Persuasion vs. Deception
The Connotative Shifts of ‘Propaganda’ and their Critical Implications

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Randal Marlin (2013: 4), in his recent survey of the history of propaganda, acknowledges that there is now ‘a strong association between the word “propaganda” and the ideas of lying and deception’. This has not always been the case; propaganda found its beginnings as both a practice and a word in rhetorical (and often quite honest) efforts to persuade other parties of a position they might not currently hold. Now, however, the association of propaganda with lying has become firmly entrenched – so much so that ‘the word carries the taint of bloodshed’ (Kingsbury 2010: 13) or at the very least a hint of infamy. While these two connotative poles allow for little hope of reconciliation, it is worth considering how such a transition of associations came to be in the first place. Some of the blame must fall upon the role of propaganda on the home front both during and after the First World War.

Chief among the enduring tropes of home front existence during the war is the notion of inhabiting a propagandized community – that is, of a community in which the state uses various means, of varying breadth and severity, to influence public opinion, and in which these means are used upon what Arthur Ponsonby, in his influential anti-propaganda tract *Falsehood in War-Time*, has called the ‘regimented public’ (Ponsonby 1928: 38). This serves in part to necessitate that we speak of ‘a home front’ rather than simply of ‘home’; the home front is a civilian space in a military shadow, and both language and experience jointly reflect this. This experience and its effects have been overwhelmingly remembered as negative, and Trudi Tate’s articulation of it in *Modernism, History and the First World War* may be taken as exemplary: ‘In Britain, almost no one who was touched by the Great War had any reliable information about it. Casualty figures were misrepresented; defeats were presented as victories; atrocity stories were
invented; accounts of real suffering were censored; opposition to the war was suppressed’ (Tate 1998: 43).

This catalogued oppression of a truth-starved public by a deceiving establishment does not adequately encompass the wide degree of complexity and even reciprocity involved in the propagandizing of an entire nation; indeed, as Heather Jones (2013: 870) has provocatively put it, ‘civilians were more complicit and less coerced in waging the war than previously thought. They were not just keeping the home fires burning; they were setting Europe ablaze.’ The view articulated by Tate and others attributes to the perpetrators seemingly omnipotent ability and illimitable bad faith even as it echoes, with Ponsonby, a conviction that the general public is best understood as ‘poor ignorant people’ who have long been prevented by official machinations from ‘realizing the true meaning of war’ (Ponsonby 1928: 26). It seems difficult to take either of these evaluations as comprehensive.

While ‘propaganda’ and ‘lies’ have now become largely synonymous in common parlance, the people employed by organizations like the British War Propaganda Bureau would perhaps have been surprised to see their work subsequently tarred with such a broad brush. They often viewed it instead, as a post-war report of 1918 from the bureau attests, as an effort to acquaint the world with ‘the soul that lurks in the statistics’ (quoted in Marlin 2013: 60). This should hardly be surprising; as the sociologist and propaganda theorist Jacques Ellul (1965: 52) has rightly noted, the incorporation of truth into propaganda – or indeed the total foundation of a propaganda work upon accurate facts – can be the most persuasive approach of all.

This chapter, then, examines how the widespread connotative shifting of the term ‘propaganda’ from persuasion to deception has complicated the study of the war’s British propaganda.¹ By viewing through a lens of falsehood a field of work that has not always been false in either intention or result, many critical texts about the war’s art and history evaluate its propaganda from a position of moral condemnation rather than of analytical detachment, cast British propaganda writers as foils to truth-telling poets and memoirists and end up occluding from popular memory certain important historical details about the war. An examination of this tension will form the most substantive part of the chapter, with literary and other examples being used as case studies to show the ways in which a connotative understanding of acceptable persuasion has given way to one of unacceptable falsehood.

A working definition of ‘propaganda’ is necessary before proceeding further, but in attempting to develop one there are two problems with which