

Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War 1914-1918*

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This year (2014) is the 100th anniversary of the First World War's (the Great War's) outbreak. It will be all the more meaningful to review and argue Randall Stevenson's perceptive, stimulating book of the Great War, one of the volumes in the series of *Oxford Textual Perspectives* focusing on texts and on the technologies, cultures and communities that produce, inform, and receive them. Regarding the Great War and British literature and culture, we have already several important and influential books from Paul Fussell's canonical book, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), which rather concentrates on poetry and on the Western Front; through Samuel Hynes's *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture* (1990) offering wider view of the War's influence on British culture on Home Front as well as on the Western Front; to Jay Winter's stimulating book, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), which reexamines the War's "modern memory" through a wide range of sources and newly conceptualizes the meaning of the War. Stevenson's book should surely be included among these canonical works on the War mentioned above, because this book precisely examines, from an extensive range of perspectives, the Great War's impact on the shaping of the modern world, not only through a wide range of literary texts (poetry, novel, autobiography, and memoir), but also newspapers, films, diaries, letters and even propaganda during the War and after.

Here I will give a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the book, closing with general summary and a discussion of the issues raised by the book. Chapter 1, "Unspeakable War," focuses on the issue of the wartime ("unspeakable") difficulty of communication through newspapers, letters, films, propaganda and so on; Chapter 2, "Unaccountable War," on the issue of representing "unaccountable" realities of the War through wartime prose writings, such as autobiography, memoir, and novel; Chapter 3, "Unfamiliar Lines," on the roles of poetry ("unfamiliar lines") during the War and after, through both the earlier Romantic-pastoral war poetry and the canonical anti-pastoral war poetry; Chapter 4, "Unforgettable War," the final and concluding chapter, on the War's influence upon British culture through "unforgettable" war memory and memorials, summing up the cultural, historical studies of the Great War up to the present.

Chapter 1, "Unspeakable War," starts with the news of the Battle of Somme in 1916, a watershed and a decisive moment in British cultural history. The first section of the chapter, "Words, Films, Myth," analyses the great popularity of the documentary film *The Battle of the Somme*. Thereby, film media not only provided entertainment but also gradually nudged print media out of its leading role in reporting and representing the world. In Addition, the issue of the difficulty in communicating war experiences— "beyond

expression"—is repeatedly examined through letters, newspapers, and propaganda. The second section, "Language and Letters," mainly examines the letters by soldiers and their use of vernacular and military slang, and the issue of military censorship.

The third section, "Press and Propaganda," shows the press's expanding powers as a means of informing war experiences. On the other hand, as early as 1914, the Press Bureau was established to censor news reports of the War, producing a gap in understanding the truth about the war, between the Home Front (civilians) and the battlefield (soldiers). The big gap between newspaper reports and the realities of the trenches on the Front is most explicitly depicted in Erich Maria Remarque's popular novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen Nichts Neues*, 1929), the 1930 film of which gained a great popularity in Britain at that time.

The fourth section, "Mobilizing Authors," shows the issue of the co-operation of the well-known writers called "Masterman," such as J. M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, Robert Bridges, John Galsworthy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, directly into the affair of the state, into assisting in the propagation of war ideal at the early stage of the War. The fifth section, "Veils and Paper Curtains," examines the issue of the "chasm" between the life at home (civilians) and at the Front (soldiers)

The persuasive and impressive sixth section, "Words... Cancelled," discusses the writers' consciousness of the War's effects on language and communication. In Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, for instance, Jacob on the Front rarely appears as a character, and exists only as "silence and vacancy." Thus actually the expression of far wider loss and pain (reality) was "silenced," or "invisible" during the War.

The final, and equally persuasive and stimulating seventh section, "Living Voice and Speaking Silence," points out the importance of "living" speech (voice), such as vernacular, dialect, colloquialism, in communicating war experience, because the immediacy of speech and the mobility of "living voice" appealed to the writers, who considered that war experience was "beyond expression," or "unspeakable," creating a "loquacious" silence. Stevenson suggests here that this kind of stress on language during the war somehow opened the way to modernism of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and others in the 1920s.

Chapter 2, "Unaccountable War," mainly elaborates on well-known and unknown wartime prose writings, such as autobiography, memoir, and novel. Generally, autobiography and novel depend on sense of significance of individual life. During the War individuals were overwhelmed by its destruction of so many lives, such that they felt they were reduced to "things." This view of the war as "impersonal," as an "inhuman machine" that made soldiers mere "automatons" is considered in the first section, "Mere Automatons."

