

A GRAVITATIONAL PULL

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By far the bulk of what I have written, both in fiction and poetry, concerns the tensions of peacetime rather than wartime. But I must acknowledge that I return to the subject of war, particularly World War Two, rather like one of those comets on an elliptic cycle, drawn into close orbit by a strong gravitational field then flicked away by its own momentum into space until momentum slows and the pull of gravity re-asserts itself.

That is to say, I have written about war because the events of war have moved me. I must therefore face the discomfiting fact that this means I have found the circumstances of war attractive. Let me not evade the issue by saying that 'I have found them attractive as a poet or as a novelist. I was moved by the stories and imagery of war way back in my childhood long before the business of being an author entangled me, and I suspect I would have been attracted to these things had I never written a word but gone into bricklaying or hotel management instead.

Furthermore, the weapons and accoutrements of war had a numinous hold on my imagination which may be lessening only now as I pass beyond eligibility for the warrior class. Though if I was to walk into a room where there was a .303 rifle leaning against the wall, I could not trust myself not to be magnetised by its presence, to pick it up and handle it, work through its oiled bolt action, sight down the barrel and adjust the sight mechanism, charmed by the smooth, compact integrity of the instrument, while talking about world peace to the other people in the room. For my mature, reflective mind prefers peace. I have watched the combatants of Bosnia, Lebanon, Nagorno Kharabash, loosing off at each other, and have felt disgust, not envy. I have looked at the Time-Life photo of the little Vietnamese girl, the napalm burns on her arm wadded in thick bandages, her face screwed up in diabolic agony, and have yearned for the power to reverse her misery. O yes, I prefer peace, if it is possible for anyone who has never been at war to say that.

As we have seen from the recent D Day commemorations, one of the common, and most obvious features of wars is that they continue to get talked about long after they have finished, and talked about, not only by those who took part, but by those who were born too late to have taken part. For every war there is a generation of participants, and a generation who missed participation, but for whom THE WAR, be it the Trojan or World War Two forms an integral part of their mental horizon, a horizon of events which are tantalisingly close, but always just beyond reach. Homer and Troy, Shakespeare and the Wars of the Roses, Tolstoy and the Napoleonic Wars. If war has a tide, it also has a backwash.

With the trivial exceptions of having lived in Singapore during Confrontasi with its curfews, its newspaper photos of dead Indonesian guerrillas being brought in, slung on poles like bagged game, and later, of having run the gauntlet of checkpoints and several bomb scares during a few days in Northern Ireland in 1973, I have never been caught up in the tide of war. Like many of my generation, however, I swam for forty years in the backwash of World War Two.

What do I mean by this backwash? I was born in 1949 and my first recollections cut

in at what I estimate to be early 1952. Like Jeb, the hero of my novel, *To the Burning City*, I can just recall knowing that a George VI was King, and that then he was dead, that a Winston Churchill was the prime minister, that there was rationing applied to sweets and chocolate for which my mother had a rationing card. My own father was in the British Army, so as we moved from garrison to garrison, Northern Ireland, England, Germany, Singapore, I was accustomed to the military imagery of that very militarised post-war Europe. The British army uniforms, called battledress, were identical with those worn on D Day, 303 rifle, Bren gun and Webley revolver were still in use and in each of the Army quarters we occupied during the 1950s and early 1960s, I always knew the top cupboard where my father's wartime revolver and ammunition pouch were hidden. These things were umbilicals attaching my life to a time prior to my existence.

My father's first posting to Germany was in the late 1950s, and in coming to Rheindahlen, or JHQ BAOR, NorthAG and 2nd T.A.F., to give the garrison its official acrostics, even at nine years old, I was as much aware of having arrived in a Zone as a foreign country. Dominating the garrison skyline was the massive JHQ building itself with its flags and parade ground. It looked like a long currant loaf and was called, laconically, The Kremlin. Once a year or so it would be defended against hypothetical attack from the 'Ruskies' by German troops in British Army uniforms who, with a patient anxiety, would try to shoo us children away from their gun-pits.

'Give us a feel of your bren gun, mate.'
'Weg! Bitte, weg! Weg!'

