

***The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature.*** Edited by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (distributed by Oxford UP USA), 2012. 590 pp. £150.00 cloth.

Critics of the literature and culture of war face a formidable challenge. How are they to insist on the relevance of warfare beyond the ends of particular conflicts, while resisting the tendency of modern war discourse to explain everything modern through the lens of permanent, perpetual war? It is all

too familiar an experience to see war books shelved and the terrible human lessons about militarism learned rapidly forgotten, as wars get bracketed off as “states of exception.” Conversely, the insights of literary critics have a hard time competing with the expertise of pundits of high tech warfare or of the “war makers” themselves, in a culture which still puts a premium on our collective fantasies about combat experience.

Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson have risen to the challenge by offering a remarkably ambitious, richly satisfying, and wide ranging edited collection of essays that pretty much defines this emerging field of study. Both comprehensive survey and incisive intervention into the study of modern and contemporary transatlantic war literature, *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature* gathers together an extraordinary range of expertise in five editors’ introductions and fifty seven tightly written chapters. The result is an exhilarating, provocative, sometimes uneven but endlessly diverting read, which will become essential for both specialist and generalist scholars alike. The editors, both authors of ground-breaking criticism on the British literature of World War II, make clear the critical ambition of the work in their Introductions to the volume’s five Parts: “Wars and their Literatures”; “Bodies, Behaviour, Cultures”; “Technology”; “Spaces”; and “Genres.” They set the tone and expectations for the volume by zeroing in on key debates within the field, targeting influential theorists and supplementing the contributors’ essays with brief case studies drawn from conflicts since 9/11.

Piette and Rawlinson emphasize certain compelling through-lines for both the volume and future study in this field. Their claim for the importance of war literature is on ethical grounds:

War makes literature ethical in this strict sense: the spectacle and imagining of the death of others in state-sponsored conflicts demands writing that pays due witness to that suffering, accompanies that suffering with the attention due to extreme and lethal experience, and accomplishes representations of that suffering without recourse to the usual contractual conventions that govern polite engagement with a sophisticated or jaded readership. (2)

The centre of gravity of their argument is a highly productive pragmatics of genre, rather than a theorization of violence: “War tends to alter the genres it inhabits, like a cuckoo in the nest. It stretches and distorts the normal obligations and expectations, and gives the genre a special ethical edge, as well as menace and dark intention” (6). More contentiously, in their final Introduction they observe: “War exerts pressure on all genres by politicizing them (inevitably since war is a political act), by infiltrating into their

forms of representation the morbidity of its themes...and by propagandizing itself into everything it touches, however hermetically sealed and peaceable" (475). The potential limitation of such an approach, however, is that it may remain in the realm of the ethical, of the more privatized literary imagination, rather than considering the specific political consequences of representational or critical strategies.

What's missing from the volume's conceptual framework is a sustained discussion or theorization of "war culture," despite the editors' frequent reliance on this concept. This is a notable omission given Piette and Rawlinson's assertion that "As literary studies has in recent years returned to its more empirical and cultural base post-theory, so a more focused historicism has led inevitably to a reassessment of the twentieth century as a century of wars, of war culture, of war as the force driving technology, geopolitics, and the political unconscious of citizens in the UK, Ireland and the US" (1-2). They lucidly signal this challenge for their argument: "In war literature's drive to unveil war's occluded core, the ethical and aesthetic impulse to tell the truth about war's impacts on flesh may be less articulate about cultural framings which transform somatic violence into legitimate or meaningful social acts" (266). More theorization of the relations between war literature and such "cultural framings" would have given teeth to their declaration that the essays they have commissioned "are intended to make visible the connection between the fate of flesh and both the conceptual and embodied dimensions of popular militarism (everyday practices which work to normalize the military in schemes of moral and political values) and a modern culture of military elegy" (267). This is an urgent, ambitious and wholly admirable aim. Yet one might respond by saying that the ideology of militarism is not simply about *normalizing* the military and its institutions, as they also observe of our societal obsession with militarized technology. Militarization also involves actively expanding its role and power into areas formerly considered civilian. The stress on normalization risks yielding too much territory to the war makers and too little agency to those on the receiving end.

