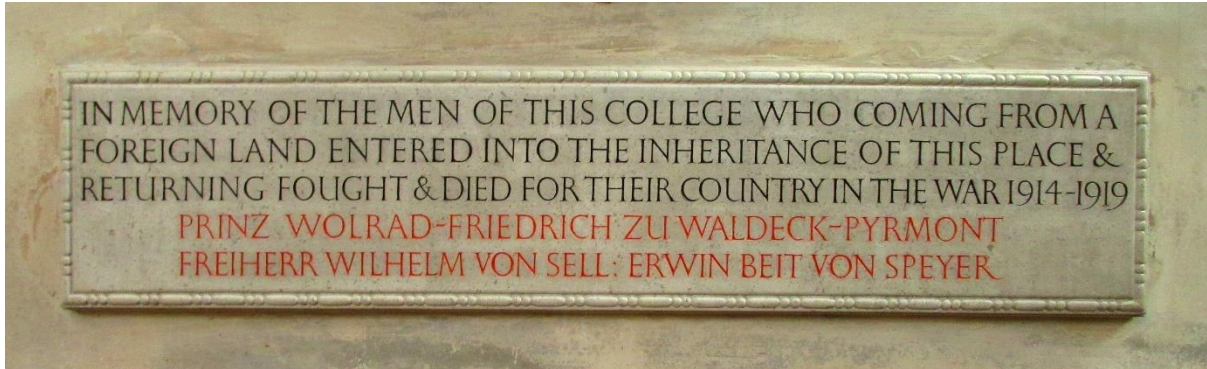


The German War Memorial in New College Chapel¹

Members of New College will have seen and been struck by one of the smaller, but most arresting, fixtures in the chapel: the memorial to three German undergraduates who died in the First World War. Beyond the usual power of any war memorial, especially one so simply and beautifully designed, this tablet is especially evocative in its willingness to commemorate men on the opposite side of such an acrimonious pan-European conflict.



Monument to New College German War Dead in the Ante-Chapel of New College, Oxford
All New College images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

As wartime lists of fallen Oxford undergraduates proliferated and grew, the first ‘memorial’ to the German alumni of New College was the small but courageous—and possibly unique—decision by Warden Spooner to include their names on the ‘pro patria’ list posted on the chapel door and regularly updated. This did not pass without comment; in June 1915 a visiting American challenged the verger on the list and was told that they were ‘very nice fellows too, “especially that one; I knew him well”’, and that ‘well, they died for *their* country, didn’t they?’ The American wrote from the Ritz to the editor of the *Morning Post* to call the inclusion of their names ‘a strange perversion of tolerance’, adding that he had seen wounded soldiers in the college gardens ‘merely because the deliberate attempt to kill them made by the comrades of those Germans named in the College Roll of Honour had slightly miscarried’.² Others disagreed, and a considerable debate developed.³ An anonymous member of college asked ‘do not those three dead Germans need our prayers more rather than less if we believe that they died fighting for a wrong and mistaken cause?’. A Bernard Holland wrote asking whether the American believed that ‘English youths are right to die for their country, but Germans are wrong to die for theirs?’⁴

The debate continued in terms of Christianity and forgiveness on one side and patriotism, British deaths, and the wrongness of the German cause on the other, the American adding that ‘bitterness, anger, are terrible qualities; they make for a tremendous fighting force, however’, and he was supported by a member of St. James’s Club, writing that as the Kaiser’s banner had been torn down at Windsor, ‘we should not commemorate elsewhere the deaths of lesser Huns’. Interestingly, one contributor mentioned disapprovingly that the Prebendary of a London church, himself a New College alumnus, included ‘German Uhlans’ in his intercessory prayers.⁵ The

¹ With thanks to Dr Christopher Skelton-Foord, Librarian, New College, Oxford, George Freiherr von Marchwalden, University of St Andrews, and especially to Jennifer Thorp, formerly Archivist, New College, Oxford.

² *Morning Post* 44,634 (8 June 1915).

³ I am very grateful to Keith Butcher’s article for bringing this media debate to my attention, fascinating as a study of wartime attitudes and martial cultures as well as in connection with New College: Keith Butcher, ‘The German War Memorial’, *New College Record* (1995), 25–7.

⁴ *Morning Post* 44,635 (9 June 1915).

⁵ *Morning Post* 44,636 (10 June 1915).

mother of an Oxford man ‘who has been at the front just over seven months’ called the list ‘this crowing insult to our beloved, heroic dead by New College!’, in response to which the mother of a serving New College undergraduate argued that ‘I regard every living German as a possible danger to our nation. But at the mouth of the grave I would let enmity cease’.⁶ Members of New College contributed, both for and against the German names.⁷ One of the most moving letters in support of the list was from a member of Keble, arguing that those unable to understand the inclusion of the German names will certainly never understand why our Public Schools and Universities have sent out so many thousands of young men to fight’, though another letter from St James’s ominously warned that ‘in my day at Oxford the undergraduates, both of New and the other colleges, would have adopted drastic measures with the cranks at New. But I suppose most of them are now at the front’.⁸ Spooner himself responded that ‘the Germans had done no disgraceful act in fighting for their own country’, adding that one had ‘died in the act of carrying a wounded comrade’—probably referring to Prince Wolrad, the first name on the memorial. He continued that ‘to carry on a spirit of hate against those who passed into another world can make us neither better patriots nor better men’.⁹

