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Alan Seeger: Medievalism as an Alternative Ideology

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## Alan Seeger: Medievalism as an Alternative Ideology

### Abstract

The American poet Alan Seeger imagined the First World War as an opportunity to realize medieval values, which were embodied for him in Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney epitomized Seeger's three ideals: "Love and Arms and Song," which contrasted with the materialism and sophistication of modernity. His embrace of "Arms" and the desire for intense, authentic experience led Seeger, who was living in Paris in August 1914, to enlist in the French Foreign Legion, in which he served until his death in combat in July 1916. As an infantryman Seeger had extensive experience of the Western front. This concrete experience of the war, of the indignities of life in the trenches and the dominance of technology, contrasted in significant ways with war as constructed in Seeger's medievalist imagination.

Seeger, however, reconciled this contradiction by seeing the war as part of the elemental Strife of nature. By this means, Seeger avoided the potentially unsettling consequences of confronting the profoundly modern nature of the war. Interpreting the war as a form of "Strife" and as an assertion of medieval values allowed Seeger to imagine himself and his comrades to be living outside the world of industrial capitalist modernity. Seeger shared with others involved in the war this medievalism and the belief that the war offered relief from the values of modernity, even if Seeger's medievalism was more intense, more thoroughgoing, than was common. However, Seeger's death as a result of wounds received from machine gun fire vividly displays the contradiction between his imagination and the reality of industrialized warfare.

The example of Seeger thus suggests that the American effort in the First World War was underwritten in part by an ideology through which a modern, industrialized war was embraced in terms derived from the imagined medieval past. Insofar as this is true medievalism functioned to provide an ideology that constructed, in the terminology of Raymond Williams, an alternative to the industrial capitalist modernity from which the war emerged, an alternative ideology that allowed the war to be imagined differently from what it was, but which posed no substantive challenge to the war's social and economic realities.

**Keywords:** war poetry; Alan Seeger; medievalism; ideology; modernity

## Alan Seeger: Medievalism as an Alternative Ideology

Even prior to US entry into World War One, Alan Seeger was seen as the archetypal American soldier-poet of the war. This status misleads slightly: Seeger was idiosyncratic in the intensity and consistency of his commitment to medieval and martial values. Yet, ultimately, those same medieval and martial values Seeger espoused consciously and deliberately appear in a more diffuse form in the broader culture of the era. Thus Seeger and, the available cultural evidence suggests, the United States as a whole, engaged in the war on a paradoxical or perhaps contradictory basis: the war was imagined as the opportunity to assert values eclipsed in, at the same time that the war itself took place at the cutting edge of, capitalist modernity. Fought using the most recent developments of the second industrial revolution, propelled by the conflict between the “unlimited dynamism” imparted to Germany by “the imperative to expand of a massive capitalist economy watching its statistical curves soaring upward” and the United Kingdom, attempting to preserve its global economic and political dominance,<sup>1</sup> this strikingly modern war was imagined in terms strikingly anachronistic.

That Seeger wrote about the war in terms derived from an imagined pre-modern past is unsurprising: his background formed him in such a way that it would be astonishing had he not shared in the post-Romantic poetic culture analyzed by Paul Fussell, Ted Bogacz, Samuel Hynes, and others. Born into an old

New England family, Seeger attended the Hackley School in Tarrytown, NY prior to entering Harvard as a member of the class of 1910. At Harvard, Seeger would eventually room with T.S. Eliot in his senior year, while Eliot was working on his Master's degree.<sup>2</sup> After graduating from Harvard, Seeger lived in Greenwich Village for a short time before moving to Paris, where he was living at the outbreak of the war.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after the war began Seeger enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, motivated in part by his love for France but also by a deep-seated desire to experience war: after Seeger died from wounds received in combat in July 1916, a friend wrote that Seeger fought on the side of the French because he had been living in France, as he would doubtless have fought on the side of the Germans had he been living in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

The poetry Seeger produced out of the fulfillment of his desire for military experience contrasts sharply in form and content with the reaction against the war in much of the canonical American literature, most prominently the work of E.E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway. Yet this desire for military experience, which for Seeger was closely related to the desire to be a poet, was common in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the U.S., particularly among the middle and upper classes; indeed, Cummings, Dos Passos, Hemingway, et al. had experiences to react against *because* they shared, to a great extent, Seeger's cultural formation. But Cummings', Dos Passos', and Hemingway's writing about the war rejects significant elements of that formation, and is thus less typical of the American culture that underpinned

the war effort in 1917 and 1918 than is that of Seeger, whose collected *Poems* were a non-fiction best seller in those years.<sup>5</sup> Understanding Seeger helps one to understand more fully these canonical writers by illuminating their cultural situation, while also revealing the powerfully anachronistic quality of the underlying culture mobilized in support of US intervention into the war.

### I. Seeger before the war

In the spring of 1908 Seeger, then a sophomore at Harvard, wrote an essay, "Suggestions for a Dissertation on the Historical Development of the Faust-motive." His professor for Comparative Literature 7, M.A. Potter, responded favorably to Seeger's essay, part of which was concerned with the historical nature of the Renaissance, which Seeger presents as a play of new and old:

It is simple enough to see the new impulses, but what shall be said of the things that are no more, of the spiritual light that has vanished out of men's hearts? I suppose that it is only within recent years that the sophistication of three centuries has so far abated as to allow of a more correct and sympathetic estimate of the mediaeval world.

In this play of new and old, Seeger prefers the old: for him a baleful "sophistication" has overwhelmed the "spiritual light" of the medieval, a spirituality that appeared to reassert itself before retreating once again:

there was the sporadic impulse of the Romantic Revival, but not apparently based upon a mature enough self-consciousness to attain that perfection toward which it was progressing when blighted under the great returning tide of materialism that has afflicted the last half-century.<sup>6</sup>

Seeger wants to reverse this "tide of materialism" so that the "spiritual light" emanating from the medieval world might shine again.

Medieval settings or themes are prominent in Seeger's prewar poetry: "Vivien," "Broceliande," and "Lyonesse," all work with traditional Arthurian material, while "Coucy" concerns a castle in France that was home to several crusaders. Less obviously medievalist his poem "The Rendezvous" concerns a lover awaiting his beloved in a Catholic church. He seeks out her face among the congregants:

But the long vespers close. The priest on high  
 Raises the thing that Christ's own flesh enforms;  
 And down the Gothic nave the crowd flows by  
 And through the portal's carven entry swarms.  
 Maddened he peers upon each passing face  
 Till the long drab procession terminates.  
 No princess passes out with proud majestic pace.  
 She has not come, the woman that he waits.<sup>7</sup>

The setting in this poem derives its flavor in large part from the Catholic revival movement, a component of Victorian medievalism. The “Gothic nave” and the “portal’s carven entry” provide a backdrop intended to make the lover’s disappointment all the more poignant.