Nevertheless, the volume's scholarly apparatus shows a sure editorial hand. While the scope of the volume is transatlantic, its centre of gravity is firmly British in the best sense: the majority of the scholars teach in UK universities and bring a remarkably deep and nuanced post-imperial sense of the cultural centrality of military conflict. For this reason, perhaps, World War I looms extremely large as perhaps the defining event for the war writers, intellectuals, journalists, and film-makers discussed here. Around twenty of the essays take the Great War as their focus, with stand out essays by Jane Potter surveying the uneven range of poetic responses to the conflict, Sharon Ouditt on World War I prose, and Sara Haslam with an incisive foray into modernist responses to the Great War sensorium. Santanu Das

is excellent on the affective responses to the technology of gas warfare, and who better than Allyson Booth to explore poetic spatial representations of the trenches. David Goldie's essay on the war memorials meditated on in M. V. Morton's travel writing is marvelously evocative. Jane Lewty's essay on radio, poetry, and the *séance* is another gem, showing like Haslam the welcome intervention into the field of recent work on soundscapes and "radio modernism." Ian Patterson's essay on pacifists and conscientious objectors is a wide-ranging, urgent, and ambitious piece, bridging the neglected history of pacifist resistance and peace movements during WWI and WWII. His essay also joins other contributors in emphasizing the crucial importance of thirties political struggles and the Spanish Civil War to Second World War writers.

An equal number of essays focus on World War II: the editors seem to have made the admirable decision to give poetry an anchoring role here. Jonathan Bolton and Margot Norris offer terrific counterpointing essays on British and US WWII poetry respectively. Bolton very productively adds Auden to the company of Fuller, Day Lewis, and Douglas allowing him to emphasize the ways their "work, rather than merely reiterating the Great War poets, represents a deep level of engagement with the utility, economy and control of writing, and whose work self-reflexively meditates on the value of poetry in a totalitarian age" (86). Norris convincingly makes the case for the anti-heroic complexity of the work of US poets William Meredith, Kunitz, Kirstein, Wilbur and Snodgrass. Peter Robinson's essay on the poetic displacements and stoic ironies of British jungle and desert warfare poetry also elegantly extends the canonical range. By contrast, the discussions of WWII prose are spread out over the volume. John Limon is excellent on the WWII novel, offering a refreshing reframing of Mailer, Jones, Pynchon and Heller. Leo Mellor shows the contrasting tendency of recent British criticism to emphasize material culture over historiography: his wonderful discussion of WWII Blitz writing zeroes in on tropes of fire, fragments, flowers, and futures. Jonathan Raynor's essay on the neglected fiction of the war at sea emphasizes nicely the complexity and narrative displacements of Nicholas Monsarrat's masculine romances. R.W. Maslen excavates a fascinating and deliberately "minor" key alternative canon of "fantasies of complicity" in the 1930s and 1940s by Irish and Welsh and English writers like Katherine Burdekin, Joseph O'Neill, Flann O'Brien, Howell Davies, C. S. Lewis, Mervyn Peake, Tolkien, without which Orwell's *1984* could not have been written. Petra Rau's brilliant essay on representations of the enemy uses the potential of the short essay form to full effect.

More curiously, writers of the British World War II home front are not well represented in the volume, despite the superb efforts of Rawlinson, Piette and others to put them on the map. Rather than editorial modesty, this may be the result of the recent revisionist tendency to interrogate the

myths of the “People’s War” that were so central to liberal and Left defenders of the post-war consensus. By choosing not to engage this debate, the editors’ insistence on the intrinsic ethical challenges and preoccupations of war literature take on a darker and more individualistic turn.

Three essays deal directly with the Holocaust, a topic that perhaps would have loomed larger in a more transatlantic volume given its centrality to trauma studies and theorizations of violence by Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and others. Here contributors use the short form to admirable effect given a seemingly impossible task: Bob Eaglestone’s essay on theorizations of testimony gives an invaluable overview of the genre; Sue Vice uses Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Charles Reznickoff’s poetry to explore the topoi of the camps. In one of the longer pieces in the volume, Barry Langford offers a superb and elegant discussion of Holocaust film using the evocative and revealing frame of an unfiled script by Stanley Kubrick, *Aryan Papers*. Characteristically, however, despite the relative briefness of the essays dealing directly with the Holocaust, the topic of the British and American area bombing of German and Japanese cities haunts the volume, repeatedly invoked by contributors as a kind of second order instance of violent extremity that raises parallel issues: of complicity, the limits of representability, historical revisionism, of national guilt and reparations in an otherwise just “People’s war” against fascism.

