

## HOW MUCH MUD DOES A MAN NEED? LAND AND LIQUIDITY IN *PARADE'S END*

Seamus O'Malley

Mud and the First World War are inextricably linked. Almost any account of the Western Front features complaints about the wet terrain of France and Flanders: its numbing physicality, its cheerless visual homogeneity, its often deadly power. John Ellis, in *Eye-Deep in Hell* (1975), reports that rainfall during March 1916 was the heaviest in thirty-five years. On 30 July 1917, during the third battle of Ypres, a drizzle began that lasted for the whole of August; an officer asked to consolidate his position responded to his superiors: 'It is impossible to consolidate porridge.'<sup>1</sup>

Mud made even the simplest tasks laborious. The ubiquitous British greatcoat could be so clogged with rain and mud that it could weigh over thirty pounds, adding to an already heavy load that would combine to drag Tommies deep into the wet ground. Infantrymen would urinate in their clogged rifles. One soldier wrote that 'The mud makes it all but impassable, and now sunk in it up to the knees, I have the momentary terror of never being able to pull myself out. Such horror gives frenzied energy, and I tear my legs free and go on'.<sup>2</sup> He was lucky: many never emerged from mud holes, as Liam O'Flaherty so graphically depicted in *The Return of the Brute*:

No. 8470 Private George Appleby, formerly a worker in a chocolate factory, recently a member of the bombing section of No. 2 Platoon, at that moment ceased to exist as a living organism. He had thrown back his head and started at the sky with fixed eyes, with his tongue hanging out, thick and still and yellow, on his green lower lip. Rain drops fell into his open mouth. Then he disappeared with a gentle, sucking sound into the morass, unnoticed by Friel, who gaped at him in horror. In another moment, all that was left to mark his sojourn on this earth was a series of circular wrinkles in the slime that covered the surface of the quagmire and five orphan children, fathered by him, living with their widowed mother in Canning Town, London: all proudly bearing his name, that of a hero who died in action, fighting for his king and country.<sup>3</sup>

O'Flaherty's ghastly scene is just one of many from First World War literature that uses mud to signal, not just the horror, but the futility of

the war. The thinly-veiled sarcasm of the closing lines echo poems like 'Mud and Rain' by Siegfried Sassoon and 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' by Wilfred Owen. For many writers mud was shorthand for military disillusionment.

Dan Todman's *The First World War: Myth and Memory* (2007) begins with a chapter titled 'Mud':

mud stands for much more than a mere amalgam of water and soil. It is made up of excrement, dead soldiers and animals, shrapnel, barbed wire and the remnants of poison gas. For all the opportunities it offered to bacteria, surrounding splintered trees and dead men, it seems to be opposed to nature. This mud bears the terrifying potential to engulf the soldiers who struggle within it, to suck them down – spluttering, choking, drowning – and to convert their corpses into yet more mud.<sup>4</sup>

For Todman, mud becomes a metaphor for the war itself, self-destructive, all-encompassing, deadly and drab. Similarly, Santanu Das's chapter 'Slimescapes', in *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2005), analyzes fiction and poetry for responses to mud. He quotes one front-line newspaper account from 1917:

At night, crouching in a shell-hole and filling it, the mud watches, like an enormous octopus. The victim arrives. It throws its poisonous slobber out at him, blinds him, closes round him, buries him. . . . For men die of mud, as they die from bullets, but more horribly. Mud is where men sink and – what is worse – where their soul sinks. . . . Hell is not fire, that would not be the ultimate in suffering. Hell is mud.<sup>5</sup>

Das interprets this widespread and visceral fear of mud as ultimately a fear of the 'dissolution into formless matter' that modern weaponry inflicted on soldiers in the trenches. Mud, like the war, is everywhere: the Somme or Passchendaele were not containable to battlefields like Jura or Austerlitz.

