THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN FICTION

Edited by Holger Klein
with John Flower and Eric Homberger

MACMILLAN

Preface

The literature of the Second World War – and especially fiction – has been largely neglected by critics, if not by readers. This book, in some ways a successor to *The First World War in Fiction*,* is the first major critical contribution on the subject within an international framework. The earlier volume presented full analyses of individual novels. The scale of the Second World War as well as the mass and diversity of fiction produced during and after the war years suggested the need for a different approach. Thus this volume offers fairly detailed survey essays on the fiction of five principal nations involved in the war, together with a short contribution on Japan. Given the particular historical, political and literary situation in each country, uniformity of treatment is neither possible nor even desirable.

Soon we shall be as far removed in time from the Second World War as Tolstoy was from Napoleon's Russian campaign when he wrote *War and Peace.* No work of comparable stature has as yet appeared; but there is a vast amount of writing, from ephemeral, popular stories and thrillers to journalistic narratives and to works of great scope, seriousness and complexity. The ways in which literature has recreated the war in the various countries represent important facets of modern history and contemporary consciousness. The time has come to take stock of this literature, to analyse it and to reflect on its implications.

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Contents

1 Britain

Holger Klein

Having read the "war books" so far published, Tom Harrisson in December 1941 talked of a "cataract of tripe"[1] which he surveyed, identifying a few interesting wavelets here and there. In 1943 Granville Hicks found that "some moderately good books have been written about the war" while stressing that "Literature, as everyone knows, cannot be expected to flourish in wartime."[2] The difficulties of sustained writing in Britain during the war were great and have been vividly illustrated in Robert Hewison's *Under Siege* (1977). In 1941 they prompted a group, including Cyril Connolly, George Orwell and Stephen Spender to issue a manifesto demanding an officially recognised category of "war writers" who should (in parallel to "war artists" or "war correspondents") be given "the necessary facilities for writing their books".[3] For better or worse this plea went unheeded and, taking stock in 1946, Alec Waugh and Spender ruefully recalled all the unfavourable conditions.[4]

In the same year Vernon Mallinson postulated, rather more briskly, "Nothing written in England since 1939 gives the slightest indication that this World War, however cataclysmic, has produced or is likely to produce anything immediately significant."[5] Surveying *The Novel 1945–1950* in 1951, P.H. Newby made favourable mention of four novelists, particularly Alex Comfort (for a work actually published in 1944), but joined earlier voices in noting the absence of any "good English novel" to "paint the horrors of war".[6] He explained this by the nature of total war in which (as opposed to the First World War) civilians suffered as much or more than soldiers, and suggested also that perhaps "war experience is a handicap in writing about the war . . .". Yet he held out hope, arguing that the "process of gestation" was still going on. In 1956 John T. Frederick combined both arguments; with reference to the time-lag with which "some of the

most important novels of the First World War" appeared, he surmised "major novels of World War II may be just around the corner, chronologically speaking".[7] They were not, if we trust Frederick R. Karl as *A Reader's Guide* (1961).[8]

And there the matter rests, apparently. Apart from its partial inclusion in Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig's *Women and Children First* (1979) the subject as such has by and large been left to a couple of German and (peripherally) American theses,[9] discussions of individual authors who (as e.g. Anthony Powell and Evelyn Waugh) attract attention in a wider literary framework, finally to reviews following the appearance of new works and prefaces to occasional reprints.

War drama from, say, J.B. Priestley's *Desert Highway* to Ian McEwen's *The Imitation Game*, is still awaiting intensive treatment. Poetry had not fared much better until Vernon Scannell's *Not Without Glory* (1976). Scannell remarks on "the way in which the Great War has become a powerful myth while the Second World War, to a succeeding generation, has never been other than a historical event ...".[10] Indeed the stream of fresh literature, particularly fiction, about 1914–18 is astonishing. Among the factors contributing to this mythic quality Scannell stresses the inexperienced and unjaundiced attitudes prevailing in 1914, the relative remoteness of the actual fighting, and the preponderance as well as the largely static nature of the Western Front, which facilitated its transformation into a "fixed imaginative landscape".[11]

