but are quickly shown to be no more reliable in terms of generating a factually accurate or “true” version of events. The war helps to bring a new “pseudo-environment” into being; a new matrix of informational sources, but that environment is as fragile and imperfect as its pre-war counterparts. The word, “testament,” is an apt title for this final section of the novel as it invokes the religious undertones of Mr. Britling’s musings on the nature of God in this final pages of the text. However, “testament” also touches on another current present in the novel. The word comes from the Latin word *testamentum*, meaning “a will,” which is itself derived from the word *testis*, meaning “a witness.” While Book III serves as a testament recording Mr. Britling’s evolving religious, political, and sociological beliefs, it is also speckled with the oral and written testaments of refugees and soldiers who give testimony to the circumstances on the frontlines of the war in Europe. These young soldiers witness the events of war and then testify to what they have seen in order to satisfy the needs of grieving families for a sense of connection to the events at the Front. Accuracy is not as important in these exchanges as the act of participating in the construction of meaning by filling in information not available from another source. Such first-hand testimony begins to eclipse all other information for the citizens of Matching’s Easy.

*Mr. Britling* comes to a crisis when incomplete and imprecise information comes to Matching’s Easy about the fate of Teddy, Britling’s former personal secretary, who is serving on the frontlines in France. News first comes in the form of an official notification from the military that Teddy is “wounded and missing.”<sup>200</sup> There is a great deal of speculation among the inhabitants of Matching’s Easy about the wording of the telegram. Mr. Britling believes that the lack of the phrase “seriously wounded” means

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<sup>200</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 336.

that it is not serious and the fact that he is “missing” accounts for their lack of precise information. Letty, his wife, insists that “wounded and missing” means that Teddy is a prisoner. Not satisfied by official sources, Mr. Direck tracks down witnesses to corroborate his death, gathering these accounts personally in both London and France. Direck returns to England ready “to bear convincing witness to Teddy’s fate.”<sup>201</sup> After holding out hope against all reason, this first hand report is considered by everyone as “conclusive evidence of Teddy’s death.”<sup>202</sup> Direck talks to participants in the raid on which Teddy is killed and finds that “only one of his witnesses was quite clear about Teddy, but he, alas! was dreadfully clear.”<sup>203</sup> Britling says, “I was afraid it was so, and yet I did not believe it [... u]ntil now.”<sup>204</sup> Letty, who has spent months refusing to admit to even the possibility that Teddy is dead, says, “I’m glad I know for sure [...] it is a comfort. It is peace.”<sup>205</sup> Mr. Direck’s version of the story is believed despite the fact that it had “the queer halting telling of a patched-together tale.”<sup>206</sup> Direck brings back the same information that was included in official accounts of his death, including in the telegram and in letters from soldiers approved by Teddy’s commanding officer, but the fact that he carries it in person gives the same facts a different weight.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 395.

<sup>202</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 395.

<sup>203</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 384.

<sup>204</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 398.

<sup>205</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 399.

<sup>206</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 394.

<sup>207</sup> In terms of informing the family of the loss of a loved one during the war, Wells’ account of how such news is delivered corresponds with the actual practices of the British government during the war. According to Jay Winter’s study *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, the families of the killed and wounded were told of the fate of their men in a number of ways, usually first in messages with “the terse language of the army’s formal regret” contained in official cables, followed in slightly more broad terms by letters from men who had served with the dead soldier. Winter 35. Wells sticks close to real life experience in depicting the manner in which Mr. Britling is informed of Hugh’s death near the end of the novel. At nearly the same time as inconclusive news of Teddy arrives, Mr. Britling receives an official telegram informing him that Hugh has been killed in action and, shortly thereafter, “a letter from [Hugh’s] chum Park” explaining that Hugh was shot through a loophole and killed by a bullet to the head. Wells, *Mr.*

The novel contains a final twist that undermines Direck's first-hand intelligence, and in turn the stability of any pseudo-environment built from such sources. Teddy miraculously appears, missing an arm but very much alive, almost on the heels of the report of his death. When Letty first sees him, she hesitates to believe that it is Teddy, thinking, "This strange man came from Belgium perhaps, to tell something about Teddy."<sup>208</sup> Instead of recognizing that her husband has returned alive, she expects this "stranger" to carry additional information about his fate, more first-hand evidence of Teddy's fate in the war. The fact that, despite all Direck's sleuthing, the true facts about Teddy are not established before his return underscores the fact that while rumors play a useful role in circulating information and can help a group "construct a meaningful interpretation" of their experiences, they do not represent an improvement in the accuracy of new information patterns produced by the war. A pseudo-environment built around the "intelligence" of rumor is as fragile and as mediated as the pseudo-environment built on the "information" in newspapers prior to the war.

*Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, like Professor Oman's lecture, investigates the role that "Rumour, Reports, and Legends of a false or exaggerated sort" play during times of military and political upheaval. In *Mr. Britling*, Wells indicates that a shift has taken place in the way information circulates in British society as a result of the war. In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells begins to investigate how information is created and circulated in modern society by examining the way that advertising becomes a means of controlling how individuals interpret the increasingly complex and confusing conditions within which

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*Britling* 402. For Mr. Britling, official notification is sufficiently final. He tells Letty, "For me it came all at once, without a doubt or a hope [...] it was like a black shutter falling – in an instant." Wells, *Mr. Britling* 400.

<sup>208</sup> Wells, *Mr. Britling* 411.

they live. In *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, Wells is concerned with how centralized, top-down systems for the dissemination of information prove inadequate to the unstable information landscape created by the war. Conditions of wartime society are best suited to the creation and circulation of rumors and easy access to first hand accounts, the raw material of rumor, allows for the “whispering gallery” of rumor, underestimated and submerged within in the pre-war environment, to reconstitute a different dominant pseudo-environment operating in English society for the duration of the war. *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* demonstrates that an individual, or a group of individuals circulating the same rumors, can construct a new pseudo-environment, one where the individual can stake out a more satisfying and more useful, if not more accurate, pseudo-environment relative to all possible sources of information.

H.G. Wells is not generally considered a modernist writer, although his interest in the epistemological uncertainty that arises in the distance between exoteric and esoteric storytelling indicates that he confronts many of the basic questions in play for modernist writers, particularly an interest in questioning the fundamental categories of knowledge. Virginia Woolf, in her essay “Character in Fiction” (1924), argues that Wells belongs to the category of “Edwardian” writers, those writers who she felt were rendered outmoded when measured against “Georgian” writers such as E.M Forster, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot.<sup>209</sup> Woolf’s judgment of Wells is based solely on viewing him as a writer of utopias and by her general assessment that the “Edwardian” writers are overly concerned with the material facts of life. She writes, “They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of

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<sup>209</sup> Woolf judges the efforts of the Wells and his contemporaries harshly, arguing, “Now it seems to me that to go to these men and ask them to teach you how to write a novel [,] how to create characters that are real - is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him to teach you how to make a watch.” Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction” in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 44.

things.”<sup>210</sup> The central premise of Woolf’s essay is that the goal of writing fiction is to “express character,” for the writer to impose upon the raw material of fiction his or her own, unique interpretation, rather than merely explicating a social, political, or historical milieu. Using the example of a certain “Mrs. Brown” whom Woolf had recently encountered in a railway car, Woolf argues that the Edwardians would

have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature.<sup>211</sup>

For Woolf, modern writers know that the central problem of creating characters is that “[y]ou see one thing in character, and I another. You say it means this, and I that.”<sup>212</sup>

Left with this epistemological uncertainty, she asks, “what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?”<sup>213</sup> In dismissing Wells as an “Edwardian,” Woolf does not recognize that Wells is a fellow investigator into the very problem of rendering “reality” in fiction. Most scholarship on Wells after Woolf has continued to focus on the sociological, materialist, or science-fiction aspects of his career without noticing that he is fundamentally interested in both the epistemological and the narratological problems at the heart of modernism.

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<sup>210</sup> Woolf 44.

<sup>211</sup> In regards to Wells, Woolf focuses on the tendency of Wells’s late novels to slip into utopian speculation, writing that Wells “would instantly project upon the window - pane a vision of a better, breezier, jollier, happier, more adventurous and gallant world, where these musty railway carriages and fusty old women do not exist [...] where every citizen is generous and candid, manly and magnificent, and rather like Mr. Wells himself. But nobody is in the least like Mrs. Brown.” Woolf 45.

<sup>212</sup> Woolf argues that any subject is, by necessity, capable of existing in versions, even versions that must contradict others. She writes, “To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words. For example, old Mrs. Brown’s character will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born. It would be easy enough to write three different versions of that incident in the train, an English, a French, and a Russian.” Woolf 44.

<sup>213</sup> Woolf 44.

Joseph Conrad: Multiplicity, Counternarratives, and the “Open” Information Environment

Joseph Conrad is not a literary figure generally associated with the First World War. Best known for works such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900), he is more often associated with the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the war, when so many British writers played an active role in the creation and dissemination of propaganda, Conrad stayed largely on the periphery of official government work. He was not asked to be a part of C.F.G. Masterman’s efforts at Wellington House and he never wrote for its successor organization, the Ministry of Information.<sup>214</sup> While coming late in Conrad’s career, the First World War had a more significant impact on the contours of Conrad’s fiction than is often acknowledged. In this chapter, I am interested in the increased prevalence and the greater narratological sophistication in Conrad’s use of rumor in the works, both fiction and non-fiction, that he wrote in response to the changed conditions of information that result from – or are intensified by – the war. Conrad’s new, broader use of rumor is intertwined conceptually with the new ways in which he uses counternarrativity in his late texts. Counternarratives, or multiple, overlapping, and competing versions of the same story, are part of Conrad’s writing from his earliest texts, but counternarrativity becomes a dominant, formal preoccupation in his wartime writing. In *Victory*, “The Unlighted Coast,” and “The Tale,” Conrad explores the way in which rumor establishes and defines its own communities, delineates boundaries and borders in both geographic and social space, and creates additional narratives from the layering and recombining of other rumors already in

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<sup>214</sup> Conrad may have been excluded due to the fact that he was in Poland when the war began and, therefore, was not invited to the initial meetings concerning Wellington House. Conrad’s status as a naturalized citizen may also have contributed to his exclusion.

circulation. Given the self-definitional, generative qualities inherent in rumor, Conrad's wartime texts grapple with questions of ontology, particularly the world-building capacity of rumors, in a way which gestures toward an incipient form of postmodernism. Therefore, examining Conrad's use of rumor draws attention to the way that Conrad, especially in his late period, straddles the modern/postmodern divide.

Conrad's fictional and conceptual terrain has been, from the beginning, that of European imperialism, so it is not surprising that he engages the shift from modernism to postmodernism in terms of how imperialism itself shifts from questions of epistemology to questions of ontology during the crisis of the war years. Although maps and mapping are recurring elements in Conrad's works, the nature of his engagement with mapping changes over time. In his early texts, mapping focuses on epistemological concerns, such as the accuracy of the maps in one's possession or, as is the case with Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, maintained in one's mind. By contrast, in late Conrad, the focus has moved to ontological concerns, such as the way that drawing a new map can actually generate a new reality.

Ontological questions of imperialism and mapmaking are at the forefront of Conrad's argument in a series of letters, the first written to the editor of *The Times* on November 7<sup>th</sup> 1912 and the second written a few days later in an effort to expand and clarify his previous ideas, which were then included in the volume *Last Essays* (1926) under the title "The Future of Constantinople." The letters were written in response to Bulgarian successes against Ottoman forces in Anatolia in the autumn of 1912, a conflict often viewed as a military precursor to the First World War.<sup>215</sup> In these letters, Conrad

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<sup>215</sup> See Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913: Prelude to the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2000).

argues for a pan-European effort to re-draw the map of Europe, and Constantinople's place within it, in order to bring into being a certain socio-historical reality – Constantinople as a European-oriented, “Imperial” city. Conrad contends, “The independent Constantinople of my vision would be the splendid spiritual capital of the Balkan Peninsula naturally; its intellectual capital almost certainly.”<sup>216</sup> Of course, the Constantinople of Conrad's imagination was never mapped nor created, but Conrad's intellectual exercise in 1912 foreshadows the actual post-war effort, captured in detail in Wilson's Fourteen Points, to use words (and their corresponding maps) to bring into being a new map of Europe. For example, the idea of “Poland” advanced in Point Thirteen is less descriptive of actual historical, political, or ethnic boundaries than it is an effort to draw boundaries in the hope that a historical, political, and ethnically coherent Polish nation would emerge.<sup>217</sup> Therefore, maps issuing from the Treaty of Versailles are narratologically world-creating in a way similar to the mapmaking potential that Conrad explores in “The Future of Constantinople.” Starting with *Victory*, Conrad's later fiction reflects, in various ways, a shift in Conrad's engagement with the central problems of imperialism toward ontological questions.

I start my discussion of the impact of the war on Conrad's fiction with *Victory*, published in 1915 but finished before August 1914. *Victory* is a slightly pre-war text only if one defines “pre-war” as events prior to the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. However, by looking at Conrad's understanding of the destabilizing

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<sup>216</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 115.

<sup>217</sup> Point Thirteen reads, “An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.” President Wilson's Message to Congress, January 8, 1918; Records of the United States Senate; Record Group 46; Records of the United States Senate; National Archives.



geopolitical conditions in the Balkans in “The Future of Constantinople, it is possible to see that Conrad is already thinking about the onset and anticipating the consequences of the First World War when he writes *Victory*. In Conrad’s reaction to the precursor events playing out in the Balkans, one can see that Conrad’s perspective has already begun to shift by 1912. As I will explore later in this chapter, the many crosscurrents of rumor in *Victory* combine in such a way that the figure at the center of that novel, Heyst, is engineered through narrative in much the same way that large-scale imperial engineering happens through mapmaking in 1919. Metaphorically, *Victory* represents a battle of words between various imperial voices – the German Mr. Schomberg and the British Mr. Davidson, for example – in an effort to narratologically determine the space occupied by Heyst. However, creating “maps” with words, creating worlds with words, creates vulnerabilities in these untethered realities. In *Victory*, Heyst and his secluded island remain both unclear and overdetermined. In historical terms, the First World War both strengthens imperial claims (the British Empire is never territorially bigger than just after the First World War) but also brings with it the inevitability of decolonization. Once things are defined only by what is drawn on a map, someone else can draw a new and different map of the same space.

While I am most interested in the interplay of competing versions of circulating stories in Conrad’s late texts, uncertainty, unreliable narrators, and the presence of implied counternarratives are hallmarks of Conrad’s oeuvre for the start of his career. Brian Richardson posits one conceptualization of Conradian counternarratives in his work on “The Secret Sharer,” pointing to the existence of “obscured narratives” that

challenge the credibility of the main narrator's perspective in Conrad's story.<sup>218</sup> For Richardson, the reliability of the narrator – an unnamed captain who is telling the story of how he sheltered a murderer named Leggatt during his first command years earlier – is undermined by partially suppressed counternarratives, which the narrator either fails to notice or actively suppresses. These counternarratives “nevertheless leave some significant traces” that challenge the version of the story that the narrator tells.<sup>219</sup> For example, the visiting crewmen from Leggatt's ship tell their own version of Leggatt's crime, but “The Secret Sharer” only includes a trace of this alternative story. The chief mate says to the captain, “As if we would harbor a thing like that,” hinting that the crew told a much darker and more violent version of the murder.<sup>220</sup> Further, both Richardson and Michael Murphy, in an earlier article attuned to similar problems, draw attention to the fact that the story does not record the version of the murder told by Archbold, the captain of Leggett's ship.<sup>221</sup> The narrator admits that he maneuvers the conversation so that Archbold tells him this alternative version but then excludes this story from his narration, saying, “it is not worth while to record that version.”<sup>222</sup> As Murphy argues, “[the readers] should be the judges of that, but we do not get the chance. All we get are bits, though Conrad makes sure they are significant bits.”<sup>223</sup> Richardson calls for scholars to pay greater attention to these counternarratives because it is in the interplay between these competing versions that Conrad “embodies a depth and a playfulness typical of

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<sup>218</sup> Brian Richardson, “Construing Conrad's ‘The Secret Sharer’: Suppressed Narratives, Subaltern Reception, and the Act of Interpretation” in *Studies in the Novel* (33:2) Fall 2001: 306-21.

<sup>219</sup> Richardson 308.

<sup>220</sup> Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” in *Selected Short Stories* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1997) 192.

<sup>221</sup> Michael Murphy, “‘The Secret Sharer’: Conrad's Turn of the Winch” in *Conradiana* (18) 1986: 193-200.

<sup>222</sup> Murphy 188.

<sup>223</sup> Murphy 195.

high modernism.”<sup>224</sup> In an early text such as “The Secret Sharer,” the “obscured narratives” exist largely on the story’s periphery. In this chapter, I examine how such counternarratives move into a more central role in several of Conrad’s later works. In *Victory* and “The Tale” the idea of dueling, competing narratives becomes a primary focus and an organizing principle of each text.

Jonathan Arac’s important article “Romanticism, the Self, and the City: *The Secret Agent* in Literary History” suggests how counternarrativity in Conrad, an aspect of Conrad he develops suggestively but only incipiently and in the context of the earlier fiction, can have crucial social meaning.<sup>225</sup> Arac draws on the distinction between pre-modern “storytelling” and modern “information” developed by Walter Benjamin as a distinction between two different kinds of narrativity emerging from two different temporalities and locations of experience – one kind of experience, *Erfahrung*, emerging from the accumulated practical knowledge and deep continuities of the traditional and ordered pre-modern world, and the other kind of experience, *Erlebnis*, evincing the jolting threats and discontinuities of modern urbanity. Arac points out that *The Secret Agent* is an effort by Conrad to *integrate* modern information, in this case “that quintessential shock, the explosion at Greenwich,” into relatable, accessible storytelling

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<sup>224</sup> Richardson 318. In his article, Murphy also points out the similarities between Conrad’s effort in “The Secret Sharer” and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*: “Conrad has surely been justified in his crow of delight at his success with the story, as he wrote to Edward Garnett: ‘the Secret Sharer between you and me is it. Eh? No damned tricks with girls there. Eh? Every word fits, and there is not a single uncertain note. Luck, my boy. Pure luck.’” Murphy argues about this claim of Conrad’s, “I could not even begin to prove it, but I like to think that his remark about ‘damned tricks with girls’ is a reference to Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* which Conrad had read when it came out in 1898. Dubious narrator there too. Eh? No definite answers to many of the questions raised there either. Eh? I suspect Conrad felt proud that he had written a story to match the famous teaser of his ‘cher maître.’ If indeed Conrad felt that he had written a story to match that of James, the remarkable variety of interpretations of his tale would seem to bear him out.” Murphy 199.

<sup>225</sup> Jonathan Arac, “Romanticism, the Self, and the City: The Secret Agent in Literary History” in *boundary 2* (9:1) *A Supplement on Irony*. Autumn 1980: 75-90.

“with the aid of oral tradition.”<sup>226</sup> In ways Arac hints at but does not develop, rumors play an important role in this project of integration in *The Secret Agent*, anticipating in incipient form the central role rumors will take in Conrad’s later fiction.

For Conrad, the idea for *The Secret Agent* starts in rumors circulating around London in 1894, years before Conrad completed the novel, about an actual bombing in Greenwich. Conrad heard a rumor about the sister of one of the victims of the bombing from Ford Madox Ford, which “made the book possible, that allowed the outrage to ‘be laid ahold of mentally.’”<sup>227</sup> According to Conrad, Ford was attuned to the “urban oral tradition” that circulates *stories* by word-of-mouth (here, a means within urban modernity of integrating experience in the manner of *Erfahrung*) rather than as the hollowed out and discontinuous information contained in the pages of a newspaper or official report (here, a narrative experience of urban *Erlebnis*). Conrad described Ford as the consummate modern rumormonger:

‘He was...a man who liked to talk with all sorts of people, and he may have gathered those illuminating facts at second hand or third hand, from a crossing-sweeper, from a retired police officer, from some vague man in his club, or even, perhaps, from a Minister of State met at some public or private reception.’ Like the narrator of a novel by Dickens, Ford connected all strata of the city, and not from newspapers but from his experiences among diverse people, he had the needful story.<sup>228</sup>

Like the rumor of the victim’s sister told to Conrad by Ford, Conrad’s story of Winnie Verloc, whose disabled brother is killed by a bomb given to him by Winnie’s own husband, can “be laid hold of mentally” because of its integration into *Erfahrung*. Conrad here effectively “negates” certain aspects of the modern urban experience through a

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<sup>226</sup> Arac 84.

<sup>227</sup> Arac 82.

<sup>228</sup> Arac 82-3.

counternarrative impulse in his own prose to negate its own status as purely written, and creating a hybridizing oral and written domain by incorporating the properties of a circulating rumor into the text. In making his case for Conrad's interest in managing modern information, Arac reaches to the famous passage from *Heart of Darkness* in which Conrad writes that "the meaning of an episode [is] not inside like a kernel" but rather outside like "one of these misty halos made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."<sup>229</sup> Drawing attention to the Note at the beginning of *The Secret Agent*, Arac points out that Conrad "places his center not in the explosion itself – the kernel – but at a metonymic remove from it – the halo, its atmosphere."<sup>230</sup> Rumors are important in the Conradian universe since meaning is found in "halos" and "halos" are often made up of the "hazy," "misty," "spectral" knowledge circulated among "all strata" of people as rumors.

Conrad's inclusion of competing and contradicting counternarratives highlights the fact that Conrad is concerned in his fiction with questions of epistemology. In his work *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, Mark Wollaeger approaches this problem of knowability in Conrad by examining the philosophical tradition of skepticism, a tradition that is fundamentally concerned, especially in his early fiction, with a "sustained interest in, among other things, the relation of sensory impressions to knowledge, the problem of other minds, definitions of self, problems of individual agency, and the persistence of the sacred."<sup>231</sup> According to Wollaeger, Conrad's early fictions search for a "sheltered retreat," a place of refuge from skepticism and Conrad's

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<sup>229</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 20.

<sup>230</sup> Arac 85.

<sup>231</sup> Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) xv.

expressions of this trope take the form of his interest in “authority, tradition, and ‘the idea of fidelity.’”<sup>232</sup> For example, in *Lord Jim* Marlow looks for a “sheltering conception of light and order,” but, according to Wollaeger, “the effort can result only in a series of analogies that postpones the revelation of the ‘whole’ truth Marlow desires.”<sup>233</sup> There are residual traces of tradition, authority, and religious yearnings in Conrad’s fiction that betoken an enduring desire for, if not a confidence in, absolute values and absolute truths. Building on Walter Houghton’s *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Wollaeger situates Conrad’s relationship to skepticism historically, pointing out that the Victorian period was “an age of doubt” and for Victorians “‘faith in the existence of ultimate truths’ and in the mind’s ability to apprehend them was seriously undermined by a deeply skeptical relativism”; however, “it never occurred to them to doubt their capacity to arrive at truth.”<sup>234</sup> For Wollaeger, Conrad is pulled in two directions, “forced to acknowledge, without fully accepting” that any attempt to render the truth of a situation is complicated by the instability of underlying terms and categories.

I agree with Wollaeger’s assessment here that the central concern of Conrad’s early fiction is one of epistemology, in which his narrators are searching for a stable rendering of the world even as such stability is in a constant state of slipping beyond their grasp. Such a focus on problems of knowability places Conrad’s early fiction in line with the language of modernism developed by Brian McHale. In his text *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale defines modernist fiction as:

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<sup>232</sup> Wollaeger, *Fictions of Skepticism* 2.

<sup>233</sup> Wollaeger, *Fictions of Skepticism* 2.

<sup>234</sup> Wollaeger, *Fictions of Skepticism* 7-8.

fiction organized in terms of an epistemological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the accessibility, reliability or unreliability, transmission, circulation, etc., of knowledge about the world.<sup>235</sup>

In positing such a definition, McHale contends that modernist fiction involves an “epistemological quest” in which the “cognitive hero,” or the figure who is the “cognizer of the world and agent of *recognitions*,” grapples with “an elusive or occluded reality.”<sup>236</sup> In Conrad’s fiction, it is often the figure of the frame narrator who is on an epistemological quest to tell, and often repeatedly retell, a narrative in order to relate what is known and fully assessable, and also to reconstruct or recover aspects of the narrative that have been lost, hidden, misunderstood, or previously misrepresented by other tellers.

However, I disagree with Wollaeger’s assessment of the issues at stake in Conrad’s late fiction. Wollaeger subscribes to the “decline” camp of Conrad critics, who see the texts he wrote later in his career as less accomplished than his early efforts.<sup>237</sup> For Wollaeger this decline begins around 1912 when Conrad’s growing interest in commercial success causes him to curtail his investment in philosophical aspects of skepticism and to emphasize the traditional conventions of romance in texts such as *Victory* and *Chance*. While Conrad does not simply turn out “potboilers” after 1912, Wollaeger argues that his investment in skeptical thought becomes a “kind of gratuitous philosophical shorthand that is easily consumed by a mass audience.”<sup>238</sup> Instead, I posit

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<sup>235</sup> McHale 146.

<sup>236</sup> McHale 147. Emphasis in original.

<sup>237</sup> The “achievement-and-decline” narrative of Conrad’s career is the most pervasive estimation of his late fiction. See Thomas Moser’s *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (1957), Albert Guerard’s *Conrad the Novelist* (1958), or Edward Said’s *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). Many different points of division have been proposed, including drawing the line after “The Secret Sharer” (1909), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), or *Chance* (1913). For a full discussion of this trend in Conrad scholarship see Leonard Orr and Theodore Billy, *A Joseph Conrad Companion* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999).

<sup>238</sup> Wollaeger, *Fictions of Skepticism* 182.

that Conrad's later fiction moves from a modernist mode, in which the narrator struggles to uncover obscured aspects of the underpinning reality, to a mode narration that is incipiently postmodern, in which multilayered, palimpsestic narration generates and circulates the terms of its own reality. McHale defines postmodern fiction as:

fiction organized in terms of an ontological dominant, fiction whose formal strategies implicitly raise issues of the mode of being of fictional worlds and their inhabitants, and /or reflect on the plurality and diversity of worlds, whether "real," possible, fictional, or what-have-you.<sup>239</sup>

There are many different ways to construct the idea of postmodernism but McHale stresses that this "constructivism" is premised on that fact that in postmodernism all "our cognitive operations, including (or especially) perception itself, are theory-dependent."<sup>240</sup> Since in postmodern fiction "facts" are theory-dependent, "objective 'truth' cannot be a criterion for evaluating versions of reality."<sup>241</sup> In this chapter, I examine the way that Conrad's early texts are interested in the possibility of an epistemologically stable version and how his later texts gradually call into question this possibility, moving in the direction of postmodernist ontological concerns about the constructed nature of any narrative.

Addressing issues of rumor and counternarratives in Conrad's later work requires a recognition that the Conradian narrative universe as a whole regularly revisits the same "mapped" locations, layering new, often related narratives over already occupied sites. Traveling through Conrad's fiction, the reader will often find himself traveling over familiar ground in the company of familiar faces. Marlow may be the most recognizable traveler, but there are many characters who reappear in multiple texts and in varied

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<sup>239</sup> McHale 147.

<sup>240</sup> McHale 2.

<sup>241</sup> McHale 2.



narrative situations. Conrad's texts frequently involve the same people, the same events, or the same situations, but the narratives differ in detail and are told from different perspectives. This narrative stacking happens both within a single text, such as in *Victory*, and between multiple texts written at significantly different points in Conrad's career, such as in "Falk" and *The Shadow-Line*. This narrative stacking is represented graphically on the map included in the first American edition of *Victory*, authorized and corrected by Conrad himself. This map places each of Conrad's texts, starting with *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and ending with *Victory*, in geographic space.<sup>242</sup> For example, the triangle formed by the coasts of Sumatra, Java, and Borneo is packed with overlapping information, marked as the geographical setting for both *Almayer's Folly* and *Victory*, and also Conrad's short stories "The End of the Tether" (1902), "The Secret Sharer" (1910), "Freya of the Seven Isles" (1912), and "Youth" (1902).

Because Conrad's fictional universe is a transtextual one, organized as a series of overlapping, palimpsestic narratives, it is well suited to the narrative structures of rumor. By their very nature, rumors are narratives that mutate and multiply, allowing overlapping versions of a story to exist simultaneously. Rumors circulate widely in the early texts. Besides the rumors of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, texts such as *Lord Jim* and "Falk" are built around rumors of past actions by the title character. But, for all the multiple voices and collective integrations that exist as "obscured narratives" in these texts, the narratives read like lonely, solitary stories pieced together by the frame narrator who acts as the story's weaver. In this chapter, I argue that Conrad's later texts use the narrative function of rumor in a different way. Since these later texts are less concerned with the idea of an authorized version of the "truth," rumors operate as competing stories

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<sup>242</sup> Peter Lancelot Mallios, "Conrad's Poetics of Democracy" in *Conradiana* (35:3) 2003.

ving for supremacy.

This chapter begins by examining the role of rumor in *Victory* (1915) and its companion short story “Because of the Dollars” (1915). *Victory* is a useful starting point in examining Conrad’s understanding of rumor because it uses extensively the palimpsestic narrative structure of rumor within the novel, retelling the story of Axel Heyst as a series of competing rumors being spread simultaneously within the community of European expatriates in the South Seas. Additionally, Conrad’s related short story, “Because of the Dollars” (1915), written as Conrad was composing *Victory*, is an example of information circulating between separate texts in the form of rumor. The short story tells one possible version of the pre-history of Captain Davidson, a central storyteller in *Victory*. The unnamed narrator of “Because of the Dollars” relates a rumor about Captain Davidson’s early life that is circulating within the Conradian information environment of the South Seas concurrently with the story of Heyst that is retold in *Victory*, in part by Davidson himself. Together, the rumors in *Victory* and “Because of the Dollars” enrich the available information about a specific Conradian location.

The middle section of the chapter takes a closer look at Conrad’s propaganda essay “The Unlighted Coast.” The final section covers *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and “The Tale” (1917), the later text serving as a restaging of the final scene of *Heart of Darkness* between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended. With *Victory* as a pre-war benchmark, an examination of changes in Conrad’s use of rumor in his wartime texts helps indicate the way that Conrad understood the war’s impact on the status of information in the modern world. While *Victory* is structured as a series of competing rumors, overlapped and built up to create a descriptive narrative about the main character, Heyst does not contribute a

rumor of his own to the circulating versions. In “The Unlighted Coast” (1916), Conrad’s investigation changes from an interest in the uncertainty caused by the existence of multiple, competing versions of a narrative to the uncertainty inherent in any narrative situation. This essay includes the retelling by Conrad of a story he was supposedly told by a young officer. The officer admits that he is himself uncertain about many of the elements that he includes in his narrative. In “The Tale,” published in 1916, Conrad engages a third perspective on rumor: the way an individual or, in the case of “The Tale” a pair of individuals, create and circulate rumor-versions of a story in order to influence the narratives circulating among the wider community. The text engages the process of narrative construction directly and allows the reader to see the way in which the narrator actively shapes his own story, “writing out” facts or interpretations that undermine the version of the story he is attempting to establish. These wartime texts show Conrad’s heightened awareness of the importance of securing control over the sources and consequences of one’s own narrative, perhaps a necessary skill in order to fill in the missing information caused by disruptions in the flow of information, counter misinformation engendered by the scaled up use of propaganda during the war, or make more palatable the questionable nature of one’s own wartime behavior.

Within the final section of this chapter, I pair *Heart of Darkness* and “The Tale,” two texts by Conrad that occupy the same fictional space, although this similarity is not easily noticed at first glance. Focusing on the last scene of *Heart of Darkness*, the scene in which Marlow goes to see Kurtz’s Intended to give her the story of that man’s fate, the seemingly divergent texts are brought into contact.<sup>243</sup> “The Tale” can be read as an

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<sup>243</sup> Interestingly, “The Unlighted Coast,” written at nearly the same time as “The Tale” is also in many ways a rewriting of *Heart of Darkness*. See Mark Wollaeger, “Conrad’s Darkness Revisited: Mediated

alternative version of the encounter with the Intended. In both texts, the narrative situation boils down to a man and a woman alone together constructing a story. In *Heart of Darkness* there is little meaningful communication between Marlow and the Intended; Marlow doesn't present her with the version of Kurtz' story known only to him and, when he gets close to doing so, she interrupts him and finishes his truncated sentences in a way that corresponds to her own, quite different version of the facts. In "The Tale," the plot of the story re-enacts this scene, keeping many of the same details to provide a connection between the two storytelling moments. However, in "The Tale," the storytelling process is a collaborative effort between a wartime sea captain and his own intended wife, in which the pair together constructs, revises, and ultimately agrees on a version of the story that obscures the captain's culpability for actions he took during the war that led to a great number of deaths.<sup>244</sup> While the reader does not know for certain what version of the story is launched into circulation, the pair deliberately constructs the framework of their version to slant the story in a certain direction, a version that understands the situation more favorably than the probable facts would reasonably support.

#### Section I: "Open Totality" and Conrad's Information Environment

In order to fully engage the use of rumor in Conrad's fiction, it is helpful to explore the vocabulary that Conrad uses to describe the status of information in modern life.

While Conrad doesn't directly utilize a Lippmannesque vocabulary of "information

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Warfare and Modern(ist) Propaganda," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Lancelot Mallios, and Andrea White, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 67-82.

<sup>244</sup> As I discuss later in this chapter, the text of "The Tale" leaves the exact nature of the connection between this pair ambiguous. It is uncertain if the story begins with an engagement or an estrangement, and this uncertainty is thematically consistent with the epistemological questions that Conrad is raising in the text as a whole.

environments,” he employs the same basic ideas using a vocabulary of geography and cartography in his 1923 essay “Geography and Some Explorers.” Using geography as a lens, it is possible to see how Conrad’s assessment of the state of geography in the modern world provides a glimpse into his assessment of the way information is experienced in modern life.

