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A War to End All Innocence

The Enduring Impact of World War I

By A. O. SCOTT | JUNE 20, 2014

“I feel like a soldier on the morning after the Somme.” This line of dialogue, from an episode in the second season of the BBC series “Call the Midwife,” caught my ear recently as an especially piquant morsel of period detail. It is uttered by a doctor to a nurse after they have just assisted in a grueling home birth, an experience that is compared to the four-month battle in a muddy stretch of Picardy beginning on July 1, 1916, that was, at the time, the bloodiest episode of combat in human history, generating 60,000 casualties in a single day of fighting on the British side alone. The doctor’s comparison is surely metaphorical overkill, but it also represents a familiar style of wit, a habit of linking the challenges we regularly endure with calamities we can scarcely imagine.

But why choose that particular calamity? “Call the Midwife,” based on a popular series of memoirs by Jennifer Worth, takes place in the late 1950s, not long after a war that, in terms of the sheer scale and extent of global slaughter, far eclipsed its predecessor. It is interesting that for this youngish doctor and nurse, the earlier conflict comes more readily to mind. The Somme is more accessible, and perhaps more immediate, than Dunkirk or D-Day.

The allusion may require a footnote now, but its occurrence in a television program that is acutely sensitive to historical accuracy is a sign of just how deeply, if in some ways obscurely, World War I remains embedded in the popular consciousness. Publicized in its day as “the war to end all wars,” it has instead become the war to which all subsequent wars, and much else in modern life, seem to refer. Words and phrases once specifically associated with the

experience of combat on the Western Front are still part of the common language. We barely recognize “in the trenches,” “no man’s land” or “over the top” as figures of speech, much less as images that evoke what was once a novel form of organized mass death. And we seldom notice that our collective understanding of what has happened in foxholes, jungles, mountains and deserts far removed in space and time from the sandbags and barbed wire of France and Belgium is filtered through the blood, smoke and misery of those earlier engagements.

One person who did notice the lasting and decisive cultural influence of World War I was Paul Fussell, a literary scholar and World War II infantry veteran whose 1975 book, “The Great War and Modern Memory,” remains a tour de force of passionate, learned criticism. Fussell, who died in 2012, combed through novels, memoirs and poems written in the wake of the war and found that they established a pattern that would continue to hold, consciously and not, for much of the 20th century.

Many British soldiers and officers arrived at the front steeped in a literary tradition that colored their perception — a tradition that included not only martial epics and popular adventure novels but also religious and romantic allegories like John Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” The central character in that 17th-century tale of desperate hardship and ultimate redemption is first seen as “a man clothed in rags” with “a great burden upon his back,” a description that seemed uncannily to prefigure the trench-weary conscript with his tattered uniform and heavy pack.

That soldier, in turn, with some adjustments of outfit and equipment, would march through the subsequent decades, leaving behind a corpus of remarkably consistent firsthand testimony. Whether presented as memoir or fiction, post-1918 war writing returns again and again to the same themes and attitudes. Among them are an emphasis on the tedium and terror of ground combat; the privileging of the ordinary soldier’s perspective over that of officers or strategists; a suspicion of authority and a tendency to mock those who wield it; a strong sense of the unbridgeable existential division between those who fight and the people back home; a taste for absurdity, sarcasm and black humor; and the

conclusion that, whatever the outcome or justice of the war as a whole, its legacy for the individual veteran will be cynicism and disillusionment.

Fussell found these traits in the literature of his own war — in “The Naked and the Dead,” “Catch-22” and “Gravity’s Rainbow” — and they saturate the Vietnam narratives that followed the publication of his book. The title of “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien’s cycle of autobiographical stories about life before, during and after combat in Vietnam, carries an echo of “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” and its blend of economical prose, blunt naturalism and surreal terror makes it both a definitive account of its own war and a recapitulation of the Great One.

Like nearly every other male writer in English to have tackled the subject of war, Mr. O’Brien owes a clear debt to Hemingway, who came as close to anyone to striking a template for how it should be dealt with in a famous passage from “A Farewell to Arms”:

“There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.”

This tough wisdom — itself curiously abstract, in spite of its insistence on specificity — has remained in effect even as the geography has changed. The imperative to tell what really happened, even to a public or a posterity incapable of fully understanding, has produced a literature full of names and dates. Verdun, Passchendaele, Gallipoli, Guadalcanal, Monte Cassino, Stalingrad, Inchon, Khe Sanh, Kandahar, Fallujah. Nov. 11; June 6; Tet; Sept. 11.

In 1964, 50 years after the war began, Philip Larkin, born in 1922, published a memorial poem called “MCMXIV.” Larkin’s subject is less the war as such than a faded England of “archaic faces” and bygone habits, an England that ceased to exist sometime between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28 and the commencement of full, continent-engulfing hostilities at the beginning of August. The poem tries to freeze the moment when

the older world — a world his parents knew intimately but one that lay just beyond the horizon of his own memory — “changed itself to past without a word.”

