

NO MAN'S LAND

WRITINGS FROM A WORLD AT WAR

CHOSEN AND INTRODUCED
BY PETE AYRTON



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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction • Pete Ayrton	xiii
Henri Barbusse • ‘The Vision’, from <i>Under Fire</i> , translated by Robin Buss	1
Mulk Raj Anand • ‘Marseille’, from <i>Across the Black Waters</i>	6
Ernst Jünger • ‘Rajputs’, from <i>War Diary 1914–1918</i> , translated by Martin Chalmers	24
D. H. Lawrence • ‘The Nightmare’, from <i>Kangaroo</i>	32
Siegfried Sassoon • ‘Done All That was Expected of It’ and ‘That Necessary Faculty for Trench Warfare’, from <i>Memoirs of an Infantry Officer</i>	42
Vera Brittain • ‘Destiny was Not Willing’ and ‘I Thank You, Sister’, from <i>Testament of Youth</i>	59
Helen Zenna Smith • ‘Liquid Fire’ and ‘The Beauty of Men Who are Whole’, from <i>Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War</i>	69
William Baylebridge • ‘The Apocalypse of Pat McCullough: The Sergeant’s Tale’, from <i>An Anzac Muster</i>	88
Robin Hyde • ‘Dawn’s Angel’, from <i>Passport to Hell</i>	99

CONTENTS

W. N. P. Barbellion · ‘Before the War I was an Interesting Invalid’, from <i>The Journal of a Disappointed Man</i>	114
Mary Borden · ‘The Square’, ‘The Beach’, ‘Conspiracy’ and ‘In the Operating Room’, from <i>The Forbidden Zone</i>	124
Emilio Lussu · ‘A Real Hero’, ‘You Should Have Done Nothing’ and ‘The Austrian Officer Lit a Cigarette’, from <i>A Soldier on the Southern Front</i> , translated by Gregory Conti	142
Carlo Emilio Gadda · ‘The Battle of the Isonzo’, from <i>Journals of War & Prison</i> , translated by Cristina Viti	160
Prežihov Voranc · ‘At Doberdob’, from <i>Doberdob</i> , translated by Ana Jelnikar and Stephen Watts	168
Wyndham Lewis · ‘The Romance of War’ and ‘Political Education under Fire’, from <i>Blasting and Bombardiering</i>	176
Richard Aldington · ‘Cannon-fodder’ and ‘A Timeless Confusion’, from <i>Death of a Hero</i>	186
A. T. Fitzroy · ‘Beethoven and Bach’, from <i>Despised and Rejected</i>	197
William Faulkner · ‘Crevasse’, from <i>These 13</i>	206
Frederic Manning · ‘Cushy avec Mademoiselle’, from <i>Her Privates We</i>	215
Stratis Myrivilis · ‘Animals’, ‘Anchorites of Lust’, ‘How Zafiriou Died’, ‘Alimberis Conquers His Fear of Shells’ and ‘Gas’, from <i>Life in the Tomb</i> , translated by Peter Bien	232
Raymond Escholier · ‘Sheep’, from <i>Mahmadou Fofana</i> , translated by Malcolm Imrie	252
Robert Musil · ‘The Blackbird’, from <i>Posthumous Papers of a Living Author</i> , translated by Peter Wortsman	265
Liviu Rebreanu · ‘To the Romanian Front’ and ‘We’ll See What You Do There...’, from <i>The Forest of the Hanged</i> , translated by A.V. Wise	270