In “Geography and Some Explorers,” Conrad sets out a somewhat surprising argument that the modern world is fully mapped. Therefore, his assessment of the “mind” of people living in the modern world reflects this fact. In the essay, Conrad devotes extensive space to marking the connection between the geographical vocabulary of a certain era and that era’s general relationship to information. For example, Conrad asserts that the “fabulous geography” of the Middle Ages, replete with “circumstantially extravagant speculation” and a “love of the marvellous,” gives us a “glimpse into the medieval mind.” The “age of exploration,” defined expansively by Conrad as stretching from the discovery of the New World to the mid-nineteenth century, is best understood through that period’s “geography militant,” a geography marked by adventurous action, “open spaces and wide horizons.” Even in its declining years, this era can be described as a realm of “worthy, adventurous, and devoted men nibbling at the edges [of the known world...] conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there.”<sup>245</sup> The world of “geography militant” offered a real possibility of filling in unknown details, correcting mistakes on still somewhat crude maps, or even the possibility of getting beyond the edges of the map entirely.

Conrad regrets that his own lifetime saw an end to the era of exploration, pushing

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<sup>245</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays*, Harold Ray Stevens and J.H. Stape, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 12.

the modern world into a new age; one he doesn't directly name but might have called "post-geography militant." In this "post-geography militant" world, every point has already been interpenetrated with information, even if the accuracy of that information could sometimes be challenged. In describing his own travels in Africa, Conrad writes that when he arrives at Stanley Falls, a spot in the center of Africa that in his youth was an open, unexplored space, he does not find himself communing with men such as David Livingstone and Mungo Park, the great explorers of "geography militant." Rather, his experience, and by extension the general experience of modern life, has been reduced to a state he describes as:

only the unholy recollection of a prosaic newspaper 'stunt' and the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration. What an end to the idealized realities of a boy's daydream.<sup>246</sup>

Conrad admits to feeling "very lonely" in the center of Africa, a modern loneliness that shares little with the "aleness" of the age of exploration. The adult Conrad can no longer "nibble at the edges" of the unknown.

"Geography and Some Explorers," while useful in explicating Conrad's understanding of the information environment, provides only a partial view of his position. There is evidence elsewhere in Conrad's body of work of a countervailing concern; a fear seen in his early texts of operating in a world with only the thinly-marked, color-coded maps of European imperialism to serve as a guide. Most directly, *Heart of*

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<sup>246</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 14. Conrad's venture in Africa, along with much of that era's colonialism, was prompted, at least in part, by the propagandistic rhetoric of colonialism coming to him through the modern press. See Peter Mallios's discussion of the "new journalism" in "Reading *The Secret Agent* Now" in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 170-171. Zdzisław Najder points to speeches given by both Henry Morton Stanley and King Leopold of Belgium that represent the colonial rhetoric around the time that Conrad decided to take up work in Africa. Conrad would not have been present at either of these speeches, but would have been able to read about them and others like them through reports in the newspaper. Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2007) 17.

*Darkness* considers both the logistical and the psychological difficulties of traveling in those parts of the world that are nominally, but not substantially, mapped. *Heart of Darkness* turns on the discrepancy between the under-known nature of Africa itself – hence all of Marlow’s confusion in the story – and the over-known and over-determined “map” of “Africa” in Marlow’s head – the map of stereotypes (of race, savagery, etc.) from which Marlow has equal trouble shaking free. Without both sides of this equation – the strength of the *a priori* ideological map, and the radical unknown to which it has such trouble corresponding – *Heart of Darkness* would lose much of its narrative dynamism.

At the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow initially offers up to his listeners a regret about the loss of unmapped places similar to that expressed by Conrad in “Geography and Some Explorers.” He regrets that the Africa of his adulthood is not longer “a blank space of delightful mystery.” However, his interest in going there still hinges on the fact that it is not fully known, no longer a “white patch” but still a “place of darkness.”<sup>247</sup> While still in Europe preparing for his adventure, Marlow recalls seeing a map on the wall at the Company’s headquarters:

[the room had] on one end a large shining map marked with all the colours of the rainbow. There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there – a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer.<sup>248</sup>

This map is filled with swatches of color to indicate which European power has claimed sovereignty over a certain area – the “vast amount of red” referring to British colonies, the “deuce of a lot of blue” referring to French colonies, and the green and orange areas likely referring to Germany and Portugal respectively. However, this map does not

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<sup>247</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 22.

<sup>248</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 24.

convey information pertaining to any other category of knowledge.

Later in the text, Marlow's lack of cartographical information concerning the geography of the river he is charged with navigating is mirrored in a lack of concrete information about the mysterious figure named Kurtz awaiting him upriver. Marlow encounters information about Kurtz through the trickle of rumors streaming out of the "darkness" upriver and begins to construct a constantly mutating cognitive map of Mr. Kurtz. The most interesting figure to influence Marlow's understanding of Kurtz is a young Russian wanderer, known in the novel by the impressionistic moniker, the "harlequin." While his information is essential to Marlow's construction of a workable cognitive map of Kurtz, his devotion to the man causes him to present an incomplete and, at times, wholly inaccurate version of Kurtz's existence. The clownish appearance that gives him his name comes from the fact that his clothes are "covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow," mimicking the multi-colored colonial maps seen by Marlow on the wall of the Company headquarters.<sup>249</sup> Like Kurtz, about whom Marlow says, "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of [him]," the harlequin is an amalgamation of European influences – Russian by birth, educated on English ships, and nominally employed by a Dutch trading house. He operates as a physical manifestation of the hodge-podge nature of European information about the interior reaches of the river.<sup>250</sup> The harlequin, like the multi-colored colonial map, does not really help to enlighten Marlow about the inner meaning of Kurtz.

Further, everything about the harlequin is presented in the vocabulary of illegibility, reinforcing the idea that he is a problematic source of information. He first

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<sup>249</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 69.

<sup>250</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 66. The harlequin also acts as a kind of autobiographical stand-in for the multinational Conrad.



appears in the story as an absent present, leaving at his downriver hut a pile of firewood and a sign in “faded pencil-writing” that “[w]hen deciphered says, ‘Wood for you. Hurry up. Approach cautiously.’”<sup>251</sup> The message has “a signature, but it was illegible” and the travelers comment “adversely upon the imbecility of that telegraphic style.”<sup>252</sup> The harlequin is also seen through the pages of a book titled *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship by a Master in His Majesty’s Navy* that Marlow finds in the harlequin’s hut. The book provides a professional “talk of chains and purchases” that allows Marlow to temporarily “forget the jungle” and to relish the “sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real.”<sup>253</sup> However, the comprehensibility of the book’s information is complicated by marginalia written by the harlequin in Russian but interpreted by Marlow as an unreadable cipher, a form of writing deliberately holding back its meaning from the act of communication. In his work *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness*, Jeremy Hawthorn considers Conrad’s treatment of the harlequin’s book on seamanship in his chapter titled, “Heart of Darkness: language and truth.” Hawthorn points out that in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad makes a distinction between two different possibilities inherent in language. One category is language that is “eloquent,” a term that is often used by Conrad as “almost an interchangeable term for ‘skilful lying,’” exemplified in *Heart of Darkness* by the report that Kurtz writes to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs.<sup>254</sup> Kurtz’s report is a “beautiful piece of writing” but the arguments he makes about the ability of white men to

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<sup>251</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 53. For a further discussion of this marginalia, see Asako Nakai’s *The English Book and Its Marginalia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 52-53.

<sup>252</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 53.

<sup>253</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 53.

<sup>254</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness* (Lincoln, Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1979) 9-10.

“exert a power of good” are utterly undermined by his subsequent manipulation of the native population. The writing may be beautiful, but it has no truthful relationship to the experience of Europeans or Africans living under the colonial system. Hawthorn compares this “eloquent” report to *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*. This book presents language that is linked to real “work” and, therefore, possesses “a potentiality for honest reportage.” Hawthorn concludes that “much of Conrad’s fiction and non-fiction is devoted to an exploration of this janus-faced character of words.”<sup>255</sup>

Given Conrad’s concern over the fact that the modern world offers an individual both too much and too little information, I find a useful vocabulary for describing Conrad’s understanding of his historical moment in the concept of an “open totality” developed by Fredric Jameson. Jameson identifies a problem with the way information is available to the individual in the modern world, arguing that in the “age of imperialism,”

the phenomenological experience of the individual subject [...] becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life.<sup>256</sup>

Simply put, as an individual living in a certain place – be it some tiny corner of England or a sailing ship in the South Seas – the “truth” of your experience escapes your understanding because of the extended global networks that underpin such an existence. What follows from this understanding of modern life is “that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same

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<sup>255</sup> Hawthorn 10.

<sup>256</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping” in *The Jameson Reader*, Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 278.

content is true, then it escapes individual experience.”<sup>257</sup> For Jameson, the idea of “totality” addresses the “infinite relationality” of the modern world, recognizing the need to “strive constantly to relate and connect, to situate and interpret each object or phenomenon in the context of those social and historical forces that shape and enable it.”<sup>258</sup> Jameson distinguishes between a “closed totality,” a system in which nothing new can arise and everything moves inevitably toward a single unity, and an “open totality,” an environment that uses “the creative and unpredictable efficacy of the new,” constantly incorporating new information through its porous borders and, therefore, “moving and growing in an amorphous way.”<sup>259</sup> Such an open totality will always exceed any attempt to understand or represent it; however, it is just such an open totality that Conrad strives to represent in his fiction.

The difference between Lippmann and Jameson’s view of the information environment, and therefore that of Wells and Conrad, should not be overstated. Both view the world as something that no individual can fully comprehend. And, therefore, both assert that individuals must create a mechanism for translating information about the world to a manageable scale. For Lippmann, this becomes the “pseudo-environment of mediated fact.” For Jameson, this translation takes the form of “cognitive mapping.” Jameson borrows the term from the work of Kevin Lynch, who developed the term by asking city residents to draw a map of their city from memory and in the process discovered the highly-individualized geographic understanding contained in those maps.<sup>260</sup> Jameson argues that an individual must construct a “cognitive map,” a

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<sup>257</sup> Jameson 278.

<sup>258</sup> Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, “Introduction” in *The Jameson Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 22.

<sup>259</sup> Hardt and Weeks 21.

<sup>260</sup> Hardt and Weeks 22.

navigational aid to help situate himself within the “multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities” of life, similar to the way a person living in a modern city constructs a mental map through which to connect the fragmented pieces of knowledge he has of such a complex urban environment. A cognitive map is a way to situate your narrative in context.<sup>261</sup>

*Victory*, as a complete work, can be understood as a “cognitive map” of Conrad’s fiction since it maps, through multiple retellings, the story of a particular location within this fictional universe. To start, it is helpful to consider in more detail the literal map that was included by the publisher in the first American edition of *Victory* and corrected by Conrad himself. The map shows the global expanse of Conrad’s fiction to that date, literally placing each of his narratives on this map, starting with his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, labeled with the number “1”, and ending with *Victory*, labeled “21,” the two occupying almost the same geographical location. The map’s numbers are confusedly jumbled, not following strictly the order of publication from earliest to latest or a clear movement in one direction around the globe. Peter Mallios considers this map in his article “Declaring Victory: Towards Conrad’s Poetics of Democracy,” arguing that the map presents a world “crisscrossed” by Conrad’s ships and urging the book-consuming

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<sup>261</sup> Several previous scholars examined transtextual mapmaking in Conrad’s work. Robert Hampson, building on the idea of “heterotopias” developed by Foucault, uses the term “heterotopic fiction” to describe how in certain Conrad texts “different places have been superimposed in what is, effectively, a process of composite map-making.” He argues, “These composite maps produce impossible sites: not a unified, homogeneous fictional space, but a collage of heterogeneous spaces.” Such juxtaposition “brings these different ‘sets of relations’ into dialogue.” For example, in *Victory* Heyst’s Island, known cartographically as “The Round Island,” is “not just a nonexistent place, but an impossible space” because no real place satisfies the conditions of its “location within shallow seas, its coal deposits, and its proximity to a volcano.” What Hampson notices spatially in a text such as *Victory*, calling it “collaging,” can be described alternatively as cognitive mapping. Heyst’s island, viewed as part of Conrad’s cognitive map, may be a geologic impossibility, but it represents a cognitive mental paradigm, one point on Conrad’s cognitive map of the South Seas. Robert Hampson, “Conrad’s Heterotopic Fiction: Composite Maps, Superimposed Sites, and Impossible Spaces” in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 121–35.

public to “travel the world further with Conrad.”<sup>262</sup> Mallios points out the way the numbers on the map “beat a general path eastward.”<sup>263</sup> Therefore, he argues, “The narrative key to the map depends on and is structured in terms of the same illusion that in the process of completing a linear sequence, an entire whole – simultaneously geographical and Conradian – has been encompassed.”<sup>264</sup> I agree with Mallios that this map represents the *illusion* of an “entire whole – simultaneously geographical and Conradian”; however, I would disagree that the map implies a fundamentally linear progression to this idea or that it conveys the idea of completeness. While this map provides relationality, it resists imposing a strict organization. The numbers on the map move eleven times to the east, but also nine times to the west, once directly to the north, and twice largely to the south. Two of the numbers appear twice at different points on the map, again confounding any sense of linearity. The reader, therefore, can enter the Conradian world as it is mapped at any point, reading these texts in any sequence, and still gaining access to the whole transtextual world.

This flexible and permeable cognitive map also operates narratively in Conrad’s work as the same characters, locations, and narrative situations can be approached from various vantage points across multiple texts. In a narrative universe thus organized, rumors circulate across textual boundaries, bringing into conversation characters and narrative moments in such a way that these moments situate and interpret each other. In this way, the transtextual rumor mill that operates in Conrad’s Malay canon, and later the smaller rumor communities that he attempts to map within works such as “The Tale,”

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<sup>262</sup> Peter Lancelot Mallios, “Declaring *Victory*: Towards Conrad’s Poetics of Democracy” in *Conradiana* 35.3 (Fall 2003) 163.

<sup>263</sup> Mallios, “Declaring *Victory*” 163.

<sup>264</sup> Mallios, “Declaring *Victory*” 163.

help the reader to navigate Conrad's fictional universe.

## Section II: *Victory* and "Because of the Dollars"

The story related in Conrad's novel *Victory* can be understood as a story built up through a series of overlapping, contradictory, and constantly changing rumors that circulate within the novel's instantiated community of European expatriates who frequent the same set of colonial establishments and who trade information back and forth. It tells the story of Axel Heyst and the mysterious events that occurred on his secluded island retreat of Samburan in the South Seas through the rumor-versions of Heyst that continue to circulate within this community after his death, diverging from one another in substantial ways. Conrad's short story "Because of the Dollars," written as Conrad was composing *Victory*, tells a related story about Captain Davidson, one of the most important sources of information in *Victory*. Together, these two texts demonstrate the way information circulates within the Conradian universe. *Victory*, on its own, is organized as a collection of aggregated rumors. "Because of the Dollars," when read as part of the same transtextual story as *Victory*, shows the relationship that exists between information contained in Conradian texts occupying the same geographical space.

*Victory* begins and ends with a pair of very short chapters, comprising less than ten pages of the novel together. While both chapters are narrated by a first-person narrator, it is unclear whether the first-person narrator of the opening chapter is also the narrator of the final chapter. Since the end frame is not necessarily narrated by the same voice as the opening frame, the final chapter may not suture up the time of the novel, bringing the narrative clearly to the present moment established in the novel's opening.

This ambiguity is productive since the structure of the novel as a series of competing versions of the same story does not require the novel to return to the same specific narrative voice. In this way, the collectivized perspective of the novel's rumor community is constantly in the process of alteration. The rest of the novel, from the second chapter to the penultimate one, is the story of the "mystery of Samburan," the story of Axel Heyst and the solitary life and tragic end he met on a small island in the South Seas, told from a limited third-person point of view. I will return to this internal narrative below, after first discussing how the rumor community is established in the framing chapters.

The collective perspective of the opening frame is established immediately in the novel's opening sentence: "There is, as every schoolboy knows in this scientific age, a very close chemical reaction between coal and diamonds."<sup>265</sup> This opening stands in contrast to the opening of the majority of Conrad's earlier texts. For example, *Lord Jim* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* both open with descriptions of specific characters within the work's fictional universe.<sup>266</sup> *Heart of Darkness* and "Youth" open with a description of the specific locations at which the storytelling takes place.<sup>267</sup> In contrast, the opening line of *Victory* makes a claim about the fundamentals of science that "every schoolboy knows," every schoolboy who has the basics of a Western education. In

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<sup>265</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Victory* (New York: Modern Library, 2007) 1.

<sup>266</sup> *Lord Jim* begins, "He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built..." *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* begins, "Mr. Baker, chief mate of the ship *Narcissus*, stepped in one stride out of his lighted cabin into the darkness of the quarter-deck."

<sup>267</sup> *Heart of Darkness* begins, "The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest." "Youth" begins, "This could have occurred nowhere in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak..." To further establish this point, Conrad's post-*Victory* work, *The Shadow-Line*, published in 1919, opens with the similarly universalizing sentences: "Only the young have such moments. I don't mean the very young. No. The very young have, properly speaking, no moments. It is the privilege of early youth to live in advance of its days in all the beautiful continuity of hope which knows no pauses and in introspection."

“Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative,” an important essay in *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said argues that a significant aspect of all Conrad’s “major” fiction, i.e. the texts written before *Chance* (1913), is that it is situated: formally and substantively, there is generally attention drawn to the narrative frame within which a story will be elaborated, the point of this framing narrative strategy being that all stories take their meaning as a function of the contingent contexts in which they are told or retold. Such a view presupposes an anchoring reality, howsoever it may change or be the ground of a different context or retelling.<sup>268</sup> This is different from the later fiction, which is not as certain in any specific sense of anchoring or referability: language, information, discourse itself being the only “ground” these books can assert with any confidence. In these texts, it is the machinery of information, not the referent, which is the anchor of the story.

The real narrative force of this opening frame chapter comes from the collective voice, articulated repeatedly by the narrator as “we ‘out there,’” the broad community of Europeans in the South Seas who form the information environment within which this story spreads.<sup>269</sup> The narrator tells the reader, “Everyone in this part of the world knew of [Heyst],” which extends the narrative community to cover both those who knew him and the much larger category of people who knew “of him.”<sup>270</sup> The native population of the South Seas is largely excluded from this collective voice (and pushed to the margins of the novel as a whole, most clearly in the persons of Heyst’s Chinese servant, Wang, and

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<sup>268</sup> Edward Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) 101.

<sup>269</sup> The phrase “one of us” is also used here in echo of *Lord Jim*. Conrad uses this phrase eight times in *Lord Jim* to indicate Jim’s affinity with other colonials living in the South Seas.

<sup>270</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 4.



his wife, a native of Samburan, whose silence is continuously marked within the text.)<sup>271</sup>

The reader knows no specifics about this narrator, not his name, his occupation, his nationality, not the circumstances under which he is offering up this tale nor the audience for which it is intended. The narrator, speaking as a member of this rumor community, does not add any new, personally gathered information in the opening frame. Contrast this with Conrad's highly individualized narrators, such as Marlow in *Lord Jim* or *Heart of Darkness* or the young captain in "Falk," who are explicit about how and why they become interested in the subject and circumstances of the stories they tell. In *Victory*, the frame narrator simply rearranges and repackages information that is already part of the circulating story. To accomplish this, the narrator relates a range of different, and ultimately competing, versions of Heyst that are circulating simultaneously within this community. Taken together, these competing rumors provide possible explanations for the presence of Heyst on Samburan and help to reduce the community's anxiety about a figure who does not fit easily into existing categories or within the group's existing narratives.

Each rumor version of Heyst related by the narrator contains clues to its origin and clues to the history of its circulation as a rumor. Heyst is known as "Enchanted Heyst" because it is rumored that he once exclaimed to "the manager of the branch of the Oriental Banking Corporation in Malacca," "I am enchanted with these islands."<sup>272</sup> This exclamation was transmuted into a rumor because the manager was "so impressed by the tone, fervour, rapture [of the statement] that he [...] related the experience to more than

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<sup>271</sup> Interestingly, the typescripts of *Victory* reveal Wang to be a much more present and substantive character. Conrad quite calculatedly makes him the "vanishing" figure he becomes in the novel's final version.

<sup>272</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 6.

one person.”<sup>273</sup> Alternately, a “kindly, benevolent old gentleman” once asked Heyst, “And you are interested in – ?” and Heyst is supposed to have replied, “Facts.” The narrator states, “for a time, our man got the name of ‘Hard Facts.’”<sup>274</sup> A third rumor-version of Heyst stems from “a certain disreputable white man” who calls Heyst “a ut-uto-utopist” when he foolishly offers to quench the thirst of a notorious old drunk.<sup>275</sup> This opening chapter doesn’t confirm the truth of any of these existing rumors about Heyst. Rather, by presenting many competing versions, the narrator creates a space for his own version of the story to join the conversation. It is into this crowded marketplace of rumor that the narrator plans to enter his forthcoming story about Heyst.

With the opening of the embedded story in the second chapter, the narrative stops equivocating between various rumored positions and picks a place on the spectrum of rumor, declaring it the “real truth.” Starting with a retelling of the moment that Heyst meets the ill-fated Captain Morrison, the narrator states, “It was about this time that Heyst became associated with Morrison on terms about which people were in doubt. Some said he was a partner, others said he was a sort of paying guest, but the real truth of the matter was more complex.”<sup>276</sup> The first phrase, “It was about this time,” is complicated by the fact that it is unclear from the end of the preceding frame chapter the “time” to which this phrase refers. The embedded narrator hypothesizes that this meeting occurred when Heyst was “mooning about” Timor “in search of some undiscovered facts.” This could establish the “time” of this event as that when the rumored “Hard

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<sup>273</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 6.

<sup>274</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 6.

<sup>275</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 7.

<sup>276</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 8.

Facts” Heyst was “moon[ing] about the Java sea.”<sup>277</sup> The embedded narrator is, therefore, not offering the “real truth,” but a tale that is merely a competing version to the stories he is aiming to supplant.

In this first chapter of the embedded narrative, the narrator initially maintains a self-conscious emphasis on who qualifies as a member of this rumor community, similar to the way such boundaries are policed in the opening frame narrative. While Heyst is excluded from membership in the community, staying a topic of rumor rather than a participant in its creation, Captain Morrison is awarded the status of “one of us.”<sup>278</sup> He fits within established categories since he is a white European, and even more so because he is “owner and master of the *Capricorn*, trading brig.”<sup>279</sup> Morrison’s status as a member of the rumor community is bolstered further by the speculation that he may be the source for one of the most prolific rumors about Heyst. Morrison is given partial responsibility for putting a version of the story about how he and Heyst ended up business partners in the Tropical Belt Coal Company into circulation. The narrator remarks, “Morrison himself, not a perfect vessel by any means, was bursting with gratitude and under the stress he must have let out something vague – enough to give the island gossip a chance.”<sup>280</sup> The narrator acknowledges that such rumors are an inevitable part of society, appealing directly to the reader’s own experiences when claiming, “you know how it is with all such mysteries. There is always a leak somewhere.”<sup>281</sup>

At first glance, much of the embedded narrative appears to be narrated from the perspective of third-person omniscience. However, from the outset this omniscience

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<sup>277</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 6.

<sup>278</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 8.

<sup>279</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 8.

<sup>280</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 15.

<sup>281</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 15.

shows evidence of being deliberately constructed, as if the narrator is cobbling together pieces from various versions to make a new whole instead of occupying a position of independent understanding. Unlike the deliberately marked collectivity of a text such as *Lord Jim*, in which Conrad makes clear the constructed nature of Marlow's understanding through quotation marks and quoted text, the multiplicity of source information in *Victory* is not established through overt punctuation. For example, the reported exchange between Morrison and Heyst, in which Heyst offers to provide the financial means necessary for Morrison to rescue his brig from auction, is constructed almost entirely out of clichés. Morrison's gratitude is described "as if he expected Heyst's usual white suit of the tropics to change into a shining garment flowing down to his toes, and a pair of great dazzling wings to sprout on the Swede's shoulders."<sup>282</sup> Morrison wonders if Heyst is really an emissary of God or if "it's the Devil who has sent him."<sup>283</sup> The constant repetition of Morrison's obsession with racial whiteness, the overwrought nature of Morrison's religious pleas, the "miracle" of his salvation through Heyst, and the overly formal attitude assumed by Heyst all hint at the constructed nature of the story, built up from the stock phrases of circulating versions. The telling does, however, provide an explanation of how Morrison and Heyst ended up in business together, thereby reducing the ambiguity for the wider community over this mysterious part of the story. While not the "real truth," the narrator's story is a truth with sufficient complexity and plausibility to provide the receiving rumor community with an explanation for Heyst's peculiar behavior and, therefore, to compete in the densely populated marketplace of South Seas' gossip.

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<sup>282</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 13.

<sup>283</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 13.

But, what exactly is the narrator's story competing against? One additional element of the novel is the existence of a spiteful version of Heyst's story, originating and circulating through the efforts of Schomberg, a prodigious inventor of rumors about things in general and Heyst in particular. For reasons only guessed at in the novel, Schomberg has a long history of malicious talk aimed at damaging Heyst's standing in the community. The narrator tells us, "A rumour sprang out that Heyst, having obtained some mysterious hold on Morrison, had fastened himself on him and was sucking him dry [... t]he originator, it seems, was a certain Schomberg."<sup>284</sup> This version of Heyst is known in the lexicon of the novel as "Heyst the Spider."<sup>285</sup> In general, Schomberg constructs his rumor by "asking everybody about everything, and arranging the information into the most scandalous shape his imagination could invent."<sup>286</sup> The frame narrator dismisses Schomberg's version of "Heyst the Spider" and, therefore, the novel's embedded narrative acts as a counterbalance to the version of Heyst that has been constructed by Schomberg's rumors. Within the Conradian universe, Schomberg was already well known to readers by the time *Victory* was published from the character's earlier appearances in *Lord Jim* and "Falk," in both cases as a vicious gossip. The fact that Conrad enlarges and makes more central Schomberg's role in *Victory* serves as another indication that he is becoming more interested in the role of rumor in constructing narrative situations.

The narrator's anti-Schombergian stance appears to have its authority from the information of a certain Captain Davidson, a "fine," usually circumspect man who is compelled to share what he knows about Heyst with others as a result of being the only

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<sup>284</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 15.

<sup>285</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 17.

<sup>286</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 25.

witness to the climactic events of the novel. It is Davidson's "fineness" that becomes the controlling perspective of the embedded narrative, even though the narrator admits that the tidbits of information offered up by Davidson were, in actuality, quite scarce. Chapter Four of *Victory* begins, "A few of us who were sufficiently interested went to Davidson for details. These were not many."<sup>287</sup> Davidson is described as a "good, simple fellow," one whose "fineness was real enough to alter the course of the steamer he commanded" to check in on the solitary Heyst as he traveled about the islands on business.<sup>288</sup> There is an underlying question as to whether Davidson's actions are actually ruled by his "fineness" or by his placid immobility, the narrator admitting, "I don't know whether it was his delicacy or his obesity which prevented Davidson from clambering upon the wharf," a failure to act that prevents him from gaining any significant first-hand knowledge of Heyst's life on the island.<sup>289</sup> These gaps in information give some indication of the distance between Davidson's perspective and that of the narrator.

Besides Davidson, some of the most marginalized individuals in this community serve as the genesis of rumor-versions in *Victory*. Schomberg's wife, who mainly sits behind the bar in her husband's hotel "speaking to no one, and no one speaking to her," is an important indirect source of information in the novel. The reader is told that when Captain Davidson first encounters her, he believes that she is "an It – an automaton," a statement that robs the woman of both her gender and her humanity.<sup>290</sup> When she does speak, he comments, "Did that speak just now? Will it speak again? It

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<sup>287</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 23.

<sup>288</sup> Davidson is, perhaps, not the ideal critical narrator. Conrad's short story "Because of the Dollars" concerns the rumored back-story of Captain Davidson and establishes the origins of Davidson's compassionate nature, a nature that colors his interactions with Heyst and determines the version of Heyst that he helps to circulate in *Victory*.

<sup>289</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 43.

<sup>290</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 33.

was as exciting, for the mere wonder of it, as trying to converse with a mechanism.”<sup>291</sup>

“Mechanism” remains Davidson’s word for Mrs. Schomberg throughout this section until she produces for him the “fact” that a young English girl has run away from the hotel in the company of Heyst. It is only after this revelation that the “mechanism” becomes humanized. Davidson’s description then changes and he states that “Mrs. Schomberg’s immobility gave her an appearance of listening intently” and he realizes that “she might be aware of other facts.”<sup>292</sup> Like Morrison, who is similarly described as both “speechless” and “an automaton” earlier in the novel, Mrs. Schomberg does manage to achieve the status of rumormonger, even if her part in the creation of this rumor is only achieved at second-hand through Davidson. Other characters, most notably Heyst’s Chinese servant, Wang, never participate in the construction of any rumor-version of Heyst. This is a particular oversight since Wang, and his even more marginalized native wife, are the only surviving witnesses who possess information that could revise, complicate, or undermine Davidson’s sketchy version of events. As a woman, Mrs. Schomberg’s place in the South Seas ex-patriot rumor community established by the “we” pronoun of the opening frame is tenuous, but this rumor community appears to be entirely inaccessible to non-westerners, raising interesting questions within the novel about the racialization of rumor as a structure of power. The exclusion of women and natives from the South Seas’ rumor community sits in contrast to the way that Conrad constructs his fictional universe as an “open totality” in which many narrative perspectives occupy the same location in time and space. While Conrad understands the possibility of such radical narrative multiplicity, he is also aware that the “openness” of

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<sup>291</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 33.

<sup>292</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 33-4.

such a system is impacted by power dynamics that create, privilege, and possibly foreclose opportunities for narrative participation to certain individuals.

The final chapter of the novel is located in such a position that one would expect it to function as a close to the frame narrative that was opened by the first chapter of the novel. However, it does not clearly return to the same narrative voice used in the opening frame. Instead, it is constructed as a conversation between Captain Davidson, the most reliable source for the information that is contained in the internal chapters of the novel, and “an Excellency,” a “high official on his tour” who is interested in Davidson’s account because ““the mystery of Samburan’ had caused such a sensation in the Archipelago that even those in the highest spheres were anxious to hear something at first hand.”<sup>293</sup> *Victory* ends just as it begins – in the middle of the creation of a rumor. The point of view of this final chapter is almost exclusively external, focusing on details that could be reported by someone witnessing this conversation, such as dialogue and the descriptions of movements and speech patterns. But there is one moment when the reader is given access to information that cannot be available through observation alone. The narration provides the information: “But [Davidson] refrained from disclosing to the Excellency the real cause which had sharpened Mrs. Schomberg’s wits... Davidson only said that her agitation had impressed him.”<sup>294</sup> Davidson chooses not to disclose to the official what he knows about Schomberg’s obsession with Lena, the girl who becomes Heyst’s companion on Samburan after running away from her employer, an orchestra master staying at Schomberg’s hotel, and the fact that this obsession caused Schomberg to set the events in motion that ultimately destroyed Heyst’s life on the island. This

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<sup>293</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 319.

<sup>294</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 320.



moment of explanation by the narrator opens the possibility that the “I” voice of the first chapter is also the narrative voice of the final chapter and that this information comes from the opening narrator’s knowledge, which is now the reader’s knowledge, of the “mystery of Samburan.” However, this only establishes a possible connection between the “I” narrator of the opening chapter and the third person-observer who narrates the final chapter, leaving the frame of the story open and indeterminate.

The fact that the novel leaves open the possibility of a new narrator in the closing frame fits with the dynamic and open-ended chain of rumor established in the opening frame. In a narrative universe conceived as an “open totality,” there can be multiple rumor-versions of Heyst in circulation going forward, just as there have been multiple rumor-versions of Heyst in circulation in the past. Taken as a whole text, *Victory* is a study of the politics of rumor and the way in which rumor hovers between facilitating the creation and spread of information in an open totality and becoming a tool of foreclosure in a closed totality. It is precisely because rumor – as Conrad understands and explores it – is continually poised to open up its domains of reception that participants within a rumor community who are empowered by it (those included in the category ‘one of us’) will attempt to foreclose the domain of totality. Conrad constructs rumor as a genuinely ambivalent phenomenon in which the premise advocates an open totality but its operation, precisely because of the threat of radical openness, also engenders counter-efforts of insularity and closure. The indeterminacy of establishing who is the narrator at the end of *Victory* speaks to this of indeterminacy in the nature of rumor itself.

Since much of the story that unfolds between the opening and closing chapters is constructed around the evidence gathered by Davidson when he comes ashore on Heyst’s

island and witnesses the final scenes of the drama, the few sentences in the final chapter that relate Davidson's interaction with Heyst are heavy with importance for understanding the narrative structure of the novel as a whole. These crucial moments read:

“I arrived in time to see that poor girl die, as I have told your Excellency,” pursued Davidson. “I won't tell you what a time I had with him afterward. He talked to me. His father seems to have been a crank, and to have upset his head when he was young. He was a queer chap. Practically the last words he said to me, as we came out on the veranda, were:

“Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love – and to put its trust in life!”<sup>295</sup>

Critical accounts of the novel have often focused on Heyst's final statement, which should more accurately be characterized as Davidson's account of Heyst's last statement, to make claims about the meaning of Heyst's story. However, the lines just before this, where Davidson says, “I won't tell you what a time I had with him afterward. He talked to me,” have, perhaps, greater consequences for the novel. If Davidson is the only person still alive, excepting the inaccessible Wang, who has seen the island in general or who witnesses the climactic events in this mystery in particular, what Heyst says to Davidson in these few moments is crucial to the narrative. Presumably, what is said between the two forms the genesis of the island sequences in the version of the “mystery of Samburan” that precedes this final chapter. However, Davidson himself admits that Heyst was not a reliable source of information at this moment. There is a narrative gap between the statement “He talked to me” and the actual story that the novel recreates. It is in this gap that the collective storytelling mechanisms of rumor come into play. Despite the illusion of authority, the ostensibly “omniscient” and “objective” third-person narration of the middle of the text is grounded in the rumor network already established by the

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<sup>295</sup> Conrad, *Victory* 320.

frame chapters.

