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War

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Abstract
Beginning with George Tomkyns Chesney's The Battle of Dorking, invasion novels became a regular feature of late Victorian and Edwardian popular fiction. The article takes a closer look at the depiction of war in these texts from a military history point of view; it argues that they were not so far from reality as to render them useless to the military historian. Rather, they can be used to provide insights into how the authors and their audience thought about the great war that many expected to come within their lifetime.

Introduction – The Big Push

The plan was a sound one, at least to those who had come up with it. More than 200,000 soldiers had been concentrated for a decisive push on a small front. After an intense bombardment they were to be hurled against the enemy lines to achieve an initial breakthrough. Mobile forces were then ready to exploit this breakthrough, and strategic success would be the eventual result, with the enemy who had so brazenly invaded the country being finally driven out.

However, it was not to be. The artillery had pounded the enemy positions for a prolonged period of time, and when the men left their starting line in the early hours, much of their approach was covered by a dense haze. Yet soon they were met by a hailstorm of machine gun and rifle fire, and within barely half an hour, 15,000 men lay dead or wounded on the battlefield. Even so, the attackers still pressed on, and by sheer weight of numbers they were just about to enter the enemy trenches, when a flanking counterattack finally broke the assault. By mid-afternoon, the retreating infantry had reached their starting line again, and casualties already amounted to 30,000 or more in dead and wounded. A follow-

up attack by those forces originally assigned to exploiting the breakthrough achieved nothing apart from further adding to the body-count. Although the defenders had also suffered heavy losses, at the end of the day the attacking force was utterly spent and incapable of further operations, having suffered close to 50.000 casualties.[1]

What sounds like a slightly garbled version of one of the big Western Front battles in the First World War in fact happened almost two decades earlier – or rather, it never happened at all. The 'Battle of Stralsund', where a German army tried in vain to destroy a bridgehead formed by a combined British-American army, is one of the key events in Louis Tracy's 1896 *The Final War*, a truly epic tale about Britain – and eventually, the United States as well – fighting an alliance of France, Germany and Russia during the closing years of the nineteenth century. It had all the ingredients that at the time made for quite a successful novel: a plot of global dimensions with the three continental powers conspiring to topple Britain from its position and to seize most of its colonial empire; heroes of admirably quirkiness, like a bicycle factory owner who turned his company staff into a volunteer cycle battalion, or a major leading the Worthing Volunteer Reserve in a final, desperate bayonet charge directly into the surf against French naval infantry trying to force a landing; some romance between resourceful officers and ladies eager to take part in the great effort by following in the footsteps of Florence Nightingale; a German emperor being captured in a daring cavalry raid before finally coming to his wits and switching sides; the Czar together with his whole family blown to pieces in the Kremlin by anarchists; and finally a happy ending seeing the foes either come to their senses or succumb to the might of the combined Anglo-American forces, with the end of the war ushering in a new era of global peace and prosperity. *The Final War*, dedicated to 'Private Thomas Atkins', was first published as a weekly serial in issues 284 (28 December) to 315 (1 August) of *Pearson's Weekly*, with Tracy partly making things along as the weeks passed by, before being published in book form in the same year.[2]

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[1]Louis Tracy, *The Final War. A Story of the Great Betrayal* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1896), pp. 232-236

[2]Tracy, *The Final War*, p. v. As *The Final War* turned out to be a success, Tracy followed it with yet another story about evil invaders (this time a coalition of France and Germany) eventually being driven out by British pluck; *The Invaders: A Story of British's Peril* ran from 10 March to 11 August 1900 in *Pearson's Weekly*; it was published as a novel in the following year (Louis Tracy, *The Invaders. A Story of Britain's Peril* (London: C. A. Pearson)); while in both cases the circulation of the novels is difficult to determine with any precision, *Pearson's Weekly* reached a wide audience with well over a million copies sold in1897 (Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt, *Revolutions from Grub Street. A History of Magazine Publishing in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 30.).

Apart from his commercial success, one might wonder where exactly the significance of Louis Tracy's novel lies for the military historian – or whether there is any significance at all in the first place. Looking slightly beyond Tracy himself reveals that he was far from being the only one writing about how a future war might turn out in the decades before the First World War. In fact, it was something of a fashion at the time, and one that has a firmly identifiable starting point. Ever since George Tomkyns Chesney had published his vision of a successful invasion of Britain by an unnamed invader in 1871 (whose soldiers spoke German and had steamrollered France the year before, so that anyone could have a good guess at whom Chesney had actually in mind), texts about future conflicts were produced at an astonishing rate, resulting in a large number of essays, short stories, novelettes, novels and dramas hitting the market between 1871 and the outbreak of the First World War.[3] They often had Britain threatened with or even suffering from an invasion, the enemy depending on the political climate of the day. Thus, by the late 1870s and early 1880s Britain was supposed to find itself in conflict with France or Russia, regularly caused by colonial differences and foreign ambitions of toppling Britain from its hegemonial position; only after the turn of the century did Germany appear again as a likely enemy with increasing frequency.[4]

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[3]George Tomkyns Chesney, *The Battle of Dorking. Reminiscences of a Volunteer* (Edinburgh/London: William Blackwood, 1871); see Roger T. Stearn, 'Chesney, Sir George Tomkyns', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online edition https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5231 accessed 2 November 2023; a detailed description of both Chesney's work and his impact on contemporary political debate and literary production can be found in I.F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763 – 1984* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 30-46; Chesney's *The battle of Dorking* turned out to be a great success, with more than 100,000 copies sold (Christian R. Melby, 'Empire and Nation in British Future-War and Invasion-Scare Fiction, 1871–1914', *The Historical Journal* 63 (2020), pp. 389-410, pp. 389-390). Chesney, *Battle of Dorking*, p. 7; a French translation published in the same year left little room for imagination by changing the subtitle in a not entirely subtle way: George Tomkyns Chesney, *Bataille de Dorking. Invasion des Prussiens en Angleterre. Préface par Charles Yriarte* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1871).

