

Book Reviews

Hell's Foundations: A Social History of the Town of Bury in the Aftermath of the Gallipoli Campaign. By Geoffrey Moorhouse. New York: Holt, 1992. 256 pp. \$24.95.

The Middle Parts of Fortune. By Frederic Manning. With an Introduction by Paul Fussell. New York: Penguin, 1990. xxi + 247 pp. \$8.95.

As Geoffrey Moorhouse argues in his introduction to *Hell's Foundations*, the social—as opposed to military—history of the Great War has only begun to be written. It is time, Moorhouse suggests, that historians move beyond the battles and campaigns to examine the aftereffects of the Great War on its veterans, and the various rituals through which communities commemorated and mythologized military events. To see the value of this approach, one need look no further than Moorhouse's own unique and fascinating book, which traces the still-resounding reverberations of the Gallipoli campaign within the English community of Bury, once the regimental home of the Lancaster Fusiliers.

Of course, such an "opening up" of First-World-War history greatly assists literary scholars interested in Robert Graves and his generation. In the chapters that describe Bury during the interwar decades, for example, Moorhouse provides a sorely needed context for English First-World-War novels and memoirs by documenting the economic, psychological, and, in many cases, physical hardships endured by veterans. It is no coincidence that the book recounts numerous suicides, including, for example, that of Albert Forrest, whose wife subsequently reported that "[h]er husband . . . had come back from the Great War after service with the regiment, a changed man" (198). Forrest killed himself in 1938—twenty-three years after Gallipoli. Though Moorhouse shows that many men attempted to recapture the excitement and comradeship of wartime by joining veterans' organizations, he stresses that former soldiers of this nostalgic variety were, in fact, the minority. A far greater number of veterans lost touch with their regiment entirely. Others suffered from severe depression, culminating in suicide years—sometimes even decades—after the Armistice.

Consistent with his notion of using military events merely as the starting point for research, Moorhouse devotes little space to the Gallipoli campaign. After establishing the traditional ties between the Fusiliers and their host community, he moves quickly through the regiment's ordeal at Cape Helles. Yet *Hell's Foundations* still manages, in a chapter of only 20 pages to capture the horror of Gallipoli more vividly than many works devoted exclusively to the campaign. Of the slaughter at V beach, where a steamship packed with troops was run ashore in an effort to surprise the enemy, Moorhouse writes,

The Turks, waiting for the invaders in an old castle, did nothing until the cutters and the collier grounded; then they put down a hail of machine-gun fire, a mixture of lead and incendiary shells. The men in the cutters were almost wiped out, and so were the first troops to emerge from the River Clyde, mown down as they ran along the gangways, body falling over body and tumbling into the water, where wounded Dubliners had already sunk under the weight of their packs and been drowned. . . . A British airman who flew overhead shortly after the disaster began, reported that the sea for fifty yards from the shore was 'absolutely red with blood' (62).

The remaining four-fifths of *Hell's Foundations* trace how this military fiasco affected a Lancashire mill town two thousand miles away, and cover a mammoth block of time: from 1915, when the first news of disaster began to trickle home, to 1990, when only one local survivor of the Dardanelles campaign remained alive. Appropriately, Moorhouse touches on a wide range of topics in these pages, including the role of the local Anglican church in the war effort, the bellicose recruiting tactics of Bury's chief landlord, the 17th Earl of Derby, the construction of local war memorials, the post-war collapse of the Lancashire cotton industry, and the myriad individual destinies of Bury's returning soldiers. Perhaps most profoundly, he explores how the *esprit de corps* of the regiment spilled over into the town, resulting in civic rituals that continue, even seventy-eight years later, to keep the memory of Gallipoli alive.