In the years after the war, permanent memorials to fallen Oxford students sprang up, including the striking 1921 New College roll of honour on the south wall of the chapel, containing 228 names, but with those who had died for the Central Powers conspicuously absent.¹⁰ In January 1930, Ernest Barker and H. W. B. Joseph suggested the creation of a German tablet for the college, modelled on the main memorial. The names were supplied by Freiherr Waldenar von Mohl, alumnus of New College and Rhodes scholar, who added to Joseph that the idea ‘is regarded by all of us as an act of very great kindness and as a true example of the spirit of Oxford’ which would be ‘appreciated not only by the families of those three, but throughout Germany. Thank you very, very much’.¹¹ The memorial was designed and situated on a visit to the college on the 17 March by Charles Holden for ‘20 guineas plus expenses’, and in April the college contracted Eric Gill, the designer of the main memorial as well as other significant war memorials, such as that of Rupert Brooke at Rugby, for £40 ‘plus carriage and fixing’.¹² By September it was in place, and the college commissioned printed photographs to send to von Mohl and the families of the men memorialised.¹³ In 1941, a lieutenant of the Canadian Army on leave in Oxford visited the chapel and wrote to *Life Magazine* with a transcription of the memorial, offering it as a ‘quiet manifestation of what I have found to be a typical English characteristic’.¹⁴

THE STUDENTS

By the time the three men on the memorial arrived at Oxford, the university had a vibrant and growing German community that no one could have predicted would vanish a few years later. Thriving Anglo-German intellectual relations and similar cultures of upper-class rites of passage—albeit with much less permissive attitudes to duelling or to female relations than at Heidelberg—meant that in the academic year 1911–12, forty-three Germans matriculated at Oxford, while by

⁶ *Morning Post* 44,638 (12 June 1915); *Morning Post* 44,641 (15 June 1915).

⁷ *Morning Post* 44,645 (19 June 1915); *Morning Post* 44,648 (22 June 1915).

⁸ *Morning Post* 44,640 (14 June 1915); *Morning Post* 44,641 (15 June 1915).

⁹ Jennifer Thorp, ‘The College at War’, in *New College*, ed. Christopher Tyerman (London: Third Millennium Publishing, 2010), pp. 114–25, at p. 117, and Butcher, ‘German War Memorial’.

¹⁰ Francis W. Steer, ‘Memorials at New College’, in *New College Oxford 1379–1979*, ed. John Buxton and Penry Williams (Oxford: Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, 1979), pp. 346–59, at p. 351.

¹¹ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 3195: von Mohl to Joseph (15 February 1930).

¹² NCA 3195: Holden to Joseph (3 March 1930); NCA 3195: Holden to Joseph (15 April 1930).

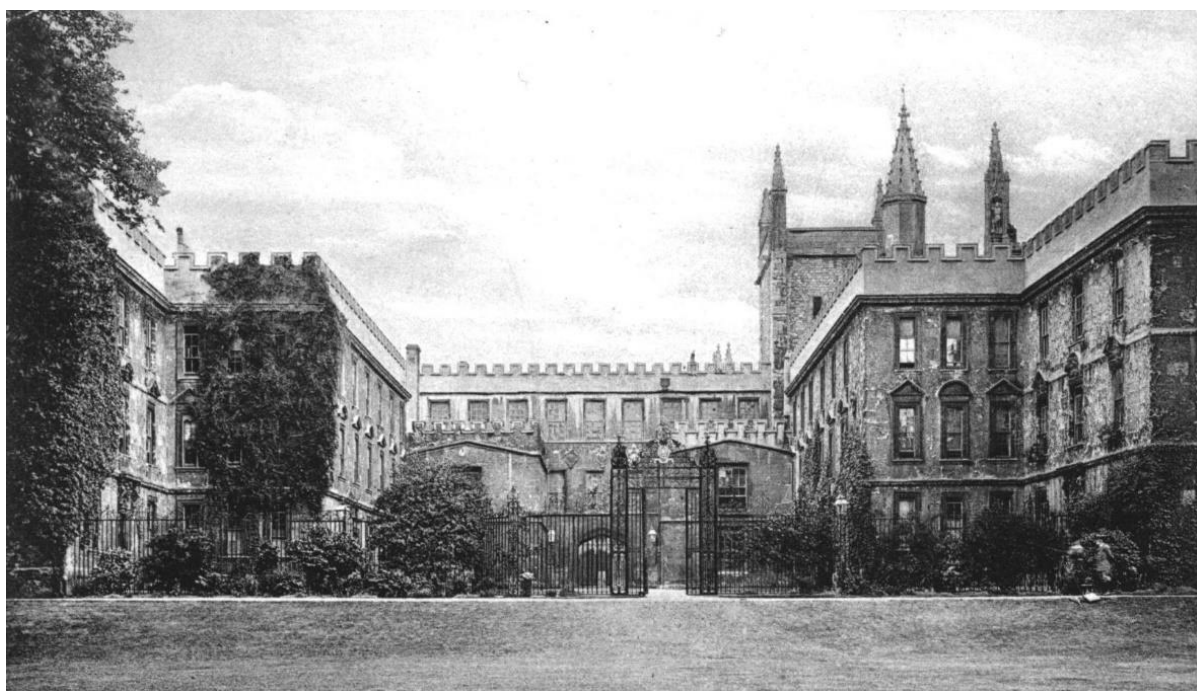
¹³ NCA 3195: John Johnson (OUP) to Joseph (19 September 1930).