It should be no surprise, then, that mud features so heavily in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*, with its two middle volumes that devote so much time to impressionistically describing trench warfare. Ford paints a muddy landscape in *No More Parades*: 'Hundreds of thousands of men tossed here and there in that sordid and gigantic mud-brownness of mid-winter' and Christopher Tietjens operates 'against a background of hell-fire, row, blood, mud, old tins'.<sup>6</sup> Tietjens at one point is described as an 'absurd statue: a collection of meal-sacks done in mud', resembling many of the iconic photographs of soldiers in the trenches.<sup>7</sup>

Impressionist immediacy, however, can only partly account for the attention paid to mud by Ford. Mud may be a hellish metaphor for war experience, but in Ford's hands it encompasses more than simply battle conditions or fears of death. With the conceit of mud Ford dramatizes and mediates Tietjens' psyche and the social world that has produced him. If mud for Todman and Das symbolizes the carnage and chaos of the first modern war, for Ford it dramatizes the forces of modernity itself, the propulsions that led to war, traumatic memories of battle, and the questions regarding Europe's post-war future that occupy *Last Post*.

Any discussion of mud must also incorporate land: fertile ground for scholarship on *Parade's End*.<sup>8</sup> The opening scene of Tietjens and Macmaster on a train depicts a deceptively secure English landscape, but the train's speed hints that this stability will be revealed as a mirage. As many critics have discussed, we are encouraged by the tone of the novels to interpret Tietjens, schematically, as signalling the final fall of an older order that English literature had been charting for centuries. As *Parade's End* opens, Tietjens' position in society is as secure as his seat on the train, with a son who will succeed him. Then through the war, domestic disputes, scandal and shell-shock he is reduced to powerlessness, forsaking his inheritance and stripped of his pension. Ford's prose descriptions of landscape follow in the wake of Tietjens' social and psychic collapse, the text's language mirroring its protagonist's gradual dissolution.

When we get to the front in the opening scene of *No More Parades*, Ford depicts a Vorticist landscape in direct contrast to the initial realism of the tetralogy:

An immense tea-tray, august, its voice filling the black circle of the horizon, thundered to the ground. Numerous pieces of sheet-iron said, 'Pack. Pack. Pack.' In a minute the clay floor of the hut shook, the drums of ears were pressed inwards, solid noise showered about the universe, enormous echoes pushed these men – to the right, to the left, or down towards the tables, and crackling like that of flames among vast underwood became the settled condition of the night. Catching the light from the brazier as the head leaned over, the lips of one of the two men on the floor were incredibly red and full and went on talking and talking. . . . (NMP 9-10)

This scene prepares us for the disorientations of the second volume, in which the securities and assurances of pre-war life have evaporated. At its conclusion, Tietjens is deep in trench mud, homesick for an

eighteenth-century pastoral oasis to escape from the ravages of this modern war:

Tietjens was sentimentally at rest, still with wet eyes. He was walking near Salisbury in a grove, regarding long pastures and ploughlands running to dark, high elms from which [. . .] peeped the spire of George Herbert's church. . . . One ought to be a seventeenth-century parson at the time of the renaissance of Anglican saintliness. . . . (NMP 244)

Such pastoral moments are common features of First World War literature, as Paul Fussell explored in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.<sup>9</sup> Reassuring images of England's past negatively reflect the shattered landscape around Tietjens. The trench dirt reminds him of Groby, his ancestral home, conjuring personal, not just social memories:

This had been like being at home where they had springs like that. On the moors, digging out badgers. Digging earth drains, rather. Badgers have dry lairs. On the moors above Groby. April sunlight. Lots of sunlight and skylarks. (MCSU 177).

Again, this scene is a negative impress of the French fields that mock any attempt at tranquility.

When we see Tietjens again, in *A Man Could Stand Up* –, he is back at the front, contemplating the impending German attack while looking at the war-ravaged landscape, craving stable land that informs the third title: to be able to stand up you need some solid dirt beneath you, but all he can see is 'solidish' ground:

Otherwise the ground had been so smashed up that it was flat: went down into holes but did not rise up into mounds. That made it look gentle. It sloped down. To the untidiness. They appeared mostly to lie on their faces; Why? Presumably they were mostly Germans pushed back in the last counter-attack. (MCSU 67)

The landscape is deceptive: while it appears 'gentle,' it is actually scattered with German corpses and is as deadly as the soil from O'Flaherty's grisly scene. In *Some Do Not . . .*, Tietjens and Valentine had walked through an idyllic English landscape: 'This, Tietjens thought, is England! A man and a maid walk through Kentish grass fields: the grass ripe for the scythe.'<sup>10</sup> Then, the landscape was stable and their mastery over it complete (or at least in their minds – the scythe, and Tietjens' assault on the vegetation, foreshadow the death

to come). But on the Front, Tietjens is powerless and land signals only volatility.

