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Whitsun and Beyond: Continuing the Great War

There's a straight row of houses
in these latter days
All covering the downs where the sheep
used to graze;
There's a field of red poppies,
(a gift from the Queen),
But the ladies remember at Whitsun
And the ladies go dancing at Whitsun.

—*“Dancing at Whitsun”*

The haunting verses by John Austin Martin, the last of which I've quoted above, repeat a story familiar in English villages after the First World War. Because the men were dead, the women of the villages, dressed in “white linen, with ribbons of green,” performed by themselves the Whitsun dances of summer, traditionally danced by the men of the villages. The widows continued, “for fifty long springtimes,” the trust unwittingly left them by their young husbands when they disappeared into the war. The dances have survived, thanks to the old ladies, who danced year after year past the “fine roll of honor, where the Maypole once stood.” For them the war was always only yesterday.

The First World War, becoming with each decade a little more exotic in the imagination, does refuse to become the completed past. Though warfare today bears little resemblance to that war, and though today it's difficult to conceive of any nation sustaining such effort and slaughter for over four years, the war remains part of our past in a half-remembered way. We may be hard-pressed to

describe the familiarities, but we recognize them nevertheless. For that reason, the war remains with us. We are horrified, fascinated, saddened, and instructed by its quality of dogged and resigned immutability; we remain shaken, even 75 years later, by the statistics.

There has been no lack of First World War scholarship, especially in the last thirty years. But an interesting phenomenon has occurred during the last two decades. Scholars have turned their attention from the socio-political-military interests of the Liddell Harts, Fischers, Taylors, and Tuchmans and have focused instead on the experience of the war itself. We have been given numerous excellent anthologies of war prose and poetry. We have had the chilling, touching trilogy of Lyn MacDonald's oral histories, and well-researched definitive biographies of many of the major participants. We have enjoyed cross-cultural analyses of the climate of 1914 (Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*) and perspective on the war's intellectual significance (Stromberg, *Redemption By War*). We have, in short, deconstructed and rebuilt the war in an infinite number of ways, and are not done with it yet.

Three books stand out as particularly important in this contemporary spate of scholarship. Each is unique, with different aims and differing methods of attaining its ends. One of them is not even wholly devoted to the war, but is a book that has, in my view, helped to change the whole discipline of military history. Together the three illustrate the kaleidoscope character the First World War holds for new approaches to understanding its ramifications. A look, therefore, at Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, and Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined* follows.

It has been almost twenty years since the publication of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and Fussell has moved on, over the intervening years, to consider other fields—inter-war British travel literature, the concept of class in America, the Second World War experienced and presented, and the deterioration, as he sees it, of American ability to distinguish

standards of taste and excellence. The range of his interests belies the fact that in a sense, Fussell continues to question, through his choice of subject, the intellectual and cultural groundings of Anglo-American experience and belief in the twentieth century. Fussell, like the First World War's memoir-writers and poets, continues to re-examine, for all of us, the past and present expectations of reality that shape our late twentieth-century existences.

Many will argue that *The Great War and Modern Memory* is Fussell's most successful book. It is a work that has worn well. It is elegant both in conception and execution, a joy to read not only for the lucidly developed arguments the author advances, but also for the perspicacity and wit with which he makes his case, Fussell being himself a master of the ironic mode that he would argue typifies the post-1918 perception of the world—"No one's warm passionate lips come anywhere near those of Jarrell's Ball Turret Gunner" (250).

The Great War and Modern Memory reminds us of all those dimly remembered connections we still have to a world that so often seems a millennium, not a century, removed. As Fussell reviews the Edwardian and Georgian sentimentalities of theme and motif, we, the middle-aged, are reminded of the odd parental or grandparental phrases—"corker," "dandy," "having a ball," "grand"—barely recalled from childhood. We make the traverse back in mind, as well as time, back past "Mairsy Doats," to "Daisy Daisy" and we understand, almost, the seeming sun-dappled simplicity of the pre-1914 world, and the route traveled since.

At his best, underneath the intriguing discussions of Sassoon, Jones, Graves, Blunden, and Owen, Fussell raises the much larger issues of the protective structural framework of a culture's *a priori* beliefs; the cultural trauma when language cannot embrace actuality in an acceptable way; the varieties of a psyche's defenses, both conscious and unperceived; and the brave and touching ways in which those who have experienced the indescribable attempt to describe it, both to themselves and to the world. By examining so sympathetically the literary failures of expression, and by understanding so perceptively why those failures *had* to occur, Fussell himself writes a paean

to humanity and its eternal struggle to understand its context and to leave an inheritance of understanding for those to come. In the calm of reflection, the initial greedy reaction, after appreciative recognition that one has just finished an intellectual feast, is that one wishes to have written Fussell's book oneself. It is a work that any cultural historian, literary critic, or lover of fine prose would be proud to have produced.