There is good evidence that Davidson's perspective was of some interest to Conrad during the writing of *Victory*, since alongside the novel he wrote the short story "Because of the Dollars" which explores the nature of Davidson's "fineness" and the way that this trait pulls Davidson into a rescue similar to the one he tries with Heyst at some point in the past. Composed during the period that he was writing *Victory* and published in January of 1914, the story shares with *Victory* a structure built up from the accreted layers of rumor and gossip that circulate within the same South Seas community. It tells the story of Laughing Anne, a former prostitute Davidson once knew, whom he is determined to save from a life of wretchedness now that she has fallen on hard times, and the story of four villains who target Davidson's ship for a robbery "because of the dollars" that Davidson is transporting between ports in the South Seas. In the story, Davidson kills the robbers to save the dollars, but also inadvertently causes the death of Anne at their hands.

Just as in *Victory*, the text of the story hints at several competing versions of this rumor. The narrator of "Because of the Dollars" retells the story of Davidson he heard from his friend, a man named Hollis.<sup>296</sup> In short, this is not the story of Davidson but the story of Hollis's Davidson. His authority for telling Davidson's history derives from personal knowledge since Hollis claims that "[h]e was telling me all about it only a few days ago."<sup>297</sup> However, he admits that he is also relying on the fact that he is a "fellow who had so many adventures and ha[s] known so many queer people in that part of the (more or less) gorgeous East in the days of his youth" and is, therefore, familiar

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<sup>296</sup> Hollis also appears as a character in Conrad's short story "Karain: A Memory" first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1897 and then included in *Tales of Unrest* in 1898.

<sup>297</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Within the Tides* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1925) 171.

with rumors about Davidson in general.<sup>298</sup> The transition from Hollis's retelling of Davidson's story and the narrator's own version is often marked by the difference between Hollis's very critical view of Davidson's wife and the narrator's acknowledgement that general opinion of her character was significantly more benevolent.

The premise of "Because of the Dollars" is that Davidson, a previously happy man, has had his smile spoiled over a sense of guilt in the violent death of Laughing Anne. However, the story hints at the fact that the real cause of his despair is the desertion of his wife and her permanent removal with his child to Australia, an event that is brought about by her hearing a scandalous version of Davidson's involvement with Laughing Anne. A certain Monkey-faced Ritchie, the captain of the ship which brought Mrs. Davidson out from Australia, who was "always a great chatterer [...] got hold of the story rather vaguely" and convinced her of Davidson's unfaithfulness.<sup>299</sup> Mrs. Davidson talks of his "base intrigue with a vile woman, of being made a fool of, of the insult to her dignity."<sup>300</sup> However, Hollis believes that the real reason Davidson left out certain details about the attack when telling the story to his wife was so that she wouldn't pester him about the dangers of his work and fear needlessly while he was away.

Similar to Heyst's story in *Victory*, Davidson's story is a local rumor, originating in the very tiffin-rooms in which the story is being retold later as a rumor. In "Because of the Dollars," these rooms are never explicitly marked as Schomberg's establishment, although they are the same kind of long empty rooms staffed by China boys as those in Schomberg's hotel. A chance encounter in the tiffin-rooms of this hotel

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<sup>298</sup> Conrad, *Within the Tides* 169.

<sup>299</sup> Conrad, *Within the Tides* 209.

<sup>300</sup> Conrad, *Within the Tides* 209.

leads to the nefarious actors forming a plot against Davidson, not unlike the plot against Heyst concocted by Schomberg and Mr. Jones in *Victory*. As this version of the story goes, Davidson tells his mates about his upcoming dollar collecting trip, mentioning “the creek and Bamtz’s name,” geographic markers that allow the eavesdropping criminals to plan their theft since one of the men is “familiar with the locality” and another has a casual, if viciously negative, acquaintance with the low-life named Bamtz.

Of course, there is no proof that these men overheard any conversation or that their encounter with Davidson on the ill-fated river was anything but coincidence. This kind of speculative leap has the mark of a circulating rumor. A plausible reason for these three men to be present at Bamtz’s village when he arrives is needed and this story provides an (almost) plausible explanation. The pieces of the story appear to fill in gaps between more certain pieces knowledge, thereby providing an explanation for something previously unexplainable and forming into a useful narrative for circulation. This story coordinates with the “known facts” of Davidson’s goodness and the known shrewish behavior and ultimate desertion of Davidson’s wife, thereby making it plausible within this community. In the larger universe of Conrad’s fiction, it establishes the trope of tiffin-room nefariousness that plays a role in the rumor version of events that comprise the story of *Victory*.

Ultimately, none of the rumors circulating about Heyst in *Victory* or Davidson in “Because of the Dollars” can be established as the “real truth” with any certainty because each is contradicted by another version of the same story supported by similarly unaccredited and improbable evidence. Rather, these texts are interested in exploring the plural, social dimensions of storytelling inherent in the narrative strategies of rumor. By

the eve of the First World War, Conrad's focus has shifted toward exploring the way that multiple versions of a story can contradict, complicate, deepen, or write over each other by existing palimpsestically in the same narrative space. Yet, neither *Victory* nor "Because of the Dollars" posits that a "true" version of the story is impossible to know. Nothing in either *Victory* or "Because of the Dollars" forecloses the possibility that a party could ultimately obtain an "accurate" account of what occurred.

With the coming of the war, Conrad continues to engage the complex status of "truth" both in his fiction and his non-fiction, continuing to grapple with the problem of uncertainty at the heart of experience, and especially of war experience, but also engaging the consequences of this uncertainty on one's ability to communicate a stable understanding of any event. Because of this enhanced interest in questions of communicability, the texts that Conrad produces during the war are especially concerned with the way an individual can exert a measure of control over the version of his own story that launches into circulation and spreads along the complex conduits of rumor. Such an act of purposeful narrative construction cannot prevent the creation of competing rumors. It can only add an additional layer to a given narrative space. But, the change is significant. Unlike characters such as Kurtz and Heyst, who are the subjects of rumor but never participants in the creation of rumor, the characters in "The Tale" (and in Conrad's wartime short novel *The Shadow-Line*) participate in the formation of their own stories.

### Section III: "The Unlighted Coast" and Conrad's Wartime Propaganda

Before looking directly at Conrad's wartime fiction, it may be helpful to take a look at Conrad's 1917 essay "The Unlighted Coast" since it is in this piece that he most

directly engages the impact of the war on British life.<sup>301</sup> “The Unlighted Coast” is generally considered by scholars to be Conrad’s only significant contribution to wartime propaganda, but both the originating circumstances and structure of this piece complicate its relationship to such a category. In generic terms, “The Unlighted Coast” is most often referred to as an essay; however, a closer look shows that “The Unlighted Coast” does not fit neatly into that genre. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction in “The Unlighted Coast” can be difficult to delineate. Ray Stevens notes that “The Unlighted Coast” is a text that “approaches a short story in format – an imaginative recreation replete with purple prose.”<sup>302</sup> In fact, as Mark Wollaeger has recently emphasized, the “purple prose” in the piece’s opening paragraphs is heavily reminiscent of the opening paragraphs of *Heart of Darkness*. Echoing the images of Roman exploration into the “darkness” of the Thames Valley offered by Marlow, the opening of “The Unlighted Coast” reads, “What I mean is the fact itself, the fact of darkness spread over the land and water of old civilization such as wrapped up early mariners’ landfall on their voyages of exploration.”<sup>303</sup>

“The Unlighted Coast” is organized as two loosely connected parts, an opening section in which Conrad relates his experience aboard a naval vessel as it patrols for

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<sup>301</sup> Conrad also wrote three pieces during the war on the situation in his native Poland that might be considered propaganda; however, in these pieces, the war is the occasion for making arguments about a need for the West to support the rights of Poland instead of the central concern. The first, titled “Poland Revisited” was written after Conrad made it back to England from Poland, where he had been caught by the outbreak of the war. It was published in 1915 after having first been rejected by *The Saturday Evening Post* because Conrad did not describe “actual war experiences.” It was followed by “A Note on the Polish Question” in 1917 and “The Crime of Partition” in 1919. The four pieces were published together in various places and then appeared in Conrad’s volume *Notes on Life and Letters*. Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, J.H. Stape and Andrzej Busza, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 278-283.

<sup>302</sup> Ray Stevens, “Essays and Memoirs: *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), *A Personal Record* (1912), *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921), and *Last Essays* (1926)” in *A Joseph Conrad Companion*, Leonard Orr and Ted Billy, eds. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999) 314.

<sup>303</sup> Wollaeger, “Conrad’s Darkness Revisited” 67-82.

submarines in the North Sea and a second section in which Conrad relates a story that he has previously been told by a young officer about that man's experience on the deck of a ship during an engagement with a German Zeppelin. In the first section, Conrad is writing about his own experience at sea during the war and this act of remembering leads to an acknowledgement of high praise for the "officers and men of the various branches of the [Royal Naval Reserve]." <sup>304</sup> Conrad admits that the work of these men is generally "work without glamour," work in which "no great moments can be expected." <sup>305</sup> Conrad makes the transition to the second half of the piece by following the logic that as such moments of action are rare in naval warfare, the story of the young officer is as "rare as drops of rain in a desert" and, therefore, a story worth singling out for repetition.

"The Unlighted Coast" has generally been situated in relation to Conrad's ten-day voyage aboard the *Ready*, an old-fashioned sailing ship commissioned into the British navy for wartime service in October-November 1916 owing to the fact that the first half of the essay clearly draws on this experience. There are a number of correspondences between Conrad's essay and the account of this trip provided by Captain J.G. Sunderland in his book *At Sea with Joseph Conrad*. <sup>306</sup> The opening paragraphs can be linked clearly to Conrad's trip aboard the *Ready*. Conrad's impression of the "unlighted coast" of England at the beginning of the piece – "the fact of darkness spread over the land and water" – is similar to Captain Sunderland's memory: "During the forenoon I walked the deck with Conrad, and asked him what impressed him most on leaving the night before [...] He replied that the complete blackness of the coast, absolutely lightless as it was,

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<sup>304</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 39.

<sup>305</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 39.

<sup>306</sup> John Georgeson Sunderland, *At Sea With Joseph Conrad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922).



reminded him of some island in the Pacific, uninhabited or peopled by savages, and that this sight brought war home to him more than anything else had done.”<sup>307</sup>

However, there is also evidence in Conrad’s text that the “tale” he places at the center of the essay was told to Conrad in another location and, possibly, at a different time than his voyage aboard the *Ready*. Sunderland points out that on this trip, the only two types of vessels that Conrad sailed on were the *Ready* and a small minesweeper that transported Conrad back to shore at the end of his voyage from which he went directly to a hotel.<sup>308</sup> In “The Unlighted Coast,” Conrad writes that “[o]n the morning I heard the tale” he was at “the pier at one of our ‘bases,’” and that his act of listening took place in “the wardroom,” an apartment fitted out with wood paneling, a fireplace, and a “window.”<sup>309</sup> The word “wardroom,” generally used to indicate the officer’s mess on a ship, is probably used here incorrectly by Conrad to identify a room of similar use on shore. Neither a wooden sailing ship nor a small minesweeper would have had a fireplace and the use of the word “window” seems to indicate a location on shore since a seasoned sailor such as Conrad would have known that such a word is misplaced in describing nautical architecture. The fact that Conrad hears this “tale” under different and unidentified circumstances has not been pointed out previously by scholars, perhaps because it is irrelevant to and does not overturn previous readings of “The Unlighted Coast.” However, it does point to the way inaccuracies become embedded in successive

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<sup>307</sup> Also, Conrad recalls standing on deck with the Captain when the “wireless man” approaches and that they all “went below to decode the messages,” which related to “an enemy submarine seen off the coast not many hours before.” Conrad, *Last Essays* 38. Captain Sunderland recounts the situation in similar language: “One night we received another wireless message to say that German submarines were reported to be in a certain latitude and longitude, but [...] the position was a hundred miles or so from ours [...] So, after a consultation with Conrad, Osborne and Moodie, I decided to stand on, and simply acknowledged receipt of the wireless message.” Sunderland 96.

<sup>308</sup> Sunderland 146.

<sup>309</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 40.

retellings of narratives. The misdirection over where this story originates prevents any post hoc corroboration of its details.

“The Unlighted Coast” is quite different from the pieces of propaganda written by other similarly notable authors of the period. Writers such as H.G.Wells, Ford Madox Hueffer, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett worked under their own names and published with big commercial houses at the request of Wellington House, the emerging government department in charge of British propaganda during the early stages of the war. Conrad never had a formal connection to Wellington House or its successor department, the Ministry of Information. Rather, “The Unlighted Coast” was submitted to the Admiralty, the leadership structure of the British naval services, with whom Conrad had an informal relationship.<sup>310</sup> While Conrad did research for others, “The Unlighted Coast” was the only essay actually produced. The Admiralty chose not to publish the piece during the war and it did not appear in print until 1925.<sup>311</sup> The composition history of “The Unlighted Coast” is somewhat uncertain but Sunderland promulgates the fullest version of its origin in *At Sea with Joseph Conrad*. Writing in 1922, Sunderland claims that, having attained command of the *Ready*, he mentioned this fact to Conrad who then “begged that he might be allowed to accompany me,” at which time the Captain sent the request up the ranks for approval, never knowing exactly how such approval was won. Sunderland does point out that “[t]wo years later in reading Rear Admiral Sir Douglas

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<sup>310</sup> The circumstances surrounding the composition of this essay are unclear. According to John Stape, the Admiralty’s Chief Censor, Captain Sir Douglas Brownrigg, asked Conrad to write a series of three articles. Conrad spent two days aboard the HMS *Brigadier* and visited the HMS *Worcester* in order to do research. See John Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007) 209-212. Zdzislaw Najder outlines Conrad’s naval visits and the fact that he submitted “The Unlighted Coast” to the Admiralty, but he does not acknowledge that the direction for these activities originated with the Admiralty itself. Rather he states matter-of-factly, “Conrad’s immediate contact was with the war at sea and lasted two months” and then goes on to describe Conrad’s various naval excursions. Najder 484-490.

<sup>311</sup> “The Unlighted Coast” was first published in the London *Times* on August 18, 1925. It was also included in the volume *Last Essays* (1926).

Brownrigg's delightful articles published in *The Daily Telegraph*," Brownrigg remembered,

I asked the imperturbable Chief of the Staff (Admiral Sir Henry Oliver) if I might send [Conrad] out. He looked up at me, merely saying, "I don't want to know anything about it," went on writing and smoking his pipe, so I darted out of the room, knowing that I could go ahead.<sup>312</sup>

Zdzisław Najder attributes the Admiralty's disinterest in the essay to the fact that it "contained no trace of propaganda and not even much optimism."<sup>313</sup> The fact that the "The Unlighted Coast" was not solicited directly by a department may account for some of the elements of its structure detailed below.

In "The Unlighted Coast," Conrad engages the topic of information directly, providing a glimpse into Conrad's understanding of the information environment during the war. The emphasis of Conrad's investigation has shifted from a focus on the uncertainty extending from the existence of multiple, competing versions of a narrative, the investigation he carries out in *Victory*, to a focus on the uncertainty inherent in any narrative situation. This change is expressed through Conrad's choice to focus on one specific "tale," recounted by a young officer, in which the officer remains unclear about both the actual events in which he participated and the larger meaning that they have in relation to the progress of the war.

The organizing idea at the beginning of "The Unlighted Coast" is the distinction Conrad draws between "grouped letters war talk," the information conveyed through wireless communication and official reports, and the "war talk we hear on the lips of men

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<sup>312</sup> Sunderland 19.

<sup>313</sup> Najder 490.

(and even the great men) which often seems to talk around the war.”<sup>314</sup> Conrad probably intended to draw a distinction between the “talk” of professional military men as they go about their duties, such as the naval officers for whom he so clearly has respect, and the “talk” of politicians, journalists, and general pontificators who “talk around” the war with inflated rhetoric or imprecise generalizations. However, after setting up this dichotomy, one of the most interesting features of “The Unlighted Coast” is Conrad’s focus on a third, unnamed kind of “war talk” for the majority of the piece, the stories of personal experience in the war conveyed directly by combatants outside of any formal or official channel of communication about the war, exemplified by the “tale” of the young officer, the kind of “war talk” he would have heard in the wardroom when he was off duty or on shore.

Conrad initially appears to privilege the importance of “grouped letters war talk” for the way “inquires, information, orders, and reports” present “words in direct relation to things and facts,” a position not surprising given that he was writing with the Admiralty as his intended audience. The most compelling example of this kind of “war talk” for Conrad comes in the form of the “wireless,” a technology that works in contradiction to the surface silence and absolute darkness that emanates from the “unlighted coast” of England he can see for the deck of the ship, “talking to its watchers at sea; filling the silence with words pregnant with the truth.”<sup>315</sup> The early part of the essay reads like much propaganda of its time, praising the Navy for its “clear-eyed foresight in planning,” calling attention to the “general efficiency” of the individual officers and sailors, and acknowledging that the “work itself” is mostly “a nerve-straining

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<sup>314</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 38.

<sup>315</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 38.

drudgery” during which “no great moments can be expected.”<sup>316</sup> The rest of the essay, by contrast, is devoted to Conrad’s retelling of the “tale” or “personal impression” that he hears directly from the young naval officer. This officer recounts an incident a few months earlier in which a Zeppelin appeared unexpectedly out of the fog over his ship. According to the officer, the incident lasted only a few, chaotic minutes during which the officer ordered his ship’s single gun to fire on the enemy craft, apparently taking the airship by surprise. The Zeppelin made a speedy retreat and, before it was lost from sight, dropped its payload of bombs harmlessly into the ocean. The events in this “tale” take place under a thick layer of fog, which allows the Zeppelin to take the officer “completely unawares,” both circumstances that Conrad will use later in “The Tale.”<sup>317</sup>

In focusing on the story of the “Zeppelin-strafer,” Conrad identifies the inherent uncertainty in the tale, both in his retelling of it, captured in “The Unlighted Coast,” and in the officer’s initial version of the story, a version that does not exist as an independent text. First, while the source of the story is nominally marked in the person of the young officer, Conrad admits, “It’s very likely that my impressions set down truthfully are altogether untrue,” acknowledging that this story has already begun the process of alteration inherent in rumor formation.<sup>318</sup> In the story itself, the young officer admits that the ultimate fate of the Zeppelin is unknown even to official sources. He sees that the Zeppelin was damaged and forced to empty its bombs harmlessly into the ocean. However, all he knows of its journey after it vanishes from view comes from a possible connection to a later report; “There was a report, in the papers, some time afterward. . .

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<sup>316</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 39.

<sup>317</sup> Fog is a common feature in Conrad’s work, figuring in works such as *Nostromo* and *Heart of Darkness* and “The Tale.”

<sup>318</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 40.

Damaged Zeppelin coming to ground in Norway... I sometimes think... ”<sup>319</sup> This half-finished sentence, this nascent rumor, is all that remains of the affair. The young officer is also becoming untethered from the story itself; Conrad states, “when we parted and he closed the door of that room behind him I felt that he was as utterly gone from me as though he had stepped out in the middle of the Pacific.”<sup>320</sup> In a few more tellings, the story will have the “they say” or “I heard” anonymity that is a hallmark of a circulating rumor.

A number of elements in “The Unlighted Coast” connect it with Conrad’s later wartime fiction, and provide specific insight into Conrad’s growing interest in one’s ability to influence which version of a story becomes the dominant narrative. First, it derives from a first-hand account and there are a limited number of people who could contradict this story on the basis of their own, differing personal experience. Secondly, this version is the earliest version of the story to circulate, so it will, at least initially, frame the events.<sup>321</sup> Thirdly, Conrad acknowledges the fundamental reluctance of men who have lived through war to talk about their experiences. When asked by Conrad to tell his story, the young officer “looked down on the ground, glancing at [him] only now and again, and spoke in a low tone with unexpected pauses” delivering it “with the aspect, the bearing of a man who broods over the event in silence.”<sup>322</sup> For Conrad, when the encounter ends, the officer “left me with the impression that [...] his official report would

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<sup>319</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 43. Ellipses in original.

<sup>320</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 40.

<sup>321</sup> The importance of the initial telling has been labeled the “primacy effect” by narrative theorists, defined as “our tendency to accept as valid the information we are initially given, even when that information is contradicted later in the same message.” James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995) 549.

<sup>322</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 41.

have remained, of his own choice, his first and last utterance.”<sup>323</sup> All three of these features are characteristics common to many first-hand accounts of war and ones that Conrad addresses even more directly in “The Tale.”

There is nothing in the surviving historical record to tell us definitively why the Admiralty chose not to publish “The Unlighted Coast,” but one explanation may be that this third kind of “war talk” did not fit into any recognizable category of propaganda.<sup>324</sup> It doesn’t glorify the cause or denigrate the enemy. It doesn’t shore up support in the government or encourage people to endure sacrifices. What it does do is point out the inconclusiveness of war experiences for those who participate in them and the way in which these experiences do not lend themselves to clear understandings. Conrad tells us that the young officer would have preferred to brood over his experience in silence. While he is coaxed to tell his story, he does not help his listeners to a greater sense of certainty about his experiences largely because he does not have a clear understanding himself of exactly what happened. By focusing on this third kind of talk, inconclusive “tales” told by unwilling narrators, “The Unlighted Coast” may not have been helpful to the Admiralty since it does not propagate a clear opinion about any specific aspect of the war. Rather, the essay begins to explore the way information untethered from any identifiable source can be actively constructed into a narrative. By placing such a “tale” in relation to both the technical and military information coming

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<sup>323</sup> Conrad, *Last Essays* 43.

<sup>324</sup> In *Our Conrad*, Peter Mallios offers a counterargument to the idea that “The Unlighted Coast” is not an effective piece of propaganda. He writes that we might understand “‘The Unlighted Coast’ as actually quite effective propaganda, not at the level of jingoism or bald defamation, but rather in the very modernist affect of restraint that organizes its power: the seductive allure of “dark” authenticity combined with the heroic prospect of disciplined conduct and consequence, all situated in a context of attempting to recruit young British men to the cause of *patria* and military service.” Viewed through such a lens, “The Unlighted Coast” could be seen as encouraging those people with a penchant for such “dark” mysteries to go to war as an opportunity to confront them. Peter Mallios, *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010) 145.

over the wireless and the empty rhetoric of political speech, Conrad acknowledges that such information can be just as illuminating (and perhaps even more so) given the constraints of the information environment created by the war.<sup>325</sup>

Conrad wrote only a few pieces of fiction during the war, so it is significant that both “The Tale” and *The Shadow-Line* address the problem of uncertainty that Conrad raises in “The Unlighted Coast.” In both of these works of fiction, Conrad revisits a location already occupied by another Conradian narrative. In *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad returns to the port of Bangkok, the setting for his earlier story “Falk” and probably for the Patna inquiry in *Lord Jim*, and also returns to one of his favorite narrative situations, an officer’s first command, a situation that supplies the plot for so much of Conrad’s fiction. In “The Tale,” Conrad returns to the still, shadowy drawing room that is the location for the end of *Heart of Darkness* and, once again, follows an attempt at conversation between a man and a woman. A comparison of these wartime texts with their similar predecessors, particularly the way in which Conrad engages more directly with problems of uncertainty and ambiguity in the later texts, helps to illustrate the changing nature of Conrad’s interest in how narratives are constructed as a result of changes to the information environment during war.

#### Section IV: “The Tale” and *Heart of Darkness*

*Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Conrad’s later wartime short story “The Tale” (1917) have a number of interesting similarities that connect them to each other and make

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<sup>325</sup> I agree with Mark Wollaeger, when he argues in his essay “Conrad’s Darkness Revisited” that “for Conrad, focusing on impressions in “The Unlighted Coast” ultimately meant turning toward the medium of his message – toward the place of the written word in wartime – and toward competing media that were transforming the status of his own.” However, I break from Wollaeger when he claims, “But, just as Marlow is ultimately more interesting than Kurtz, so too the essay’s frame is more interesting than the “Zeppelin-strafer.” Wollaeger, “Conrad’s Darkness Revisited” 77.



it a useful exercise to read them together. The two texts don't immediately appear closely related. However, by focusing on the last scene of *Heart of Darkness*, the scene in which Marlow goes to see Kurtz's Intended to give her the story of Kurtz's fate, the seemingly divergent texts are brought into contact. "The Tale" can be read as an alternative version of the ending of *Heart of Darkness*, a reconceptualization of Marlow's encounter with the Intended. In both texts, the narrative situation ultimately turns on a man and a woman engaged in conversation. Similarities help to establish a comparable mood within these texts but it is the differences that exist between these similar narrative moments that highlight the change in Conrad's use of rumor – and highlight how the war served as an accelerating agent of this change. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow frames his effort at communication in terms of an attempt, and then a subsequent failure, to convey a reliable version of Kurtz's life and death to the Intended. "The Tale," by contrast, represents a conscious and collaborative effort by the two conversational participants to determine which version of the story is most strategically useful, the version that these two both desire to actively disseminate in the fictional universe beyond the text.<sup>326</sup>

Recalling again Brian McHale's distinction between modernism and postmodernism, it is possible to understand *Heart of Darkness* as a modernist text in the McHalian sense that the text is "organized in terms of an epistemological dominant," in which a text considers issues of accessibility and reliability.<sup>327</sup> In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Conrad offers multiple, often contradictory, versions of its main subject, Mr.

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<sup>326</sup> I am using the word strategic here in the sense that McHale uses it, referring to "constructions," or "versions of reality," that "are strategic in nature, that is, designed with particular purposes in view." McHale 2.

<sup>327</sup> McHale 146. Similarly, in his chapter titled "*Heart of Darkness*: language and truth" in *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness*, Jeremy Hawthorn points out, "What we believe of what we have read, and how we believe it, are questions that Conrad raises time and again for the reader, and not just in *Heart of Darkness*." Hawthorn 15.

Kurtz. But, the story is constructed to privilege the version of Mr. Kurtz constructed by Marlow in the present tense of the frame narrative to his listeners aboard the *Nellie* (and thereby for the external readers of *Heart of Darkness*). Other versions of Kurtz's story exist within Marlow's storytelling, most notably in the various rumors of Kurtz that are circulating in Africa before Marlow's arrival. In fact, in the process of telling his listeners one version of the story, Marlow admits that he has circulated different versions of Kurtz's story at different points in the past. Upon his return to Europe from Africa, he actively chooses among these contradictory versions, releasing some information and holding back other information in his interaction with officials of the trading company, with Kurtz's family, and, most famously, with Kurtz's Intended. While Marlow propagates different versions, the category of "truthfulness" remains a category valued by Marlow – he declares in *Heart of Darkness*, "I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me."<sup>328</sup> In *Heart of Darkness*, "truth," at least in some form, is still a category of consideration in the text.<sup>329</sup>

Readers familiar with both *Heart of Darkness* and "The Tale" will be struck immediately by a number of similarities between the two texts, especially if one focuses specifically on the final scene of *Heart of Darkness* – the one in which Marlow converses

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<sup>328</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 42. Kurtz's phrase – "The horror! The horror!" – represents a dark truth for Marlow and reinforces his esteem for the dying man. Also, the fact that Marlow lingers on his lie to the Intended at the end of *Heart of Darkness* indicates that the act of lying is something sufficiently unusual that it is worth remembering.

<sup>329</sup> Because *Heart of Darkness* is focalized through Marlow's perspective, it is not structured as a cooperative, social, or "dialogic" text. The text as a whole is a coercive monologue by Marlow, even as it admits threats to Marlow's perspective and externalities to his viewpoint. See Aaron Fogel's idea of "a speech forcer" in *Coercion to Speak* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

with Kurtz's fiancée upon his return to Europe.<sup>330</sup> The basic conversational situation is similar in both texts: one man and one woman conversing alone in a dark, shadowy drawing room just as dusk starts to fall. Marlow describes the room in *Heart of Darkness*: "The dusk was falling. I had to wait in a lofty drawing-room with three long windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped columns."<sup>331</sup> In "The Tale," the frame narrator also describes a room marked by the shadows of dusk: "Outside the large single window the crepuscular light was dying out slowly in a great square gleam without colour, framed rigidly in the gathering shades of the room."<sup>332</sup> The women in these two texts are also described in similar terms, first as a shadowy presence dressed all in black and then as a presence that can generate an internal light in the darkness. In *Heart of Darkness*, when Marlow first sees the Intended, "[s]he came forward all in black with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk."<sup>333</sup> However, as the conversation progresses, Marlow remarks on the way an internal light seems to radiate from her: "But with every word spoken the room was growing darker and only her forehead smooth and white remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love."<sup>334</sup> In "The Tale," the narrator relates that at first "the deep, shadowy couch [held] the shadowy suggestion of a reclining woman" and, in the darkness, the man can

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<sup>330</sup> Celia Kingsbury draws an additional connection between the two texts. She recognizes that the frame of *Heart of Darkness* "links the civilized world with the 'uncivilized,' in the form of drawing together "those at home and those who physically seek to extend the boundaries of empire." Similarly, "The Tale" links "the world of the Great War with the home front," bringing the war "into the parlor" and "even into the boudoir" through the narrator's relationship to the female narratee. Celia Malone Kingsbury, "Infinites of Absolution': Reason, Rumor, and Duty in Joseph Conrad's 'The Tale'" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 44:3 (1998) 720.

<sup>331</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 91.

<sup>332</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1926) 59.

<sup>333</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 91.

<sup>334</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 92.

see “only the faint oval of her upturned face.”<sup>335</sup> However, by the end of the text, after the woman has listened to the man’s tale, “her eyes put two gleams in the deep shadow of the room.”<sup>336</sup> Such similarities may seem incidental, but each helps to establish a comparable mood within these texts, serving as a helpful background for more consequential similarities in theme.

One important commonality between *Heart of Darkness* and “The Tale” is the importance Conrad attaches to the inherent uncertainty that lies at the heart of narrative construction. In both texts, Conrad sets up a contrast between the “simple” tales told by sailors, tales in which there is a clear relationship between what happened and what is “said” to have happened, and more complex narratives in which this relationship cannot be so easily established. Returning to Jeremy Hawthorn’s distinction between language that is “eloquent,” a term that is often used by Conrad as “almost an interchangeable term for ‘skilful lying,’” exemplified in *Heart of Darkness* by the misleading report that Kurtz writes to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, and language that is linked to real “work” and, therefore, possesses “a potentiality for honest reportage,” exemplified by a book Marlow finds in the hut of the harlequin titled *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, Hawthorn concludes that “much of Conrad’s fiction and non-fiction is devoted to an exploration of this janus-faced character of words.”<sup>337</sup> In one of the most often parsed passages of *Heart of Darkness*, the frame narrator says,

“The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like

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<sup>335</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 59.

<sup>336</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 80-1.

<sup>337</sup> Hawthorn 9-10.

a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.”<sup>338</sup>

Different from other “seamen,” Marlow looks for meaning on the outside of the “kernel,” in the information and effects that “envelop” the tale. Conrad opposes this to the “direct simplicity” of the “yarns of seamen,” in which the meaning is contained within the tale itself. The distinction of inside and outside is, in part, the distinction between meaning that is derived from the tale itself and meaning that is derived from the construction of the tale – how it is organized, how it is framed.<sup>339</sup> In making this distinction, Conrad is establishing Marlow as someone who recognizes the way that the component parts of a story, those that make up the majority of a seaman’s “yarns,” can be constructed, rearranged, and reinterpreted to render different meanings.

In “The Tale,” Conrad moves this distinction between simple yarns and “enveloping” tales to the level of metanarrative. The story’s title draws self-conscious attention to the act of narrative construction by elevating a general engagement with the process of “telling tales” over the thematic content of any of the particular tales contained in the text. Within the text, the female protagonist, known only as “the woman,” remembers the pre-war stories told by her conversant, known only as “the man,” as having the “direct simplicity” that the frame narrator references in *Heart of Darkness*. She says, “You used to tell – your – your simple and – and professional – tales very well at one time.”<sup>340</sup> However, the war has made it impossible for the man to continue this sort of simple storytelling, refusing her request with the statement, “But now, you see, the war

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<sup>338</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 20.

<sup>339</sup> J. Hillis Miller makes a similar argument about the “parabolic” nature of *Heart of Darkness*. See J. Hillis Miller, “*Heart of Darkness* Revisited” in *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties*, Ross C. Murfin, ed., (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985) 31-50.

<sup>340</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 60.

is going on.”<sup>341</sup> Like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, the man in “The Tale” searches for meaning “outside the kernel.” However, by the time Conrad writes “The Tale,” the manner in which the narrative is constructed becomes a much more central concern. In the absence of any meaningful hope of establishing a true version of a story, the choices made during the process of storytelling that ultimately determine what version is available for circulation.

Both *Heart of Darkness* and “The Tale” directly address the problem of communication – the difficulty of how to successfully share information with another person. Before turning to the failure of communication in final scene of *Heart of Darkness*, it is useful to look just prior to this interview and examine Marlow’s actions once he becomes sole possessor of crucial information about Kurtz. With this information, he is able to control which narratives about Kurtz are available for circulation within the text. Upon his return to Europe, Marlow has in his possession both physical evidence of Kurtz, in the form “documents” placed in his care by the dying man, and cognitive information, in the form of Kurtz’s last words. On various occasions, Marlow holds back crucial information about Kurtz through which others might gain a better understanding of the man’s life or his death. Of course, Marlow does present as complete the story he tells to his listeners aboard the *Nellie*, but these listeners have no way to challenge Marlow’s version and, more importantly, no motivation to become active participants in shaping the resulting story.