¹⁴ *Life Magazine* (14 June 1941).

1913 there were twenty-two matriculated British men at Heidelberg.¹⁵ The Rhodes Trust allocated two-year scholarships to German candidates chosen at least nominally by the Kaiser, while undergraduate clubs such as the Anglo-German Club and the German Literary Society were founded.

The Oxford and the college that these men would have known would in some ways have been very different. As one commentator put it, some students ‘studied; others studied and played, many simply played’.¹⁶ Socially and politically, the university was a very different place; in February 1908 the Union moved on the issue of Oxford educating ‘the democracy’, an idea criticised stridently by one New College member—partially on the grounds that ‘dons supported the scheme, and dons were always wrong’.¹⁷

College life would perhaps have been more relaxed and less academically intense for many students of 1912 than 2022, especially German aristocrats—allegedly, builders regularly turned up at the gate every Monday to repair the damage from the weekend’s exuberance.¹⁸ Other parts of Oxford life were more familiar to the modern mind: one undergraduate poem lamented how ‘Last night Bridge kept me up past One / My essay’s still unfinished’, concluding ‘I’m in hot water every day; / it can’t get any hotter’. As the photographs below show, New College was—at least physically—the same, and the quiet and calmness of the gardens and cloisters today (‘Emerald set in grey / Uneclipsed, unworn, unseen’, as one 1910 observer put it) would have been instantly recognisable to the students of the early 1910s, including these men.¹⁹



The Garden Quad, c. 1910
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA LIB/J 21/2

¹⁵ Thomas Weber, *Our Friend “The Enemy”*: *Elite Education in Britain and Germany Before World War I* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 68.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *The Oxford Magazine* 27 (13) (18 February 1909), 205.

¹⁸ A. H. Smith, *New College, Oxford, and its Buildings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 145.

¹⁹ *Oxford Magazine* 29 (5) (17 November 1910), 78.



Front Quad, c. 1910
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA LIB/J 17/7

PRINCE WOLRAD-FRIEDRICH ZU WALDECK-PYRMONT

His Serene Highness Prince Wolrad Friedrich Adolf Wilhelm Albert zu Waldeck-Pyrmont was born on 26 June 1892 into the princely family ruling Waldeck, a small German principality of 1,121 square kilometres and under 60,000 inhabitants.²⁰ He grew up at the beautiful ancestral palace in Arolsen, the capital of the principality, and was educated at Kassel Gymnasium, the *alma mater* of Wilhelm II, along with spells at Grenoble, Oxford, and Heidelberg.²¹ He was remembered as a headstrong but pious child, who was fond of singing the *Morgenlied*, including its final poignant verse: ‘I wish to fight hard, and if I die, then a good horseman dies’.²²

Prince Wolrad arrived in Oxford at the age of seventeen years and nine months, and only spent Easter and Trinity term 1910 here, and was a member of New College, though it is not clear that he formally matriculated. In this regard, he was likely following the ‘summer university’ trend of the Wilhelmine ruling elite spending a single semester at Heidelberg.²³ No evidence survives of what he studied—or if he studied—and like the other two men on the memorial, he does not seem to have ever taken any examinations, something that cannot have improved the reputation

²⁰ *Almanach de Gotha: annuaire généalogique, diplomatique et statistique, 1910* (Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1910), 527.

²¹ NCA 3195, ‘German and Austrian Old Members of the College’.

²² New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Waldeck-Pyrmont, *Gedächtnisrede am Sarge des bei Lille gefallenen Prinzen Wolrad und Pyrmont*.

²³ Weber, *Our Friend*, p. 31.

of Germans at Oxford as unscholarly aristocrats.²⁴ While in Oxford he lived out of college, at 4 St Margaret's Road in north Oxford; it is tempting to imagine he socialised with three non-collegiate 'vons' who lived together nearby at 21 Bardwell Road.²⁵ In April–May he stayed with his half-sister, the Duchess of Albany, and attended a wedding in Christ Church cathedral with her.²⁶