On the part of Britain the Second World War was, as A.J.P. Taylor put it in 1975, "that very rare thing – a just war".[12] Opposing at last the aggressions of the tyrannical and barbarous National Socialist German state could leave little sense of tragic, i.e. unnecessary and futile waste such as hangs over the Great War and informs much of its literature. On the other hand, there was no "innocence" (Philip Larkin)[13] to be lost. People knew, or thought they knew, what a war with modern weapons involved and what comes out of it. Not surprisingly there was no enthusiasm, nothing resembling the euphoric war hysteria of August 1914. Instead, there was resigned resolution. In an exercise of "Mass Observation" carried out before the German attack on Poland, only 2 per cent of those questioned were glad at the prospect of war; 34 per cent still agreed that "anything was better than a war"; 9 per cent had no definite view. A majority, 55 per

cent , assented directly or indirectly to the proposition that "we ought to get it over with".[14]

This war proved, overall, anything but static. It was also more intensely global and much more diversified than the First. With Fascist Italy and Imperialist Japan as further enemies, no single "theatre" of war held for very long a position of unique importance. Furthermore, other arms besides the infantry, and the other Services besides the Army had an incomparably more active role than in 1914–18. Finally, while in the Dominions and in India the war remained (just about) *ante* or *ad portas*, large parts of the Empire were scenes of destructive combat, and in Britain the population was directly affected by aerial attacks. Civilians have suffered from war throughout the ages. This time, however, as Taylor says, "The distinction between Front and Home almost disappeared under the impact of indiscriminate bombing." These factors may, at least for a time, have helped to inhibit the growth of a large literary myth. As time passed, certainly some smaller myths seem to have arisen.

Mythical or not, and whatever Hicks meant by "flourishing", was literature has definitely been booming. Harrisson's "cataract" of forty years ago has become a floodlike river. And the supply shows no signs of dwindling. A step to the nearest bookstall is usually enough to procure the latest comics in *The War Picture Library* (more than 1600 numbers so far) or in *Commando: War Stories in Pictures* (more than 1300 numbers). Halfway between comic and book one finds Marcus Allgood's *D-Day Dawson* (1977), "The Hero of Battle Picture Library". Indeed as far as shortish and fairly stereotyped novels are concerned, the tide was rising in the 1970s. In 1973, Charles Whiting set *The Destroyers* on their devastating path, in 1974 Klaus Netzen unleashed *The Killers* around John Standish (a combination of Campion, Bond, and The Man from ORGY) while Leslie McManus launched *Churchill's Vixens*; 1976 saw the first of Joe Hunter's books on the (unpalatable) feats of "Major Harrison" and his *Attack Force.* Compared to these, earlier series like those of *Biggles* and W.E. Johns's additional ones (*Worrals* and *King of the Commandos*)[15] or Dennis Wheatley's *Gregory Sallust* stories (covering his stupendous activities from 1939–45) appear as it were hand-made, fairly sturdy and homely, though they are as easy to read and as predictable.

Nor is this recent rash confined to secret agent and commando-

type stuff. Whereas with John Fuller's *Desert Glory* (1960) Spencer & Co's "World War II Series" of independent and solid stories had reached 91 numbers, the 1970s witnessed a proliferation of specialised one-author series. In 1976 David Williams started *Tank*, in 1978 Matthew Holden *Squadron*, ". . . the riveting series of aerial combat adventures", joining Frederick E. Smith's bulkier *633 Squadron* (1956) with its sequels. All these have a long way to go before nearing *The J.E. MacDonnell Sea Adventure Library* which already in 1968 numbered around 80 volumes. Moreover, there are book versions, assured of mass consumption, made after television series – notably the three-volume Ashton Saga of John Finch's Granada production *A Family at War:* Vol. 1 (Kathleen Barker) appearing in 1970, Vol. 2 (Jonathan Powell, with some very effective writing) in 1971, Vol. 3 (Roy Russell) in 1972. Another example is William Buchanan's *Pathfinder Squadron* (1972) after the Toledo series.[16]