This penchant for the medieval, for role-playing, and for a peculiar and crucial form of abstraction may be seen in a February 1916 letter that Seeger wrote while he recovered from a respiratory infection contracted in the trenches. He explains to his mother that in his first years at Harvard he

was a devotee of Learning for Learning's sake.... The events of that life were positive adventures to me. Few, I am sure, have known more than I did then the employ of intellect as an instrument of pleasure. I shut myself off completely from the life of the University, so full, nevertheless, of pleasures. I scoffed at these pleasures that were no more to me than froth. I felt no need of comradeship. I led the life of an anchorite.

The choice of terms is significant: while not an exclusively medieval phenomenon, anchorites are strongly associated with the medieval. As a sort of anchorite, Seeger devoted himself to “Learning for Learning’s sake.” The capitalization is typical of Seeger, who tended to abstract and to allegorize. This Learning of his produced not, apparently, knowledge or understanding, but pleasure; Seeger’s sensibility was fundamentally, although complexly,



hedonistic, as is seen further in his account in the same letter of his turning away from Learning. Comparing himself to characters in Balzac, Seeger says, "Obsessed by the burning vision of Happiness they left the quiet groves of the Academy and went down into the city in search of it." He continues:

But my hedonism, if such it may be called, was not superficial like that of so many, to whom the emotional means only the sexual. I was sublimely consistent. For seeing, in the macrocosm, all Nature revolve about the twin poles of Love and Strife, of attraction and repulsion, so no less in the microcosm of my individual being I saw the emotional life equally divided between these two cardinal principles . . . . [M]y aspiration was to go all the gamut, to "drink life to the lees." My interest in life was passion, my object to experience it in all rare and refined, in all intense and violent forms. The war having broken out, then, it was natural that I should have staked my life on learning what it alone could teach me.<sup>8</sup>

The capitalization continues in this passage, but now Seeger's abstraction and allegorization takes on a slightly different cast. First, the melodramatic quality of Seeger's imagination becomes even more prominent. But beyond this, his move into the abstract stands in curious relation to the desire for experience Seeger expresses in the letter. But then again, however concrete and particular any given experience may be, nothing is more abstract than Experience.

This is not all. In his movement from whatever the particulars of a given experience may be to the terms in which he understands it (Love, Nature, Strife) Seeger elides the realms of the social and political: in his war poetry, the war will remain largely a matter, on the one hand, of sense experience and, on the other, of remote abstraction. Thus the war rarely appears in his writing, either poetry or prose, as a *political* conflict. While this elision typically allows Seeger to avoid types of ideology common in much of the American poetry of 1914-1918, it also displaces ideology to those levels that *are* presented, most clearly but not exclusively onto the abstractions, Love, Nature, Strife, Romance, etc., through which Seeger processes the particulars of experience. Seeger thus also displaces ideological conflict to the level of the imaginative, as when he makes an imagined medieval world or imagined medieval figures repositories of anti-modern values.

While Seeger attempts to explain the varying patterns of his life in this letter to his mother, emphasizing the break between his existence as an anchorite and as an active participant in the world, a strong continuity underlies his concerns: the medieval functions in the same manner in both the "Faust-motive" essay of 1908 and in his wartime writing. In the essay, Seeger imagines a break with "the sophistication of three centuries," with capitalist modernity. Clearly, such a change would be epochal, and Seeger becomes simultaneously apocalyptic and prophetic as he imagines the possibility: "Now we are dwelling in the uncertain lull and sultriness that precedes a storm. Now we have reached

the issue when materialism has been weighted and found wanting."<sup>9</sup>

Apocalypse and prophecy enter here in the figure of the waiting storm, a storm that would indeed break six years later with the advent of the war.

For Seeger, this storm promises to end the era of materialism that has so far defeated the romantic return to the spiritual.

What is to be the color of the dawning spirit? I fancy this: it is to be a new romanticism, a romanticism based on a truer perfection of man's relation to Nature; it will be that renovation which shall be the death of all our shallow refinement that so unduly emphasizes the psychological in human intercourse, which shaking off the trammels of a deadening sophistication shall return to those purer ideals when mankind was only artistically admissible in so far as entered into his proper relation to the universal and encompassing Beauty.<sup>10</sup>

Here, in this sophomore term paper, much of the basis of Alan Seeger's career as a poet may be seen. Both Seeger's poetry and his embrace of the war emerge from his rejection of the materialism and sophistication characteristic of life in the modern era. Seeger's program opposes what Fussell sees as characteristic of the response to the war. Fussell's "irony" is a sophisticated response to the war. Seeger, even as an undergraduate, calls for a return to a naïve sensibility. Seeger will advocate, and attempt to embody, a kind of new

romanticism that revives the values of the medieval world and aspires to the ideal. Seeger intends his medievalism, then, foremost as a rupture with modernity.<sup>11</sup>

## II. The Storm Breaks

The deep-lying nature of Seeger's sensibility is glimpsed in the terminological consistency between the "Faust-motive" essay and his wartime writing. In an essay published in the *New York Sun* in 1915 and later incorporated into his posthumously published *Letters and Diary*, Seeger refers to his unit's encampment as "romantic."<sup>12</sup> In a later article for the *Sun*, Seeger refers to going on a night reconnaissance patrol as "the one breath of true romance" to be found in "the monotonous routine of trench warfare" (*Letters and Diary*, 92). In one of his wartime sonnets, one in which he, atypically, imagines life after the war, he sees a future in which

... the great cities of the world shall yet  
Be golden frames for me in which to set  
New masterpieces of more rare romance. (*Poems*, 156)

Romance promises to restore to life the spirituality lost during three hundred years of "sophistication," three hundred years that correspond roughly to the era of capitalist modernity.

Between 1914 and 1916, Seeger looked to the war to usher in the revived romanticism he imagines in the "Faust-motive" essay, a romanticism whose values opposed the "materialism" of capitalist modernity. But as may be

gleaned even in the brief quotation in which he refers to “the monotonous routine of trench warfare,” the war does not offer the prospect of this romanticism in any unproblematic way. If patrols and raids offer the “one breath of true romance,” then the norm of warfare experienced by Seeger and his comrades is that of “monotonous routine.” Seeger described this routine at some length in an earlier article for the *Sun*. Trench warfare, dominated by artillery, “is extremely modern, and for the artilleryman is doubtless very interesting, but for the common soldier, is anything but romantic” (*Letters and Diary*, 29). The war threatens to be another version of the very modernity that Seeger hopes to see ended by the storm that is the war. Indeed, trench warfare transforms soldiers into the very embodiments of monotonous routine: industrial workers.