Prince Wolrad was the only child of the second marriage of his father, Georg Viktor, Prince of Waldeck-Pyrmont, to Princess Louise of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, making him a junior member of the intricate network of royal bloodlines that underpinned pre-war Europe.²⁷ On the morning of 18 May 1910, Prince Wolrad arrived at Victoria station from the continent to attend the funeral of King Edward VII, along with his brother Friedrich, the reigning prince, and attended a dinner at Buckingham Palace with his fellow 'sovereigns, princes and representatives'.²⁸ The next day he joined a spectacular procession of fifty kings and princes in the King's funerary cortege, few of whom could have imagined that no such display of European royalty would ever take place again. Other Oxford men were present, with the 'soldiers' of the Oxford University Officers' Training Corps providing the guard of honour, and one described the 'wonderful company of monarchs and princes' as 'a sight probably without parallel in history', mentioning that the corps were looked over by the 'eagle eye of the Kaiser' in Windsor Chapel.²⁹ One of the greatest accounts of the outbreak of war would later see the funeral as epitomising how 'the sun of the old world was setting in a dying blaze of splendour never to be seen again'.³⁰ Prince Wolrad rode in the final rank of the royal procession, next to Prince Leopold of Coburg and six ranks behind his brother, who shortly afterwards left London in the company of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand.³¹

Unlike most Oxford students who met their deaths in autumn 1914, Prince Wolrad was a career officer. As befitted a man of his background, in 1913 he joined the cavalry as a regular, commissioning into the 23rd (1st Grand-Ducal Hessian) Dragoon Guards at Darmstadt, whose regular officer complement included another prince, and only two non-noblemen.³² Since the age of fifteen he had held a presumably ceremonial position as a staff officer in the 83rd Infantry Regiment, whose third battalion was based in the Waldeck family seat of Arolsen with the ruling prince as its colonel-in-chief.³³ When the German army mobilised in summer 1914, Prince Wolrad deployed with the 23rd. Through August and early September, the Kaiser's army attacked through France in a series of chaotic, horrendously violent engagements until it was eventually checked at the Battle of the Marne. By 12 September, they had lost 350,000 men.³⁴ German cavalry regiments served as reconnaissance and harassing units in close proximity to the enemy, and as a mounted officer in an war of machine guns and rapid-firing rifles Prince Wolrad would have been horribly vulnerable. His mother later received a letter telling how he had a horse shot from under him and, trapped in a ditch, gave his helmet to another soldier.³⁵

He saw action at several fierce sectors of the German advance, including the Vosges, the Meuse, and the Marne, and reportedly wrote sadly to his family of witnessing mutually cruel

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 72.; New College Archives, Oxford, NCA ADM/R1, 'College Admissions Register 1871–1921', pp. 283, 301.

²⁵ *Oxford Magazine*, Easter & Trinity terms 1910 Alphabetical List, 24.

²⁶ *Truth* 67 (1,740) (4 May 1910), 1130; *Swindon Advertiser* (27 April 1910), 3.

²⁷ *Almanach de Gotha* (1910), 102.

²⁸ *The Times* (18 May 1910), 10; *The Times* (21 May 1910), 5.

²⁹ *Oxford Magazine* 28 (21) (26 May 1910), 345.

³⁰ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (London: Robinson, 2000).

³¹ *The Times* (21 May 1910), 5.

³² *Rangliste der Königlich Preussischen Armee und des XIII. Königlich Württembergischen Armeekorps für 1914* (Berlin: Mittler, 1914), pp. 384–5.

³³ *ibid.*, pp. 253–4.

³⁴ David Stone, *The Kaiser's Army: The German Army in World War One* (London: Conway, 2015), p. 224.

³⁵ Butcher, 'German War Memorial'.

conduct between the two sides, including the execution of wounded French prisoners.³⁶ In mid-autumn, the German Fourth and Sixth Armies, including the 25th Brigade of the 3rd Cavalry division—the wartime parent formations of the 23rd Dragoons—attacked the strategic town of Ypres.³⁷ It was likely in a probing operation preparing for the offensive that three days beforehand, on 17 October 1914, Prince Wolrad was killed outside Moorslede, apparently while trying to rescue his orderly.³⁸ He was twenty-two. The ensuing German offensive was notable for including a significant proportion of wartime volunteers on both sides: five days later, the nearby town of Langemarck would witness the infamous slaughter of the German students who had joined the army in the wave of patriotism at the outbreak of war.

Prince Wolrad's memorial service was conducted at the Neues Schloss in Arolsen on the 26 October 1914, to a German version of the Daniel Webster Whittle hymn, 'I know whom I have believed'.³⁹ King George V reportedly telegraphed to express condolences.⁴⁰ In his address to the princely family, the Waldeck court chaplain reassured the mourners that 'our Prince fell in the line of duty, and this was a beautiful death', and promised that his sacrifice would remain a credit to his house, comparing his death with that of his great-grandfather, killed in the Napoleonic Wars almost exactly a century earlier.⁴¹ By late 1915, ten members of German princely families had been killed in the war.⁴² In the collapse of the German monarchies in November 1918, Prince Wolrad's hereditary realm became the 'Free State of Waldeck'. In 1929 it was amalgamated into the State of Prussia, a *Times* journalist describing it as having once had the 'splendour of a miniature court'.⁴³



A young Prince Wolrad with his mother
Black and white photograph, ARV708049
© Arkivi UG All Rights Reserved / Bridgeman Images

³⁶ *New York Times* 'Current History' 3 (3) (1 December 1915).

