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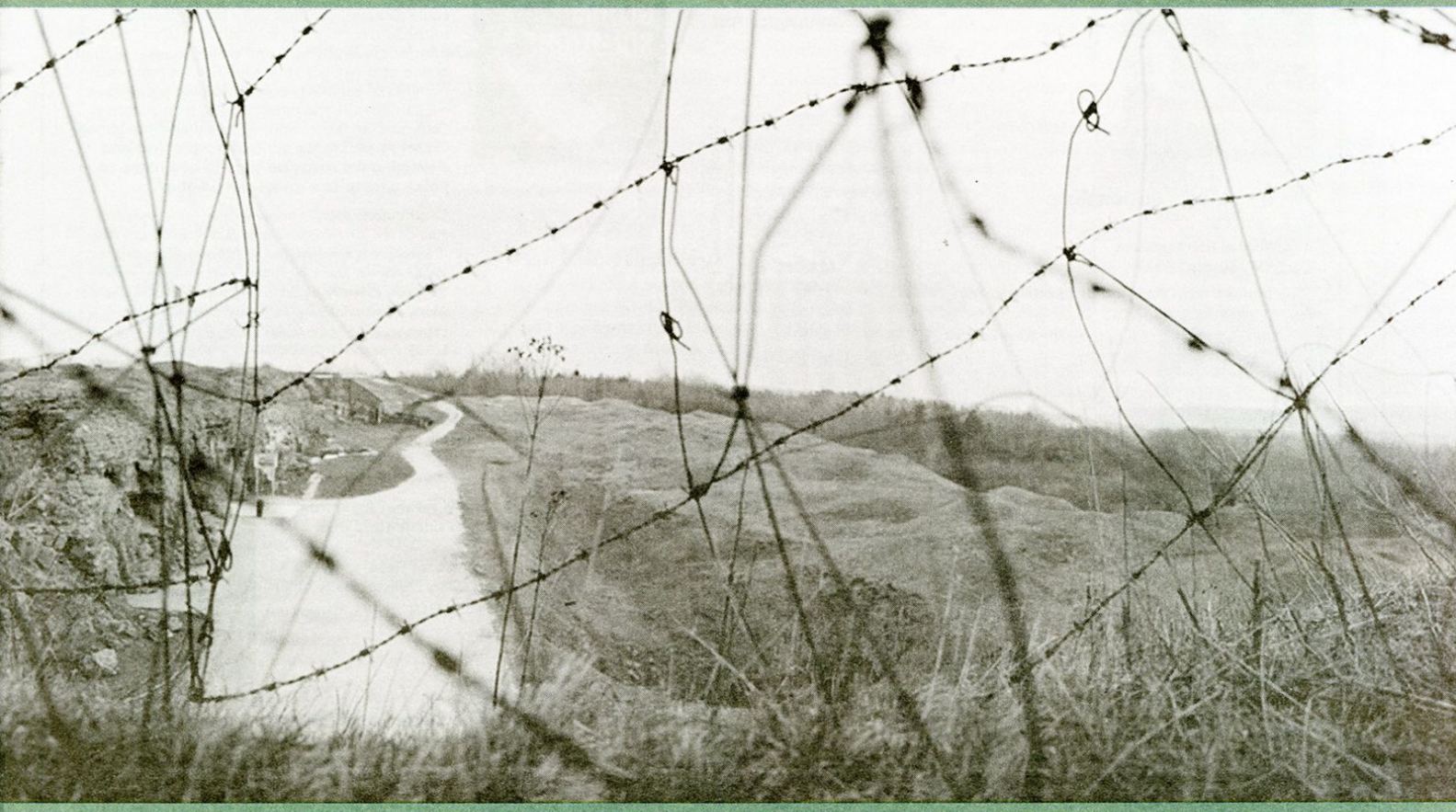
November 5, 2004



TERRY CASTLE

The First World War: an Uncanny Vision of the Future

JOHN HORGAN

Surveys of American Innovation

ANDREW FURMAN

Measure Professors' Real Service

The Chronicle Review

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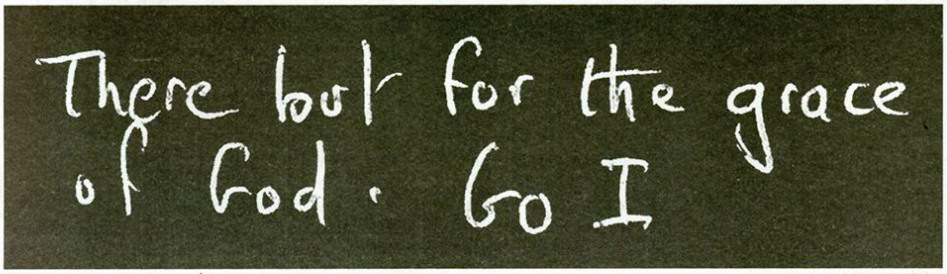

