In *Vanity Fair*, William Makepeace Thackeray asks “What qualities are there for which a man gets so speedy a return for applause, as those of bodily superiority, activity and valour? Time out of mind strength and courage have been the theme of bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to today, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero.” Despite the obvious irony of the novel, it is definitely true that the brave warrior, soldier, hero has proved to be one of the most durable and powerful forms of idealized masculinity within Western cultural traditions at least since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Military values such as aggression, strength, courage and endurance have repeatedly been defined as the natural and inherent qualities of manhood, whose apogee is attainable only in battle. Celebrated as a hero, the soldier has become a quintessential figure of masculinity. Heroic narratives have become a part of discourse of the nation, intimately bound up with the foundation, preservation and affirmation of national territory and its values. A ‘real man’ was (is?) defined and recognized as one who is prepared to fight (and die) for Queen, King, country, nation, people etc. The enduring significance of these images is signalled until now in moments such the election of an iconic piece of war propaganda (Lord Kitchener’s face on the WWI recruitment poster glaring and pointing directly at the onlooker with the words WANTS YOU) as the most efficient advertisement of the twentieth century.

Indeed WWI has been a frequent topic of debate in connection with the demise of traditional values, including the revaluation of traditional forms of masculinities. The connection between these two (the war and forms of heroism) together with their allure for fiction, are the focus of this BA thesis. WWI was indeed a war of great disillusion. It is difficult to exaggerate the traumatic influence of the war. Not only because of the sheer numbers of casualties, it proved to be a shattering experience for the British experience. Actually, even compared to the horrors of WWII, it is this war that is still referred to as the Great War. How come that the impact of WWI on British society was so much greater that WWII? Is it a matter of numbers?

The reaction of the British soldiery to the trauma of the war was uniquely literary - memoirs, diaries, fictions, millions of war poems (yet, no great war novel). The important influence of war poetry is granted even in the thesis (the upsurge of popularity is mentioned on page 8) although merely indirectly, as entering the school curricula from the 1970s and thus influencing the image of the war. How exactly did the poetry influence the image of the war, since negative images were available from the 1930s? How can Jiří Pondělíček relate the famous generation of Georgian and war poets to his selected prose? It may need some explanation why (since the title refers to British literature) no mention is made of the famous poetry of the time. Also, the figure of S.Sassoon as poet, novelist, author of memoirs and literary character could have been analysed.
Some more comments and questions:

The language and style of the thesis is of a high standard, yet the article before World War I in the title of the thesis is rather unfortunate.

A question of genres and categories: What are the reasons for categorizing Sassoon’s memoirs as a “strict autobiography and autobiographical novel”. What constitutes an autobiographical novel?

In the abstract, the term ideology is used quite often (though it does not appear in the main body of the thesis). In what sense is the word ideology used in the abstract?

The distinction between Falstaff and Hotspur as warrior types is useful for a good conceptual beginning, but if referring to William Shakespeare it may have been remembered that his great warrior king and soldier hero is Henry V. In this context, by the way, the film depictions of the Harfleur and Agincourt battle scenes in the adaptations by Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh are significantly shifted. Olivier present a heroic sunlit battlefield celebrating the RAF men while KB’s version is definitely firmly “entrenched” in images of muddy trench warfare (note especially the four captains scene). Here is further connection between Shakespeare’s images of noble heroism and WWI. Branagh himself confirmed the influence of films about WWI when shooting this scene.

To what degree is part of the criticism of war a rebellion of the sacrificed youth (the image of sacrifice looms large in WWI literature) against the older generation? The prophetic words of the Head (page 15) seem to imply this but a deeper discussion of this grand theme is missing. It became a key element in Wilfred Owen’s poems (e.g. Anthem for Doomed Youth and The Parable of the Old Man and the Young) and a similar moment (sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham) is echoed in Pat Barker’s novel (in a crucial epiphanous passage for Rivers) implying the image of the broken contract between the young and the old (the idea of contract is crucial in the justification for fighting in the war, if not for the war itself - as the dialogue between Graves and Sassoon in the novel by Barker also makes clear.

I appreciate the structure of the thesis, following issues of heroism, war aims (i.e. justification of war) and the allure of the form and topic for fiction. Such a structure creates richer resonances than simply moving from one text to another. Yet, there are some oversimplifications in the thesis. For example, the understanding of heroism as naivety and innocence is far too simple. Even Billy Prior says that going over the top of the trench was “sexy”. Here is no simple reversal of silly macho jingoism to sensitive and sensible. In war novels the pull of war is part of masculine experience felt at the most basic level of the body.

Jiří Pondělíček accents the moments when traditional warfare and conservative notions of heroism clash with the creeping slyness of modern technology standing up against which is absurd. But what do we make of moments when opposing even larger forces seems like Don Quixote fighting against windmills (like the lone man with shopping bags defying tanks on Tiananmen Square) or in the case of the officer - How would he conceptualize the degree to
which ideology of King, country, victory depends on personal concern for fellow soldiers (19-20).

Some of the war texts cannot be said to simply mock heroism as rubbish. Tennyson’s ideal, yes, but there is more complexity in, for example the dual ironies of Regeneration. What does it mean when Sassoon says: I will justify what I wrote by going back? Why does he go back? Sacrifice may not be a justification of war, or a consolation (as in traditional Christianity) but does possess a certain nobility – again, the image of sacrifice and the significance of religious metaphors loom larger than would seem from the thesis.

Since the debate centers a lot on images of heroism, the shifting images of masculinity as emerging in the 1990s and thus influencing debates on WWI should have been taken more into account. (This my explain some of the mistrust of fake vast ideologies but individual responsibility as necessary in the heroic construct of the new action hero.)

The comic justification of the war by Sir Quiller Couch may imply that he was indeed rather less cerebrally endowed, yet the words (see page 32) may imply a clash between various systems of thought and thus certain cultural and political values (which obsessive overuse of footnotes, excessive categorizing etc. may stand for). This thesis, thankfully, is also not plagued by excesses of typology, its form and structure, style and organization are clear, logically developed, and the whole work is immensely readable. It definitely fulfills all requirements for a BA thesis. Therefore, I recommend it for defence with the preliminary degree of very good (velmi dobře.)

Post scriptum: The ambiguous nature of the discourse on masculinity is brough to mind by a comment in Sasoon’s autobiographical memoir Siegfried’s Journey. Sassoon asks:

Had he [Churchill] been entirely serious, I wondered, when he said that ‘war is the normal occupation of man? He had indeed qualified the statement by adding ‘war – and gardening’.

V Prze dne 31.8.2011 .............................................

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