

*Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939*, by Rosa Maria Bracco. Oxford: Berg, 1993. Pp. 1-210. \$49.95

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Rosa Maria Bracco's *Merchants of Hope* is an analysis of literary losers: the Middlebrow novel of post-WWI England. While these novels may have been "the staple of the circulating libraries; . . . adorned book shop windows, filled review columns and, most importantly, made up the bestseller list," (11) Bracco openly admits that, "There is not a sign in their writings of aesthetic consideration of how the subject matter and literary medium suit each other, and that is why their names failed the test of literary criticism" (196). Than why spend an entire book dedicated to these non-artists and their less than artistic literature? For good reason. Bracco's analysis points out that, although these books should not necessarily be dusted off and included in the canon of war literature, their contribution to the traumatized post war England was both real and significant.

Middlebrow fiction was extremely popular during the post-WWI period in England and is classified by Bracco as, "those novels and plays which made no attempt to go beyond or, as the writers themselves would have put it, to deviate from comfortably familiar presentations" (10). These works, which George Orwell called "good bad books" (11) consisted of "Autobiographical memoirs thinly disguised as fictional accounts; civilians' stories of the home front they knew, or their description of the ordeal in the trenches they never saw; novels where the soldiers' experience is the centre of the narrative . . ." (13). While never achieving or even attempting the sophistication of an Eliot, Pound, or Joyce, Bracco points out that these Middlebrow writers were obligated to counter the disillusionment portrayed in the "highbrow literature" and instead re-created a truth that healed.

Middlebrow war novels depict the period which represented for many the watershed between the

reliable past and the confusing present, the tragic break between old and new. They attempt not to camouflage the horrors of war but to soften the impact of the break it represented by reasserting links with the past; even when lamenting the disruptive consequences of the war they still imply the possibility of readjusting the various parts and making them whole and functional again. (12)

Such reasserting links to the past were accomplished by the writers under discussion by closely modeling their fiction on the formulaic works of the 19th century model such as Dickens. Although these writers were criticized with corrupting the great literature of the past, the Middlebrows were simply using a form they thought would best serve their didactic purpose. "Middlebrow fiction writers," Bracco explains,

. . . attempted to establish continuity not with great literature but with the past: they employed the nineteenth-century structure of well-rounded narratives, with clearly structured plots and community of values. They viewed the English language and the English novel as the expression of the unalterable, shared values and traditions; they defied cultural obsolescence and transitoriness. (12)

This belief in "unalterable shared values and traditions" is central to the Middlebrow authors and how they portrayed their war experiences. Because they "were from the middle classes and addressed a middle-class audience; they meditated between conflicts and extremes, and balance was their alleged trademark"(12), balance and sensibility became the shared values. These works were wrought with sensibility and every facet of the war, from its initial patriotism to the devastating aftermath, are all dealt with accordingly. Questioning the cause of the war, the terrible loss of life, or how to adjust back into society did not reflect English sensibility and was not addressed. In *The Barber of Putney*, a young soldier has just witnessed his first death and a veteran offers comfort:

Look 'ere, son. I know just how you're feeling. Fit to howl. I bin through it. Just take a tip from an old 'and. Don't never think. Don't never think. There's no good in it when it comes to war. You'll see worse things than this yet. Bags of worse things. Keep doin' something. It's the only way. When you 'aven't got a job, sleep. When you can't sleep, get a job. (69)

This same sensibility applies in the almost comical *The Sword Falls*, which chronicles the war experience of a clerk:

His world collapses during the war; his son is killed (after which tragedy he enlists), his household is bombarded, and his wife dies. Afterwards he returns to work and tells his employer who asks him about the bad time he had: 'Oh nothing really, sir. It was a very interesting experience in many ways. All that sort of thing broadens the mind so, I always think. (71)

Appealing to stereotypical English sensibility was one technique used by these authors. Their common use of a War-as-School metaphor is an even more interesting technique. Since these authors were middle and upper middle class, they were generally well educated. The majority attended either private schools or the still prestigious grammar schools and many went to Oxford and Cambridge. Their school experience gave them sense of belonging and entrenched their place in society. In their minds, the war presented many similarities. These authors comprised the company grade officers (captains and lieutenants) rank structure and within this structure there was a "school-like" sense of belonging and camaraderie. The struggle in the War was often compared to the struggle of a rugby or cricket match. Maria Bracco summarizes this school mentality in *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant*:

The spirit which is so willing to do the right thing is at the core of the utterly homogenous attitudes which he

encounters in an officers mess in a huge gutted French farm in 1915. The men all look identical, with the 'same carefully curled up mustaches, the same modulated voices.' They address each other with nicknames. The atmosphere is unmistakable to Peter; 'merely glorified Eton.' This is the backbone of England. Its hallmark is understatement; everyone is pretending not to indulge in emotions, not to know or care much about his role in the war. If questioned by an outsider as to why they were fighting they would have answered with the lift of an eyebrow which meant: 'My dear fellow, I was from Eaton and one does, don't you know, one just does.' This display of the strength of deep cultural roots implies an entrenched class system which is the truly unmentionable political dimension. (71)

The Middlebrow understood and felt comfortable in this "entrenched class system" and attempted, through their war literature, to guarantee that it didn't dissolve. In the role of company grade officers, the Middlebrows lived, fought, and died in the trenches with the enlisted men (lower class). The officers often portrayed themselves as concerned, paternal figures who felt an overriding sense of obligation to their unimaginative yet loyal and loving troops. Although these middle rank officers may have questioned the purpose of some of the ludicrous orders coming down from their superior officers (upper class), the orders were obediently carried out, often with disastrous results.

By portraying war as a microcosm of English society, with its rigid class structure and middle class ideals, the Middlebrows were attempting to prove that the Great War was not the cataclysmic event so often portrayed by the post-modernist but "a gigantic catastrophe of exactly the same quality as a railway accident" (154). For the Middlebrows, WWI was an intense struggle that was nobly fought and won. To these writers, the war was very real but was no greater than any other major crisis that England had survived. English culture and character had remained intact for centuries and it was unthinkable to believe WWI could challenge this. By emphasizing sensibility and class structure, the Middlebrows gave

their audience a formula to fall back on. If such a formula worked during the War, it no doubt would carry the society through any difficulties it would have to face after the war.

To assume that authors of popular WWI fiction had such intentions in mind, especially in light of their huge commercial success, seems extremely generous. Bracco, however, provides a number of examples to support the idea that these authors had a high purpose in mind. Gilbert Frankau, author of *Masterson* stated:

Mere royalties were not the main urge. The one white flame had flared again. The one altruistic dream—stimulated maybe by a night in Ypres, where men still disinterred the bodies from the blood-soaked soil—had returned to me while I corrected and rechecked the proofs. (37)

Bracco's final analysis of the archetypal Middlebrow work and Middlebrow author, Robert Sherriff and his play *Journey's End*, confirms, not only the intent of the novels, but proof that Middlebrow idealism was actually successful. This highly romantic play, performed in 1928, dramatizes the war experience of a young "Middlebrow." Sherriff's hero, an idealistic schoolboy, James Raleigh, arrives to the Front, fresh from school, and encounters his school hero Captain Stanhope. Stanhope, who has been at the Front some three years, has turned to drink to quell his fears and has begun to question his own courage. He is consequently short-tempered with Raleigh who remains an innocent hopeful, not quite understanding his own situation. A suicide raid is directed by higher command and Stanhope sends young Raleigh and Raleigh's new found mentor, Osborne. Osborne dies, as does Raleigh's innocence. The next day, Raleigh is mortally wounded by a German shell but, before he dies, he and Stanhope rekindle their old friendship.

It is no wonder Bracco selected this play as an archetypal Middlebrow work. English sensibility, school references, and a continuance of humanity are all outwardly portrayed, and *Journey's End* was an immediate success both publicly and critically. The public exclaimed, "How like it all is" (153), which is a telling commentary. The English public felt that, while the war was

truly awful, it provided men an environment to prove themselves, exhibit their enduring English identity, and ultimately win the war. The literary critics also jumped on this bandwagon. They saw Sherriff's play as "a protest against war which conveyed its harsh reality without tarnishing humanity" (153)—quite in contrast to how, say, a Sassoon or Remarque depicted the war when they argued that WWI destroyed humanity by crushing idealism and offering no hope. *Journey's End* demonstrated not only how the War did not destroy idealism, but, with its melodramatic ending, actually validated humanity.

The extreme contrast between Sherriff's own experience and how he conveyed it in his play supports the purpose of and the peculiar effectiveness of Middlebrow literature. Robert Sherriff was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army in 1915 and sent to France almost immediately. The school-like image so often portrayed by Middlebrows is what Sherriff's initially encountered. He wrote home, "Every officer you meet is a personal friend and somehow it is like a big school" (155). Unlike his play, however, this romantic ideal rapidly disintegrated. Sherriff encountered homesickness and paralyzing nervousness. He again wrote home concerning his fear of going back to the line "... it seems the farther away from it you are the more it preys upon your mind and I feel I simply cant [sic] go up again" (158). Sherriff was so ineffective as an officer that he was relieved of duty for not taking care of his men (they were not clean). Eventually wounded by bomb fragments, Sherriff was honorably discharged in 1917. Bracco adds,

