

WAR FEVER



WAR FEVER

Boston, Baseball, and America
in the Shadow of the Great War

**RANDY ROBERTS
AND JOHNNY SMITH**

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*For the grandfather I never knew and the father
I knew too briefly, but loved dearly.*

*Charles Henry Roberts (1897–1929),
U.S. Army, Mexican Expeditionary Force,
American Expeditionary Force,
Northern Russia Expeditionary Force*

*Clifford Edwin Roberts (1923–1963) U.S. Navy,
World War II, Pacific*

—RWR

*For me, Boston means baseball and bonding with
family. And Fenway Park will forever be the place
where my sister McKenna and I celebrated the joys of
being together. This book is for her.*

—JMS



Only the dead have seen the end of war.

—George Santayana, 1922



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Preface

IN 1918, A FEVER GRIPPED BOSTON. NOT SINCE THE REVOLUTIONARY War had a passion this hot consumed the city. It lurked palpably, appearing in various forms in every neighborhood. It was present in the half-filled classrooms and quiet streets in Cambridge, where students huddled in groups and discussed the conflict raging in France. Bostonians heard it in Symphony Hall, where careful listeners noticed a marked decline in the Boston Symphony Orchestra's performances since its German conductor, Karl Muck, had been accused of spying for Germany. And they saw it at Fenway Park, where the Red Sox honored wounded soldiers and military bands played "The Star-Spangled Banner." The draft had robbed the team of much of its hitting talent, forcing Babe Ruth, a star left-handed pitcher, to play the outfield and bat as a regular. Through it all—as the feverish crowds cheered at ballgames and decried invisible enemies—another fever, a deadly pandemic, was circling the globe, moving toward Boston.

The year created and destroyed celebrities, a process that reveals much about the values, desires, and fears of the country during the war. In *War Fever* we explore the impact of the global conflict on three men—how it changed their lives, how it gave them purpose,

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In 1917, Boston Common bustled with activity. While bands played military tunes, recruiters combed the crowds looking for potential soldiers, and signs called on citizens to “Protect America’s Women: It Is a Patriotic Duty.”

(Courtesy of the Leslie Jones Collection, Boston Public Library.)

and how it dictated their legacy. Like celebrities before and since, they were as complex and contradictory as the images they projected were elemental and flat. They were as much a product of the war as James Montgomery Flagg’s propaganda poster of Uncle Sam declaring, “I Want You for U.S. Army.”

The men we selected, each connected to Boston in some way—Charles Whittlesey, Karl Muck, and Babe Ruth—became, in 1918, the most famous war hero, war villain, and war athlete. Nearly everything they did was interpreted through the lens of the war. In that sense, they became a product of wartime propaganda, each serving a larger political purpose. Once they had been identified and cast in the Great War Production, they were all but powerless to undo it, pawns in the hands of proselytizers and the press.

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AT THE BEGINNING OF 1918, Karl Muck reigned supreme as the world-renowned maestro of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, one of the most prestigious ensembles in the United States. With an imperious manner and unshakeable confidence, the acclaimed German conductor, a friend of the Kaiser's, mesmerized wealthy elites in Boston and cities throughout the country. The year before, the Victor Talking Machine Company had recorded him and the BSO, and rushed out several 78 RPM records, including selections from Tchaikovsky and Wagner. By the spring, however, Muck's career had completely unraveled. Accused of espionage for the Imperial German government, exposed as a wanton libertine, he became a victim of the anti-German hysteria whipped up by the administration of Woodrow Wilson.¹

The Justice Department first began investigating him in October 1917, after jingoists from Providence, Rhode Island, charged that he had refused to lead the orchestra in "The Star-Spangled Banner" during a concert at Infantry Hall. Many at the time were insisting that the anthem be played at every public occasion—during military parades, before sporting events, and certainly when symphony orchestras performed. Playing or singing the anthem not only demonstrated patriotism and loyalty it expressed a war-time consensus, the "Gospel of Americanism."²

During the hysteria over German spies and saboteurs, and under the cloud of suspicion cast by Muck's supposed refusal to conduct "The Star-Spangled Banner," the BSO's performances provoked violent protests in numerous cities. Patriotic groups demanded the maestro's expulsion from the country. In the darkness of war, the BSO—with about half of its musicians from Germany and Austria—came to be seen not just as a Teutonic institution but as a threat to "100% Americanism." Muck feared the rising current of anti-German extremism. He heard rumors about violent Boston thugs rounding up his countrymen and read stories about Germans who were publicly flogged or tarred and feathered. He could imagine a day when a mob would come knocking on his door.³