“Never such innocence again,” Larkin concludes, summarizing what was, then and now, a crucial tenet of the conventional wisdom about the Great War, a notion that informed Hemingway’s rejection of the old, elevated language of honor and glory. Even as he acknowledges the seductive power of the idea of lost innocence, Larkin also suggests that it is complicated, even deceptive. Individuals like the anonymous children and husbands who populate his lines can easily be imagined as innocent. Imperial nation-states that have spent the last few centuries conquering most of the rest of the globe are another story.

This was clear enough to Larkin, whose patriotism rested on the notion that England was the worst place on earth with the possible exception of everywhere else. The first time he uses the phrase “Never such innocence” he qualifies it with “never before or since,” suggesting that the particular Edenic aura that hangs over the prewar months of 1914 may be its own kind of illusion. To imply that Britain (or for that matter any other combatant nation) was somehow more innocent than ever on the eve of catastrophe is to register an aftereffect of the catastrophe itself.

The war was so foul and terrible that it could only have erupted in a landscape of goodness and purity. That, at any rate, is one of the myths it leaves behind. Another, favored at the time by a handful of vanguard intellectuals (notably the Italian Futurists) and adapted by some later historians, was that the war accelerated tendencies already present in modern society: toward mechanized violence, total conflict and the fusion of technology and politics.

Accounts of that summer, especially in France and Britain, frequently emphasize beautiful weather and holiday pleasures. Gabriel Chevalier’s “Fear,” a novel of combat published in 1930, opens with “carefree France” in its “summer costumes.” “There wasn’t a cloud in the sky — such an optimistic, bright blue sky.” A lovely example of the interplay of empirical reality and literary embellishment: the meteorological record will attest to the color and clarity of the sky, but only the cruel, corrective irony of hindsight can summon the word

“optimistic.”

And then: “In a few short days, civilization was wiped out.” This brutally concise sentence, a few pages into “Fear,” summarizes the loss of innocence that subsequent chapters of first-person narration will elaborate. But those chapters will also make clear the extent to which that “civilization,” so intoxicated by its own rhetoric of national glory and heroic destiny, was the author of its own extinction. The discrepancy between that lofty language and the horrific reality of war opens a chasm in human experience that, in Fussell’s account, has never closed: “I am saying,” he wrote, “that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.”

More recent events, and the imaginative response to them might indicate the extent to which minds can change, and memories fade. Chevalier’s “bright blue sky” can’t help evoking a certain late-summer sky over Manhattan almost 13 years ago, at another moment that would come to mark a boundary between Before and After.

After Sept. 11, 2001, we were told — we told ourselves — that everything had changed. In a curious reversal of the logic of the Great War, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were widely and quickly understood to herald “the death of irony.” What this meant, at least at first, was that a cultural style dominated (according to Roger Rosenblatt in *Time*, among others) by “detachment and personal whimsy” would give way to an ethic of seriousness and sincerity. But in retrospect, the obituaries for irony were not only premature; they were also part of an aggressive reassertion of innocence, a concerted attempt to refute the conclusion of Larkin’s “MCMXIV.”

There followed a rehabilitation of the abstract words that Hemingway and his lost generation had found so intolerable. Ordinary soldiers were routinely referred to as “heroes” and “warriors,” even as their deaths and injuries were kept from public view. Those at home were encouraged toward displays of patriotism and support but also urged to continue with the optimistic routines of work, leisure and shopping “as if it were all” (to quote Larkin) “an August Bank Holiday lark.”

But the Great War is not quite finished with us. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have wound down in bloody inconclusiveness, the men and women who served in them have started writing, and what they have produced should return us to the morning after the Somme. “Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk,” Ben Fountain’s award-winning 2012 novel, pushes past irony into farce as it juxtaposes the experiences of a battered platoon plunged from the chaos of Iraq into the vulgar spectacle of the Super Bowl, where their service is honored and exploited. The book belongs in the irreverent company of “Catch-22,” which is to say on the same shelf as “All Quiet on the Western Front” and Chevalier’s “Fear.”

Phil Klay’s “Redeployment,” meanwhile, published this year, follows in the hard-boiled, matter-of-fact line of Hemingway and “The Things They Carried.” A deceptively modest collection of linked short stories, “Redeployment” bristles with place names, military numbers and acronyms, grim humor, sexual frustration, sentimental friendship and contempt for authority. It could only have been written by someone who was there, even if “there,” with some adjustments of technology, idiom and climate, might just as well be Ypres as Ramadi. And the moral might have been written by the British memoirist Edmund Blunden, who derived a stark lesson from his own experience at the Battle of the Somme: “The War had won, and would go on winning.”

Correction: June 29, 2014

An article last Sunday about the effect World War I had on America’s cultural consciousness misidentified the era in which John Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress” — an allegory of hardship and redemption that many British soldiers and officers were familiar with — came out. It was published in the 17th century, not during the medieval years.

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