QUOTATION PHOTOGRAPHED FROM VISITORS' BOOK AT A WORLD WAR I MEMORIAL IN FRANCE — JANE ALDEN STEVENS

"PARIS, JUNE," 1911 (GLASS NEGATIVE) ASSOCIATION DES AMIS DE JACQUES-HENRI LARTIGUE, PARIS — JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE

On the cover: Fort Douaumont, France, by Jane Alden Stevens

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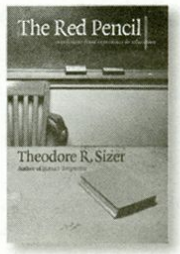
The Red Pencil

Convictions from Experience in Education

Theodore R. Sizer



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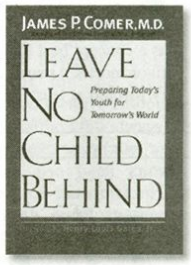

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE ALDEN STEVENS

Chevaux-de-Frise, Butte de Vauquois, France

Our First View of the End of the World

By Terry Castle

The photographs accompanying this article are from *Tears of Stone: World War I Remembered* (Ohio Arts Council and the University of Cincinnati, 2004), by Jane Alden Stevens, a professor of fine art at the University of Cincinnati. Over the course of two years, Stevens made several trips to Belgium, Germany, England, and France, documenting the war's impact on the landscape and visiting cemeteries, memorials, and sculptures. *Tears of Stone* is available through Photo-Eye Books.

WHAT does it mean to *remember* the First World War? Over the past few years I have been trying to get my students—mostly 19- or 20-year-old Stanford English majors—to learn about, think about, reckon with, *remember* the Great War. I have been spectacularly unsuccessful. My latest failure came just this spring, in an honors seminar on Virginia Woolf. We were reading *Jacob's Room,* the hero of which dies on the Western Front, and I suspected—correctly—that my students knew little about the war or its repercussions. (Make of it what you will, but all of the students except one were female.)

I set out to give them my usual nasty brutish overview, complete with some rough-'em-up Powerpoints to shock them into attention: Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife dead in their coffins; the idiot kaiser in his skull-helmet; pathetic mobs of Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Germans crowding into recruiting stations in 1914-15; Ypres and Verdun in ruins; trenches and craters and bombed-out churches; and of course lots of dead and dismembered bodies. Boneyards and muck on a sunny Palo Alto morning! This is why, I gravely informed the students, Woolf gave the doomed protagonist of *Jacob's Room* the last name of *Flanders.*

When their papers came in, one of the more intelligent young women in the group (or so I had judged her) had produced some garbled late-night drivel about how traumatic it was for Woolf to see the peaceful English countryside devastated by trench warfare during the First World War. Now I know academic piety insists that one hold one's students dear, even when they exhibit the most shameful ignorance and inattention. But for several days afterward I felt only rage at the student and a fairly mind-boggling hatred for my job. Why did *I* have to deal with such obtuseness? How could a seemingly good student get it all so bollixed up? Why did these intelligent Stanford girls (their hip-huggers and pedicures and blonde ponytails notwithstanding) have to be so *blatantly* oblivious? What was the point (*sputter*) of trying to teach them anything?

An overreaction, to be sure (though I wonder how prevalent, if taboo to mention, such feelings are in the world of college teaching). I've got various personal connections to the First World War—a great-uncle killed during combat in France in 1918, a childhood spent on the southeastern English coast near an old World War I military cemetery—and I've always taken a deep, even proprietorial interest in the war. I've read too much about it to feel indifferent. I share the view of H.M. Tomlinson, who in 1930 called the war "the greatest disturbance of mankind since the glaciers pushed our hunting forefathers down to the South." It seems indissolubly linked—politically and existentially—to everything that has gone wrong in the world ever since, including present-day calamities in the Middle East. My student's mental chaos—her palpable failure to *remember* what I'd told her—caused me pain.

