**Birkbeck during the Great War**

The resilience of Birkbeck’s community during World War One ensured that teaching continued at the College and led to individual battlefield honours.

According to the 1914-1915 annual review, John Charles Bigham, 1st Viscount Mersey, delivered an “eloquent and impressive address on War and Patriotism”, which was followed by many enforcements, including to the College Officers’ Training Corp. In the same report, references are made to students enlisting for “special chemical work in the Army”, in response to a call from the War Office. Birkbeck staff, students and alumni joined the forces during the war, including the inspirational and pioneering Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan CBE, who received the CBE honour because of her wartime service. As well as being Birkbeck’s first female professor, and a prominent botanist and mycologist, she served as the Controller of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in France and was the Commandant of the Women’s Royal Air Force.

Other individuals mentioned in the annual reviews include Captain Sidney Eames MC, who was appointed Chief Instructor at a Trench Mortar and Bombing School in France; and HN Dale Richards BSc, a former assistant in the Zoology Department, who joined the navy as a surgeon and was killed in the Mediterranean when his ship was torpedoed.

The sadness and severity of the losses incurred during the war were referred to year after year in the annual reports: “The College, like other educational institutions, has suffered under the influence of the great war” (1914-1915). “The College may feel a pride mingled with sadness at the loss of these promising lives” (1915-1916), and “The death of so many strong and promising young men brings home to the College the supreme sacrifice this country is making of its best and bravest in the work of the front. According to the annual review of 1917-1918: “It is noteworthy and of excellent augury for the future that in the army on the Continent books of study and literary pursuits have proved the best form of relief during periods of quiescence”.

Despite the horrors and perils of war, soldiers still read and exhibited a desire to learn at the front. According to the 1914-1915 report, “The College has adapted itself to the changed conditions, and with slight modifications, has fulfilled its regular functions”. Three years later, a similar sentiment was echoed in the latest report: “During the war all the regular courses of instruction were maintained with marked success, in spite of the shortage of staff”.

According to the roll of honour, 87 members of Birkbeck’s community, including five past or present members of staff and one governor, were killed.

Zepplin Nights: London in the First World War

Jerry White

The Bodley Head

Award-winning London historian Jerry White, Professor of History at Birkbeck, launched his book Zeppelin Nights in May 2014. The scholarly work, which won the Spear’s Prize for Social History Book of 2014, explains how London was transformed by the Great War. Munitions were manufactured in the capital’s factories, wounded soldiers were treated in its hospitals, and London came under air attack for the first time. As well as the horrors of the conflict, London experienced an economic boom linked to the war effort, the end of Victorian levels of poverty, the growth of opportunities for women in the labour market, and the shift towards manufacturing in the capital’s western suburbs.

Listen to a podcast interview with Professor Jerry White at: www.bbk.ac.uk/birkbeckvoices/episode21