Within the text’s internal narrative, the importance of Marlow’s position as possessor of information does not go unnoticed in the text. While still in Africa, Marlow has “two rows with the Manager” over his possession of information about Kurtz. In

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<sup>341</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 60.

Europe, he is visited by an emissary of the Company arguing that he should turn over all of Kurtz's papers since they "had the right to every bit of information about its territories."<sup>342</sup> Marlow rebuffs this request, arguing, "Mr. Kurtz's knowledge however extensive did not bear upon the problems of commerce or administration," a statement that contradicts the view of the Manager that "Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company...[t]he district is closed to us for a time."<sup>343</sup> In the end, Marlow only surrenders to the Company Kurtz's report "on the 'Suppression of Savage Customs' with the postscriptum torn off."<sup>344</sup> Since the postscriptum, "Exterminate all the brutes," undermines the arguments of the report itself and is the only piece of information that offers a clue to Kurtz's final state of mind, Marlow effectively denies the Company all the new information in his possession. When Kurtz's "cousin" comes around asking for information, Marlow allows him to take only "some family letters and memoranda without importance."<sup>345</sup> A journalist, the final supplicant to Marlow, is only offered the aforementioned "Report," never specified as a copy or as a separate extant version, but one must assume that, if necessary, Marlow has again removed the enlightening postscript. Since Marlow admits that he has been a careful manager of information about Kurtz in the past, his listeners (and therefore the readers of *Heart of Darkness*) should continue to be wary of Marlow's "*Nellie*" version of the story.

Turning to the final scene of *Heart of Darkness*, the scene between Marlow and Kurtz's Intended, it is important to recognize that this interchange is marked by a profound lack of communication. While scholarship on this scene usually focuses on

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<sup>342</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 89.

<sup>343</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 78.

<sup>344</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 89.

<sup>345</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 89.

Marlow's failure to communicate truthfully to the Intended by his choice to conceal Kurtz's actual final words in favor of the lie that Kurtz died whispering her name, it is also possible to see the manner in which the Intended controls the scene, cutting off Marlow's opportunities to contribute to the conversation and, therefore maintaining the version of events that she has chosen to support as the dominant narrative.<sup>346</sup> Between the two personalities present, Marlow does not dominate the interaction. In retelling the story to the audience aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow recalls that at the beginning of the interview he had "a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human to behold."<sup>347</sup> In contrast, Marlow remembers the Intended as a strong personality, describing her eyes "guileless, profound, confident, and trustful" and her movement as calm and deliberate.

In their conversation, the Intended lays out the story she has already decided on without an attempt at hearing or accommodating the information that Marlow brings.

Consider the following extended piece of conversation:

"You knew him well," she murmured after a moment of mourning silence.

"Intimacy grows quickly out there," I said. "I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another."

"And you admired him!" she said. "It was impossible to know him and not to admire him Was it?"

"He was a remarkable man," I said unsteadily. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze that seemed to watch for more words on my lips I went on, "It was impossible not to..."

"Love him," she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness.

"How! How true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best."

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<sup>346</sup> Mark Wollaeger argues this dominant position: "Like British journalists who preemptively censored themselves during World War I, Marlow helps keep the Intended safely cocooned in propaganda by suppressing information. He lies about Kurtz's last words to give her the romantic ending life withheld, and he tears off the savage postscript to Kurtz's report on the suppression of savage customs – 'Exterminate the brutes!' – to prevent the degradation of Kurtz's original intentions from seeing the light of day. In many ways, Marlow is Conrad's agent for debunking the myths that Kurtz's Intended and Marlow's aunt drink in." Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda* 28.

<sup>347</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 92.



“You knew him best,” I repeated. And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker and only her forehead smooth and white remained illuminated by the unextinguishable light of belief and love.<sup>348</sup>

Over the course of this conversation Marlow speaks “unsteadily” and is silenced “into an appalled dumbness,” finally repeating the statement, “You knew him best,” that is suggested for him by the Intended. In contrast, the Intended speaks in declarations, such as “And you admired him!” When Marlow pauses to consider the wording of his statement beginning, “It was impossible not to...”, the Intended takes the opportunity to finish the sentence, “[I]love him” without regard to Marlow’s actual intended meaning. By the end of the conversation, Marlow himself is partially convinced of the possibility that her version of events is correct, stating in response to her claim to have known him best, “And perhaps she did.” As the conversation continues, the Intended is left as the dominating conversational presence. Ultimately, Marlow’s choice to bring up the fact that he knows the final words spoken by Kurtz seems almost accidental instead of a main reason for his visit. Speaking shakily, he says, “I heard his very last words...” before admitting that this revelation to the Intended caused him to stop “in a fright.”<sup>349</sup> It is under the pressure of the Intended’s insistent declaration, “Don’t you understand I loved him – I loved him – I loved him,” that Marlow continues speaking, telling the lie: “The last word he pronounced was – your name.”<sup>350</sup> In giving an explanation for his deceit, Marlow states, “But I couldn’t. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark altogether...”<sup>351</sup> This statement implies that Marlow tells the lie to protect the Intended. However, a careful look at the conversation shows that the Intended was controlling the

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<sup>348</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 92.

<sup>349</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 94.

<sup>350</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 94.

<sup>351</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 94.

direction of this interview and Marlow's choice to withhold information might just as easily be ascribed to the Intended's determination to maintain the narrative already operating in her head.

In *Heart of Darkness* the reader knows Marlow's version of Kurtz's life and of his death, as well as several divergent and conflicting versions of this story. In addition to the version being told by Marlow to his audience aboard the *Nellie*, there is the version circulated by the Company officials, the version circulated by the ultimate recipients of Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, and the version circulated by the Intended. Each of these competing versions exists as a counternarrative, often an "obscured" counternarrative, to version that Marlow is presenting at length to his audience (and therefore to the reader). In an effort to think through problems of truthfulness in *Heart of Darkness*, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan posits that the text is a "narrative of failure, the belated testimony of a witness haunted by his own failure to testify. The truth toward which Marlow's narrative inches its way is the truth of his own lie."<sup>352</sup> Therefore, the problem for Marlow in the text "is not his lack of knowledge, but his suppression of knowledge, his failure to respond and to testify to what he has known all along."<sup>353</sup> In this way, *Heart of Darkness* is not about establishing some kind of external, *a priori* true version of the narrative of Kurtz, but it is invested in Marlow's process of articulating the contours of the "suppressed knowledge" that Marlow knows but has not communicated. In telling his story aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow acknowledges a number of his previous acts of suppression. Years before Marlow chose to withhold what he knew of Kurtz from the Company and from Kurtz's relatives.

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<sup>352</sup> Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, "Some Millennial Footnotes on Heart of Darkness" in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 57.

<sup>353</sup> Erdinast-Vulcan 57.

Marlow's attempt to communicate what he knew about Kurtz to the Intended ends in him telling a lie. But, Marlow never abandons the ethical ideal of truth and the frame narration of *Heart of Darkness* establishes Marlow's effort to place a corrected counternarrative into circulation. While *Heart of Darkness* may be fundamentally concerned with difficulties of knowing, it does not abandon its effort to produce an epistemologically stable truth.

In contrast to *Heart of Darkness*, the issue at the heart of "The Tale" is, to use McHale's vocabulary again, an incipient crisis of ontology.<sup>354</sup> In turning from an interest in multiple perspectives and reiterations of a given narrative to an interest in constructing a narrative that will be strategically effective – and even strategically affecting the world – when circulated as a rumor, "The Tale" implicitly questions the line between fiction and reality.<sup>355</sup> The story's title, "The Tale," draws self-conscious attention to the act of narrative construction at the heart of Conrad's story by elevating a general engagement with storytelling over any specific reference to the thematic content of the text.<sup>356</sup> Despite the singular grammar and definite article of the title, the text of "The Tale" is composed

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<sup>354</sup> In his chapter titled " 'The Tale': Epistemological Uncertainty Dramatized through Three Concentric Tales" in *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Jakob Lothe makes a similar argument, saying, "one of the main questions asked by 'The Tale' is the very general one of whether knowledge can be related to some class of truth, or indeed whether knowledge is possible at all." However, Lothe chooses not to push on the significance of this unknowability. He concludes "by regarding 'The Tale' as an interesting late example in the Conrad canon of a modernist text offering conflicting interpretive possibilities. 'The Tale' is a short story where the narrative generates a thematic which remains tantalizingly unresolved." Jacob Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 84-86.

<sup>355</sup> McHale glosses the idea of a strategic narrative: "we do not claim that our story is 'true,' a faithful representation of things as we find them 'out there' in the world [...] but only that our story is interesting to our audience and strategically useful." McHale 25.

<sup>356</sup> William Bonney claims that the "tale" referred to in the title is the tale narrated by the commanding officer that takes up the majority of the texts pages. Jakob Lothe disagrees with Bonney but maintains the idea that the title refers to the commanding officer's tale. He argues, "we cannot say, as William W. Bonney does in a stimulating discussion of this short story, that its title is 'misleading.' Conrad is of course perfectly justified in using the commander's tale as the short story title; moreover, it economically enhances the commander's centrality, as the other tales of the text are inseparable from the one he relates." However, the general nature of the title seems rather to push the meaning toward a consideration of "tales" as a category and the idea that none of the many layers of narrative in this text should be elevated above the others. Lothe 73.

of three separate layers of narrative. The discrepancy between the story's title and its structure highlights the fact that, as a whole, the text is a meditation on the genre of the tale and the accompanying characteristics of tale-telling. The narrative that is constructed about this event (the details of which I will take up in a moment) represents a conscious effort by both the conversants to collectively construct a version of the story they will both promulgate as "true" – in other words, what is the story they will tell two or five or twenty years in the future aboard their own metaphorical *Nellie*. The text's multiple layers of storytelling are attempts by the participants to share information with each other while at the same time suturing up gaps and erasing information that is troubling to the version that they ultimately plan to disseminate. The emphasis here is not on representative fidelity to the concrete contours of history or the world so much as the constructability of the world through the give and take of narrative participants, however they may be unstably or mutably grounded in the world over time.

As in *Heart of Darkness*, "The Tale" concerns a conversation carried out between a man and a woman who bring disparate experiences and disparate perspectives to the conversation. At the beginning of "The Tale," the man and the woman do not have access to a shared narrative about a specific set of events. However, through a process of collective storytelling, the two are able to construct a version of this "tale" that is stable enough to serve as both a foundation for common understanding and a platform for future repetition. Over the course of Conrad's story, the man and the woman collectively assemble the pieces of a "tale" connected to the man's recent experiences at sea during wartime. The man contributes a much larger portion of the conversation, with the woman often present only as a listener. However, the woman's slim interjections and suggestions

provide the impetus for him to begin telling his story, significantly impact the shape of that story, and, at times, prevent him from abandoning the act of storytelling all together. Moreover, the recipients of rumor count nearly as much as speakers in determining what makes a rumor fit for circulation.

Given the complicated structure of this text, it is useful to start with a detailed description of each of the three “tales” contained within it.<sup>357</sup> The first layer of narrative is presented from the perspective of an “authorial narrator,” who introduces the story’s two conversational participants, known only as the “man” and the “woman,” and establishes the situation and the setting for the framing events.<sup>358</sup> The authorial narrative occurs “as the war is going on” and the pair is together again after an absence, presumably when the man is home on leave from his service on a British naval vessel. The woman asks the man to tell her a “tale” and much of this first narrative layer details the negotiation that takes place between the man and the woman over the terms of his possible storytelling. Since the man feels he is no longer able to tell the kind of “simple” and “professional” story the woman remembers him telling before the war, the woman suggests he set his story in “another – some other – world.”<sup>359</sup> The man goes to great lengths to explain that this fictional world is “[I]ike the earth” in many ways, containing “seas and continents and islands” and with its own war “being carried on over

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<sup>357</sup> William Bonney proposes a fourth narrative in “The Tale” consisting of the unspoken “grave murmur in the depth of his very own self, telling another tale” that the Commanding Officer hears internally and upon which he decides to act. Since this “grave murmur” is not a version of the tale communicated within the text and, therefore, launched into circulation, I will not concern myself with it in this argument. William W. Bonney, *Thorns and Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad’s Fiction* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>358</sup> Jacob Lothe first uses this term to describe the framing narrative in his chapter titled “‘The Tale’: Epistemological Uncertainty Dramatized through Three Concentric Tales” in *Conrad’s Narrative Method*.

<sup>359</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 61.

the land, over the water, under the water, up in the air, and even under the ground.”<sup>360</sup>

Since this first layer of narrative is the one in which a story is being collectively agreed upon, it is the layer that has the most interesting relationship to rumor. In this layer, terms of interconversational agreement are privileged over terms of referent to materiality.

The second layer of narrative is the story that the man tells, his “tale” about the experiences of a commanding officer serving aboard a warship. The text makes it clear that this “commanding officer” is a stand in for the man himself and that he is telling the woman the story of his own experience through this thinly-veiled fiction. The “commanding officer’s” narrative is a plot-driven tale that takes up the majority of the short story’s pages. In the narrative, the commanding officer comes upon an unidentifiable object floating in the ocean. Primed to suspect that neutral ships have been refueling enemy vessels in the vicinity, the object arouses the commanding officer’s suspicions. A short time later, the commanding officer’s ship comes upon a neutral vessel in a fog-bound cove claiming to be in the area due to a mechanical breakdown that has just recently been resolved. The commanding officer finds no hard evidence of treachery among the crew or with the ship’s captain, called only the “Northman,” but he orders the ship to leave the safety of the cove, giving them a heading that, if followed, will lead them onto a ledge of rocks. According to the commanding officer’s logic, if the Northman was lying about his innocence he will know the correct heading and make it to open sea, thereby establishing his guilt. When the Northman follows the directions given by the commanding officer, the ship hits the rock ledge and sinks with all hands lost.

The third layer of narrative is the “tale” told by the Northman as he tries to convince the Commanding Officer that his presence in hostile waters is the result of an

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<sup>360</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 62.

innocent mechanical breakdown instead of evidence that he was in the area giving aid to the enemy. The Northman's narrative enters the text through the perspective the commanding officer and the Northman never appears as a narrator himself. Jakob Lothe contends, "Although not given in full, this story qualifies as a narrative in its own right: it describes, and explains in order to justify, the neutral ship's movements and activities, stating its professional purpose, cargo, and destination."<sup>361</sup> The second and third layers of narrative, the commanding officer's tale and the Northman's tale, comprise the raw material available to the man and the woman as they create their joint narrative.

On a number of levels, uncertainty is an important theme that stretches across all three narrative layers within the story. In the "authorial" narrative, one of the great unknowns is whether or not the story begins with a matrimonial engagement or a final rejection – in the language of *Heart of Darkness* – a question of whether or not the woman has just now become this man's Intended. The text opens with a whispered conversation, but the reader is not privy to the details. Neither the man's "whispering" nor the "answering murmurs" of the woman are stated directly. The authorial narrator states, "Had he not just said to her everything worth saying in the world – and not for the first time!", implying that this is not the first time that he has made a proposal of marriage.<sup>362</sup> However, the story keeps open the question of whether or not the woman's answer has changed. In response to the man's pleas, "passionately interrupted and passionately renewed," this unheard conversation is abandoned when "[a]t last no answering murmur came."<sup>363</sup> While it seems most likely that the man stops asking the question after repeated rejections, it is also possible that the woman stops objecting and,

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<sup>361</sup> Lothe 80.

<sup>362</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 60.

<sup>363</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 59.

therefore, offers her silent assent. This uncertainty is reinforced later in the story when the man brings up the topic of love. He dismisses the topic quickly, saying, “we won’t talk of that.”<sup>364</sup> The woman’s response is related by the narrator: “‘No. We won’t,’ she said, in a neutral tone which concealed perfectly her relief – or her disappointment.” Once again, the relationship between the two is uncertain and the woman’s place on the spectrum between “relief” and “disappointment” is never firmly established. It is less important that the reader know the current status of this relationship than for the story to establish that certainty itself is the most contested ground in the text.

The authorial narrative quickly turns from this unheard conversation to one that is fully accessible to the reader, the conversation between the man and the woman that has so many overlapping features with the one at the end of *Heart of Darkness*. To start the conversation, the woman suggests, “Why not tell me a tale?”<sup>365</sup> The remainder of the conversation contains a negotiation between the man and the woman to establish the parameters of story that the man will tell. In a passage already partially quoted above, she says,

You used to tell – your – your – your simple – and professional – tales very well at one time. Or well enough to interest me. You had a – a sort of art – in the days – the days before the war.<sup>366</sup>

Instead of the confident speech of Kurtz’s Intended, the woman’s speech is faltering, described by the narrator as “a little unsteady with a sort of fluttering intonation which made [the man] think suddenly of a butterfly’s flight.”<sup>367</sup> The broken sentence structure and the use of the dash as the dominant mark of punctuation underline her loss of

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<sup>364</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 62.

<sup>365</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 60.

<sup>366</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 60.

<sup>367</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 60.



confidence in the man's ability to tell a story, especially one with which she can make a connection – or to use her term – in which she can generate a productive level of “interest.” When he hesitates, showing the same uncertainty in his ability to generate narrative now that “the war is going on,” it is the woman who nudges the conversation forward with the suggestion that he tell a story “not of this world.” Through a series of questions and leading statements by the woman, the pair collectively carves out a fictional space – separate from but similar to the real world – in which the man's ability to tell a story is reestablished. This change raises interesting questions about the difference in narrative models and in the relationship between information and audience given the advent of war. At some level, “The Tale” is a meta-narrative of the attempt to translate “war” experience to an audience “back home.” In this way, the story is about an “informational” problem during the war itself and it anticipates a major anxiety of literature in the post-war period.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> The idea of a divide between the experiences of soldiers and the experiences of people who live through the war on the home front is a major issue for postwar literature. For example, Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* all circulate around this problem. The incommunicability of war experience to non-combatants is the foundation of Paul Fussell's influential formulation of First World War literature in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. However, “The Tale” is an interesting wartime example of that runs counter to the idea that soldiers cannot find the means of connecting with noncombatants. Historiographers of the First World War have noted that the historical narrative of the war developed over time, starting with military and diplomatic histories, followed by soldier's first hand accounts, and only many years later growing to include social and cultural histories that take an interest in non-combatants and life on the home front. Coming out of recent work on this third socio-cultural phase of historical narrative, French historiographers of the First World War, Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker coin the term “war culture,” to describe “the mental furniture men and women draw on to make sense of their world at war.” Understanding this “war culture” is important to understanding the experience of the war itself since it “bypasse[s] the earlier and unsatisfactory divide between the history of the front and the history of the home front” and provides “a conduit between the men in uniform and the people whose lives they were ostensibly trying to defend.” Generally, these conduits are built decades later when excluded voices are readmitted into the conversation and finally seen as a valuable component of the history of the war. What is remarkable about “The Tale” is that Conrad recognizes the existence of an inclusive “war culture” in which combatants and non-combatants are all immersed and must all navigate during the war years themselves. For a clear historiography of the First World War see Jay Winter and Antoine Proust, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 163-4.

In a number of ways, the text reinforces the possibility of storytelling as a collaboration by maintaining narrative interpenetration between the authorial narrative and the commanding officer's narrative. By doing so, the man can confess his mistakes and lay out the circumstances under which these mistakes were committed in the "real" world of the authorial narrative but gain access the revisionary properties of fiction available in the commanding officer's tale. This interpenetration is achieved in a number of ways. First, the transition between the authorial narrative and the commanding officer's narrative is not an abrupt switch, but rather a gradual shift back and forth between the two narratives, a situation created by the woman's constant, if gentle, interruptions of the man's storytelling. This creates a continuing conversation rather than a fixed relationship of "storyteller" and "listener." Unlike the disruptive interruptions of Kurtz's Intended in *Heart of Darkness*, the woman in "The Tale" interrupts the man's story primarily to offer encouragement, using such statements as "I can imagine" and "How well I can understand that in him."<sup>369</sup> Secondly, within the commanding officer's narrative, there are moments when the man, as narrator, lets the distinction blur between the real world and the "other world" of his story. He mistakenly uses real-world references, such as identifying cargo as headed to an "English port" or calling a character an "Englishman," which mark the man's supposedly fictional tale as a thinly disguised version of his own experiences at sea during the present war. On occasion, the woman interrupts his story to gently remind him of the veil of fiction separating his "tale" and his own experience. When the man gives an enthusiastic description of the naval vessel, she adds, "That was the opinion of the commanding officer?"<sup>370</sup> In her article " 'The Tale'

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<sup>369</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 63 and 67.

<sup>370</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 63.

and the Ethics of Interpretation,” Vivienne Rundle points out that the woman’s request for a “story” indicates her desire for communication but Rundle sees her subsequent behavior as “inattentive or uncommitted listening” that leads to “the end of all storytelling, the end of all listening, and the end of all involvement for the ‘disengaged’ narratee.”<sup>371</sup> However, the woman is far from a passive recipient of the man’s storytelling. Without her constant refocusing, it seems unlikely that he would be able to maintain the separation between the real world and the fictional world that makes sharing his experience possible.

Near the end of “The Tale,” the text abandons the commanding officer’s narrative and returns to the authorial narrative – to the conversation between the man and the woman. There are narrative elements that emerge in the first part of the authorial narrative that reemerge in the second part, allowing the text to reveal changes in the narrative situation. At the beginning of “The Tale,” during the first part of the conversation between the man and the woman, the man describes what it is like to see a comrade’s ship blown up by an unseen enemy lurking beneath the water, going down “almost before you know what has happened to her,” a situation that would have been new to a sailor serving at the dawn of the age of submarine warfare and one that would be difficult for a non-combatant to fully understand.<sup>372</sup> He further emphasizes that for sailors, a reality of warfare is that “some day you will die from something you have not seen.”<sup>373</sup> He contrasts the unpredictability experienced by those fighting in the war aboard naval vessels to the relatively higher level of certainty he believes available to

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<sup>371</sup> Vivienne Rundle, “‘The Tale’ and the Ethics of Interpretation” in *The Conradian* 17:1 (Autumn 1992) 23.

<sup>372</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 67.

<sup>373</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 67.

soldiers who are fighting the war on land. The man's ruminations on this topic are given at length:

One envies the soldiers at the end of the day, wiping sweat and blood from their faces, counting the dead fallen to their hands, looking at the devastated fields, the torn earth that seems to suffer and bleed with them. One does, really. The final brutality of it – the taste of primitive passion – the ferocious frankness of the blow struck with one's hand – the direct call and the straight response. Well the sea gave you nothing of that, and seemed to pretend that there was nothing the matter with the world.<sup>374</sup>

From this speech, the woman is able to identify the most important ideas expressed by the man, saying, "Oh, yes. Sincerity – frankness – passion – three words in your gospel."<sup>375</sup>

However, the man is aggravated by the fact that these words do not represent for the woman a shared understanding, asking the question, "Isn't it ours - believed in common?"<sup>376</sup> While he asks the question "anxiously," he goes on "without expecting an answer," quickly refocusing the narrative and distancing himself from his previous speech by stating, "Such were the feelings of the commanding officer."<sup>377</sup> At this early point in their conversation, they are unable to occupy a common ground of meaning, although this is clearly the goal of their project.

From early in the opening authorial narrative, the text establishes that the meaning of words, especially words central to the war effort, have become unstable. When the woman mentions that she has taken "five days' leave from – [her] duties," the pair has a disagreement over the meaning of the word "duty" under the changed conditions of wartime life. The woman says that she finds it "horrible sometimes."<sup>378</sup> The man responds by stressing that the word must be understood with the broadest of

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<sup>374</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 64.

<sup>375</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 64.

<sup>376</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 64.

<sup>377</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 64.

<sup>378</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 61.

definitions. He contends that the woman's belief is incorrect because she understands the concept to be "narrow." He argues, "But it isn't. It contains infinities, and – and so."<sup>379</sup> Further, he telegraphs the definition of the word he wants her to share – a definition necessary for her to forgive him for the actions he is about to admit – adding, "An infinity of absolution, for instance."<sup>380</sup> The man also argues for wide and flexible definitions for other words related to his "tale." When the woman asks if his story will be a comic story, the man responds, "Yes. In a way. In a very grim way. It will be human, and, as you know, comedy is but a matter of the visual angle."<sup>381</sup> Similarly, the man argues that the talk of most men in war is flippant, but he says that there is "more than meets the eye. I mean more wisdom. Flippancy, like comedy, is but a matter of visual first-impression."<sup>382</sup> "The Tale," as a whole, diagrams the attempt by the man and the woman to align themselves on the same "visual angle" in relation to the man's wartime experience, an attempt to evolve together using the collective properties of rumor as a means of communicating and translating their disparate wartime experiences.

When the text's narrative focus returns to the conversation between the man and the woman at the end of "The Tale," the woman has a new capacity to comprehend his meaning. When the man finally drops all fictional pretense and admits that his actions caused the death of scores of men, her response is described:

The woman on the couch got up and threw her arms round his neck. Her eyes put two gleams in the deep shadow of the room. She knew his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity.<sup>383</sup>

The woman, who has been depicted as a shadowy figure recessed into the folds of the

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<sup>379</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 61.

<sup>380</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 61.

<sup>381</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 62.

<sup>382</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 62.

<sup>383</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 81.

couch prior to this moment, emerges here as a fully-embodied conversational participant, shortening the physical distance between herself and the man for the first time. The dusky twilight that has dominated previous descriptions of the setting is now also cut by the addition of “two gleams” of visual perception. This atmospheric clarity and physical closeness is mirrored in the way the woman is now able to more fully understand the “three words of [his] gospel.” Her previous articulation of “Sincerity – frankness – passion” is rearranged to form the “passion for truth,” “horror of deceit,” and “humanity” of which she now has confident knowledge. The category of “truth” is retained here, perhaps serving – to use Wollaeger’s term – as a “sheltering retreat” and providing a reason for calling this text an incipient postmodernist work instead of one more fully aligned with that category. The narrator’s “passion for truth” in “The Tale” is significantly more tenuous than Marlow’s claim “I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie” in *Heart of Darkness*. This passion does not prevent him from significantly blurring the relationship between his actual war experience and the fabricated reality of the “Commanding Officer” he hopes to substitute in its place.

Turning to the second layer of narrative, the tale of the Commanding Officer, uncertainty is also thematically important. This layer of the narrative is set in a world that reveals the ‘grouped letters war talk’ that Conrad identifies in “The Unlighted Coast” to be problematic, and in some cases, entirely useless. The Commanding Officer’s duty in the war is described:

He used to be sent out with her along certain coasts to see – what he could see. Just that. And sometimes he had some preliminary information to help him, and sometimes he had not. And it was all one, really. It was about as useful as information trying to convey the locality and intentions of a cloud, of a phantom taking shape here and there and impossible to seize, would have

been.<sup>384</sup>

Based on his experience, the man takes the position that information is inherently unreliable during the war. Even when some “preliminary information” is offered, he acknowledges that it is of little use. For example, he states, “The last reported submarined ships were sunk a long way to the westward. But one never knows.”<sup>385</sup> This is similar to the way that Conrad experienced “wireless” information while aboard the *Ready*.<sup>386</sup> During this cruise, the information that came through the wireless did not provide the basis for effective action since it was too general in nature. A report that German submarines might be within a few hours of your location is, in reality, no better than receiving no information at all.

Right from the start, the fact of “never knowing” permeates the commanding officer’s tale. Patrolling in the North Sea, the crew of the officer’s ship spots a floating

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<sup>384</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 63.

<sup>385</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 65.

<sup>386</sup> Conrad seems to pull a number of the ideas for the composition of “The Tale” from both his experience aboard the *Ready* and the “tale” he is told by the “Zeppelin-strafer” that forms the centerpiece of “The Unlighted Coast.” “The Tale” concerns a Captain’s suspicion of neutrality after encountering vessel at sea during the war. False neutrality was something Conrad was very familiar with due to his experience aboard the *Ready*. According to Captain Sunderland’s account, Conrad actively took an active part in creating a fake identity for the *Ready*, which sailed under guise of a Norwegian flag and under the name *Freya*, suggested by Conrad for his fictional ship of that name. Conrad and the officers of the *Ready* examined nautical charts to pick an appropriate “Port of Registry.” Sunderland writes, “the same hour our little vessel, called after Conrad’s “Freya of the Isles” became the *Freya of Bergen*.” Sunderland 40. Similarly, the idea expressed in “The Tale” that even written evidence, such as charts and logbooks, are suspect can be linked to Conrad’s time aboard the *Ready*. On the two occasions that the crew of the *Ready/Freya* incorrectly believed they were being approached by a German sub, Conrad’s assigned role was to go below deck and retrieve the confidential and incriminating doctored logbooks and be prepared to throw them overboard. Captain Sunderland remembers, “It was here I gave Conrad the first and only direct order during the cruise. “You,” I said, “go down and bring up all the confidential books and take charge of them. If ordered to do so, throw them overboard.” Sunderland 118. Near the end of its cruise, the *Ready* made contact with a group of British minesweepers of the English coast. Because his ship was flying a Norwegian flag, Sunderland remembers, “when I had introduced myself [to the Captain of the minesweeper] he seemed doubtful. Conrad was an amused spectator of all this, and I must say I enjoyed it not a little myself. My invitation to the officer to descend to the cuddy was not readily accepted, so once again the confidential books were sent for, and these reassured our visitor, who thereupon signalled to his senior that everything was in order.” Sunderland 141.

object in the water and “the ship’s course was altered to pass the object close.”<sup>387</sup> This object remains unidentified and the ship never comes too close in case it is an explosive device or lingers too long near it for fear of being a static target for submarines. The man, who is narrating at this point in the text, says, “No use describing it. It may have been nothing more remarkable than, say, a barrel of a certain shape and colour. But it was significant,” a good symbol of, or metaphor for, the ultimate indeterminacy of reality in the story.<sup>388</sup> The officer and his crew speculate that the object is detritus left in the area after some ship of a neutral country supplied an enemy ship with provisions or fuel. The man states, “This was generally believed, if not absolutely known.”<sup>389</sup> The commanding officer and his subordinate determine of the object: “Well, it’s evidence. That’s what this is. Evidence of what we were pretty certain of before. And plain, too.”<sup>390</sup> Of course, they were not certain of anything and the evidence is far from plain.

Turning to the commanding officer’s encounter with the Northman in the fog-bound cove, the evidence of treachery on the part of the Northman is also far from certain. On the one hand, the commanding officer’s tale endorses a barely plausible interpretation of the Northman’s guilt. On the other hand, it provides his listener (and thereby the reader) with the information necessary to construct a competing, and somewhat more plausible, interpretation of his innocence. In doing so, the man is asking the woman to endorse his version and *knowingly* disregard the other possibilities regardless of their merit. The version positing the Northman’s innocence is actually offered first, only to be quickly disregarded. A young officer is first sent over to the

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<sup>387</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 65.

<sup>388</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 65.

<sup>389</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 66.

<sup>390</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 66.



Northman's ship to investigate. Upon his return, the officer reports back the ship's story of engine troubles, saying the story is "plausible enough from a strictly professional point of view" with the usual elements of "disablement" and "dangerous drifting."<sup>391</sup> He adds, "Papers and everything in perfect order. Nothing suspicious to be detected anywhere."<sup>392</sup> The commanding officer, acting on a "suspicion" that the ship is aiding enemy vessels unsupported by evidence, sets aside this version of the Northman's tale and determines to investigate further by boarding the ship himself.

Just after the commanding officer makes this decision, the text contains a curious moment of interpenetration between the separate layers of narrative as the commanding officer's tale is briefly interrupted by a passage that seems to come from the perspective of the authorial narrative. The commanding officer announces to his crew, "I'll go on board all the same."<sup>393</sup> This statement is followed by an extended passage that does not seem to come from any perspective within the commanding officer's tale, but rather from the man in the authorial narrative to the woman who is listening:

He had made up his mind. Curiosity is the great motive power of hatred and love. What did he expect to find? He could not have told anybody – not even himself.

What he really expected to find there was the atmosphere, the atmosphere of gratuitous treachery, which in his view nothing could excuse; for he thought that even a passion of unrighteousness for its own sake could not excuse that. But could he detect it? Sniff it? Taste it? Receive some mysterious communication which would turn his invincible suspicions into a certitude strong enough to provoke action with all its risks?<sup>394</sup>

What is most striking about this passage is the fact that it contains so many questions.

The first question ("What did he expect to find?") is answered with the admittance that he

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<sup>391</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 70.

<sup>392</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 71.

<sup>393</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 71.

<sup>394</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 71.

did not have an answer at the time and, in truth, does not have an answer now. Since he can never say for certain why he believed in the Northman's guilt, any narrative that he spins about the situation must, by definition, be conditional. The next sentence ("What he really expected to find there was the atmosphere, the atmosphere of gratuitous treachery") is, therefore, not the man's "truthful" answer, but a possible explanation offered to the woman for her consideration. The final questions are concessions that he does not have the tools to discern the truth or falsity of the Northman's tale, that in evaluating the Northman's tale he is relying on little more than hope (a "mysterious communication") to confirm his suspicions.

At this point, the text returns to the commanding officer's narrative. The failure of communication that happens in *Heart of Darkness* between Marlow and Kurtz's Intended reappears in the conversation between the commanding officer and the Northman. Like in *Heart of Darkness*, the two conversational participants, the commanding officer and the Northman in this case, each have an explanation for the existing situation. However, unlike in *Heart of Darkness*, the reader is not in a position to evaluate which of the two versions is closer to the truth. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is far from a reliable narrator, but there is little doubt that his version is a better approximation of the "real" Kurtz than the one presented by the Intended. In contrast, there is plenty of evidence in the commanding officer's tale that calls into question the version of events he ultimately endorses and plenty of evidence that the Northman is telling the truth. For example, the commanding officer latches on to the Northman's manner of speech, "broken by the most queer, thoughtful pauses," as an indication that he is lying. However, it seems more likely from other evidence in the text that the

Northman's behavior can be explained as drunkenness. The commanding officer even considers this interpretation, stating, "It's perfectly plain that the fellow has been drinking. Yes, he had been drinking; but he will have a lie ready all the same."<sup>395</sup> In arguing so, the commanding officer both admits that a different interpretation is possible and pushes that alternate interpretation out of the version he is endorsing.