Now a few months later, having just read a raft of new books on World War I, I feel a little more forgiving. Since the appearance of the first official histories in the 1920s, the First World War has inspired a body of scholarship and interpretation virtually unmatched in erudition, vastness, and moral depth. (Only the scholarship on the Holocaust rivals it, perhaps, in scope and seriousness.) Some very great historians indeed—Winston Churchill, Fritz Fischer, Luigi Albertini, A.J.P. Taylor, Martin Gilbert, John Keegan, Jay Winter—have written books on the conflict; hundreds of others have made major contributions. Yet general interest in the Great War remains undiminished. As the centenary of the whole wretched debacle approaches—and no, August 2014 is not that far off—the flow of scholarly volumes dealing with the war's military, political, economic, technological, sociocultural, artistic, and psychic ramifications will no doubt increase tenfold.

I'm glad, because in my experience just about any book dealing with the First World War is worth reading. The subject has traditionally inspired eloquence, brilliance, even nobility in its chroniclers. Not so surprising, perhaps: Between 1914 and 1921, it has been estimated, the war was directly responsible for the deaths of 9 million to 10 million combatants, produced at least 3 million widows and 6 million orphans, and, if we take the global flu epidemic of 1918-19 as part of its attendant ghastliness, resulted in an overall "population deficit" of 60 million people. (As David Stevenson observes in *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, the conflict left in its wake "a memorial architecture unparalleled since ancient Egypt.") To write about disaster on this obscene scale one has to stop puttering and preening and engage with some imposing questions. Who or what brought it on? Was it necessary? Why did it last so long? Can we learn anything from it?

EVEN the most profound accounts of the war, I've come to realize, can leave one feeling drained and confused. Something about the horror of the event—its sheer bloated repulsiveness—produces a cognitive impasse, a scrambling of mental circuits. The brainpan just isn't big enough to take it all in. Dutifully sifting through the books discussed here, I've felt at times as weirdly dumbed down as my student—unable to keep things straight, to get a fix on certain basic facts. How did the number of military deaths break down among the different Great Powers, for example? I've just read seven books and I still don't know. Stevenson says 723,000 British, 1,398,000 French, 1,811,000 Russian, 2,037,000 German, and 1,100,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers died in the war of wounds or disease. John H. Morrow Jr. lists the relevant totals at 800,000, 1,900,000, 2,300,000, two million, and one million. "Total Turkish deaths in the war," writes Hew Strachan, "may have risen as high as 2.5 million." Yet Morrow puts them at 770,000 and Stevenson at 892,000. What's a few hundred thousand corpses here or there? Or even the errant million? Such tabulations not only fail to clarify; after a while, they stupefy.

How then to retain a psychic grasp on the event? Historians have typically confronted the problem—how to keep us from forgetting—in one of two ways. The first (and more old-fashioned) approach might be called the "top down" method: Mobilize as many of the major military and political facts of the war as you can in a single sweeping master narrative. In English, A.J.P. Taylor's best-selling one-volume history, *The First World War* (1963), is the classic (if corrosive) example.

The emphasis in this kind of study necessarily tends to fall on the war's Great Men—the political leaders and military strategists who by their various foolish yet momentous actions determined, at least superficially, the overall shape of the conflict. Taylor was a master of the "top down" mode: His (still-controversial) book is nothing less than a virtuoso piece of literary satire, in which Europe's leading statesmen and wartime leaders—Wilhelm II, Franz Josef I, von Moltke, Falkenhayn, Joffre, Asquith, Kitchener, Haig, Lloyd George, Foch, Clemenceau—take starring roles in a Swiftian pageant of hubris, folly, and incompetence.

Starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, a group of younger historians began to shift attention away from the *bêtise* of individual leaders toward so-called Big Ideas—the broader social or collective underpinnings of the conflict. By focusing on the ghastly physical and mental hardships faced by ordinary soldiers, pathbreaking books such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (1976), and Malcolm Brown's *Tommy Goes to War* (1978) helped to open up this new "history from below" or "ground up" approach.

Interest in Great Men and their failings gradually gave way to questions about ideology and *mentalité*—the shared cultural attitudes that made such all-encompassing mayhem possible. Why were so many men willing to fight? Why weren't the antiwar sentiments we associate with the British war poets—Sassoon, Graves, Owen, and the rest—more widespread? Over the past 20 or so years—even as the last remaining survivors of the war die off—historians have begun to address such questions with often revelatory results.