This may have been a cold war, but it heated a child's imagination readily enough. Perhaps under the spell of such a pervasive military atmosphere, our play was all warfare. With the neighbouring German farm-boys we feuded incessantly, nicknaming them after the size of army trucks according to their relative burliness, Ten Tonner, Seven Tonner, Five Tonner, down to the shrimplike Half Tonner. The first-named was built like a silo. He had a slab head you could toboggan down and this would flush a benzinered at our yells of 'We won the war/In nineteen forty four' or our insults, 'Dummkopf! Sheiserkopf!' Once he ran me down and I experienced at close proximity a countenance of literally *working* with menace. The small eyes blazed in that massive head, the huge fist shook and his torrent of abuse told me things about my character and the honour of England that it was just as well I could not translate. But eventually he put me down, impressed, but unhurt.

Not that I, or my playmates, needed a real bogey to dare and frighten ourselves with as we wargamed, dressed in bits and pieces of authentic army webbing, prowling those same woods and fields the American 9th Army had crossed in March 1945. The yell of 'Stukas!' could send us diving for cover as one of us would imitate the howl of these once-dreaded crook-winged dive-bombers and the rest would pop-pop-pop with wooden firearms. Ours was a vicarious kind of dread, of course, gleaned from films like 'Dunkirk' or the newsreel documentaries of aerial bombardment we had seen at the garrison cinemas. But it was one sign that the *idea* of World War Two had lost none of its hold on the imaginations of adult or child, British or German, despite the fact that hostilities had been over for fourteen years or so. There were the physical reminders of the conflict, parks of derelict tanks, demolished pillboxes heaped like broken cake on the road to Aachen, and the concrete anti-tank 'teeth' across broad fields on the Belgian border, eerily white against green under a stormlit sky, like the jawbones of some colossal shark.

There were our toys and reading matter. Plastic soldiers, clockwork tanks in which some flint mechanism allowed them to blaze away across the lounge room carpet, kit

plastic aeroplanes with moveable ailerons and retractable undercarriage that were the simulacra in miniature of the warplanes of 1939-45. There were comic books called 'War temps', temps because they cost tenpence, which came out, four per month, and contained, more often than not, stories that were psychologically credible rather than heroic from different theatres of World War Two. In black and white, of course. The War for us was profoundly a black and white experience.

And there was the readiness of our fathers and their German counterparts when they chance-met in restaurants or shops, to turn conversations back to the War. It was not, so far as I was able to judge at nine, a case of proving anything, or giving vent to unresolved animosities. Indeed, it was not morbid at all. Rather it was as if the War were a centre of intensity in their lives which required to be shared, not so much as a form of release from those vivid years, as a recognition of its centrifugal force on their lives. As a boy, sitting at the end of the table listening to these exchanges in halting German or halting English, the war came to have a peculiar status in my imagination. At one level it seemed to form a dark dividing-line in time through which grownups had passed, and this fact marked an essential difference between adult and child. At another level the war was vividly real, and fascinating to me, because its paraphernalia, the comics and toys, the memorabilia, and the prevalence of military imagery throughout the length and breadth of Cold War Europe, seemed to keep the war years permanently in focus. In the history of humankind, has any war ever had such powerful and multifarious means of re-enactment in the imaginations of the post-war world?

When I turned twenty in 1969, I was offered a war. Vietnam. I declined it. With such a military matrix to my early experiences, this might surprise you. It surprised me. I can only conclude that, in the face of the reasons against waging that particular war, all the vivid phantasmagoria and its attendant ethos I have just described suspended its impact, on my moral choices at least.

Twenty five years on from those moral choices, I'm confident I opposed Vietnam because I believed the war was an ill cause, and not because I was a coward and traitor, which were the terms used to revile us by the pavement onlookers of those early anti-war demonstrations. But I remember being still sufficiently under the long shadow of World War Two for that albeit mindless scorn to have sometimes stung me to the quick. After all, my childhood and teenage ambition had been to become a soldier. In the end I spent time in prison for refusing to do so.

But then the peace movement I was a part of was, in some of its elements, a highly belligerent one. We 'occupied'; we stormed barricades; marched under banners; chanted with the unison of a Zulu impi; we fought street-battles with police, and watched these things happening in far more dramatic form at Berkeley and Kent State Universities, in Paris and Tokyo streets. Our rhetoric was often thinly disguised wartime stuff, 'campaigns', 'waging the struggle', 'United Front', 'smashing the National Service Act or whatever'.

