Journey's End

by Martin Blocksidge



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Robert Cedric Sherriff (1896-1975) served in the First World War as a Captain in the 9th East Surrey Regiment. He was wounded at Passchendaele in 1917 and awarded the M.C. Before and after the war Sherriff had worked as an insurance salesman and had no previous experience of the professional theatre. The immense success of *Journey's End* (which opened in London's West End early in 1929) changed his life for ever, though the play's success proved in time a curse as well as a blessing: although it made Sherriff wealthy and famous overnight, he never subsequently wrote anything else which equalled it, and by the time of his death he was, as a dramatist, something of a spent force. Sherriff had originally planned a novel about the lives of two young men called Dennis Stanhope and Jimmy Raleigh, but he made slow progress at it. When he decided to reshape the idea as a play with a First World War setting, he found that all his problems were instantly solved, both in terms of setting and characterisation:

> I had lived in those murky underground caverns [the trenches] for so many months that I knew them as well as the room I was working in … for the first time I was writing about something real, about men I had lived with and knew so well that every line they spoke came straight from them and not from me. I had lived through it all.

Even so, the play's success was by no means a foregone conclusion and it took Sherriff himself by surprise. Plays about the recent war had appeared on the London stage and had generally proved failures. Sherriff himself attributed this to the fact that these plays had generally had a more obviously polemical thrust than *Journey's End* did. *Journey's End* was

> the first war play that kept its feet in the Flanders mud. What they [the public] had never been shown before on the stage was how men really lived in the trenches, how they talked and how they behaved. Old soldiers recognised themselves…Women recognised their sons, their brothers, or their husbands, many of whom had not returned.
>
> *They were simple, unquestioning men who fought the war because it seemed the only right and proper thing to do. Somebody had got to fight it, and they had accepted the misery and suffering without complaint.*

Sherriff's comment that his characters were 'simple' and 'unquestioning' men is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's declaration in the preface to his poems that his book 'was not about heroes'. Owen witnessed a great many of the same kind of horrors that Sherriff did, but the two authors' responses to them are very different. The anger, frustration and sense of tragic injustice which characterise Owen's work are much harder to find in Sherriff's (though they are certainly not absent). One of the most notable aspects of Sherriff's play, which undoubtedly contributed to its success, was its refusal to comment or take up a position. The play's characters speak for themselves and the reader responds accordingly.

A modern reader, however, needs to make some adjustment to his preconceptions of what constitutes 'simple' men. The characters presented in *Journey's End* are for the most part junior officers or subalterns, and they bring with them certain habits of thought and certain class assumptions. They are, with only one exception, products of the public schools, and their beliefs and values are entirely those of the English middle classes. It was these men who almost exclusively formed the officer class, and there is a very clear separation between the officers and 'the men'. 'Where do the men sleep?' asks Osborne early in Act One, only to be told by Hardy: '*I* don't know. The sergeant-major sees to that.' One of the most uncomfortable confrontations between Stanhope

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and Raleigh comes when Raleigh, dazed and bemused after his first taste of battle, admits to having been 'feeding with the men' rather than having dinner with his fellow officers. The play registers no sense of social injustice about this: it merely reflects current assumptions about class and about the way in which the army was organised. The Colonel remarks that 'The men expect officers to lead a raid', and it was officers of the sort depicted in *Journey's End*, middle-class, public school products, who offered this kind of leadership and who also constituted the First World War's largest category of casualties. These officers, especially towards the end of the war, were extremely young. Raleigh is obviously straight out of school, but it should not be forgotten that Stanhope, precociously bad-tempered and unquestionably in charge of his company, had himself been a schoolboy only three years previously. Whilst Osborne observes that Stanhope is 'a long way the best company commander we've got…His experience alone makes him worth a dozen people like me', he nevertheless still, on one occasion, cannot stop himself referring to Stanhope as 'a boy'.