If *Hell's Foundations* has weakness, it is that it treats this compelling subject in only 256 pages, minus the bibliography and index, leaving many relevant issues only superficially examined. For instance, when documenting the harassment doled out by the women of Bury to any males suspected of dodging military service, Moorhouse remarks,

It was as though the helpless in this war, the people who were disqualified from fighting because of their age, their infirmity or their sex, needed to lash out at someone, anyone, in order to confound their own impotence. (96)

This statement fits in well with the male literary mythology of the Great War, with the scathing portraits of home-front women as harpies found in *Death of a Hero* or *Good-bye to All That*. But does it tell the whole story? How many women from Bury, one might ask, actually followed the men off to war, to serve as V.A.D.s near the front? Were there any who, as Sandra Gilbert has suggested, felt liberated by the sudden absence of men?

Yet these unanswered questions perhaps point less to inadequacies within Moorhouse's study, which should not be expected to cover everything, than to the rich material still to be mined in the "many areas of social history that lie adjacent to military events" (13). Though the reader may wish that Moorhouse's book were longer—a rare and complementary response to a historical text—it remains one of the most rewarding First-World-War studies to appear in years.

Just as *Hell's Foundations* reveals entire continents of unexplored territory within the social history of the Great War, the recent and long-overdue republication of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929) considerably broadens the range of First-World-War fiction now in print and reminds us of the vastness and variety of the literary territory. When set beside more-established classics such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *A Farewell to Arms*, Manning's surprisingly introspective novel seems to come from a different century—and a different war. Filled with elegant Victorian sentences, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is the kind of war novel that Matthew Arnold might have written. Consider, for example, the "high seriousness" of this passage:

The problem which confronted them all equally, though some were unable or unwilling to define it, did not concern death so much as the affirmation of their own will in the face of death; and once the nature of the problem was clearly stated, they realized that its solution was continuous, and could never be final. Death set a limit to the continuance of one factor in the problem, and peace to that of another; but neither of them really affected the nature of the problem itself. (184)

Given the polemical nature of most First-World-War writing, such calm and analytical prose comes as a shock. So too does Manning's obvious lack of interest in the issues that obsessed his contemporaries. While other writers struggled to understand the Great War as a terrifyingly modern event, as a conflict completely unlike any other, Manning emphasized that the "War to End All War" was merely the latest manifestation of an age-old evil. War, he writes in his Prefatory Note, is a "peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime" (xxi). Yet Manning also suggests, paradoxically, that this "punishment," a product of original sin, arouses tenderness as well as depravity in its victims; thus his book is, on one level, a homage to the kind of intense comradeship that the veterans' organizations in Bury hoped to perpetuate. War

emerges from *The Middle Parts of Fortune* as a "mystery" that embraces every human contradiction.

Fortunately, Manning develops these weighty ideas through a deceptively simple story that includes few of the stock characters and scenes normally found in First-World-War fiction. Three main sections emerge. In the first, we follow Manning's autobiographical protagonist Pte. Bourne as his battalion regroups after an assault at the Somme. While any other writer would probably emphasize the terrible ironies of the Great Offensive, Manning dwells, instead, on the psychological condition of Bourne and his fellow survivors, who are exhausted not only by the physical effort of battle, but by the strain of having mastered their own fear. In the second section, which comprises the bulk of the novel, the battalion enjoys a rest from the front line and reestablishes its sense of community. Here, Manning meticulously recreates day-to-day life within the enlisted ranks of a New Army battalion—the scavenging for provisions and billets, the casual interaction between N.C.O.s and private soldiers, and the ambivalent relationship between men who have been "over the top" and those who have not. Inevitably, this idyll comes to an end; and, in the final section, the battalion re-enters the trenches and participates in a shattering, climactic attack.

To describe *The Middle Parts of Fortune* in any greater detail would only ruin it for first-time readers, who should be numerous now that Penguin has released this new paperback edition. Why then has this novel, which Hemingway described as the "finest and noblest book of men in war," failed to achieve the prominence of texts such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Good-bye to All That*? The reasons perhaps derive less from Manning's intellectual and occasionally turgid prose than from his disturbing and unfashionable themes. By making war seem natural and inevitable and by showing that the experience of combat produces both savagery and nobility in soldiers, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* departs from the reigning literary mythology of the Great War. A novel so lacking in indignation over the horrors of modern warfare also invites criticism as an implicit defense of militarism or aggression.

