

*Irene Cooper Willis*

*England's Holy War*

*A Study of English Liberal Idealism  
During the Great War*

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## *Editor's Foreword*

In 1914, at the outbreak of the Great War, the *Union for Democratic Control* (UDC) was founded in London, a pressure group with the aim of promoting a more rational foreign policy and of supervising the involution of the internal politics in the United Kingdom as a consequence of the war. Numerous Liberal and Labour politicians joined the UDC, which was an important presence in English life throughout the war. The UDC was not exactly a pacifist association, but rather a pressure group whose aim was to promote democratic methods and transparency of treaties in international politics, and therefore hosted more or less radical pacifists within it. In the context of militancy in the UDC, the original analytical contributions on the war of some radical pacifist male and female writers were born, and among women the cases of three of them are to be noted in particular, all more or less unfortunate as writers and forgotten, and all probably penalized by being women. They all understood the Great War as a collapse of the European system whose origins were to be found in the conflict between the living conditions of the contemporary world and the surviving cultural institutions that were not adequate to it, which it had inherited from the long past; and they all produced non-trivial analyses, out of the mainstream of the Great War historiography. The best known of these writers was Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935), an author with a broad spectrum of interests, who had always had a discreet audience of admirers and readers, who in the years around 1910 had reached a certain notoriety as a commentator, and who after the war paid with isolation the intransigent pacifist positions that she expressed in a very little read book, which is also a masterpiece: *Satan, the Waster*, of 1920, in which the war is represented through an expressionist macabre farce and is commented by a set of essays that we could call of political philosophy and anthropology of rare depth in the search for the roots of political phenomena. Another of these writers was Caroline Playne (1857-1948), who wrote four volumes in which she attempted to develop a cultural study of English society at the time of consent to the Great War: an aural, promising attempt, which is sometimes quoted by historians of the Great War, but whose value has certainly not been recognized in proportion to the originality of the outlook. The third writer was Irene Cooper Willis, belonging to a younger generation (1882-1970), a barrister, known for some biographies of English women of the nineteenth century and for a study on Montaigne;

she analyzed a singular and important aspect of the War in some essays that she collected in *England's Holy War* in 1928: the metamorphosis of the British Liberals from neutralism based on rational analysis to enthusiastic war-like spirit.

*England's Holy War* tells the story of a number of compromises of conscience and self-fuelled illusions by British Liberal opinion as it was reflected in the newspapers that represented it at the time, in particular the *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian*, and it is a remarkable contribution to the problem of consent to the Great War, the immense and generalized consent that for various reasons the politically literate population of the whole of Europe gave their country's participation in the war. The most remarkable defect of *England's Holy War*, a recurrent defect in several pages and throughout the course of the book, is that as a Liberal militant betrayed by her political side, Cooper Willis has an oversimplified view of the opposite opinion, the conservative one, to which she attributes a sort of traditional consistency between political realism and war-like spirit. Now, it is true and it is well known that the war ended in 1918 with the Pyrrhian victory of the cynical and short-sighted conservatism represented by Clemenceau and Lloyd George: but this does not prevent *England's Holy War* from being very poor in information regarding the way of think of England Tories, and above all suggest an implausible unilateral vision which is a consequence of the political commitment of the author, a political militant rather than a scholar, animated by strenuous aversion for the Tory or popular and nationalist press controlled by the Harmsworth family. But in the analysis of Liberal politics, the discussion goes deeply, and vividly reveals the state of consciousness, throughout the war, of this half of England forced to comply with a war that contradicted all the principles for which it had committed itself until on the day of England's involvement. Opponents of secret treaties, opponents of Balance of Power, supporters of free trade, supporters of the fact that there were no substantial reasons for conflict with Germany, opposed in Europe only to the Tsarist government of Russia (not to the Russian nation), in solidarity with the Polish, Jewish and Finnish subjects oppressed by the Russian government and by popular nationalism, the Liberals were caught by the war while "napping", and were overwhelmed by their idealist tradition: "... [they] found themselves in a most uncomfortable predicament. It was not Liberalism which determined their way out of the predicament, but the habit, common to all

men, whatever their political opinions, of avoiding, instead of facing, difficulties which threaten their peace of mind..." (p. 4) .