Though Fussell's main focus is the loss of innocence and the sense of irony engendered by the war, he also achieves several collateral ends that place his thesis in a broad, convincing context. While discussing what was rendered irrelevant in literary convention by the war, he presents a capsule analysis of literary themes, motifs, and characteristics of British life and literature in the generation preceding the war. The existing socio-literary stage is so well set that it provides the foundation for a course in late Victorian culture. Fussell also juxtaposes the qualities of the war against the inherited motifs and symbols, to show the malignant distortion of British verities caused by the hostilities:

It was a cruel reversal that sunrise and sunset, established by over a century of Romantic poetry and painting as the tokens of hope and peace and rural charm, should now be exactly the moments of heightened ritual anxiety. (52)

Though he does not discuss, by any means, the whole wealth of writers the Great War produced, he does consider at length the more well-known of the memoirists and poets as he builds his main thesis—that the war's horror was responsible for both the set of experiences for the combatants that defied realistic expression within the boundaries of the inherited tradition and the development of a modern sense of the cynically ironic: two crucial developments in Anglo-American culture. The main body of Fussell's work, then, deals with the varying ways in which writers like David Jones, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, and Wilfred Owen attempt to express their own trauma and outrage, and to present their

experiences as a successfully articulated description for the sake of the non-combatants and the dead alike.

Fussell is particularly effective in using Graves, Sassoon, and Blunden, the war's most noted memoir writers, to illustrate the writers' very different ways of dealing with the war, their roles in it, and their memories of the experience. Each, in a sense, created an alter ego to absorb the stress, the horror, and the memories, and so, in singular ways, each persona became a buffer for its creator that made "going over the ground again" (259) bearable.

For Sassoon it was the admittedly thinly disguised character of George Sherston, Sassoon's stand-in, who with his created biographical details and life exemplifies the distance Sassoon needed to put between his own life and his character's, while allowing him the license to create the contrasts that so color the entire Sherston trilogy. As Fussell so effectively illustrates, the Sassoon books are constructed to emphasize the polarities of life: before the war/in the war; callow youth/wiser soldier; separate special days/the blur of time in the trenches. We are constantly reminded of the horrific discrepancies between the world that one thought one knew and the new world where, it seems, none of the old certainties can be counted on. The simple George Sherston eventually evolves into the war protester, and further still, into the war protester who realizes that protesting is meaningless. Sassoon's feat, by the end of the trilogy, is, in Fussell's words, "to enact the ironic redemption of a shallow fox-hunting man by ironic events" (102). This trilogy is no guileless set of fictionalized "memoirs," but an artfully constructed moral tale.

Robert Graves takes an almost opposite tack in *Good-bye to All That*. Where Sassoon takes experience and displays it in terms of its polarities and ironies, Graves, in a more nihilistic way, takes his war years and turns them into caricatures of farce—the better to accentuate the horror. If, as Dürrenmatt maintains, comedy is the only true twentieth-century mode because "tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility. . ." (203), then it is obvious that Graves has, in his memoir, become the ranking

cynic, using satire disguised as fact to underscore the indescribable, meaningless epic he has survived. Where Sassoon seeks his own mental salvation and distance through the creation of Sherston, Graves emerges kicking and screaming “Bad joke!” The lie, Graves suggests, comes from the war itself, which jumbles reality and memory, exaggerating some elements as it purges others from existence (207).

Fussell, too, sees the theatrical elements of the war illustrated by Graves’ work, which is arranged to illustrate farce over catastrophe, mimesis over reality, drama over the deadeningly mundane, and set mask over mobile features. The ironies Graves employs are also dramatic—the notice of his own death (premature), the gallows humor dialogue, the bits and pieces of the ridiculous sandwiched among the seemingly serious. Fussell justly appraises Graves, because he takes him seriously for the right reasons, forcing the reader to consider in a more sophisticated manner Graves’ book, for too long taken at face value.

