



# None That Go Return: Leighton, Brittain and Friends, and the Lost Generation 1914-18

*Don Farr*

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Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow, the four subjects of this book, typify the experiences of many in a world turned upside down by the outbreak of the Great War in early August 1914. In the summer of that year they were all on the threshold of entry into Oxbridge. Only days later all thoughts of university had been cast aside by three of them as they sought instead to obtain army commissions with a view to serving as infantry subalterns. Probably the least militant of them, Geoffrey Thurlow, would complete a term at Oxford before following the same path.

All four were well-educated scions of reasonably prosperous middle-class families. Three of them had the casual self-confidence that such a background usually endowed (the other, Thurlow, was curiously tortured by self-doubt). They would all have absorbed the easy assumptions about Britain's place in the Victorian and Edwardian world even before entering their public schools. There these assumptions would have been reinforced at every turn by a combination of team games, military training and schoolmasterly exhortation. The so-called public school ethos played a major part in inculcating in its students an almost conditioned reflex to any threat to their country's security and honor.

It was not just in the public schools that their ethos held sway. Novels and comics about public schools were universally popular as were adventure stories with ex-public schoolboy heroes. The most remarkable feature of the days immediately following the declaration of war was the torrent of young men who besieged Army recruiting offices seeking to volunteer to serve King and Country. Not all of them were motivated by pure patriotism, although most certainly were. Some would have been looking for adventure, others an escape from domestic drudgery or dreary and soulless employment. Some, who had the background and qualities that would fit them to become officers, were so keen to do their bit that they volunteered to serve in the ranks. Whatever their reasons, many of them would end by lending credence to the notion of the 'Lost Generation'. The belief that the enormity of the casualty lists, especially among well-educated and privileged young men, amounted to the loss of a generation of future leaders in the political, commercial, academic and cultural fields, gained a hold on the popular imagination in the aftermath of the War. Whether this belief can be supported statistically or was merely impressionistic and largely based on disillusionment with political and economic developments between the two world wars will be assessed in the book.

The four subjects of this book reached the Western Front in 1915 or 1916. There they died or were mortally wounded. Their brief lives are better known about than those of most of their contemporaries through their close association with Vera Brittain, whose best-selling autobiography of the war years, *Testament of Youth*, describes their lives and deaths. *None That Go Return* attempts to place the lives of the four men in their social environment and in the context of political developments and military strategy and operations which affected the activities of their respective battalions, brigades, divisions and armies and thereby made their contribution to the circumstances surrounding their deaths. This approach will enable them to emerge in their own right from the shadow of Vera Brittain where, for so long, they have been largely confined.

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