The mob never showed up at his home, but in late March 1918 federal agents did. Investigators questioned his associates and fellow

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musicians, and seized his private papers. From his correspondence, they learned that his closest friends included prominent German musicians, professors, and, most notably, Germany's chief of espionage, Count Johan von Bernstorff, who had ordered attacks on American supply depots during the war. Yet they could not tie the conductor to any nefarious activity against the United States. When federal agents arrested him on March 25, the public had no idea that the government's entire case rested on "obscene" letters between Muck and his young mistress—missives that divulged his deepest secrets and desires. Armed with what the government considered incriminating evidence, US Marshals delivered him to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, an internment camp for German prisoners.

WHILE MUCK LANGUISHED BEHIND A barbed-wire fence, George Herman "Babe" Ruth, the son of a German-American saloon-keeper, gave little consideration to how he could help win the war or how it might change his life. Baseball, booze, and brothels occupied his thoughts. For the irrepressible young ballplayer, the Great War was something happening somewhere else, and it involved other people. It was therefore of little interest to him. By the time the Red Sox completed spring training in 1918, Babe had discovered the thrill he felt—and the joy he brought spectators—swinging a bat. He found a new purpose entertaining crowds of soldiers with his mighty "war club," launching baseballs into the ether. In the past, pitching well had reliably brought him applause—but hitting home runs, he found, made the crowd roar.

It was the Great War that made possible his eventual transformation from the game's dominant left-handed pitcher to the sport's greatest slugger. Ruth filled a need for both the Red Sox and America. "The Colossus" redefined the dimensions of the game, displaying a kind of awesome power that portended a new era to come, one where the home run proved integral. After 1918, he was no longer just a ballplayer. With a bat in his hand, he became a showman unlike any other in the history of the sport.

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In the context of America's deadly attacks on the Western Front, Ruth's power took on a new meaning. Where once informed spectators viewed baseball as a scientific game of slashing singles and strategic bunts, now the violent, full-bodied swings of Ruth's bat resonated with the country's glorification of unrestrained force. During the summer of 1918, as the Babe assailed American League fences, the American Expeditionary Force assaulted German positions in France. The US offensives at Cantigny, Chateau-Thierry, the Marne, and especially the Meuse-Argonne, were artless frontal attacks, depending more on deadly straightforward drives in which lives were sacrificed for inches of ground than any sort of imaginative tactical planning.

In Boston, war fever turned Fenway Park, a stadium built for the masses, into a stage for "preparedness." During the sport's first major political crisis, Major League Baseball became more than a diversion; it offered a template for Americanism. The national pastime took on a new meaning in the lives of citizens who viewed sports as critical to making good soldiers and promoting the nation's ideals. Babe Ruth and his teammates, wearing full baseball uniforms, substituted bats for rifles as they conducted military maneuvers under the instruction of a drill sergeant, a demonstration of patriotism that linked the national pastime to the country's war effort. Yet all the marching and posing was for show. Like the other owners in professional baseball, Harry Frazee understood the value of draping his squad in the American flag and did everything he could to convince the public that baseball was, in the words of columnist Hugh Fullerton, "the greatest single force for Americanization."⁴

In the summer of 1918, sportswriters hardly mentioned Ruth's German heritage. Writers, fans, and ballplayers called him "Babe" almost exclusively because "George Herman" sounded too German. During the last two years of the war, when any Teutonic-sounding name provoked suspicions of disloyalty, and the phrase "German-American" became a pejorative, "the Babe" served him well. It Americanized his last name and advertised his nonthreatening

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personality. Privately, he spoke German on occasion among friends or at his father's Baltimore saloon, but he never said anything publicly about his ancestors. Besides, he was not German-American. He was the Babe.

KARL MUCK AND BABE RUTH were the most visible personages of Boston's highbrow and popular cultures. Newspaper editors splashed their names across the city's papers, and Bostonians closely followed their exploits. Yet, it was a Harvard Law graduate who would become the most widely publicized figure of the war. Before enlisting, Charles Whittlesey, a tall, gangling, bookish lawyer hardly cast a shadow. He seemed to have an aptitude for distinction, but not an iota of interest in fame. In truth, he desired a comfortable anonymity—he had no wife and no children, just a business partner and a few friends who did not know him very well.