After living in a nightmare no man's land between courage and nervous collapse, between the desire to escape and the unwillingness to step with ignominy out of the exclusive world of fear, all was resolved into an intense experience and an honorable war record, a narrative which he began to re-present in fictional form as soon as he found himself permanently out of the line and out of fear. (161)

Sherriff was hardly the stuff of English sensibility and stoicism depicted in his own play. What intrigues is how Sherriff dealt with



his war experience. He should have been devastated from what he encountered: the horrors of trench warfare, shell shock, injuries, and daily exposure to atrocities and death. More to the point, Sherriff suffered the shame of being relieved of duty and not being able to “stick it out.” Sherriff should have been traumatized but wasn’t. According to Bracco, Sherriff seems to have suffered no ill effects. When asked about the war some years later, he stated, “There had been bad times in France, but all in all it had been a magnificent experience, and with my wounds [sic] gratuity I bought myself a sculling boat” (171).

Sherriff had reconstructed his personal war experience as a Middlebrow and went on with his life. His middle class sensibility and strict reliance on entrenched social ideologies and structures did not allow for deep questioning of the war. A comparison of the war environment to *Alice in Wonderland* clearly hints at how Sherriff viewed the war.

It has reminded me very often of Alice’s Adventures through the Looking Glass when I have stood and looked at the little mound of earth that marks “Fritz’s” trenches through a Periscope—it is so near and yet so far—you can see to there and no further—you wonder what is going on behind that little earth mound—and just as it actually [is on a] looking glass—just the same thing is going on behind—Germans sit and write home—they do what we do—they are just a reflection of us at present—he runs away from our Mortar shells and we run away from him—we are always wondering what he is going to do next and he wonders what we are going to do—so taking it all round we just sit and frighten each other. (156)

Bracco continues, “This is Sherriff at his best, observing his surroundings with childish penetration” (156). Such perception seems to have not been a detriment to Sherriff but instead a “strength” allowing for full recovery from the War and expressing, however altered an experience, into one of the most successful war dramatizations in modern time.

Bracco concludes:

The Middlebrow novelists of the inter-war years were engaged not with the sense of an irretrievable world, but with a commitment to avoid the fragmentation of what they saw as 'English' culture. In the years of readjustment following the war, popular writers struggled to make 'common sense' (in both meaning of the expression) of the new world, and fulfilled their traditional functions as social commentators by providing their readers with models through which to absorb the trauma of their experience. (197)

Sassoon and Remarque painted a grimmer picture of WWI that focused on the horror, waste and sense of loss the war represented to many. Eliot, Pound, and Joyce's work broke old forms that may have better represented the fracturing and disillusionment that was occurring among their circles. The Middlebrows perceived a different struggle and wrote of a different reality. Their stories were romantic, didactic and, although not ignoring the horror of the war, made the Great War more palatable to those who suffered at both the Front and on the home front. These popular authors are relatively forgotten now, but during the twenty years between WWI and WWII, their works were widely disseminated and understood. The highbrows can't make the same claim.

Maria Bracco's *Merchants of Hope* forces some interesting issues: what is good literature and what influence does art have on society? If we are to look only at the aesthetic or literary qualities of the Middlebrow war novels, our efforts might well prove unrewarding. But what may reward is considering the powerful effects these works had on the multitudes that read the books and watched the plays. England not only survived the trauma of WWI but also went on to fight an equally devastating war only twenty years later with the same sensibility and determination once again heralded by the Middlebrows.

The U.S. experience with war and art has something in common with the Middlebrow reporting of war in England. Films made during and after WW II were quite idealistic and portrayed what the



American public wanted and perhaps needed to feel: that the cause was just; that the U.S. symbolized good, while the Germans and Japanese symbolized evil; and that God was surely on the side of right. Although the devastation of WWII certainly parallels that of WWI, the American public seemed to feel more comfortable with our role in the Second World War. Was this attitude particular to WWII and how it was fought or to the art forms that portrayed it?

U.S. attitudes about the war in Vietnam were significantly different. Disillusionment and uselessness were, and still are, the main focus of both Vietnam War film and literature. Not only were those in charge of this war portrayed as incompetent, it was made clear that the common soldiers came from the underprivileged classes. Moreover, the enemy was portrayed as victimized rather than as evil. Through the on-going stream of Vietnam War literature and film, the American public appears unable to let go of the conflict and still feels uncomfortable about it some twenty years later.

Maria Bracco's *Merchants of Hope* raises questions on how war literature should be evaluated. What determines a good or bad text, play, or film? Is it how accurately it reports the human condition, how well it's constructed, how much it conforms or breaks from the norms, or the kind of effect it has on its attentive public? Bracco's detailed and comprehensive analysis of a particular genre and the impact it exerted on a society provocatively muddles the definition of good and bad art.

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