In this context, on August 3, 1914, the Liberal press was still looking for the coherence of things within the framework of its vision: the German invasion of Luxembourg was an understandable tactical move given the threat impending on Germany from East and West, on which the *Manchester Guardian* wrote "we deeply regret it but we understand" (p. 58). Large demonstrations were called for neutrality, with the participation of academics and people of rank and the churches, and it was argued that the thing to do was, if anything, a general alliance involving Germany to contain the erratic action of the Russian government. But on August 4, the picture suddenly changed. In the House of Commons "the instinctive rush was emphatically for war" (p. 82), the Liberal government began to speak of "vital interest", but Liberal opinion still resisted the use of this concept. On August 6, after the war was declared, the *Manchester Guardian* repeated again that everything was a mistake, but added "Being in, we must win", which would be the formula that would accompany England for the whole duration of the war.

From now on the war became holy, the war that would bring democracy and the transparency of democratic methods in the world, "the war to end war", and this idealistic motivation claim would accompany the Liberals for all subsequent events while remaining tolerated by conservatives, although they would never make it their own: "the Liberal press, as the only begetter of the Gospel of War to end War, remained the only retailer of that Gospel's pure milk" (p. xiv). The great prophet of this Gospel was the socialist and utopian writer H. G. Wells, who began on August 7 the constant work of defamation of Germany under the banner of the "sword of peace". The alliance with illiberal Russia was a source of embarrassment, but the consolation was that the war would also bring civilization to the Russians, and a "Home Rule" to the Finns and Poles, not unlike Germany, which would emerge from the conflict transformed for better and freed from militarist tradition.

With this leitmotif, i.e. attention to the stratagems of English Liberals to justify their actions against their principles, the book tells the whole war, and in particular the refusal of the negotiated peace that would have been possible in 1917 and the ignoble chapter of the armistice, the vengeful blockade on Germany and the punitive peace treaties. The leitmotif of the compromises of conscience of English Liberalism gradually fades because

that Liberalism is extinguished under the weight of the defeat suffered, and so in the last part of the book the central element of interest is lacking. Especially in the third part, the one on the treaties, *England's Holy War* becomes a narrative of the war by a Liberal pacifist who remained consistent with the original ideas, and not willing to compromise.

Alberto Palazzi

May, 2020

***Notes for the 2020 electronic edition***

This e-book has been composed on the basis of the 1928 printed edition of *England's Holy War*, and the printed editions of the texts included here as Appendices. The scanned text was carefully controlled, in order to make available to the readers a good quality electronic version of this works. The page numbers of the original editions have been preserved in [square brackets].

To facilitate the reading of this electronic edition, the author's longest footnotes have been integrated in the text. Other footnotes containing remarks that add some contents to the main discourse have been marked with an asterisk '\*'. The other footnotes contain references to the author's sources, and should be read only by those who have an interest in identifying the author's sources.

# *England's Holy War*

*Original title page*

ENGLAND'S HOLY WAR  
A STUDY  
OF ENGLISH LIBERAL IDEALISM  
DURING  
THE GREAT WAR  
BY  
IRENE COOPER WILLIS  
1928



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This book is set in DeVenne, a Modern type face, which is drawn sharply and with an almost mathematical exactness. The Modern types were first made about 1790 and, becoming immensely popular, were soon grossly distorted, each type-founder trying to outdo his competitors by exaggerating the Modern characteristics. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that the Modern type was brought back to a useful sanity of design, largely through the influence of the great American printer Theodore Low DeVinne, in whose honor this type face was named.

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*Dedication*

TO  
VERNON LEE

## ***Foreword by J. A. Hobson***

*Author of Problems of a New World; Incentives in the New Industrial Order; Economics of Unemployment; Free Thought in the Social Sciences, Etc.*

Much has been written about the part played by Press Propaganda during the war and the period of so-called peace-making that followed. The related arts of skilled mendacity and facile credulity were a new revelation of human faculties. Most of this work was done by politicians, journalists and other literary gentlemen who deemed it to be their patriotic duty to suspend the ordinary canons of truth in the interests of victory, and to allow their inventive imagination a license fitted to the needs of the situation. These men knew what they were doing; they were out to raise the morale of the nation so that it might undergo the necessary sacrifices of life and money. Doubtless most of them came easily to believe in the nobilities they attributed to their men and the atrocities which belonged to the enemy, for such belief belongs to the artistic temperament.