Moving to the third layer of narrative, the embedded story told by the Northman about his situation, uncertainty dominates nearly every aspect of the narrative. The Northman's tale is interspersed with that of the commanding officer and the Northman is never a narrator himself. The bulk of the Northman's tale is presented in a passage beginning: "The commanding officer listened to the tale. It struck him as more plausible than simple truth is in the habit of being."<sup>396</sup> The Northman may have facts and circumstances on his side, but the veracity of his narrative is turned into proof of guilt by the commanding officer. Like Kurtz's Intended, a particular interpretation of the information has *a priori* status in the commanding officer's mind, foreclosing the possibility of communication before the conversation with the Northman even begins. Rather than listening to the Northman's story, the commanding officer simply substitutes his own alternative narrative for the Northman's version.

In the final line of the commanding officer's tale, the text creates two competing endings to the commanding officer's tale – the version in which it is clear that the commanding officer forced the Northman's ship out onto the rocks and the version that the commanding officer admits he originally put into circulation among his subordinates when he returned to his own ship. He admits that he told his officers, "I let him go,"

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<sup>395</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 75.

<sup>396</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 73.

which is a deliberate obfuscation. However, it is this “lie” that will be marked down in official reports and become part of the official record of the war. Moreover, neither of these endings seems likely to be the actual “truth” about the commander’s actions in the cove. The version of the ending told to the woman makes little sense – testing the veracity of the Northman’s claim to be lost by giving him a heading that will kill him and his crew if he is telling the truth is substantially absurd on its face. The “true” tale is likely not the ridiculous, but the terrible; the commander deliberately gave the Northman an erroneous heading and intentionally sent him and his men to their deaths.

This version of the story is never directly acknowledged, but that does not mean that this version is not communicated. On the one hand, the man’s “tale” of the commanding officer endorses a barely plausible interpretation of the Northman’s guilt. On the other hand, it provides the woman with the information necessary to construct a competing, and somewhat more plausible, interpretation of the Northman’s innocence. In doing so, the man is asking the woman to endorse his version and *knowingly* disregard the other possibilities regardless of their merit. Also, just as the reader can piece together a logic that allows the commanding officer’s act to be terrible, the woman can catch a glimpse of this possibility in the spaces between the other competing versions of the story.

But when the text’s narrative focus returns to the conversation between the man and the woman at the end of “The Tale,” the woman has a new capacity to comprehend the meaning behind the words spoken by the man. The woman, who has been depicted as a shadowy figure prior to this moment, emerges here as a fully embodied conversational participant. When the authorial narrator states, “She knew his passion for truth, his horror

of deceit, his humanity,” the succinct phrase “she knew” reinforces the fact that she is now confident in this knowledge.<sup>397</sup> It’s not important that the man, when viewed objectively in light of his treatment of the Northman, does not seem to possess any of these traits in spades. What is important is that the woman can now understand him in relation to the same terms with which he understands himself.

The ambiguity of the situation actually facilitates the development of a shared understanding in “The Tale” because the man and the woman can “fill in the gaps” in the narrative together and thereby develop a common understanding of what the story means. This points to why rumor is so successful as a means of communication - it is a mechanism for multiple parties to collectively work to fill in the gaps and develop a coherent narrative. In “The Tale,” the man and the woman work together to develop a new version of the story. Borrowing once again Shibutani’s definition of rumor, when these two are “caught together in an ambiguous situation [they] attempt to construct a “meaningful” interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources.”<sup>398</sup> Such communication, such collective meaning-making, is something denied the Intended in *Heart of Darkness*. And, given the almost obsessive concern in post-war texts with the impossibility of meaningful communication, this small “tale” by Conrad, written in the autumn of 1916 when the difficulty of locating and evaluating information about the war is already apparent to the British public, offers an interesting glimmer of hope for communication in the modern age. The fact that the text moves away from an interest in epistemological concerns about reliability and toward ontological concerns about plural and diverse realities, “The Tale” also provides a glimpse into the terms of information

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<sup>397</sup> Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* 81.

<sup>398</sup> Shibutani 17.

circulation that are a part of an emerging postmodernism.

John Buchan and the Emerging “Post-modern Fact”: Fiction as a Response to Changing  
Definitions of Information During the War

John Buchan is a fascinating case for anyone interested in the information environment of the First World War. He is both a prolific author of wartime fiction and a leading contributor to the British government’s wartime propaganda effort. In these different roles, Buchan writes prolifically across many platforms during the war years. In contrast to the slimmer output of Wells and Conrad, Buchan’s productivity makes feasible an examination of his work at various points *throughout* the war, instead of the more static pre-war, wartime, and post-war categories.<sup>399</sup> Such intermediate sampling is useful since one risks glossing over the internal dynamics of cultural change at play *across* the war years by overprivileging the catch-all category “wartime,” where an effort to bound and unify the historical situation of the war demands primacy. While this chapter focuses largely on Buchan’s fiction, an examination of his ongoing role in the production of official government propaganda makes visible a significant reorientation in the government’s attitude toward the scope and purpose of propaganda from the beginning to the end of the war. Buchan’s role as a propagandist makes him an active participant in this change. In turn, he uses the narrative space of fiction to work through his own ideas and concerns about the changing nature of information control.

One of the principal tensions that Buchan explores in his wartime fiction – which mirrors a similar tension within the British propaganda service itself – is the relationship of narrative construction to empirical fact. Although Buchan’s fiction and British

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<sup>399</sup> Wells, as we have seen, wrote a wartime bestseller in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916) and then largely abandons fiction for non-fiction. Wells also quit the Ministry of Information and opted out of writing propaganda in the last two years of the war. Conrad’s output of fiction slows to a trickle after 1914 and he makes only a small effort at writing propaganda.

propaganda in the early phases of the war are marked by a fidelity to narratives grounded in objective fact, as the war progresses, both Buchan and British propaganda increasingly shift towards an approach that prioritizes the effectiveness of a narrative in furthering British war aims, regardless of its relation to empirical evidence. One way to understand this shift is by utilizing Mary Poovey's concepts of "the modern fact" and "the post-modern fact."

In her work *A History of the Modern Fact*, Poovey defines her foundational term, "the modern fact," as an epistemological unit made up of "particulars" *and* the "systematic claims that [are] somehow derived from those particularized descriptions."<sup>400</sup> Put slightly differently, "the modern fact" privileges facts that are composed of "both observed particulars *and* evidence of some theory" – both data and the contextualized narration of that data.<sup>401</sup> In contrast, "the post-modern fact" is an epistemological unit that "gradually elevate[s] rule-governed, autonomous models over observed particulars."<sup>402</sup> Therefore, the category of "observed particulars" loses value since "the post-modern fact" does not aim to produce knowledge simultaneously grounded in observed particulars and systematic, narrativized theory, but rather, "to *model* the *range of the normal*."<sup>403</sup> Poovey argues that "as digital 'bits' of information, the 'phenomenological laws' of physics, or poststructuralist signifiers with no referent, [post-

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<sup>400</sup> Mary Poovey, *A History of The Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) xii.

<sup>401</sup> Poovey 9. Poovey also sets "the modern fact" apart from its predecessor "the ancient fact." The epistemological unit that underpins "the ancient fact" is characterized by claims of "universality and commonality." Poovey 8. Aristotle's articulates this distinction, arguing in *Posterior Analytics*, "sense perception must be concerned with particulars, whereas knowledge depends upon the recognition of the universal." Peter Dear summarizes the change from "the ancient fact" to "the modern fact" clearly, explaining that in modernity singular experiences or points of data gathered through experiment or observation can no longer indicate knowledge that is "*evident*," but rather can be used as "*evidence*" with which to construct knowledge. Poovey 95. See Peter Dear's *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 25.

<sup>402</sup> Poovey 3.

<sup>403</sup> Poovey 3.



modern facts] are themselves already modeled and thus exist at one remove from what the eye can see, although they are no less the units by which we make what counts as knowledge about our world.”<sup>404</sup> Therefore, the change that takes place between the basic unit of knowledge in modernity and that in postmodernity is not an abandonment of the desire for systematic knowledge but a belief in the necessity of tying such knowledge to a requirement for empirical evidence.<sup>405</sup>

One of the most significant changes in wartime propaganda involves the alteration of British propaganda’s relationship to the epistemological unit it uses to construct narratives. The British government’s system of wartime propaganda was hastily assembled in August of 1914 and remained in a state of alteration and modification throughout the war years. While this change happens gradually, it is possible to distinguish the initial orientation of British propaganda, which relied on “the modern fact” as its basic unit of narrative construction, from its changed position later in the war, in which “the post-modern fact” was the principal unit of narrative construction. In this chapter I refer to the earlier orientation as the “Wellington House position,” after the name attached to the British propaganda department at the beginning of the war, and the position of the later war years as the “Press Baron position,” after the fact that the British propaganda effort was dominated by the opinions and efforts of a group of powerful newspaper owners in the final years of the war.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Poovey 3-4.

<sup>405</sup> This post-modern epistemological unit is a useful tool because it draws together many of the main lines of argument about postmodernity from, as Poovey herself points out, “Ferdinand de Saussure’s claim that signs are arbitrary,” to “Jacques Lacan’s definition of the ego as lack,” to “Jean Baudrillard’s fascination with simulations’s ability to end all original reference, or Slavoj Žižek’s celebration of the ‘meaningless traces’ that thrust meaning production onto analysis itself.” Poovey 328.

<sup>406</sup> The press barons were intentionally left out of Masterman’s organization of propaganda at Wellington House, but newspaper writers and editors were included. According to Gary Messinger, “Masterman’s view, in any case, seems clear: the power he wanted to harness was in the wordsmiths, not in their business

In very general terms, propaganda activity at Wellington House was constrained by the limits of the modern fact. Although Wellington House propagandists sought to create compelling propaganda capable of persuading domestic and foreign audiences of the rightness of British war aims, they insisted on grounding their propaganda claims on empirical evidence. By contrast, the Press Baron position was subject to no such constraints. By embracing the flexibility of the post-modern fact, Press Baron propagandists created compelling and persuasive propaganda unmoored from “observed particulars.” Simply put, while both Wellington House and Press Baron propaganda sought to persuade its target audience, Press Baron propagandists had far greater freedom than their predecessors in narrative construction. Buchan sits at an interesting intersection of these two positions, having assumed a leadership role in British propaganda after a reorganization reduced the power of Wellington House and saw the demotion of its chief, C.F.G. Masterman, to a secondary role. Buchan, in turn, was subordinated within the hierarchy of the government’s propaganda organization by the installation of the powerful newspaper proprietors Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Northcliffe in leadership roles for the final two years of the war.

In reality, this shift in the orientation of British propaganda happens gradually as the government’s participation in propaganda expands and departments evaluate their experience with information control. However, when pegged to the December 1916 collapse of the government of Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, these changes become easier to systematically identify. The 1916 change in government is a watershed moment for British propaganda in the First World War, in part because of its effect on

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sponsors.” Gary Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 37.

staffing at agencies handling propaganda activities. The new Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, was greatly helped into office by Lord Northcliffe, whose company Amalgamated Press published such newspapers as *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Observer*, and the *Edinburgh Daily Record*, and Lord Beaverbrook, who published the *London Evening Standard* and the *Daily Express*. In 1918, Lord Beaverbrook became the first Minister of Information, responsible for propaganda in allied and neutral countries, a position that made him Buchan's direct supervisor for the final year of the war. Lord Northcliffe was made Director of Propaganda and given control over propaganda in enemy countries.<sup>407</sup> As is the case for change in most complex systems, these leadership adjustments caused an alteration in the government's handling of propaganda policy and reflected the fact that already changing priorities made the appointment of certain individuals seem necessary and desirable.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Lord Beaverbrook's memoir *Men and Power* presents a more complicated version of how the press barons ended up in charge of government propaganda later in the war. Focusing more on Northcliffe's motives than his own, Beaverbrook explains that Northcliffe did advocate for the ouster of Asquith, but because he favored replacing the Asquith government with one pushing significant power to the generals in charge of military policy. Beaverbrook goes so far as to claim that Northcliffe favored "something approaching a military style dictatorship." Beaverbrook 62. Neither man was able to secure an official position immediately after the change in government. Given the need for new leadership and a Cabinet level appointee in charge of propaganda, it was for practical purposes that Beaverbrook is invited into government in February 1918. Northcliffe, on the other hand, was initially sent on an official visit to the United States to render him "out of the way"; however, he excelled at the job and was given control of foreign propaganda at Beaverbrook's urging upon his return. Beaverbrook, acknowledging Northcliffe's tendency to embellish information, said of Northcliffe's time as head of a British Mission to the United States, "He always saw a situation with truth but he invariably painted it in bright colours. Reiteration and over-emphasis, a part of his newspaper technique, still broke out in crisis." Lord William Maxwell Aitken Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-1918* (London: Archon Books, 1968) 79.

<sup>408</sup> Hew Strachan argues that the impetus behind this new orientation in propaganda derives from Lloyd George himself, but agrees with the assessment that the estrangement stems from different understandings of the role of truth in propaganda: "What really divided Lloyd George from Buchan was their different understandings of propaganda. Lloyd George and those whom he appointed to run the propaganda agencies in 1918 saw propaganda as a form of popular journalism; Buchan saw it as a form of truth-telling. Of course he recognized that confidential information should be censored in wartime; of course he appreciated that criticisms which might be legitimately voiced after the war was over had to be silenced while the struggle was in hand. But if the war was a struggle to defend civilization, waged by democracies, then the people on whose behalf it was being fought, and who were bearing the brunt of the fighting, had the right to be apprised of the facts, not fired by unsubstantiated rumour or half-baked opinion. Buchan was accused of speaking to those who shaped public opinion, not to the public itself, but he himself felt that 'he could

These developments, turning on a decoupling of the relationship between narrative and empirical evidence, anticipate a significant debate within the contemporary field of Information Studies. As we shall see in more detail later in this chapter, it is possible, using the very different information typologies developed by John Budd and Michael Buckland to explain how British propaganda changes its operational definition of “information” over the course of the war through a change in the relationship between information and the concept of “fact.” Budd argues that the aim of information is to inform, meaning untruths that aim to misinform cannot fall within the definition of information. Budd’s concept of information is thus inextricably linked to empiricism and the modern fact. In Budd’s understanding, the post-modern fact, with its rejection of the importance of empiricism, has no place in the dissemination of information. Buckland, in the alternative, argues that information, like evidence in a criminal trial, is only deemed true or untrue through the attention and consideration of the individual to whom it is presented. Buckland’s concept of information, by incorporating both empirically-based and non-empirically based narratives, thus permits and even elevates narrative construction through the use of the post-modern fact.

The Budd-Buckland debate tracks onto the fundamental difference between a closed information environment and an open information environment, a difference explored in the previous chapter. Jameson, we have seen, distinguishes a “closed totality,” a system in which nothing new can arise and everything moves inevitably toward a single unity, and an “open totality,” an environment that uses “the creative and

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confide implicitly in the mass of my own people.’ To mislead them, to spin fiction posing as fact, was the way to undermine civilization, not to protect it.” Hew Strachan, “John Buchan and the First World War: Fact into Fiction” in *Reassessing John Buchan*, Kate Macdonald, ed. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009) 89.

unpredictable efficacy of the new,” constantly incorporating new information through its porous borders and, therefore, “moving and growing in an amorphous way.”<sup>409</sup> The Wellington House position resembles that of the Jamesonian “closed totality.” In such a closed system, one is limited to empirically-bound narratives because information is restricted to what can be demonstrated to exist within the system itself.<sup>410</sup> Facts are concrete, static, *a priori* and merely re-presented rather than generated in such a system. As the war goes on, the rise of the Press Baron position causes a shift towards an understanding of the information environment as an open system, or a Jamesonian “open totality,” a system into which one can inject new narratives whenever the need arises unconstrained by the limitations of empiricism.

Given this shift in British propaganda, a shift that provides insight into larger changes in the culture’s relationship to information more broadly, Buchan is well-suited to serve as a lens for exploring this change. Before the First World War, Buchan was a prolific writer, if only a minor player in the literary life of London. By August of 1914, he had achieved modest success with such novels as *Prester John* (1910) and with his biographical sketches *Sir Walter Raleigh* (1911) and *The Marquis of Montrose* (1913). Buchan’s first try at writing a thriller, *The Power House*, had been serialized in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in December 1913. In his position as an editor in the Scottish publishing house Nelson, he was responsible for the Nelson Sixpenny Library, an inexpensive book format that aimed to “introduce good modern fiction to the public” at an affordable price and was responsible for publishing books by many of the leading

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<sup>409</sup> Jameson 21.

<sup>410</sup> One version of this argument is contained within the correspondence theory of truth, a theory oriented towards semantics that argues a true statement is one that asserts only that which can be definitively shown to exist. See Tarski, A. “The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics” in *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* (4:3) 1944, 341-76.

writers of the day.<sup>411</sup> Despite these efforts, Buchan was not invited to the secret organizational meeting of Wellington House, a meeting that drew together the leading voices in British letters – established writers, historians, and academics – on the frontline of propaganda work early in the war.<sup>412</sup>

Despite the fact that he was never officially connected to Wellington House, Buchan's initial understanding of propaganda corresponded to the understanding of propaganda embraced by Wellington House and its proponents. In fact, prior to the start of the war Buchan clearly established his dislike for the "Press Baron" style of information manipulation. In 1908, Buchan used the pages of the *Scottish Review* to condemn "new journalism," stating, "shrillness and wildness seem to be characteristics of too many leading articles, just as exaggeration is the chief feature of the news."<sup>413</sup> He saw the sale of *The Times* to Lord Northcliffe, whom he called "a manager who has hitherto been chiefly connected with halfpenny papers," as signifying the end of "the golden age of British journalism."<sup>414</sup> A number of scholars have commented previously on this similarity between Buchan's initial empirically based understanding of propaganda to that of his superiors early in the war. For example, David Daniell argues of Buchan's work at the Foreign Office that Buchan was "deeply concerned that the truth should be

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<sup>411</sup> Buchan's acquisitions for Nelson's included an early edition of H.G. Wells' novel *Mr. Polly*. Through the celebrated literary agent J.B. Pinker, Buchan also bought novels by Henry James, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett and made an unsuccessful offer on Joseph Conrad's *Romance*. Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (Jaffrey, New Hampshire: David R. Godine, 1995) 101-102.

<sup>412</sup> Buchan also had a personal connection to Wellington House. His wife, Susan Grosvernor, was the cousin of Lucy Lyttelton, who was married to Charles Masterman, the head of Wellington House. Even if invited, it would have been impossible for Buchan to attend this meeting. He was in Scotland and quite ill during the first few months of the war. Perhaps Masterman knew this and did not bother making the invitation.

<sup>413</sup> Strachan 82. Strachan gives a very good overview of Buchan's orientation toward the different strains of government propaganda during the war.

<sup>414</sup> Strachan 82. Brigadier General John Charteris served as chief Intelligence Staff Officer under the Commander-in-chief General Douglas Haig in France during the early years of the war.

told, and that manufactured propaganda (that the Germans were boiling down human corpses in a factory, for example, a story *The Times* featured) should be discredited.”<sup>415</sup>

By the Armistice four years later, Buchan had emerged as both an influential public servant and a major wartime writer. He had risen through the ranks of government, serving in the Foreign Office as a Second Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps, on the staff of the General Headquarters in France, and eventually serving as Head of the new wartime Department of Information. Buchan ended the war as the Deputy Director of the Ministry of Information, the independent ministry that eventually swallowed up the propaganda efforts of the Department of Information and, therefore, the remaining tendrils of the work of Wellington House. During the same time, Buchan became a household name in Britain and in other Allied countries, writing three bestselling novels following the exploits of the adventuring protagonist Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), *Greenmantle* (1916), and *Mr. Standfast* (1919). He was also the main author of *The Nelson History of the War*, a series published throughout the war, which ran to more than 20,000 pages and served as an important early history of the war.

An examination of Buchan’s fiction serves as an effective way to track the change in both the orientation of British propaganda and in the information environment more generally because it is in his fiction, writing that he does outside of his official propaganda duties and in his own time, that he most fully explores the problems that arise when information dissemination is untethered from a commitment to empiricism. In his

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<sup>415</sup> David Daniell, *The Interpreter’s House: A Critical Assessment of John Buchan* (Camden, New Jersey: Nelson, 1975) 122. When Buchan took over from Masterman at the helm of British propaganda in 1917, Lucy Masterman notes that Masterman and Buchan “were old friends and the latter consulted him very fully on the methods by which the new department should be organized.” Lucy Masterman, *C.F.G. Masterman: A Biography* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1939) 291.

work *The Great War of Words*, Peter Buitenhuis acknowledges the freedom of expression Buchan found in his fiction. Recognizing the subtlety with which Buchan offers criticisms of official positions in the Hannay novels, Buitenhuis argues that, on the one hand, Buchan's texts "were extensions of his propaganda work, painting the Germans in the bright colours of ruthless aggressors, militarists, and exploiters, full of plots and wickedness." On the other hand, "The novels [...] gave Buchan a chance – not taken too often – to state his own view of the conduct of the war instead of the official one. The *personae* of his characters allowed him to evade responsibility for his critical remarks."<sup>416</sup> Similarly, Hew Strachan argues, "For Buchan, fact and fiction were not alternatives, but part of a continuum. His novels were vehicles for his ideas and beliefs, a way of propagating values that he thought important through heroes who were often based on real people."<sup>417</sup> Despite constant changes in his official duties during the war, Buchan, a consummate patriot who was deeply committed to Britain and especially to the institutions of the British state, stayed within the active propaganda service and adapted to the accompanying changes in the character of information control. But, just as consistently, he allows concerns and questions about his propaganda work to percolate within his fiction, perhaps rarely occupying the surface story directly, but often forming an interesting subtext to the novel's plot.

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<sup>416</sup> Buitenhuis 110. Focusing on Buchan's non-fiction writing rather than his fiction, Kate Macdonald makes the claim that there is a change in Buchan's writing from the beginning to the end of the war that corresponds to Buchan's shift from a civilian journalist and historian to an active military officer regulated by the constraints of official duty. Noting that instances of openly questioning government actions and policies decrease as Buchan takes on greater official responsibilities, Macdonald notes, "By late 1916 the earlier, questioning Buchan had been quenched by khaki." Kate Macdonald, "Translating Propaganda: John Buchan's Writing During the First World War" in *Publishing in the First World War*, Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed, ed., (London: Palgrave, 2007) 189.

<sup>417</sup> Strachan 89.



In light of the changing nature of British propaganda during the war, it is not surprising that Buchan incorporates rumor into much of his wartime fiction. Rumors are not necessarily divorced from empirical evidence but a rumor's empirical basis is much less important than its ability to generate a "meaningful" narrative. As discussed in prior chapters, Shibutani began a reorientation of the study of rumor toward this thesis, arguing in *Improvised News*,

[r]umor is a collective transaction whose component parts consist of cognitive and communicative activity; it develops as men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a "meaningful" interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources.<sup>418</sup>

The power of rumor, therefore, lies in its ability to facilitate coherent narrative construction; it is this capacity, far more than its empirical grounding (or lack thereof), that permits rumors to reduce anxiety and uncertainty for both the individual and within the larger community in which the rumor circulates. Rumor, like the Press Baron orientation of propaganda and like Buckland's definition of information, privileges the *effectiveness* of a narrative – its ability to be accepted and understood by its recipients – over the *accuracy* of the narrative – its fidelity to empiricism. By focusing on the creation, circulation, and consequences of rumors and rumormongering in his fiction, Buchan is able to explore both the possibilities and the problems that come with using rumor – and, therefore, other forms of *effective* communication – as a propaganda tool.

Buchan's use of rumor differs from that of Wells and Conrad; these other writers

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<sup>418</sup> Shibutani 17. Shibutani differentiates his work on rumor from earlier cohorts of rumor scholars, whose work focused on rumor as an act of serial transmission. Shibutani argues that these scholars focused on the "distortion" that happens as a rumor is passed, which requires one to begin with the idea that the initial "testimony of the eyewitness" at the beginning of the chain is accurate. Since "the accuracy of any report is something that can be ascertained only with the benefit of hindsight [...] It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the problem of accuracy and that of *credibility* [...] Men act on the basis of their beliefs, which are not necessarily demonstrated truths." Shibutani 7. Rather, Shibutani explains the "distortions" that occur as a rumor moves from person to person as "part of the developmental process through which men strive for understanding and consensus." Shibutani 16.

examine rumor-communities that are organic and undirected, while Buchan examines a situation in which the controlling hand of government generates “official” rumors or co-opts existing ones in order to direct them toward a desired result.

Much of Buchan’s wartime writing explores the generative power of rumor creation, examining the ways in which an individual or a government can create or manipulate a rumor to achieve desired goals. However, Buchan also considers problems resulting from such efforts, including the way that rumors can be used to make people do things that are counter to their own best interests and the way that, once created, a government has little power over the course a rumor takes. Buchan’s fiction reflects the idea that rumors used as propaganda are not as powerful or as productive as rumors that arise organically from an environment to provide a “meaningful interpretation” of uncertain situations.

I will elaborate on these changes in the circulation of information during the war more fully below. However, since I trace out the emergence of this paradigm through close examination of Buchan’s work, it is useful at this juncture to map out the narrative terrain that Buchan covers with his wartime literary works. Section I expands on Budd and Buckland’s theories of information and applies them to the shift in approach taken by the British propaganda service over the course of the war. While the British propaganda service largely approached the dissemination of information at the beginning of the war in a manner consistent with Budd’s conception of information, by war’s end, the British propaganda service had adopted a broader and unbounded approach to the dissemination of information more consistent with Buckland’s more expansive conception. Section II begins an examination of Buchan’s fiction by taking a look at Buchan’s short story “The

King of Ypres” (1915). This small work provides the reader with a condensed look at many of the issues surrounding the circulation of information more extensively considered in his wartime novels. The story concerns a young soldier, left behind in the city of Ypres by the retreating British army, who feels it is his duty to keep order in the city by any means available to him. The young man manages to establish law and order in the city, an achievement that saves both lives and property, but he is court-martialed for breaking military regulations when the British army arrives back in Ypres a few days later. “The King of Ypres” is narrated from a limited third-person perspective that relates the facts of the story strictly from the young soldier’s point of view. However, the soldier’s actual experience is transmuted into an alternative version of the story the moment the British army returns and begins to view what happened through the lens of its own rules and regulations. Given that the young man both chooses not to speak up and is not given the opportunity to explain his version of what happened once his court-martial is in progress, “The King of Ypres” establishes that, although there can be multiple empirically-based narratives derived from a specific set of events, particular informational systems may only be able to recognize the validity of certain of those narratives. Written mid-war in 1915, this story balances Buchan’s continuing belief in the soundness of the British military system as a whole with an acknowledgement that institutional constraints may preclude the military – and by extension the British war effort as a whole – from accepting certain narratives, even ones that demonstrate a high fidelity to empiricism. Buchan’s recognition of these institutional constraints and the way in which they shift the metrics by which narratives are assessed away from a fidelity to

empiricism highlight his growing acceptance of the use of the post-modern fact in narrative construction.

Sections III, IV, and V examine three of Buchan's Hannay thrillers, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, written before the war and published in 1915, *Greenmantle*, published in 1916, and *Mr. Standfast*, written before the end of the war and published in 1919. Like Wells and Conrad, Buchan's pre-war fiction already manifests an interest in the difference between false versions of a story and objectively true versions. *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, published in *Blackwood's Magazine* from July to September 1914, is fundamentally about false information, how it is circulated, and how the protagonist Richard Hannay digs down through the layers of false information to find out the truth about a foreign plot secretly at work in Britain. Hannay, who spends much of the novel spinning false versions of his own story to confound his enemies, must succeed in discovering the true details of the mystery in order to prevent a threatened war. Like in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, this book, whatever its complications, nevertheless seems committed to a yardstick of objective truth – to which information is referable, and tethered in a “closed” fashion that defines information's domain of possibilities. At the end of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Hannay does discover the truth about the German plot but the war starts anyway, an outcome that is discussed later in this chapter.

What changes for Buchan during the war is that he increasingly recognizes the power that inaccurate information can have and how the effectiveness of information in a given situation bears little relationship to its commitment to the empirical fact. In Buchan's wartime novels *Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast*, Buchan increasingly acknowledges the usefulness created by false versions of a story, even as these novels

grapple with a growing discomfiture with an abandonment of stable truth. *Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast* are both concerned with how different versions of a story can be used, manipulated, and created in order to bring about a desired outcome. In these final two novels, Hannay utilizes rumors at the heart of each text without allowing these rumor-versions to be displaced by a final “true” version at the end of the novel.

Buchan has been overlooked by most of the scholarship on fiction of the First World War, perhaps because his fiction can be seen as a predecessor to the also much overlooked postwar category of “middlebrow” fiction. Middlebrow fiction is loosely defined as fiction that preserves themes, forms, styles, and genres from the past. Rosa Maria Bracco, whose book *Merchants of Hope* looks at British middlebrow writers who directly engage the war during the immediate post-war years, defines middlebrow fiction as that which stands “in the vast space between lowbrow fiction, designed merely to entertain, and highbrow works, increasingly alienated from a common reference of values. Its authors were from the middle classes and addressed a middle-class audience.”<sup>419</sup> Stretching Bracco’s definition back to the war years enables one to understand Buchan, the son of a Scottish churchman who paid his way through Oxford by working for a publishing house, as a very effective spokesman for middle-class values. At the level of formal technique, Bracco argues that middlebrow novels generally “employed the nineteenth-century structure of well-rounded narratives, with clearly structured plots and definite endings.”<sup>420</sup> Such a description certainly fits Buchan’s writing. His novels, literary progenitors of the “thriller,” have a neatly organized plot structure relying on coincidence and cleverness to tie together all of the loose ends.

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<sup>419</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1993) 12.

<sup>420</sup> Bracco 12.

Buchan's use of either a strictly limited third-person narration, as in "The King of Ypres," or first-person narration, as in the Hannay novels, paired with plot-heavy, adventurous storylines is reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century adventure writers such as Rider Haggard. Perhaps because of their conventionality, these novels were very popular with audiences during the war, aiding the translation of unfamiliar situations into familiar terms. The popularity of Buchan's proto-middlebrow fiction to the wartime reading audience reinforces the idea that, in the midst of the disorienting experience of war, people tend to focus on the many aspects of culture that continue without disruption.

However, Buchan's fiction is not actually as conventional as it first seems. First, the books simultaneously endorse and criticize the way that information is being used as propaganda. Just as Buchan the professional propagandist is able to engage in several writing projects simultaneously, balancing projects with different audiences, different relationships to secret information, and aiming to please different sectors of British governmental policy, Buchan's fiction shows a remarkable ability to balance a tension between endorsing and promulgating the official positions of British propaganda and opening up lines of inquiry within his fiction that question and challenge some of the basic premises of his own propaganda work. Buchan's wartime fiction provides a window into the way that he struggles with the difficulties that arise when one attempts to control inaccurate – but effective – information. As Buchan recognizes in his wartime texts, narrative construction involves both the origination of the narrative and its subsequent evolution and refinement as it is disseminated through interpretive communities. Buchan is a fundamentally conservative figure, concerned with bolstering British success and working within the hierarchical system of British institutions, and

therefore cautious about accepting changes to the British way of life. Because of this caution, Buchan's wartime fiction instantiates for the British reading public a careful transition between two ways of looking at information and provides a model for negotiating this moment of change in the information environment.

### Section I: To Inform or to Misinform – Information and Truth in British Propaganda

Debates over the definition of “truth” go back millennia, but definitions of “information” have a more recent lineage, the most vigorous debate taking place within the contemporary field of Information Studies. Further, because scholarship originating in Information Studies has most fully considered the relationship between the terms “truth” and “information,” it is from that field that I draw the theoretical framework that follows. In his article “Meaning, Truth, and Information: Prolegomena to a Theory,” John Budd argues that “[i]nformation is meaningful communicative action that aims at truth claims and conditions.”<sup>421</sup> Budd excludes lies from the category of information, stating, “The intention to deceive is also the intention not to inform or, stated differently, it is the intention to misinform in the sense of distorting the shape of what a cognizer receives.”<sup>422</sup> Therefore, in Budd's conception of information, the teller's intention to inform is critical.<sup>423</sup> Budd understands the intent of the communicator and the value of the statement to be intrinsically connected – a person can only “inform” his or her audience if

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<sup>421</sup> John M. Budd, “Meaning, Truth, and Information: Prolegomena to a Theory” in *Journal of Documentation* (67: 1) 2011.

<sup>422</sup> Budd 67.

<sup>423</sup> Budd builds on the work of Fred Dretske, who argues, “What information a signal carries is what it is capable of ‘telling’ us, telling us *truly*, about another state of affairs ... If everything I say to you is false, then I have given you no information.” Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981) 44. Emphasis in original.

he or she is attempting to convey accurate information. The dissemination of information thus requires communication to have a high degree of fidelity to empiricism. Budd's definition of "information" consequently excludes approaches to narrative construction, such as those built on a foundation of post-modern facts, which do not give primacy to empirical evidence.

Alternatively, Michael Buckland, in his seminal article "Information as Thing," argues that there is no inherent connection between information and either communicative intent or empirical accuracy.<sup>424</sup> Buckland's article advocates for including in the definition of information the concept of "information-as-thing," thereby granting informational status to objects, data, documents, or anything else that can affect individual understanding or perception. Buckland argues that this conception of information can be viewed as synonymous with the term "evidence." He asserts,

[I]t is reasonable to view information-as-thing as *evidence*, though without implying that what was read, viewed, listened to, or otherwise perceived or observed was necessarily accurate, useful, or even pertinent to the user's purposes. Nor need it be assumed that the user did (or should) believe or agree with what was perceived.<sup>425</sup>

Buckland stresses the human agency required in this conception of information, stating,

[e]vidence, like information-as-thing, does not *do* anything. Human beings do things *with* it or *to* it. They understand, misunderstand, interpret, summarize, or rebut it. They may even try to fake it, alter it, hide it, or destroy it.<sup>426</sup>

In this framework, everything has the potential to be informative, and therefore Buckland concludes that determining something's status as information must be situational (able to be informative "depending on the inquiry and on the expertise of the inquirer") and a

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<sup>424</sup> Michael K. Buckland, "Information as Thing" in *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* (42:5) June 1991.