Seeger writes that as afternoon shades into evening, and the artillery fire ends, “Everybody turns out like factory workmen at 5 o’clock” (*Letters and Diary*, 37). This most unspiritual experience of war emphasizes the basic material aspects of existence, and threatens to provide the basis not of a new romanticism, but of a kind of ultra-materialism. Seeger allows this criticism of modern warfare to be voiced most powerfully by a Serbian comrade:

It is ignoble, this style of warfare, he exclaims. Instead of bringing out all that is noble in a man, it brings out only his worse self—meanness and greed and ill temper. We are not, in fact, leading the lives of men at all, but that of animals,

living in holes in the ground and only showing our heads  
outside to fight and to feed. (*Letters and Diary*, 31)

So reduced is the existence of the soldier in trench warfare that “the matter of eating assumes an importance altogether amusing to one who gives it only very secondary consideration in times of peace” (32). War, rather than rescuing life from the materialism of modernity, threatens to intensify modernity, lowering one even further from the spiritual.

At this point Seeger withdraws from the negativity of his portrait of trench warfare and presents a more pleasing vision. Describing sentry duty, Seeger notes that “the sentinel has ample time for reflection. Alone under the stars, war in its cosmic rather than its moral aspect reveals itself to him” (*Letters and Diary*, 38). Seeing the remote stars transports him to the cosmic plane, away from the sordid materiality that surrounds him, and puts him in mind of the spiritual meaning of the war, which for Seeger lies in participation in the elemental “Strife” of nature. Spiritual meaning overcomes material being, and war’s romance returns; rejoined to the timeless demands of nature, war leads away from, rather than further into, modernity.<sup>13</sup>

Here Seeger shifts from the immediate conditions in which he experiences warfare—conditions that render it disturbingly modern—and places it within what he understands to be a larger significance. By doing so he shifts from the human world to the realm of nature and elemental forces, skipping altogether the dimensions of the social and the political, through which human experience

of nature is mediated. Seeger thus reifies—out of a subjective necessity—the very realm of experience to which he resorts as an escape from the modern, material reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Having initially acknowledged the modern, unromantic nature of his war experience, he then places it within the context of an all-embracing and unmediated Nature. This recontextualization makes possible the project imagined in the “Faust-motive” essay, that of a new romanticism that would revive the spiritual values of the medieval world.

### III. Love and Arms and Song

The nature and function of the medieval in Seeger’s poetry is most visible in the first sonnet from the “Last Poems” section of his *Poems*. Seeger wrote the entire section after the war began, and the war provides the topic of or a significant backdrop to all the poems in it. In the first of a series of sonnets, Seeger apostrophizes Sir Philip Sidney:

Sidney, in whom the heyday of romance  
 Came to its precious and most perfect flower,  
 Whether you tourneyed with victorious lance  
 Or brought sweet roundelays to Stella's bower,  
 I give myself some credit for the way  
 I have kept clean of what enslaves and lowers,  
 Shunned the ideals of our present day  
 And studied those that were esteemed in yours;  
 For, turning from the mob that buys Success

By sacrificing all Life's better part,  
 Down the free roads of human happiness  
 I frolicked, poor of purse but light of heart,  
 And lived in strict devotion all along  
 To my three idols -- Love and Arms and Song. (*Poems* 145)

The object of this address, Sidney, functions as the ideal of manhood, the “perfect flower” of the “heyday of romance.” Sidney, of course, was not really a man of the medieval era, but Seeger betrays a similarity with his old college roommate, Eliot. Writing about Eliot, Michael Alexander comments that his “English history is not medieval, but is taken from the period between the executions of Mary Queen of Scots and those of Laud and Charles I. The Caroline spirituality ended by the Cromwellian reformation figures as a little Middle Age of Anglicanism.”<sup>14</sup> But Mark Girouard notes that, “In England, mediaeval chivalry had an Indian summer during the reign of Elizabeth—a summer which lasted on into the early seventeenth century.”<sup>15</sup> When Eliot and Seeger use this “little Middle Age” as a repository of anti-modern values, they draw upon elements actually present in Elizabethan culture although seemingly at variance with important developments in Tudor society.

Seeger, as did Eliot, would have seen Sidney’s likeness regularly as an undergraduate, pictured in stained glass windows in Harvard’s Memorial Hall. Sidney is portrayed three times in these windows. The upper portion of window number five in what is now Annenberg Hall (fig. 1) shows Sidney holding in his left



hand a piece of paper containing lines from the *Old Arcadia*, with a sword at his hip: poet and warrior. The lower portion represents the scene related by Sidney's friend and first biographer, Fulke Greville, in which Sidney, wounded—somewhat ironically given his function for Seeger—by a bullet at the Battle of Zutphen, gives his water bottle to a fellow casualty with the words, "Thy necessity is yet greater than mine."<sup>16</sup> The window displays Sidney as a poet and a warrior, selfless and valiant. Sidney appears again in the south transept window in another representation of the same scene. Here the scene functions somewhat differently than does the one in Annenberg Hall; in the south transept, "general and ideal" figures of "the Soldier (or Knight) and Scholar" flank "concrete examples of virtues which should characterize these ideals."<sup>17</sup> In the first case, the wounded Sidney plays out a characteristic scene from his life. In the second, he provides a concrete illustration of right behavior on the part of the abstract Soldier.

In this Shakespearean sonnet, Seeger asserts that Sidney embodies values alien to capitalist modernity. The first stanza celebrates Sidney, noting in particular his martial prowess, his ostensible devotion to Penelope Devereux, and his poetic skill, while the second stanza presents the speaker as a student of Sidney. Stanzas three and four become slightly more concrete, and we see what it means to pattern oneself on Sidney, or on the ideals esteemed in his day, which entails rejecting material success and wealth in favor of devotion to "Love and Arms and Song." By patterning himself along the same lines as those

he imagines to have defined Sidney, shunning "the ideals of our present day," the speaker positions himself as non-contemporaneous with the commercial society of capitalist modernity.

Seeger, then, based his life and his poetry on a medievalism that led him to idealize the past, yet also, in an irony of which he seems unaware, led him to idealize the present in the form of the First World War, a war he saw as the proper site for the practice of his devotion to "Arms and Song," and which lent special poignancy to "Love." Seeger sought in the imagined past, of which Sidney is the "most perfect flower," an alternative to the world of industrial capitalist modernity. In this, Seeger follows in the footsteps of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century antimodern militarism. This antimodern militarism typically favored medievalist forms of expression, with the medieval knight being the preferred means for expressing the ideal of martial virtue. According to T. J. Jackson Lears, two versions of the knight were dominant in late-Victorian America: the Galahad figure and the Saxon.<sup>18</sup> The Galahad figure emphasizes purity and the Saxon a kind of ferocious vitality, but Seeger's Sidney provides an attractive alternative because his status as a poet allowed Seeger to synthesize the martial ideal with the religion of beauty, a variant of 19<sup>th</sup> century medievalism. Unlike Galahad or the Saxon, Sidney was a lover, a fighter, and a singer: the quintessence of Romance.

