How useful is the book "Goodbye to All That" by Robert Graves to historians studying life in the trenches during World War One?

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**Section A: Introduction**

This investigation focuses on life in the trenches as it is described in Robert Graves’ book “Goodbye to all That”. The recent death of 111-year-old Harry Patch, the last British survivor of the massacre of World War I, prompted me to choose a WW1 related question.

In order to answer my question I have thoroughly analyzed what Graves states in his book and compared and contrasted to various other sources. I will asses two sources in detail, with reference to their purposes and origins. For the main body of my investigation I will look at the historical importance, followed by a three-part analysis, focusing on: (a) Armaments & Injuries, (b) Discipline & Sanctions and (c) Food & Rest. In each section, Graves’ account is looked at in contrast with other sources.

(129 words)
Sections B: Summary of Evidence

The extract from Robert Graves’ autobiographical book, “Goodbye to All That”, quoted in appendix A demonstrates to what extent soldiers lived on the brink of life and death and how little regard they had for life itself. As Stalin said during the time of the Purges; “One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is merely a statistic”. In the trenches, soldiers were likely to literally be blown to pieces at any moment. In his book, “All Quiet on the Western Front”, Eric Remarque shares his opinion that the “emotional disconnection had [a] hugely destructive impact on a soldier’s humanity.”1 A soldier would be lucky to were only hurt in battle and even luckier if they then make it to the hospital. Graves calculated that the “best way of lasting through to the end of the war would be to get wounded.”2

Ultimately, during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, “Graves was struck by a shell fragment, a piece of which passed through his shoulder and chest, seriously injuring his right lung”3. He was "left for dead and pronounced dead by his surgeon [as did] his commanding officer in a telegram to his parents”4. He however, recovered to read of his own demise in The Times. He returned home, where his parents took care of him until he made a full recovery. Feeling guilty for leaving “his soldiers in peril while he himself was safe”5, Graves return to the front. However “before seeing action again”, he was threatened with court-martial by his company surgeon to go back home immediately.

The oral testaments in Max Arthur’s book ”Forgotten Voices of the Great War”6, recounts the experiences of numerous influenced veterans and survivors of the War. Arthur presents the oral testament in a much more direct and almost brutal manner compared to Graves, given the reader a more serious and emotive perspective of the experiences of war. Extracts such as, ”the conditions were indescribable. There were the wounded, dead and dying, rifles left all over the place,”7 really presents the reader with a strong visual description of these terrible conditions.

In addition, art can also present yet another perspective. Artist such as Otto Dix, George Grosz, Paul Nash and Wynne Nevinson have all produced war art. The piece that caught my eye was the oil painting, “Paths of Glory” by Wynne Nevinson. This piece was part of a series produced between 1900 and 1925, completed upon his return from France where he had been sent as an official war artist by the British government. Paths of Glory attempts to highlight the human cost of the war, with the on-going hillside in the background indicating a continuous number of dead soldiers carrying on beyond the limits of the canvas.

(462 words)

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1 “Paul, for instance becomes unable to imagine a future without war”. Spark Notes Editors (Jan 2002), “All Quiet on the Western Front”, Spark Notes (ISBS: 978-1586633745)
2 Graves established the “best time to get wounded… [would be] when there was no rush on the dressing station services… [and] while the back areas were not being heavily shelled”. Robert Graves, (2000), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)
5 Ibid.
Section C: Evaluation of Sources

Source 1: “Goodbye to All That” by Robert Graves

With regard to its origin, the source can be considered valuable as when the book was first published in 1929, only 10 years had passed since the end of the war; permitting Graves to take enough time to formulate substantial, detached objectivity towards the recounted events and obtain some broader knowledge to give context to his memories, whilst simultaneously, not letting too much time pass by for his memories to become blurry.

However, the origin of the source can be considered limited as Graves became mentally ill after the war. He suffered from “shell-shock". He became rather disconnected from reality due to “a sequence of events so crazy, they seem more suitable to fiction than reality." To quote Graves, "I partly wrote... during a complicated domestic crisis". Moreover, the book was republished in 1957, in that prologue; Graves says, “a good many changes have been made in the text". Graves evidently felt the book incorrectly represented reality, but what says the events described now don’t stray even further from reality? Additionally, Graves was not simply an author, but also a dramatist and a poet. Prior to writing ‘Goodbye to All That’, he wrote several "historical novels" best known as the author of “I, Claudius and Claudius the God (1934), a two-volume fictional autobiography of the Roman emperor of the first century”. It would be almost impossible to abandon this fictional writing style when producing his biography, making its factual reliability questionable.