"Tripe"? – most things mentioned so far would be called that by many. The term would be unjust to Fuller, and Finch's wartime panorama deserves a better name. And what shall one call authors like John Harris or Douglas Reeman who turn out, nearly year by year (something little known in the literature of the Great War) self-contained, solid, interesting and on the whole competently written novels? Hardly "great" in the sense applying to Dickens or Scott. Pondering "Prospects for the English Novel" in 1949, V.S. Pritchett claimed that "the gulf between the intelligent novels and the popular pulp has become wider than it has ever been".[17] Only a thorough history of the novel since 1939 could help decide on that. Meanwhile Pritchett's term is useful. Leaving aside "greatness", always best used for the past, one must insist that there are good and very good novels of the Second World War. A vast distance lies between *D-Day Dawson* and *The Cruel Sea*; but the "gulf" is filled with works many of which may well be described as "moderately good" (Hicks) or as "intelligent" novels. The whole gamut needs to be taken into account. What "tripe" is read by vast numbers of people cannot be a matter of indifference. Moreover the excellence of certain works is often best seen by comparison with thematically or structurally similar ones. And the strong appeal of the war as a subject in contemporary fiction is noteworthy in itself.

In a literary field so vast (and largely uncharted) as to make one doubt the possibility of ever reading half the relevant books,

drastic limitation might seem to commend itself, perhaps by region (e.g. Europe, the Far East) or by period (e.g. the war years, the seventies) or by Service (Army, RN, RAF). But such restrictions would entail losses in perspective outweighing the advantages. Moreover, the field itself, "war fiction", is by no means easily definable, and even if it were, discussing it in isolation would entail grave impoverishment, indeed distortion of the horizon. There is, indicated by Harrison's term "war books" (continuing a critical tradition arising from the Great War) much closely related prose literature, often excellent and representing a challenge to fiction. In view of these circumstances and the scope here available, a mainly exploratory and theoretical approach seems preferable at present. Thus the survey offers an inquiry into what *war* fiction may encompass with regard to the Second World War; a consideration of the general condition of war *fiction*; a review of the thematic context followed by a typological review of war fiction according to a fundamental aspect of structure and, by way of a sample, a look at a quality-linked aspect; finally, some reflections arising from factors of chronology.

The narrowest compass of war fiction would be, following Oldsey (note 9), "Aspects of Combat", concentrating on the fictional representation of battle and its effects on men. This, while feasible, would segregate one aspect of the war experience and preclude many important avenues of investigation. It would also tend to overlay features of reality: "combat" in this war was not so clear-cut. Riding on a bus through London, Rowe, the central character in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) reflects:

> Knightsbridge and Sloane Street were not at war, but Chelsea was, and Battersea was in the front line. It was an odd front line that twisted like the track of a hurricane and left patches of peace.

This is just one among many contemporary impressions of what Taylor later characterised as the near-merging of between Front and Home – a corollary of total warfare that could only be sustained as *The People's War* (Angus Calder, 1969).

John T. Frederick confines himself to "books of fiction that deal

primarily with the experience of men and women in the armed services during the war" (see note 7). This would seem to afford sufficient scope, but the problems of such a formula need to be explored. Cecil Lewis's *Pathfinders* (1943) e.g. deals "primarily" with the past lives of a Wellington bomber crew as reflected upon in turn during a flight to Kiel. Leslie Kark's *Red Rain* (1945) proceeds analoguously with a Lancaster and Munich. Both books have essential affinities with Rex Warner's *Why Was I Killed?* (1943), a (non-realist) composite portrait of British society which remains outside Frederick's terms as the characters (except perhaps the dead soldier) are not "in the armed services". Yet such works cannot be dissociated from the subject, however one defines it.

Considering the receiving end of air warfare, can one really draw a firm line separating "fighters" on the ground like those portrayed in William Sansom's "The Wall" (1941) or "Building Alive" (1946), Henry Green's *Caught* (1943), Nicholas Monsarrat's *Heavy Rescue* (1947) from those figuring e.g. in Hammond Innes's *Attack Alarm* (1941) which aims, "Within the framework of a thriller" at giving "some idea of the atmosphere of a fighter station during the Blitz"?