The list with which Seeger concludes this sonnet, "Love and Arms and Song," provides the topics of the sonnet sequence which the apostrophe to

Sidney initiates. Eight of the sonnets concern Love, a topic Seeger turns in various ways. For example, the fourth sonnet approaches love in the manner familiar from the religion of beauty. In what might also serve as a reasonably accurate summary of Seeger's work, the religion of beauty is described as "a protest against the religion of Self, of Materialism, and of Worldly Advancement."<sup>19</sup> This religion of beauty appears throughout Seeger's poetry and, like the earlier form of medievalism from which it descends, Seeger's version of the religion of beauty presents the singleness of its obsession as an alternative to the practical daily-mindedness of commercial society. Compared to the religion of beauty, religion as such pales, becoming part of the routinized world, like that of world of the office and shop, against which the speaker rebels. The sonnet ends:

Enchanting girl, my faith is not a thing  
 By futile prayers and vapid psalm-singing  
 To vent in crowded nave and public pew.  
 My creed is simple: that the world is fair,  
 And beauty the best thing to worship there,  
 And I confess it by adoring you. (*Poems* 148)

Love and song meet at this point: the object of love is the "enchanting girl," who provides the subject of the poem, which as art is also a form of the beautiful. Seeger's immersion in beauty sets up a model of human subjectivity

and a set of values that seem to provide an alternative to those dominant in industrial capitalist society.

#### **IV. The Warrior Elite**

After a series of poems dedicated to love, Seeger concludes the sequence with two poems, one contrasting the men at the front and those who are not, and the other an anticipation of life after the war. Sonnet XI, "On Returning to the Front after Leave," returns to Seeger's conception of war in its social aspect: soldiers are the elite, forming a community whose willingness to sacrifice themselves and whose commitment to one another contrast with the ruling individualism of peacetime existence.

Apart sweet women (for whom Heaven be blessed),  
 Comrades, you cannot think how thin and blue  
 Look the leftovers of mankind that rest,  
 Now that the cream has been skimmed off in you.  
 War has its horrors, but has this of good --  
 That its sure processes sort out and bind  
 Brave hearts in one intrepid brotherhood  
 And leave the shams and imbeciles behind.  
 Now turn we joyful to the great attacks,  
 Not only that we face in a fair field  
 Our valiant foe and all his deadly tools,  
 But also that we turn disdainful backs

On that poor world we scorn yet die to shield --

That world of cowards, hypocrites, and fools. (Poems 155)

A variant form, Sonnet XI combines the relaxed rhyming demands of the Shakespearean sonnet with the strong division between octave and sestet of the Petrarchan sonnet. After women are exempted from criticism in the first line, the remainder of the poem contrasts two orders of men: the "leftovers" who do not fight, and the "cream" who do, and to whom the sestet is dedicated. Praising war for separating these two orders of men occupies the second half of the octave. The characterization of the impact of war on those who fight, to "bind/Brave hearts in one intrepid brotherhood" is consistent with Seeger's contrast elsewhere between the possessive individualism of ordinary existence and the higher community to which war calls one. Seeger celebrates a version of a "socialism of war," "the ideal of a more intimately and organically united community, forged upon the shared experience of danger and war,"<sup>20</sup> widespread in the early days of World War One.

The sestet of "On Returning to the Front after Leave" combines an archaic conception of war with an ironic conception of its function: a split more dramatic than it may initially appear. Seeger and his comrades "turn... joyful to the great attacks," an attitude difficult to comprehend, and perhaps believe, especially given that the great mutinies in the French army were only about a year off. The "valiant foe" is met in a "fair field," a conception of the war unusual in American poetry since the need to mobilize the American population

to support a war against an enemy incapable of directly threatening the security of the American mainland led to characterizations of the enemy tending toward the demonic, negating the generosity to one's opponent prescribed by the chivalric code.<sup>21</sup> And the landscape produced by the war can hardly be described as a "fair field." In this field the foe wields "deadly tools," a surreptitious acknowledgement of the mechanized nature of modern warfare, perhaps, but in language that actually evades the real nature of these "tools," whether machines or chemical compounds, as products of the second industrial revolution. Such language is an example of the high diction analyzed by Paul Fussell and by Ted Bogacz, who describes it as "an abstract euphemistic language.... This elevated language is not rooted in observed reality; rather, it could all too easily be used by a writer to ignore or obfuscate his and others' experiences."<sup>22</sup> While Seeger's language certainly does this, it also must be seen to emerge from Seeger's program to realize a new, medievalist, romance.

Still, a potentially discordant note enters: that the soldiers in facing their foes turn their backs on those at home uses a schematized vision of the confrontation to pass judgment on those who remain behind, thus setting up an irony, the ramifications of which Seeger does little to explore. The soldiers' "disdainful backs" are turned "On that poor world we scorn yet die to shield." This contempt for those not at the front is the negative obverse of the "intrepid brotherhood" of those who fight, but was a feeling pervasive not only in Seeger, but in the writing of veterans of the various countries involved in the war. The war

inspired a widespread sense that it called people to a higher form of community and that in enabling community to trump the marketplace, the war transcended ordinary pre-war existence. While this sense of solidarity was—at least at the start of hostilities--experienced throughout the societies engaged in the war, Seeger limits the experience to the soldiers who serve at the front, anticipating the ideology of the *frontsoldat* that emerged most famously—and disastrously--in Germany during the postwar period, but the basic elements of which were common to many of the armies.<sup>23</sup> Yet Seeger himself does not develop or explore this irony, as indeed he cannot without abandoning his attempt to resurrect the naïve and wholehearted embrace of the ideal.

For Seeger fighting in the war and writing poems about it contrasted with modern existence, dominated by commercial values, distracted by the pursuit of the false and the trivial. For Seeger, fighting, preferably for France, perhaps, but often in his writing, simply fighting, offered an opportunity to be part of a fundamental animating principle of existence: "Strife." As an elemental part of reality, war provides a means of access to experience that lies beyond the "Getting and spending" with which, Wordsworth famously tells us, "we lay waste our powers."<sup>24</sup> In "The Hosts," the combatants are:

Purged, with the life they left, of all  
That makes life paltry and mean and small,  
In their new dedication charged  
With something heightened, enriched, enlarged,

That lends a light to their lusty brows

And a song to the rhythm of their trampling feet. (138)

As is typical in Seeger, and there will be more of this in "The Hosts," the war revivifies those who fight, those who have broken with the routines of domestic life.