³⁷ Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army, 1914–1918: Organisation, Structures, Orders of Battle* (Solihull: Helion, 2002), p. 301; John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), pp.142–3.

³⁸ *New York Times* 'Current History' 3 (3) (1 December 1915).

³⁹ NCA JCR/R/Waldeck-Pymont, *Gedächtnisrede am Sarge . . . Prinzen Wolrad*.

⁴⁰ Butcher, 'German War Memorial'.

⁴¹ NCA JCR/R/Waldeck-Pymont, *Gedächtnisrede am Sarge . . . Prinzen Wolrad*.

⁴² *New York Times* 'Current History' 2 (6) (1 September 1915).

⁴³ *The Times* (1 April 1929), 9.



Prince Wolrad in uniform as a lieutenant of the 23rd Dragoons⁴⁴
Black and white photograph, ARV704917
© Arkivi UG All Rights Reserved / Bridgeman Images

Another poignant memorial to Prince Wolrad, of a quite different kind, are copies of eight poems of his which Princess Cecilie of Waldeck and Pyrmont kindly donated in 1995 to the college archives.⁴⁵ All are fluent and effective verse, and each poem exerts a charm, but ‘Am Meeresstrand’ (‘At the Seashore’) captures something of the idea of battle—with its *Sturm und Drang* quality—and a transcription and translation of it are set out in the Appendix to this article.

⁴⁴ The neck decoration is the lowest grade of the dynastic Order of Merit of Waldeck, cf. D. G. Neville, *Medal Ribbons & Orders of Imperial Germany & Austria* (St. Ives: Balfour Publications, 1974).

⁴⁵ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Waldeck-Pyrmont, *Gedichte von Wolrad zu Waldeck und Pyrmont*.

FREIHERR WILHELM VON SELL

Freiherr Wilhelm von Sell was born in Torgau on 12 October 1887 to a baronial military family of Potsdam. His father was a decorated career officer, Major Freiherr Wilhelm von Sell, then stationed in Torgau with the 72nd (4th Thuringian) Infantry Regiment.⁴⁶ He was educated at the Queen Victoria Gymnasium in Potsdam.⁴⁷

Wilhelm matriculated at Oxford for Michaelmas term 1906 and enrolled as a commoner at New College.⁴⁸ He was one of the first generations of German Rhodes scholars, and was also memorialised on the Rhodes House memorial. He does not appear to have taken any exams, but he remained here and resident in college for three years, having left by November 1909, and he remained listed as a member of the university until 1915.⁴⁹ Wilhelm's main interest appears to have been the river, rowing with the boat club until May 1909. In February 1908 he rowed in the 2nd boat in Torpids in very poor weather, weighing 10 stone and 10 pounds.⁵⁰ In May he rowed in the 2nd boat in Eights Week; the college was described as a 'dark horse' but in the event, 'New College II disappointed the hopes formed of them', an Old Blue writing to bemoan how the year's rowing in general had been 'depressing in the extreme. It was not like a *race* at all'. In February 1909 Wilhelm again rowed in the Torpids—though New College's training had been hampered by unspecified illness and the *Isis* called them 'disappointing', the *Magazine* was more optimistic of their chances than the new Christ Church III and IV, of whom 'so many jokes have been perpetrated . . . that we dare not criticize them further'.⁵¹ In May he rowed in the Eights, and his boat was described as making a 'good effort'.⁵² It is tempting to speculate that he attended Henley in 1909.

After Oxford Wilhelm reportedly spent a year studying law and political science at Marburg, before entering the Prussian civil service and undergoing national service.⁵³ In 1910, a press controversy was initiated by an article by an Oxonian in the *Daily Mail* complaining of the wasting of Rhodes scholarships on German aristocrats 'who came to Oxford to amuse himself, to hunt and play polo' and not to study, in response to which Wilhelm wrote a letter to *Der Tag* (Berlin) ascribing it to the *Mai's* underlying Germanophobia.⁵⁴ On the outbreak of war, he was commissioned as a lieutenant of the reserve, joining the 3rd 'von Zieten' (Brandenburg) Hussar regiment, possibly the regiment of his peacetime service—though he does not appear on a reserve rank list—and whose ceremonial colonel-in-chief was ironically a member of the British royal family.⁵⁵ On mobilisation, the 3rd functioned as the divisional cavalry of the 6th Division, which until suffering sixty per cent losses at Verdun in 1916 was reputed one of the best in the army. They entered Belgium on 4 August as part of the First Army, and the division's reservists, possibly including Wilhelm, arrived shortly afterwards. He would have seen action at Mons and Framiers, and on 4 September the division arrived at Petit-Morin. On 5 September Wilhelm was wounded and as the division retreated the next day, he was presumably captured by the French.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ *Rang- und Quartier-Liste der Königlich Preussischen Armee für 1887* (Berlin: Mittler, 1887), p. 205.

⁴⁷ ADM/R1, 'College Admissions Register 1871–1921'.

⁴⁸ *Oxford University Calendar 1907* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 281.