Edmund Blunden probably has Fussell’s greatest affection, because Blunden’s sincerity and innocence, striking in *Undertones of War*, offer the author little shield against what he has lived through in the war. Blunden was the youngest of the three writers, the most self-effacing, and the least studied in his memoirs. Blunden reveals himself as a genuine believer in the soul of pastoral England, and, by extension, the pastoral France ravaged and mutilated by the war. As he exposes his own sensitivity, somehow undamaged by what he has survived, the “ironic cruelty” (259) of the war stands out almost more starkly than it does in Sassoon’s polarities or Graves’ brittle satire. Blunden’s contrasts are far more moving than those of Sassoon, because they are set against a mind genuinely ensconced in another world, where bullets are compared to gnats, and grey reality is seen always against the metaphor of rural peace. When Blunden finally loses his innocence, we know it, as Fussell points out, for Blunden does not dissemble as he tells us, in the last lines of the book, of the knowledge to come—further devastation of the rural landscape (267). Fussell sees, in *Undertones of War*, that Blunden fights against the war’s

faceless and mechanized determinism with what he knows best and with what is perhaps most effective, a simple pastoral to the "green and pleasant" land. But Blunden, the "intelligent chinchilla," as Edmund Gosse described him, still sees clearly.

The three profiles Fussell presents contrast nicely with those of David Jones and Wilfred Owen, the two poets he discusses at length. Jones is perhaps the least well-known of the five writers, and his work, especially *In Parenthesis*, the least accessible. Owen, to his detriment, is more known through anthology than by widespread exposure to his whole body of work. Nevertheless, as with the memoir writers, Fussell's treatment not only explicates these two poets' works in a larger and more original context than we see elsewhere, his treatment also reveals the idiosyncratic self-defenses erected by all soldiers who wrote. We wonder, above all, what Owen's post-1918 poetry would have been like, as Fussell traces the growing subtlety of the work in Owen's ironic use of the homoerotic themes.

The beauty of these sections of *The Great War and Modern Memory* is that Fussell achieves what, sadly, too few literary critics accomplish. While analyzing the authors' works in the context of their biographies, experiences, and literary traditions, he makes a far larger statement about the culture that produced these varied responses, and about the war itself. He has taken literary criticism and cultural history out of their own disciplines and placed them on a larger canvas, that of twentieth-century European history. By so doing, Fussell shows us why the war is not the past, and how all of us have gotten from then to now.

In the concluding section of *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Fussell isolates what he considers the "inexpressible" for most of the war's writers, and finds this phenomenon eventually coming to full development a generation later, in the literature of the Second World War and that of the following decades. In a journey that is remarkable for its solid signposts, Fussell takes us from Hardy to Pynchon via a route that makes complete sense. Fussell realizes, rightly, I think, that Brigadier Pudding's tryst with the "Mistress of the Night" in *Gravity's Rainbow*—when one reads past the scatology, pornography

and masochism—is both ennobling and touching (333), for the tryst is a ritual commemoration, on Pudding's part, of his loss of innocence, dignity, and belief in behavioral bounds. After we are horrified, we are sympathetic and sad. In the Mailers, Hellers, and Pynchons of the 1950s and '60s, we find at last the mushrooming of the bitterness, cynicism, irony, gallows humor, scatological and pornographic reappings of the First World War, impossible for a Sassoon or Owen to express fully.

We may disagree with Fussell's analysis and interpretation of what the memoirists/poets do succeed in doing with their work. How does one finally balance where experience becomes fiction or fiction meets autobiography? We may also quibble with Fussell over what the writers he discusses were consciously attempting and how well they succeeded. It is difficult, however, to quarrel with the fact that for those who were writers before they were soldiers, the war scorched the soldier into the writer's psyche for the rest of his life, to produce, as Sassoon put it, "my queer craving to revisit the past and give the modern world the slip," or, as Blunden explained, "for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this" (92, 256). It is also impossible not to recognize the elegy to innocence lost in the First World War disguised as the swaggering obscenities of the post-Second World War period.

The real achievement of *The Great War and Modern Memory* is that Fussell, in his intricate depiction of the polarities of the war and the struggle of the participants to deal with them, has indeed written a masterful book on the war itself. If one were to read only one book, ever, on the First World War, one might read *The Great War and Modern Memory* and come away with an historian's sense of its magnitude, as well as its literary and cultural legacy.