Certainly, the belief that exposure to war benefited men was common among the educated elites of this period. At the most general level, martial virtue and the rigors of soldierly life were contrasted with the sloth and ease into which developed industrial societies had fallen. Such fears and contrasts were fueled in part by the inherited anxieties of the republican political tradition, with its view of the inevitable degeneration of societies once successful republican polities provided a standard of material comfort that threatened to lapse into the dreaded contagion of luxury. While the republican tradition predates industrial capitalism, the course of the American 19th century ensured that its anxieties would be well aroused at the opening of the 20th, with the emergence of a reasonably large, prosperous, and educated social elite.<sup>25</sup>

## **VI. "All are made one"**

The martial ideal is clearly articulated in three essays written by people affiliated with Harvard University during Seeger's time there. *The Harvard Monthly*, where Seeger went on to serve as an editor and to publish a number of poems,<sup>26</sup> published two essays about military training, Louis Grandgent's "Camp Sketches" in 1908 and Richard Douglas' "A Rookie in the War Game" in 1909.



Like Seeger, Grandgent presents military experience as a dramatic break from the civilian norm, "... in lively, romantic, strenuous qualities no game surpasses the game of war.... the isolated nature of military training binds the participants together and lends to their life a peculiar charm."<sup>27</sup> Grandgent's list of the qualities that distinguish "the game of war" is significant: "lively," not dull; "romantic," not humdrum; "strenuous," not lethargic, a list to which Seeger would no doubt assent. Beyond this, Grandgent and Seeger share the conception of "the game of war," although Grandgent's experience was literally of war as a game, while the game-like quality of war in Seeger emerges from his sensibility, not from his experience of war, since this was of a deadly serious character.

As will Douglas and Perry, Grandgent emphasizes the democratic nature of military experience: it brings together a cross-section of American society:

They are of all kinds,--white and black, regulars and militia, infantry and cavalry, artillery and engineers; and whether they hail from Virginia or northern New York, these are all in the same service as yourself. Some come from the mass of factory hands, some from farms, some are doctors and lawyers in fashionable organizations, some have been tramps; but all are made one by the uniform of the American soldier.<sup>28</sup>

Military service becomes a way of reestablishing the organic community that has disintegrated under the pressures of modernity. Striking a note that will be repeated in countless poems written during the war, Grandgent presents regional and class differences as dissolved by the unifying force of "the uniform of the American soldier." In Douglas, also, military experience levels in a way that does not challenge social hierarchy, even as it temporarily erases it. A corporal "bosses a gang of former lawyers, doctors, and professional men, now doing dago-work for the good of the service."<sup>29</sup> The community of the battalion makes these men willing to do "dago-work" and thus levels; yet the work remains "dago-work."

Also emphasizing the commonality of military experience is Harvard philosophy professor Ralph Barton Perry, who published "Impressions of a Plattsburg Recruit" in *The New Republic*. The Plattsburg camp that Perry attended resulted from a movement to provide military training to American men in a format similar to that of a summer camp. Like his fellow Plattsburg recruits, then, Perry was a civilian. Yet Perry, and apparently his fellow "recruits," felt the same sense of unity as that to which Douglas and Grandgent, who trained with the National Guard, attest:

Soldierly experiences are common experiences, and are hallowed by that fact . . . . To walk is one thing, to march, albeit with sore feet and aching back, is another and more triumphant. It is "Hail! Hail! The gang's all here," or "Glorious!

Glorious! one keg of beer for the four of us"—it matters not what the words signify, provided they have a rhythmic swing and impart a choral sense of collective unity. Special privilege and personal fastidiousness, all that marks one individual off from the rest in taste or good fortune, seeks to hide itself. Instead there is the common uniform . . . .<sup>30</sup>

Apparently, the "socialism of war" does not absolutely require war, or even membership in an organized military unit. Training for war suffices to eliminate those marks of distinction that in other contexts are not hidden, but rather displayed. Again, community and commonality are achieved through the mechanism of military training and experienced within a hierarchical community imagined as organic. Military experience generally, and not just war, appeared to provide what Eric J. Leed calls "a means of transcending social and economic contradictions."<sup>31</sup>

But this supposed transcendence was based firmly on those selfsame contradictions. Lears describes the appeal of militarism to the American upper class because of its utility in rallying the restive lower orders around the American flag. In addition to remaking society without class antagonism, war seemed a good way to reinvigorate upper class manhood, and thus also to reassert the leading role of the elites:

"Idleness and luxury have made men flabby," a *North American Review* contributor observed in 1894, wondering "if

a great war might not help them to pull themselves together." Imperialist adventures offered a chance for enervated young men to follow Francis Parkman's prescription: "to realize a certain ideal of manhood—a little medieval." As the *Century* wrote in 1898, the contemporary passion for war signaled a yearning for purification: "we think of war nowadays, not so much as being a means of making others suffer as an occasion for giving ourselves up to suffering."<sup>32</sup>

By embracing suffering, the martial ideal contrasted itself with the unheroic nature of bourgeois existence; at the same time, shunning the life of ease opened the way to a type of asceticism, one that complements rather than contradicts Seeger's hedonism: both asceticism and hedonism offer intense experience. *Gemeinschaft* and powerful experience, a heady combination for Seeger and, apparently, for many others.

## **VII. The Warrior Elite, Society, and Strife**

In his desire to experience war, Seeger exemplified "the militarist search for authenticity." But embracing the martial ideal not only satisfied a subjective need for authenticity, it also provided a reassuring sense of girding oneself against the threat posed by the lower orders: the militant trade unionists, socialists, anarchists, and immigrants that, however unfashionable they may have been, appeared to possess in abundance the vitality that the upper class

feared it was losing, indeed, was fated to lose according to the republican vision of history. In his writing Seeger emphasizes the personal, not the social, value of martial ideals and experience. However, Alan's older brother Charles believed that the Seeger children were raised within a clear set of social values. He considered his father the "snobbest of the snobs," and summarized his sociopolitical outlook:

Seventy percent of the human race was fit only to be governed; another twenty percent was intelligent enough to act under direction; the remaining ten percent was constituted by the competent who had the discipline, the sense of moral duty and physical ability to give that direction for keeping the remaining seventy from mere savagery and anarchy. It was taken for granted that we children inherited the qualifications and duties of membership in this ten percent.