Loosely speaking, all seven of the new books noted here exemplify one of the two approaches. David Fromkin, Morrow, Stevenson, and Strachan have all written traditional "top down" histories, while Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, Robert B. Bruce, and Nicholas J. Saunders are "ground up" scholars of one kind or another. There is no question about the erudition each writer brings to his or her subject, or the gravitas with which each registers the global scale of the tragedy. But no historian in the world, I find myself increasingly persuaded, can ever really explain the Great War—or keep us from trying to screen out its traumatic imagery. To understand the First World War one would have to understand Death itself, and for most of us such comprehension—for better or for worse—remains psychologically elusive. No one can fault the historians for not trying hard enough: The problem is ultimately an existential one.

To understand the First World War one would have to understand Death itself, and for most of us such comprehension—for better or for worse—remains psychologically elusive.

More pessimism in a moment; first, some specifics on the books at hand. Although written with enormous energy and gusto, Fromkin's study—dealing with the political and diplomatic maneuvers prompting the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914—is undoubtedly the most old-fashioned work of the seven. *Europe's Last Summer* is very much in the A.J.P. Taylor vein: lots of gossipy material here on the kaiser, Franz Josef, Czar Nicholas, Gavrilo Princip, and all the rest of them—the whole light-opera chorus of mustachioed Serbian terrorists, fornicating French diplomats, and minor Hapsburg princelings in *Fledermaus*-style ribbons and epaulets—and how they managed to set the machinery of death in motion. Nothing wrong with this, of course, except one feels it has been done before. (Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August,* from 1962, is only one of many precursors.) And unfortunately, too, as in so many "top down" studies, a certain basic paradox goes mostly unaddressed. If the leaders of the Great Powers in 1914 were indeed such buffoons, how did they ever persuade millions of ordinary citizens to leave their homes and submit to the most appalling conditions in the history of organized warfare? The satiric mode, perhaps, can go only so far; after a while one wants more engagement with deeper cultural factors.

Stevenson, Morrow, and Strachan have produced more ambitious and satisfying books in the "top down" vein. (Strachan, dizzyingly enough, having finished the one-volume history here, is now in the midst of an even more elaborate three-volume study.) Each historian rolls confidently—even Juggernaut-like—through the now-standard topoi of World War I narrative: Germany's post-Bismarckian hankering after global influence; the Balkan Crisis of July 1914; the German invasion of Belgium and France; the collapse of the "war of movement" and the construction of defensive trench systems on both Eastern and Western Fronts—all the way through to Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele; America's entry into the war and Russia's exit; the 1918 Spring Offensive (during which Germany came very close to defeating its enemies); the Allied counterpush to victory, followed by the Armistice and the division of the spoils at Versailles. In Strachan's volume, the précis of events is accompanied by exceptionally good photographs, including some (unusually) in color. We tend to "see" the First World War in sepia or black and white, and there is something both startling and eerie about seeing French infantrymen in their grimy pale-blue coats; green clumps of grass next to a burned-out British tank at Cambrai; a "real" red cross on a dusty ambulance behind the lines.

One would be hard pressed to say which book is best:

Continued on Following Page

Books Discussed in This Essay

14-18: Understanding the Great War, by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker; translated by Catherine Temerson (Hill & Wang, 2002)

Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy, by David Stevenson (Basic Books, 2004)

Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?, by David Fromkin (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004)

The First World War, by Hew Strachan (Viking, 2004)

A Fraternity of Arms: America & France in the Great War, by Robert B. Bruce (University Press of Kansas, 2003)

The Great War: An Imperial History, by John H. Morrow Jr. (Routledge, 2003)

Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War, by Nicholas J. Saunders (Berg, 2003)

Figures, Langemarck German Military Cemetery, Belgium

Villers-Cotterêts French Military Cemetery, France

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Each represents an extraordinary feat of scholarship; each has strengths and weaknesses. Surprisingly, Morrow, the least heralded scholar and the only American among them, provides the most readable narrative. Stevenson and Strachan are British historians in the old-school manner (the mandarin John Keegan is the model here), yet both of them bog down at times in a welter of political, tactical, and economic minutiae. Dour analysis (as in Stevenson) of German wartime industrial policy can't compete with Morrow on, say, the various tropical horrors faced by British troops fighting in Africa against Lettow-Vorbeck and his multiracial German Colonial Army:

"As if disease did not suffice, parasitic infestation from chiggers, a flea that burrows into the skin and lays eggs, and guinea worm, ingested in water containing infected fleas, plagued the troops. Chiggers, unless extracted by needle, could infect, reduce to a pulpy mass, and even consume one's feet and toes, and they occasionally lodged in other body parts. The guinea worm bores through the intestinal wall to various parts of the body, which causes deep abscesses and further infections, or externally after emerging through the skin. . . . At the time of emergence treatment entailed hooking the worm on a stick and winding it gently and gradually out of the body over a two- to three-week period. If one tore the worm while removing it, its young would penetrate bodily tissues and spread further infection. African women, who had years of experience performing such operations, enjoyed a higher rate of success than army doctors."

One of Morrow's greatest strengths, as the foregoing illustrates, is the attention he pays to the non-European theaters of war and imperialist dimensions of the conflict. Moving indeed is his account of the thousands of black Senegalese troops deployed by France on the Somme, or the Chinese Labor Force, charged with the grisly work of reburying countless corpses in the year or two after the Armistice.

By contrast, Strachan and Stevenson can both seem a bit jaded—notably when describing some of the "signature" events on the Western Front: the protracted battle over the forts of Verdun, the disastrous Somme offensive of July 1916, the stomach-churning *Blutmühle* ("blood mill") that was Passchendaele. On trench warfare and its attendant atrocities Strachan in particular can be dispassionate to a fault. (He is similarly offhand—distressingly, in my view—on the massacre of a million and a half Armenians by the Turks in 1915.) But Stevenson also temporizes, as when he elaborates (by way of some jolly Benthamite statistics) how "remarkably successful" the combatant powers became over the course of the war at returning wounded soldiers to the battlefield. Every gas cloud has a silver lining, I guess, but one can't help but think about those mutilated French *poilus* (46 percent, according to Stevenson) who despite the improvements in medical care simply failed to pull up their socks and go charging back to the trenches.

Such caviling is really unfair, though: To read any of these magnificent books is to be hugely informed about what happened and why. Nor should it be concluded that because they are primarily "top down" scholars, Morrow, Strachan, and Stevenson neglect the war's psychic role in the lives of ordinary men and women. As space permits, each one of them attempts in one way or another to limn the conflict's broader cultural and ideological ramifications. The emphasis still falls mainly on noteworthy players—from Kaiser Wilhelm to Woodrow Wilson—but no one loses sight either of how traumatically the war affected its millions of ordinary fighters or the enormous psychic costs paid by those who survived them.

For a far more detailed—and groundbreaking—treatment of the latter topic, however, one must turn to Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker's *14-18: Understanding the Great War.* Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker are two French Big Ideas historians associated with the Museum of the Great War, the international museum and research center opened in 1992 in the old citadel at Péronne on the Somme.

Their closeness, in the curatorial sense, to the actual debris of the war—the leftover shell casings, bullets, tunic buttons, and human and animal bones that continue to come to the surface of the soil in France and Flanders some 80 years after conflict's end—has given them a deep imaginative connection with the ordinary men and women, soldiers and civilians, swept up in the conflagration. Theirs is "ground up" scholarship of the most literal kind. But it also allows them to pose the *mentalité* question with unprecedented directness and clarity: What made millions of otherwise placable human beings ready to both kill others with extraordinary violence and risk their own lives in the process?

The answer is not particularly consoling. On all sides, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker find evidence of an irrational "mystique of sacrifice"—and consequent dehumanization of the enemy—so primitive, tribal, and fanatical as to prolong the savagery for four bestial years. Each belligerent country had of course its own partisan (and seemingly irrefutable) "deep" rationalization for fighting. The Big Idea mobilizing the French, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker suggest, was that *civilisation* itself—chauvinistically identified with the French Enlightenment—needed defending against German barbarism and autocracy. For Germans and Austrians it was the fantasy that only a heroic, pan-Teutonic *Kultur* could reenergize a decadent and increasingly febrile Europe. Britain's involvement in the war grew out of a profound, often narcissistic fetishization of empire and an arrogant faith in the unswerving moral rightness of British political and economic interests.