But a special and particularly interesting study in press propagandism is presented here by Miss Cooper Willis, namely that of the strange and ingenious attitudes and [x] writhings by which the Liberal Idealism of England was harnessed to the war chariot. A Liberal Government held office. It had repeatedly declared that we had no obligation to fight a continental war, not even for the neutrality of Belgium. The Liberal press was definitely pacifist right up to the outbreak of war. It was not even convinced by Sir Edward Grey's statement on August 3. But when it did come in quickly but reluctantly, it had to go the whole spiritual hog. The war had to be a "Holy War," to enable these editors and writers to devour, with a sacramental gusto, all they had said and written in the past. Miss Cooper Willis reproduces with brief pungent interpretation the passages which explain the mixed mental processes by which they came, not merely to accept, but to glory in a war that was to be the final overthrow of militarism and the liberation of all oppressed peoples. That the "War to End War" should be "A Fight to a Finish" was really a spiritual economy. Never again! was the spiritual slogan. So every rigour, "force without stint," was not merely allowable but right. The banner of the ideal — unavoidably bloodstained — could still be waved aloft, and when the Peace was won, the world would be safe for a great new era of moral advance! The skill and courage with which these self-delusions about the origin, conduct and consequences of the war were fashioned in the press,

how all through the monstrous proceedings at Versailles these journalists “kidded” themselves and their readers into believing it would all come out right — all this constitutes a record in the annals of unintelligent uplift. The clearest testimony to the moral degradation of such a mental debauch is found in the general [xi] acquiescence of our nation in the starvation blockade of Germany, maintained for many months after the Armistice and in defiance of the plainest pledges of the Allies.

There is humour as well as tragedy in the collapse of Liberal Idealism, and Miss Cooper Willis brings a keen ridicule to bear upon the intellectual processes she diagnoses.

The book contributes a very necessary chapter to the history of the war, neglected hitherto by formal historians.

J. A. Hobson

Hampstead, May 1927

## *Preface*

The three little books making up this volume were originally published in England in 1919, 1920 and 1921, under the respective titles of “How We Went into the War,” “How We Got on with the War” and “How We Came Out of the War.” In republishing them, a few words of explanation are needed as to the newspaper material drawn upon for illustration.

In dealing with the political situation at the outbreak of war I quoted from the then most representative London morning newspapers, the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily News* and from the other two important organs of Liberal opinion, the *Manchester Guardian* (which though published in Manchester has a considerable London circulation) and the weekly *Nation*. I also quoted from *Punch*, the *Spectator*, and from *John Bull* which was then, under the editorship of Mr. Horatio Bottomley, the oracle in over a million lower class English households.

These papers were not selected by me with any polemical motive; they were the papers to which with no thought in my head, at that time, of writing a book on the subject, I naturally turned to find out what people of different political views were thinking and to get samples of those different views.

[xiv] It would have been impossible to continue drawing upon all these papers, Conservative and Independent as well as Liberal, weekly as well as daily, lower class as well as upper class, for illustrations of my study of Liberal idealism during the war. Considerations of space alone would have prevented this. The critical days of the outbreak were at most twelve or thirteen in number (July 22nd to August 3rd); the war lasted for over four years. But considerations of space were not the ruling ones, for, after the outbreak, I was concerned with one stream only of the great flood of war-feeling, the stream which bore the Liberals onward from rock to rock. As I have tried to show in the first book (Part I of this volume), it was from the conflict between the Liberals’ pre-war attitude and the circumstances in which they found themselves when the war started, that the idea of the Holy War arose. The crusade, moreover, originated in the Liberal press, and though it was generally adopted (as was any idea that would stimulate hatred of Germany), the Liberal press, as the only begetter of the Gospel of War to end War, remained the only retailer of that Gospel’s pure milk. I confined my attention therefore to the Liberals and to their most voluble

and popular organ, and in dealing with the course of the war I took my extracts almost entirely from the *Daily News* (the chief of the two London Liberal morning papers, the other being the *Daily Chronicle*) and from the articles, leading or otherwise, of the *Daily News*' then editor Mr. A. G. Gardiner, better known as A.G.G.