⁴⁹ *Oxford Magazine*, Hilary term 1908 Out-College Residents; *Oxford University Calendar 1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), p. 334.; *Oxford University Calendar 1915* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 676

⁵⁰ *Oxford Magazine* 26 (14) (27 February 1908), 230; *Oxford Magazine* 26 (21) (28 May 1908), 345; New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/P2/1, Boat Club Training Book.

⁵¹ *Oxford Magazine* 27 (13) (18 February 1909), supplement; *The Isis* 404 (13 February 1909), 217.

⁵² *Oxford Magazine* 27 (21) (27 May 1909), 332.

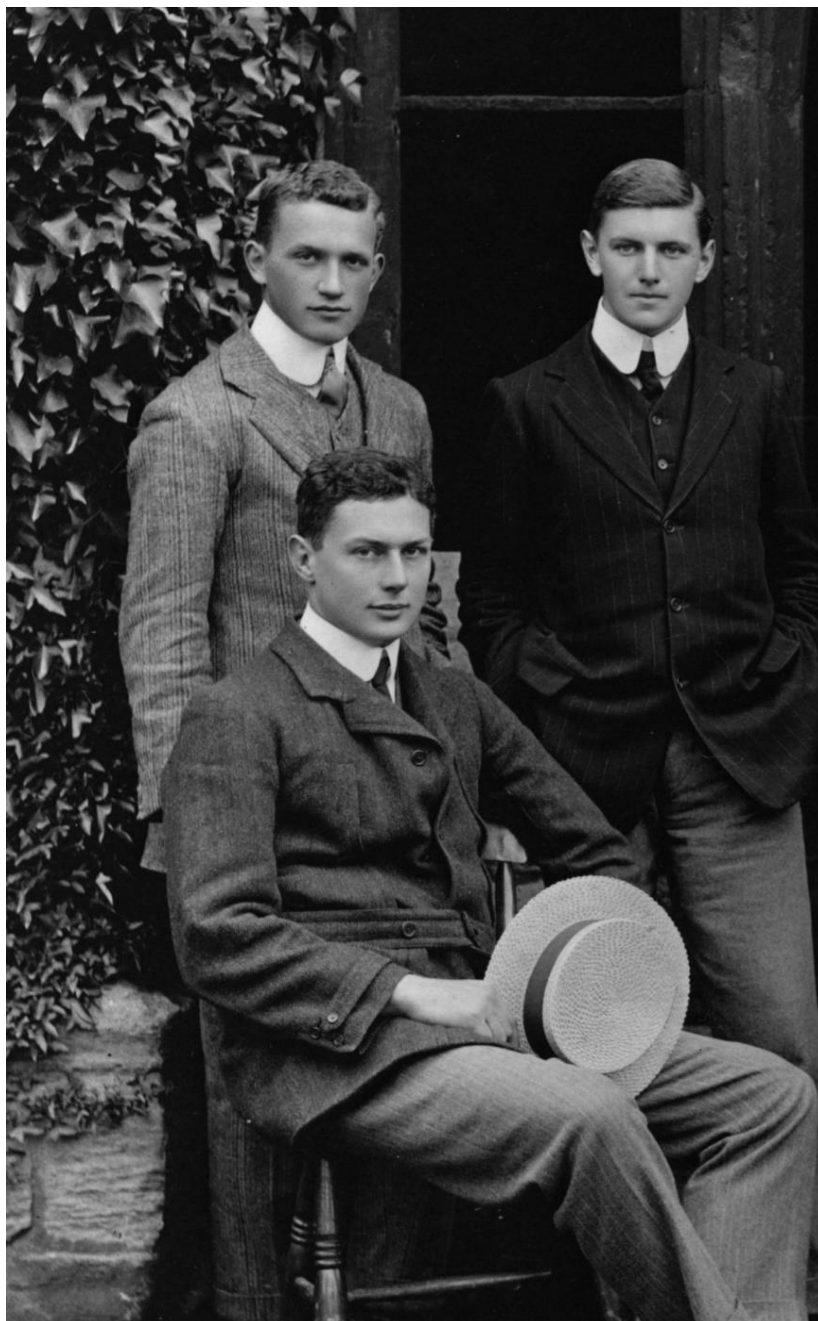
⁵³ Butcher, 'German War Memorial'.

⁵⁴ *Daily Mail* (20 October 1910), 6; Weber, *Our Friend*, p. 72.

⁵⁵ *Rangliste der Königlich Preussischen Armee . . . für 1914*, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Office of the Adjutant General, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army which Participated in the War (1914–1918)* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 6th Division entry.

Wilhelm was apparently taken to the French naval hospital at Rochefort sur Mer, where he died of his wounds on 19 November, and was buried in a nearby communal German cemetery.⁵⁷ He was twenty-seven. His name appears on a family memorial in Potsdam, also listing Adolf von Sell, an officer of the 5th Naval Infantry Regiment, killed at Ypres in 1915, and Fritz von Sell, lost on the SMS Breslau in the Dardanelles in 1918.⁵⁸ In 1930, a photograph of the Rhodes memorial panel with Wilhelm's name was sent to the von Sell family house on Bismarskstrasse, Potsdam, where his mother still lived.⁵⁹



Wilhelm, standing left, with two other boat club members
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/P5/4, f. 30

⁵⁷ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/von Sell, *Cimetière Communal* German list.