Yet Manning does not glorify war, nor argue, as Ernst Jünger did, that the psychological changes aroused by combat are liberating or desirable; he merely reminds us that wars are fought by human beings and sustained by impulses lodged deep within ourselves. "A man might rave against war," Manning writes, "but war, from its myriad faces, could always turn towards him one, which was his own" (239). Hopefully, the Penguin edition of *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, enhanced by Paul Fussell's astute introduction, will finally bring this novel the wide audience that it deserves.

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Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community by Douglas Kerr. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993. xi + 346 pp.

This fascinating, deeply researched and well-written study argues strongly for recognition of Owen as a fully fledged modern poet. Thus, Kerr takes a position beyond a predecessor, Dominic Hibberd, to whose work he makes due acknowledgement. Hibberd places Owen as a transitional figure 'between the nineteenth century and modernism' (*Owen the Poet*, 1986, p. x). Both critics are, of course, far from Yeats's notorious exclusion of Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Kerr, without ever explicitly confronting Yeats' rejection, implicitly does so, finding in Owen not only the essential quarrel with self, but a language in which Yeats should have recognized much more than 'blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick':

The army made Owen a modern poet. In an eerie way, the army itself was modernist in its language, and belongs in company or relationship with contemporary modernizers—Yeats, who wanted his writing to be more masculine...(p. 168)

So Owen, for whom it had been much to be 'held peer by the Georgians,' should now be admitted to the select modernist company of not only Yeats, but Pound and Eliot, renewers of language who, like Owen, disentangled themselves from subtle Romantic bonds.

Owen's modern vision was schooled in France where, as Kerr acknowledges Hibberd has shown, he encountered late Romanticism under the aegis of his first poetic mentor, Laurent Tailhade. Kerr stresses Owen's becoming aware in that period of the conflict between tradition and modernity, having shown in the first two parts of his study, 'Family' and 'Church,' how personal experience had predisposed him to adopt the alienated, outsider's stance—in the domestic frustrations, educational disappointments, and social alienation of his earlier years...related to his Dunsden apostasy, when declaring his independence had meant refusing a comforting faith....' (331). In his closing chapter, 'Soldiers and Poets,' Kerr further underlies Owen's candidacy for adversarial alienation—a homosexual neurasthenic with decadent continental tastes, unpatriotic, etc. (326). He has, however, earlier noted that the elements of Owen's alienation were typical enough among young men of his time (142).

Unimpressed like Yeats by the claims of war poetry, Eliot wrote, 'A poem might happen to a very young man: but a poem is not poetry—/That is a life' ('A Note on War Poetry'). (We might remind ourselves that Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' was written in 1910, his 23rd year, while Owen's efflorescence belongs to his 24th and 25th years, in 1917-18). Kerr's aim, in tracing Owen's 'discourse history' (331) and illustrating how it is 'inscribed in his language' (332), is to show how deeply implicated is Owen's brief but intense experiential and literary life in his mature war poetry. His study is the history of a modern poet's forced maturation. His most interesting chapter,

'English Elegies' (one provisional title for his collected poems, which Owen decided against), places Owen's 'disconsolate' elegies in relation to the elegiac tradition, finding his work 'in the last year or so of his life...the God-forsaken *In Memoriam* of his generation' (287): it is again worth remembering that the earlier poems of Tennyson's sequence date from 1833, his 24th year. Whereas Tennyson, while expressing anxiety and doubt, could draw upon a community of feeling in finding his way to a hopeful, if belated resolution, Owen's urgency and trials were greater, reflected in Kerr's image of attrition: 'he is in grim, covert, antagonistic dialogue with the genre' (290). The argument is strongly supported with intensive readings of the 'polyphonic style' of 'Futility,' tracing its 'four discursive dimensions, of family, church, army, and poetry' (288), and 'Disabled' (297-309). The method is adumbrated in Kerr's Introduction, with an anti-Romantic, alienated reading of 'Exposure' (7-14), and continued throughout, the 'history' interspersed with applied readings of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth,' 'translating the speech and imagery of one community into that of another...one of Owen's favourite rhetorical devices' (82); of various poems whose harsher style illustrates how 'when the army became available to Owen as a literary subject it gave his writing a field of material observation and at the same time a new quality of terseness, where before he had tended to luxuriance' (159). This tendency, Kerr is aware, was never utterly vanquished, but he confines instances to asides and footnotes.