Furthermore, given a war that *was* partly fought "unconventionally" by spies, agents, small groups of saboteurs and raiders, often in co-operation with resistance movements in enemy-occupied territory, a war moreover of ideologies, cutting to some extent across nationalities, "thrillers" are hard to reject as part of war fiction. And there is no difference of principle between those fighting this kind of war at home and those doing it abroad – between, on the one hand, Nicholas Blake's (Cecil Day Lewis's) *The Smiler with the Knife* (1939), Michael Innes's (J.I.M. Stewart's) *The Secret Vanguard* (1940), Margery Allingham's *Traitor's Purse* (1941), Agatha Christie's *N or M?* (1941), Somerset Maugham's *The Hour before the Dawn* (1942), Greene's *Ministry of Fear* (weaving rings round many "professionals"), Priestley's *Blackout in Gretley* (1943) and, on the other hand, books like Wheatley's *V for Vengeance* (1942), Walker Taylor's *Spylight* (1943), Johns' *Gimlet Goes Again* (1944), Nevil Shute's *Most Secret* (1945), Alistair Maclean's *Where Eagles Dare* (1967), Leslie Thomas's (splendid) *Ormerod's Landing* (1978) and Harris's *The Fox From His Lair* (1978); to take two novels with the same intended assassination victim: between Geoffrey Household's

(just pre-war) *Rogue Male* (1939) and Heinz Kunz's *The Führer must die!* (1959) or, juxtaposing two novels by the same author, between Peter Leslie's *The Bombers* (1972) and *Killer Corps* (1971).

An intriguing case in this connection is Duff Cooper's *Operation Heartbreak* (1950), peculiarly linked to a documented incident. To divert German attention from the planned Allied invasion of Sicily (July 1943), Naval Intelligence ingeniously fabricated official letters pointing to Greece, and put them on the body of a dead British officer with a likewise fabricated identity, whose body was floated off the Spanish coast in April 1943. The German intelligence network functioned well, as expected; the deception came off.[18] What (clothed in decorous camouflage) Cooper does is to invent a life-story for the man who posthumously served his country in this bizarre fashion. He makes no thriller of it nor a combat story. The dull, disappointing career of Captain Willie Maryngton is a poignant portrait of an increasingly frustrated Simple Soul. It is moreover an ambivalent view of military and clubland Britain before and during the war as well as a (likewise unhappy) love story. That touches on another direction in which the subject's delimitation is problematic.

A "love interest" is, quite naturally, frequent in war fiction, and practically *de rigueur* in the thriller variety (of late, often juicily explicit) as well as essential to the type of romance Rachel Anderson treats under "The Relentless Lava of War" (1974). There are again many gradations. In many novels love and war are equally central, e.g. Dan Billany's superb *The Trap* (1943; publ. 1950), Lionel Shapiro's *The Sixth of June* (1955) and J.L. Carr's *A Season in Sinji* (1967); or, from complementary points of view: Dan Brennan's *Never Too Young* (1944); the pilot's) and Sarah Patterson's *The Distant Summer* (1976; the girl's). In other novels love is linked to the action but subordinate, as in Antony Trew's *Kleber's Convoy* (1974). In still others the war serves as background, with varying degrees of intensity: from Robert Grant's *A Clutch of Caution* (1975), unfolding the doomed love between a Conscientious Objector and a fighter ace's wife (literally) beneath the Battle of Britain sky, to the twisted passions Beryl Bainbridge sets against a less concrete backcloth of war in *The Dressmaker* (1974). Structurally viewed, there are besides stories of continuous co-presence others focussing on love and war in "blocks". Very sharply sequential is Eric Lambert's hard-bitten *The Veterans* (1954); an inverse sequence is found in Morris

West's *The Second Victory* (1958), won in the first phase of occupation in Austria. This romance also illustrates the problem of deciding at what point the war ends for fiction: the novel opens with the last killing of a British soldier in those parts and seems to lead away from the war (as does, definitely, Priestley's *Three Men in New Suits*, 1945); yet the war is, very concretely, omnipresent in the book.