The fact that Mr. Gardiner now writes for *John Bull*, a paper no longer under the magnetic influence of Mr. Bottomley but a paper, nevertheless, whose posters do their best to [xv] suggest that the world is run on the lines of Drury Lane melodrama, must not be allowed to stand in the light of his, or the *Daily News*' aforesaid political reputation. The ways of journalists are hard — as hard, no doubt, for the journalist to pursue as for the educated person to understand. We are apt to forget that the first object of the journalist, as of the press, is to make money. To do that, a wide public must be secured and to secure that, sensational appeals and all that goes against the grain of fastidious thinking and feeling must be stomached. The downfall of Liberalism has not been without sad consequences to many of its leaders and followers. The mighty have indeed fallen but we must not forget that once they were mighty.

Before the war and during the war, the *Daily News* was a powerful influence among the Liberals. It was read at all the best Liberal breakfast tables and had no rival other than the *Manchester Guardian*, which, however, because it circulates primarily in the North of England and does not reach London until mid-day, was less of a rival than an ally. Though only a half-penny paper and therefore not as impressive in appearance as a Conservative penny daily, in manner of utterance it was as pontifical. I do not know what its circulation was in 1914; its circulation in 1926 was advertised in Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory as 600,000, but even if the 1914 figures were below this, that must not be allowed to depreciate the estimate of its importance. As Mr. Leonard Woolf pointed out, recently, in the *Nation* (Feb. 5, 1927) circulation figures are deceptive, in measuring the influence of a newspaper in periods before the rise of modern journalism. Accustomed as we are, nowadays, to figures that easily [xvi] run to or go beyond a million, it is difficult to realise what enormous weight a weekly paper, such as the *Fortnightly* had in the 'eighties, under the editorship of John Morley, with a circulation of only 2,500. Modern journalism with its "splash" headlines, "stunts" and pictures, started, of course, before the end of the 19th century (the *Daily Mail* arose in 1896) and in 1914 was well on its way to becoming the huge advertisement

agency that it is today. But the paper shortage during the war and the rapid developments in the popular press that have taken place since in the way of appeals to every variety of popular taste, from offers of free insurance to puzzle competitions and baby-chat, justify our considering the pre-war and war period of modern journalism as distinct from the post-war and therefore not measuring the influence of the *Daily News* in that earlier period by a comparison between its circulation figures then and now.

The popular press (meaning the half-penny dailies now a penny) of twelve or thirteen years ago, though not written for “the small, educated, influential class of the eighties” referred to by Mr. Woolf, was not so obviously addressed to the uneducated masses as it is today. Vulgar sensationalism was well to the fore in its pages but had not reached its present level, at any rate in the *Daily News*. The tone throughout of that paper was still distinctive, if not distinguished (as I have good reason to know, having worked among its files for months in the newspaper room of the British Museum); the Liberal seasoning was not confined to the leading articles, and the majority of its readers were the army of the politically faithful. The leading articles themselves — and this is true, of course, of the leading articles in [xvii] all papers — carried far more weight than they do now. They were read with respect, if not reverence; the flock looked to them and were fed.

Nowadays, the flock are less inclined to be shepherded. Political indifference and scepticism are more general than they were in 1914. Morning readers are apt to make straight for the serial story, the crossword puzzle or the sporting news. We talk of the enormous influence of the press nowadays, and in the sense in which influence means far-reachingness, our remarks are true. But that which influences, by far-flung distribution, is, in the main, so vulgar, trivial and motley that “influential” in the old-fashioned, significant sense can scarcely be applied to it. The popular press of today is too representative of the thoughtless majority to be influential among the educated as it was in former days. Even during the war it was only representative of the educated because for the time being the educated had fallen to the level of the uneducated.