[4]Texts covering future conflicts between Britain and other major powers were also published as contributions to discussions on military reforms which in the late 1860s and early 1870s focussed mostly on the army, while the years preceding the Naval Defence Act of 1889 saw a significant uptick in naval-themed publications (one of which (Anonymous, *The Battle Off Worthing or Why the Invaders Never Got To Dorking* (London: The Literary Society, 1887)) directly referred to Chesney's original 1871 novel, testifying to its continuing importance even more than 15 years after its initial publication).

Usually most of these texts are seen as part of the then emerging genre of science fiction, and as such they have attracted scholarly attention in the past. They have also been analysed with regard to the development of fiction in general and of wider issues like the impact of technology on society and how literature of the time dealt with it.[5] Most importantly, I. F. Clarke laid down the foundation for any future research into these texts in a number of seminal studies.[6] However, his 1966 'census' with 321 texts for the period up to 1914 is still the most recent list of relevant texts available,[7] which shows that research into them has been far from exhaustive; an earlier list also composed by I.F. Clarke included a significantly wider range of future fiction material.[8] Indeed, historians in general and military historians in particular have paid fairly little attention to them, which is slightly unfortunate as some of the texts can yield valuable evidence on what significant parts of pre-war society may have expected from a future war.[9]

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[5]Antulio J. Echevarria, I*magining Future War. The West's Technological Revolution and Visions of Wars to Come, 1880–1914* (Westport: Praeger Securities International, 2007)., Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 64-106; for other approaches to – usually a selection of – these texts see Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Ailise Bulfin, *Gothic Invasions: Imperialism, War and Fin-de-Siècle Popular Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018).

[6] I.F. Clarke, *The Great War with Germany, 1890-1914. Fictions and Fantasies of the War-to-come*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997); Clarke 1997, I.F. Clarke. 1995. *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871-1914. Fictions of Future Warfare and of Battles Still-to-come*, (Syracuse/NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*; I.F. Clarke, *The Tale of the Future. From the Beginning to the Present Day*, (London: Library Association, 1961).

[7]Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, pp. 227-249; for an example of a text that escaped Clarke's attention see Rev. Thomas Berney, *The Battle of the Channel Tunnel and Dover Castle and Forts* (Norwich, 1882).

[8]Clarke, *Tale of the Future*, pp. 19-129.

[9]Notable exceptions include Melby, *Empire and Nation*, taking a closer look at the psychological impact of invasion novel texts and putting some of them into the context of British late Victorian political culture; Danny Laurie-Fletcher, *British Invasion and Spy Literature*, 1871–1918 (Cham: Palgrave McMillan, 2019), in particular pp. 31-96, focussing on the connection between invasion novels and the pre-WW1 spy scares; and Norman Longmate, *Island Fortress. The Defence of Great Britain 1603-1945* (New York: Pimlico, 2001), concentrating on texts covering invasions; for other aspects of the genre see for example A. Michael Matin, 'The Creativity of War Planners: Armed Forces Professionals and the Pre-1914 British Invasion-Scare Genre', *English Literary History* 78 (2011), pp. 801-831; Iain Boyd Whyte, 'Anglo-German Conflict in Popular

The present article will take a closer look at these war fiction texts from a military history perspective and concentrate on three main points. The first is that within the large number of texts published between 1871 and 1914 covering a future war in some way or another, a distinct corpus of 'political war fiction' texts, for want of a better term, can be identified, which are materially different from 'standard' science fiction texts. Although there were significant areas of overlap – Louis Tracy's *The Final War* would probably fall into one of these areas – political war fiction texts generally raised different issues and had quite different intentions as compared to science fiction texts. As a consequence, the second point is that the corpus of late Victorian and Edwardian political war fiction texts as defined above represents a legitimate, useful, and indeed important source particularly for the military historian researching how pre-First World War society thought about future war. Analysing this corpus results leads to a third point – political war fiction texts offer quite a *specific* picture of the nature of future war. This war was one of mass armies on a battlefield where technology had a significant – and, one has to add, altogether unpleasant – impact.

Most interpreters have argued in the past that war fiction authors had a vision of future war based on past conflicts which the First World War would ultimately prove to be utterly wrong. Yet comparing war as described in war fiction with the actual experience of war before and during the early years of the First World War suggests otherwise – in fact, taking a closer look at how war is described in war fiction texts will show that in many respects they did not fall far from the mark. In conclusion, an analysis of the corpus of late Victorian and Edwardian political war fiction suggests that the First World War – at least initially – cannot have held little in the way of surprises for both the military decision makers and for significant parts of the general public.

War Fiction is not Science Fiction – the corpus of future war texts
As the raw numbers given above show, late Victorian and Edwardian writers were quite interested in 'future war', resulting not only in a significant number of texts, but also in a large variety.[10] Some of these were of a very general nature, some – like one of the most famous of it, H. G. Wells's 1897 *War of the Worlds* – clearly science fiction.

Fiction 1870-1914', in: Fred Bridgham (ed.), *The First World War and a Clash of Cultures* (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), pp. 43-99; David A. T. Stafford, 'Spies and Gentlemen: The Birth of the British Spy Novel, 1893-1914', *Victorian Studies* 24 (1981), pp. 489-509.

[10]Unfortunately, in many cases, particularly when it comes to shorter texts and pamphlets, publication numbers are nearly impossible to come by; it is probably fair to assume that the great variety characterizing these texts also extended to their circulation, which will have ranged from a few hundred for a small pamphlet to hundreds of thousands for a novel serialized in a major magazine or newspaper.

