

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Robert Sayre, PhD

Vera Brittain

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) is a much longer autobiography than Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* but it too is dominated by the Great War. "When the Great War broke out," it begins, and the next two chapters, describing her sheltered life as the daughter of a prosperous paper manufacturer in Buxton, in England's midlands, are essentially just a preface to the long middle of the book which describes her wartime activity. She left Oxford, where she had started as a promising poet and student of literature, to become a nurse-assistant in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, or "V.A.D." She could not bear to be cloistered in St. Mary Hall, the University's small women's college, while her brother was training for the army and her boyfriend, Roland A. Leighton, was at the front. She served from the summer of 1915 in various military hospitals in London, Malta, and France, and finally in a civilian hospital back in London until the War's end. But meanwhile her boyfriend Roland, who had become her fiancé, was killed in France, and later her brother Edward, to whom she was devoted, was killed in Italy. These two devastating losses left her so broken and depressed that it was very difficult for her to go back to Oxford and start a post-war life.

In fact, the War changed her whole life. At Oxford she changed her subject from literature to history, hoping to understand the origins of the War. After Oxford she and her close feminist friend Winifred Holtby became aspiring journalists and novelists in London, but her keener interest was as a volunteer lecturer for the League of Nations Union. She also attended League conferences in Geneva. Still later, after *Testament* was published, she became a leading pacifist, though she did support World War II to the extent of leading food drives and serving as an air raid warden. But her dedication to pacifism was proven by the discovery in 1945 of her name on a German list of the 2,000 people the Germans would execute if they occupied England. She died in 1970. Her life, as represented in *Testament* and her other volumes of autobiography, has since been made into a film and a Masterpiece Theater series.

What further distinguishes *Testament of Youth* is its immediacy and her passion for life. Although she presents herself as just a bright middleclass girl from the provinces who loves her family and sports (especially tennis), she clearly had an exceptional interest in preserving every possible record of her life, her times, and her friends. Most notably, she kept a diary. She also saved her friends' letters and sometimes copies of her own letters to them. Thus she can, and does, quote from all these at length, as well as from her and her friends' poetry. The result is a very long book, but such detailed documentation lets the reader know exactly what she said and felt. Brittain is not quite Tolstoian, but she wants to be.

Somewhat paradoxically, she is also sometimes shy. While frankly saying of her work nursing that she became quite unashamed of seeing and touching all parts of the naked male body, she never describes her intimacy with her fiancé Roland. Carefully chaperoned, as proper young girls and boys then were, they never even seem to kiss. Brittain's admirers have been still more curious to know of her relationship with Winifred Holtby. Were they lesbian lovers? During college they became very close, as two very talented older students who had little to do with either men or the younger women who had not served in the War. Afterwards, they lived together for long periods, until Holtby's death in 1935. The man Brittain did marry is coyly referred to only as "G." But he too was unusually talented. His name was George Catlin, and he was born in England, but moved to the United States after serving in the War and became a professor of Political Science at Cornell University. They were married in 1925 and had two children, but had a trans-Atlantic marriage. She did not like the isolation of Ithaca, New York, and so lived mostly in London, where Winifred helped raise the children. He divided his time between the United States, Canada, England, and extensive travels. He was reportedly very jealous of Vera's close relationship with Winifred.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare Brittain's and Graves' experiences in the War and after. Which is the more vivid writer? Who presents the more sympathetic picture of the problems they had readjusting to civilian life and at college?
2. Study the poems that Brittain quotes. Some are chapter epigraphs; many more are included in the text. Who are they by? How do they add to the autobiography?
3. What are the possible reasons for Brittain's not giving "G.'s" full name and background?