⁵⁸ Monument to Freiherr Wilhelm von Sell: <<https://billiongraves.com/grave/Wilhelm-von-Sell/12135668>> (Accessed: 21 May 2022).

⁵⁹ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 3195, Secretary of Rhodes Trustees to Joseph (5 October 1930).

ERWIN BEIT VON SPEYER

Erwin Eduard Beit von Speyer was born on 8 September 1893 to Eduard Beit and Hannah Louise Speyer. He was a junior member of the Speyer family, a cosmopolitan German Jewish banking family, along with the equally influential Beit family—who gave their name to Beitbridge in modern-day Zimbabwe. Eduard was a Prussian banker and holder of a variety of local honorary posts, and Erwin was brought up at the family's townhouse in Frankfurt and educated at the Goethe Gymnasium there.⁶⁰

In January 1912, Erwin's father was named British Consul General by the Foreign Office.⁶¹ It was perhaps in this context, as well as the family's broader English connections, that Erwin matriculated as a member of the university and of New College in April 1912, and appears to have stayed until Hilary term 1913.⁶² To an even greater extent than the other two men, evidence of his time in Oxford has proved elusive, though he lived in college, and like most German students of the time, his name is conspicuously absent from contributions to the Union or other student societies.⁶³

Like men of his background across Europe in July 1914, Erwin would no doubt have shared the experience of debating the likelihood of war, while panic-buying field-glasses and map cases and watching how 'the world suddenly seemed to become a different place . . . wherever one looked, endless streams of men in the streets'.⁶⁴ At some point, Erwin joined the army—almost certainly as a volunteer on the outbreak of war, rather than a national serviceman. Detailed information on his service has proved elusive but he reportedly served as a non-commissioned officer of the 'seventh dragoons', almost certainly the 7th (Westphalian) Dragoon Regiment, not a reserve regiment of the same number. The 7th was detached from its peacetime formation on mobilisation and assigned to the 42nd division, which crossed the Lorraine frontier in August under the army command of Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, and by 24 August one of the division's infantry regiments had been reduced from 3,500 to 1,500 men; it is likely Erwin's dragoon regiment would have similarly suffered.⁶⁵ On 18 September the division was entrained and sent north to Cambrai, the southern edge of the hotly contested sector along the Somme in the 'Race to the Sea' that would precede the hardening of trench warfare by the end of 1914. They were on the Somme on 24 September and it was near there ('Western Arras' according to his monument) that Erwin was killed.⁶⁶ He was twenty-one. A memorial was erected to him in his home of Frankfurt. Erwin's brother, Herbert Beit von Speyer, was wounded and disabled, leaving no one to take over the family business.⁶⁷

The Speyers—who had recently been ennobled as 'vons'—were remarkably international: Erwin's uncle, Sir Edgar Speyer, was a prominent British privy councillor and musical patron whose main legacy was the 'Promenade Concerts', or 'proms', as well as funding Scott's polar expedition.⁶⁸ After the outbreak of war he was instructed by his London club to resign, only to find his resignation refused when he did.⁶⁹ Hannah Louise, Erwin's mother, became fanatically

⁶⁰ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Beit von Speyer, *Geschichte der Familie des Kommerzienrates Eduard Beit von Speyer* . . . (1936); ADM/R1 'College Admissions Register 1871–1921'.

⁶¹ Butcher, 'German War Memorial'.

⁶² *Oxford University Calendar 1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 347.

⁶³ *Oxford Magazine* Michaelmas term 1912 Alphabetical List, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Walter Bloem, *The Advance from Mons, 1914*, trans. German G. C. Wynne (London: P. Davies, 1930), p. 6.

⁶⁵ cf D. B. Nash, *Imperial German Army Handbook, 1914–1918* (London: I. Allen, 1980), p. 40, and Office of the Adjutant General, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions*, 42nd Division entry.

⁶⁶ Monument to Erwin Eduard Beit von Speyer: <<https://billiongraves.com/grave/Erwin-Eduard-Beit-Von-Speyer/27063135>> (Accessed: 21 May 2022).

⁶⁷ George W. Liebmann, *The Fall of the House of Speyer: The Story of a Banking Dynasty* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 164–5.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 23, 21.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 55.

anti-British after Erwin's death, covering her house with bunting after the British disaster at Gallipoli. 'Heartbroken at the death of her son', she died in 1918 at the age of forty-eight.⁷⁰ Erwin's father died shortly before Hitler came to power, and the family emigrated to Switzerland.⁷¹ However, he lived long enough to hear of the memorialisation of his son at college, and in October 1930 wrote to describe his 'great satisfaction' on seeing a photograph of 'that dignified memorial tablet which contains also the name of my son'. He added his hopes that 'such and similar actions' will 'contribute to foster a better understanding between the two nations and will thereby gradually restore the old harmony that has existed between them all through the nineteenth century'.⁷²

