As we celebrate the centenary of August 1914, this paper seeks to explore what could be called ‘The Myth of the Great War’ through the words and actions (or inaction) of two contemporaries: the historians, biographers and essayists, George Macaulay Trevelyan and Giles Lytton Strachey. Very similar in their family background and cultural milieu – both members of the elite Cambridge Apostles Society – they were very different temperamentally, philosophically, even generationally (though Trevelyan was only four years the older). If Trevelyan in many ways was a late Victorian, Strachey saw himself as an Edwardian or even a Georgian.

Their reactions to the war, initially almost identical, were also quite different. Trevelyan rapidly became an ardent liberal warrior, actively involved in the war effort politically and diplomatically, in Serbia, the United States and Italy, before serving as the Commandant of the 1st British Red Cross Unit on the Italian Front from 1915–1918. He also contributed significantly to the propaganda war between the allies and the Central Powers. Strachey remained an ironic commentator and became a notorious conscientious objector, who sought in a variety of literary genres to make a protest against ‘a whole set of vices and weaknesses which had come to be treated as virtues’: myths (as he saw them) of social activism, religious fundamentalism, philanthropic self-sacrifice, public school conformity, patriotic duty and missionary politics, which he saw as the dominant values of the Victorian era and considered responsible for the catastrophe of 1914.

Trevelyan clearly subscribed to many of the myths of ‘The Great War for Civilization’. But what of Strachey? Was he just a de-mythologizer? Or did he propose a different myth of the war as an absurd, futile tragedy: at once a cock-up and the inevitable product of the vices of the age?

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