

Testament of Youth

Fifteen members enjoyed the deeply moving Testament of Youth on Wednesday 9th March.

Based on the First World War memoir by Vera Brittain, the film charts how the pre war hopes and aspirations of a group of young people are cruelly destroyed in the terrible conflict.

This review is taken from Wikipedia.

In 1914, Vera Brittain wants to escape her traditional family in Buxton by attending Oxford University with her younger brother Edward and his friends at Uppingham School, Roland Leighton and Victor Richardson. In the face of her father's opposition, she passes the entrance examination for Somerville College, Oxford. Before enrolling at Oxford, Vera and Roland—who shares her interest in writing and poetry—begin a romance, although she knows that Victor is in love with her.

After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand starts World War I, Vera helps convince her father to let Edward join the army instead of studying at Oxford; Roland and Victor also join, and Roland is the first to reach the Western Front. As long lists of casualties appear in newspapers, Vera leaves Oxford to volunteer for the Voluntary Aid Detachment as a nurse tending the wounded in a hospital in England.

His friends still see the war as exciting, but Roland tells Vera of his traumatic experiences from trench warfare at the front. He proposes to Vera; they will marry during his next home leave. Roland returns to France, now with Edward. Roland writes in late 1915 that he has been granted leave, and is safe away from the front. As Vera awaits his arrival during the Christmas holiday, Roland's crying mother tells her on the telephone that he has been killed.

The army tells Vera and Roland's family that he died "a noble and painless death". After she demands the truth, George Catlin, who saw the wounded Roland in Louvecourt, admits that Roland died from his abdominal gunshot wound in agonising pain. When Victor, blind from his own injuries, arrives at Vera's hospital, she proposes to him because he is "going to need someone and

I... well, Roland would like it", but he gently turns her down before suddenly dying from his head injury.

In 1917, Vera asks to transfer to France to be closer to Edward, but her first assignment is to treat wounded Germans. She is reluctant, but learns that they suffer and die like English soldiers. Vera finds Edward among the dying, and helps to save his life. He shows her a letter from his "dear friend" Geoffrey Thurlow, implying the two men were lovers. After Edward's recovery, she is glad that he is sent to the safer Italian Front. Edward insists that Vera return to her Oxford studies after the war. Vera returns home after her mother has a nervous breakdown. She sees a telegram being delivered and learns, from her father's weeping, that Edward has died.

In 1918, having lost all the young men closest to her, Vera cannot celebrate as crowds cheer the Armistice with Germany. Back at Oxford, she has nightmares about Roland's and Edward's deaths. Winifred Holtby, another student at the college, helps Vera cope with her trauma.

Vera attends a public meeting where speakers debate how to punish Germany for the war. Most of the audience is against George Catlin, who warns that "the philosophy of 'an eye for an eye'" could cause another war. Vera confesses her guilt over persuading her father to let Edward join the army, and tells of how she held the hand of a dying German soldier, who was no different from her brother or her fiancé. She says that their deaths have meaning "only if we stand together now and say 'No'" to war and revenge.

Now a pacifist, Vera promises her dead men that she will not forget them.

The film ends with a dedication:
In Memory of

Roland Leighton 1895 – 1915

Victor Richardson 1895 – 1917

Geoffrey Thurlow 1895 – 1917

Edward Brittain 1895 – 1918

The discussion after the film focused on how relevant the subject is to today's situation in Ukraine. The young men who joined up thinking that the war will be an adventure are very quickly disillusioned and the first death of Roland is particularly hard hitting. The awfulness of the war is brought home, with the appalling conditions in the field hospitals (no effective antibiotics meant that many soldiers died from infections rather than their wounds) and British nurses caring for German soldiers being two examples.

Being critical, the film mentions the Spanish Flu, which didn't occur until 1919. The handheld camera could be a bit annoying as was the sometimes intrusive incidental music, but the overall message of the futility of war came across very strongly. Nearly all the attendees had relatives who fought or were killed in the Great War (including the coordinator's great uncle), which made the screening very poignant indeed.