Texts on future wars could be found in different genres, resulting in pieces of greatly differing length or character, from essays and short stories to full-length novels or even theatrical plays. This variety was matched by a comparable diversity in the personal backgrounds of the authors, which ranged from officers on active service like Vice Admiral Philip Howard Colomb, one of the foremost navy theoreticians of the time, or gunnery specialist Sydney Marrow Eardley-Wilmot, to journalists like Fred T. Jane, historians like William Laird Clowes and 'true' literary men like Louis Tracy.[11] Authors could also use pseudonyms, which in some cases could be rather peculiar; while some of these had an obvious meaning like 'Cassandra', others may have had their roots in service nicknames, as was apparently the case with Sydney Eardley Wilmot, who published the first edition of his second war fiction text under the pseudonym 'Searchlight', a nickname he had probably gained when readying his first independent command, HMS *Dolphin*, for sea.[12] In all, around two-thirds of the texts were published under real names, the remaining third being more or less evenly divided among texts published anonymously and texts published under pseudonyms.

Closer inspection, however, shows that within this wide array of texts a fairly distinct group can be made out. These texts were inspired by a specific military or political issue under discussion at the time of their publication, and it is this direct connection to the politics of the time that science fiction texts, for example, lack. To put it slightly differently, as they were obviously often seen by their authors as instruments with which to sway public opinion into one or another direction, the texts were part of the political process of the time, which science fiction was not. 'Political war fiction' would therefore appear to be a fairly fitting description for these texts.[13]

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[11]Philip Colomb et al., *The Great War of 189–*, (London: Heinemann, 1893); Sidney Eardley-Wilmot, *The Next Naval War*, (London: Edward Stanford, 1894); Fred T. Jane, *Blake of the "Rattlesnake" or The Man Who Saved England. A Story of Torpedo Warfare in 189–*, (London: Tower Publishing, 1895); William Laird Clowes, *The Captain of the "Mary Rose". A Tale of To-morrow*, (London: Tower Publishing 1892).

[12]Cassandra (pseud.), *The Channel Tunnel; or, England's ruin* (London: William Clowes, 1876); the text covers a German invasion of Britain through the Channel tunnel in the immediate aftermath of a second Franco-German war; Searchlight (pseud.), *The Battle of the North Sea in 1914*, (London: Hugh Rees, 1912). The second edition was published under his name in 1913; Sydney Eardley-Wilmot, *An Admiral's Memories. Sixty-Five Years Afloat and Ashore* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., 1920), pp. 71-79

[13]An anonymous review of Eardley-Wilmot, *Next Naval War* (*Army and Navy Gazette*, July 7 1894, p. 559) noted the book was 'of a type with which <we> have now become very familiar, and if it help [sic] to stir public attention in the navy will serve a useful purpose'; evidently, while individual texts may have seen only small publication runs, sufficient material was floating around at any given time to justify the familiarity mentioned by the reviewer.

Perhaps the most obvious sign for such a text and its intention to influence public and, if possible, official opinion could be found in prefaces or introductory remarks; these could include notes by the most eminent military men of the day like the endorsement of William Le Queux' works by the last Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Frederick Sleigh Roberts.[14] Even without such 'almost-official' sanctioning, texts could be quite explicit, as already the opening words of Chesney's 1871 novel show:

> You ask me to tell you, my grand-children, something about my own share in the great events that happened fifty years ago. 'Tis sad work turning back to that bitter page in our history, but you may, perhaps, take profit in your new homes from the lesson it teaches. For us in England, it came too late. And yet we had plenty of warnings, if we had only made use of them.[15]

While political war fiction is thus fairly easy to identify, there are nevertheless areas of overlap with 'regular' fiction, and in particular with science fiction. While texts like Chesney's 1871 *The Battle of Dorking* or William Le Queux' 1894 *The Great War in England of 1897* have always been the reaction to a political or military issue under discussion at the time, authors could also, as in the case of for example Louis Tracy, aim more generally at strengthening the moral fibre of the nation. Although it still owed its existence to the political climate of the mid 1890s, Tracy's *Final War* thus belongs into a grey area of overlap between political war fiction and 'regular' war fiction; waters are muddled further by the appearance of an element of highly advanced technology in Tracy's novel fitting more to a science fiction text – the so-called 'electric rifle', a standard Lee-Metford fitted with a Victorian version of a target designator requiring the soldier to carry a big battery pack on his back.[16]

Sometimes, certain science fiction elements could indeed creep into political future war texts, in the shape of untried, not-yet-introduced or even outright fantastic technology. Perhaps the most obvious examples are the 'tunnel scare' publications expanding on the perceived dangers a Channel Tunnel would present for the security of the United Kingdom. The operations of the Anglo-French Submarine Railway Company in 1881 caused several texts to appear in 1882, like the anonymous

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[14]Le Queux, *The Great War in England in 1897,* (London: Tower Publishing, 1894), p. 5 and Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910 with a full account of the siege of Londo,n* (London: MacMillan, 1906), p. I; both were initially published as serials, the former in *Answer*, the latter in *Daily Mail;* while it is doubtful that *The Invasion of 1910* sold a million copies, as Le Queux later claimed (Melby, *Empire and Nation*, p. 390), both texts certainly saw a wide circulation.

[15]Chesney, *Battle of Dorking*, p. 5.