'We are, generally, just waiting for something' (Osborne, Act I Sc I)

Quite apart from its content, one of the reasons for *Journey's End*'s success in the theatre lies in its structure. *Journey's End* belongs to a genre which would come in time to be known (not entirely flatteringly) as 'a well-made play'. This is to say, a play with a clear three-act structure, in which a range of characters are introduced sequentially, and in which climactic moments are carefully placed, either in the middle or at the ends of scenes (*Journey's End* has successful examples of both). What is remarkable, however, is the way in which Sherriff combines a tight and rather demanding structure with a plot which requires, for most of the time, a sense that nothing is happening. One of Sherriff's provisional titles for the play was *Waiting*, and the psychological consequences of waiting are *Journey's End*'s chief subject.

An inevitable consequence of waiting is that the characters are forced to develop strategies for coping with time: indeed the passing of time (or its failure to pass) is an almost obsessive concern among them. Trotter sees the six-day duty period as 'Six bloomin eternal days', and is ironically (but characteristically) unaware of the fact that the period is going to be tragically curtailed half-way through. His drawing of 'a hundred and forty four little circles' to signify each hour that the company is occupying the trench illustrates the way in which time could indeed seem to hang heavily. Yet Trotter is also aware of the tricks that time can play on the men in the trenches. He tells Raleigh that 'you'll feel you've been 'ere a year in about an hour's time', a point which Raleigh corroborates the following morning when he says 'I feel I've been here ages'. Clearly there was something fundamentally disorientating about trench-warfare, particularly when it is remembered that officers were, as a matter of course, on duty both day and night and therefore had little opportunity to sleep. Whilst time could seem to pass very slowly indeed when nothing happened, it was very different when actual fighting took place: Osborne's minute-by-minute count-down to the raid which he and Raleigh are to make together is almost unbearably tense.

In *Journey's End* the chief general strategy for coping with what might be described as the highly pressurised leisure of trench life is humour. 'Trench humour' can often seem edgy and black, yet as the popular revue-musical *Oh What A Lovely War* (1964) would subsequently show, First World War humour was a distinct and abundant genre of its own, a necessary and compensatory distraction from experiences which it would otherwise be too horrible to contemplate. If Wilfred Owen's poems stressed 'the pity of war', *Journey's End* stresses its frequent absurdity. We hear of the store of gumboots: 'thirty-four…seventeen pairs?…no twenty-five right leg and nine left-leg'. We hear of earwig races ('if you want to get the best pace out of an earwig, dip it in whisky') and of beds that 'haven't got any bottoms to them. You keep yourself in by hanging your arms and legs over the sides.' But there are darker examples, too, the consequence of the inevitable hardening that results from warfare: the dug-out 'that got blown up and came down in the men's tea', the army cook that set himself on fire 'and went home properly fried.' When Stanhope informs Osborne that the big

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German attack is due within 48 hours, he has little alternative under the circumstances than to make light of it by predicting that 'we shall be in the front row of the stalls' when it happens.

A chief source of humour in *Journey's End* lies in its frequent references to food, and this is more than simply a running joke. Food is no joking matter: it is an essential part of anyone's life, and it is worth remembering Napoleon's *dictum* that an army marches on its stomach. One of the things that the play consistently emphasises is the way in which Sherriff's 'ordinary plain people' accommodate (or fail to accommodate) themselves to 'the drawn-out wretchedness' of trench life. Jokes about the food both highlight and conceal its often insanitary and disgusting nature. Jokes about onion-flavoured tea or yellow-tasting soup are harmless enough, but the fact that the water is polluted, that Mason's foul dishcloth infects his food, that bits of rust fall from the frying pan and into the breakfast is an indication of the most obvious of all daily deprivations.