The second section, "War Time," evokes the "timelessness" of the war time, the sense that the sequence of events is completely lost. It is also interesting for us to find that 'Summer Time' was first introduced by the Summer Time Act in 1916. The third section, "Redundant Genres and Mythical Realms," examines preference for mythic consolation in fantasy, romance or the supernatural (spiritual) during the War.

The fourth section, "Horrible Realism," focuses on the scepticism of the realistic accounts of the war represented in war writings, such as autobiography and novel. The realities of the Front-line were so "horrible" that they were rarely described for nearly a decade after the Armistice. There was then the sudden profusion of the war narratives in the late 1920s and early 1930s. There were; such well-known autobiographical writings as Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928), Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1929), and Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929); such war novels as Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929), H. M. Tomlinson's *All Our Yesterday* (1930), Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress* (1930); such American writings as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1920), and then a German writer Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). The sudden profusion of these war narratives a decade after the War suggests that wartime experiences took time to "assimilate or settle into coherent communicable forms" (Stevenson, 90). Interestingly, autobiographies outnumber novels in late 1920s' publications, as examined in the fifth section, "Autobiography and Memoir." Autobiographical writings can communicate "simple facts" of the battlefield and ensure readers directly see and understand them.

The sixth section, "Autobiography and Beyond: War Novels," examines war novels, such as Frederic Manning's *The Middle Part of Fortune* (1916), R. H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm* (1927), Henry Williamson's and Ford Madox Ford's multiple novels, comparing with autobiographies. While wartime autobiography sometimes relies on novelistic technique, many war novels are strongly autobiographical, so they are sometimes almost indistinguishable from autobiography. In war novels, the recording of war experience is stressed and the central character's experience coincides with the author's own. Thus Stevenson introduces two representative long war novels, treating Henry Williamson's 15-volume *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* as a kind of war memoir and Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End*, as offering a broad and extensive view of life before, during, and after the War.

The seventh section, "War and the Modernist Novel," argues for the War's impact on modernist novels, such as those of Woolf and James Joyce. In *Jacob's Room*, for instance, Woolf suggests the contradiction (or gap) between the young officer's (Jacob's) war experience and the impossibility of direct experience for domestic civilians. Thus after the destruction of the War, coherence and harmony may not be found in "outer things," but rather in inner consciousness or in abstract forms of imagination. Awareness of the unbearable, "unspeakable" or "unaccountable" of experience "beyond description" remained a key influence on literary writing in the 1920s. This kind of suggestion here by Stevenson is quite insightful and persuasive.

The most perceptive and stimulating Chapter 3, "Unfamiliar Lines," elaborates on poetry, from Edwardian poetry, through war poetry, to modernist poetry. In the first section, "Song and Spirit," Stevenson insists that the War expanded the demand for poetry, since poetry is the genre most appropriate to serious emotion, with particular powers to address difficult

“heart-high” times. This first section demonstrates how formalized language with rhythm, popular song and recitation played a huge part in entertainment for soldiers and civilians in music halls and theatres, and even at the time in the trenches. Further, poetry offered the opportunity of reading or composing easily anywhere in any spare time at the front. In the second section, “War Time and the Lyric,” the “lyric” element of wartime poetry by such canonical war poets as Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon is interestingly examined.

The third section, “Pastoral,” describes how poets during the War began writing in awareness of pastoral-Romantic poetry, admiring nature, particularly the pastoral landscapes of the English countryside, for instance, Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, and Edmund Blunden. The fourth section, “Skies and Stars,” argues that being on the front line encouraged poets to develop new angles to this pastoral vision, looking up at the sky, clouds, birds, and stars. However, as the fifth section, “Against Nature,” indicates, this affirmative pastoral vision proved harder to sustain as the War continued. Thus movements away from pastoral idealism, or scepticism regarding pastoral poetic convention are symptomatic of war poetry. Gurney, for instance, in “To His Love,” moves away from such affirmative pastoral conventions towards their inadequacies in confronting the violence of the war.

The sixth section, “Earthy Powers,” and the seventh section, “Ideals Unravelling,” mainly discuss such canonical poets as Owen (“À Terre”) in particular, Sassoon, Rosenberg and others. The earlier war poet Rupert Brooke expresses a heroic vision of noble sacrifice for an ideal of patriotism and country in “The Soldier” (1914). This kind of idealism continued until the battle of the Somme, which marked a decisive stage in the War’s movement from idealism towards disillusion, as mentioned before. The later war poets, such as Owen and Sassoon, who were sceptical of abstractions and of conventional forms of the pastoral, concentrated on expressing the shocking immediacies of death and misery in the trenches, with details of “mud,” “blood,” “horses dead,” and so on.

