

Above the Battlefield



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The early twentieth century is usually remembered as an era of rising nationalism and military hostility, culminating in the disaster of the First World War. Yet it was marked also by a vigorous campaign against war which called into question the authority of the nation state. This book explores the role of artists and writers in the formation of a

modern, secular peace movement in Britain, and the impact of ideas about 'positive peace' on their artistic practice. Previous studies have focused on the violence implicit in modernism, and on the disintegration of the avant-garde in Britain at the outbreak of war, but Grace Brockington argues that 'pacifist modernism' flourished before 1914, and that it survived during the war through a network of dissident cultural communities. Two such groupings - Bloomsbury, and a previously unrecognised circle of artists, writers and performers based around the Margaret Morris Theatre in Chelsea - are the focus of this important study. Brockington reveals the exhilarating expectation of an international cultural Renaissance that motivated the Edwardian avant-garde, and that militated against conflict in 1914. She refutes the assumption that the Bloomsburies failed during the war, whether in their duty to their country, or as a force for political and cultural change. Rather, she argues that they demonstrated an active, principled and audaciously public commitment to pacifism, sustained in difficult circumstances, and consistent with their pre-war cultural ambitions. Her analysis of the Chelsea circle draws on a wealth of new archival material about experimental performance during the war, overturning the convention that avant-garde theatre was moribund after 1914. There emerges a rich and interconnected world of hellenistic dance, symbolist stage design, marionettes and book illustration, produced in conscious opposition to the values of an increasingly regimented and militaristic society, and radically different from existing narratives of British wartime culture.

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