Source 2: Forgotten Voices of the Great War. [Appendix C]

In terms of purpose, the source is valuable because Max Arthur intended “to capture through the words of men and women, what life was like in the First World War.” Making it in the author’s interests to produce the most factual account possible. With regard to origin, these oral testaments were collected as a task set by The Imperial War Museum. They consist of “ordinary veterans and survivors of the...war” describing their experiences. When judging the value of such oral testimony, “interviews are valuable as sources of new knowledge about the past and... perspectives on it... providing information about everyday life and insights into

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8 Graves claimed to be haunted by ghost and nightmares which were “to haunt him throughout his life” Penguin Classics (2000), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)
10 Graves states that in the second edition of his book a “good many changes have been made - omission of many dull or foolish patches, restoration of a few suppressed anecdotes; replacement of [a] chapter by a longer one written five years later [and] correction of factual misstatements” Robert Graves Prologue (1957), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)
the mentalities of... ‘ordinary people’ unavailable from more traditional sources."\(^{15}\)

For instance, soldiers having to eat “German turnips again and again”\(^{16}\) due to food shortages. This drove some soldiers, including Gunner Philip Sylvester, to eat “biscuits that had been left by troops two years previously”\(^{17}\).

However, the source also presents limitations. In reference to origin, the problem with oral testaments is that individuals usually lack the detached objectivity and broad knowledge, which helps them to make sense of the events they were involved in. Historians exercise critical judgement towards the values of the interview, as “just because someone says something is true... doesn't mean it is true. Just because someone ‘was there’ doesn't mean they fully understand ‘what happened’.”\(^{18}\)


**Section D: Analysis**

**Importance of the investigation in its historical context.**

Life in the trenches during WWI is historically significant because, despite the notorious difficulty to give firm statistics, “It has been estimated by various sources that the total number of deaths lies somewhere between 10 and 13 million."\(^1^9\) whole generations were wiped out. Its still carries significance today, only last summer “The last British survivor of the World War I trenches, Harry Patch, has died at the age of 111.”\(^2^0\) He was a powerful eyewitness and with him dies the last British survivor of the horrors of war and the living symbol of this lost generation.

**Critical Analysis of the Evidence**

**Armaments & Injuries**

Graves’ book numerously mentions of armaments, such as rifles, snipers, shells, gas bombs. His description of a “man of company” is very specific\(^2^1\), whereas more common sources focus more on general aspects such as advances in Chemical Warfare, “The War in the Air”\(^2^2\), the introduction of Tanks and the machine gun - “the master of the battlefield”\(^2^3\) as J.R. Roberts called it. The book highlights some inefficient war tactics and armament\(^2^4\). Gas bombs very quickly became an inept killing weapon; soldiers simply wore “gas masks as soon as they subjected an attack”\(^2^5\). Nonetheless, historian Robert Wilde observed that “the First World War's military legacy involve[d] tanks [and] air forces...used by all sides in the Western and Eastern Front.”\(^2^6\) Graves naturally was unable to comment here as he only served for two years, on only one side of “the Western... Front”. Wilde, was able to offer an exterior perceptive by examining sources and archives. However, his statement is only as reliable as the sources he used to formulate it.

Graves describes soldiers enduring “rapid firing over our heads” or “gas discharges”\(^2^7\) attacks. Soldiers “lost [their] legs”, were “riddled through” with bullets, found lying unconscious in No Man’s Land, sometimes only to “recover consciousness after two days.” The picture Graves has presented is accurate, only it is not whole picture that is being presented. Graves only saw a certain sector of the Front, officers could not

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\(^1^9\) Neil Stewart (2001), “The Changing Nature of Warfare 1700-1945”, Hodder & Stoughton (ISBN: 0-340-78075-4). However, casualty figures can never be exact. From source to source the number may vary in the millions. As can be seen in the source in Appendix D.


\(^2^1\) Graves describes that each “man of company... [was] to carry: 200 rounds of ammunition, bombs throw 50 and signalers 150 rounds, field dressing and iodine, one helmet...one smoke helmet...wire cutters”. Robert Graves (2000), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)


\(^2^4\) Graves highlight the fact that gas bombs were rendered inefficient “where there had been a slight wind to take the gas over”. Robert Graves (2000), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)

\(^2^5\) Dr. Geoffrey Miller (1926), “The Medical Department of the United States in the World War, Volume XIV, Medical Aspects of Gas Warfare”, Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine


\(^2^7\) Gas discharges were often released “for forty minutes, after quarter of an hour’s bombardment”. Robert Graves (2000), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)
have seen the 'bigger picture', available to a General at the time or a historian since. The later psychological effect of the War on soldiers, known as “shell-shock” would be something only historians could have commented on in later years.

**Discipline & Sanctions**

In the book, it appears necessary to re-enforce discipline on several occasions. Punishments were used to keep the soldiers on their toes, for example, always "address [a] Corporal" correctly.

