

***Commemorative Modernisms: Women Writers, Death, and the First World War.* Alice Kelly. Edinburgh University Press, 2022 (paperback). \$29.95, 297 pp.**

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In this tour-de-force study, which combines in-depth cultural analysis with consistently insightful close reading, Alice Kelly (University of Warwick) contends that the literary task of determining “what to do with the war dead,” was, if you will, largely women’s work, both during the conflagration of 1914 to 1918 and during the decades of Modernist art that followed (1). After all, in Britain and the United States, the two nations from which Kelly draws most of her samples, “the burden of mourning was symbolically focused on women, making them predominantly responsible for the emotional labor of the war” (3).

Thus, while the depiction of military violence in the Great War remained the province of male writers, interpreting the incomprehensible scale of loss and injury produced by such violence became a central concern for female literary artists from 1914 onward, sometimes explicitly, sometimes at a subtextual level. Moreover, grappling with the meaning of mass death, Kelly shows, strained the limits of traditional prose forms and fueled the emergence of Modernist experimentation.

*Commemorative Modernisms* offers a comprehensive survey of this specific and highly gendered literary activity. The book begins, appropriately enough, with the writings of frontline nurses who confronted death directly. In narratives published while the war was still underway, medical volunteers like Enid Bagnold (a conventional and now forgotten author) and Ellen N. La Motte (an audacious Modernist) recorded the “shock of the dead”—the way that seemingly

endless streams of mutilated male bodies, in some cases left unidentifiable by industrial weapons, shattered the Victorian construct of the “good death” and demanded new forms of mourning and commemoration. Kelly devotes an illuminating chapter to such writers before turning to the super-patriot Edith Wharton, a denizen of Paris by the time of the Great War and an indefatigable spokesperson and propagandist for her adopted country. Kelly’s extended examination of Wharton’s neglected wartime writings stands as one of the book’s highlights, and it sheds important new light on works such as *Fighting France* (1915), a travel memoir created through Wharton’s then-unprecedented access to the front lines of the Western Front, and the little-known short story and revenge narrative “Coming Home” (1915). Within these texts, as well as others, Kelly convincingly excavates an “underlying anxiety concerning the war dead” that existed even in the writings of one “who fully supported the war” (83).

The second half of *Commemorative Modernisms* turns to “representations of the war dead at a distance” and includes valuable discussions of works by H.D., Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf (146). In an especially fine chapter, which showcases the strengths of her interdisciplinary approach, Kelly reads Woolf’s novels *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Mansfield’s short stories “The Garden Party” (1922) and the “Fly” (1922) as “response[s] to the key questions of the immediate postwar period: the ongoing identification and burial of bodies; the question of locating and visiting the dead; and the building of local and national memorials” (196). Her detailed treatment of *Jacob’s Room*, here interpreted as the literary equivalent of a hollow cenotaph or as a kind of anti-memorial volume (Woolf, one learns, reviewed the “memorial volume produced for Rupert Brooke” and despised it, along with other tribute texts), is perhaps the most illuminating analysis this notoriously cryptic high-Modernist text has received in years.

Through her exploration of the ways in which women writers participated in—and responded to—the cultural processing of tragedy and loss, Kelly dips in and out of various scholarly fields: in addition to featuring impressive archival research, *Commemorative Modernisms* draws upon up-to-date work in memory studies, feminist and gender studies, and Modernist studies, as well as a vast array of sources devoted to social, political, and military history. The result is a study that will appeal to multiple audiences. Readers uninterested in the specific writers Kelly discusses will nevertheless find this book gripping as a cultural history of death in the Great War. At the same time, scholars of First World War literature and/or literary Modernism will appreciate Kelly's fresh and incisive readings of works like La Motte's *Backwash of War* (1916), Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live* (1960), and, especially, Woolf's *Jacob's Room*.

First published in 2020, *Commemorative Modernisms* is a late arrival to the international boom in First World War Studies occasioned by the Centennial of 2014 to 2018. However, it stands among the very finest books linked to this profound anniversary. Alice Kelly effectively develops and defends her claim that death in the Great War emerged as a central concern for British and American women writers, and she adds an important new perspective on the linkage between mass trauma and the emergence of literary Modernism.

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