[16]Tracy, *Final War*, pp. 325-333.

publications *The Seizure of the Channel Tunnel*, *The Channel Tunnel: A Poem* and *The Story of the Channel Tunnel*, as well as T.A. Guthrie's *The Seizure of the Channel Tunnel*, with texts associated with that topic appearing as late as 1901.[17] Other examples include the appearance of flying machines in whatever shape, size or function in many texts. Thus, in Colomb's 1893 *The Great War of 189–* a Russian airship operates against Varna, aiming 'at terrorising the inhabitants by a cruel and wanton destruction of property', while in W. Le Queux' *The Great War in England of 1897* published a year later another Russian airship is prevented from raining destruction onto Edinburgh only by the timely arrival of a Scottish inventor and his 'pneumatic dynamite gun', a contraption evidently suitable for taking an airship down from a distance.[18]

Whereas flying machines appeared well before their technological feasibility in the real world, and while a Channel Tunnel would most probably have exceeded the capabilities of late Victorian and Edwardian engineers considerably, in both cases texts can be classified as political war fiction. Aircraft, as long as they were not a requirement for the plot – which would open the road to texts like H. G. Wells' 1908 *War in the Air* or Jules Vernes' 1886 *Robur-le-Conquérant*, were merely a colourful detail in an otherwise believable scenario of a 'modern' war, while a tunnel under the Channel may in reality have been out of reach for late Victorian and Edwardian engineers, but was at the time widely seen as something perfectly possible.

Just like war fiction in general, political war fiction is characterized by great diversity of author and genre. It is however possible to give the corpus of late Victorian and Edwardian political war fiction texts some semblance of order. Going by the content, it is possible to distinguish at least three main groups: First of all, there are texts covering future war in a very general way. They are usually of considerable length and not infrequently look beyond what happens on the battlefield, offering some political background to the events. A second group of texts concentrates on a single event, be it an invasion or a battle, and gives only the briefest of sketches of what led to the event and what happened afterwards. Many of the texts covering an enemy invasion in Britain fall into this category, including Cheyney's 1871 *The Battle of Dorking,* in which the author never even mentioned the nationality of the invader let alone covers in any detail the chain of events which had led to their invasion, or Howard Lester's 1888 *The Taking of Dover,* focussing on the French capture of the 'key to the realm' as related by the French military governor of the place in a letter to his son, a young officer

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[17]Jeremy Wilson/Jerome Spick, *Eurotunnel: The Illustrated Journey,* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 14-21. See e.g. Max Pemberton, *Pro Patria* (Toronto: The Copp Clark Co., 1901), a wild tale of a British traitor helping the French to secretly build a tunnel under the Channel.
[18]Colomb, *Great War of 189–*, pp. 228-234; Colomb, *Great War of 189–*, p. 229; Le Queux, *Great War in England*, p. 248-255.

studying at the military academy of St Cyr.[19] A third group of texts concentrates on a single piece of technology – usually a weapons system – and describes its impact on modern warfare. Examples include texts focussing on the impact of the torpedo on naval warfare and on the capabilities of the submarine.[20] Obviously, these distinctions get blurred easily, and there is a great deal of overlap; texts like Le Queux' 1894 *Great War in England of 1897* on the one hand describe the full course of the war, but are not outrageously talkative on the political background of the military conflict, while William Laird Clowes' 1892 *The Captain of the Mary Rose* offers more than a mere account of the fate of the warship and gives, albeit sketchily, an account of the whole war.

Finally, one peculiarity of these texts is worthy of a small note: some of them correspond with each other, a phenomenon most easily observable with Chesney's 1871 *The Battle of Dorking*, which inspired several different works either offering more background information on the war in which the battle was supposed to take place or continuing the story where Chesney had left it, sometimes turning it from a story about a British defeat to one where defeat is averted and the invader eventually beaten.[21] War fiction texts written as 'answers' to other war fiction texts, either supporting them or sketching out a different scenario, are an additional testimony to their role in the public discussion of political and military matters.

The future war – gentlemanly pastime or industrialised horror?
While the great variety in texts and scenarios naturally results in a great variety of wars, ranging from fairly brief naval affairs to invasions followed by intense fighting in

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[19]Horace Frank Lester, *The Taking of Dover* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1888); Lester was the youngest son of major general who died in India in July 1858 while in command of a Bombay army division (*Allen's Indian Mail*, August 19, 1858, p. 704; *The Times*, October 13, 1896, p. 1).
[20]Torpedo boat attacks feature quite prominently, mainly in naval themed texts, see e.g. Clowes, *Captain of the Mary Rose*, pp. 66-102; as for submarine warfare, in George Griffith, 'The Raid of Le Vengeur', in: *Pearson's Magazine*, February 1901, 178-188 (also not in Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*), a French submarine attacks British ships in the Solent and is then hunted down by a British destroyer in what is possibly the earliest detailed description of a submarine hunt.
[21]Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, pp. 228-229 lists no fewer than eight further texts alone which were published in 1871 and had 'the Battle of Dorking' in their title; several more directly interact with *The Battle of Dorking*, see e.g. Anonymous ('J. W. M.'), *The Siege of London. Reminiscences of "Another Volunteer"* (London: Robert Hardwicke), where Chesney's work is described as an "old woman's story" (Anonymous, *Siege*, p. 3); examples for texts referring to *The Battle of Dorking* can be found as late as 1887, see Anonymous, *Battle off Worthing*.

England to full-blown conflicts on a global scale, five general themes can be identified, which, in some way or another, surface in most war fiction texts – technology, destruction, casualties, totality and change. Taken together, they form a fairly specific picture of future war and its main characteristics as seen by the authors of the texts in question.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the future war described in Victorian and Edwardian war fiction is its reliance on technology. While individuals could still play a key role in events, and while there was still room in future war for personal heroics, future war was at the same time assumed to be dominated by the results of the dramatic technological progress during the latter half of the 19th century. Accordingly, armies fought with repeating or even magazine rifles, machine guns and breech-loading rifled field artillery. There was still a place for bayonet charges and cold steel, but in general battles were decided by winning the firefight. While from a post-World War I perspective this emphasis on firepower might appear to be self-evident given the technology of the time, it is important to bear in mind that even in the first decade of the 20th century tactical thinking still put great emphasis on close combat and bayonet charges.[22] Technology not only had a profound effect on firepower, armies also employed modern means of communication, searchlights were used for illuminating the battlefield and trains played a key role in army logistics. Aircraft, either in the shape of balloons or of airships, already featured in pre-1900 war fiction, as did means of fighting them; it should be noted however that in most cases – of war fiction at least, which is a notable difference to science fiction that could be much more optimistic about it – their capabilities were still somewhat limited.[23]

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[22]Among the more striking examples is the following example taken from a study on the principles of modern warfare by the later Maréchal Foch: 'Les lauriers de la victoire flottent à la pointe des baïonnettes ennemies. C'est là qu'il faut aller les prendre, les conquérir par une lutte corps à corps, si on les veut' (Ferdinand Foch, *Des principes de la guerre : conférences faites à l'École supérieure de guerre* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1903), pp. 320-321).