A different block structure occurs in novels where the war action frames love, very strongly in Richard Mason's *The Wind Cannot Read* (1947); Michael Quinn's harrowing participation in two Burma campaigns encloses the pathetic story of the love between him and "Miss Wei", the Japanese instructress. Alexander Fullerton's *A Wren Called Smith* (1957), complicated by a fictional present frame, demonstrates the deceptiveness of appearances: despite the brief and gory war action this romp is in essence a "lonely island" adventure equally feasible with other circumstances to the key situation. In Monsarrat's *Leave Cancelled* (1945) on the contrary, the war as action is only there as past and threatening future to the consummate moment of love; but it is vital. So it is in Alexander Baron's *There's No Home* (1950), explicitly introduced with the words: "This is not a story of war but of one of those brief interludes in war when the almost-forgotten rhythms of normal living are permitted to emerge again . . .". The scene is Catania, at the beginning exhausted troops arrive for a rest, at the end they move forward again. Yet this "interlude" is inseparable from what surrounds it. The war impinges continually and forcefully, as in the ambulance incident witnessed by the Sergeant and his love.

With the exception of West's books all these works technically fit into Frederick's formula. It remains to probe it once more, with the emphasis not on the active "fighting" of all sorts that could be subsumed under Greene's "front line", but in a more general conspectus. Before the Germans conceived the wobbly "Festung Europa", people in Britain had come to think of themselves as living in a "Fortress": ever since the "colossal military disaster" (Churchill, 4 June 1940)[19] in France. Hewison's title *Under Siege* recalls this concept. An early, widely disseminated instance of its use is found in Priestley's BBC-*Postscript* of 23 June 1940.[20]

If one grants the image validity, one may reasonably argue that other defenders of the garrison must be considered alongside those in uniform as depicted, say, in Gerald Kersh's (pyrotechnic)

recreation of training in the Guards, *They Die with their Boots Clean* (1942), Alun Lewis's *The Last Inspection* (1943), Ernest Raymond's Home Guard novel *The Corporal of the Guards* (1943),[21] Howard Clewes's brilliant *Dead Ground* (1945) or Powell's three war novels within his long sequence: *The Valley of Bones* (1964), *The Soldier's Art* (1966) and *The Military Philosophers* (1968). An Army existence like that of Nick Jenkins involves no fighting,[22] and he personally encounters less danger than Sammy Rice, the weapons research scientist of Nigel Balchin's *The Small Back Room* (1943). From there one is lead to the factory people in Priestley's *Daylight on Saturday* (1943) or Monica Dickens's *The Fancy* (1944) and beyond them to all individuals whom fiction shows experiencing the war. One might begin with Jan Struther's *Mrs. Miniver* (1939, 1942) who in the autumn of 1939 felt "they weren't back to normal, and never would be" and continue with Evelyn Waugh's blithe cad Seal of *Put Out More Flags* (1942), L.P. Hartley's massive egotist Casson in the village struggle around *The Boat* (1949; equally massive), Ursula Bloom's gushing *Jenny WREN* (1944), the blighted and twisted existences of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover and other Stories* who embody a general feeling of insecurity, strain, abnormality and distortion that she acutely analysed in her "Author's Postscript" (October 1944), the staunch back-bencher Merriwell of Raymond's *Our Last Member* (1972), Henry Williamson's embittered Phillip Maddison, out of tune with his countrymen also in the last volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*,[23] Summers, the ex-soldier repatriated to the fortress with a peg leg and a bruised soul in Henry Green's *Back* (1946),[24] to end with Joanna, one of Muriel Spark's *Girls of Slender Means* (1963) who is killed when a house collapses through the explosion of a buried bomb in July 1945 – still during the war, but long after the fortress had been re-inforced, had broken out, had stormed and liberated what was not so much another "fortress" ("Festung") but, as Joseph Kessel termed it in 1943, "a prison":[25] France, and many other prisons besides.