Land can be both visual subject and object. It is both a place to look from – *Last Post* begins with Mark Tietjens, whose ‘view embraced four counties’ – and also landscape, something to be observed.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, we can chart the continuous instability of land and landscapes throughout the four volumes, as the solidish ground beneath Tietjens’ feet mirrors the hazardous No Man’s Land that he regards. Tietjens is looking at and from mud; like Stephen Dedalus in the ‘Proteus’ episode of *Ulysses*, Tietjens cannot find stillness even while at rest.

Mud is thus an omnipresent and constant threat, but, as befitting Ford’s aesthetic, mud is most terrifying in Tietjens’ memories and his anticipations of the future. Mud is his greatest fear, and the first image that comes to mind when he finds out he is going up the line in *No More Parades* is mud: ‘The ground moved under Tietjens’ feet. He felt himself clambering over slopes of mud with his heavy legs and labouring chest’ (*NMP* 102). His fears for the men under him are described in muddy terms: ‘It was the worries of all these wet millions in mud-brown that worried him’ (*NMP* 17). While his war experiences from *Some Do Not . . .* are for the most part ellipsed, occurring between the first and second parts of that novel, it is only at this later stage of the tetralogy, as he faces fire again, that Tietjens begins to confront his memories of battle: ‘The profound misery of brooding apprehension in the line was less on his mind than, precisely, the appalling labour of the lower limbs when you live in mud to the neck’ (*NMP* 102). Much later he is still concerned with the mud: ‘His mind was battling with the waters. What would it pick out as the main terror? The mud: the noise: the dread always at the back of the mind?’ (*NMP* 221). Note how Ford stages terror: it is not simply that Tietjens fears death or battle, but rather he fears what his mind will actively focus on – ‘pick out’ – during the suppression of traumatic experiences, and he has already intuited that it will be the mud that will remain once all other traces of death and conflict have drained away.

As Ellis has suggested, the dread of mud was so widespread that its presence in Ford’s novels need not be conspicuous. Nevertheless, Ford’s texts stage a terror of mud that go beyond a fear of discomfort or death. *A Man Could Stand Up* – viscerally depicts the dirt that surrounds the soldiers, continually returning to the physicality of the trench walls. Tietjens’ fear of mud explains, in part, his desire to be

able to stand up: 'he imagined himself standing up on a little hill, a lean contemplative parson, looking at the land sloping down to Salisbury spire [. . .] Imagine standing up on a hill! It was the unthinkable thing there!' (*MCSU* 90). The transformation from an older way of life is now depicted as complete, as Tietjens will no longer stand on Groby's soil. (He will return only to recover a broken branch from the felled Groby Great Tree.) In fact, Tietjens compares the dirt at the front to that of Groby:

Yes, it was friendly, the trench face. And singularly unbellicose. When you looked at it you hardly believed that it was part of this affair. . . . Friendly! You felt at peace looking at its flints and pebbles. Like being in the butts up above Groby on the moor, waiting for the grouse to come over. (*MCSU* 72)

The image of the solid dirt fills him with peace and reminds him of the dirt that he securely owned back in England. This is solid, protective dirt that is not being pickaxed or blown up, dirt that stands between him and the enemy, dirt that literally divides him from death.

But dirt that is not solid is mud.

Tietjens' mind missed a notch again. . . . It was the fear of the mud that was going to obsess him. Yet, curiously, he had never been under heavy fire in mud. . . . You would think that that would not have obsessed him. But in his ear he had just heard uttered in a whisper of intense weariness, the words [. . .] of utter despair, meaning: It is unbearable; it is that that has ruined us. . . . The mud! (*NMP* 231)