In turn, under the pious Nicholas II, the Russians—like their allies the Serbs—sought collective spiritual revitalization. (In all the combatant nations, say Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, "a new infatuation with religion"—often cultic and talismanic—was a primal psychic element in "the eschatology of victory.") As for the Americans—slow to get involved but bloodthirsty when they did—a central ideological motivator, as Bruce confirms in *A Fraternity of Arms: America & France in the Great War,* was a desire to assert those patriotic republican values (historically linked with France) supposedly endangered by reactionary kings and emperors and other Old World bogeymen.

Freud is a powerful presence in Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker's analysis: They derive their central theme—that European society has yet to come to terms with the stupendous, cross-generational sorrow World War I engendered—in large part from his *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915) and the celebrated essay on mourning and melancholia. They see a collective "failure to mourn" as the war's most paradoxical and lasting legacy. True: The war brought about sudden bereavement on a scale unknown to previous generations. (In France alone, say Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, two-thirds to three-quarters of the population lost a relation or acquaintance.) Yet something in the traumatic nature of the conflict—its sheer horror and destructiveness—also seemed to disrupt, if not foreclose, any normal mourning process. Many families had no body returned to them to bury, or only a body that had "suffered unprecedented mutilations." In such cases it was difficult for survivors to comprehend—let alone begin to accept, in whatever way "acceptance" might be possible—the appalling circumstances in which their loved ones had died. Equally hard to absorb, however, was the idea that one's own dead son, brother, or father might himself have been a brutal killer. Ambivalent feelings toward the dead—of guilt, doubt, fear,

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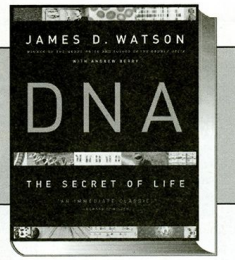

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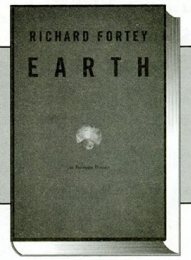

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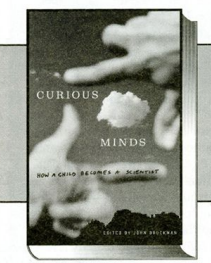

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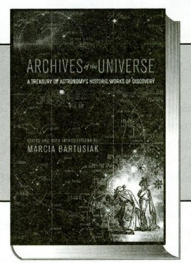

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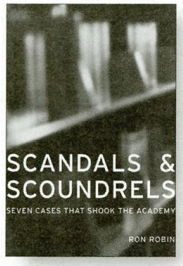

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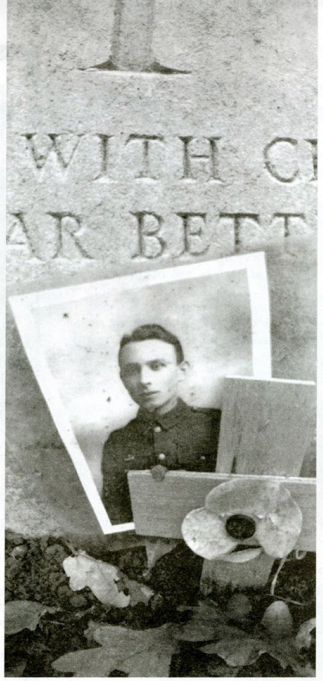
rage, shame, disgust—were rigorously suppressed.

Most important, once the official commemoration of war dead began—almost as soon as the Armistice was declared—grieving "too much" came to seem unpatriotic and self-indulgent. "It was one of the hidden objectives of the postwar commemorations," write Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, "to forbid protracted mourning, which was seen as a betrayal of the men who had sacrificed themselves on the battlefields." Disparaging, at least in public, the supposedly heroic ideals for which the slain had fallen became taboo.

Ironically, when general disillusionment *did* set in—during the 1930s—any genuine catharsis became even more difficult: "Whereas in the years 1914-18 the war had created a deep consensus—built on millenarianist hopes for a new mankind, hopes that can be likened to a veritable 'crusade myth'—the effects of the war later, particularly during the 1930s, provoked a rejection as profound as the initial eschatological expectation had been powerful. Never, in contemporary times, had European societies been so massively in mourning. Yet between the two wars, this post-1918 mass mourning gradually opened on to a void."

Nor has the void been filled even today, almost a century after the fact. For all the sentimental attention paid to the Great War at anniversary moments—at the 80-year commemoration of the Armistice in 1998, for example—the colossal human tragedy it represents, the French historians claim, has yet to be collectively "worked through." The power of their book to disturb as much as it enlightens—and *14-18* is indeed an extraordinarily sad and frightening book—suggests they may be right.