The eighth section, “Occasions, Techniques, and Legacies,” sums up this chapter’s argument concerning war poetry and its influence on modernist and other poets. In the earlier war period, poetry of a pastoral nature, containing romance, idealism and religious consolation, such as the patriotic and pastoral poetry of John Oxenham and Brooke, maintained a broader appeal than the later war poetry of disillusioned realism, such as that of Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg. As mentioned before, the later war poetry’s abandonment of Romantic and pastoral convention and wider movement toward realism exercised a remarkable influence on modernist poetry. Although *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot rarely depicts the War itself, its anti-pastoral images have some affinities with Owen’s, “À Terre.” *The Waste Land* surely demonstrates that war time scepticism towards Romantic pastoralism extended into later literature. Two of war poetry’s other “legacies” to later literature are the denial of rhetoric and the use of ordinary spoken language (colloquialism). Stevenson then significantly points out that these legacies are furthermore inherited by

modern British nature poet Ted Hughes, who highly admires Owen's poetry.

Chapter 4, "Unforgettable War," considers war memory, recollection, and the war's various impacts on British culture and society, finally summing up the whole content of the book. Stevenson here insists that the Great War is even now remembered as a central influence on the emergence of the modern world, so it still refuses to remain buried in the past and is still remembered in memory.

The first section, "Memory and memorial," examines tourism to the battlefields and graveyards, the construction of war memorials (more than 40,000 throughout Britain), and discusses the writing of war memories in such novels as Christopher Isherwood's *The memorial* (1932), Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which depicts a shell-shocked soldier and recollections of a more congenial pre-war world.

The second section, "Recollection and Revision," examines the historical views and criticism of the Great War, from 1960s' many publications on the War, to such works as Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (1990), in which Hynes emphasizes a "Myth of the War"; and revisionist Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (2001), in which Sheffield describes the War affirmatively in terms of necessary resistance, rather than of the futile conflict of the "Myth." Although Stevenson sees value partly in this revisionist view on the War, he concludes that the great losses by the War should never be forgotten ("Unforgettable").

The third section, "Gender and Class," focuses on the War's influence on the structure of British culture and society, especially on "gender" and "class," since the War somehow removed the restriction of gender and class, as now is widely accepted. The fourth section, "Materialism and Mechanism," discusses again the issue of reduction of men to "things" and "machines" by the War.

The fifth section, "Modernism and War," and the sixth section, "Literature and War," argue again for the War's influence on modernism and on literature, showing that the Great War challenged authority and tradition, and that it played a central role in the development of modern literature and art, as already discussed in the earlier chapters.

The seventh section, "Unforgettable War," summarizes the whole of the book, and how it shows the War's importance for imagination and modern memory. As the title of this final chapter puts it, the Great War and its literature cannot be allowed to fade into the shadow of historical inattention or critical unconcern. This is rightly what Stevenson attempts to demonstrate throughout the book.

As already mentioned before, this book examines a wide range of texts (including American, French, and German war novels) on the War and their cultural, social and historical backgrounds, addressing themes and questions that can be applied to literary studies and cultural, historical studies as a whole. This kind of diverse, extensive study of literature and culture on the Great War is quite significant and rewarding for both specialists of literature and historians, but sometimes makes it rather hard for us to

concentrate our attention and concern on the main stream of the whole argument, because the sources for the argument are so rich and diverse, from novel and poetry, through autobiography and memoir, diary and letter, to drama and film, and even to propaganda. However, I believe this book will certainly be valued as one of the canonical works on the study of the Great War and British culture for its extensive and detailed analysis of the literary and historical sources, just as Paul Fussell's, Samuel Hynes's, and Jay Winter's have been.

Stevenson concludes the book, by questioning the readers of the 21st century on the meaning of the Great War:

The Great War can never now—perhaps could never ever—be wholly known or imagined. Yet readers may still find some way up the communication trenches war writing proves, reaching as nearly as possible toward those dark and archetypal modern experiences. (233)

Now in the 21st century we may not “wholly know or imagine” the Great War, but we can follow its “archetypal modern experiences” through a wide range of (well-known and unknown) texts mentioned and referred to in this book. Thus this book elucidates and demonstrates the significance of the Great War on the development of modernity, redefining the interrelations of literary imagination, history and culture, and provides us with fresh discoveries and invaluable suggestions of literary works and their social, cultural background in the early decades of the 20th century.