<sup>425</sup> Buckland 353.

<sup>426</sup> Buckland 353.



product of consensus (granting something an agreed upon status as information).<sup>427</sup>

Emphasizing this human agency, Buckland argues, “The essence of evidence is precisely that perception of it *can* lead to changes in what people believe that they know.”<sup>428</sup> In short, information is anything used by an individual as part of the analytical process he or she goes through in developing an understanding of a situation. Buckland’s definition of “information” is consistent with a flexible approach to narrative construction. Although not excluding empirically-based narratives, Buckland’s definition is not limited by empiricism. The value of information in Buckland’s conception is defined solely on its own terms, by its capacity to shape and influence individual understandings and perceptions. For Buckland, disseminators are not bound by fidelity to empiricism or by empirical facts themselves. They are free to disseminate whatever statements they wish and they will privilege any statement with a significant capacity to affect the views of their audience.

By applying this framework to British propaganda in the First World War, it is possible to understand that there is a shift in the orientation of propaganda that equates to a shift between the position advocated by Budd and that advocated by Buckland. At the beginning of the war, propaganda activity, largely handled through the nascent British propaganda department known as Wellington House, embraced a fidelity to empiricism – the organization focused on constructing and disseminating the most effective empirically-based narratives it could construct to further British war aims. Most

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<sup>427</sup> Buckland uses the example of the historical status given to evidence that someone is a witch. In a trial by water, the agreed upon evidence was: “If she floated she was a witch. If she sank she was not. This event, the outcome of the experiment, was, by consensus, the information-as-thing needed for the identification of a witch. Nowadays it would be denied, by consensus, that the exact same event constituted the information that it had previously been accepted, by consensus, as being.” Buckland 357.

<sup>428</sup> Buckland 353. Emphasis mine.

of the documents from Wellington House were destroyed after the war, making it difficult to reconstruct much of its activity. One of the most useful documents available covering this period is a biography of Wellington House's director C.F.G. Masterman, written by his wife Lucy Masterman in 1939. Of course, this document has its limitations since it was written by a person not present at the events discussed many years after the fact. However, she recalls, "The practice [at Wellington House] was laid down 'to present facts and the arguments based on these facts.'"<sup>429</sup> According to his wife, Masterman was "immovable" in his belief that the integrity of Wellington House depended on an empirically-based standard of truthfulness even when there was pressure to relax such a standard from many directions. Therefore, Wellington House, while embracing the multiplicity of potential narratives, saw the acceptable universe of such narratives as those that were based on discoverable, provable "facts."

Scholarship on propaganda largely supports Lucy Masterman's claim about the desire of Wellington House to avoid the use of fabrications in the creation of propaganda. Michael Saunders and Philip Taylor, drawing from a Foreign Office memorandum from December 1914, state in their well-regarded work *British Propaganda During the First World War 1914-18*,

From the beginning, the guiding principle of Wellington House was that propaganda should be based upon accurate information and measured argument. As one official wrote in December 1914, "our activities have been confined to the presentation of the facts and of general arguments based on facts."<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> Masterman 274. Lucy Masterman also relates how Wellington House collected the raw material of its work. For example, Edwyn Bevan, the leading classicist at Oxford, "spent most of his working hours scouring German newspapers and other periodicals for information which could be used for propaganda against the Germans." Masterman 39.

<sup>430</sup> Saunders and Taylor 41. Gary Messinger relies heavily on Lucy Masterman's biography to claim, "Masterman said he did not mind if the facts were carefully selected and presented to suggest conclusions convenient for the British cause. But he was firmly against fabrication." Messinger 39.

Philip Taylor returns to this topic in his 2005 work *British Propaganda in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Writing about the struggle for control of propaganda between the Foreign Office and the War Office, a debate that helped to precipitate Masterman's demotion and Buchan's appointment as Director of Information, Taylor reiterates that propaganda work even at this slightly later stage of the war was "merely a continuation of the former arrangements on a grander scale but with all the inherent deficiencies remaining."<sup>431</sup>

Taylor quotes a War Office memorandum from this period that states:

Until the idea is grasped of combating enemy propaganda not merely by news, which it is impolitic to fabricate, but also and even mainly by views, which it is quite possible to propagate, it seems hopeless to expect that any progress will be made towards designing an organization suited to the necessities of the case.<sup>432</sup>

Taylor sums up the situation well when he argues, "This 'news versus views' issue was to lie at the heart of debates surrounding best practice approaches to propaganda for many years to come."<sup>433</sup> While the debate continues throughout the war, it is clear that the initial empirically-grounded "news" orientation of Wellington House gradually loses ground to a more flexible "views"-oriented position deemed better "suited to the necessities" of wartime conditions. In contrast to the "news" orientation, the "views"-oriented position, although willing to make use of empirical evidence, was not bound by empirical considerations.

An interesting case study exposing the divide between a "news versus views" understanding of the purpose of wartime propaganda is the handling of a rumor circulating in April 1917 about the existence of a German "corpse factory." In general terms, the rumor stated that Germans were boiling down human corpses in factories

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<sup>431</sup> Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) 16.

<sup>432</sup> Taylor's source for this is War Office memorandum on press propaganda, 1 February 1916, INF 4/9.

<sup>433</sup> Taylor 16.

behind their positions on the Western Front. Circulating in 1917, this example takes place after the fall of the Asquith government in December 1916, but it is still possible to discern the reaction of early propagandists as separate from the response of the press barons from available sources. The rumor appears to have originated from a similarity between the German word “*Kadaver*,” which refers to the carcass of a dead animal, and the English word “cadaver,” which generally refers to the corpse of a human being.<sup>434</sup> Reports reached Britain from various sources that the Germans were boiling down “*Kadavers*” to make feed for animals. This information was largely disregarded by official sources, but Fleet Street aggressively pushed the rumor, especially in the Northcliffe papers. Buchan, at the time helming the Department of Information and the highest-ranking propaganda official in Britain, refused to allow his department to aid in the dissemination of the rumor.

When information about German “corpse factories” initially came to the attention of the British government, the nature of the debate that ensues hinged on the rumor’s veracity, not on whether it was likely to make effective propaganda. In his memoir, Major James Marshall-Cornwall, an intelligence officer at the General Headquarters in France who was responsible for processing information from German sources, recalled that during the attack at Arras on April 9 the British captured a cache of German papers, one of which was an army order showing the organization of the German rearward support services and referred to a “German Carcass Processing Center.”<sup>435</sup> This piece of information engendered considerable debate among the intelligence staff. Major

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<sup>434</sup> The word for a human corpse in German is *Leiche*.

<sup>435</sup> James Marshall-Cornwall, *Wars and Rumours of Wars* (London: Leo Cooper Secker and Warburg, 1984) 29.

Cornwall, a talented linguist, dismissed the information's significance since he understood that it was referring to animal remains. However, Cornwall showed the information to General Charteris, who was then the head of Intelligence at the GHQ and Cornwall's immediate supervisor. Cornwall writes, "When I showed this document to [General] Charteris he shouted gleefully: 'This confirms what I have always suspected; the Germans are so short of fats that they are boiling down their dead soldiers.'"<sup>436</sup> Charteris, eager to spread this story, called a press conference to relay the details over Cornwall's objections, insisting that his language skills were more than sufficient to interpret the documentary evidence. While Charteris enabled the circulation of false information, what is interesting here is that he does so only because he convinced himself that it was, in fact, true information.<sup>437</sup> Further, Cornwall quickly angles around Charteris and explains the mistranslation. He noted that "the more respectable press organs accepted" his correction "and refrained from publishing Charteris's mendacious propaganda."<sup>438</sup> Wellington House, still in existence as a subdepartment of British propaganda under Buchan's umbrella, chose not to spread the story. Lucy Masterman described her husband's reaction to this rumor as a moment that "displayed his attitude to his work." Lucy recalled,

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<sup>436</sup> Marshall-Cornwall 29.

<sup>437</sup> Brigadier General John Charteris served as chief Intelligence Staff Officer under the Commander-in-Chief General Douglas Haig in France during the early years of the war. Major James Marshall-Cornwall, a gifted linguist who served under Charteris at the GHQ as an Intelligence Officer, provides an interesting picture of the Charteris' understanding of propaganda. Charteris often professed to be concerned with adhering to the facts of a situation in his intelligence work. However, Major Cornwall's book presents Charteris as a man who is quick to convince himself that information is true even when the evidence for this is shaky. Cornwall remembers, "Charteris, however, with breezy optimism, disregarded the sounder and more cautious forecasts which emanated from the War Office and were submitted to the War Cabinet. Consequently the GHQ Intelligence Summaries seemed designed to bolster up our own morale rather than to present a true picture of the enemy's strength and fighting qualities. This divergence of views led to constant friction between GHQ and the War Office; worse still, it misled the C-in-C in the field, who placed implicit confidence in his Chief Intelligence Officer." Marshall-Cornwall 41.

<sup>438</sup> Marshall-Cornwall 29.

A leaflet consisting largely of extracts from that paper was set up and circulated round the office. When, however, it was brought to the “Moot,” the opinion of the experts on German in the office had already been ascertained, and it was turned down [...] (“Laughed out of court” is the phrase used by Mr. Elliot Dodds, who was also present.) In after years, Masterman, not unjustly, prided himself that Wellington House had nothing to do with it. It was later shown that some of the material on which *The Times* relied was faked.<sup>439</sup>

In the case of the German “corpse factories,” the “official” government position waffled slightly, but the heart of the internal government debate over this rumor revolved around preserving the ethical imperative of truthfulness behind information circulated as propaganda.

Receiving the rumor around the same time but from different sources, the British press quickly published the rumor. Lord Northcliffe’s newspaper *The Times*, considered the newspaper of record at the time, ran the story prominently and repeatedly on its front page, likely getting the information from a story in a Swiss newspaper. After this information was reported (and belabored) in *The Times*, there was significant public debate about the truthfulness of these claims. Lucy Masterman writes, “There followed a series of indignant letters, signed and unsigned, implying that this was just what the Germans would do, and a hail of dictionary extracts about the precise meaning of *Kadaver*.”<sup>440</sup> *The Times* continued to pursue the story for several weeks. When concerns about the veracity of the story came up during a debate in Parliament, Lord Robert Cecil

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<sup>439</sup> Lucy Masterman lingers over this moment in her biography. She also points out, “The committee at which this matter was discussed was one of the first attended by Mr. Bellows, and the circumstance that the leaflet was vetoed on the single point of not being true impressed him deeply, and he told Sir Eric Maclagan, who was also present, that it decided him to co-operate with Wellington House.” And, she writes, “Mr. Elliot Dodds also told me that his won first piece of writing for propaganda was a pamphlet concerning a hospital bombed from the air. Between the time he received the commission and the time it was brought up for approval, information came in that the particular hospital was far too close to an ammunition dump, and that the Germans had indeed dropped warnings from the air on the point. So, a little ruefully, he had to vote with the rest for the scrapping of his maiden effort.” Masterman 293.

<sup>440</sup> Masterman 293.

punted on the question, saying only that *The Times* was a “reputable newspaper” in whose reporting he had confidence.<sup>441</sup>

Even in 1917, debates over the accuracy of information are occurring at the highest levels of the British government and there continues to be significant reticence to the circulation of known untruths. For many, the appropriate raw material of propaganda work remains only information that informs, and excludes any material that aims to misinform. However, the press barons, and their broad understanding of information as “evidence” whose truth can and should be left to the determination of those who receive it, are waiting just beyond the horizon. It is the Press Baron position that dominates the late stages of the war and dominates the information environment of the post-war world.

With the benefit of hindsight, the rumor of the “*Kadaver*” factories helps put into perspective the consequences that came with this decoupling of the categories of information and empirical fact for the modern world. During the war, the rumor of German “corpse factories” spread widely in Allied countries. After the war, the public was outraged when it was discovered that the rumor was false and that it had, at best, been allowed to circulate without objection by official sources and, at worst, been actively spread by government departments.<sup>442</sup> In the 1940’s, when rumors of German atrocities once again spread through Allied countries, people remembered how they had been duped during the previous war and many dismissed the stories as likely falsehoods, including those in a position to intervene and help victims of the German Holocaust. Falsehoods can be very effective in achieving desired outcomes, but that effectiveness

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<sup>441</sup> Masterman 293.

<sup>442</sup> There was, in fact, a large post-war outrage over government misinformation. See John Terraine’s *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War 1861-1945* (London: Leo Cooper, 1980). Also see Arthur Ponsonby’s *Falsehoods in Wartime: Containing An Assortment Of Lies Circulated Throughout The Nations During The Great War* (New York: E.P Dutton and Co., 1928).

comes with enormous potential consequences. Even those British propagandists such as Buchan and Masterman who were discomfited by the changing definition of information during the First World War could not have imagined the sheer magnitude of the cost of such a change just twenty years later.

## Section II: “The King of Ypres” and Problems of Empiricism

Buchan’s short story “The King of Ypres” (1915) articulates the way that Buchan is able to investigate the multiplicity of available versions of a given set of events within a larger work that does not obviously belie this multiplicity, providing a quick short-hand for understanding the way that Buchan engages information in the longer Hannay novels. The majority of the story narrates the experiences of Private Peter Galbraith using a limited third person perspective, giving the reader the events of the story only through the understanding of Galbraith himself.<sup>443</sup> This straightforward, third person narration leaves little doubt that the “truth” of the situation is that Private Galbraith acted to the best of his ability and in the best interests of the general welfare of the people of Ypres. Buchan widens out to an omniscient third-person perspective in the final paragraphs of the text, allowing several different versions of Galbraith’s story to rub up against one another. When asked to provide his testimony under oath at the end of “The King of Ypres,” Galbraith chooses to stay mute and does not relate his version of events to the British Army, leaving them to piece together what happened to Galbraith from rumors, suppositions, and the testimony of other people involved in the events. “The King of Ypres,” therefore, establishes a “true” version of the story while allowing several other

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<sup>443</sup> This is different from how Buchan narrates the Hannay novels, which are told from the exclusive first-person perspective of Richard Hannay.



versions of the story to coexist. The clear separation between the “official version,” created by the British Army and inserted into the permanent historical record of the war, and the “truth” of Galbraith’s experience underscores the idea that, under certain conditions, the maintenance and promulgation of an official version must supersede a concern for the factual truth. The story balances Buchan’s continuing belief in the soundness of the British military system as a whole with an acknowledgement that the institutional constraints of the system can limit the range of acceptable versions of events. Institutions cannot always accommodate a particular version of a given story, even one heavily grounded in objective fact.

The story was first published in *The Illustrated London News* in December 1915 and was then republished for the American audience in the short story collection *The Watcher by the Threshold* in September 1918. The story begins as Private Galbraith wakes from a night’s sleep to find he has been left behind when the British army withdraws from the city. He also finds that order has quickly begun to break down in the army’s absence. Feeling the pressure of professional obligation, Private Galbraith finds it is his duty to restore order. According to the story, he feels “[h]e was a British soldier--marooned here by no fault of his own--and it was his business to keep up the end of the British Army and impose the King's peace upon the unruly.”<sup>444</sup> The few remaining reasonable citizens of the city, including a priest, a young woman named Omèrine who catches Private Galbraith’s fancy, and Omèrine’s father, a prosperous attorney, form a “Committee of Public Safety.” Galbraith serves as “Acting Provost” of the city. He immediately sets out to establish order by collecting a posse comprising any wounded

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<sup>444</sup> John Buchan, “The King of Ypres” in *The Watcher by the Threshold* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919) 83.

soldiers who still “had the use of his legs, some well-grown boys, one or two ancients, and several dozen robust women,” and posting a “Proclamation” that establishes both a curfew and serious punishments for any rule-breaker. Connecting to the story’s title, Mademoiselle Omèrine jests shyly to Galbraith at the end of this first busy day that he has become “Monsieur le Roi d'Ypres,” the King of Ypres.

Private Galbraith turns out to be a very effective tyrant. His governing style is nothing short of royal. According to the story,

By the second day the order in Ypres was remarkable. By the third day it was phenomenal; and by the fourth a tyranny. The little city for the first time for seven hundred years fell under the sway of a despot. A citizen had to be on his best behaviour, for the Acting Provost's eye was on him.<sup>445</sup>

Galbraith does his best to exercise power reasonably. Despite the initially draconian punishment code promulgated by his posted orders, “[l]ooters and violent fellows went to gaol instead of the gallows.”<sup>446</sup> Even when he feels he must use force, for example when three German spies are caught red-handed and ultimately “taken and shot after a full trial,” he attempts to remain faithful to the little knowledge of law that he has in his possession. The trial of the spies is described as

the master effort of Private Galbraith--based on his own regimental experience and memories of a Sheriff Court in Lanarkshire, where he had twice appeared for poaching. He was extraordinarily punctilious about forms, and the three criminals--their guilt was clear, and they were the scum of creation--had something more than justice.<sup>447</sup>

The story’s limited third-person narration establishes clearly that Galbraith has done his best to adhere to the good intentions of the British army and the bureaucratic precision of British civil institutions, even if he has deviated from specific regulations.

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<sup>445</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 86.

<sup>446</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 86.

<sup>447</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 86.

When the British army returns to Ypres, a rumor-version of Galbraith reaches his compatriots before they find the man himself. They enter to find an orderly and peaceful city and hear tales of “le Roi,” not immediately realizing that this title refers to Private Galbraith and instead believing that the title refers to Belgium’s King Albert. When they come upon Galbraith, they find the soldier “in a corner of the cathedral yard, sitting disconsolately on the edge of a fallen Monument,” stunned by the recent death of his beloved Omèrine by an errant shell.<sup>448</sup> Although the story does not significantly develop this short love affair, Buchan portrays Galbraith as devastated by the death. He tells the Committee of Public Safety in his thick Scottish accent, “I maun resign this job [...] I’ve been forgettin’ that I’m a sodger and no a Provost. It’s my duty to get a nick at thae Boches.”<sup>449</sup> Galbraith effectively resigns his role as “King,” takes up his previous place as a private in the “King’s Army,” and is reintegrated into the hierarchy of this institution.

The version of the story transmitted to the army is quite different from the version presented to the reader through the straightforward narration that comprises the majority of the short story’s text. It is also quite different from the rumors about “le Roi” that first introduce the situation in Ypres to the returning army. Using Omèrine’s death as a pivot, Buchan changes the narrative perspective of the story in the final few paragraphs. The narration pulls back from Galbraith’s perspective and takes on the remote stance of omniscient third person. For example, the narration shifts to put his fellow soldiers at the center of the story’s perspective: “Soon his fellows forbore to chaff him, regarding him as

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<sup>448</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 86.

<sup>449</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 86.

a doomed man who had come well within the pale of the ultimate penalties.”<sup>450</sup>

Galbraith’s version – the version that the reader knows from the previous pages – is never transmitted to the army because, in his grief, he tells a version that is “so bare as to be unintelligible. He asked for no mercy, and gave no explanations.”<sup>451</sup> The result of this change in narrative perspective combined with the fact that Galbraith refuses to defend himself allows Buchan to place different versions of the story of Galbraith’s time in Ypres in relation to each other without undermining the accuracy of Galbraith’s original version.

In the end of the story, Galbraith’s court-martial produces an official document that records “what happened” for bureaucratic purposes and for inclusion in the historical record of the war. The third-person narrator relates that Galbraith has been found guilty of “riding roughshod over the King's Regulations,” “absenting himself from his battalion without permission,” “neglect[ing] his own duties and usurp[ing] without authority a number of superior functions,” and causing “the death or maltreatment of various persons who, whatever their moral deficiencies, must be regarded for the purposes of the case as civilian Allies.”<sup>452</sup> This “official” story is, in fact, an empirically-based version of what happened while Galbraith was the “King of Ypres” in the sense that he did ride roughshod over the King's Regulations, absent himself from his battalion without permission, neglect his own duties, and usurp without authority a number of superior functions, and cause the death or maltreatment of various Allies. However, the reader knows that it is a very partial understanding of the circumstances and motivations that lay behind these actions.

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<sup>450</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 87.

<sup>451</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 87.

<sup>452</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 87.

Certain individuals involved in creating this “official” version appreciate the virtue of Private Galbraith’s actions and attempt to fill in the silences that Galbraith refuses to elucidate on his own behalf. During his court-martial, various fellow members of the Committee of Public Safety speak up and tell their own, differing versions of “le Roi,” including the priest, and Omèrine’s father. While he is still found guilty, the British military court is persuaded by these accounts, and, as a result, the court takes into consideration the “exceptional circumstances” of Galbraith’s time in Ypres by imposing no penalty on him. Going a step further, “his Commanding Officer and the still more exalted personages shook hands with him,” telling him that “he was a devilish good fellow and a credit to the British Army.”<sup>453</sup> The rules of the British army do not have a way of dealing with the fact that there can be multiple versions of a story—Galbraith’s concealed version and the version the British army construes from its own sources and accounts—that are both empirically grounded and in contradiction with each other, but the people behind such regulations are capable of seeing such a situation clearly and reacting to it.

Throughout the story, Galbraith is aware of the fact that his experience can, and probably will, be seen from two different, yet mutually accurate, perspectives. He is sure of his decision to help reestablish order in Ypres, acknowledging that “[f]or once he was arrayed on the side of the angels.”<sup>454</sup> However, he does worry about the consequences of his actions once the army returns. One night he wakes from a dream and “suddenly saw the upshot of it all – himself degraded and shot as a deserter, and his brief glory pricked

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<sup>453</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 87.

<sup>454</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 83.

like a bubble. Grim forebodings of court-martials assailed him.”<sup>455</sup> However, at the end of the story, Buchan allows this contradiction to go unresolved and simply reinserts Galbraith back into army life. Both a convicted war criminal and a pet of the establishment, Buchan writes that Galbraith “cared for none of these things. As he sat again in the trenches at St. Eloi in six inches of water and a foot of mud, he asked his neighbour how many Germans were opposite them.”<sup>456</sup> Galbraith seems disconnected from his present life at the Front as his mind remains fixed on memories of Omèrine. The somewhat unsatisfying love plot in “The King of Ypres” is Buchan’s method for sidestepping the problems arising from the multiple existing versions of Galbraith’s story. Because of Omèrine’s death, Galbraith refuses to participate in the circulation of his version of the story and does not seem to care that the “official” version of the story will remain on his military record. “The King of Ypres” provides a clear illustration of the uncertainty that can arise in an environment in which the modern fact is the principal epistemological unit of narrative construction. Because the modern fact embraces both data and interpretation, it permits multiple narratives to be formed from the same data. Although all such narratives represent valid constructions of the empirical evidence, they nonetheless – as “The King of Ypres” demonstrates – present accounts of events that are in fundamental tension with one another.

“The King of Ypres” is a particularly interesting document when viewed in relation to one of the central tenets of British propaganda early in the war: the idea that the German army viciously mistreated the citizenry of Belgium during its initial invasion. Instead of adhering to an expected depiction of German brutality, “The King of Ypres”

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<sup>455</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 86.

<sup>456</sup> Buchan, *The Watcher by the Threshold* 87.

depicts the “unruliness” that goes on in Ypres to be the result of disruptive elements within the Belgian population. While some of the malcontents are tagged as “German spies,” most are depicted as opportunistic Belgian citizens taking advantage of the temporary absence of law and order to plunder the possessions, and occasionally the virtue, of their neighbors. When writing “The King of Ypres,” Buchan would have been familiar with the idea of German atrocities in general and specifically with the “Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages,” often referred to as the “Bryce Report,” published in May of 1915. Historians now call into question the veracity of much of the evidence from the “Bryce Report,” but little was made of its defects at the time of its publication. This report, based on the depositions of more than 1,200 individuals, including “Belgian witnesses, some soldiers, but most of them civilians from those towns and villages through which the German Army passed, and from British officers and soldiers,” outlined the atrocities committed by German soldiers during the initial invasion of Belgium.<sup>457</sup> The violation of Belgian neutrality was the stated precipitation for Britain’s entry into the war and the “Bryce Report” was an important document in bolstering this justification with the British public.<sup>458</sup> What is extraordinary about “The King of Ypres” is that Buchan would write a story in 1915 that challenges a central tenet

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<sup>457</sup> *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2004) 3.

<sup>458</sup> Lord Bryce, the head of the committee responsible for producing the report, was a trained lawyer and evidence remains that he was initially very concerned about establishing the factual basis of all eyewitness testimony included in the report. However, he succumbed to political pressure and dropped his demand that the committee be allowed to cross-examine witnesses personally. See Trevor Wilson’s *The Myriad Faces of War* for a good overview of the problematic evidentiary procedures involved in the creation of the Bryce Report. The “Bryce Report” presents itself as an evidence-driven document, but there are significant problems with the believability of the evidence on which the report is based. While the report stated that the original documentation of these stories “remain in the custody of the Home Department, where they will be available, in case of need, for reference after the conclusion of the War,” no documents of this type were found at the Home Office after the war. Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War* (London: The Polity Press, 1986).

of the British justification for war – the idea that “outrages” in Belgium were carried out by Germans on the innocent people of Belgium.

In a number of ways, “The King of Ypres” summarizes Buchan’s attitude toward wartime information circulation at a mid-point of the war. Buchan asserts with this story that large, bureaucratic institutions, here presented as the British army but implicating by extension any arm of the British government, are not capable of capturing a truly accurate understanding of the complicated and compromised actions occurring under wartime conditions. The example of Galbraith’s court-martial shows that even when no malice is intended and the official version aims at getting to the truth, accuracy remains elusive. By placing the action of “The King of Ypres” in conversation with the problematic truth-claims of the Bryce Report, Buchan makes possible a subtle but deeply important commentary on the monumental possibilities available to those willing to manipulate facts to fit a desired outcome. The British nation went to war to protect the neutrality of “innocent” Belgium. What a surprise that in 1915 Buchan would dare to question whether or not the good people of Ypres were deserving of such sacrifices.

Viewed through the prism of the Bryce Report, it is possible to see “The King of Ypres” as an exploration of the tension between narratives grounded in empirical evidence and those grounded only in their own terms – which, in large parts represents the tension between the modern fact and the post-modern fact. Although acknowledging the possibility that a single set of events can give rise to multiple accurate narratives, Buchan in “The King of Ypres – through both his emphasis on the importance of obtaining the “true” facts about Galbraith’s experience and his implicit criticism of the Bryce Report – clearly embraces an empirically-based approach to narrative construction.



However, at the same time, Buchan is cognizant of the limits of such an approach. The story ends on a note of resignation through Galbraith's reintegration into the British Army, an implicit acknowledgement that doing what is necessary to defeat the Germans is of paramount importance in this historical moment.

### Section III: "Truth" in Buchan's Pre-war Novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

The shift in Buchan's perspective on the relationship between information and truth in his early Hannay fiction mirrors the process of reevaluation he undergoes as a propagandist. Consistent with the early war Wellington House approach to propaganda, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is fundamentally concerned with discerning objective facts at the heart of the novel's plot.<sup>459</sup> The novel follows Richard Hannay, a seemingly ordinary British colonial just arrived in London from South Africa, as he attempts to track down and piece together the tendrils of a secret plot, the existence of which he is only begrudgingly and imperfectly informed of by someone whose information is also far from complete. This secret plot, if successful, threatens to plunge the European community into war. Through its fast-paced adventure plot and Buchan's frequent use of fortuitous coincidence, the novel depicts an environment in which Hannay finds information easy to acquire but difficult to parse. However, through careful vetting and significant legwork Hannay is able to uncover the true facts concerning this conspiracy that exist behind all attempts at obfuscation.<sup>460</sup> By the end of the novel, Hannay discovers that

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<sup>459</sup> *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is technically a pre-war novel since Buchan wrote it in the months before the opening salvos of the war in August 1914. It was first published serially in the spring of 1915 in *Blackwood's Magazine*.

<sup>460</sup> Perhaps unintentionally, Buchan will later undermine the bedrock of the story he sets out in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in his final wartime Hannay novel, *Mr. Standfast*.

the plot is aimed at stealing secret details about British naval maneuvers, drawing attention to the important role that information will play in the looming European war. Adding additional confusion and misdirection within the novel is the fact that, in order to stay one step ahead of the various groups following him, Hannay creates and sends into circulation a series of inventively false versions of his own story. Buchan uses first-person narration throughout the novel, allowing Buchan to maintain the idea of a “true” version of events that is clearly separate from the many “false” versions spread within the text.

At the beginning of the novel, Hannay’s relationship to information and his understanding of the means by which information is circulated within the community of British citizens is that of an average person of his age and class. The story begins with Hannay going to his club to read the evening papers. The important news of the day is about the diplomatic efforts of “Karolides, the Greek Premier” who is leading the effort to reduce international tensions and lessen the likelihood of a European war. Hannay summarizes the newspaper position of the European situation and of Karolides role in it as such:

From all accounts he seemed the one big man in the show; and he played a straight game too, which was more than could be said for most of them. I gathered that they hated him pretty blackly in Berlin and Vienna, but that we were going to stick by him, and one paper said that he was the only barrier between Europe and Armageddon.<sup>461</sup>

Hannay believes in the accuracy of information presented through the newspaper, taking the newspaper’s version to represent “all accounts” of the situation. When he first becomes embroiled in tracking the secret at the heart of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Hannay

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<sup>461</sup> John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1915) 11.

relies on the understanding of events he “gather[s]” from the newspaper and accepts the assumption that the plot must involve a political assassination of Karolides.

While the novel includes a number of action-packed chase scenes, much of the plot’s dynamism stems from the fact that each time Hannay gathers enough information to formulate a plausible understanding, that version is immediately undercut by new information. With his newspaper reading fresh in his head, Hannay is immediately faced with circumstances that challenge the newspaper’s version of events. When Hannay gets back to his rooms, he is accosted in the hallway by a man he knows vaguely as his upstairs neighbor. When they get inside Hannay’s flat, this man starts to tell him “the queerest rigamarole” and Hannay relates a version of this new information to the reader, restating “what he told me as well as I could make it out,” a situation that creates narrative space between the version the man tells to Hannay and the version that Hannay transmits to the reader.<sup>462</sup> This man, an American named Scudder, tells Hannay that the story of Karolides reported in the newspapers is wrong and that “[a]way behind all the Governments and the armies there was a big subterranean movement going on, engineered by very dangerous people” that is bent on war and is not interested in diplomatic efforts to prevent it.<sup>463</sup> Scudder acknowledges that he came upon the information “by accident; it fascinated him; he went further, and then he got caught.”<sup>464</sup> In this way, Scudder operates as a proto-Hannay in the novel, a lone actor who pieces together his story a bit at a time and only with great effort.

This first encounter with an alternative narrative establishes a pattern for Hannay’s acquisition of information that repeats throughout the novel. Scudder’s version

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<sup>462</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, 15-16.

<sup>463</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 16.

<sup>464</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 16.

provides Hannay an understanding of events that satisfies certain logical inconsistencies created by the newspaper version, so Hannay is open to believing its credibility. In sharing the credible “hints” that he has gathered, Scudder is passing along to Hannay a series of related rumors. Scudder tells Hannay,

I got the first hint in an inn on the Achensee in Tyrol. That set me inquiring, and I collected my other clues in a fur-shop in the Galician quarter of Buda, in a Strangers’ Club in Vienna, and in a little bookshop off the Racknitzstrasse in Leipsic.<sup>465</sup>

Going back to Shibutani’s definition of rumor, this new information rests on the fact that it provides a “‘meaningful’ interpretation” of ambiguous events. Hannay says, “[h]e told me some queer things that explained a lot that had puzzled me – things that happened in the Balkan War, how one state suddenly came out on top, why alliances were made and broken, why certain men disappeared, and where the sinews of war came from.”<sup>466</sup> As is often the case with rumors, Hannay’s initial instinct is to determine the truth of a story by determining the trustworthiness of the storyteller. Hannay believes Scudder, claiming, “I had heard in my time many steep tales which had turned out to be true, and I had made a practice of judging the man rather than the story.”<sup>467</sup> This method of assessing the veracity of information by reference to the trustworthiness of the speaker resembles in significant part Budd’s definition of information in which the intention of the speaker determines the statement’s informational content. However, the novel continually complicates the connection between storyteller and story. Scudder is the first of the novel’s many storytellers who appear to be reliable but turn out to be unreliable, who offers up a “‘meaningful interpretation” that turns out to be factually inaccurate. Thus,

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<sup>465</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 22.

<sup>466</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 16-17.

<sup>467</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 25.

while at one level embracing Budd's approach to information, the novel also implicitly critiques an approach to information that relies too heavily on the speaker's or the disseminator's intent.

Determining the accuracy of information is a constant problem in the novel. While much of Scudder's story convinces Hannay, he also dismisses certain claims because they do not provide a sufficiently satisfying interpretation of an abstruse set of circumstances or do not touch on a topic about which Hannay is uncertain. For example, Scudder believes that the movers behind this plot are anarchists and Jews. Scudder suggests that if one is able to dig down through the layers of business and get behind "Prince *von and zu*" or the "elegant young man who talks Eton-and-Harrow English" one will find "a little white-faced Jew in a bath-chair with an eye like a rattlesnake" who is pulling the strings on the whole operation.<sup>468</sup> In fact, it turns out that much of what Scudder thinks is wrong, including his hypothesis about the date on which he believes Karolides will be assassinated.