If one accepts Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker's account of the war's psychic effects—that by its traumatic nature the First World War produced the conditions for its own "forgetting"—then the hundreds of thousands of war memorials built in France, Belgium, Britain, and other countries after the Armistice might best be described not, perhaps, as *commemorative* markers, but as markers of war amnesia. The memorializing of the dead—the literal displacement of countless bodies by cenotaphs, heroic statuary, and other monuments—was the paradoxical means by which individuals avoided the "deep pain," seemingly fathomless, that the war left in its wake. The paradox perhaps explains too the peculiar numbness that can assail a present-day visitor to the old Western Front cemeteries. Confronting the most grandiose and elaborate memorials—at Vimy Ridge, Verdun, or Thiepval, say—one's sympathetic circuits become, as it were, so jammed up and overloaded by myriad cues to "remember" that a kind of blankness sets in. One feels apathetic, dissociated, morally dulled.



Berks Cemetery Extension (British), Belgium

> We can't think too hard about what the war was because to do so is also to think ahead: toward our own dissolution.

The strange psychic truth embedded here—that, as one historian has put it, "memory serves to forget"—may have something to do, finally, with the skepticism and gloomy disquiet that I felt reading the last and most unusual of the books considered here, Nicholas J. Saunders's *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War.* Saunders, a British historian in the "ground up" mold, has written a weirdly engrossing book on what he calls "trench art": the souvenirs and mementos made by World War I soldiers and civilians out of military debris.

The First World War was the first conflict in which trench art was produced on a massive scale, partly because of the sheer amount of detritus available and partly because of the often static nature of the fighting. Soldiers immobilized in trenches, prisoners held for months behind the lines in internment camps, and civilians caught in the various occupied zones all had ample opportunity to take up and "remake" the *lumpen* material of war into objects either decorative or useful.

Thousands of such artifacts have survived: Art Nouveau-style lamps made from shell casings; crosses, medallions, and plaques forged with metal from downed zeppelins; bracelets and rings hammered from the recycled copper drive-bands of artillery shells; swagger sticks made from split bullets inserted one inside the other. Among the many illustrations in the book is a picture of a Lilliputian tank made from scrap brass and copper, and another of a French cigarette lighter (complete with a comic portrait of German Crown Prince Wilhelm) fashioned out of bullet cartridges.

Saunders is careful not to pass judgment on the aesthetic qualities of such objects, or the tastefulness, say, of a little talisman made for a wounded soldier out of a piece of shrapnel previously embedded in his own body. Like so-called "tramp art" or "outsider art," this is the People's Art—the creation of put-upon men and women ostensibly without other viable forms of self-expression. As such, each recovered artifact, like a potsherd from an ancient midden, is to be respected for the "unique human story" it tells.

Yes, OK: a worthy enterprise. But the things themselves are hideous: kitsch, crazy looking, disgusting. I can't believe people scour Internet sites looking for them (as Saunders claims they do) or display them on mantelpieces. (The Art Nouveau lamps are particularly nasty.) And notwithstanding the value of such material for "anthropology, archaeology, museum studies, tourism studies, military and art history [and] cultural geography" (Saunders's dreary cult-studies litany), the academic discovery of trench art has to my mind something morbid and parasitic about it—like collecting photographs of car crashes. I bought my copy of the book in England, I confess, because of the grotesque, Hans Bellmer-ish cover image: a crude brass sculpture of a woman's head in which numerous large bullets have been set, points inward, to approximate a halo of Medusa-like spiky hair. But I didn't feel especially good about it.

Nor am I sure that such dismal trinkets functioned—either for their creators or for unfortunate family members who inherited them when the maker was killed in action—as Saunders claims they did, as "multidimensional memory objects" through which the subjective experiences of war might be piously recollected. Saunders makes heavy weather of the fact that many artifacts were made of brass and thus required constant polishing. "It is almost certain that as house ornaments such objects gave rise to a domestic routine of cleaning and polishing" that "had therapeutic effects for the bereaved." But I can't help but wonder how much the very routines associated with such objects, not to mention the banal ubiquitousness of the objects themselves, may have contributed, *pace* Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, to a kind of *dulling* of memory: the substitution of reflex for emotion—of a sort of robotic "sensing" in place of real recollection and feeling.