In his inevitable discussion of Owen's relationship with Sassoon, Kerr gives an original turn to the practice of playing these poets off against each other in a way that promotes Owen's distinctive stature as alienated modern. He observes that whereas for Sassoon, though he was no shallow patriot, there was a valued community (his 'pastoral') whose benign continuity had suffered the War's 'rude interruption' (328), but to which he would return, for Owen the war was a continuation by other means of his life's 'struggle against a series of dominating tyrants' (33). Ultimately, 'coming of age' in the modern world (63), Owen had no 'community' to hark back to nostalgically, or anticipate hopefully rejoining, and such ameliorating positives are absent from his more single-minded poetry. Kerr points, in both Sassoon's war-time collections, to the nostalgia for the idyll, the pieces that promise 'the pastoral may be regained,' and describes Sassoon's 'postwar writing,' in 'verse and prose,' as 'a poignant effort to make that idyll live again' (329). While this is broadly a just distinction, it is questionable whether Sassoon believed, by the end of the War, that it had only interrupted his fortunate Edwardian afternoon. Like Blunden, he was deeply traumatized by War experience, and his post-war writing was largely a process of therapy for self and others, a deliberately sought and constructed nostalgia or 'dream': '[I] designed it [*The Old Century*] as an anodyne for my fellow-sufferers,' with a worse war looming; 'as regards the limitations of my recollections they were deliberate and consistent....' (see my *Sigfried Sassoon*, 1966, *passim*, my Introduction to the

Faber & Faber reprint of *The Old Century*, 1968, and my edition of S.S., *Letters to a Critic*, Kent Editions, 1976).

Owen's 'aim,' Kerr asserts, 'was to rewrite the language of War' (139). Besides initiating us comprehensively into the making of that language, Kerr affirms Owen's final entry into 'a community of sympathy' (179)—the 'secret nation' at

the Front (182: where he discusses 'Smile, Smile, Smile,' as Owen's last written poem), whose 'good morale,' demanded by 'The Disciplines of the Wars,' becomes a love 'The War both created and destroyed' (204). Thus, war made Owen a modern poet whose passion—to turn Yeats's words against him once more—was reality.

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What emerges clearly from Quinn's balanced use of diaries and letters (and a great deal of unpublished material is used, contextualised and applied in this book) and close readings of the poems, is that the absence of war, perhaps unsurprisingly, brings its own difficulties. For Graves, it is the persistence of a neurosis which merged the guilt of the survivor with the disability of the victim; for Sassoon, it is the removal of a poetic 'raison d'être' of political or protest verse. If the unthinking patriotism of the Home Front is a specific and specifiable target, then the diffuse and maddening post-war apathy proved more of a block for both poets. By focusing on a decade of transition, hesitation and experimentation, this book offers a welcome reevaluation of a formative but largely unred area of their output, salvaging a great deal of fine poetry for examination and drawing out a vivid and detailed picture of a restless, often directionless period.