John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, published in 1976, a year after Fussell's book, is very different. Keegan's book has done for military history what *The Great War and Modern Memory* did for literary criticism—brought the discipline into the larger fold of the humanities in a thoughtful and pragmatic way. Keegan's

book remains one of the best and most riveting examples of the “new” military history, which considers military events as they need to be seen—in the reflection of the civil states that sponsor wars, the economies that support them, and the participants who experience them. Keegan declares shamefacedly that one of his aims as an unblooded Sandhurst instructor writing a book about war was to understand what it is like to be in battle (17). But he also seeks to realize the effects of a battle’s peculiarities on subsequent postwar history and to thereby help recloak military history in respectability. Keegan was one of the first to reintegrate military affairs into the historical discipline’s mainstream, and the rest of the practitioners owe him a great debt. In subsequent books, Keegan has continued to put military topics into broad political, sociological and economic contexts, but *The Face of Battle* has a compelling simplicity that lures the lay reader as well as the professional historian, and provides a more profound understanding of the complex dynamics of war.

The Face of Battle is not wholly devoted to the First World War; the chapter dealing with the Battle of the Somme is only a quarter of the book. But in the single chapter on the Somme, Keegan, like Fussell, opens avenues to wider considerations of the actual mechanics of warfare: what goes on in planning a campaign; what can go wrong (and does); what happens when the battle starts; what danger one runs of dying, and how that death might occur; and finally, what it all means when it’s over. This is the no-frills plan Keegan follows for each of the three battles he discusses—Agincourt (1415), Waterloo (1815), and the Somme (1916). The approach sounds almost too simple, but the contrasts and similarities among these three seminal battles give us pause for thought, and leave us considering the components of warfare in new configurations.

The issues Keegan raises, as when he discusses the presence of the leadership ingredient in the untrained and untried public school graduates, are not new revelations, but when these graduates are considered in terms of their later abilities as officers, new and vital sociological questions present themselves. If one handles one’s troops as one handles

underclassmen, what does that then say about class differences, or their unchangeable qualities? The leadership question is also a logical one to ask, since obviously the Kitchener battalions, with their amateur officers at the head of amateur troops, potentially had a leadership problem. One answer to that question has always been the seasoned non-commissioned officer who trains the young lieutenant, but Keegan recognizes the poignancy of such young men dealing with their new positions by means of the training another world has provided them, doing what generations of prefects have done to control and train their charges. Keegan's explanation makes eminent common sense, and certainly parallels have been drawn before to the military qualities of a public school education, and the gentlemanly qualities of the good officer. But Keegan, unlike other military historians, has recognized the parallels as a meaningful question to address in depth.

Before turning to a consideration of Keegan's discussion of the Somme, however, it seems to me profitable to take note of his prefatory chapter on the relevance of military history, for the field is one of the most mispracticed, misunderstood, and misused in the historical discipline.

Keegan throws blame squarely on the discipline of military history for its failure to instruct in the more profound issues of its profession—issues of planning and decision-making, use of technology, judgment, leadership, behavior in battle, ethics. He cites the limitations of “general's” history, so often ascending into elitist hagiography; of “technical” treatments, which deal in isolation with the factors of weaponry; institutional studies, dealing with armies, general staffs, and ideological foundations of civil-military relations, all, as Keegan wryly notes, besmirched by the addition of war to their smoothly-running systems; and finally the battle history, which is the crucial story, since it's the military's story of “what they *do*” (30).

Given that battle needs to be the core of military history, Keegan then examines “the battle piece” and dissects its shortcomings. Every historian, military or not, should read this segment, for in it Keegan outlines what is wrong with so much history, no matter what the bent. Unrealistic language, unlikely

conformity of group action, hollow metaphor, unanswered details—Keegan uncovers all the sins. What is brave here is that Keegan sets himself a stiff challenge—battle history that is more than battle history. Keegan hopes to provide a participant's-eye view of three decisive battles, to place them not only in their own milieu but to consider them comparatively.