[23]Perhaps the most ingenuous example is William R. Booth's 1909 silent movie *The Airship Destroyer*, in which a fleet of airships tries to invade England but is stopped by an inventor and his 'aerial torpedo', essentially a surface-to-air missile (see Simon Baker, 'Airship Destroyer, The (1909)', *BFI screeenonline*, http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1019305/ Accessed 2 November 2023).
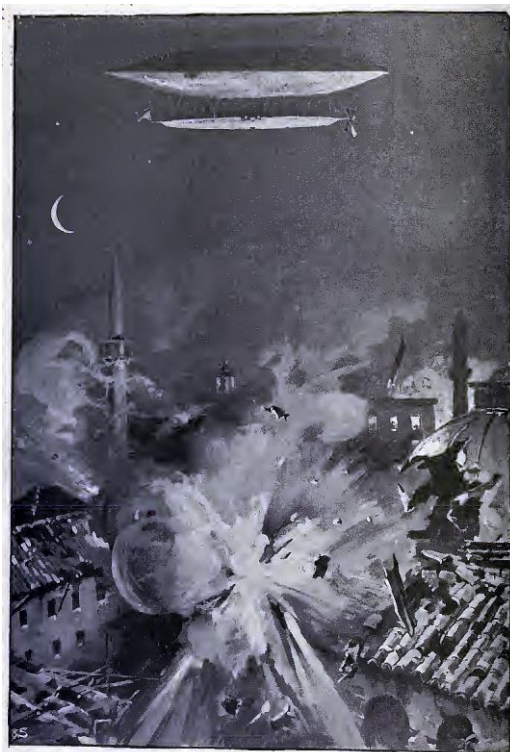
Figure 1: The bombardment of Varna by a Russian airship (Colomb, *Great War of 189–*, p. i)

The description of war at sea also tended to concentrate on new technology like the torpedo or the submarine, or on the relative merits of new warship designs as opposed to old ones. It is interesting to note that, while every now and then admirals appeared who were described as gifted tacticians, naval engagements were mostly a test of technology rather than of tactical abilities.[24] As a whole, the dominance of

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[24]A well-known example for the dichotomy between 'traditional' naval values and the interaction with modern technology is the famous case of Kipling's poem *The Ballad of the Clampherdown*, which was originally published as a satirical reaction to a four-part article in St James's Gazette (Anonymous, 'The Incubus of the Navy, parts I-IV', *St James's Gazette*, March 15, 1890, pp. 3-4; March 18, 1890, pp. 3-4; March 19, 1890, pp. 3-4; March 24, 1890, pp.3-4); the anonymous author severely questioned the choice of two 16.25in BL (Breach Loading) guns ('monster' or 'juggernaut' guns as they were called in the article) as the main armament for HMS Benbow, and criticized the general

technology in the various narratives had an interesting side-effect in that it levelled differences in national character. English soldiers and seamen might have been 'worth five of any other people in the world', as Louis Tracy once put it, but as operators of technology they usually differed little in competence, courage, and organization from their French or German or Russian counterparts.[25]
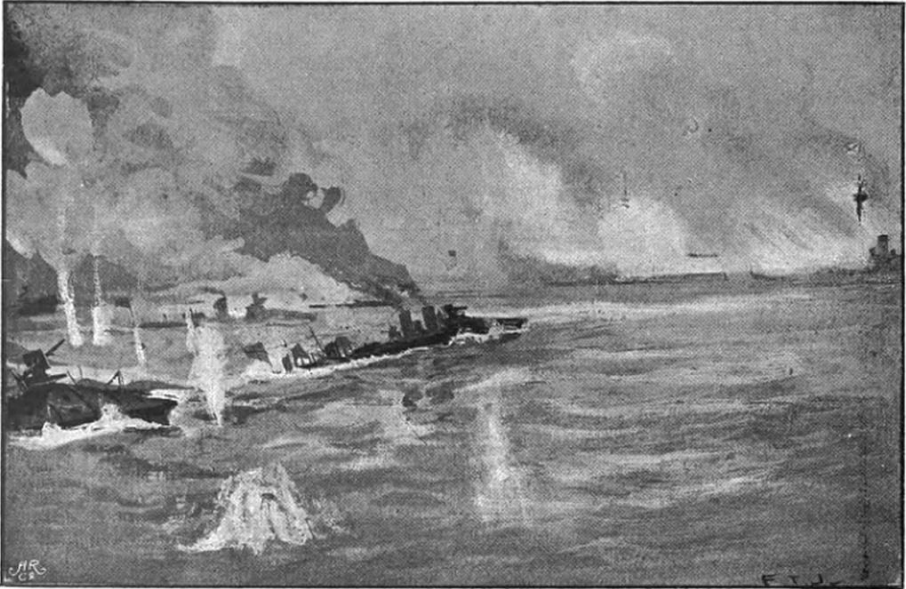

Figure 2: British torpedo boats attacking Russian vessels (Jane, *Blake*, opposite p. 150)

Closely connected with technology are two other highly important themes that run through nearly all of the war fiction texts and basically describe the effect of a war dominated by modern technology. The first one is destruction. While it does not take much of an intellect to predict that war will eventually result in destruction, it is

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trend towards ever heavier artillery and a perceived neglect of the 'human factor' going along with it: 'unless we maintain, as we have maintained in the past, the superiority of the human factor, our springs, our wheels, our boilers, our dynamos, and our hydraulic gear will avail us nothing in the hour of need' (Anonymous, 'The Incubus of the Navy, part III', *St James's Gazette*, 19 March 1890, p. 4); curiously, this 'human factor' does not feature prominently in naval war fiction literature.