Whittlesey and his younger brother Elisha, an idealistic, sickly undergraduate who also studied at Harvard, heard the bugle call early and immediately fell into line. They were products of an elite New England culture and an ethos of voluntarism that echoed throughout the halls of Harvard and other Ivy League institutions. The brothers lived by a code instilled in New England's sons to believe that defending their country was not only a sacred duty but also an ennobling one. Elisha drove camion trucks on the French Soissons Front even before American troops went overseas, and Charles traveled across the Atlantic as an officer in the famed 77th "Statue of Liberty" Division, a melting pot of soldiers. In the language of the day, both men "did their part"—and then some. As the personification of the most noble ideals of the war, Charles captured the imagination of Americans when he led a strike force, dubbed the Lost Battalion, behind enemy lines and held it together against overwhelming numbers.

The "Lost Battalion"—a piece of inspired newspaper hyperbole—altered everything. A tiny part of an immense offensive became *the* story. Journalists transfigured Whittlesey into the Peter Pan of the Great War, the leader of a plucky flesh-and-blood band

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of Lost Boys—surrounded, battling against insurmountable odds, and refusing to surrender. The tale was truly compelling. Like a story about a child trapped in a well, it dripped human interest. Whittlesey's pedigree was spotless, and the fact that his second in command, millionaire George McMurtry, was a former Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider added a soupçon to the equation. It was as if overnight America decided that Whittlesey had to be saved, and though most early attempts bordered on suicidal, the rescue mission transfixed the nation.

Whittlesey and his men epitomized their country's iron resolve in the bloodiest campaign in American history. He returned to America determined to find meaning in all the bloodshed, but instead found himself locked in yet another conflict, fighting against intractable leaders and an apathetic public. The first Great War veteran to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, he became an American hero. His name and face appeared on the front page of every major newspaper in the country. He had achieved the impossible, surviving the worst hell of battle and coming out with hardly a scratch. None that you could see anyway. Hollywood wanted to sell his story. Novelists wanted to write his story. And the government wanted to use his story—and him—for its own ends. Everyone wanted something from him, some piece, something that they could hold on to and share when they talked about all the men who never came home. But Whittlesey wanted none of it. All he wanted was peace. He could not bear living the war over and over again. Not for one more day.

THIS IS THE STORY OF the disruptive forces of an epoch and a war that permanently altered Boston, America, and the lives of three public figures. In the turbulent year of 1918, Boston stood as a microcosm of America: a locus of urban strife, ethnic conflict, and fundamental, lasting change. The stories of Muck, Ruth, and Whittlesey reveal how a city and a nation confronted the havoc of a new world order, the struggle to endure the war and all its unforeseen consequences. Reading accounts from Boston's newspapers from

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that year, it's impossible to separate the war from popular culture. The citizens of Boston followed the war intently—reading stories about baseball players serving in Europe or evading the service; published accounts about accusations against the BSO's German conductor; tales about a heroic Harvard Law grad who refused to surrender in the Argonne Forest; and frightening reports about Boston's invisible enemy—the grippe—an unrelenting scourge that overwhelmed the city that summer and fall, killing thousands in the Hub and millions around the world.

The war's influence could be seen everywhere in Boston. The city became the military and naval headquarters for all of New England, and the main shipping port in the region. While workers at the Boston Navy Yard prepared war ships and cargo vessels, New England's men and women manufactured munitions, rifles, uniforms, boots, and supplies for the American and Allied armies. United in patriotism, every senator and congressman from New England voted in favor of the war, signaling the region's commitment to fighting the Germans no matter the cost.⁵

The Great War changed the lives of virtually every citizen in the Hub. Nowhere was that more evident than on the Boston Common. The vast green park became a theater of war, a battleground where anarchists, socialists, suffragists, soldiers, and sailors climbed onto soapboxes, proselytizing to crowds until their voices became hoarse. The tree-lined mall hummed with activity. One could hear the sharp notes of bugles, pounding drums, and the tramp of soldiers' boots drilling. The Salvation Army and the Knights of Columbus erected huts along Tremont Street while recruiting tents housed clean-shaven soldiers in olive drab and khaki uniforms. Conservationists planted Victory Gardens and Red Cross volunteers trolled for donations. And police patrolmen interrogated anyone who seemed suspicious, especially men with dark features who looked stereotypically German, warning the public that the Kaiser's agents had infiltrated the city's factories and shipyards.⁶

That sense of fear pervaded the city and the country. The enemy seemed everywhere—prowling in submarines off the coast of Cape Cod, arriving on passenger ships at Boston Harbor, or

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disguised as the friend of workers, lecturing men at the munitions factories, saloons, and shipyards about the injustice of a sixty-hour workweek. Like a contagion, the pro-German conspirators, spies, and union radicals hiding in plain sight had to be contained, with force if necessary. Anyone who expressed dissent or un-American opinions could find himself jailed, beaten, or hanged. For the sake of victory, Americans tolerated suppression, censorship, and deprivation. In a nation at war with Germany—and itself—no sacrifice seemed too great.