CONTENTS

Jaroslav Hašek · ‘Švejk Goes to the War’ and ‘From Hatvan towards the Galician Frontier’, from <i>The Good Soldier Švejk</i> , translated by Cecil Parrott	286
Miroslav Krleža · ‘Hut 5B’, from <i>The Croatian God Mars</i> , translated by Celia Hawkesworth	301
Miloš Crnjanski · ‘My Good Galician Forests’, from <i>Diary about Čarnojević</i> , translated by Celia Hawkesworth	320
Viktor Shklovsky · ‘The Democratic Principle of Discussion’, from <i>A Sentimental Journey</i> , translated by Richard Sheldon	330
Gabriel Chevallier · ‘I Was Afraid’, from <i>Fear</i> , translated by Malcolm Imrie	347
Jules Romains · ‘Jerphanion Writes to His Wife’, from <i>The Prelude to Verdun</i> , translated by Warre B. Wells	362
Jean Giono · ‘Julia Remembers’, ‘The Salt of the Earth’, ‘News from Joseph’ and ‘Joseph’s Left Hand’, from <i>To the Slaughterhouse</i> , translated by Norman Glass	367
Louis-Ferdinand Céline · ‘In Ten Thousand Years, This War will be Utterly Forgotten’, from <i>Journey to the End of the Night</i> , translated by Ralph Manheim	380
Isaac Babel · ‘Papa Marescot’s Family’, from <i>On the Field of Honour</i> , translated by Peter Constantine	391
Dalton Trumbo · ‘A Date with the Shell’, from <i>Johnny Got His Gun</i>	395
Willa Cather · ‘Manger, Aimer, Payer’, from <i>One of Ours</i>	406
Irene Rathbone · ‘Who Dies if England Lives?’, from <i>We That Were Young</i>	413
Rose Macaulay · ‘Evening at Violette’, from <i>Non-Combatants and Others</i>	421
Josep Pla · ‘Veritable Equine Items of Dentistry’, from <i>The Grey Notebook</i> , translated by Peter Bush	430

CONTENTS

A. P. Herbert · ‘One of the Bravest Men I Ever Knew’, from <i>The Secret Battle</i>	441
Vahan Totovents · ‘Infidels and Curs’, from <i>Scenes from an Armenian Childhood</i> , translated by Mischa Kudian	448
Ömer Seyfettin · ‘Why Didn’t He Get Rich?’, translated by Izzy Finkel	466
James Hanley · ‘I Surrender, Camerade’, from <i>The German Prisoner</i>	477
Theodor Plievier · ‘Mutiny!’, from <i>The Kaiser’s Coolies</i> , translated by Martin Chalmers	489
Arnold Zweig · ‘Snow’, from <i>The Case of Sergeant Grischa</i> , translated by Eric Sutton	504
Edlef Köppen · ‘Cavalry Charge’, from <i>Military Communiqué</i> , translated by Martin Chalmers	516
Joseph Roth · ‘My Son is Dead!’, from <i>The Radetzky March</i> , translated by Michael Hofmann	521
John Galsworthy · ‘The Gibbet’, from <i>Forsytes, Pendyces and Others</i>	530
Erich Maria Remarque · ‘Sweet Dreams Though the Guns are Booming’, ‘The Dead Man’s Room’ and ‘He Fell in October’, from <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> , translated by Brian Murdoch	533
<i>Permissions</i>	550

INTRODUCTION

IN COLLECTING MATERIAL FOR *NO MAN'S LAND*, my first priority was to feature writing from as many of the countries that took part as possible. This not from some desire to be exhaustive but because I wanted to convey that the war truly was a *world* war – so there are contributions from writers from twenty countries. The pieces in the book cover the fighting in all the theatres of the war: of course the Western Front, but also the Eastern Front, the Balkan Front, the Italian Front, Gallipoli and the War at Sea.

They also cover the experiences of the men and women left behind on the home front, of the women on the war front and of the soldiers who returned home never able to forget what they had endured. Because they come from many countries, the pieces reflect very different attitudes to the nation and very different motivations for fighting the war.

For the British, French and Germans who wrote about the war, their attitude was relatively straightforward. Whatever the historical facts, almost all of them felt loyalty to a well-defined nation which they took to be morally superior to other nations and whose war effort they supported. A small minority opposed the war but this was more because they took war of any kind to be evil than from the belief that other nations were morally equal to their own.

For combatants from other countries, the nation-state was more

recent and/or more contested and they had a much more fragile commitment to nationhood and empire.

The tensions in the Italian army, for instance, reflected the fact that Italy was united only in 1861 and that the creation of Italian nationalism was a work-in-progress. In Lussu's *A Soldier on the Southern Front*, the officers went into battle with the shout 'Savoy!':

Now that I was calm again, I could see all that was going on around me. Officers and men were falling with their arms flung wide and their rifles hurled so far in front of them that it seemed as though a battalion of dead men was advancing. Captain Bravini never stopped shouting: 'Savoy!'