[25]Anonymous ('P. W.'), 'The Man Who Wrote "The Final War"', in: *Pearson's Weekly*, 20 March 1897, p. 583.

interesting to note both the scale that repeatedly comes up in the war fiction texts and the fact that it is often the destruction of civilian infrastructure and property authors dwell on in particular. To give an example, Le Queux' *Great War of England in 1897* is a veritable orgy of destruction seeing port cities shelled without mercy, major city centres laid waste by intense fighting in the streets and the heart of London all but destroyed by French artillery firing from positions around the Greenwich observatory.[26] While the scale of destruction is not mirrored in all war fiction texts, some elements occur frequently, like the coastal city which, after refusing to pay ransom, is indiscriminately shelled, or the city centre that is destroyed by fighting for barricades.[27] Also, plunder and pillage often took a significant toll in texts dealing with invasions that were either initially or totally successful. Here, light Cossack cavalry units in particular were repeatedly depicted as 'Muscovite hordes' laying waste to the countryside.[28]

Figure 3: Fighting for Barricades in Manchester (Le Queux, *Great War*, opposite p. 222)

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[26]See eg Le Queux, *Great War*, pp. 284-298.
[27]See eg Le Queux, *Great War*, pp. 150-161.
[28]See eg Le Queux, *Great War*, pp. 65-69; see in particular p. 67: 'The soldiers of the Tsar, savage and inhuman, showed no mercy to the weak and unprotected'.

The other theme directly connected to technology and its effect on modern war is casualties. Especially in the case of texts covering not only a single event but a whole war, authors often do not shy away from describing the effect of modern firepower on the battlefield. The 'Battle of Stralsund' mentioned at the beginning of this article is a good case in point, others are offered for example by Le Queux, who often gives fairly precise numbers. In a battle for the city of Birmingham described in *The Great War in Britain in 1897*, the British army loses 20,000 men in dead and wounded out of a total of 50,000 against 42,000 men out of a total of 150,000 Russian attackers, this all taking place over the course of a single day.[29] Putting these figures into a historical context shows that they are considerable, but not in an unbelievable way.[30] Rather, they are related to the size of the forces engaged on both sides, which in turn were significant, but not totally out of the world. The raw numbers in many war fiction texts may not always have been completely correct, but they were still believable, adding to the image of modern war bringing about not only considerable destruction but also mass casualties. The trend to associate modern warfare with large numbers of casualties was not limited to land warfare. At sea, engagements tended to result not only in heavy casualties among crews but also in a great number of ships sunk. Again, while the late nineteenth century had limited experience in large scale naval warfare, the results were entirely within what was possible and indeed expected from battles between large fleets of modern warships. Besides casualties among combatants on land and at sea, civilian losses were also frequently mentioned – and they, too, were considerable.[31] The shelling of port cities was expected to result in significant casualties, with communities being given an hour or less to pay ransom unable to evacuate their citizens; the same was the case with cities that were the scene of street fighting.

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[29]Le Queux, *Great War*, pp. 150-54

[30]For comparison, the Battle of Le Mans during the War of 1870/71 saw the Prussian Second Army with about 73,000 men inflict a decisive defeat onto the Army of the Loire; while the Prussians lost around 3,500 men, French losses amounted to nearly 25,000 in dead and wounded, with up to 50,000 deserting in the aftermath of the battle (see Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 292-293.).

[31]In the nearly 30 years between the Battle of Lissa in 1866 and the Battle of the Yalu River in 1894 no major naval engagement took place; as a result the major navies of the time had to face the challenge of technological progress with almost no practical experience.
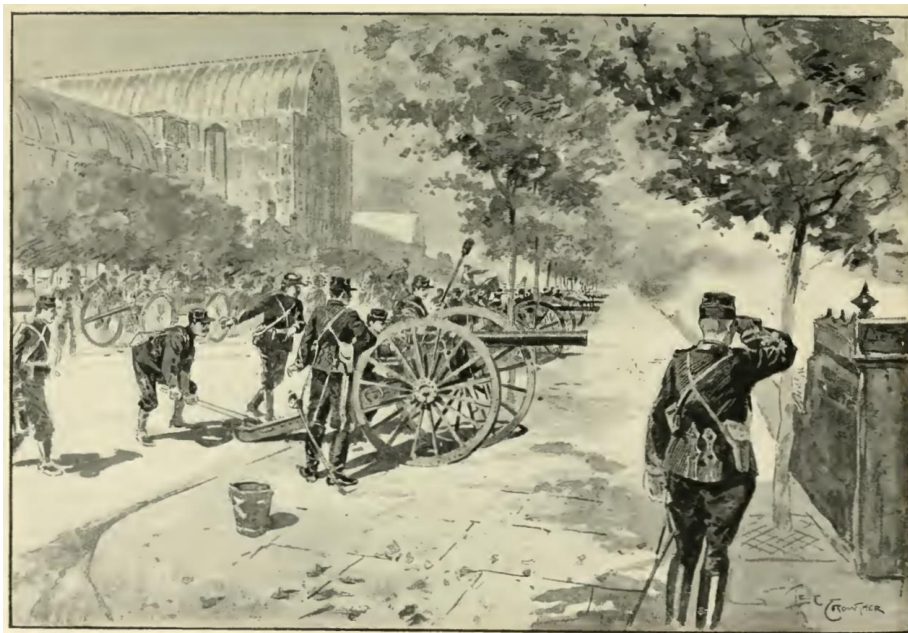
Figure 4: French artillery shelling the centre of London (Le Queux, *Great War*, p. 292)

