

# THE "LOST-GENERATION" HOAX

BY FLETCHER PRATT

ONE of the ideas most firmly held by the generation now reaching full maturity is that it does not exist. It even has a name for itself, the Lost Generation, and a legend thereunto appertaining — that the generation lost its birth-right, spiritually and physically, during the World War.

This curious but persuasive doctrine has the advantage of universal convenience. If an ex-service man (two months at Camp Upton) murders his wife in 1938, or a promising soldier-poet continues to offer promise in lieu of performance after two decades, war neurosis is the answer. If the authors, the diplomats, or the pretzel-benders of today seem men of less talent than their fathers, it is because all the bright boys were killed in the war. "The history of music," Deems Taylor said in effect during a recent radio speech, "shows that every musician of great talent has shown strong evidence of genius before reaching the age of forty. But where are our musicians of under forty today? Lying in Flanders or the

Carpathians or along the Isonzo, killed in the war."

It does not seem to have occurred to anyone, however, that an explanation which covers so much ground is suspiciously like the patent-medicine ads of the '90's, which guaranteed the cure of everything from a pain in the neck to galloping consumption out of the same bottle. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone that a statement so sweeping as the one that an entire generation of the world's genius perished on the battlefield demands the most elaborate buttressing of special facts. For statistically the idea is absurd. The number of persons killed in the war reached a total of 8,500,000 by the best estimates, which is a number huge by absolute, but not by comparative, figures; and to suppose that these 8,500,000 included any considerable portion of the world's geniuses is the same as supposing that some other composite group — say the population of Rumania, of Spain, of London, or New York City — should produce

all the artists, writers, politicians, sculptors, chemists, and what-not of the world for a similar period.

Nevertheless, the radio address by Mr. Taylor seems the only effort to place the theory, or any part of it, on an actuarial basis. The bulk of the population simply accepts as axiomatic the statement that the best, bravest, most intelligent, and most useful citizens went to the front and were killed there. Merely to state such a case is to recognize it not as an axiom but as dogma, an act of faith of the same quality and rooted in the same sentimentality as that other dogma which declares that the finger of death in war is inevitably pointed at the finest physical specimens. "Napoleon took an inch from the stature of France."

Now the theory that war produces physical degeneracy of the race happens to have been investigated with some care by no less an authority than Dr. Ales Hrdlicka of the Smithsonian Institution. "We have no scientific basis for the belief that any of the warlike nations of the past have degenerated physically as the result of their wars", he pronounced, and went on to say that if there be any observable tendency it is in the other direction. It is exactly the same with the theory of the Lost Gen-

eration, which turns out to rest on an undemonstrable major premise; does not check with any but the most random facts; and is in violent disagreement with data of far greater plentitude and importance.

## II

The simplest method of proving the existence of a Lost Generation would be to produce a list of geniuses killed in the war, either general or specific. But this is precisely what no one has been able to do. Mr. Taylor, in voicing his regrets over the brilliant young musicians killed in the war, failed to supply a single name, and one may fairly assume that if evidence so strongly supporting his thesis had existed he would have presented some of it.

Further, three positive and conscious efforts have been made to show high mortality in the arts without very much more result. These three are a French government publication, *Les Artistes Morts pour la Patrie*; a volume by Maurice Barrés and Ch. Larronde entitled *Anthologie des Écrivains Français Morts pour la Patrie*; and a work from the pen of E. H. Osborn, called *The New Elizabethans*, containing brief but painstaking

ing biographies of English literati who fell in the war.

Nearly all Mr. Osborn's golden lads are minor poets, only two of whom (Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger) enjoyed anything but local celebrity. His only representative of the drama is Harold Chapin, an actor who part-authored one mildly successful farce; the prose writers are two Oxford dons and Donald Hankey, whose literary output consisted of that highly sentimental war diary, *A Student in Arms*. In other words, the contribution of English literature to the casualty lists is not particularly impressive. *Écrivains Morts pour la Patrie* is a longer list, as one might expect from the fact that the French war dead outnumbered the British by thirty-three per cent, yet it still consists mainly of minor poets, does not include a single figure known to more than a limited circle outside France, and includes as its most prominent members Albert de Mun, Guy Lassaussaie, and Louis Sailhan. *Les Artistes Morts pour la Patrie* contains well over 300 names. But there is a thumbnail biography attached to each, and from these biographies it develops that in a laudable desire to *épater*, the compilers have included in their list of defunct and heroic artists such

practitioners as a businessman who etched in his spare time and a foreman at the Gobelin tapestry factory. Now it happens that a somewhat crude but effective critical estimate of any group of French artists can be made from the number of pictures they sell to the great State museums: and of the 300-odd *morts pour la Patrie*, exactly two had sold pictures to the State at the time of their demise, and none of them has attained the Louvre.

In a sense, though, this demonstration that the published lists of war casualties in the arts show no evidence of lost talent is begging the question. The claim today is that the generation was *lost*; that it possessed capacities never permitted to bear fruit; and the Osborn opus supports this view by listing young men who had not passed their twenty-fifth year, with extravagant adjectives of praise for what they might have done. This view, however, receives a terrific facer from the two French compilations, prepared by persons with no Lost-Generation axe to grind. The average age of the French writers *morts pour la Patrie* is thirty-four, and in a group of about two score it includes nine men over forty and three over fifty, while the 300 artists show an aver-

age age of 35.2. Both groups should have been at the height of their powers, yet they reveal the same general poverty of accomplishment as the English writers.