Charles felt that it took enormous effort to overcome "the 'anti-lower class' attitude that he had imbibed from his father and the rest of the Seeger clan."<sup>33</sup> Raised in the same environment as his brother, Alan was exposed to the same attitude. While Charles struggled against it, the role of "the elite" in his poetry suggests that Alan did not, or rather that he transformed the social elite of his father into a warrior elite.<sup>34</sup> The attributes required of the "ten percent,"

“discipline, the sense of moral duty, and physical ability,” demonstrate how easily Seeger would have associated the martial, asceticism, and elitism.

For Seeger, military service calls to and creates a class of supermen, a term he uses in the letter in which he recalls his former dedication to Learning. In

“The Hosts,” Seeger celebrates these supermen:

These are the men that have taken vows,  
 These are the hardy, the flower, the élite,--  
 These are the men that are moved no more  
 By the will to traffic and grasp and store  
 And ring with pleasure and wealth and love  
 The circles that self is the centre of;  
 But they are moved by the powers that force  
 The sea for ever to ebb and rise,  
 That hold Arcturus in his course,  
 And marshal at noon in tropic skies  
 The clouds that tower on some snow-capped chain  
 And drift out over the peopled plain.

They are big with the beauty of cosmic things. (*Poems* 138)

War destroys the economic rationality and egoistic calculation that the ideologues of capitalism elevate as the greatest of all virtues. In so doing, war returns men to the world from which they have been sundered. War allows the combatants to reorient themselves in line with the elemental forces of nature. By

doing so, they become ironically fertile, pregnant in fact, "big with the beauty of cosmic things," ministers not of death and destruction, but of life and beauty because war provides relief from the values and habits of life in market society.

In "The Aisne (1914-15)" he writes,

For that high fellowship was ours then  
 With those who, championing another's good,  
 More than dull Peace or its poor votaries could,  
 Taught us the dignity of being men. (*Poems* 132)

"High fellowship" and "championing another's good" are not values of the competitive marketplace. As with Seeger's attitude toward warfare generally, his transcendence of self, accomplished through warfare, is mediated by the transformative power of a medievalist imagination.

### **VIII. "There was only an industrial world"**

Seeger imagines military experience to provide an escape from and an alternative to the alienating individualism of modernity; in doing so it provides a means by which to return to the ideals of Sir Philip Sidney and "the heyday of romance." Yet the kind of military experience Seeger underwent was decidedly modern. Leed argues that the First World War destroyed the illusion that military experience lies apart from ordinary modern experience: "In war combatants learned there was *only* an industrial world, the reality of which defined them much more in war than it had in peace. In the trenches men learned that mechanized destruction and industrial production were mirror images of each

other."<sup>35</sup> *Some* combatants learned this. Not Alan Seeger. Indeed, the lesson that Leed asserts was taught to men in the trenches appears to have been learned less frequently than Leed suggests, at least by American soldiers. Jonathan Ebel argues that the industrialized violence of the Western front prompted many American soldiers and war workers to make sense of their experience in religious, predominantly Christian, terms.<sup>36</sup>

This Christian theologizing of the war finds a significant point of contact with Seeger's poetic imagination in the figure of the Crusader, which combines Christianity with military violence. Part of the larger pattern of medievalism, the Crusader appears throughout American literature and culture during 1917 and 1918.<sup>37</sup> The poster for the movie *Pershing's Crusaders* (Fig. 2) provides a sense both of this pervasiveness and of the function served by medievalist discourse and iconography. The visual logic of the poster is obvious enough: the American Expeditionary Force led by General Pershing represents a modern version of the Crusaders of the middle ages. The Crusaders are understood, as they must be for the logic to be effective, as unproblematic moral agents: the Crusades are not political, are untainted by involvement with the economic, and so too by extension is its modern counterpart. The whiteness of the Crusaders' robes and horses express visually this purity.

Seeger's medievalism did not typically manifest itself in terms of the Crusades. Yet he would have been exposed to their iconography as an undergraduate at Harvard. As was Sidney, both abstract and concrete



Crusaders were represented in the stained glass of Memorial Hall. The upper portion of window number thirteen depicts an abstract Soldier, arrayed as a Crusader. The lower portion depicts the crusader charging on his steed. Window number twelve depicts a specific Crusader, Godfrey of Bouillon. Seeger's medievalism was thus nurtured and reinforced by the culture around him, even as medievalism seemed to provide an alternative to the values dominant in the society. Alisa Miller has argued that Seeger's life and writing "supplemented the rhetoric established by the propaganda, official and unofficial, being produced by the Entente nations as well as by interested individuals and groups in the United States."<sup>38</sup> The full truth of this emerges when one examines the imaginative framework of Seeger's writing, especially medievalism and values associated with it.

Given that Seeger reacted against the cultural effects of industrial capitalism by embracing medievalism and the martial ideal, his death from wounds received in combat becomes deeply ironic. Seeger died in a minor operation as part of French support for the British in the Battle of the Somme. Thus Seeger was one of around 200,000 French casualties killed or wounded, or one of over 600,000 Allied casualties, or around 1.2 million total casualties killed or wounded in the battle between 1 July and 18 November 1916.<sup>39</sup> Seeger died as a result of machine gun fire, not only a common cause of death in the war, but one that reveals the strikingly modern and industrial character of the

warfare experienced by soldiers like Seeger. In *The Face of Battle*, John Keegan characterizes the machine gun:

*a machine*, and one of a quite advanced type, similar in some respects to a high-precision lathe, in others to an automatic press. Like a lathe, it requires to be set up, so that it will operate within desired and predetermined limits; this was done on the Maxim gun, common to all armies of 1914-1918, by adjusting the angle of the barrel relative to its fixed firing platform, and tightening or loosening its traversing screw. Then, like an automatic press, it would, when actuated by a simple trigger, begin and continue to perform its functions with the minimum of human attention, supplying its own power and only requiring a steady supply of raw material and a little routine maintenance to operate throughout a working shift. The machine gunner is best thought of, in short, as a sort of machine-minder....<sup>40</sup>

Seeger, as did many others, died as the result of someone's routinized labor, in which the machine technology characteristic of the second industrial revolution was applied to the business of killing people.

Obviously, Seeger's perception of himself and what he was engaged in on that day in 1916 are remote from war as Keegan, Leed, and others describe it. In this, Seeger is simultaneously idiosyncratic and typical. He is idiosyncratic

precisely in the way indicated by the comment of an acquaintance: "Alan was consistently medieval."<sup>41</sup> Seeger's medievalism, his construction of himself as non-contemporaneous, was more thoroughgoing than was common, and to this extent idiosyncratic. Seeger did not merely transmit a received anachronistic culture. He developed his anachronism precisely as a counter to capitalist modernity and its attendant values and culture. Paul Fussell emphasizes the persistence of "the old rhetoric" and Ted Bogacz argues that this persistence was not a matter of simple inertia but rather "a defense and barrier against a threatening modern world."<sup>42</sup> Seeger's medievalism, part of a more general anachronism of which "the old rhetoric" and high diction are a part, provided an ideological alternative to modernity, an alternative Seeger consciously and actively cultivated. While Seeger's is an extreme case of the anachronistic imagination, it provides a sense of the imaginary alternative supplied by anachronism in less extreme cases.

