***Veteran MPs and the Aftermath of the Great War: The Memory of all That.* By Richard Carr. Ashgate, Farnham, 2013. 234 pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-4103-8, (hardback).**

Richard Carr’s new book explores the interaction between the First World War and British politics after 1918 and provides a long needed accompaniment to the myriad studies that focus on the cultural legacy of the war in the same period. Carr adopts the ‘generational theory’ of Karl Manheim in order to analyse the political image, ideas and actions of those he has elsewhere termed the ‘phoenix generation’ of Conservative MPs: those who saw uniformed service in the First World War.

Carr argues that there *was* a generation of MPs that drew similar lessons from their experience of conflict. He shows that such men often spoke the same progressive language when it came to questions of domestic economic and social policy and that such views were heavily influenced by the experience of war. However, there were clear limits to any generational ideological synthesis. Carr finds them in debates over Empire, foreign policy and, contrary to received wisdom, appeasement (in May 1940 over two thirds of Conservative ex-servicemen backed Chamberlain’s foreign policy, the same proportion as the government as a whole). Finally, Carr demonstrates that these men were ‘leapfrogged’ after 1940 by a younger generation, not burdened by the legacy of war and influenced heavily by the neo-liberal and anti-statist writings of Friedrich von Hayek, who took the Conservative Party in a different direction after 1945.

Defining a ‘generation’ has often proved difficult for historians.Following Mannheim’s criteria Carr emphasises experiential as much as chronological homogeneity, thus all those MPs who saw uniformed service, regardless of age, are included as part of his wartime generation. Carr shows that over the whole inter-war period 448 such individuals were elected under the Conservative banner alone (all listed by name and age in a remarkable appendix). Immediately, merely by dint of numbers, these men constitute a more powerful political entity than previously thought.

In terms of experience Carr is keen to point not just to combat itself but to the social world ex-servicemen MPs inhabited before 1914. It was through this prism, he argues, that they interpreted and attached meaning to their war service. The majority of these men were educated in public schools, for which the casualty rate of serving students and alumni was almost double the national average of 10%. This, as much as the individual experience of trench warfare, shaped their understanding of the conflict. Whilst many recent histories (this one included) stress that the war was about more than just suffering and slaughter for those that fought it, Carr is sympathetic to the idea that for Britain’s public schools ‘the deaths of bright young scholars, to a cohort that worshipped them, seemed a tragedy beyond all recovery’ (p.24). Crucially, whether factually accurate or not, Carr demonstrates that many ex-servicemen politicians would take this message to the political platform after 1918. This should interest scholars of the cultural legacy of the Great War; if we want to understand how Britons made sense of the conflict we should pay attention to the fact that even before the much analysed wave of memoirs and poetry broke in the late 1920s, a significant number of politicians were sketching a picture of the war as tragically costly from an equally influential position. The political campaign trail, this book shows, should be considered as much a site of memory and mourning as poetry and memorials.

Beyond popular politics, the strongest section of Carr’s book is his analysis of the territory ex-servicemen occupied within the Conservative Party itself. Through careful analysis of contemporary writings Carr shows that these men drew other lessons from war, aside from the notion of the ‘lost generation’. In the social melting pot of the British Armed Forces these men gained exposure to the regular ‘Tommie’ which opened their eyes to social inequality. Meanwhile victory in 1918 seemed to vindicate the power and effectiveness of state control and intervention. As a result, after 1918, these men largely rejected ‘laissez-faire’ as an economic creed, turning instead to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes as an alternative, often favouring protection and state action as remedies for the problems of housing and unemployment. Here was a generational outlook that led to an ever deepening ideological faultline between ex-servicemen and the Conservative Party leadership. The latter who drew more negative lessons from war, ‘saw danger at every turn and proceeded to take the most cautious route out of every problem’ (p.75).

When it comes to ex-servicemen politicians, the name Oswald Mosley looms large. In locating a growing dissatisfaction amongst ex-servicemen MPs with the Conservative status quo Carr, too, is drawn to this most divisive of British political figures. Carr’s treatment of Mosley is expert. Whilst avoiding Skidelsky’s tendency to paint him as a misunderstood political messiah he also refuses to depict Mosley as an innately unpalatable individual operating on the fringes of political acceptability. Carr presents him as what he was for many Conservative veterans between 1929 and 1931: a very real alternative to the political status quo.

Carr shows that Mosley came closer than many might like to think to extricating a significant number of ex-servicemen from Stanley Baldwin’s party. Furthermore, those that considered joining Mosley didn’t reject him because of his ideological leanings or innate personal flaws. Rather, through analysis of letters and diary entries from the time, Carr suggests that it was a mixture of career pragmatism and a natural ‘conservative’ aversion to seizing the moment that held them back. Thus, Carr helps to explain the eventual acceptance by these men of a Tory-led National Government after 1931.

This also has implications for how we view the leadership of Stanley Baldwin. Whilst Carr is far from sympathetic towards what he sees as Baldwin’s ‘assertion of inaction’ in the face of disaster, his work does show that, through speaking the language of progress and conciliation whilst acting in a decisively more ‘anti-socialist’ manner, Baldwin was able to appear progressive enough to keep veterans on side. In this way, Carr adds to Phillip Williamson’s vision of Baldwin as a remarkably talented party leader, ably walking a tightrope between pressures from the right *and* left of his party. This work shows that, although not as destructive as those affecting the post WWI Liberal Party, fractures were present too in post-war Conservatism and ran down generational lines. The success the Conservative Party enjoyed in these years was in part due to the fact that they were able to maintain electoral unity despite these divides.

Carr’s study is a fine academic achievement. It could be argued that his work focuses too heavily on the big beasts of the war generation of MPs (names like Harold Macmillan, Oswald Mosley and Leo Amery loom large). But not to do so would ultimately require a more statistically focused study which would detract from the very human lessons these men took from their war experiences. Carr ably maps these sometimes similar and sometimes divergent lessons and highlights the varying and often unexpected ways in which they were applied to a vast spectrum of political issues after 1918. Students of inter-war British politics, culture, memory and foreign policy will all find much of interest within these pages.