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Hugh Cecil, historian who brought home to readers the experience of fighting in a war – obituary

For some, he discovered, war was a test of courage and an escape from monotony; he also wrote several acclaimed biographies with his wife

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Premium



Hugh Cecil, who has died aged 78, was a military historian with a special interest in the experience of fighting in the First and Second World Wars.

In his own life, Hugh Cecil found interest in, and made friends with, all sorts and conditions of people, and he approached the study of war with instinctive sympathy for the miscellaneous congregation caught up in its horrors and its triumphs.

Flower of Battle: How Britain Wrote the Great War (1996) was a highly original study which showed that, while the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon now commands almost universal assent in portraying the war as a hellish disaster, there are other possible perspectives.

In examining the work of largely forgotten writers of the 1920s and 1930s – authors such as Richard Aldington, R H Mottram, Robert Keable, Gilbert Frankau, Herbert Read and Richard Blaker – Cecil concluded that “many, probably the majority, were far from looking back on the war as unmitigated hell, however great their miseries at the time ... The positive side of the Great War was widely acknowledged – as a test of courage, adventure, [and] escape from a monotonous and complicated existence.”

The *Times Literary Supplement* observed in its review: “Here, unsurpassed, perhaps unsurpassable, is a catalogue of the lives of the British male at war ... in all his extraordinary variety of class, region, talent, morality, experience, desire.”

In 1994 Cecil and Peter Liddle, a colleague at Leeds University, organised a conference to mark the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. This event proved the inspiration for *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (2009), in which 64 contributors wrote about largely unexplored aspects of the conflict.

Among the many subjects covered were the French at Gallipoli, the treatment of conscientious objectors, the development of restorative surgery, the coverage of the war in the cinema, the experience of working women, the maintenance of home morale and the role of propaganda. The book constituted a hugely valuable addition to the literature of the First World War.

Cecil was also closely involved when Liddle set up the Second World War Experience Centre in 1998. The Centre, now at Otley, near Leeds, preserves every kind of resource – diaries, memoirs, film, interviews and photographs – concerned with the war, and has proved invaluable not just for historians and students, but also for film-makers and broadcasters.

THE FLOWER OF BATTLE

HOW BRITAIN WROTE THE GREAT WAR





HUGH CECIL

The Flower of Battle emphasised that pure horror is not the only perspective from which to assess the experience of war

In order to raise money for the centre Cecil organised a series of lectures on the war which took place in the State Rooms at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea. The speakers, who included MRD Foot and Anthony Beevor, addressed packed audiences.

Hugh Peniston Cecil was born in Oxford on December 29 1941, the second son of Lord David Cecil, the biographer of Lord Melbourne, Max Beerbohm and Jane Austen, and Goldsmiths' Professor of English from 1948 to 1969. Hugh's mother, Rachel, the daughter of the literary critic Desmond McCarthy, afforded inspiring hospitality to countless undergraduates.

Hugh's elder brother Jonathan would become an actor, celebrated especially for his readings of P G Wodehouse. His younger sister, Laura, would run a literary agency which specialised in children's books.

Hugh was an Oppidan scholar at Eton, where he was especially fortunate in his housemaster, Francis Cruso, for whom he registered his enduring gratitude and affection in a fine memoir, published in 2009. Cruso's humour and wisdom, his delight in pricking pomposity, his sound common sense and his steady morality at once matched and reinforced Cecil's own character.

Imaginative, endlessly curious, at once amusing and easily amused, somewhat distraught in manner but always sharp in mind, Cecil was one of those rare schoolboys – an intellectual who becomes effortlessly popular. An editor of The Eton Chronicle, he was elected to Pop, an institution more generally the province of “the bloods”.

From Eton Cecil went on to New College, Oxford, where he occasionally read Modern History, but more generally followed his own fancies. His studies became more serious when he stayed on for postgraduate work, choosing for his thesis the part played by his great-uncle, Lord Robert Cecil, in founding the League of Nations in January 1920.

In 1967 Cecil was awarded a Harkness Fellowship to Harvard. During his 18 months in America he was able to travel widely, and to meet the poet, novelist and critic Conrad Aitken, formerly an associate of Ezra Pound and T S Eliot.

In 1973 Cecil was appointed Lecturer in Modern British History at Leeds University, where he would teach for some 30 years. Wholly without ambition to compete in the academic rat-race, he conducted tutorials of wide-ranging fascination while generously helping promising pupils on to the academic career ladder.



Hugh and Mirabel Cecil

In 1972 Cecil married Mirabel Walker, a journalist and writer who in 1974 would publish *Heroines in Love, 1750-1974*, a sparkling survey of romance in women's magazines.

Hugh and Mirabel Cecil complemented each other in an exceptionally happy match – evident not only in their family life, but also in the books they wrote together.

They began in 1980 with a quartet, *Teddy Tales*, for children, commissioned by Mirabel's brother, the publisher Sebastian Walker. As a spur to the sometimes dilatory Hugh, Sebastian

presented him with a splendid box of watercolours, which Hugh used to illustrate fantastic stories of a motley collection of bears.

Their first jointly written biography, *Clever Hearts* (1990), concerned Hugh's maternal grandparents, Desmond and Molly MacCarthy. The book won the Duff Cooper Prize and the Marsh Biography Award.

The Cecils' next book, *Imperial Marriage* (2002), concerned the ill-starred union between Lord Edward Cecil, third son of the Prime Minister, and Violet Maxse, descended from the Earls of Berkeley.

The Cecils' last work together was the first fully illustrated biography of the artist Rex Whistler, who had been a close friend of Hugh's father; Hugh Cecil had lectured on Whistler at Chelsea Hospital.

Subsequently he and Mirabel published *In Search of Rex Whistler: His Life and Work* (2012), followed by *Rex Whistler: Inspirations* (2015), and a facsimile edition of *Anthology of Mine* (2015).

These beautifully produced and critically acclaimed books, together with an exhibition of little-known work by Whistler, which the Cecils helped to organise at Colefax and Fowler in London, did much to restore the artist's reputation, which had become somewhat eclipsed by contemporaries such as Eric Ravilious.

Cecil was an accomplished and entertaining book reviewer, especially in *The Spectator*. In assessing Anthony Seldon's and David Walsh's *Public Schools and the Great War* (2013), he took issue with the cliché that these institutions had unfailingly produced superb – or even competent – officers. In 2019 Cecil appeared in the *Fake or Fortune* television series, in which a portrait of his 18th century relation Peniston Lamb, previously thought to be painted by Maria Cosway, was identified as the work of Thomas Lawrence.

In his last years Cecil was afflicted by a rare and horrible illness, progressive supranuclear palsy, which gradually deprived him of movement and affected his speech. To the end, he was supported by Mirabel and their two sons and two daughters.

Hugh Cecil, born December 29 1941, died March 11 2020