Mud is liquid land. The instability of mud terrifies him for the same reason that the solidity of the trench dirt reassures him, leaving him exposed, powerless. The dirt that provides cover threatens suffocation when in liquid form. But ideologically, trench mud is Ford's ultimate symbol of the instability caused to landed relations that he believed culminated in the war. Modern capitalism, as Marx famously announced, turns all that is solid into air; land it turns to mud.<sup>12</sup> In the earlier part of the tetralogy Tietjens took a walk on a solid English dirt road, but now, after the symbolic liquefaction of estates like Groby (it will be sold to a parvenu American in *Last Post*), he is immersed in protean land: 'In the whole affair it was the slippery mud he hated most [. . .] He became again merely the sitting portion of a man, presenting to view the only part of him that was not caked with mud' (*MCSU* 78).<sup>13</sup> He has been overwhelmed by the land that he had once owned and mastered, and if we read 'land' in both senses we can see

how the symbology of the novels operates.<sup>14</sup> For Tietjens, land should be a sanctuary from the trenches, but it is now threatened with its own dissolution, and the 'us' in the above passage could equally refer to families like that of Tietjens as it does to his fellow soldiers.

Or maybe all modern individuals? If Ford believed that the landed aristocracy was undergoing a radical change, he may be off by several generations. It was only the trappings of the landed families that were under threat: City had replaced Country long ago. But if we see the novels' ambitions as greater than simply a realist depiction of land relations, and instead read them as narratives of modernity itself, then Ford has found an apt metaphor. As Zygmunt Bauman writes in *Liquid Modernity* (2000):

liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time [. . .] In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing liquids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake.<sup>15</sup>

It is not just that modern life is protean, unpredictable, contingent; it is that time continually works on matter, so any consideration of space must also be an equal consideration of time. Mud unites time and space, history and land.

Mud in *Parade's End* is destructive and terrifying, but simultaneously life-giving, and this stance separates *Parade's End* from other muddy war texts. In *A Man Could Stand Up* – Tietjens is buried in mud trying to save a fellow soldier from suffocation. As he afterwards tells a baffled General Campion, 'I was buried. Temporarily' (*MCSU* 181). Tietjens emerges from the mud in a metaphoric rebirth, his ties toward his family's estate and old way of life now fully severed.<sup>16</sup> His new life begins at this moment. T. S. Eliot had explored the paradoxical nature of water in *The Waste Land* as both deadly – 'Fear death by water' – but also as life-bringing and healing, as Sarah Cole notes in *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*:

Eliot's poem seems divided, on one hand suggesting a poetic enactment of burial and regrowth, where the possibility of recovering and blooming after the war is painful but possible [. . .] and on the other hand offering an alternative fantasy of consigning the body not to the ground but to the sea, where the whirlpool, in its whispering ways, will dematerialize the body, making art out of organs, pearls out of eyes.<sup>17</sup>

For Cole, modernist texts vacillate between those that envision violence as 'enchanted' and 'generative,' and those that are 'disenchanted,' that is, 'in tension with an insistence that all violence is unredeemable'.<sup>18</sup> Disenchanted violence – like the death of O Nine Morgan in *No More Parades*, or that of No. 8470 Private George Appleby in *The Return of the Brute* – suggests the absurdity and futility of the war (hence the emphasis on their numerical military identities), but the violence that Tietjens faces in *A Man Could Stand Up* – enchants: 'The war had made a man of him!' (MCSU 210); and Das writes that 'This is one of the few moments in First World War writings when the mud is figured in its regenerative, womb-like function'.<sup>19</sup> Ford's mud both disenchant and enchants, just as for Cole *The Waste Land* 'neither flees violence, nor transcends it, nor merely represents it, but rather trades on its power, at times appropriating its force and creating something especially brilliant, at other times succumbing to the sheer ruin that violence leaves in its wake'.<sup>20</sup> Ford opts for the less archetypal, less ritualistic symbol of mud to express his vision of modernity, 'the clumsy mud-bath of his incompetence' (MCSU 209) that combines death, burial, and rebirth in one image. (And while the images of land in *The Waste Land* are often compared to the trenches, the soggy soldiers would not have recoiled at 'the dry stone' which gave 'no sound of water'.) In one muddy instant – narratively drawn out to several pages, where 'Long dollops of liquid mud surrounded them in the air' (MCSU 174) – Tietjens is killed, entombed and reborn, the meaningless violence of the war giving Tietjens' life meaning.