PART ONE

GATHERING CLOUDS



1

Something That I *Don't* Want to Do!

CHARLES WHITE WHITTLESEY LIVED HIS LIFE IN SHADOWS, EVEN during those intense days and nights along the Charlevaux Brook. He was happy to speak on any subject except himself. Sometimes he entertained his friends with marvelous stories of school and camp life, featuring carefully imagined characters and preposterous scenes. Sitting among a group of friends at Williams College, or later at the Williams Club or the Harvard Club in New York City, he regaled listeners with his stories, drawing out his characters' accents and quirky mannerisms. Other times he tackled the big ideas—truth, beauty, duty. Weaving tales or discussing abstract ideas, he was at his best, “towering like a cliff over a brook,” a friend said. His soft but assured voice mesmerized. He was at his best then, for he “loved speculation and friendship; classic beauty; a jest; an argument; a convivial evening.” Yet the stories, speculations, and arguments of the man his classmates called the Count seemed oddly impersonal, as if he lived separate from his words.¹

There is a maddening paradox about his life. War correspondents and then journalists and historians have written so much about him, yet so little of what he wrote survives. A handful of battlefield messages, several after-action reports, a few frustratingly impersonal letters—that's about all. Only by digging into



At Williams College, classmates called Charles White Whittlesey “the Count” because of his precise, even stiff, manner of speaking and walking. Reserved yet well liked, he engaged in the world of the mind and seemed destined for a life behind a desk. (Courtesy of Williams College Archives.)

his years at Williams and Harvard can you glimpse the man who commanded the Lost Battalion, the leader who somehow held his unit together among the dead and dying, the stink and danger of a small hell they called the Pocket.

Although he had been born in Florence, Wisconsin, he was of *Mayflower* descent, and in 1894, at age ten, his father, Frank Russell Whittlesey, moved the family to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, because of a job transfer. Working as a production manager for the recently formed General Electric Corporation—in 1914 Pittsfield would soon earn the moniker High Voltage Capital of the World—Frank prospered, and his children enjoyed the advantages and responsibilities of his elevated position in the community. Charles inherited and further cultivated his father’s *noblesse oblige*, which instilled in him a powerful faith in education, a belief in civic service, an acceptance of hard work, and a temperament that was steadfastly courteous, judicious, and moderate.

Always close to his parents and siblings, when he graduated from Pittsfield High School, he stayed near home, venturing just

twenty miles north to Williamstown. It was a village of stunning natural beauty nestled in the Berkshires of northwest Massachusetts and guarded over by the famed purple hills. It was a community of white steeple churches, fieldstone fences, and long green lawns. The place suited the boy; both were quiet without being deadly somber, handsome without being ostentatious, and industrious without loudly announcing their ambition.

Whittlesey was seventeen when he enrolled at Williams College in September 1901. The school had a tradition of student pranks, but it was foremost a place of education. Max Eastman, who enrolled at the college a year before Whittlesey, recalled the tough entrance exams. He underwent a battery of tests in Latin and Greek, mathematics and science, and of course literature. He wrote his sister that he failed the exam in English literature, noting that one of the essay questions was, "Write on Dryden's religious life." When Charles enrolled the following year, his first semester courses included Elocution, English, French, Greek, Latin, Geometry, and Algebra. Judging from Whittlesey's transcripts, Williams was not the home of gut courses and "gentlemen's C's."²

The month he arrived at Williams his country was beginning a seismic transition. A new century had dawned, and the nineteenth century—the century of Lincoln and Grover Cleveland—was waning. An influx of new peoples, innovations, and ideas had recreated a new America. Popular writers like Edward Bellamy and Henry George had reimagined the country's social contract, while Thorstein Veblen and Richard Ely attacked classical economic theory. Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch questioned conventional religious assumptions, while Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair exposed political and economic abuses. Electric ideas illuminated the intellectual landscape in the brave new century and charged Whittlesey's imagination.

All the ideas, energy, and change appeared to coalesce in one man: Theodore Roosevelt. An assassin's bullet placed him in the Oval Office only days before Whittlesey arrived on campus. During the next four years, while Charles studied ancient and modern