Apart from the chirpy Mason, the most obviously comic character in *Journey's End* is Trotter. Much of the humour that Trotter brings to the play lies in the fact of his behaving in the trenches as if he were still at home. To Trotter 'this 'ere war' seems very much like something which is happening somewhere else and involving other people. His chief complaint is that war upsets mealtimes. Whilst others recoil from the unpalatable food, Trotter attacks it heartily, bemoaning the absence of pepper, the shortage of fat bacon, the flavour of the jam. He makes frequent references to his wife, and talks about his garden as if he's just come from it. Even the potentially lethal gas, phosgene, is memorable to Trotter chiefly because it 'smells like pear-drops'. To Trotter all military matters quickly become domesticated.

'it's the only thing a decent man can do.' (Stanhope Act II Sc II)

To Raleigh, on the other hand, everything to do with fighting is still bound up with conceptions of honour, and with the 'keenness' he has learned to show on the games field at school. To begin with, at any rate, he apprehends little of the risk involved in combat. While Trotter finds it hard to move beyond the here and the now, Raleigh looks to the end ('How topping if we both get the M.C.!') The prospect of making his first raid is 'most frightfully exciting'. In his own more measured way Osborne shares something of Raleigh's idealism. He has already told Raleigh that he finds 'something rather romantic' about warfare and, on the point of departure for the fatal raid encourages Raleigh to 'put up a good show.' (A 'show' was the word commonly used to describe an attack).

Osborne's words are more knowing than Raleigh's, but they are an important contribution to the debate about heroism which *Journey's End* contains, and which comes to a head when Hibbert tries (at least in Stanhope's eyes) to desert. Whilst Stanhope is uneasy about Raleigh, he is openly contemptuous of Hibbert ('Another little worm trying to wriggle home'). As Osborne tries to tell him, this contempt seems not entirely rational. Nevertheless it can be accounted for. If Trotter accommodates himself to war by pretending it is not there, Hibbert cannot see beyond its immediate strain and discomfort. What Stanhope claims is 'Pure bloody funk' on Hibbert's part is, in fact, an amalgam of precisely those physical and psychological traumas which Stanhope has himself experienced. His contempt for Hibbert lies in his unwilling acceptance of this fact. Stanhope has literally soldiered on, despite all the stresses of warfare and the mental scars are apparent in his almost every action. Hibbert's abortive attempt to leave on the eve of battle poses the greatest challenge in the play to Stanhope's command, and he shows his mettle impressively. The most crucial point that Stanhope has to make to Hibbert is that he himself has felt everything that Hibbert has felt: 'I hate and loathe it all. Sometimes I feel I could just lie down on this bed and pretend I was paralysed or something-and couldn't move-and just lie there till I died-or was dragged away.' In thus attempting to reassure Hibbert, Stanhope is simple, clear-sighted, yet almost apologetic about what sacrifice and heroism actually mean. They are not anything to do with winning the MC, or, indeed,

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about putting up a good show, but, in the play's ultimately most memorable words they represent: 'the only thing a decent man can do.'

> *'There's no need to tell him it's murder'* (Osborne Act II Sc II)

Significantly, when Trotter discovers Osborne reading *Alice in Wonderland* he sees 'no point in that…that's a kid's book!' Osborne (and Sherriff) know differently, however. It is no coincidence that, on the eve of a potentially fatal raid, Osborne is reading the book which famously deals with the absurd and illogical:

> How doth the little crocodile
> Improve its shining tail,
> And pour the waters of the Nile
> On every golden scale?
>
> How cheerfully he seems to grin
> And neatly spread his claws,
> And welcomes little fishes in,
> With gently smiling jaws!

On this occasion the crocodile's jaws are, quite literally, the jaws of death, and it is not at all fanciful to see First World War military strategy as rather like the world of *Alice in Wonderland*. The likely death which Stanhope and Osborne both fear in the raid is a world apart from the *Boys' Own* heartiness of the Colonel who is in charge of the operation. To him the raid is about making a 'dash in' and 'collar[ing] some Boche', rather like a game that schoolboys might enjoy in the playground. The Colonel also sticks to the blind faith that must have sustained most of the senior officers when he grotesquely suggests to Osborne and Raleigh that 'a great deal may depend on bringing in a German. It may mean the winning of the whole war. You never know.' Presumably it was necessary for some people somewhere to believe this sort of thing.