Tietjens exits the war low in rank, deprived of his ancestral estate, pensionless, working as an antique dealer and living with a physical education instructor. In *Last Post* the pair are literally selling off the relics of his fallen class, and expecting a child on their small plot of land where they perform sustenance farming. Tietjens' relationship to land has now been recalibrated: he owns but also farms, occupies but also labours. As Bruce Thornton reminds us, *Last Post* should be read as Georgic, not pastoral:

otium is the freedom, peace, and leisure to sing and to love, the two representative pastoral activities sustained by a responsive, sympathetic landscape. The georgic, on the other hand, glorifies labor, the work necessary to overcome the harsh conditions and destructive forces of the natural world in order to create and maintain civilization [. . .] Tietjens' life in *The Last Post* has little leisure, pastoral or otherwise.<sup>21</sup>

Tietjens is now a labourer, no longer of the leisured class; as the pig-farmer Ford surely knew, Tietjens requires a balance between wet and dry, liquidity and solidity. Having almost perished in the mud, but also recognizing the need of soil and water for his future, Tietjens now craves the waters of life, but not so much as to drown him.

## NOTES

- 1 John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 45.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 3 Liam O'Flaherty, *The Return of the Brute*, Dublin: Wolfhound, 1998, p. 66.
- 4 Dan Todman, *The First World War: Myth and Memory*, London: Hambledon and London, 2005, p. 1.
- 5 Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 35.
- 6 Ford, *No More Parades*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011 – henceforth *NMP*; pp. 16, 15.
- 7 Ford *A Man Could Stand Up* –, ed. Sara Haslam, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011 – henceforth *MCSU*; p. 173.
- 8 See Robert Green, *Ford Madox Ford: Prose and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 134-166; Gene M. Moore, 'The Tory in a Time of Change: Social Aspects of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*', *Twentieth-Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, 28:1 (1982), 49-68; Andrzej Gasiorek, 'The Politics of Cultural Nostalgia: History and Tradition in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*', *Literature and History*, 11 (2002), 52-77; and Paul Skinner, 'The Painful Processes of Reconstruction: History in *No Enemy* and *Last Post*', *History and Representation in Ford Madox Ford's Writings*, International Ford Madox Ford Studies 3, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004, 65-75.
- 9 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 10 Ford *Some Do Not . . .*, ed. Max Saunders, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011, p.131.
- 11 Ford, *Last Post*, ed. Paul Skinner, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011 – henceforth *LP*; p. 9.
- 12 Marshall Berman appropriated Marx's line for his study of modern societies, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- 13 As Andrew Radford notes: 'the earth itself, far from being the stable entity dominated by the observing Tietjens in *Some Do Not . . .*, here threatens to engulf both the protagonist and his beleaguered men': 'The Gentleman's Estate in Ford's *Parade's End*', *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism*,

52:4 (2002), 314-32 (p. 324).

- 14 In Ford's war novel *No Enemy* (1929) he also uses mud as a metaphor: 'There were, in those days, you will remember, no more sanctuaries. All nooks of the world were threatened by the tide of blue-gray mud': *No Enemy*, New York: Ecco Press, 1984, p. 63. Ford's line might call to mind the equally anxious tone of W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming', where the 'The blood-dimmed tide is loosed': *The Collected Poems*, New York: Scribner, 1996, p. 187. Interestingly, in the earlier *No Enemy* manuscripts (1921) mud is depicted as a foreign force, the Germans invading the land of France, while three years later in *A Man Could Stand Up* – the instability is caused as much by internal as external forces, the Germans remaining an abstract, distant force while the mud itself becomes the source of horror.
- 15 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, p. 2.
- 16 See Sara Haslam, *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, The Novel and the Great War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 108: 'Tietjens is opened out, existentially speaking; he is made to be self-aware in his journey through warfare [. . .] In the most violent and painful fashion imaginable [. . .] everything has been changed. Groby, his land, his inheritance, is, he believes, to pass into Sylvia's [his estranged wife's] hands.'
- 17 Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 73.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 19 Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, p. 47.
- 20 Cole, *At the Violet Hour*, p. 81.
- 21 Bruce Thornton, 'Pastoral or Georgic? Ford Madox Ford's *The Last Post*', *English Language Notes*, 26:1 (1988), 59-66 (p. 60).