With the educated restored to a critical outlook, and with scepticism growing generally as regards the authoritativeness of the press (shown, for instance, by Mr. Lloyd George’s recent remark, at a public dinner, that the most reliable parts of a newspaper are the advertisements) it may seem as if the idealistic thought and utterances discussed and quoted in this book,

taken as they were entirely from the press which, intellectually, nowadays counts for so little, cannot have been truly representative of a great political party such as the Liberals were. Indeed, at moments I have felt this myself, in revising the books for republication, and, in a state of scepticism more advanced than that of the Knock-out-Blow Prime [xviii] Minister, I have sometimes wondered why I should ever have thought it worth while to bother about what the Liberal newspapers, or any newspapers, said. But then, in answer to that feeling and query, have come the unforgettable recollections that the great mass of Liberal opinion during the war was undoubtedly represented by the *Daily News*, that Liberal statesmen, writers and speakers did say these things and were enthusiastically supported in saying them and moreover that they are still, though in a less passionate form, going on saying them or allowing them to be believed. For the Peace Treaty is still accepted in the main as a righteous settlement instead of being regarded, as it should be, as a mockery of Peace and the undeniable triumph of the Spirit of War. With those recollections has come also the conviction that unless a by no means sufficiently disillusioned world is reminded of its war delusions, in a future Great War, it will — I was going to say, slip into those same delusions again, but of course, whether reminded or not of its former delusions, it will slip into them if another Great War should occur. For War means delusion and more so in this age when, in peace-time, war is a monstrosity, and no humane person, or group of persons, can believe themselves or their country to have had a share in bringing war about. From this universal assumption of innocence, unquestioned as soon as war starts, arise all the conceptions of the enemy as the guilty party; then follows naturally, in the minds of sensitive and liberally inclined people, the immense myth of a Holy War. The logic of the feelings supplants the logic of fact and reason. Loss, risk, sacrifice, sacrifice, as Vernon Lee in her magnificent “Satan — the Waster” has pointed out, of all civilized man’s [xix] repugnances no less than of his self and of those dear to him, consecrate and sanctify the cause. The greater the sacrifice, the holier the war, the more Satanic the enemy. Psychological necessities, many of them, such as the need for self-justification and self-respect, of a creditable kind, stand between us and Reality once we are in a war which we are keenly aware we did not want. Out of the hopes and fears, struggles and sufferings of war, out of its tremendous practical pressure and equally tremendous emotional stress, are born the passionate delusions and superstitions which, in times of war,

constitute men's opinions and beliefs. Only non-participation can save a nation from these delusions. Warfare can no more be sane than humane. The idea, to which the Liberals so pathetically and grotesquely clung throughout the war, that the lusts of war could be directed into the paths of their war-aims, that the savage in war could be licked into shape and tamed into a morally inoffensive member of their crusade, was but the offspring of their own self-satisfied sentimentality. This idea is echoed in many disappointed idealists' criticism of the Peace Treaty as a betrayal brought about by some unexplainable miscarriage of their aims. There was, in fact, no betrayal. The Liberal war-aims, as I have tried to show in my Preface to Part II of this book, were stultified from the start. The outbreak of the war — not its conclusion — destroyed them. Liberalism was betrayed when Sir Edward Grey went *in*. And Reason was betrayed when the Holy War was proclaimed, and those who proclaimed it were among the earliest casualties of the mental and spiritual havoc produced by the war. For war plays the devil not only with bodies but with minds, and the ensuing intellectual deterioration [xx] of the warring nations, being less obvious than the physical deterioration, is by so much the more dangerous.

I. C. W.

London, March 1927

## *Part One - Going into the War*

### *Preface to Part One (as First Published)*

[3] This book, dealing with the origins of Liberal idealism during the war, was written some months before the prospect of finishing the story came into sight. Now that the war is over, an apology to the reader is necessary for publishing it without making it relevant to the end which has been reached. A second volume, *How We Came Out of the War*, is in preparation to amend that deficiency.

By some readers, the book will be, perhaps, understood as an indictment of Liberalism. It has been so understood by a few people who were good enough to read it before publication. I want therefore, in this preface, to correct, or rather to qualify, that impression.