But this is not all. There is another piece of reflected evidence pointing to the fallacy of the Lost-Generation theory. The World War was not really a world war; that is, its casualties were not distributed proportionately over the whole population of the globe, but were confined to a relatively few nations. If the geniuses, or even a considerable portion of the talents within those nations, had been destroyed, we should expect the non-participating countries to be at present experiencing cultural revivals of some importance. We should find outbursts of genius in Scandinavia, Holland, Spain, Switzerland, which suffered no war casualties, and in Japan, which suffered only 395.

If there be any such explosion in Spain and Japan it has taken one of the oddest forms by which genius has ever sought expression, *viz.*, that of inflicting casualties upon itself. Switzerland has shown no cultural leap; Scandinavia is actually complaining about a lost generation of its own, with no new talents coming along to replace those which bloomed during the

early '20's. The Low Countries present the queerest case of all: Holland, due to be riding the crest of the wave, is in a cultural sense living off the product of German exiles, while exhausted and war-torn Belgium is enjoying the revival the Dutch should have.

The fact can be demonstrated statistically with the Nobel Prize awards as a basis. In the fourteen years from the foundation of the Nobel system to the outbreak of the war, thirty-four of these prizes went to citizens of nations which later became involved in the war and twenty-three to citizens of nations which were to remain neutral. In the fifteen years to 1929, there were fifty-one awards to citizens of the warring nations and twenty to neutrals. In 1930, the Lost Generation should have been nearing maturity; but the Nobel awards from that date to the present are thirty-four to the fighting nations and five to the neutrals. In percentages, the situation can be expressed as follows:

NOBEL PRIZES AWARDED		
	<i>to citizens of nations involved in World War</i>	<i>to neutral nations</i>
1901-1913....	.701%	.299%
1914-1929....	.718	.282
1930-1937....	.871	.129

Thus, as measured by the Nobel awards, the Lost Generation has

produced fifteen per cent more genius in the nations that lost it than either of the preceding generations.

### III

Considering the question in a historical light, is it not strange that the World War should be the only one in history to produce a lost generation? The complaint has never been made before; and yet our generation is not the only one to suffer heavy losses. The Persian invasion of Greece saw some extremely heavy fighting, which cost Athens fourteen per cent of her entire citizen body, a far higher proportionate loss than any nation suffered in the World War. The "lost generation" which resulted — after precisely the same time-lag that separates our Lost Generation from the World War — was known as the Age of Pericles. . . . The Lost Generation of the wars of Louis XIV was the generation that produced Corneille, Racine, Molière, and Boileau.

Let us also consider more recent cases. The Napoleonic Wars, including those of the French Revolution, swept over the whole of Europe and produced casualty lists that compare with those of the late unpleasantness. According to the

lost-generation theory, there should have been an observable downswing in the general European intellectual level from 1814 to 1834. Yet the fact is precisely the reverse; this was the age of the great poets in England, the great musicians in Germany, and in France of the school of art which was destined to dominate Europe for nearly a century.

In fact, by whatever route one approaches the question, the conclusion seems inescapable that no great amount of talent was destroyed by the guns of the World War. It is not necessary to deny that there has been a falling-off in literature, music, and other cultural activities since 1918; but there have been such recessions before, entirely unconnected with what has been going on in the political world. To ascribe them to the effect of the war is to commit as great an absurdity as Lord Kingsborough's when he declared the decline of Dutch painting due to an increased diet of fish. All the available evidence tends to show that the production of talent in a nation is entirely unconnected with the wars in which the country engages; and that if there be any specific mark of genius, it is in the ability to keep out of the fighting when a conflict gets under way.

## AN APPRECIATION OF HEMINGWAY

BY KENNETH CAMPBELL

"TODAY, children," began Miss Prindle, "we continue our criticism of the great classics of the Post-War Period. Having finished the *Studs Lonigan Trilogy*, I'm anxious now to know what you punks and broads—" Miss Prindle broke into a merry laugh. "It *does* seem the spell of that book lingers! What I mean, my dears, is what do you boys and girls think of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*?"

Miss Prindle beamed as her senior class in American Literature poised pencils over notebooks. All fine, clean boys and girls, and so interested in the gems of literature! Looking into the alert faces before her, Miss Prindle chose Henry, her A-student, to open the discussion.

"But before we begin today's assignment, what do you think of the New Hero as compared to the Old—let us say King Arthur or Galahad, for example? Suppose you tell us, Henry."

"The mugs you mention, Miss Prindle"—and Henry's interest

was evident in his eager voice—"ain't to be compared to the New Hero. Arthur and Galahad! Nuts, I say! But Studs and Harry Morgan—they're right guys, they are! They're not always shootin' off their traps about some goddamned ideal, or their strength being the strength of ten because they're pure. There ain't no such tripe about Studs and Harry, and—"

"Thank you, Henry," interrupted Miss Prindle. "You have said enough to indicate that your taste is, as usual, excellent. I wish, however, I could say the same for your grammar. Now, Henry, don't you know *ain't* isn't right?"

"Any punk that's had you for a teacher knows that, Miss Prindle." Henry looked contrite. "But Mr. Farrell . . ."

"Certainly, Henry," Miss Prindle carried on. "In modern times a few illiteracies have crept into the works of our most elegant stylists, and Mr. Farrell is no exception. But I expect *you* to be on your guard. You are forgiven—this time."