In strategic terms, of course, the raid is a waste of time as well as of life. Its immediate consequence is an anti-climax and there is certainly comic potential in the scene in which the Colonel interrogates the captured German soldier. The Colonel discovers the name of the soldier's regiment and the somewhat unsurprising detail that he arrived in the line the previous evening. The only booty the soldier brings with him consists of a 'bit o' string…box o' fruit drops; pocket-knife…bit o' cedar pencil- and a stick of chocolate'. For this Osborne, the pillar of the community (and indeed of any community), lost his life.

> *'Think of all the chaps who've gone already…Sometimes I think it's lonelier here.'*
> (Stanhope Act II Sc II)

R. C. Sherriff recalled that he received a complaint from a senior army officer about the amount of whisky his characters consume in *Journey's End*. It is, however, a well-documented fact that large quantities of whisky were supplied to the officers in the trenches, and also that dinner parties were held in dugouts at times of significance. The dinner party which follows the raid and the death of Osborne in *Journey's End* is an obviously unsuccessful attempt to bury psychological tensions. Stanhope is edgy; the jokey conversation is wallpaper over the cracks. Stanhope is rude to Trotter, to Hibbert, and most conspicuously in due course, to Raleigh. There is also something strangely hollow about Stanhope's reminding Trotter that, after Osborne's death, he is now second-in-command of the

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company. As was indeed the case, the constant attrition meant that there was an increasing shortage of good officers as the war dragged on.

Sherriff also recalled that he had had difficulty in arriving at a title for his play, but that his problem resolved itself when he came upon a sentence in a novel: 'It was late in the evening when we came at last to our Journey's End.' The title is, however, a surprisingly gentle one for a play which ends so violently. As the sounds of battle, of machine gun, of mortar fire, of explosion, gather and intensify, it is clear that Sheriff's characters are in the middle of a holocaust: the holocaust which they have spent the entire play expecting, preparing for, yet trying to deny: 'ordinary plain people caught up in extraordinary events over which they had no control'.

Yet there is an ambivalence in Sherriff's conclusion. Just as it presents a picture of destruction, so also it presents one of human tenderness. On a personal level, the most crucial and ongoing tension in the play has been between Stanhope and Raleigh. It has been fuelled by the conflict between (in military terms at least) age and youth: between hardened experience and callow naivety. But it is also the conflict between Dennis and Jimmy; to Jimmy, Stanhope, was always Dennis; to Stanhope, Raleigh could only become Jimmy again as he lay dying. The title 'Journey's End' has an additional and Shakesperean resonance: 'Journeys end in lovers' meeting'. Military conventions and proprieties inevitably served to heighten and exaggerate the difference between them, but, in truth, very little separated Stanhope and Raleigh: there was only a three years' age-gap between them and they had once seemed destined, after all, to become brothers-in-law. Stanhope's insistence upon having the wounded Raleigh brought into the highly unsafe dugout rather than having him sent to a field hospital was unusual, but in so doing he afforded Raleigh that special treatment which he had previously taken pains to deny him. The final image of one young man comforting a dying colleague is not without the suggestion of homo-eroticism that often plays not far beneath the surface of First World War writing.

Stanhope's final sacrifice is the greater for having been undertaken in the spirit of love and reconciliation.

Further Reading

In his autobiography *No Leading Lady* (1968), Sherriff provides a detailed account of the genesis, production and reception of *Journey's End*. In the same year he also contributed an essay on *The English Public Schools in the War* to a volume called *Promise of Greatness The War Of 1914-1918* edited by George A. Panichas. John Lewis-Stempel's *Six Weeks* (2010) is a study of the British Officer in the First World War, and, apart from making several references to Sherriff and *Journey's End*, it also provides an invaluable documentary background to the world which Sherriff represents in his play.

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