A renunciation of the wider canvas to which these lines, indicated both by reality and fiction would lead, is very difficult to defend in theoretical terms. It can be upheld in practical terms, of course. All the more since a good portion of the picture has already been analysed by Cadogan and Craig, looking at "the experience of women and children in the two major wars of the twentieth century, as presented ... in fiction". They also contri-

bute a delimiting formula not quite congruent with Frederick's: Following a suggestion by Bowen they insist on a distinction between a "wartime" and a "*war* novel".[26] By "war" novels they probably mean "combat" novels (like Oldsey) and subsume everything else under "wartime". Clearly, there exists again a gliding scale of emphasis shift, as also with yet another, perhaps more adequate distinction: "wartime" designating fiction set in the war as environment, "war" designating fiction in which the war is a major subject. While keeping the wider conspectus in mind and emphasising its basic unity, it seems indicated here to complement in some measure the work of Cadogan and Craig by concentrating on soldiers in fiction about the Second World War. A second practical advantage of this restriction is that it allows inquiries particularly dependent on a rough comparability of materials.

On balance it appears defensible to pass over most British novels dealing with the war from the enemy side, such as Errol Brathwaite's *An Affair of Men* (1961), Earl Gray's *No Survivors* (1974) and Spencer Dunmore's *Ace* (1981). This whole area, interesting and significant in itself, warrants separate discussion. Nor are other countries lacking in this – Albert Maltz's *The Cross and the Arrow* (1944) is an American example, Chapter 3 discusses Alfred Andersch's *Winterspelt* (1974) as a German analogue.

On the other hand books like Comfort's *The Power House*, Newby's favourite, which depicts the French side 1939–41, or C.S. Forester's *The Good Shepherd* (1955), centred on the captain of an American escort destroyer, are close to the British experience and therefore directly relevant. The same applies to Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1952; transl. 1954). Nor could one do without Brennan's novels about the war in the air (even if he had not himself served with the RAF until 1943). They are essential to the subject.

So are the numerous contributions from the Dominions who stood by Britain in the hour of need – as a popular ANZAC song good-naturedly put it: "There'll always be an England/While Australia will be there."[27] It would be feasible and in some ways desirable to discuss these books in separate groups. However, these countries' war efforts were closely intertwined with Britain's; thousands of volunteers served in the British Forces[28] (including thousands from Eire whose official neutrality one finds as resented in fiction as it was in fact), and in many if not most

campaigns entire units from the various Forces were involved jointly.[29] So there is something to be said for discussing the literary reflections of this situation intermingled with the British. The only alternative in our present context would be to leave them out altogether – and that could not be justified.

As it takes its subject matter from a historical event – really a vast conglomerate of events – it is not surprising that most fiction dealing with the Second World War is realist. Briefly to characterise successful realist fiction we may adopt Harrisson's (incidental) definition of literature, "the reconstruction and arrangement of life" as verisimilitude of plot and life-likeness of characters and environment. Furthermore, as in all fiction, unity and intensity which, notwithstanding old and new blurring devices (*ars est celare artem*) we recognise, on reflection, as properties not of life, of reality, but of the aesthetic experience. Unity derives mainly from "rearrangement". Intensity derives mainly from the language. Without a use of words apt to evoke whatever impression the author wants to communicate, the whole falls flat; the touchstone of literary quality is, ultimately, style. It goes nearly without saying that a long and continuous tradition in this kind of fiction has conditioned many readers to accept and appreciate variations and partial deviations from this set of conventions.

In war fiction, one limit of realism is transgressed by the speculative projection of what might have happened, if it contradicts the generally known course of history. No buttressing by possibility and probability or historical scholarship avails in this case. Kenneth Macksey's *Invasion: The German Invasion of England, July 1940* (1980) has a peculiar air of unreality, fictitiousness about it.[30] This is brought out even more when one contrasts it e.g. with Netzen's second *Killers* volume, called *The Winston Churchill Murder* (1974) and Jack Higgins's vastly superior *The Eagle has landed* (1975), both thrillers about (imagined) unsuccessful attempts to silence "That Voice", as Vere Hodgson described it on 8 May 1945, "which had steered us from our darkest hours to the daylight of deliverance."[31]

The effect of realism is not eroded in such novels but by others, straining the conventions in different directions: that of snobbish whimsicality as exhibited by Curzio Malaparte (esp. in *La Pelle*,