

SHOULD NON-COMBATANTS WRITE ABOUT WAR?

GEOFF PAGE

BACKGROUND

My interest in writing poetry about World War One began with my experience of teaching the history of the war to upper secondary students. I was continually impressed when teaching its causes that no single country could be held responsible.

I also quickly realized that World War One was the ideal pacifist's war. Unlike World War Two it didn't have the saving grace of inevitability, the moral issues were not particularly clear (especially towards the end) and obviously the standard of generalship left much to be desired. Though Haig may have been rehabilitated slightly in recent years, the senselessness of the Somme is still the dominant image for that war and, by extrapolation, for the mechanised slaughter of modern warfare in general.

Another early stimulus to my war writing was the memory of my experience of the old style national service in 1959. Here I was trained by NCOs who'd fought in Korea and was taught to fire a variety of weapons including six pounders, the Bren and the Vickers machine gun. Bayonet drill ('In, Out, On Guard') was also somewhat disconcerting and tended to reinforce any antiwar feelings one might have been quietly developing.

The precipitating factor in my writing about war, however, was probably the Vietnam war which I was, fortunately, just a few weeks too old for. Following this war on the news, teaching its background at school, associating loosely with the moratorium movement all gave a sense of the parallels between it and World War One, especially as far as Australia was concerned. Again there was the 'great and powerful friend' syndrome and a parallel with the pointless bravery of Australian troops at Gallipoli and, less obviously, in France. The naivety of our faith in ANZUS seemed to repeat our faith in an earlier empire defeated at Singapore.

Another factor bringing war in general into the consciousness of writers such as myself at that time was the memory of the Cuban nuclear stand-off in 1962 and the build-up towards the Brezhnev-Reagan brinkmanship in the early 1980s. This seemed to be a culmination of all that had been developing steadily since the mass destruction of World War One.

Finally there was the inspiration of what had already been achieved by English poets such as Owen, Sassoon and Rosenberg, who had actually fought in the war, and the way their example taught one to avoid oversimplification e.g. the way Owen's and Sassoon's opposition to the war combined with their voluntary return to the front. Clearly writing about Australian troops in World War One could be no simplistic propaganda exercise.

PROJECTS

Individual Poems About World War One

In the relatively large number of poems I have written about World War One I have hardly ever attempted to describe combat experience. I have concentrated more on the

war's impact on others and on veterans, post-war society, the home front, and so on.

The poems grew out of particulars rather than generalizations e.g. posters, songs, cartoons, paintings, diaries, letters, sermons. I was also aware of, and intrigued by, the fact that Australian combatant poets seemed so markedly inferior to the best of the English poets – not an admission that one normally likes to make in such matters.

I was aware, however, of the problem of retrospective moral outrage, of being wise after the event – but I noted that contemporary opposition to the war was real and of ten courageous and that not all Australians had supported the war unquestioningly. To some extent the 'anti-war' poetry of my own generation was being true to this earlier tradition (which rarely, unfortunately, found its way into effective poetry at the time). And the issue was not so very retrospective either. One's younger friends were still being conscripted for what seemed a 'foreign' war – or had only recently escaped such a fate.

Shadows from Wire

This anthology collected poems written mainly in the 1970s and early 1980s about Australians in World War One. Initially I had intended to juxtapose these with Australian poems written by combatants but the poor quality of these poems led me instead to use photos from the Australian War Memorial. They expressed far more graphically what the war was really like than did most of the poems written by Australians at the time.

Benton's Conviction

In this novel I wanted to examine what kind of courage it took to be a conscientious objector, especially in a man who had an understanding of the complex issues involved yet felt he had to take a stand. In some ways the novel was a 're-run' of my poem 'Christ at Gallipoli', examining the old issue of the proper Christian response to war (do we turn the 'other cheek' or not?).

The Great Forgetting

In this yet to be published book of poems (illustrated by the Aboriginal artist Bevan Hayward Pooraraar) I was concerned to look at the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia since 1788 and especially what may reasonably be defined as a war where the fatalities (according to Henry Reynolds and others) were in the order of 2,500 Europeans and 20,000 Aborigines.

At this point I realized that the Australian landscape was no longer as 'innocent' of war as I had presumed. In these poems I did not attempt to 'get inside' Aboriginal culture (beyond the simple human level that getting shot or speared hurts). The emphasis was more on white motivations than on Aboriginal culture. Again I worked from details (diaries, letters, photos, artefacts, breastplates) rather than from generalized feelings. The book proceeded from the assumption that to know our past truly is ultimately empowering, not disabling.

Poems About Contemporary Wars Such As Bosnia

In these few poems I have been aware of how difficult it is to write convincingly about a war which is known purely from contemporary media, as in the Gulf war or the conflict in Bosnia. To a large extent one is really writing about the media rather than the war.

Conclusions

- There are certainly limits to a non-combatant's knowledge of war and these must be admitted and respected (even though there are exceptions such as Stephen Crane's novel *The Red Badge of Courage*).

- There is no reason why a non-combatant should not write about war, as long as he or she is aware that imagination can only take one so far. Conversely there are many veterans of war who do not have the skill to convey their experience linguistically.
- War is a continuing moral issue but it is difficult to take a firm and clear overall position. There certainly seem to be some things worth dying for (and killing for, I suppose) – or this, at least, is what many people felt in the struggle against Nazism. Absolute pacifism is a hard position for a writer, or anyone else, to maintain.
- Only writing with a moral dimension is truly sustaining – and the best war writing nearly always has this dimension. On the other hand, simplistic propaganda about the bravery of either side, the righteousness of one's cause and so on has to be avoided at all costs.
- Writing has at least as much to do with the imagination as with experience and it is not surprising that one of the best poems written about World War One was written by a non-combatant who lived through it. Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly' parts IV and V sums up the whole cultural impact and, to a large extent, the personal impact in a matter of just thirty or forty lines.