A subaltern of the 12th, red in the face, passed near me, clutching his rifle. He was a republican, and disliked the monarchial war-cry that we used in attack. Seeing me, he shouted: 'Long live Italy!'

(*A Soldier on the Southern Front*, New York: Rizzoli, 2014, pages 121–122)

There is no doubt that the scenes of mutinous hatred described by Lussu were fuelled by the soldiers' sense of grievance at being led by an officer class whose loyalty to the Italian nation was, in their eyes, doubtful.

For those fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army, loyalty to empire was weak. In Rebreanu's *The Forest of the Hanged*, Lieutenant Bologna is a brilliant officer whose bravery will be rewarded by a Gold Medal bestowed on him by General Karg, who wants to take him with him on his next campaign to Ardeal in Romania. Apostol is not keen on going.

'Very well, very well,' repeated the general thoughtfully. 'Though I don't understand why you should not want to come with us. My division has a holy mission in Ardeal! A great mission. Yes! The enemy has stolen our country's soil. There the Wallachians...'

Suddenly General Karg stopped short as if a ray of light had entered his brain. He again took a few steps backwards and glued his gaze on Bologna, trying to read his innermost thoughts. For

INTRODUCTION

several seconds there reigned a grave-like silence in the room, while outside could be heard the grinding of cart wheels and the noisy chirping of the sparrows in a tree under the office window. Apostol unconsciously closed his eyes to protect himself from the general's scrutiny.

'You are a Romanian?' the latter jerked out abruptly, his voice almost hoarse.

(The Forest of the Hanged, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930, page 100)

Bologa is prepared to fight valiantly but draws a line on going into battle against his kith and kin. Certainly, the effectiveness of the Austro-Hungarian army was undermined by its need to enlist combatants from its ethnic minorities.

The Good Soldier Švejk has a wry, sardonic attitude to the loyalty demanded by his commanding officers:

'His Imperial Majesty must be completely off his rocker by this time,' declared Švejk. 'He was never bright, but this war'll certainly finish him.'

'Of course he's off his rocker,' the soldier from the barracks asserted with conviction. 'He's so gaga he probably doesn't know there's a war on. Perhaps they're ashamed of telling him. If his signature's on the manifesto to his peoples, then it's a fraud. They must have had it printed without his knowledge, because he's not capable of thinking about anything at all.'

'He's finished,' added Švejk knowingly. 'He wets himself and they have to feed him like a little baby. Recently a chap at the pub told us that His Imperial Majesty has two wet nurses and is breast-fed three times a day.'

'If only it was all over,' sighed the soldier from the barracks, 'and they knocked us out, so that Austria at last had peace!'

And both continued with the conversation until Švejk condemned Austria forever with the words: 'A monarchy as idiotic as this ought not to exist at all...'

(The Good Soldier Švejk, London: Heinemann, 1973, pages 207–208)

If the patriotism of Europeans fighting varied greatly, for many of the Indians and Africans enlisted in the imperial armies it was non-existent. For some, the links were primarily monetary – they went to fight in the hope that they would come back from the wars with financial rewards and even a pension; for others there was the hope that the imperial nations would recognize the contribution made to the war effort by the soldiers from the colonies and implement political and economic reforms. As Mulk Raj Anand writes in *Across the Black Waters*:

And once now in a while in a district arrived a hero, a man who had earned both a pension and a medal attached to it. And soon he became a legend and people came to see him, the wonder, especially as he had left an arm, a leg or an eye behind, and used a miraculous wooden substitute...

Information about rewards was, therefore, the chief preoccupation of the sepoy, talking about it their main consolation in exile, the inspiration of it what spurred them on to battle. How happy would be the dear ones at home if only a ready sum could help to pay even a tenth part of the moneylenders' interest and towards the repair of the roof which had been washed out by the last monsoon before the drought!

(*Across the Black Waters*, Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2008, page 169)

It was the same for many of the African soldiers – they were rewarded poorly and their expectations of a better life when they returned home after the war were not fulfilled. In *Mahmadou Fofana*, Raymond Escholier writes that the silver ring given by Samba Kamara's brother was

...all that would be left to the dead man of the village he had so much hoped to see again.