This alternative should not be seen as altogether false. As Lears points out, the martial ideal "contains an admirable streak of honest stoicism" necessary to confront the element of pain that life entails, but that the culture of consumption evades. In this way Seeger's contrast between the elemental reality of his military experience and the distracting superficiality of "getting and spending" contains a critical component. Yet medievalism ultimately failed to pose any significant challenge to the culture of consumption, the second industrial revolution, or capitalist modernity more generally. In Seeger and in the

broader war culture, medievalism functioned as an alternative ideology in the sense developed by Raymond Williams, a set of meanings and values that differed from that of an enveloping industrial capitalist modernity.<sup>43</sup> But even Seeger's actively and consciously constructed medievalism remains only alternative and not, in Williams' terminology, oppositional. Indeed, insofar as the First World War occurred within, not against, capitalist modernity and is a part of its unfolding dynamic, medievalism was largely incorporated by the capitalist modernity it scorned, providing Seeger and others with vital self-deceptions that helped enable one of modernity's greatest atrocities.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, 318-319.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, *T.S. Eliot*, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Hart. "Alan Seeger," 372. This period is the least well-documented of Seeger's life. The nature of his time in Paris, in particular, has largely to be construed from his poetry or inferred from later personal writing.

<sup>4</sup> Reeves, "Tragedy of Alan Seeger," 160.

<sup>5</sup> *Bowker's Annual/Publisher's Weekly*. <<http://www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/courses/bestsellers/best10.cgi>> (accessed 24 September 2009). According to Van Wienen (*Partisans and Poets*, 6), Seeger's *Poems* saw eight printings and sold 28, 375 copies by the end of the war.

<sup>6</sup> This and the preceding quotation are from Seeger, "Suggestions," 1.

<sup>7</sup> Seeger, *Poems*, 99. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

<sup>8</sup> This and the preceding quotation are from Seeger, *Letters and Diary*, 184-85. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Seeger, "Suggestions," 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Seeger's medievalism thus differs from British and German medievalism as analyzed by Stefan Goebel. Goebel emphasizes the "assertions of continuity" with "a remote yet meaningful past" (*Great War and Medieval Memory*, 287, 286)) in war memorials. While he acknowledges the attempt to maintain a sense of continuity in war memorials, Samuel Hynes (*War Imagined*) emphasizes a more widespread sense of *discontinuity* in his survey of English culture and the war from 1914 to 1933. This discontinuity was occasioned by the war. But unlike Seeger's, the discontinuity Hynes perceives was more comprehensive: the war put the lie to much of the past, including Seeger's beloved romance.

<sup>12</sup> Seeger, *Letters and Diary*, 56, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Seeger thus joins the train of writers analyzed by Paul Fussell for whom the sight of the sky was freighted with meaning (*Great War*, 51-63).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, *Medievalism*, 231. Mary was executed 8 February 1587, while Sidney, who died 17 October 1586, was interred in the old St. Paul's 16 February 1587. Laud was beheaded 10 January 1645, and Charles I followed him 30 January 1649.

<sup>15</sup> Girouard, *Return to Camelot*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Greville, *Life of Sir Phillip Sidney*, 130.

<sup>17</sup> Hammond, *Stained Glass Windows*, 291.

<sup>18</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 100.

<sup>19</sup> Galloway, "Translator's Preface," vii.

<sup>20</sup> Losurdo, *Heidegger*, 13, 15.

<sup>21</sup> David Kennedy argues that the manner in which the U.S. war effort was financed also contributed to this demonization of the enemy, since the Liberty bond campaigns relied upon stirring the emotions of the public to be successful (Kennedy, *Over Here*, 104-5). He also points out that the Food Administration's reliance upon voluntary efforts led to similar techniques (118-19). See also Nicoletta Gulace, "Barbaric Anti-Modernism," 72-3.

<sup>22</sup> Fussell, *Great War*, 21-3 and Bogacz, 649.

<sup>23</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, 39-72, 193-213; Losurdo, *Heidegger*.

<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, 568.

<sup>25</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 97-139.

<sup>26</sup> "Editors of *The Harvard Monthly*," 4.

<sup>27</sup> Grandgent, "Camp Sketches," 173.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas, "Rookie," 71. David Kennedy comments that advocates of universal military training "seemed... to offer military service not as a means to achieve equality, but as a substitute for it" (146).

<sup>30</sup> Perry, "Impressions," 231.

<sup>31</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, 193.

<sup>32</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> This and the preceding two quotations are from Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 33, 24, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Heinz Eulau mentions Seeger as a member of the Harvard Socialist Club ("Mover and Shaker," 293). Otherwise, nothing suggests that Seeger had any interest in socialism.

<sup>35</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, 194.

<sup>36</sup> *Faith in the Fight*, 54-75,

<sup>37</sup> On the pervasiveness of the Crusades and crusading in American World War One discourse, see Ebel, *Faith in the Fight*, 34-38. See also a poem such as Edward S. van Zile's "Rise Up! Rise Up, Crusaders!" Goebel discusses crusading in British culture, esp. pp. 86-91 and 115-19, as does Elizabeth Siberry, *New Crusaders*, 87-103.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, "Alan Seeger," 18.

<sup>39</sup> John Keegan, *First World War*, 298-99.

<sup>40</sup> John Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 230.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Howe, *Memoirs of the Harvard Dead*, 116.

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<sup>42</sup> Fussell, *Great War*, 23; Bogacz, "A Tyranny of Words," 664.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, "Base and Superstructure," 39.

