

A dramatic landscape photograph serves as the background for the book cover. In the lower-left foreground, a person is seen from behind, standing on a dirt path and looking out over a dark, flat field. The horizon is marked by a line of trees. The sky is filled with large, dark, heavy clouds, with a patch of lighter blue sky visible in the upper left. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

AMERICAN WAR POETRY

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by

Lorrie Goldensohn

A M E R I C A N
W A R
P O E T R Y

An Anthology

EDITED BY

Lorrie Goldensohn



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AMERICAN WAR POETRY



PREFACE

This anthology shapes a compact portrait of Americans at war, from the early days of their history up to the present time. Many other anthologies of war poetry focus on European poets or solely on English and American war poetry, or on the poems of a particular American war. This book stretches from 1746 to 2004, beginning with a poem about a skirmish with Indians in a colonial meadow and ending with poems about the desert wars in Iraq. Within each war, I have arranged the poems in chronological order by the poet's birth date, thus throwing into relief the long arc of a war's impact. Besides offering insight into what might be an American way of going to war, the poetry also gives a sense of how nearly four centuries of warfare continue to affect the human beings of a multiethnic society—the soldier and civilian, the old and young, male and female—as they find themselves in the age-old grip of collective violence.

It could not be easy to identify the best work on such an enormous topic. Many fine poems were also out of reach for this anthology, being too long or too expensive to reprint. I tried to limit the selection to those poems showing literary merit as well as a social, historical, or military relevance. And yet these qualities do not always readily combine: one poem or another would offer a kind of compelling interest that would tip the balance toward inclusion, as the urgency, originality, or historic texture of its observation sometimes outran the poem's performance as a literary object. In order to give the subject of war its natural amplitude, I found myself committed to an ever-widening definition of style. This meant giving the nod to less as well as more familiar writers: those writers drawn to write well about war were not always those who dominate the literature elsewhere. Occasionally, I have selected poems whose familiarity, rather than excellence, would appear to have earned their place in an anthology

like this one; yet it seems to me that an affection for something we memorized early in life is something we should not give up easily. It may be that reading—instead of singing—the familiar stanzas of Francis Scott Key's "Defence of Fort McHenry," better known as "The Star Spangled Banner," or even taking on "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the context of other poems of its era will restore fresh and unexpected meanings.

Still, I took fewer poems from periods in which a strong canon of more than antiquarian interest was not yet formed. There were more poems of higher quality covering the larger engagements like the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam. While World War I sent an army of two million American soldiers abroad, the greater volume of significant poems about that war can be found in the work of English poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon: the preeminence of their poetry marks a literary period just converging with the general onset and rise of American modernism. A chronologically loose but large group of poems by and about Indians deals with the long, persistent war to subjugate the native peoples of a continent. This work runs like a subcutaneous layer through the whole of the national narrative, so it seemed right that a hefty section of poems should be allotted to these struggles. Poems by or about Indians in the colonial wars or wars of the twentieth century are under those headings.

The Civil War, our first industrial war, brought on proportionately and absolutely the heaviest casualties in one war, and this war remains to the present a cause for national mourning and avid analysis. World War II meant a lengthy and truly global mobilization against fascism, and nicknamed "The Good War," it became the war about whose necessity most Americans agree. In contrast, the Vietnam War offered defeat, stalemate, and divided allegiance on the home front; even today, the issues of this war are returned to and refought with each successive show of American military force. These three wars have taken a prolonged measure of our national consciousness, stimulating a poetry that increasingly occurs in a breadth of styles and that voices sharply different perspectives. Yet every war, big or little, long or short, is charged with its own peculiar mix of social and geopolitical realities, visible in some way in the poetry of that time, or in retrospect. The present outpouring of work in response to the Persian Gulf wars is yet so diffuse and so immediately upon us as to defy adequate evaluation. And yet the attentive anthologist, like someone removing a finger from a hole in the dike, must make some attempt to catch or contain the spill.

Each war has brought poems that show how Americans have thought about soldiers, and the relation of soldiers to a democratic republic whose founders frequently expressed an aversion to standing armies and the militarist ambitions of rulers. Yet poetry from Joel Barlow on reveals the pressure to dominate the continent and to thwart the imperial expansion of foreign powers, or to contest the holdings of the indigenous native. From the first guerilla engagements using badly fed, thinly clad, and ill-armed farmers, to the latest glittering deployments of men and machines, American warfare has both changed and stayed the same. A spread of poems over more than three centuries cannot help but show this, as well as show how the resistance to war, placed against an equally loyal support for it, has come to frame a permanent tension in the war poem. In addition, as the thirteen colonies moved from the defensive posture of an agricultural society to become an aggressive and industrial America, and as the capabilities of modern warfare continue to extend the killing range and arena of devastation over time, distance, and population, our thinking about war as a legitimate means to political ends has necessarily altered. Any poetry of worth will reflect how these changes have stunned and galvanized the people who have endured our wars.

The American war poem, beginning with a national identity yet to be defined, and rooted in the starvation, hardship, and dogged will of revolutionary independence, often evinces an unabashed and optimistic patriotism and a deep love of country. Yet even in the early poems holding to such feelings, the moral conflicts that trouble the unequivocal acceptance of war are evident. Passages here and there point to the hot debates that have always smoldered beneath the fabric of a war, about who in a democracy should fight, and when and why, and at what cost. The first poems in this anthology sketch the coming of those questions and the testing of our national goals—goals that were set even before the Civil War and that climax in the elegiac reflections of Walt Whitman, who even while grieving remained a scribe of the spectacular and sensual aspects of war.

The record of battlefield advance and retreat, the daring and courage of leaders and men, as well as the despoliation of territory, the experience of prison camp and the making of refugees, the annihilation and wounding of human flesh, the grieving aftermath—all have wrung from the poets of war a wide response, a response that has also varied with the circumstances of a given war. While a longing for and celebration of heroic courage and a willingness to give “the last full measure” have remained

constant, these older attitudes are increasingly accompanied by a sense of helpless, saddened vulnerability and by a more detailed recognition of war's underside of pitiless death and destruction. More than half of the poems chosen here result from direct witness of war. Many other poems bring in the memory of war's lingering aftermath, adding the thinking of those who are still assaulted in their own lives by the spreading injury that particular conflicts have imposed. While it is mostly young men who go to war, we see that war's effects are felt by everyone.



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clean. I am also especially grateful to four previous editors of war poetry. W. D. Ehrhart's *Carrying the Darkness* first set the standard for Vietnam War poetry, followed by his subsequent and unmatched collection of Korean War poetry in *Retrieving Bones*, a volume of Korean War literature that he coedited with Philip K. Jason. Cary Nelson's collection of Spanish Civil War poetry in *The Wound and the Dream* was unique and indispensable, as was Harvey Shapiro's *Poets of World War II* and Richard Marius's *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry*. Additionally, volumes 1 and 2 of *The New Anthology of American Poetry*, edited by Steven Gould Axelrod, Camille Roman, and Thomas Travisano were invaluable.

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