The “smaller wars” of the twentieth century are covered in a number of outstanding essays. Helen Goethals’ opening essay on Boer War poetry sets the standard for the following contributors by showing how much can be accomplished by writer and critic alike in a very short space, with brilliantly discursive readings of poems by Swinburne, Brooke, and Kipling. The volume decisively puts the Korean war, still too often referred to as a “forgotten war,” back on the map in three superb essays. William D. Earhart on US poetry about the conflict, Martin Halliwell on military psychiatry in WWII and Korea, and Mark Van Wienen on representations of race. The Cold War and Vietnam yield about half a dozen essays each. Highlights include Adam Piette’s tremendous and disturbing discussion of nuclear war fictions, and Mark Heberle on US Vietnam war fiction. Cold War counterinsurgency operations and dirty wars are also discussed in invaluable and complementary essays by Lee Erwin and Kris Anderson, each of which offer essential surveys in miniature of British and US writing respectively. Surprisingly, given its centrality as both a laboratory for colonial warfare and counterinsurgency and a power-house of modern representations of violence in transatlantic culture, Ireland gets relatively short shrift in three strong essays dispersed across the volume. Aaron Kelly’s discussion of Irish and British thrillers representing the “Troubles” critiques the recent fascination with special forces hyper-masculinity. Given the remarkable strength of interdisciplinary work in Irish Studies transatlantically in the

last two decades, this is one clear oversight in the design of the volume. More essays from a postcolonial perspective would also have strengthened its scope and range.

In addition to these essays about specific conflicts, the volume offers around a dozen more theoretical or genre based pieces. Indeed, the final section on genre almost amounts to a volume of its own, and nicely complements the previous scope. Mark Rawlinson's discussion of camouflage is not quite up to the excellent standard of his co-authored introductions, a little "meta" in its exploration of the ways camouflage serves as "not only the possibility of a further detour from hurt but also a further unveiling of the precariousness of the human subject." Julia Boll's excellent reading of Caryl Churchill's recent drama is particularly memorable, extending the scope of the volume beyond its avowed terminus in 1991 Iraq War. Roger Tolson's well-illustrated discussion of the visual arts is remarkable for its scope and authority, arguing importantly that "In practice, faced with the demands at the limits of language, the language of art had to exploit every style and format to describe changing rather than static situations" (534). Other key literary genres discussed are children's fiction, science fiction, the Cold War spy thriller and police procedural.

Although the mediatization and assault on human rights resulting from the "War on Terror" since the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks are discussed in several strong essays, the editors declare in their "Introduction" that they have deliberately limited the scope of the volume: "We stop short of the wars in the Middle East, in the Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, for that story is still being written and told" (3). Alex Houen's foregrounding of 9/11 as a rupture in history, rather than an intensification of logics of warfare and militarism, produces a sense of abstraction and apocalypticism that is less helpful in making sense of our current predicament. This postmodern seduction is resisted in John Armitage's discussion of the theory of Paul Virilio, and Esther Macallum-Stewart's piece on video and virtual war gaming. Superb correctives are also offered in Andrew Hammond's essay on British literature from the former Yugoslavia and the Bosnian genocide, Kris Anderson on the literature of the Pax Americana, and Jon Begley's discussion of mainly British literary and filmic representations of the Falklands/Malvinas war. The closing duo of essays—Kate McLoughlin's extension of her superb monograph, *Authoring War*, with a discussion of twentieth-century war correspondents, and Nick Mansfield's incisive discussion of essential philosophers and critical theorists on war—provides a fittingly discursive and authoritative conclusion to a most impressive volume.

All this is to say that the *Edinburgh Companion* is a remarkable collaborative achievement. Readers will make good use of the volume's thorough index, which gives a sense of the volume's key themes and ideas. Indeed, the big index entries on "body," "enemy," "ideology," "modernism,"

“violence” and “trauma” would have benefited from the kind of subheadings offered for “war.” The lack of index entries on “militarism,” “militarization,” and the “military industrial complex” reveals a need for greater clarity about the political economy of twentieth-century warfare, despite the editors’ and contributors’ references to the massive—and continuing—shadow cast by modern war economies on literature and culture. The omission of an index entry for “Anti-americanism” may also be revealing of Rawlinson and Piette’s ambivalence towards the exact place of the US and its war machine in their transatlantic study. Given the sheer richness of the range of critics and theorists cited in the footnotes to the volume, the *Companion* would have benefited from their inclusion in the index, which tends to be tilted towards primary texts. This could, of course, be rectified in an expanded online index, had the editors world enough and time. Overall this is a superb and invaluable resource, which will repay repeated reading and consultation.

---Patrick Deer, New York University