I must admit that to my sadness was added remorse. I felt the revolt that had found no place in the simple, docile soul of Samba Kamara. What gives us whites the right to remove a black man from the peace of his field to involve him in our quarrels, in our hatreds.

INTRODUCTION

Yes, I know how the story goes: ‘We are tearing these people from Barbary, we are letting them enjoy the fruits of civilisation. When the crunch comes, they must pay back their debt: we share the same course.’

(*Mahmadou Fofana*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013, pages 68–69)

Whatever a soldier’s relationship to the army he was fighting in, the war marked a crucial period in his life – for many millions it also marked his death. Of the soldiers who survived the war and are written about in *No Man’s Land*, some returned reduced by injury, others never were reconciled to the horrors they had witnessed and how the war had made them unfit for the return to civilian life. The ambulance-driver narrator in Helen Zenna Smith’s *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* finds contemplation of the return unbearable:

Home, home... and I do not care.

I do not care. I am flat. Old. I am twenty-one and as old as the hills. Emotion-dry. The war has drained me dry of feeling. Something has gone from me that will never return. I do not want to go home.

I am suddenly aware that I cannot bear Mother’s prattle-prattle of committees and recruiting-meetings and the war-baby of Jessie, the new maid; nor can I watch my gentle father gloating over the horrors I have seen, pumping me for good stories to retail at his club to-morrow. I cannot go home to watch a procession of maimed men in my dainty, rose-walled bedroom. It is no place for a company of broken men on parade...

(*Not So Quiet*, New York: The Feminist Press CUNY, 1989, page 169)

For some on the home front, what happened during the war was confirmation that society had to change – that other ways of organizing it were possible. Those who saw this were a minority that had to make their voice heard:

We’re few; that doesn’t matter. We shall be pilloried; that doesn’t

NO MAN'S LAND

matter. All that matters is that we shall have striven against what our brains and our hearts recognised as evil – Oh, not only evil, but stupid and petty and beastly – and we shall have done our bit towards bringing nearer the day when militarism will be supplanted by industry, and we may hope to have an international system of legislation that'll knock out the possibility of disputes having to be settled by barbarous and unintelligent means of bloodshed.

(*Despised and Rejected*, London: GMP, 1988, page 241)

As the war went on, the minority grew and was joined by the many disillusioned soldiers who returned home determined to make sure the suffering they had endured would not be in vain. So, the post-war period was in many of the countries involved in the war a period of revolutionary fervour and/or democratic reform.

Any selection of writing on the First World War has certain criteria. To give *No Man's Land* as international a perspective as possible, translations were undertaken of works that had previously not been translated. The selection was limited to works written before 1945; this, like most criteria, is arbitrary, but I felt that the experience of the Second World War gave writers a very different perspective from which to assess the First and so marked a valid cut-off point. And priority was given to fiction and to a lesser extent memoirs – though it is clear that the boundary between them is fluid – much of the fiction about the war is autobiographical. No poetry was selected since the war poetry has already been well represented in many excellent anthologies and was relatively well known.*

No Man's Land begins with the declaration of war being declared in Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (London: Penguin, 2003, page 5):

'It's the French revolution all over again.'

'Crowned heads beware!' murmurs another.

*Where the selected piece of writing has no title I have given it one as a guide to what it is about. Other titles are provided by the authors. Some writers from the period use ellipses to indicate a pause or a change of place or tone: they do not indicate omissions (Ed.).

INTRODUCTION

And a third man adds:

‘Perhaps it is the war to end all wars.’

There is a pause, then a few brows shake, still pale from the wan tragedy of a night of perspiring insomnia.

‘An end to war! Can that be? An end to war! The world’s affliction is incurable.’

At the end is the narrator of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

But perhaps all these thoughts of mine are just melancholy and confusion, which will be blown away like dust when I am standing underneath the poplars once again, and listening to the rustle of their leaves. It cannot have vanished entirely, that tenderness that troubles our blood, the uncertainty, the worry, all the things to come, the thousand faces of the future, the music of dreams and books, the rustling and the idea of women. All this cannot have collapsed in the shelling, the despair and the army brothels.

The trees here glow bright and gold, the rowan berries are red against the leaves, white country roads run on towards the horizon, and the canteens are all buzzing like beehives with rumours of peace.