Two things led me to withdraw from all that militant activity as the 1970s progressed. I had found the vitriol directed at anyone deemed to be 'the enemy' increasingly unjust, arbitrary, and offensive. And I was alarmed by the observation that the militancy of which I had been a part seemed to double its numbers after Whitlam's 1972 victory when censorship, arrest, jail-terms and threats to one's career prospects were no longer a risk of dissent. My withdrawal was into the business of writing, poetry at first, and later fiction. Later still, I began to read non-fictional war literature again, John Keegan, Martin Middlebrook's and Don Charlwood's accounts of the air war. I found them moving, and at the same time I found them familiar. They combined with all that

childhood phantasmagoria, but in a chemistry that had found, I think, a way of reconciling childhood's instinctive interest in such things with the adult requirement to engage with the subject of war in a way that was as morally alert and imaginatively sympathetic as possible. The result has been several poems and the novel, *To the Burning City*, whose subject is very much the backwash of war.

Despite the achievement of Stephen Crane, and my own belief that a resourceful and sensitive imagination can create a credible likeness of experiences that an author has never personally undergone, I am wary of depicting combat experience directly. My own experience, for instance, does not include being either the agent or the victim of aerial bombardment. I have never strained my eyes into the murk of the the Atlantic watching for the trail of a U Boat's torpedo. Being brought up in the backwash of the Second World War, however, what I *have* experienced is being told about these things by others for whom they are firsthand experiences. My instinct, therefore, is to recognise this filter in my narrative, not as a defence of my right to describe war experience, but as a means of making that experience more authentic by giving it a characteristic voice. Thus it is Hengelow the participant who describes, I think, most persuasively, the actualities of the bomber offensive over German cities in *To the Burning City*, not Jeb, the hero, or the anonymous narrator who are born in the post-war, and I have some interaction regarding the right to talk about the war between the participant, Hengelow, and the non-participant, Mallory, whose fascination for the 'welter' of this war is in contrast to Hengelow's contact with it. Similarly, in my poem, 'Their Finest Hour' it is an anonymous seaman who describes the experience of being on a trans-Atlantic convoy, not an omniscient narrator. When I write about war, I find myself reflexively wanting this filter of a dramatic voice and context, for it creates the right relationship between my interest in war experience, my awareness that such experience *does* belong to me by virtue of its having been handed on to me as one of the main narrative legacies of my time, and yet for all that, it is not quite properly mine.

Wars are, I have discovered, a highly charged area of discourse. Occasionally I have been invited to speak or write on the subject of what it was like to have been a part of the anti-war movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, I have always tried to present the topic as I recall my experience of it, and this has sometimes led me to a critique, particularly of the manners of our militancy, rather than the focus of it. Reactions to my presentations filter back to me. 'Another radical recants', was one that I heard, and 'Some people think you're becoming a bit of a fascist, Alan', was another amiable remark passed to me at an occasion of wine.

Should such things make me wonder? I think not. For I was able to put my attraction to the subject of war to the test recently. In my latest novel, *Close Ups*, there is a character, Rikki, who is a Vietnam veteran. In researching a background for him, I had read a great deal and became interested in the experience of Australian troops in Vietnam, just those fellows I had once campaigned so fervently to bring home.

Then a month or so ago, I heard an attempt to revitalise the argument for the ANZUS involvement in Vietnam. This argument was delivered as part of a history seminar to senior private school students and was two-pronged. Firstly, it ran, Australia's essential strategic interests of the time were served by fighting alongside the US in an Asian war, as though causing havoc in some else's country did not come into such an equation. The Polish Corridor and The Invasion of Kuwait were claimed as essential strategic interests, I recall. Secondly, it was argued that Cold War conditions made the Vietnam War historically inevitable. Again, glib nonsense; history is dialectical, a choice existed *at the time*, the anti-war movement was its mouthpiece, as were many western governments.

But my point is this. I was made indignant by this line of discourse, as you can see, but I was also a little relieved that I could still feel such spontaneous moral outrage on an issue which is now old, relieved that I can say, yes, I do prefer peace, but relieved mostly perhaps, because I had assured myself I was able to make the distinction clearly between the validity of argument regarding war, and the validity of experience regarding war.