One of the distressing aspects of photographs, of course, is their tendency to go dead on you: The more you look at the picture of someone you care about, the less the image conjures up the person's presence. The picture itself is so *there,* so flimsy and yet so distracting, the person—living or dead—can no longer be called to mind. The same may be true of trench art: that it gets in the way of our seeing, and that in repossessing it now as "history," we really engage in a new kind of forgetting. With *Trench Art* on my shelves, I needn't worry so much, perhaps, about *all those dead men,* or the fact that at least some of them seem to have had so much time on their hands—in those final ghastly days—that they were reduced to making sordid little curios out of scrap metal and bone.

Why do we want to forget the First World War? Why can't we keep our facts straight? Why would we rather talk about "memory objects" than the memories themselves? (Or our inability to find them?) Given our flaunted "interest"—and academics are the worst—why do we seem so keen on *not* remembering?

In one way the answer is stupidly obvious: We can't remember the Great War because we weren't there. Only if we had some magic syncretic access to the experiences of every human being alive between 1914 and 1918 might we have a chance of "remembering"—or at least of not forgetting so completely. We'd have to have the experiences of every animal and plant alive then too, especially the millions of horses, mules, dogs, carrier pigeons, trees, rats, lice, and other nonhuman things that were also part of the carnage. Some 30 million horses and donkeys—mainly pack animals—died in the Great War. Yet when I once described the war (again to bright Stanford students) as a "hippocide," the genocidal end of a once-benign, millennium-old friendship between men and horses, they smirked as if I'd made some strange professorial joke.

The inability to remember, though, may have deeper psychic roots. In his brilliant recent novel, *Elizabeth Costello,* J.M. Coetzee has his elderly female protagonist, a celebrated novelist, deliver a lecture on the humanities at an American university. She talks at one point about the terrifying "instants at a time" in which the sentient human being knows, in advance, what it is to be a corpse: "All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not abstract—'All human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal'—but embodied. For a moment we are that knowledge. We live the impossible: We live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can." At such moments, she says, she "knows" what the corpse will never know—that it is "extinct." And "for an instant," she concludes, "before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time."

The First World War seems to me to be one of those singular events—the Holocaust, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki are others—that evoke in us just such foreknowledge and panic. We can't think too hard about what the war *was* because to do so is also to think *ahead:* toward our own dissolution. The corpse in the mud—inescapable Great War emblem—is always one's own. It may be impossible, as Coetzee suggests, to maintain more than a second or two of such scarifying insight: The mind rebels, scrambles the circuits, shuts down.

In its most profound aspect, the First World War gives us an uncanny vision of futurity. In more despairing, Cassandra-like moods, I sometimes wonder if the ravaged landscapes we associate with the war—moonscapes of dirt and filth; dead men in holes; tree stumps and duckboards and blasted-out shell craters—show us the future of our own planet after, say, a nuclear war. What in 1914-18 was localized in northern France, Flanders, and a few other traumatized places around the globe will be generalized. In this sense the First World War gave us—has always given us—our first view of the end of the world. But the end of the world, of course, is only the end of the self writ large; the extinction of "life itself," the extinction of one's own life. Perhaps it is so difficult to remember the First World War—impossible, really, except in nightmares—because in the deepest sense it hasn't happened yet.

Terry Castle is a professor of English at Stanford University and the author of Courage, Mon Amie *(London Review of Books/Profile Books, 2003), an essay-memoir about visiting the grave of her great-uncle, who died in France on the Western Front in 1918. She is also the editor of* The Literature of Lesbianism *(Columbia University Press, 2003).*

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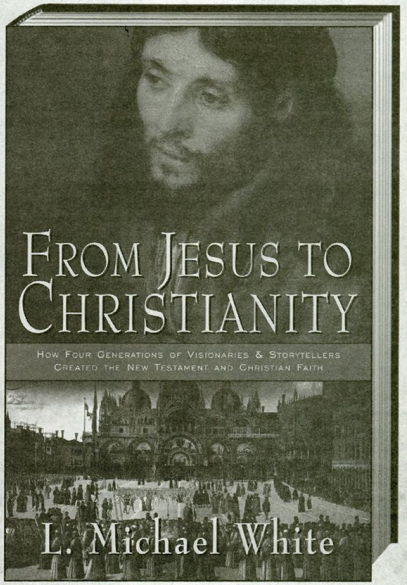

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