Further complicating the transmission of information between the two men is the fact that Hannay does not pay very careful attention to what Scudder tells him, judging Scudder's adventure story to be of greater value than his political information. Rather incidentally he manages to pick up three pieces of information, the name "Julia Czechenyi," the phrase "Black Stone," and the presence of a man with a lisp, that become necessary and useful to him later in the novel. While Hannay does not initially take Scudder's information seriously, others obviously do—so seriously that they are willing to kill Scudder for his "little black book," a notebook in which he had been constantly scribbling. After Scudder's death, Hannay finds the book hidden in a can of tobacco,

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<sup>468</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 17.

presumably hidden by Scudder to keep its contents from the assassins. It occurs to Hannay that Scudder may have been attempting to keep the book from his eyes as well, making him question whether some of the information Scudder shared with him was intentionally inaccurate. Realizing that the police will finger him for the murder, he decides to get out of town. Also realizing that those who have been hunting Scudder will suspect that he was taken into Scudder's confidence, Hannay contrives to masquerade as his own milkman, slipping out of his building unnoticed and fleeing to Scotland on a northbound train.

Besides the story first circulated by Scudder about the secret plot, the novel contains an additional story that circulates in multiple versions – the story of Scudder's death, known in the novel as the "Portland Place murder" after Hannay's address in London. While engaged in his own detective work surrounding the secret plot, Hannay tracks developments in the case of the Portland Place murder through the newspaper. On the first morning after his escape from London, he reads that his butler fingered the milkman, who "seemed to have occupied the police for the better part of the day," but that the police ultimately determined that "the true criminal, about whose identity the police were reticent, was believed to have got away from London by one of the northern lines."<sup>469</sup> The newspaper version of the Portland Place murder operates according to its own agenda and Hannay notices, "There was a short note about me as the owner of the flat. I guessed the police had stuck that in, as a clumsy contrivance to persuade me that I was unsuspected."<sup>470</sup> Hannay also observes, "There was nothing else in the paper, nothing

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<sup>469</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 55.

<sup>470</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 55-6.

about foreign politics or Karolides, or the things that had interested Scudder,” pointing out how this version is constrained by the limits of its own information.<sup>471</sup>

In the first half of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan offers two related metrics by which to judge the truthfulness of a narrative. The first is the idea that a story’s truthfulness can be determined by the trustworthiness of the teller. As noted above, this metric largely tracks the criterion used by Budd in determining what constitutes information. Buchan returns to this logic repeatedly, but does not maintain a consistent position in favor of the reliability of this method. As mentioned earlier, Hannay initially judges that Scudder is the kind of man whose statements inspire confidence, but he proves to be an unreliable storyteller. While hiding out at an inn in Scotland, Hannay uses the words “Julia Czechenyi,” one of the names he remembers hearing from Scudder, to crack the cipher that Scudder used when writing in his notebook. This decoded version contradicts Scudder’s original tale, confirming that Scudder deliberately misled Hannay at the level of fact. Hannay realizes, “The little man had told me a pack of lies. All his yarns about the Balkans and the Jew-Anarchists and the Foreign Office Conference were eyewash, and so was Karolides.”<sup>472</sup> Scudder’s notebook reveals a different, if vaguely related, organization of the details of the secret plot. After decoding the notebook, Hannay believes in the veracity of this second Scudder-originated tale “absolutely.”<sup>473</sup> Not unreasonably, Hannay believes this second version because it was intended for Scudder’s eyes only and Scudder had no reason to deceive himself in his own little black book; thus, Hannay is still assessing the reliability of information based in his assessment of the speaker’s intent. This second version is also problematic because it is incomplete.

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<sup>471</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 56.

<sup>472</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 73.

<sup>473</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 74.

Scudder did not commit everything he knew to paper, preferring to keep certain facts only in his head. Hannay realizes that the truth “was in the notes – with gaps.”<sup>474</sup> Hannay does not entirely lose faith in this method of determining the accuracy of information, returning to this logic again and again throughout the novel.

The second metric floated by the novel for judging the trustworthiness of a narrative is the idea that a story can be “true in essentials” even when it is factually inaccurate. This concept also focuses on the intentionality of the teller – consistent with Budd, a story only can be “essentially true” if the teller seeks to inform, not misinform. The difference between this conception of the truth and the one discussed above is the nature of the teller’s intent. While the “trustworthiness” model presupposes an intent to convey factual truth, the “essential truth” model assumes an intent to create an accurate understanding in the audience. In other words, individual factual details are not relevant to “essential truth”; a narrative can be essentially true if it is disseminated with the aim of creating an accurate understanding and assessment of certain events. For example, on Hannay’s second night in Scotland, he takes a room in a country inn operated by a young man known in the story only by a reference in the chapter title to the “Literary Innkeeper.” This young man wants to be a writer, wants to “see life, to travel the world, and write things like Kipling and Conrad,” but he does not see his present life as providing the raw material for writing adventure stories.<sup>475</sup> Hannay disagrees with this assessment and tells the young man, “[m]aybe you’re rubbing shoulders with it at this

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<sup>474</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 74.

<sup>475</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 64.



moment.”<sup>476</sup> He offers the young man “a true tale,” one that “a month from now you can make a novel out of”:

I pitched him a lovely yarn. It was true in essentials, too, though I altered the minor details. I made out that I was a mining magnate from Kimberly, who had had a lot of trouble with I.D.B and had shown up a gang. They had pursued me across the ocean, and had killed my best friend, and were now on my tracks [...] I described an attack on my life on the voyage home, and I made a really horrid affair of the Portland Place murder.<sup>477</sup>

Hannay’s claim that he only changes the “minor details” is hard to support. Very little in the story is accurate outside of the fact that he is being pursued by both the police and a criminal group simultaneously. Hannay does get credibility with the young man by referencing the Portland Place murder, a point of contact that the man uses to connect Hannay’s story to the newspaper version circulating under the same name. The man chooses to believe Hannay’s falsified version, claiming, “By God! [...] it is all pure Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle.”<sup>478</sup> Given his penchant for adventure literature, the young man is a willing audience for Hannay’s false tale, admitting to Hannay, “I believe everything out of the common. The only thing to distrust is the normal.”<sup>479</sup> Buchan is exploring the idea that there is a bigger picture truth in which the details are unimportant if the “essential” story is preserved.

In Buchan’s view, “essential truth” still requires a fidelity to actual fact by the teller – but the commitment to actual fact is indirect rather than direct. “Essential truth” to Buchan is a substitute for an empirically-based narrative because both are intended by the teller to leave the audience with the same understanding and assessment of the narrative. Thus, the teller of an essentially true story is subject to the same limitations in terms of

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<sup>476</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 64.

<sup>477</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 65.

<sup>478</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 65.

<sup>479</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 65.

acceptable narratives as a teller who grounds his or her story on actual fact – he or she does not have the ability to select a desired audience’s understanding and then construct a narrative that best achieves that goal.

In the middle of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* Hannay brings these two metrics of judging truth in storytelling together when he determines that telling the truth, both factually and essentially, will be the best way to proceed in discovering the secret at the center of the novel, known to Hannay by this point in the novel as a conspiracy plotted by an organization called “the Black Stone.” Despite the fact that he was incorrect in assessing Scudder’s character as trustworthy, Hannay again relies on an assessment of the trustworthiness of a stranger, a Liberal candidate for Parliament whom he encounters accidentally during his desperate race around Scotland. Hannay tells this man as close to the whole truth as he can manage, choosing this man and this moment because he determines “the time had come for me to put my cards on the table. I saw by this man’s eye that he was the kind you can trust.”<sup>480</sup> Hannay describes his telling of this version:

I seemed to be another person, standing aside and listening to my own voice, and judging carefully the reliability of my tale. It was the first time I had ever told anyone the exact truth, so far as I understood it, and it did me no end of good, for it straightened out the thing in my own mind. I blinked no detail.<sup>481</sup>

Hannay points out to this man that it is his “duty as a law-abiding citizen” to call the police, a duty based on the version of events that has been circulated in the newspapers naming Hannay as the perpetrator of the “Portland Place murder.” However, Hannay banks on the fact that the man will accept the greater credibility of Hannay’s version and help him to evade the police and the agents of the Black Stone. The man does believe Hannay’s version of the story, stating, “I don’t want proof. I may be an ass on the

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<sup>480</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 90.

<sup>481</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 91-2.

platform, but I can size up a man. You're no murderer and you're no fool, and I believe you are speaking the truth."<sup>482</sup> Based on his favorable assessment of Hannay, the man writes to his godfather, the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office Sir Walter Bullivant, setting up the plot arc for second half of the novel.

At this point, several streams of narrative begin to converge, including disparate versions circulating about the Portland Place murder and the Black Stone plot. When Hannay finally meets up with Bullivant, he tells Hannay that the police are no longer after him for the murder because he has been cleared as a suspect. As it turns out, Scudder sent a letter to Bullivant before he died and Bullivant "guessed at the rest" when he received the letter about Hannay from his nephew.<sup>483</sup> The various versions of the Black Stone plot are harder to reconcile. Hannay shares with Bullivant the contents of Scudder's notebook. Hannay's version of the story is accurate "on the whole" but Bullivant fills in a few of the gaps. In turn, Bullivant's version must accommodate information Hannay picked up during his time in Scotland. Scudder's version says that Karolides will be murdered on June 15<sup>th</sup>, two days after Hannay meets Bullivant, but Bullivant discounts this information, pointing out the source of Scudder's untrustworthiness as a narrator, saying, "The trouble about him was that he was too romantic. He had the artistic temperament, and wanted a story to be better than God meant it to be. He had a lot of odd biases, too. Jews, for example, made him see red. Jews and the high finance."<sup>484</sup> In fact, Bullivant believes that there will be no assassination, saying, "this is the weak part of the tale, for I happen to know that the virtuous Karolides

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<sup>482</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 93.

<sup>483</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 168.

<sup>484</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 169.

is likely to outlast us both.”<sup>485</sup> However, almost as soon as this “amalgamated” version coalesces, it too is undermined. Just after Bullivant makes this pronouncement, he receives a call with news that Karolides has just been killed in London. Not only does this news undermine Sir Walter’s understanding, but it contradicts both previous versions of the story. The first half of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* ends with a failure to produce any accurate understanding of events. While Hannay and Bullivant have managed to uncover many of the falsehoods, they are ultimately unable to produce an understanding of the threat upon which they can confidently take action. If previously Buchan argues that there is value in “essential” truths regardless of the accuracy of the extant facts, here he points out the difficulty of determining “essential truths” without attention to extent facts and also notes the importance of ascertaining the precise facts when faced with an actual enemy and real-world consequences.

In the second half of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan turns his investigation from the idea that one can ascertain the truth of information by determining the trustworthiness of the teller to an investigation of the whether or not it is even possible to determine a person’s identity with sufficient certainty that it can be used as a proxy for determining truthfulness. Hannay mentions that his friend Peter Pienaar, a skilled tracker who will play a very important role in Buchan’s next novel *Greenmantle*, told him once that “barring absolute certainties like fingerprints [... t]he only thing that mattered was what Peter called ‘atmosphere.’”<sup>486</sup> Peter believes, “If a man could get into perfectly different surroundings from those in which he had first been observed, and – this is the important part – really play up to these surroundings and behave as if he had never been out of

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<sup>485</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 170.

<sup>486</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 212-13.

them, he would puzzle the cleverest detectives on earth.”<sup>487</sup> As it turns out, the agents of the Black Stone have been obtaining secret information because one of their members is a master of this kind of deception.

Known in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as “the man with the lisp,” “the man at the moorland farm,” Lord Alloa, and Mr. Appleton, this man can *almost* perfectly blend in with his surroundings.<sup>488</sup> Hannay is finally able to get to the bottom of the Black Stone mystery when he sees behind this man’s deception and recognizes the real person beneath these disguises. While waiting outside in the hallway at a meeting between British and French officials, Hannay realizes that one of the British officials, Lord Alloa, is not really the man himself, but actually the same man who briefly captured Hannay during his frantic trek through Scotland. The military officials are so focused on their meeting that they fail to look closely at the man they think to be Alloa and he escapes with the details of British naval maneuvers before Hannay can stop him. Working from clues in Scudder’s notebook, the group suspects that these secrets will be smuggled out of the country from a location where “thirty-nine steps” lead down to the sea. When they arrive at the likely location, they find that a man named Mr. Appleton, a “decent old fellow, who paid his bills regularly, and was always good for a fiver for a local charity” occupies a small villa at the top of the steps.<sup>489</sup> Hannay has difficulty determining if this man and his seemingly ordinary companions are agents of the Black Stone or are merely innocent members of the British middle class until he remembers Peter’s lesson about looking past the “atmosphere,” the social and cultural trappings in which the scene is embedded.

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<sup>487</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 213.

<sup>488</sup> In Buchan’s later text, *Mr. Standfast*, this same figure is known additionally as Mr. Moxton Ivery and Graf von Schwabing.

<sup>489</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 204.

While sitting down to a game of cards with these men, Hannay notices the way Mr. Appleton's fingers tap against his knees. Hannay realizes he remembers the same motion from the man who held him captive in Scotland. When Hannay confronts the men, the youngest of the three escapes through a window and flees down the thirty-nine steps to a yacht, the *Ariadne*, waiting below. The men think they have won when Hannay announces that the *Ariadne* has been in British control for the past hour.

In one last twist, the novel's final paragraph complicates Buchan's position on the possibility of securely establishing the truth. Set apart from the last lines of the story's main action, the final paragraph acts like a coda to the novel. Narrated in the past tense, it reads:

Three weeks later, as all the world knows, we went to war. I joined the New Army the first week, and owing to my Matabele experience got a captain's commission straight off. But I had done my best service, I think, before I put on khaki.<sup>490</sup>

For the majority of the novel, the goal of Hannay's effort is to prevent a possible European war, but the novel ends with a failure to do so. Given this ending, it is unclear what uncovering the truth about the secret plot actually accomplishes. Alain Riach helpfully questions the purpose of this ending, pointing out, "If all the effort of the book has been expended in fierce games of disguise and counter-disguise, what benefit has this been to anyone, when war breaks out in any case?"<sup>491</sup> However, while Hannay's actions may not have prevented the war itself, he did prevent critical naval secrets from ending up in the hands of the enemy right at the outbreak of the war. As Buchan endorses even more fully in his later wartime Hannay novels, *Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast*, the battle

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<sup>490</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 231.

<sup>491</sup> Alain Riach, "John Buchan: Politics, Language, and Suspense" in *Reassessing John Buchan*. Kate Macdonald, ed. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009) 174.

for control of information is an important – and perhaps the most important – front in the British war effort.

In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, narratives are manipulated, combined, and pulled out of context in ways that make it difficult to get at an accurate organization of the information. However, the novel takes the position that an ultimate truth is discoverable. Buchan does acknowledge that it is possible to view the same set of facts from multiple angles. While he considers “Mr. Appleton” a despicable spy, he also realizes that “in his foul way he had been a patriot” to those on his own side.<sup>492</sup> Ultimately, Hannay is able to see through all the falsehoods circulated by the agents of the Black Stone, prevent the plot to steal naval secrets, and save the day.

Buchan expands the scope of his investigation into information in *Greenmantle* and aims at more than simply uncovering and establishing an accurate accounting of a given set of events. Where *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is written on a small scale, the action confined to a few days and to the geography of England and Scotland, *Greenmantle* is large in scope. Its action moves over great swaths of Europe and the Middle East, following the activities of four different men over several months. In *Greenmantle*, questions about the status of information continue to be a central component of the novel; however, Buchan expands the role played by false information and explores both the possibilities and the dangers associated with using false information to manipulate public opinion.

In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan focuses on an approach to information dissemination that largely tracks Budd’s understanding of information. Whether dealing with empirically true or essentially true narratives, Buchan operates under the premise

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<sup>492</sup> Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 230.

that the disseminator of information must have the intent to “inform,” i.e., the intent to leave the audience with a more clear and accurate understanding regarding the subject of the communication. In *Greenmantle*, Buchan begins to break from the Budd framework and to acknowledge the potential value of efforts to “misinform” one’s audience. Indeed, by the end of *Greenmantle*, Buchan accepts that intentional efforts to “misinform” – using Budd’s term here to mean an effort that leaves the audience with an inaccurate understanding of a particular situation – can be an effective and appropriate way to achieve one’s chosen outcome. *Greenmantle* thus marks a shift in Buchan’s approach to information away from the intentionality of the teller and towards the effectiveness of information in achieving one’s goals.

#### Section IV: *Greenmantle* and the Potentiality of Falsehoods in Wartime

Buchan’s focus on falsehood as a component of propaganda in *Greenmantle* provides insight into Buchan’s wartime reevaluation of the complex marriage of truth and information. However, the novel displaces this investigation onto the German propaganda effort. In this way, *Greenmantle* approaches questions about the appropriate role of truth in propaganda obliquely, questions Buchan could not (and probably would not) have approached directly as a loyal participant in the British propaganda service.<sup>493</sup> In general,

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<sup>493</sup> Buchan was also responding to a long-standing British fear of Germany’s interest in Pan-Islamic movements in the Middle East. Tilman Lüdke’s recent monograph *Jihad made in Germany* examines German propaganda in the Middle East during the First World War and the British response to this propaganda. The Germans’ goal in creating *jihad* among the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire – similar to the one that Buchan fictionalizes in *Greenmantle* – has a basis in historical fact. Lüdke writes, “Throughout the four years of the war [the Germans] conducted an active and costly propaganda campaign to produce a *jihad*, with rather disappointing results. Britain, on the other hand, was worried about the Pan-Islamic menace and took tough countermeasures to prevent this *jihad* from actually breaking out.” Lüdke, 1. Buchan references the historical figure Enver Pasha, head of the Turkish intelligence organization the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa, in *Greenmantle*. Enver Pasha was credited with using the idea of *jihad* in 1911 in Libya to bolster the resolve of the Muslim troops to fight against the Italians, a circumstance that Buchan



the novel seeks to weigh the risks involved in propagating false information against the potential benefits of circulating false, but highly effective, narratives.<sup>494</sup> *Greenmantle* is written mid-war and its middleness is emphasized by Buchan's changeable engagement with information. The first half of the novel does not much alter the relationship to information that Buchan establishes in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, focusing on the discovery of true facts beneath many layers of falsehood. Hannay and his companions hunt the central mystery of the novel and spin out lies and false versions of their own stories in order to bluff their way out of tight spots, creating a rich web of alternate versions within the novel.

In the second half of the novel, Buchan's exploration of the potential effectiveness of false information deepens as he describes two propaganda efforts, one German and one British, to deliberately mislead the Turkish army. The secret turns out to be an elaborate rumor the Germans have been circulating about the imminent arrival of a Muslim prophet in an effort to secure the loyalty of the Turkish army. Once Hannay and his companions penetrate the details of this rumor, they set about disrupting the German plan, ultimately turning the rumor against the Germans in order to secure a victory for British allies on the Eastern Front. By the end of the novel, the "fact" at the center of the story has become triply false – the original false prophet, known as Greenmantle, dies of

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would have been familiar with from reading the newspapers. *Jihad* against the Entente powers was proclaimed by the sultan-caliph in November 1914, but the religious and political authority of sultan-caliph in Constantinople had already been uncertain for a number of years. Tilman Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany: Ottoman and German Propaganda and Intelligence Operations in the First World War* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005) 50-3.

<sup>494</sup> In *Greenmantle* Buchan repeatedly refers to the German system using the vocabulary of "effectiveness." Hannay uses the word effective to describe his first impressions of Germany: "The capital gave one an impression of ugly cleanness and a sort of dreary effectiveness." In describing the German Von Strumm: "Here was the German of caricature, the real German, the fellow we were up against. He was as hideous as a hippopotamus, but effective. Every bristle on his old head was effective." John Buchan, *Greenmantle* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1916) 65.

cancer and is replaced by the Germans with another Muslim holy man, the head of a brotherhood called the Companions of the Rosy Hours, who pretends to be Greenmantle. Unbeknownst to the Germans, this second false prophet is actually one of Hannay's companions named Sandy Arbuthnot, a British soldier and a polyglot who possesses the ability to move around the countries of the Middle East as if he were a native. When "Greenmantle" arrives on the field of battle at the head of the British-allied Russian army, this embodied falsehood turns out to be supremely effective. The Muslim troops throw down their weapons and allow the prophet-lead Russian army to overrun the German-held city of Erzerum. In *Greenmantle*, the absence of ontological fact at the center of the plot provides the central tension in the novel. Buchan uses the fictional space of the novel to explore the idea that a system of propaganda built from all possible informational material and unconnected to any sense of fidelity to empiricism – similar to Buckland's understanding of information as anything that *can* be used by an individual to understand a situation - is more flexible and often more persuasive than a system of propaganda grounded in a fidelity to empirical fact. However, the propaganda produced in such an open system is also subject to the same vulnerabilities to which information is subject in Jameson's "open totality" paradigm. It is more easily undermined, appropriated, and manipulated once it is circulating in the world. In the end, the novel conveys Buchan's ambivalence towards such an information paradigm, acknowledging the possibilities and the potential hazards of divorcing propaganda from a strict relationship to empirical fact, but also demonstrates his growing acceptance of the necessity of such a flexible approach.

In a number of ways the story arc in *Greenmantle* is similar to that of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. The novel picks up a few months after the events described in the earlier novel as Hannay recovers in Britain after being wounded in the battle of Loos. Planning to return to the Front, he receives a telegram from Sir Walter Bullivant, who asks Hannay to go undercover to discover the details of a secret German plot, a plot device not unlike the mystery of the Black Stone at the heart of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Bullivant stresses that what he is proposing is not regular soldiering: it “does not come by any conceivable stretch within the scope of a soldier’s duties” and “any sane man would” decline to undertake such a risky mission.<sup>495</sup> Bullivant’s telegram makes Hannay realize “[t]here might be other things in the war than straightforward fighting,” a sentiment that Buchan explores in both *Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast*, perhaps because his own war work in propaganda kept him away from frontline fighting.<sup>496</sup> Hannay goes to Germany under the guise of a Dutch South African named Cornelius Brandt. Before leaving London, he pulls into the effort two other key characters, Sandy Arbuthnot and an American named John S. Blenkiron, who pretends to be a German sympathizer and, therefore, may travel freely in Germany under his own name. Shortly after leaving London, Hannay meets the last of the other key characters involved in the scheme, his old friend Peter Pienaar, a real Dutch South African and a spry colonial adventurer first mentioned in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. The men take separate journeys through German territory and the storylines eventually merge in Constantinople where they fit together the bits of information they have individually acquired. As mentioned above, the four men eventually make their way

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<sup>495</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 15.

<sup>496</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 12.

East and succeed in foiling the German plot during a battle on the Eastern Front between German-Turkish troops and the Russian army.

*Greenmantle* also shares with *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (and will later share with *Mr. Standfast*) a concern with the difference between a person's essential identity and the alternate identities that one can acquire through impersonation and deception. While in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* Buchan explores the ways in which falsifying one's identity can be used for nefarious purposes, in *Greenmantle* Sandy Arbuthnot embodies the novel's interest in such a possibility more positively. Throughout the novel, Hannay and his companions use Sandy's skill at dissemblance to great advantage. Sandy's essential identity can be definitively established through listing the material facts about his background and family:

If you consult the Peerage you will find that to Edward Cospatrick, fifteenth Baron Clanroyden, there was born in the year 1882, as his second son, Ludovick Gustavus Arbuthnot, commonly called the Honourable, etc. The said son was educated at Eton and New College, Oxford, was a captain in the Tweeddale Yeomeany, and served for some years as honorary attaché at various embassies.<sup>497</sup>

However, Sandy is capable of convincingly embodying many other personalities.

Hannay explains, "The Peerage will stop short at this point, but that is by no means the end of the story."<sup>498</sup> Reports of Sandy can also be gathered from all variety of "[I]ean

brown men from the ends of the earth," from "little forgotten fishing ports" on the Adriatic to a "shepherd's hut in the Caucasus," to "Petrograd or Rome or Cairo."<sup>499</sup>

Sandy is even more skilled at deception than Mr. Applegate, capable of "getting inside the skin" of other personalities so fully that his falsehood goes entirely undetected by his

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<sup>497</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 31.

<sup>498</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 31.

<sup>499</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 31-2.

opponents right to the end of the novel.<sup>500</sup> The same skillful lying that was so dangerous in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* when used by the enemy, in *Greenmantle* becomes an asset when deployed in the service of native interests.

Like *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Greenmantle* begins by drawing a distinction between the version of the war widely available within the British population – the narrative of the war that everyone knows – and the very different version known only to the privileged few – the narrative of what is really going on “over there.” Reprising the role of knowledgeable insider he played in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Bullivant tells Hannay, “If you will give me your attention for ten minutes I will supplement your newspaper reading.”<sup>501</sup> Bullivant sums up the public version of the Muslim world’s role in the war as widely reported, stating,

The ordinary man will tell you that it was German organization backed up by German money and German arms [...] The ordinary man again will answer that Islam in Turkey is becoming a back number, and that Krupp guns are the new gods.<sup>502</sup>

Yet there are problems with how the standard explanation of events connects the available facts. Bullivant shares additional details that contradict those available in the newspaper, admitting that if it was only German guns and German money, “we might expect to find the regular army obedient, and [also the Turks in] Constantinople. But in the provinces, where Islam is strong, there would be trouble. Many of us counted on that.”<sup>503</sup> At the outset of the novel, this privileged version of the story exists only as scraps of information. Bullivant’s son, a secret agent working in the East, died a few months earlier, leaving behind only a slip of paper with three words “‘Kasredin,’

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<sup>500</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 32.

<sup>501</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 16.

<sup>502</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 17.

<sup>503</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 17.

‘cancer,’ and ‘v.I.’”<sup>504</sup> Hannay and his friends are charged with using these clues to gain access to a more complete understanding of German actions in the Islamic world.

In creating the rumor at the heart of *Greenmantle*, the Germans understand that if they can create the expectation that a holy figure will appear and then manage the revelation at a time and in a manner that suits their military needs, it will give them a significant advantage. The extensive network of British intelligence agents in the Middle East overhear a rumor circulating among the Muslim population about “some star – man, prophecy, or trinket – coming out of the West,” and report that the Muslim population is “waiting for a revelation.”<sup>505</sup> The British do not yet know the exact nature of this “star,” but he predicts, “You never know what will start off a Jihad! But I rather think it’s a man.”<sup>506</sup> Before leaving London, Sandy gives them a hypothesis to go on, surmising,

He would have to combine a lot of claims. His descent must be pretty good to begin with, and there are families, remember, that claim the Koreish blood. Then he’d have to be rather a wonder on his own account – saintly, eloquent, and that sort of thing. And I expect he’d have to show a sign.<sup>507</sup>

When Sandy sinks down among the Muslim population, he is able to confirm the details of the rumor. As he predicted, he tells his companions when they reassemble in Constantinople, “A seer has arisen of the blood of the Prophet, who will restore the Khalifate to its old glories and Islam to its old purity.”<sup>508</sup> Uncovering the meaning of the first of the three words given to them by Bullivant in London, Sandy explains that the word *Kasredin* comes from the title of an old Islamic miracle play about the coming of a prophet named Greenmantle. To pick up on these associations, the Germans choose this

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<sup>504</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 21.

<sup>505</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 19.

<sup>506</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 34.

<sup>507</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 35.

<sup>508</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 186-7.

as the name for their ersatz holy man. According to Sandy's intelligence, the rumor is now circulating widely and Greenmantle's teachings are "everywhere in the Moslem world."<sup>509</sup> Widespread belief in Greenmantle's message explains the very set of circumstances that, according to Bullivant, surprised British officials and undermined the efficacy of newspaper accounts of the German war effort in the Ottoman Empire. This belief is why the Turks are "enduring grinding poverty and preposterous taxation" and "why their young men are rolling up to the armies and dying without complaint in Gallipoli and Transcaucasia."<sup>510</sup> The Germans are stoking the rumor with injections of new information through weekly "messages to the faithful," but are holding back vital pieces of information about the figure in order to remain in control of both the myth and the message that Greenmantle embodies.<sup>511</sup>

Once the Germans instantiate their rumor in corporeal form, the rumor becomes a literal weapon that can be deployed to actualize a specific outcome, but it also becomes vulnerable since its concrete reality can now be tracked by the British. The man who originally embodies the rumor of Greenmantle is not a "real" prophet, but he is a holy man. Sandy comes into contact with the living, breathing figure at the center of the German plot and says of the man, "He is the greatest gentleman you can picture, with a dignity like a high mountain. He is a dreamer and a poet, too – a genius if I can judge these things."<sup>512</sup> According to Sandy, "Greenmantle [...] speaks straight to the heart of Islam, and it's an honourable message."<sup>513</sup> But, the Germans have appropriated the simplicity of Greenmantle's message and "it's been twisted into part of that damned

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<sup>509</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 187.

<sup>510</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 187.

<sup>511</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 187.

<sup>512</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 232.

<sup>513</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 233.

German propaganda. His unworldliness has been used as a cunning political move, and his creed of space and simplicity for the furtherance of the last word in human degeneracy.”<sup>514</sup> However, the corporeal Greenmantle is dying of cancer, a circumstance that explains the second word given to them by Bullivant, and a possibility that threatens to disrupt the German plan. When the man dies, Hannay initially thinks that the death puts an end to the German plot. Hannay contends, “You can’t have a crusade without a prophet,” reasoning that the removal of the true element at the center of the story will end the use value of the rumor.<sup>515</sup> The Germans, however, understand that the rumor is still effective without the original referent. They substitute a new fake version of Greenmantle and proceed with the plan. This moment represents a turning point in the novel. Hannay signals this change, saying, “I thought our job was nearly over [...] and now it looks as if it hadn’t well started. Bullivant said that all we had to do was to find out the truth.”<sup>516</sup> With Sandy surreptitiously slotted into the role of the prophet, the second half of *Greenmantle* turns from a search for the factual “truth” at the center of the mystery to an effort by both sides in the conflict to use the embodied falsehood as a tool in their pursuit of a military victory.

In the second half of *Greenmantle*, Buchan begins to transition from a focus on the development of objectively true information to a focus on the effectiveness of deliberately inaccurate information, using as his focal point for this exploration the ringleader of the Greenmantle rumor-plot, a German woman named Hilda von Einem. When the group discovers von Einem’s role at the center of the mystery, it explains the final nugget of information given to them by Bullivant in London, “v.1,” as “Ein” means

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<sup>514</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 233.

<sup>515</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 231.

<sup>516</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 235.



“one” in German.<sup>517</sup> Von Einem’s goal in creating and circulating the rumor of Greenmantle is different from that of the novel’s other German combatants, who are fighting for prosaic national interests in a time of war. Von Einem is portrayed as something occult or supernatural, not a part of “the narrow world of our common experience” but “something beyond and above it, as a cyclone or an earthquake is outside the decent routine of nature.”<sup>518</sup> She hopes to use Greenmantle to advance her own personal agenda. As Sandy tells it, “she has her own dreams, and they consume her as a saint is consumed by his devotion.”<sup>519</sup> Von Einem may have manufactured many of the details of the Greenmantle plot but her philosophy overlaps with the philosophy of the real holy man who first embodies her lie and, perhaps, with Islam itself in a more general way. The philosophy of the Muslim holy man is one of “great simplicity,” a philosophy that “wants to prune life of its foolish fringes and get back to the noble bareness of the desert” from which the Turks and the Arabs originated.<sup>520</sup> Similarly,

She wants to destroy and simplify; but it isn’t the simplicity of the ascetic, which is of the spirit, but the simplicity of the madman that grinds down all the contrivances of civilization to a featureless monotony. The prophet wants to save the souls of his people; Germany wants to rule the inanimate corpse of the world. But you can get the same language to cover both.<sup>521</sup>

While there are similarities in the two worldviews, “what in him is sane and fine, in her is mad and horrible.”<sup>522</sup> Blenkiron puts it more bluntly, saying she is “mad and bad – but principally bad.”<sup>523</sup> Her concern is not with winning the present war but with spreading

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<sup>517</sup> In choosing the name “von Einem” for the woman at the center of the plot, Buchan reinforces the interesting gender dynamics that he develops around this character. In the German dative case, “einem” is only used as an article with masculine and neuter nouns, while feminine nouns use the article “einer.”

<sup>518</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 220.

<sup>519</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 286.

<sup>520</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 232.

<sup>521</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 233-4.

<sup>522</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 233.

<sup>523</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 206.

these ideas throughout the Middle East. When he begins to impersonate the prophet, Sandy tells his companions about her plan, “When we have reclaimed the East I am to be by her side when she rides on her milk-white horse into Jerusalem,” where she aims to set herself up as a spiritual and political dictator.<sup>524</sup>

In the final pages of *Greenmantle*, Buchan embraces the effectiveness of deliberate attempts to misinform. When Sandy reveals his real identity to Von Einem, he assumes that it will upset her to find out that he is not a Muslim or the head of the brotherhood of the Companion of the Rosy Hours. He tells her, “The people wait to-day for the revelation, but none will come. You may kill us if you can, but we have at least crushed a lie and done service to our country.”<sup>525</sup> Von Einem tries to plead with Sandy, countering “ ‘You seek the truth [...] So also do I, and if we use a lie it is only to break down a greater.’ ”<sup>526</sup> The crux of Buchan’s argument about information lies in the construction of her logic. The British adventurers have “crushed a lie” about *Greenmantle*’s origins, but von Einem is arguing here that such a “lie” is appropriate, even necessary, when it is the most effective way to achieve one’s aims. Hannay admits that von Einem’s reasoning can be attractive under certain circumstances, but ultimately appears to reject her arguments. Sandy stays with his friends and a Russian shell kills Von Einem before she can communicate Sandy’s deception to her compatriots.

Yet, in the final lines of *Greenmantle* Buchan embraces von Einem’s approach, even as he foils her plot. Although Hannay and his friends refuse to participate in von Einem’s efforts to misinform the Turkish army, they nonetheless use the *Greenmantle* rumor and the power of misinformation to carry the day for Britain and her allies. The

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<sup>524</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 286.