The fourth theme frequently recurring in war fiction texts is totality. Future war, as it was understood by the authors of those texts dealing with large-scale conflict, was on the one hand affecting society as a whole both through the direct effects of fighting – it caused destruction and civilian casualties on a large scale – and through the effects of measures targeted at society as a whole. Charles Gleig's 1898 *When All Men Starve* provides a good example in that it focuses on the dreadful results of the Royal Navy failing to keep open the shipping lines to Britain, which eventually result in a bread crisis and hunger riots in London.[32] On the other hand, war was also described as an undertaking in which society as a whole had a part in, ranging from women employed in auxiliary services to civilians taking up arms in defence of their homes – but one should add only their homes. It is worthy of note that civilians in arms as opposed to reservists or volunteers of all kinds, rarely if ever are depicted as forming anything resembling units. While it is never clearly stated, and while there are some texts

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[32]Charles Gleig, *When All Men Starve. Showing how England hazarded her naval supremacy, and the horrors which followed the interruption of her food supply* (New York/London: John Lane, 1898); it ends with a dystopian vision of a revolutionary mob plundering London, finally setting fire to Buckingham Palace.

mentioning guerrilla warfare after a successful invasion, the British civilian in arms is usually not meant to be a *franctireur*, but rather an individual guarding his home and his family.[33]

Figure 5: Proclamation by the 'League of Defenders' (Le Queux, *Invasion*, p. 507)

Finally, a fifth theme deserves mentioning: change. Many of the texts, again particularly those dealing with wars in their entirety, thought it perfectly plausible for future war to result in more than just a redrawing of borders, the payment of reparations or the exchange of colonies. Instead, war could result in the total dismantling of empires, as the British Empire was repeatedly in texts warning against a reduction in defence capabilities, the fall of dynasties such as the Romanoffs in Tracy's *The Final War*, and even the total extinction of states as in the anonymous 1885 *The Fall Of The Great*

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[33]See for example the William Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910* (London: MacMillan, 1910), where the London branch of the "League of Defenders", a volunteer organization formed after a German invasion, stages a rising in a German-occupied London (Le Queux, *Invasion*, pp. 495-519).

Republic, where the United States are dissolved and the individual states reduced to colonies.[34] War could thus change the world in which the readership of war fiction texts lived quite dramatically, yet in order to achieve its intended effect it still had to be believable, at least up to a point.

In all, the picture of future war conveyed by late Victorian and Edwardian war fiction is fairly clear and consistent: A war between European powers was likely to be more than only a localized conflict, technology would have a major impact on it causing widespread destruction and large numbers of casualties, and it could bring about events dramatically changing the fate of those taking part in it. Even if a significant number of texts end on a positive note, with British pluck – sometimes with outside assistance – eventually prevailing against the invader, most of them depict war as a bloody mess. Given the intention of many texts, this does not come as a surprise, as they wanted to show the audience in detail as graphic as possible the result of what their authors perceived to be misguided policy, but the detail had, of course, to be plausible, reflecting how an audience might already think about a future war.

Fiction versus reality – political war fiction texts and the pre-WW1 experience of war
Comparing the nature of war as described in the political war fiction texts with the actual experience of war during the decades before the outbreak of the First World War produces a fairly obvious result: the texts fit perfectly to how military decision makers – and, presumably, significant parts of the public – thought about the next, 'modern' war. While technology did not always develop in the way assumed in war fiction texts – no-one entered The First World War with searchlight-equipped bolt-action rifles and backpack batteries – it is particularly the Russo-Japanese War that is easily comparable to those texts covering a full war, and it fits entirely to the way war is described in political future war texts; in fact, a narrative of that war could just as well be a war fiction novel. Political War fiction novels, to put it slightly differently, depicted war entirely in accordance with the expectation and the experience of the readership.

Not that one should expect otherwise. On the one hand, authors who started working on a political war fiction text were, even if their initial inspiration had been a specific political or military issue, invariably drawn to the actual experience of war for background research, or – in case they were military men – they had been brought up professionally with that experience in the first place. Information was available in abundance, as not only were conflicts covered more than sufficiently by the press, but

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[34]Tracy, *Final War*, pp. 342-353; Sir Henry Standish Coverdale (pseud.), *The Fall of the Great Republic* (1886-88), (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1885); for a brief discussion of similar texts see Melby, *Empire and Nation*, pp. 405-406.

many of the discussions on the development of weapon systems, tactics or strategy took place in readily accessible publications throughout the nineteenth century.[35] Thus it was not only possible to access raw information about conflicts like the Franco-Prussian war by consulting newspapers, but also to access various different professional analyses in the different military journals of the time.

Any description of hypothetical conflicts was therefore quite naturally modelled on the most recent conflict, and as a result, during the years immediately following the Franco-Prussian War that conflict served as a model for most wars described in fuller detail in the war fiction texts – with certain chains of events from the 'real world' finding their way directly into war fiction literature, as for example the establishment of a Paris commune as a result of French defeat on the battlefield and an ensuing siege occurring quite frequently.[36]

The other equally obvious reason for political war fiction being very close to the actual expectation of war lies with its intended function. As it was meant to influence public opinion in a particular way, it had to present scenarios that were both directly connected to the issue at hand and were believable in a general way, at least up to a certain point. A novel like Clowes' *The Captain of the Mary Rose* offered a specific opinion on what was actually quite a narrow issue – the respective qualities of French and British warship designs – but stayed very close to actual reality by not introducing a new bit of technology but rather a design that at the time was under construction for a South American navy but did not fit to Admiralty ship design policies.[37] While the reader might have had some nagging doubts whether it would have really been as easy to obtain a letter of marque in the 1890s as it was for the captain of the *Mary Rose* – let alone, as a private person, get the opportunity to acquire ammunition for the ship's main battery of four 9.2in BL guns, in a country involved in a major war at

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[35]The Russo-Japanese War is one of the first modern conflicts covered to a considerable extent by combat photography, i.e. pictures taken during combat (as opposed to post-combat photography which was already well-established by the time of the American Civil War), and several illustrated histories were published during or immediately after the conflict; see e.g. James H. Hare, *A Photographic Record of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1905).