CONCLUSION

In Trinity term 1914, occasional hints of impending war appeared, in Union debates and magazine articles, but in the final weeks of the academic year there remained no real sense of the oncoming catastrophe. Though attempts have been made to trace pre-war hostility between British and German young men, the most thorough academic study of Anglo-German relations at Oxford and Heidelberg has found little evidence of mutual antagonism or the fabled Prussian militarism.⁷³ As the university broke up for the summer, Germans at Oxford toasted the 'elective affinity between German *Geist* and Oxonian *Kultur*' and a visit by the German ambassador was welcomed as 'a tribute . . . to German *Wissenschaft* and to the German nation'.⁷⁴ With the outbreak of war, almost all of this 'affinity' vanished. British and imperial students at Oxford, like their German counterparts, volunteered in 'staggering' numbers, as the main college war memorial demonstrates.⁷⁵ By June 1915, over 750 New College men had enrolled, and the college was turned into a military camp and hospital. Germans who remained in Britain or her territories—like Freiherr Leopold von Plessen, student of New College—were interned for the duration while the *Oxford Magazine's* union debate reviews and light verse turned to war obituaries and patriotic ballads.⁷⁶ One poem imagined welcoming back undergraduates after the war, to 'the streets they saved from the Zeppelin, / The Schools they freed from a strange *Kultur*'.⁷⁷

Yet many Germans retained fond memories of their time at Oxford. One Canadian Expeditionary Force captain told a story of having been scouting in no-man's-land and running into a German sniper, who ordered him to put his hands up and told the captain that he was 'an Oxford graduate . . . who—despite repeated requests not to be used on the British front—had been sent against us'.⁷⁸ The captain was told to turn around and count to fifty, which he did, while the German quietly left him alone. Similarly, in January 1915, the *Oxford Magazine* courageously printed a moving letter from 'Mr K. Hahn' to Lord Sandon, one of his contemporaries at pre-war Christ Church and the Anglo-German Society: 'I hesitate to write to you, knowing that all confidence between our two nations has been destroyed, and that the love of your country is the ruling passion of your life. But I cannot forget my Oxford days . . . I still regard Oxford as my *alma mater* to whom I owe more than I can say'.⁷⁹ There is no reason to doubt that Erwin, Wilhelm, or Prince Wolrad would have felt the same about Oxford or New College, and it is in this context that this most arresting of memorials—to a bygone age almost as much as to the men themselves—should be seen.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp.10, 69.

⁷¹ Butcher, 'German War Memorial'.

⁷² New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 3195, 'Joseph to E Beit von Speyer' (8 October 1930).

⁷³ Weber, *Our Friend*, p. 67 and *passim*. See *The Isis* 436 (21 May 1910), 386.

⁷⁴ Weber, *Our Friend*, pp. 228–9; *Oxford Magazine* 32 (224) (18 June 1914), 405.

⁷⁵ Weber, *Our Friend*, p. 230.

⁷⁶ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 3195, 'German and Austrian Old Members of the College'.

⁷⁷ *Oxford Magazine* 33 (9) (22 January, 1915), 143.

⁷⁸ Andy Simpson and Tom Donovan (eds.), *Voices from the Trenches: Life & Death on the Western Front* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006), pp. 266–7.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 142.

APPENDIX

Transcribed from: New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Waldeck-Pyrmont, *Gedichte von Wolrad zu Waldeck und Pyrmont.*

Am Meeresstrand

Es braust in tosendem Schwall
Der Wogen drängende Flut
Es brauset in donnerndem Halle
Das Meer in Sturmeswut.

Es stürmt um Felsen u Strudel
In unermüdlichem Drang
Der Wogen nie endendes Rudel
In brennend tosendem Sang.—

Was bist du Mensch dagegen,
Mit deiner schwachen Kraft,
Den doch auf allen Wegen
Die Sünde nimmt in Haft!

Die nie ermattenden Fluten
Soll'n dir ein Vorbild sein,
In heissen Kampfesgluten
Dir Kampfesmut verleihn.

Drum kämpfe ohne Klagen,
Wie du dereinst gelobt,
Drum darfst du nie verzagen,
Ob's um dich stürmt u tobt.

Und nimm vom Meerestrande
Dir neue Kraft mit fort,
Und spreng deine Bande
Durch Tat u nicht durchs Wort.

Und will dich noch bezwingen,
Des Kleinmuts drängende Not,
So denk der Fluten Ringen
Und kämpfe bis zum Tod.

[At the Seashore

Roaring in raging surges
The waves' urging flood
It crashes in thundering sound
The sea in fury of storm.

It storms round rocks and whirlpools
In untiringly urge
The waves' never ending pack
In burning, raging song.—

What are you, man, against it,
With your weak force,
Who on all your ways
Are imprisoned by sin!

The never tiring floods
Should be an example to you,
In the heated glow of battle
Lend you fighting courage.

Therefore fight without complaint,
As you once vowed,
That's why you should never despair,
Whether it storms and rages around you.

And take from the seashore
With you your new strength,
And burst your chains
Through deed and not through word.

And should still conquer you
Faintheartedness's pressing need,
Then think of the floods' wrestling
And fight until death.]

Elliot Jordan
Research Student
New College, Oxford