Graves neglects to mention more serious incidents like the numerous attempts by severely depressed soldiers to “kill or wound themselves [to] be excused from fighting” 29, “If found guilty of a self-inflicted wound...[the] penalty was... death."30 For instance, Private Harry Farr suffered from ‘shell-shock’. When in the trenches, he “asked to return to camp... he could not stand the noise of artillery”. In October 1916, he was “found guilty of ‘misbehaving before the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice' and was shot the following morning.”31 Graves hardly wanted to name people in his book as being ‘cowards’ or ‘deserters’, it would be insensitive to the families around at the time and thus avoids the subject altogether. In the prologue, he shows sensitive by stating his use of anonymous names.32

**Food & Rest**

Erich Remarque argued that soldiers need two things for contentment: "good food and rest"33. In Graves' book, some of the "special meals" are highlighted, consisting of “potatoes, fish, green peas, asparagus, mutton chops, strawberries and cream, and three bottles of Pommard." Some soldiers, Alfred Bromfield included, made their own meals34, however the majority of soldier had very plain meals, consisting of “canned Bully Beef or canned stew.”35 Sometimes, simply to have “food in the trenches was considered a luxury”36. Graves states, whenever soldiers had the opportunity to rest, they "engaged in getting in a bit of extra sleep..., talking and smoking, writing letters home, cleaning their rifles..., gambling" or playing "a cricket match”. However this was rare, soldiers did not even get enough time for the necessities such as sleeping37. Principally due

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28 The book recounts an incident where a soldier “addressed [a] Corporal by his Christian name... the Corporal [was placed] under arrest” and charged “on conduct unbecoming to an NCO... [they] reduced him to the ranks.” The soldier was “punished for insubordinate language to an NCO”. Robert Graves (2000), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)


32 “Some proper names have been restored where their original disguise is no longer necessary”, the ‘some’ indicates not all disguises have been removed. Robert Graves Prologue (1957), “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)


34 Bromfield used to be “standing at the bottom of the trenches...making fried bacon and dried cheese.”Alfred Bromfield (July 2002), “Forgotten Voices of the Great War”, Ebury Press (ISBN: 0-09188-8879)


37 Graves states; "from the morning of September the 24th to the night of October the 3rd, I had in all, eight hours of sleep.” “Goodbye to All That”, Penguin Classics (ISBN: 978-0-14-118459-3)
to the fact that, “every night, at dawn, [they] went out to fetch in the death and wounded] of the other battalions.”

In each of these areas, Graves never presents a false representation of what happened, it is simply incomplete. For the obvious reason that Graves is just one man, of a certain rank, with therefore a certain perspective on and experience of the War. Also, the aim of the book was not to produce a dry factual account of his life in the trenches, but instead to recount Graves’ own war experiences in such a way that the book would be a success.
Section E: Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude Robert Graves presents us with an accurate representation of life in the trenches during World War I. For a historian studying the life of a soldier of the Royal Welch would find “Goodbye to All That” a very useful source. However, there is no real focus drawn to the life in foreign enemy or allied trenches, be it French, American, German, Austrian, or Russian trenches, thus making this book a much less valuable source for a historian studying life in trenches, as the perspective it offers is very narrow. The reason for this being that after all this is an autobiographical piece of writing of one man about his own experiences.

(116 words)
Section F: List of Sources

Articles:

Macromedia Flash File:
• George Sasson, “Medicine at War”, Imperial War Museum

Novels and Books:
• Erich Maria Remarque (March 1987), “All Quiet on the Western Front”, Ballantine Books (ISBN: 978-0449213940)

Paintings:
• Oil painting (produced between 1900 and 1925), “Paths of Glory” by Wynne Nevinson.

Textbooks:
• Spark Notes Editors (Jan 2002), “All Quiet on the Western Front”, Spark Notes (ISBS: 978-1586633745)

Websites:
Sample Internal Assessment from the IST via www.activehistory.co.uk

  http://europeanhistory.about.com/od/worldwar1/a/ovww1_2.htm (10/10/2009)

“Next to me lay a Royal Welch second-lieutenant named O.M. Roberts, who had joined the battalion only a few days before the show. He told me about High Wood; he had reached the fringe when he got wounded in the groin and fell into a shell-hole. Some time during the afternoon he covered consciousness and saw a German staff officer working round the edge of the wood, killing off the wounded with an automatic pistol. Some of the Royal Welch were, apparently, not lying as still as wounded men should, but sniping. They owed the enemy a grudge; a section of German had pretended to surrender but, when within range, started throwing stink-bombs. The officer worked nearer, He saw Roberts move, came toward him, fired, and hit him in the arm, Roberts, very weak, tugged at his Webley. He had great difficulty in getting it out of the holster. The German fired again and missed. Roberts rested the Webley against the lip of the shell-hole and tried to pull the trigger, but lacked the strength. The German was only five paces off, the shot took the top of his head off. Roberts fainted.”
Source G: casualty figures for the European Great Powers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total of mobilized forces</th>
<th>Killed and died</th>
<th>Total Casualties*</th>
<th>Total casualties as % of total mobilised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>12,000,000</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
<td>9,150,000</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8,410,000</td>
<td>1,357,800</td>
<td>6,160,800</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Empire</td>
<td>8,904,467</td>
<td>908,371</td>
<td>3,190,235</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>11,000,000</td>
<td>1,773,700</td>
<td>7,142,558</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of all combatant countries</td>
<td>65,038,810</td>
<td>8,538,315</td>
<td>37,494,186</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total casualties includes prisoners, wounded and missing.