It has been far from my intention to suggest that the state of mind which the book has tried to analyse is essentially Liberal, or that the intellectual processes which it discusses are particularly characteristic of Liberal thought. The book is not an indictment of Liberalism, taking Liberalism to mean the Liberal movement which has been occupied during the last century with the struggle for political, social, economic and religious freedom; it is an indictment only of the attitude of Liberals during this war. Indictment, however, is too strong a word, since it cannot justly be applied in dealing with unconscious self-deception, and to apply it where in the great majority of cases there has been no deliberate intellectual dishonesty, is to confuse two very different states of mind, namely, hypocrisy and self-delusion.

There have been, and there are, no doubt, hypocritical Liberals, [4] men who, with their eyes wide open, deliberately adopted the attitude into which the rest of their fellow-Liberals unconsciously slipped. It is not likely that certain Liberal leaders, noted for their astuteness and power of detachment, should have forgotten their pre-war opinions and have fallen victims to the flood of humanitarian feeling which swept over the country at the time of the German invasion of Belgium. But such men were exceptions. In the case of the majority of Liberals, there was no hypocrisy; there was merely self-delusion, and as we study the self-delusion of Liberals at the outbreak of war, we realise that it arose, primarily, from the fact that at the outbreak of war, the Liberals were caught napping, and hurriedly awakening, found themselves in a most uncomfortable

predicament. It was not Liberalism which determined their way out of the predicament, but the habit, common to all men, whatever their political opinions, of avoiding, instead of facing, difficulties which threaten their peace of mind; and taking the average Liberal as he is, the circumstances of the outbreak of war as they were, it is not surprising that the Liberals took the way of idealism. For the violation of Belgian neutrality made it very difficult for the Liberals to continue their opposition to the war, and, though in their pre-war mood they had been able to contemplate the possibility of that step being taken by Germany and to declare that, if it were taken, it would in no way oblige British intervention, they would have been less than Liberals had they been able to resist the impulse to intervene when that admittedly unjust step actually occurred.

.... *End of Preview* .....

## ***Back Cover***

*England's Holy War* tells the story of the compromises of conscience and self-fuelled illusions by British Liberal opinion as it was reflected in the newspapers that represented it during the First World War, in particular the *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian*, and is a first rate contribution to the problem of consent to the Great War, the immense and generalized consent that for various reasons the politically literate population of the whole of Europe gave their country's participation in the war. The discussion vividly reveals the state of consciousness, throughout the war, of the Liberal half of England forced to comply with a war that contradicted all the principles for which it had committed itself until on the day of England's involvement.

In this context, on August 3, 1914, the Liberal press was still looking for the coherence of things within the framework of its vision: the German invasion of Luxembourg was an understandable tactical move given the threat impending on Germany from East and West, on which the *Manchester Guardian* wrote "we deeply regret it but we understand" (p. 58). On August 6, after the war was declared, the *Manchester Guardian* repeated again that everything was a mistake, but added "Being in, we must win", which would be the formula that would accompany England for the whole duration of the war.

From now on the war became holy, the war that would bring democracy and the transparency of democratic methods in the world, “the war to end war”, and this idealistic motivation claim would accompany the Liberals for all subsequent events while remaining tolerated by conservatives, although they would never make it their own. The great prophet of this Gospel was the socialist and utopian writer H. G. Wells, who began on August 7 a constant work of defamation of Germany under the banner of the “sword of peace”. With this leitmotif, i.e. attention to the stratagems of English Liberals to justify their actions against their principles, the book tells the whole war, and in particular the refusal of the negotiated peace that would have been possible in 1917 and the ignoble chapter of the armistice, the vengeful blockade on Germany and the punitive peace treaties. *England’s Holy War* is a first rate study in national psychology and a narrative of the war by a Liberal pacifist who remained consistent with the original ideas, and not willing to compromise.

### ***Irene Cooper Willis***

Irene Cooper Willis (1882-1970) was a British literary scholar and barrister. She was educated at Girton College, Cambridge where she graduated with a BA in 1904. As a barrister, she was a member of the Inner Temple and Lincoln’s Inn. Willis wrote biographies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Florence Nightingale and the Brontës. Her work *England’s Holy War* analysed how Liberals, upon the outbreak of the First World War, abandoned their pacifism and supported the war effort with a crusading spirit.