

Books Are More to Me than Food: British Prisoners of War as Readers, 1914-1918.

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Edmund G. C. King

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“Books Are More to Me than Food”
British Prisoners of War as Readers, 1914–1918

Edmund G. C. King (bio)

At the end of March 1918, within a few days of being captured in the German spring offensive, Captain John Guest of the Sixteenth Battalion, Manchester Regiment, arrived at Karlsruhe officers' lager. Given access to postal facilities for the first time since capture, he wrote immediately to his parents in Wigan, outlining his material wants:

I hope by the time this letter reaches you that you will have been informed that I am safe & sound though a prisoner of war in Germany. ... First of all let me give you a list of what I want sent out to me. A pair of grey flannel slacks + my brown shoes. Socks (... khaki or blue) thick. I change of under clothes. ... Handkies, soft khaki cap & badge. ... Later on if this war is not over you can send me my British warm but I do not need it now that Summer is coming along. Send books out but only through the publishers. You are not allowed to send them. Please send the April issue of Nash's magazine & the following months.

Reflecting on the somewhat demanding tone of this first communication, he added, "This letter seems to be all 'send' but I know you will understand that I am not asking needlessly."¹ Six weeks later, he wrote again. Trying to give his parents a taste of the listless and static life in the officers' camp at Karlsruhe, Guest drew a quick verbal sketch of his immediate surroundings: "Everybody in the room is endeavouring to write home but all seem to be failing miserably. There is so little to talk about." However, he added, "There is a library here & so we pass the time reading."² Another letter reinforced the theme: "Here *everything* is a very lazy life. Nothing at all to do except read & eat."³ The prominence that Guest gives to books and reading in his letters is by no means unusual in accounts of prisoner-of-war (POW) life during World War I. Some surviving POW diaries contain occasional lists of "books read," interspersed with other lists—loaves of **[End Page 246]** bread received, letters read and sent—showing the place that books occupied within the wider textual and material cultures of captive life.⁴ Books, and the camp libraries that housed them, are also a regular motif in British memoirs written by

former prisoners of war.⁵

The traces of prison reading experiences recorded in these accounts, however, raise a number of questions. Where did the books in prison-camp libraries come from? Who paid for their assembly, and what were they hoping to achieve by doing so? Finally, what part did the books they contained play in structuring the day-to-day experience of captive life? This article discusses two charitable schemes that set out to collect books for World War I prisoners of war: the Camps' Library and the Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational). After tracing the schemes' administrative histories and ideological underpinnings, it then describes the logistical challenges each faced in collecting and distributing books, before examining the conditions and practices of reading that existed behind the wire in German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish prisoner-of-war camps. How did prisoners of war *use* their books? To what extent—if any—did these usages accord with the book charities' belief that they could “redeem the time spent in captivity” by giving prisoners access to reading material?⁶

World War I British prisoners of war entered captivity at a time when both the constitution of the armed forces and assumptions about the role and function of prisons themselves were in a state of large-scale change. The mass volunteering of 1914–1915, combined with the eventual introduction of conscription under the Military Service Act 1916, meant that the prisoners of war held in German, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian camps during the First World War were unlike any previous prison population, civil or military, yet assembled in the nation's history, both in terms of sheer numbers and in their social diversity. The ranks of the prewar British...

“BOOKS ARE MORE TO ME THAN FOOD”



British Prisoners of War as Readers, 1914–1918

Edmund G. C. King

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