[36]See e.g. Tracy, *Final War*, p. 320: *For a time it seemed that Paris would be true to her traditions, and hold each street as a barricade, and each house as a fort.*

[37]In Clowes' *The Captain of the Mary Rose*, for which Fred T. Jane acted as some sort of technical advisor and provided an illustration for the book, the fictitious cruiser 'Mary Rose' is modelled extremely closely on the La Seyne-built warship *Capitán Prat*, which was at the time favourably compared to the similar-sized British *Admiral* class ships; on these and their complex design history see Norman Friedman, *British Battleships of the Victorian Era* (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2018), pp. 187-197.

sea – the actual battles at sea were entirely plausible in set-up (if not in outcome), as they had to be. Political war fiction could only ever work if it were as close to reality – or rather the perception thereof – as possible.

Conclusion – They got it all wrong, or did they?

Late Victorian and Edwardian political war fiction still enjoys a mixed reputation at best. Partly this is due to the fact that many texts like Louis Tracy's *Final War* exhibit an unbelievable level of jingoism. Tracy for example closes his *Final War* on a decidedly optimistic note, which was more likely to endear him to readers of the closing years of the nineteenth century than to those of the third decade of the twenty first:

> England and America – their destiny is to order and rule the world, to give it peace and freedom, to bestow upon it prosperity and happiness, to fulfil the responsibilities of an all-devouring people; wisely to discern and generously to bestow. This vision – far-off it may be – already dawns; and in the glory of its celestial light is the peace of nations.[38]

Moreover, while some examples of war fiction are of considerable quality, many others are typical pamphlets of the time, often displaying little literary ambition while often focussing on a single issue. Some also show signs of rapid production either as a reaction to an earlier text or a contribution to a contemporary political discussion. In short, the majority of these texts do not tend to make for particularly exciting reading.

Apart from their general character, there are two other reasons why political war fiction texts do not exactly loom large in the study of pre-First World War history: they are often lumped together with science fiction texts which are usually accredited with little value as a source for the historian, and by and large their prognostic power is rated fairly low. They are supposed to have painted a picture of future war as something in which individual courage could still overcome technology, and they by and large failed to accurately predict the impact of technology and industrialization on war.[39]

Looking closer at the corpus of Victorian and Edwardian political war fiction, however, has shown that it is quite distinct from science fiction, and, even more importantly, that the general picture of war that emerges from these texts not only fits closely to

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[38]Tracy, *Final War*, p. 372; on the whole Bell's characterization of *The Final War* as a text 'blending xenophobia with a celebratory affirmation of rigid gender and class distinctions … populated … with wooden British stereotype' (Bell, *Dreamworlds*, p. 228) is not really off the mark.

[39]See e.g. Clarke, *Great War with Germany*, p. 5 (*They failed lamentably to foresee how that war* [i.e. the war of the future] *would be fought*) and pp. 7-8.

how contemporaries *thought* about war in the decades preceding the First World War but both the depiction of future war in literature and the actual experience of modern warfare before the First World War also match closely what actually *happened* during the war, at least in its initial stages. Perhaps the most important exception is the actual length of the conflict – future wars tended to be no longer than a year at most. Whether it was really a widespread notion among authors of war fiction that the next war was to make an end to war is debatable. Although the phrase 'war to end war', which is usually attributed to H. G. Wells, is already found with Louis Tracy, most of the texts discussed here concentrate on the conflicts and their immediate results.[40]

To put it rather pointedly, far from getting it 'all wrong', the authors of Victorian and Edwardian political war fiction in fact got most of the key things right, and this was far from an outstanding or even surprising achievement. The European experience of modern war during the conflicts preceding the First World War had not only given military decision makers a very precise idea about the next war, but these experiences had also been widely disseminated through books and newspapers. Anyone planning to write a piece of war fiction during the decades before the outbreak of the First World War had only to take to the newspaper reports from one of the many conflicts of the time for his background information. War fiction could and did serve different purposes, from attempting to influence the political debate on a very specific issue to a general strengthening of the moral fibre of the nation in the spirit of Louis Tracy, who wrote *The Final War* because he 'thought it was time that the bull should turn and give them [Britain's enemies] a taste of his horns, and let them know who was their master'.[41] About the rather unpleasant nature of future war most of the texts were in agreement – while William Le Queux's use of the phrase 'blown to atoms' in his *The Great War in Britain in 1897* may appear slightly peculiar, the frequent description of what happened on the battlefield as 'slaughter' was shared by many texts discussing future war.[42]

Those flying to the colours on all sides in 1914 may not have imagined the war to last for four years. They were, however, certainly not unaware of the fact that in modern

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[40]H. G. Wells, *The War That Will End War* (London: Frank & Cecil Palmer, 1914). Tracy stated in an 1897 interview: *One Sunday Afternoon I discussed the matter with an old friend, and the idea of the romance was thought out: a great war to be the end of all war* (*Pearson's Weekly,* 1897, p. 115).

[41]*Pearson's Weekly* 1897, p. 115.

[42]In all, in Le Queux' *Great War in England*, 'blown to atoms' is used 17 times, most often for describing the effects of artillery fire. The verb '(to) slaughter' appears in various phrases 27 times, or almost as often as the more generic verb '(to) fire (on)'.

war, as William Tecumseh Sherman once famously put it, 'even success the most brilliant is over dead and mangled bodies' – and lots of them.[43]

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[43]Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman. Soldier, Realist, American* (Boston: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1929), p. 402.