Quinn integrates discussion of a wide range of poems and prose writings with an unobtrusive attention to the individual circumstances of each poet, following the threads of continuity, as well as the jolts of discontinuity, between collections. While Graves, for instance, might have attempted, in swift succession, love poetry, satire, nursery rhyme and 'philosophical' verse (the influence of Basil Liddell Hart on Graves's 'relativist' phrase is well-documented here), what might at first appear as a positively protean ease with different subjects, forms and techniques are also examined as a facet of restlessness and unease: of a lack of poetic 'purpose,' Sassoon, for his part, laments the post-war loss of mission, 'faced a world with no cut and dried' (his words) issues, delves in and out of socialist politics, while maintaining a high profile in London's literary 'beau monde.' Quinn gives us the background necessary to understand how war both shocks the Georgian sensibility (the prevailing one in both poets' early careers) and, especially in Sassoon's case, paradoxically preserves and refines it. Attentiveness

The Great War and the Missing Muse: The Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. Patrick Quinn. Susquehanna University Press, 1994. 297pp. Hb L34.50.

This book combines critical commentary with biographical contextualisation to produce a vivid and convincing account of the poetry and post-war adjustments of two poets whose work of the 1920's has received little critical attention. Beginning with their respective juvenilia and pre-war poetry, Quinn meticulously traces the development of both writers up to and including their parallel turn to prose 'autobiography', Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928) and Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929). In the process, Quinn argues for something more than a mere coincidence of autobiographical impulses: while Sassoon's return to an idyllic pre-war England, and perhaps only an 'England of the mind' in *Memoirs*, and Graves's leave-taking anthology of English hypocrisy and cant might have cemented the growing rift between the two writers, both books mark the beginning of two very different forms of exile.

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to nature and landscape details reemerges in the poems of *Counter-Attack*, where Sassoon opens with Georgian pastoral lyricism ('bird-sung joy', 'grass-green thickets', etc.) only to confront the reader with a 'land where all/Is ruin', whose only fauna the 'Tanks [that] creep and topple forward to the wire'. The war intrudes upon and scatters the poem's Georgianisms in a miniature reenactment of the way in which the war intrudes upon and scatters Sassoon's poetic idiom. What gives his war poetry its comparatively greater authority than Graves's is not only its 'short, sharp shock' of satirical barb, but the way in which the pastoral mode is conscripted into the task of describing the horrors of war. A sensibility which, in the absence of war, plays host to comforting depictions of bucolic ease survives its relocation to the wasteland of the trenches intact in several important ways. The poetic apparatus that gives us poems like 'Haunted' or 'Before Day 1909' is, paradoxically, still operative to altogether different effect in such poems as 'Attack' or 'Prelude: The Troops'. This is something to which Quinn contributes a great many insights, and the section of the book devoted to Sassoon unearths and explicates a lot of excellent poetry.

One of the most satisfying aspects of the book is the way in which it places every poem within the overall context of the poet's development, and Quinn is unafraid, where necessary, to find certain poems, while formatively significant, critically wanting. (On pp. 156-57, for example, Sassoon's 'October' is singled out for deservedly harsh treatment, but Quinn's analysis serves also to expose the mechanisms which make the better poetry successful.) Indeed, after a close examination of Graves's 'relativist' attitude, what Quinn calls his 'agnostic stance' in *The Poetic Unreason* and the poetry of that period, the author seems refreshingly unwilling to share the view of his subject that there is no such thing as 'good' or 'bad' poetry: Quinn's impartial close readings not only elucidate the good poems but derive some productive insights into the why's and wherefore's of the bad.

While the book gains direction from treating these two very different lives and poetic careers in parallel, it succeeds in providing the reader with an account of each writer's early work from which very little is missing. The constant drawing on biographical information helps to thread together what, especially in the case of Graves, appears as a series of only tenuously related poetic experiments (*Over the Brazier*, *Country Sentiment*, *Whipperginny* and *Mock Beggar Hall*) and helps to provide a framework in which these can be followed. In particular, Quinn charts Graves's struggle with and ultimate rechanneling of his neurasthenic symptoms into poetry, his attempt to provide a space for their productive working-out, as well as Sassoon's homoerotic post-war love poems and their early manifestations, in the guise of loyalty, soldierly bravery and indignation at the human cost of conflict, in the earlier war poems. The image of the two 'outsiders' emerges: Graves embracing the social, intellectual and poetic freedom of his association with Laura

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