(*All Quiet on the Western Front*, London:Vintage, 1996, page 200)

In between, there is the carnage and destruction of the four years of a war that determined the history of the 20th century. The war changed all aspects of people’s lives – it changed the relations between the classes, between the sexes and between races in Europe and beyond. It led to the growth of the evils that spread through Europe in the following decades: fascism, communism, anti-Semitism, and genocide. And it redrew geographical boundaries giving the victors the spoils of victory and amputating the territories of the defeated. This geographical settling of scores was fundamentally unstable – it rewarded the more powerful, it showed that might is right. And its creation of ethnic minorities all over Europe led to many of the major conflicts of the last hundred years, including, of course, the Second World War.

NO MAN'S LAND

Editing this book has been an up-and-down journey that required much reading that chronicled the relentless brutality of mankind, but it also provided many occasions of wondrous surprise that showed the power of human beings to express solidarity and kindness in conditions of great adversity. It also enabled me to discover authors who realized they were writing on the cusp of an epochal moment in which change – in its social, political and artistic forms – was possible and who fully embraced the moment. Carlo Emilio Gadda and Mary Borden were the contemporaries of Stravinsky and Webern, Klee and Leger, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe – but that is another story.

One hundred years after the beginning of the war, the celebration of the anniversary, a building block of our national identity, is contested terrain. If this anthology helps to remind us that the war was truly international, then it will have achieved its aim. I hope that reading the anthology is as rewarding an experience as it was for me to compile it.

HENRI BARBUSSE

THE VISION

from *Under Fire*

translated by Robin Buss

THE DENT DU MIDI, the Aiguille Verte and Mont Blanc stare down at the bloodless faces emerging from under the blankets lined up along the gallery of the sanatorium.

On the first floor of the palatial hospital, this terrace with its balcony of carved wood supported by a veranda is isolated in space and overhangs the world.

The fine wool blankets – red, green, havana brown or white – with emaciated faces emerging from under them, and radiant eyes, are still. Silence reigns over the chaises longues. Someone coughs. Then nothing more is heard but the turning of the pages of a book at long, regular intervals; or a murmured request and hushed reply from a bed to the one beside it; or sometimes on the balustrade, the flapping like a fan of a venturesome crow, a fugitive from the flocks that make rosaries of black pearls in the transparent void.

Silence reigns. In any case, those people, rich and independent, who have come here from all parts of the earth, struck down by the same misfortune, have lost the habit of speech. They have turned in on themselves and think about their lives and deaths.

A maid appears in the gallery. She walks softly; she is dressed in white. She is bringing newspapers which she hands around.

‘That’s it,’ says the first one to unfold his paper. ‘War has been declared.’

NO MAN'S LAND

Expected though it was, the news causes a kind of astonishment because those who hear it sense its extreme importance.

These men are cultured and intelligent, their minds deepened by suffering and reflection, detached from things and almost from life, as distant from the rest of the human species as if they already belonged to posterity, looking far ahead towards the incomprehensible land of the living and the mad.

'Austria is committing a crime,' the Austrian says.

'France must win,' says the Englishman.

'I hope that Germany will be defeated,' says the German.

They settle back under the blankets, on their pillows, facing the mountain peaks and the sky. But despite the purity of space, the silence is filled with the news that they have just received.

'War!'

A few of those lying there break the silence, repeating the word under their breath and considering that this is perhaps the greatest event of modern times, perhaps of all time. And the annunciation even casts a kind of confused and murky veil over the clear landscape before their eyes.

The calm expanses of the valley dotted with villages pink as roses and soft pastures, the splendid outlines of the mountains, the black lace of the pine trees and the white lace of the eternal snows, are filled with the bustling of mankind.

Multitudes teem in clearly defined masses. On the fields attacks sweep forward, wave after wave, then come to a standstill; houses are gutted like men and towns like houses; villages appear in crumpled white as though they had fallen on to the earth from the sky; frightful loads of dead and wounded men alter the shape of the plains.

You can see every country where the borders are eaten away with massacres constantly tearing new soldiers from its heart, full of strength, full of blood; your gaze follows these living tributaries for the river of the dead.

North, south and west, battles rage, on all sides, in the distance. You can turn this way or that; there is not a single horizon on which there is no war.