



**Ex-Private X (A.M. Burrage) *War is War* Pen & Sword 2010, 228 pages £19.99
ISBN: 9781848841543**

War is War was originally published in 1930 among the flood of memoirs which appeared about a decade after the end of the First World War. Few of them had the literary merit of Sassoon or Graves and most of them were almost immediately forgotten. BCMH members will be well aware of the new interest in the First World War provoked by the so-called “revisionists” over the last twenty years and strengthened among the general public by the popularity of family history. Publishers have seen the potential market and the result has been a new flood of reprints of memoirs or histories which has had the effect of giving new circulation to the clichés which the revisionists hoped to destroy.

The current volume is a case in point. The author was a Grub Street writer of short stories when war broke out and only “volunteered” to join the Army when conscription appeared inevitable. In 1916 he chose to join the Artists Rifles (28th London Regiment) which was basically an officer training unit with no front line unit at that time. He was, by his own admission, an unenthusiastic and “stropky” soldier and it is not surprising that he was not commissioned and found himself in France, joining the 1st Battalion shortly before it was transferred from GHQ guards and officer training to join the 63rd Royal Naval Division. He served in the battalion at Passchendaele, in the Cambrai Salient from December 1917 and during the March 1918 Retreat when his health broke down and he managed to “swing” evacuation to England.

Burrage’s justification for publishing his book in 1930 was that the current war books had been written by officers “*from an angle far remote from the view-point of Tommy Atkins*” and “*Unfortunately, Tommy Atkins is inarticulate*”; officers “*were only with us, not of us, and they cannot get inside our skins.*” Since 1930, of course, the private soldier’s voice has been fully heard and their letters and diaries are still appearing in print or filling the archives. Comparing those accounts with *War is War*, the modern reader is likely to conclude that the real failure to get under Tommy Atkins’ skin was Burrage’s own. He is the most appalling social and intellectual snob, ready to praise the private soldier in mass but appalled when he has to rub shoulders with him. Getting under the soldier’s skin for Burrage seems to mean combining saloon bar ranting with “*shocking*” attacks on authority figures. Thus there is nothing to be said about the Australians, except that they killed some of the military police; there is naturally nothing good to be said about the military police. Burrage is bitter and contemptuous about his officers but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much of this is sour grapes resulting from his own failure to win a commission.

Is there anything of value in the book for the professional military historian? It must be suspect as a source for ordinary infantryman’s experience of war and it is instructive to compare it with Frederick Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune*. Manning came from a very similar background to Burrage and also served as a private soldier, although in an ordinary infantry battalion, and was much more successful in “*getting inside Tommy Atkins’ skin*”. Because he does not patronise or despise his fellow soldiers, Manning describes their experiences much more effectively than Burrage and *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is rightly described as an “*outstanding book*” in Brian Bond’s 2008 study *Survivors of a Kind*.



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Although many well-known writers, such as Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas and R.C. Sherriff served in the Artists Rifles, Burrage's is the only literary account of the unit to appear and despite its failings there are some details which may interest historians in the book. The Artists Rifles have not been well served in terms of regimental history and anyone wishing to flesh out the battalion war diary's account of the battle of Passchendaele (30/10 5.50a.m. "Battalion attacked") could usefully look at Burrage's Chapters 10 & 11. He also took part in the Artists Rifles' counter-attack at Welsh Ridge in December 1917, immortalised by another participant, Corporal John Nash, in the painting "Over the Top" which appears on the book jacket of so many First World War books (though not this one). Nash is clearly described on page 190 as "*badly shaken and blackened all over with explosive*" after the attack. The stress of the March Retreat is well portrayed and generally Burrage's narrative of the battalion's operations from spring 1917 is borne out by the official record, even if his opinions are harder to substantiate.

Michael Orr