

Roman year as chronicled in Ovid's *Fasti*, there would have been Epicurean atheists and Platonist worshippers of the Good and those who did not think about such matters, all offering incense at the same altars. The same was probably true of churches and synagogues and temples throughout the world.

Over a century ago, within the Church of England, figures such as Dean Stanley were propounding a position very similar to the one recommended in this book. The Catholic Modernists went further in their rejection of the old mythology. But Pope Pius X ruthlessly stamped them out and the sad fact is that, in all attempts since to explore this kind of territory, churches have reacted in a paranoid and intolerant manner. Think of the fuss made in the 1960s when the poor old Bishop of Woolwich wrote *Honest to God*.

Don Cupitt, the former Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge 'came out' as an actual atheist decades ago, and there was the Death of God school of theology in America, but they did not do much to win a following in those churches which preferred to hunker down behind orthodox stockades. Quite why this is so is for sociologists and psychiatrists to explore. The 'modern' phenomenon is not, actually, the apparently radical idea expressed by de Botton. Historically speaking, the modern idea is that religious rites should only be permitted to those prepared to jump through certain intellectual hoops as an entrance requirement.

As soon as the churches began to introduce that Visa control, they guaranteed that they would lose millions of adherents. As de Botton shows in chapter after chapter, it is natural for human beings to follow ritual observances. The intolerance and stupidity of the churches were as much to blame for such people being cut adrift as were the dogmatic atheists, with their fifth-form debating club 'arguments' about whether God 'exists'.

Stronger than fiction

Alexander Fiske-Harrison

Warrior: The Amazing Story of a Real Warhorse

by General Sir Jack Seely,
illustrated by Alfred Munnings
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I think it was a Frenchman — it usually is — who observed that the English love their animals more than their children. At first glance, General Jack Seely's *Warrior: The Amazing Story of a Real War Horse* — originally published as *My Horse Warrior* in 1934 — is striking proof of this. In an entire book devoted to the exploits of his horse,



Alfred Munnings' portrait of General Sir Jack Seely and Warrior

the author's final mention of his son Frank is stunning in its brevity:

We had a last gallop together along the sands, Warrior and [Frank's charger] Akbar racing each other; then I drove him in a motor-car to rejoin his regiment He asked me to take care of Akbar, and I replied that Warrior would take care of that. He was killed not long afterwards while leading his company.

I don't believe that the General — Lord Mottistone as he became, Minister for War as he had been — was quite as inhumane as this might indicate. In fact, I think there is a vast well of emotion under those words which, when read properly, can bring a choke to the throat. However, what is so very English is his feeling that it is fine to express emotion about animals, but to do so about our fellow men is much more questionable. To say that this is psychologically and ethically limiting is to understate. Witness its *reductio ad absurdum*: the self-serving, tasteless mawkishness of the 'Animals in War' memorial. Who among the living does it move? Certainly not the animals. And who among the dead would it have comforted? Being remembered is no consolation to those with no conception of time.

However, as I have already said, Seely's version of it, the old-fashioned version, has more to it than this. The book is indeed the

story of one thoroughbred, from birth in 1908 on the Isle of Wight, through the horrors of cavalry charges at machine guns and the deprivations of the trenches, to winning the Isle of Wight point-to-point in 1919 and a retirement of fox-hunting and rural comfort (Warrior died in 1941, aged almost 33). However, as men and other horses fall like ninepins around Seely and his mount, you get the feeling that through the horse the General is actually telling the reader — and perhaps himself — that something came through the horrors of that terrible conflagration in one piece; that something of worth remained.

On the same day that I read *Warrior*, for contrast, I went to see the film adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's children's novel *War Horse*. I did not hate it as much as I thought I would, because, despite being overblown, overscored and overlit, Steven Spielberg cannot help but create striking scenes, and some of the actors — Hiddleston, Cumberbatch, Kennedy — are also superb. I would even suggest that the images it supplied me with allowed me to make more of Seely's rather spare prose. However, I was also aware that *War Horse* is very much the child of *Warrior*, and there can be no denying the superior charm, and gallantry, of the sire over his progeny.