<sup>525</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 325.

<sup>526</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 326.

final lines of the novel read: “Then I knew that the prophecy had been true, and that their prophet had not failed them. The long-looked for revelation had come. Greenmantle had appeared at last to an awaiting people.”<sup>527</sup> As the Russians come through a mountain pass and start sweeping down on the German/Turkish lines, Sandy/Greenmantle rides out at the front of the charge and into battle at the front of the Russian army instead of the German. The Turkish troops see “Greenmantle,” the prophet they have been waiting for, and lay down their weapons. Hannay describes the scene: “As we topped the last ridge I saw below me the van of our charge – a dark mass on the snow – while the broken enemy on both sides were flinging away their arms and scattering in the fields.”<sup>528</sup> In *Greenmantle*, the British do not just uncover a German falsehood. Hannay and his friends seize control of the rumor of Greenmantle in order to beat the Germans at their own game.

#### Section V: The Central Role of the “Information” War in *Mr. Standfast*

In *Mr. Standfast*, Buchan’s engagement with questions of information remains central to the development of the novel but in a more diffuse and complicated configuration than in either *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or *Greenmantle*. Continuing the transition begun in *Greenmantle*, Buchan takes a far more limited view of the importance of fidelity to actual facts in *Mr. Standfast*. While he continues to accept the need for the official apparatus of government to have an accurate understanding of relevant facts, he no longer sees such facts as a necessary constraint on British propaganda efforts. To the contrary, in *Mr. Standfast*, Buchan confirms the view articulated at the end of

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<sup>527</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 345.

<sup>528</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* 345.

Greenmantle that, in the context of prosecuting the war, it is appropriate for the official apparatus to choose not to circulate certain facts or to deliberately create inaccurate understandings in the pursuit of broader war aims. Thus, while much of the novel focuses on the efforts of the official apparatus – in this case, Hannay and his colleagues – to uncover the factual truth so that they can effectively further British war aims, they pursue these efforts by constantly telling tales, propagating falsehoods, and otherwise preventing others from accessing the factual truth. Hannay's methods do much to illuminate Buchan's approach to propaganda by the end of the war. In contrast to his earlier perspective, the intent of the propaganda to inform or to misinform has become much less central to Buchan's understanding of the possibilities and uses of propaganda, and the necessity to adhere to empirical facts no longer serves as a functional limitation on narrative construction. By the time he writes *Mr. Standfast*, Buchan has accepted the Press Baron position that, when creating and disseminating propaganda in the service of national war aims, the only metric that matters is whether or not the propaganda is advancing the desired outcome.

Utilizing many of the same plot elements he employs in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*, *Mr. Standfast* combines the basic plot structure of the two previous novels, giving *Mr. Standfast* a curious double ending. Similar to *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the novel's main action ends with a revelation of the details of the central mystery, the capture of von Schwabing, and the destruction of the German information conduit. However, this narrative arc concludes several chapters before the end of the novel. Borrowing from *Greenmantle*, the novel's final ending involves an imminent battle with the two opposing armies on the brink of clashing across a specific geographic space.

Similar to *Greenmantle*, the manipulation of information affects what happens on the battlefield. In *Mr. Standfast*, the outcome on the battlefield turns on the outcome of a battle in the air between airplanes piloted by Hannay's friend Peter Pienaar, the British army's best pilot, and his German counterpart. By dint of having a bird's eye view of the terrain below, the German pilot has knowledge of the weakness of the British position. In the end, Pienaar brings the German plane down before it makes it back behind enemy lines with the damaging information. The battle is a coda to the story, but it mirrors the central narrative's contention that the battle over information is the most important front of the war.

As with the previous Hannay novels, the action in *Mr. Standfast* revolves around a secret plot at the center of the novel. Similar to the opening of *Greenmantle*, Hannay is pulled out of his role as an active soldier in France and asked by Bullivant to "serve again in the old game" as an undercover agent.<sup>529</sup> Also like *Greenmantle*, the plot pivots mid-way through the novel when it is revealed that the nature of the secret plot is different from what was expected and, therefore, the nature of the British mission must change. In the first half of the novel, Bullivant asks Hannay to penetrate the ranks of British pacifism and to make himself trusted to the cause's true believers. Hannay eventually reconnects with Blenkiron, who has been tracking the tentacles of the same secret threat, first in the United States and then in England's industrial districts, and learns that the plot involves the leaking of information known only at the highest levels of British government. Blenkiron tells Hannay that there is "a high-powered brain in the game against us."<sup>530</sup> He has been hunting this plot across the globe but that the "centre of the

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<sup>529</sup> John Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919) 12.

<sup>530</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 51.

web where the old spider sits is right here in England, and for six months I've been shadowing that spider."<sup>531</sup> The "big brain" at center of the plot is Mr. Moxon Ivery, one of the leading voices in pacifist circles. Blenkiron says that Ivery is a "Pure-blooded Boche agent, but the biggest-sized brand in the catalogue – bigger than Steinmeier or Old Bismark's Staubier."<sup>532</sup> Bullivant and his companions in British Intelligence cannot expose Ivery because, while they have a "morally certain case," they do not have sufficient "legal proof" that he is a German agent.<sup>533</sup> They fear that if they tried to bring him before a court of law, "half a hundred sheep would get up in Parliament and bleat about persecution."<sup>534</sup> Given the trail of evidence Ivery planted in public records stretching back decades, "it appears he's been a high-toned citizen ever since he was in short clothes."<sup>535</sup>

Referring back to Peter Pienaar's argument about "atmosphere" on which Hannay relies on in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Buchan points out that surface context is a problematic way to judge the truth of a situation because relying on it alone usually causes a person to read the situation uncritically. In *Mr. Standfast*, Buchan makes it clear that it is important that the "right" people establish the factual truth so that they can act properly to counter embedded falsehoods. However, *Mr. Standfast* does not take as clear a position on whether or not those "right" people should circulate the true facts to a larger audience, thereby tipping off the other side that their secrets have been discovered. Instead of publicly accusing Ivery and shutting down the German's information pipeline, Bullivant wants to keep Ivery's conduit operating so that they can feed him falsehoods damaging to

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<sup>531</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 51.

<sup>532</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 52.

<sup>533</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 54.

<sup>534</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 54.

<sup>535</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 55.

the German war effort, to “fill him up with all the cunningest lies and get him to act on them.”<sup>536</sup> In this way, *Mr. Standfast* endorses efforts to deliberately misinform a target audience in order to keep the country on a path best able to bring about an ultimate goal that is collectively shared.

The plot of *Mr. Standfast* takes a turn when Hannay catches a glimpse of Ivery during an air raid in London and the man lets his many layers of disguise slip to reveal for a moment his foundational identity. Prior to this moment, Ivery, whose name is perhaps a play on the phrase “I vary,” is so dangerous because he can embody a wide variety of different personalities, and every bit of information discovered about his identity seems to – but does not actually - rest on a solid foundation of fact. Bullivant explains how it is that Ivery became so dangerous, stating, “We’re the leakiest society on earth, and we safeguard ourselves by keeping dangerous people out of it. We trust to our outer barrage. But anyone who has really slipped inside has a million chances” at mischief because he or she “knows our life and our thinking and everything about us.”<sup>537</sup> However, under the stress of the air raid, Ivery lets his guard down and Hannay realizes in this moment that he had seen the man before and “knew the new man better than the old.”<sup>538</sup> Having seen the real man – and determining that there is a real persona behind all of the false ones – Hannay knows that the man will not be able to fool him again. At this juncture, the plot of *Mr. Standfast* brings Hannay back to the same moment that he experiences at the end of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* since Ivery is also “Mr. Applegate” from the previous text. This allows Buchan to pick up the exploration of a person’s “true” identity at the same place that this exploration is left off in the previous novel. Ivery also

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<sup>536</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 57.

<sup>537</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 181-2.

<sup>538</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 166.

realizes during this encounter that Hannay has finally made the connection and his cover has been blown with Hannay. Once Ivery's secret is exposed, Hannay says, "The day of disguises is past. In half an hour I'll be Richard Hannay."<sup>539</sup> After this point in the story, Hannay drops his own use of disguises and goes by his own name for the rest of the novel.

In the second half of the novel, the goal of the book is to track down the details of the "true" identity of the man who has been posing as Ivery. The operatives around Hannay feel defeated after Ivery evades capture, but Hannay reminds them, "There are many faces to the man, but only one mind, and you know plenty about that mind."<sup>540</sup> As compared to the scarcity of factual evidence available in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Hannay points out that they have a lot more to go on in this situation, reminding his companions, "Now we have a great body of knowledge, for Blenkiron has been brooding over Ivery like an old hen, and he knows his ways of working and his breed of confederate."<sup>541</sup> The novel does ultimately allow for a secure identifying of the man at the center of the plot. Blenkiron states, "I've got on to his record, and it isn't a pretty story. It's taken some working out, but I've got all the links tested now ... He's a Boche and a large-sized nobleman in his own state."<sup>542</sup> The man, whose real name is von Schwabing, was thrown out of Germany after a scandal and is now an outcast. He has been feeding information to the Germans because he is "itching to get back" into the good graces of German society.<sup>543</sup> When von Schwabing traps Hannay in his alpine hideaway, he tells Hannay the true German attack plans, believing that Hannay is going to stay his prisoner and, therefore, will not be able to communicate the plans to anyone. In this way, Buchan

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<sup>539</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 173.

<sup>540</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 183.

<sup>541</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 183.

<sup>542</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 232.

<sup>543</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 233.



demonstrates that information itself is not a threat but the ability to share and communicate such information is dangerous.

In contrast to *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*, Buchan views the manipulation of information during the war with a broader lens in *Mr. Standfast*. He considers some of the same questions regarding official propaganda that he tackles in *Greenmantle*, but now firmly embraces the need to circulate inaccurate information to the public and to intentionally create deliberate misunderstandings in the service of British war goals. Buchan illustrates this perspective through his treatment of two non-governmental sources of wartime propaganda: pacifism and industrial socialism. Both of these movements produce and circulate their own propaganda in hopes of influencing public opinion concerning Britain's participation in the war. Hannay enters both of these communities under false pretenses, impersonates a true believer, and uses propaganda that he knows will resonate with those communities to manipulate public opinion. The logic of the novel is to find a way to allow multiple and often contradictory perspectives on the war to coexist, but to pull them together into a coherent relationship with each other. These differing perspectives cannot be reconciled, but they can be managed. Propaganda, when viewed from such a vantage point, is not a category of information, but a process of categorizing information that is dependent on the perspective of the person making the categorical determination.

Buchan sets much of the novel's action within the pacifist community in Britain and has Hannay adopt, arrange, and manipulate pacifist arguments in order to gain credibility with this community as part of his effort to uncover the novel's bigger mystery. His first assignment is to go to the pacifist community of Bigglesworth and "to

sink down deep into the life of the half-backed, the people whom this war hasn't touched or has touched in the wrong way, the people who split hairs all day and are engrossed in what you and I would call selfish little fads.”<sup>544</sup> Buchan sets up Lancelot Wake as one of most compelling pacifist speakers, but ultimately finds a way to make Wake both hold true to his pacifism and also be willing to die for his country. When Hannay first meets Wake, he sizes him up:

He was a perfectly honest crank, but not a fanatic, for he wasn't sure of himself. He had somehow lost his self-respect and was trying to argue himself back into it. He had considerable brains, for the reasons he gave for differing from most of his countrymen were good so far as they went.<sup>545</sup>

Later in the novel, Hannay unexpectedly comes upon Wake as he is uncovering parts of von Schwabing's secret information conduit on the Isle of Skye and Wake turns out to be a valuable asset to Hannay's sleuthing. Blenkiron even tells Wake after his participation in the events on Skye, “Why, man, last night for an hour you were in the frontline – the place where the enemy forces touch our own. You were over the top – you were in No-Man's-land.”<sup>546</sup> At the end of the novel, Hannay finds Wake in a work battalion near the frontlines in France, a posting that allows Wake to remain a non-combatant while still performing valuable war work. Wake's final act is to swim across a river during the final battle in order to get Hannay's battle plan to another part of the British line, succeeding in his task but dying in the process. As Nathan Waddell argues, “*Mr. Standfast* problematically features in the dual perspective that that response implies [...] a basic disagreement with pacifist *philosophy* and a sympathy toward certain pacifist

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<sup>544</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 28.

<sup>545</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 25.

<sup>546</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 130.

*individuals.*<sup>547</sup> While not to be read as an endorsement of pacifist views, Waddell points out, “By marking Wake as motivated by detailed psychological stimuli, Buchan avoids the reductionism of those too willing to stereotype pacifists and objectors on their particular instances of insurgency alone.”<sup>548</sup> By having Wake sacrifice himself for the British cause, Buchan contends that while pacifism is misguided, individual pacifists, when they understand the context of wartime necessity, will act in the service of British war aims.

Across the novel as a whole, Buchan repeatedly frames Hannay’s extra-military information work of greater consequence than battlefield engagements in determining Britain’s success in the war. Early in the novel, Bullivant explains the importance of Hannay’s effort, “This war’s a packet of surprises. Both sides are struggling for the margin, the little fraction of advantage, and between evenly matched enemies it’s just the extra atom of foreknowledge that tells.”<sup>549</sup> Later, Mary Lamington, another undercover agent and Hannay’s eventual love interest, argues, “Till we succeed everything that Britain does is crippled. If we fail or succeed too late the Allies may never win the victory which is their right.”<sup>550</sup> Structurally, the real climax of the book is the discovery of von Schwabing’s plan followed shortly by his capture so that he cannot actualize it. It is understandable that Buchan developed such ideas about the role of information in

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<sup>547</sup> Nathan Waddell, “Buchan and the Pacifists” in *Reassessing John Buchan*, Kate Macdonald, ed. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009) 92.

<sup>548</sup> Waddell 99. Buchan makes similar points about the propaganda circulated by socialists through the character Andrew Amos, who becomes integral to the success of the British plot Amos explains his commitment to socialism, “They think I’m stirrin’ up the men at home and desertin’ the cause o’ the lads at the front. Man, I’m keepin’ them straight. If I didna fight their battles on a sound economic ishshue, they would take the dorts and be at the mercy of the first blagyird that preached revolution.” Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 65. However, Amos states, “When the war started, I considered the subject calmly for three days, and then I said: “Andra Amos, ye’ve found the enemy at last. The one ye fought before were in a manner o’ speakin’ just misguided friends. It’s either you or the Kaiser this time, my man!” Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 65.

<sup>549</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 182.

<sup>550</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 28.

wartime given that his own duty to the British cause was carried out not with bullets but with words. For Buchan, the information battle has begun to supersede actual battlefield fighting in its importance to the war effort.

A concern with preventing the circulation of information is also central to the novel's final battle. When Hannay and his companions arrive in France with the captured von Schwabing, they have trouble getting accurate information about the conditions at the Front. They "ask for news at every stopping-place," ask "gendarmes and *permissionnaires*" but can learn nothing. Hannay buys newspapers full of "news" but realizes that "[t]he leading articles were confident, the notes by the various military critics were almost braggart" and by the "[n]ext morning the papers could tell us little more."<sup>551</sup> Hannay acknowledges that an accurate understanding of the situation at the Front might not have been available. Recalling this period after the war, he writes,

This is not the place to write the story of the week that followed. I could not write it even if I wanted to, for I don't know it. There was a plan somewhere, which you will find in the history books, but with me it was blank chaos. Orders came, but long before they arrived the situation had changed, and I could no more obey them than fly to the moon.<sup>552</sup>

The deciding factor in who wins on the battlefield comes down to whether or not the Germans receive information that the British lines are paper-thin and without available reinforcements. During the climactic air battle, it is only Peter Pienaar's suicidal sacrifice that prevents his rival, the German airman Lesch, from sharing this news with his own side. The whole premise of winning the final battle in the book is to convincingly fool the other side about the strength of the British position. If the Germans manage to get the "true" information, there is no way that the British will be able to hold out against them.

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<sup>551</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 325-6.

<sup>552</sup> Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* 342-3.

The novel's title, *Mr. Standfast*, refers to a character in Pilgrim's Progress. Pienaar tells Hannay before his death that he thinks that he resembles the character of Mr. Standfast in the Christian epic. In the end, Hannay rather thinks that Pienaar resembles Mr. Valiant-for-Truth. Ironically, Pienaar becomes Mr. Valiant-for-Truth by preventing the true circumstances on the battlefield from getting into circulation. Buchan thus ends *Mr. Standfast*, like *Greenmantle*, with Allied forces carrying the day through a deliberate and successful effort to misinform.

In *Mr. Standfast*, Buchan puts greater emphasis on issues surrounding the circulation of information and less emphasis on the relationship of objective truth to information. Similar to Buchan's two previous Hannay novels, the central narrative of *Mr. Standfast* revolves around a need for the official apparatus of government to ascertain an accurate understanding of the threats it faces. However, the novel questions more deeply the role of the official apparatus in determining when certain facts should not be circulated – or even when factually inaccurate information should be circulated – to the wider public when taking such measures would be in the interest of broader war aims. In *Mr. Standfast*, Hannay and his colleagues try to collect an accurate understanding of Ivery/von Schwabing so that they can stop information from getting into the hands of Britain's enemies. But in order to further British war aims, Buchan's patriots must tell lies, and propagate falsehoods. Such an understanding helps shed light on Buchan's understanding of the role of empirical truth in propaganda by the end of the war. By the time that Buchan wrote *Mr. Standfast*, he is much more comfortable with the concept of holding back, changing, fabricating, and manipulating factual information. Perhaps not fully at home in a world that privileges the empirically untethered post-modern fact,

Buchan is signally his incipient awareness that such a world is on the horizon and that the unstable information environment of the war years is actively contributing to its emergence.

## Conclusion

The last veteran of the First World War died this year at one hundred and ten. Her name was Florence Green and she joined the Women's Royal Air Force in 1918, serving as a seventeen year-old officer's steward for the final months of the war.<sup>553</sup> The last surviving "Tommy," Harry Patch, a veteran of the mud-soaked horror that was the Battle of Passchendaele, died just three years ago, ninety-one years after he watched three friends die from the same shell that injured him and invalidated him out of the war.<sup>554</sup> On an interesting note, I have a personal connection to the First World War. My grandfather, Lloyd Peters, joined the 74<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the New York State National Guard in 1914. Enlisting as an underage sixteen year-old, he spent the next three years on the Mexican border chasing Poncho Villa with General Pershing. His army unit remained stateside when American forces went to the rescue of our Allies in Europe in 1917, but he rightly considered himself a veteran of the First World War. When he died in 1992 at the age of ninety-four, the last few surviving veterans of the First World War in Chautauqua County, New York read John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields" at his graveside.<sup>555</sup> He went on to serve in both the United States Navy and in the newly formed Marine Corps in the Second World War and as a training pilot in the Air Force during the Korean conflict, making him one of the few Americans to serve in all four branches of the Armed Forces and to serve as a member of the enlisted ranks in four wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As we lose

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<sup>553</sup> David Blackmore, "Norfolk First World War Veteran Dies Aged 110." *Eastern Daily Press*. 7 February 2012. Retrieved 21 April 2012.

<sup>554</sup> Aleisha Scott, "Final Witness to Horror of the Trenches." *The Independent* (London). 25 July 2009. Retrieved 21 April 2012.

<sup>555</sup> Frank Hyde, "City Man had Varied Sports, Military Careers: Lloyd Peters Recalls Search for Poncho Villa." *Jamestown Post Journal*. 27 June 1981.

our living links to the First World War and it becomes only an event captured in the historical record, we must find new ways to use this record to keep the memory of the war from fading into obscurity. After spending so much time immersed in the words and thoughts of the people who suffered through the First World War, I am more convinced than ever of importance of this cultural moment to everything that has happened since.

This dissertation examines information as a category as it exists under conditions of modernity, and how the contours of and changes in definitions and understandings of modern information become more visible, and are likely accelerated by, the complex information challenges brought about by the disruptions of the First World War. It conducts this examination through two principal lines of argument. The first is that “wartime” fiction, as a distinct category from the categories of pre-war and post-war fiction, is a revealing domain of literature in its own right, and one that has been overlooked in scholarship on literature of the First World War. To the extent that wartime literature has been considered at any length in prior scholarship, it generally has focused on the work of the small set of relatively well-known war poets. Further, previous scholarship on the literature of the First World War has generally emphasized, often exclusively, the contributions of modernist texts to this literary period and the disruptions and discontinuities of cultural and intellectual threads across the chasm of the war years. This project explores how wartime texts contain significant elements that can be understood as pre-modern, as modern (and modernist), and as incipiently post-modern, which highlights the continuities, the existence of both residual and of emerging forms and ideas during this period.



The second line of argument in this dissertation investigates how pre-war fiction begins to engage with and explore a modern sense of “information” as different from the pre-modern category of “experience,” to use Benjamin’s vocabulary, how wartime texts respond to changing conditions of information and expands this exploration in new directions, and how some wartime texts begin to move beyond an examination of modern information conditions to explore conditions of incipient post-modernity. Given that “information” is a key building-block in understanding systems of knowledge in modernity, this dissertation incorporates a variety of theoretical constructs around information drawn from a variety of disciplines; Lippmann and Benjamin, Shibutani, Warner and Jameson, McHale and Poovey, Budd and Buckland, all of whom circle around the problems and concerns of the increasingly saturated, complex, and untethered nature of information in the modern age. By developing my argument in reference to the various angles and perspective on problems of information articulated by these scholars, I have tried to capture the diversity of responses to such problems that are present within the primary texts themselves.

Using different but ultimately commensurate vocabularies, post-war scholars such as Walter Lippmann, Walter Benjamin, and later scholars such as Mark Wollaeger, argue that the manner in which an individual interacts with information has undergone a profound change by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This view of the state of information in the modern world is built on the acceptance of a few central tenets. First, it requires a belief that the information environment surrounding a modern individual is so complex and overwhelming that one’s understanding of it can never be complete. Second, it requires a belief that meaningful oral communication is a thing substantially relegated to the past

and not a part of the modern experience. Third, it requires a belief that an individual, divorced of immediate agency, must rely on a whole host of “special pleaders,” individuals who have greater access than others to information in a given field. By accepting these tenets, one misses the fact that alternative and/or pre-modern forms of information engagement like rumor, forms of oral communication in the sense that Benjamin understands them, as “living immediacy” and as “[e]xperience that is passed on from mouth to mouth,” are very much still a part of the modern world. As Shibutani notes, rumor allows an individual to make meaningful sense of the world around him, even though his understanding must be incomplete, without turning to experts or opinion leaders, but rather relying on other equally situated members of the wide social network within which he is located.

This project highlights the role that rumor plays in the highly charged information environment of war. Rumor is difficult to capture, both in fiction and in the historical record, but efforts to unearth it are rewarded with a glimpse into this complex mode of communication, one that offers a way to resist the limits imposed on an individual by the information saturated environment of modern life. Rumor can be understood as an independent form of communication that both carries information and documents the manner in which this information spreads and circulates within a society. As a cognitive act, the creation and modification of a rumor is empowering to the individual, giving him or her an active role in the creation of narrative meaning. As an act of communication, rumor creates or reinforces community and empowers that community to engage in the purposive act of group problem solving. There is also an opportunistic element in rumor that makes it particularly interesting to examine given the unique information conditions

of the war years. These years bring an expansion of government-directed information control, both in the form of actively produced propaganda and in the form of censorship, and a disruption in the conduits along which information travels under normal conditions. Rumor takes advantage of weaknesses in “official” information pathways, stepping in to provide meaning when other sources begin to fail.

This project is different from previous scholarship on rumor in the First World War in a number of ways. While previous scholars have carefully mapped the details of government propaganda as a source of rumor, they have not focused on the definitional distinctions between concepts such as “propaganda,” “rumor,” “gossip,” “legend,” or looked extensively at non-governmental sources of rumor production. I propose that further consideration of the independent role of rumor in the fiction of this period opens up a wider field of inquiry into the complex, multi-faceted information environment of the modern period. Also, the historical record of the war years is full of rumor, reflected in this project through my examination of the rumor of the Angels of Mons, the way that rumor and hearsay is used in the production of the Bryce Report, and the development of the “*Kadaver*” rumor on the Western Front. While I primarily track changes in understandings of the category of rumor through an examination of fiction, these changes are first taking place in the real socio-historical moment and are then being noticed by and reflected in the literary efforts of writers such as Wells, Conrad, and Buchan.

One of the strengths of this project is the way in which I bring together texts that have not been read in relation to each other before. Both within chapters, by looking at lesser known works by each of these authors and putting them into conversation with better known texts, and between chapters, putting into conversation Wells, Conrad, and

Buchan, each a very different author with a very different literary reputation – the realist Wells, the canonical modernist, or at least proto-modernist, Conrad, the middlebrow Buchan – and looking at how their considerations of the modern category of information draw them together in ways that are easy to miss but fascinating to consider. Scholarship of the literature of the First World War often collapses into scholarship on modernism and focuses on the formal experimenters, often complacently defining modernism through experimental writers in narrative form. However, we should not allow that primary characteristic to preclude other types of modernism, the epistemological questioning of someone like the seemingly traditional Wells, or the possibility of understanding the emerging ontological concerns of post-modernism in the seemingly modernist Conrad or the seemingly middlebrow Buchan.

By looking at the pre-war fiction of each author, it is possible to see that these writers were interested in the parameters of information control well before 1914 and the war accelerated and intensified impulses already a part of each author's body of work. In this dissertation, I considered Wells's first story *The Chronic Argonauts* and his pre-war novel *Tono-Bungay*; Conrad's early text *Heart of Darkness* and his pre-war novel *Victory*, although I also argued that it was possible, in light of Conrad's essay "The Future of Constantinople," to recategorize *Victory* as a wartime text; and Buchan's pre-war novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. This broad view also draws attention to a number of previously underexamined wartime texts in which the authors consider the changing characteristics of information in the modern world. In this dissertation, Wells's once popular but now largely forgotten novel *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, Conrad's short story "The Tale" and his essay "The Unlighted Coast," and Buchan's novels

*Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast*, which are well-known within the narrow field of Buchan scholars but relatively unknown in general literary scholarship. Examining the wide sensitivity of these authors to the shifting landscape of information allows for a reexamination of each author's body of writing as a whole. Taking a broad view of each author's career makes possible an investigation of the changing dynamics of information across the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This project started from themes and issues that I first noticed in Wells's novel *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, including the way that Wells's character, like Wells himself, is both a propagandist and a private writer who is analyzing and second-guessing his own efforts at writing propaganda. In fact, all three of the authors that I examine in this dissertation wrote wartime propaganda at the request of official government departments, although Wells and Buchan were more actively involved in the production of government propaganda than was Conrad. Starting with his first attempt at writing fiction, *The Chronic Argonauts*, Wells is interested in the difference between narratives that have an origin in a collective effort at meaning-making through the creating and circulation of rumors – a form of narrative formation he calls exoteric – and narratives that have an origin in privileged access to details and data that are not available to the wider audience – a form of narrative he calls esoteric. In both *Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Britling*, Wells revisits problems of an individual's limited access to information. In *Mr. Britling*, Wells is interested in how rumor can be used by people on the home front who do not have access to information from the Front or do not believe the information coming from available sources. Wells is not generally considered a modernist writer, although his interest in the epistemological uncertainty that arises in the distance between

exoteric and esoteric storytelling indicates that he confronts many of the basic questions in play for modernist writers, particularly an interest in questioning the fundamental categories of knowledge. Virginia Woolf called Wells an “Edwardian” writer who is overly concerned with the material facts of life. In dismissing Wells as an “Edwardian,” Woolf did not recognize that Wells is a fellow investigator into the very problem of rendering “reality” in fiction due to the unavailability or unreliability of knowledge. Most scholarship on Wells after Woolf has continued to focus on the sociological, materialist, or science-fiction aspects of his career without noticing that he is fundamentally interested in both the epistemological and the narratological problems at the heart of modernism.

While coming late in Conrad’s career, the First World War had a more significant impact on the contours of Conrad’s fiction than is often acknowledged. Conrad’s new, broader use of rumor is intertwined conceptually with the new ways in which he uses counternarrativity in his late texts. Counternarratives, or multiple, overlapping, and competing versions of the same story, are part of Conrad’s writing from his earliest texts, but counternarrativity becomes a dominant, formal preoccupation in his wartime writing. In *Victory*, “The Unlighted Coast,” and “The Tale,” Conrad explores the way in which rumor establishes and defines its own communities, delineates boundaries and borders in both geographic and social space, and creates additional narratives from the layering and recombining of other rumors already in circulation. Given the self-definitional, generative qualities inherent in rumor, Conrad’s wartime texts grapple with questions of ontology, particularly the world-building capacity of rumors, in a way which gestures toward an incipient form of postmodernism. Therefore, examining Conrad’s use of rumor draws

attention to the way that Conrad, especially in his late period, straddles the modern/postmodern divide.

At first glance, including Buchan in this project may appear like an unconventional choice given that his literary reputation is so different from more canonical writers such as Wells and Conrad. I stumbled upon the work of John Buchan when I went to see a stage production of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in the West End of London. I doubt I would have thought to include a writer such as Buchan, known mostly as a middlebrow writer of adventure fiction and wholly unknown to me, without this lucky introduction, but the dramaturge's notes in the Playbill that night included a handful of intriguing statements about Buchan's war work. When I tracked down copies of Buchan's wartime novels, I noticed immediately how they were also preoccupied with information – who has it, who trusts it, who knows how to manipulate it to their advantage, and that his wartime novel *Greenmantle* was entirely structured around a centrally circulating rumor.

While the chapter on Buchan focuses largely on his fiction, an examination of Buchan's ongoing role in the production of official government propaganda makes visible a significant reorientation in the government's attitude toward the scope and purpose of propaganda from the beginning to the end of the war. One of the principal tensions that Buchan explores in his wartime fiction – which mirrors a similar tension within the British propaganda service itself – is the relationship of narrative construction to empirical fact. Although Buchan's fiction and British propaganda in the early phases of the war are marked by a fidelity to narratives grounded in objective fact, as the war progresses, both Buchan and British propaganda increasingly shift towards an approach

that prioritizes the effectiveness of a narrative in furthering British war aims, regardless of its relation to empirical fact. Buchan is well suited to serve as a lens for exploring this change because it is in his private fiction, writing as he does outside of his official propaganda duties and in his own time, that he grapples with the challenges that arise when information dissemination is untethered from a commitment to empiricism.

Buchan has been overlooked by most of the scholarship on fiction of the First World War, perhaps because his fiction can be seen as a predecessor to the also much overlooked postwar category of “middlebrow” fiction. However, Buchan’s fiction is not actually as conventional as it first seems. The books simultaneously endorse and criticize the way that information is being used as propaganda. Just as Buchan the professional propagandist is able to engage in several writing projects simultaneously, balancing projects with different audiences, different relationships to secret information, and aiming to please different sectors of British governmental policy, Buchan’s fiction shows a remarkable ability to balance a tension between endorsing and promulgating the official positions of British propaganda and opening up lines of inquiry within his fiction that question and challenge some of the basic premises of his own propaganda work.

I considered and researched a number of other authors for this project, most notably, Ford Madox Ford, Arnold Bennett, Edith Wharton, and A.S.M. Hutchinson. Like the pre-war novels of Wells, Conrad and Buchan, Ford’s pre-war novel *The Good Solider* is interested in how information circulates, or fails to circulate, among a group of intimates. During the war, Ford’s name was attached to the collection of short stories *Zeppelin Nights*, stories previously written by Ford but strung together Decameron-style by a frame involving a group of people trapped together during an air raid in London.



This volume was co-authored by Ford's companion Violet Hunt, and casts the threatening Zeppelin in the role of the Goddess Fama, a gasbag that hovers over the war puffing out both real destruction and the fear that is attached to rumors of such destruction. *Zeppelin Nights* was widely read during the war but has since been largely forgotten. Coupled with Ford's interesting use of rumor in his post-war tetralogy *Parade's End*, *Zeppelin Nights* deserves to take its place within both wartime fiction and evaluations of Ford as a modernist writer.

Arnold Bennett shares with Buchan the distinction of being both a high-ranking government propagandist and a popular wartime novelist. His 1918 novel *The Pretty Lady* was controversial at its publication, but looks at the impact of the war on British society from a number of interesting angles. Also, Bennett's use of an "angel" in resolving the plot shares a number of interesting implications for a reexamination of the rumor of the Angels of Mons. Further, expanding the scope of this study to the immediate post-war years would allow for a consideration of additional texts that were popular during these years but have since disappeared from literary scholarship. A.S.M. Hutchinson's novel *If Winter Comes*, published in 1922, was a bestseller in both Britain and America and was the source material for the 1923 silent film of the same title, the first major post-war film treatment of the First World War. Hutchinson's novel bears a striking similarity to Ford's *Parade's End* and probably influenced this later work. Edith Wharton's novel *A Son at the Front*, also published in 1922, provides an interesting perspective on the war years since she spent the war as an American writer living in France. Wharton's novel deftly considers the experience of parents, and especially of fathers, who have a "son at the Front" in ways that recall Wells's earlier paternal musings

in *Mr. Britling* and the way that Wells explores the consequences of “not knowing” on people left behind. Both Hutchinson and Wharton represent early examples of the problem of defining what constitutes a “war novel” in the post-war period.

As William Faulkner once wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”<sup>556</sup> Although the First World War has moved out of the realm of living memory and is now available to us only through traces in the historical record, it still exercises a profound influence on the present day. This project advances an inquiry into understudied areas of First World War scholarship; both wartime fiction that has not been included in the canon of war literature and the way in which this fiction explores the changing categories of information and rumor under the stress of disruptions and dislocations engendered by the war years. Further investigation into the wartime fiction of Wells, Conrad, and Buchan, and into other underappreciated authors of from this period, will deepen our understanding to the war years and the important role that these years played in creating a modern, and in some respects post-modern, understanding of information.

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<sup>556</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

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