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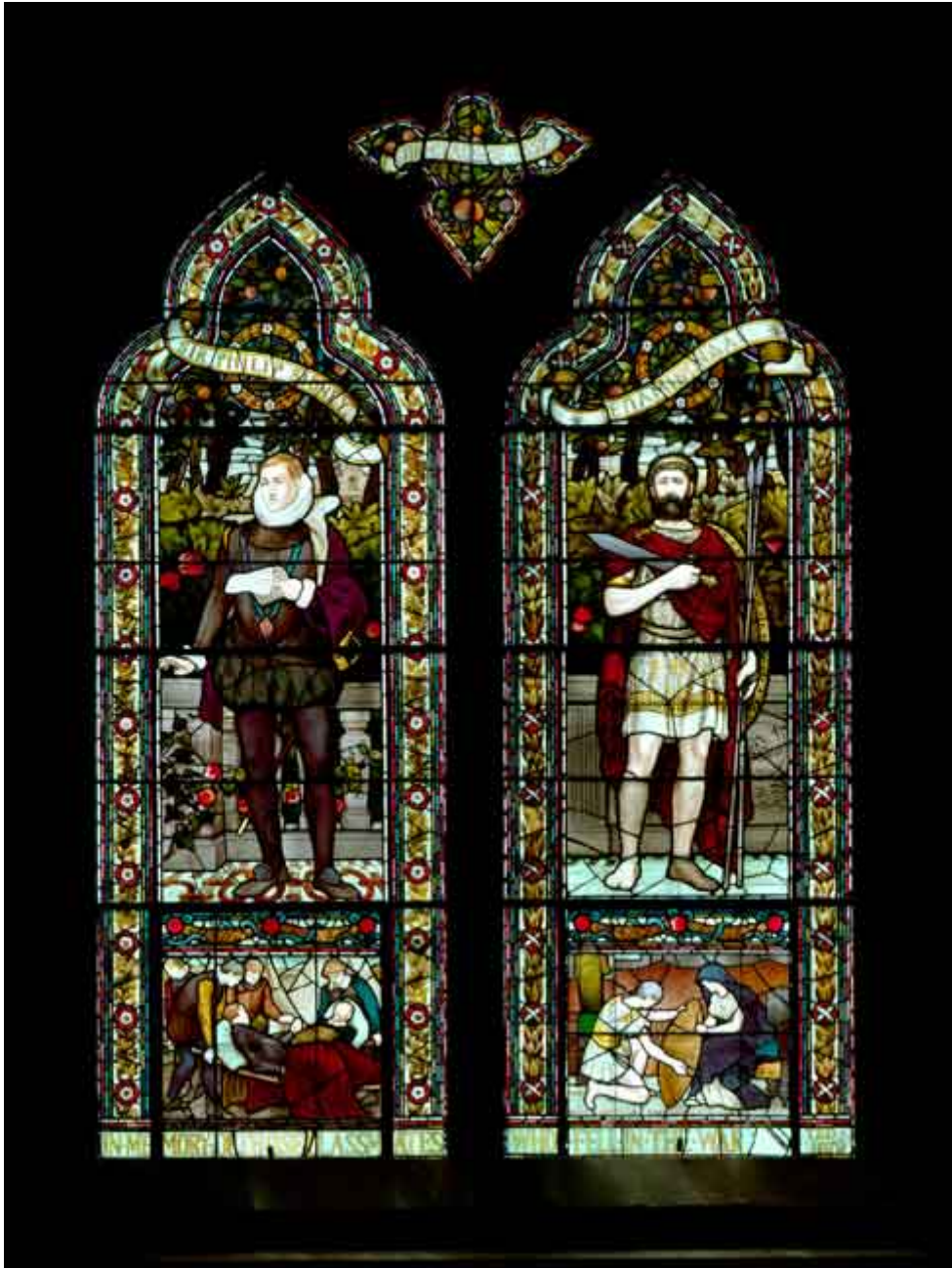


Figure 1. Stained glass window by Daniel Cottier depicting Sir Philip Sidney, Memorial Hall, Harvard University. Depicted on the right is Theban hero Epaminondas.

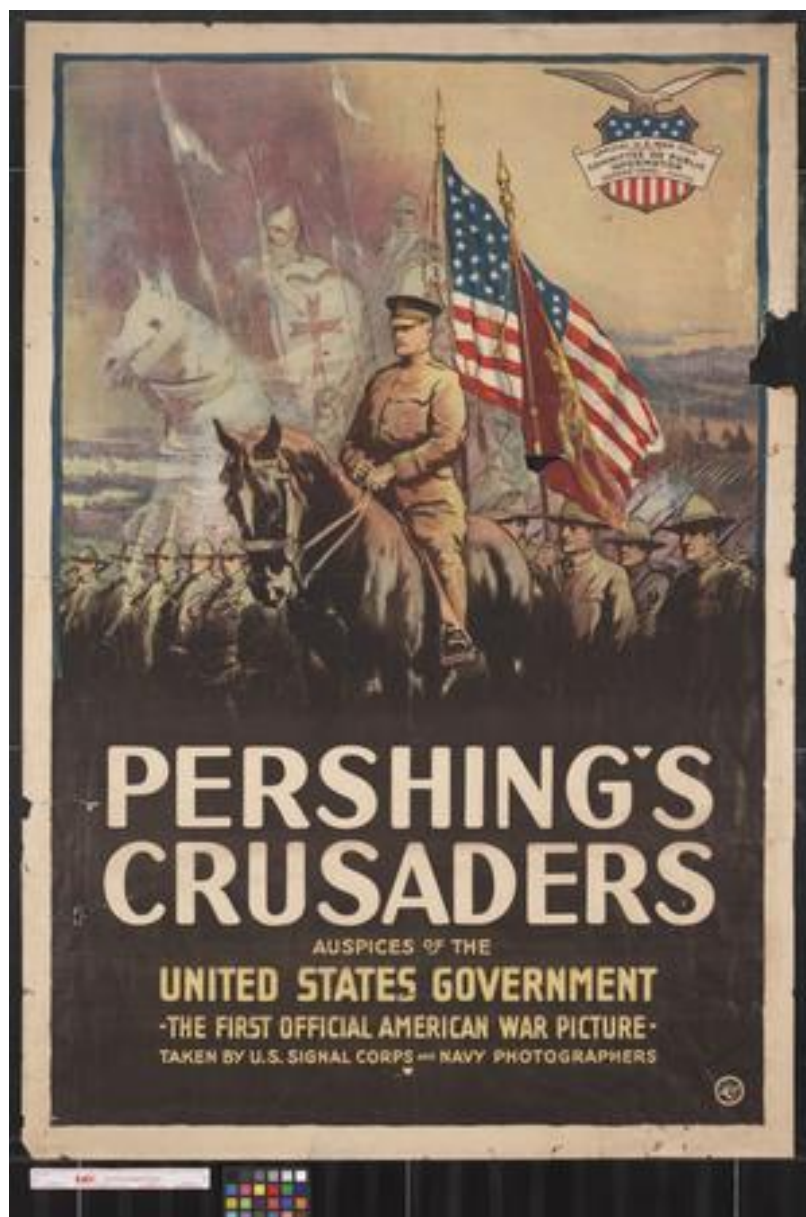


Figure 2. Poster advertising *Pershing's Crusaders* (1918).