

Words about war for boys: Representations of soldiers and conflict in writing for children before World War I.

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Abstract

During WWI boys and young men volunteered, fought and died in unprecedented numbers. Boys' books and magazines have been implicated in encouraging boys to enlist through the creation of a mythos that figured war as a time of youthful heroism, male comradeship, and an opportunity to display widely admired characteristics such as loyalty, courage and self-sacrifice. Examination of what boys were reading in the three decades before the war in fact suggests that the range of attitudes to battle, the military, and bureaucrats offered in boys' fiction was more subtle and conflicted than previous accounts have supposed.

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In August 1914 a young Irish boy wrote the following letter to Lord Kitchner, then Minister for War and leading the military recruitment campaign:

21 Park Avenue
Dublin
Dear Lord Kitchner,
I am an Irish boy 9 years of age and I want to go to the front. I can ride jolley
quick on my bycycle and would go as a dispatch rider. I wouldn't let the germans
get it. I am a good shot with a revolver and would kill a good few of the germans.
I am very strong and often win a fight with lads twice as big as myself. I want a
uniform and a revolver and will give a good account of myself.
Please send an ancncer
Yours affectionately
Alfie Knight (van Emden 33)

As we approach the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of World War I, a key question for those of us interested in children's literature must be whether writing for the young was implicated in making so many young people—like young Alfie Knight—desperate to take part in the action.¹ For this was a war in which the young fought in unprecedented numbers, as Richard van Emden notes in his study of *Boy Soldiers of the Great War*: "Among all those serving in France by the end of 1915 were more under-age soldiers than the entire force that Wellington took to Waterloo exactly one hundred years earlier" (2). Since "underage" in military terms meant under eighteen, this assessment does not include the tens of thousands of older teenagers who fought overseas—and died in great numbers—between 1914 and 1918, or those who were underage when they joined but came of age during the war, or those (at least 25,000)

Kimberley Reynolds is Professor of Children's Literature in the School of English Literature, Language, and Linguistics at Newcastle University. She was President of the International Research Society for Children's Literature from 2003 to 2007. Recent publications include *Radiant Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations* (2007) and *Children's Literature Studies: A Handbook to Research* (co-editor, forthcoming 2010).

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