The profile of the Battle of the Somme is all that Keegan promised (as are indeed, the segments on Agincourt and Waterloo). The Battle of the Somme, set in its political and geographic background, is examined from all the angles Keegan has previously mentioned, to which he has added his own unique considerations. When he finishes, because the reader has been privy to the large picture as well as the heartrending details, the battle assumes its own personality. Fussell's ironies are realized also, because we have learned about the painstaking details worked out to ensure barrage success set against the wastage of life when barrage and troops failed to synchronize their efforts. Keegan achieves the almost impossible in discussing the Somme; he writes movingly yet dispassionately. We are overwhelmed not by human stupidity, but by the great vulnerability of the most carefully considered plans. The pathetic aspects of the Somme, and indeed the whole war, are laid bare when Keegan describes plans for the battle, written

. . . [in] a spirit not of providing for eventualities, but rather of attempting to preordain the future . . . Man's attempts at preordination are always risky and require as a minimum precondition for success the cooperation of all concerned. Upon that of the Germans the British could not of course count. (261)

In 80 pages, Keegan writes a "battle piece" that brings the war into universal and timeless focus. We follow him effortlessly from the present to the past, as he peoples the present day battlefield with French farmers who unearth, spring after spring, the rusty artifacts of war. The gently rolling geography almost makes us yawn, but as Keegan sets his historical stage,

the quietness already feels ominous. Irony abounds as Keegan recounts why, in British minds, the Somme is a victory, despite the statistics we, as historians, already know—420,000 casualties by mid-November 1916.

The political and military necessities that dictated the Somme campaign taking place when and where it did are Keegan's initial focus. He is elegantly professional in his discussion of the plan for the offensive, and avoids the castigating tone so many historians take when trying to explain the thinking behind the idea that a long bombardment followed by barrage would solve the problem of the waiting enemy. From today's perspective, the potential for ineffectiveness seems resoundingly obvious, but for armies that had gained great confidence in the calculations of the technocrats, assurances that "the real work of destruction both of the enemy's defenses and men, would have been done by the artillery before zero hour . . ." were happily accepted. As Keegan says, "it was a trusting army" (215).

And what of this force of men? Keegan analyzes its components, from the minority fraction of line battalions, seasoned and professional, to the Territorials and the Kitchener battalions. He explains the men and motivations of the new battalions nicely when he examines the social taboos and the economic realities of the period, coupled with the combination of patriotic, adventuresome chums who joined up in local bursts of enthusiasm. The Pals battalions, as Keegan observes, are a poignant motif of the war, for their destruction on the Somme spread an epidemic of tragedy in the many English towns that lost whole neighborhoods of the male population in a single day. Keegan describes, sociologically, the armies of the Somme in all their variety of origins and experience, and explains how it was that lack of experience, generally, that helped determine the tactics for the battle.

The tactics have been well described in many places, and Keegan is as succinct as the directions for the advance were. Artillery bombardment would prepare the area, and at the signal the troops would advance behind their own protective barrage. Keegan again is remarkable, however, in his attention to a cogent explanation of what, exactly, went wrong in the

bombardment. The technical details, suddenly, are not insurmountable, and the miscalculations and false expectations of the planners are less incomprehensible. Once one understands how 1 1/2 MILLION shells could fail to annihilate everything in front of them, it becomes clear how the Somme turned into the debacle it did, but it also becomes clear, thanks to Keegan, that many of the assumptions made by the generals were reasonable assumptions to make.

It is Keegan's description of the battle itself, however, that is remarkable for its combination of technical details written in clear English, its collective biography that provides ironic and mundane detail, including the near-poetic account by an air patrol officer of a cloud bank over the bombardment: "It looked like a large lake of mist, with thousands of stones being thrown into it" (238). The accounts of the various battalions, with their nonexistent combat experience and their overwhelming losses (the London Scottish was reduced from 856 to 266 by the end of the day) are painful to read, for we have met members of those battalions through the firsthand sources the author has already quoted.

In contrast to the traditional battle pieces Keegan has criticized, his account of the first day of what was to be a five-month slaughter does not end with a stiff-lipped recitation of the casualty figures for the day (60,000; 21,000 killed). He instead goes on to consider the endless "fog" factors of the battle, from misplaced barrages to lack of communication lines to vision almost completely obscured by smoke. And then, the unmentionables: what, exactly, could one expect if one were wounded? And what forces kept the attackers moving forward into this hell? These questions are what make Keegan uncommon as a military historian, for they are questions everyone studying a war wants to ask. Before Keegan, though, few turned their attention to these issues (S.L.A. Marshall being a notable exception), and none did it in the larger context of battle analysis. Keegan's discussion of "the wounded" (263-269) also includes discussion of the dressing and clearing station network, the triage system, and the probable proportions of wound categories. Most touching is the unblanching treatment

of the no man's land wounded and their eventual fate, as described by Gerald Brennan: "The wounded, who could not be brought in, had crawled into shell holes, wrapped their waterproof sheets round them, taken out their Bibles, and died like that" (269).

By using available sources in new ways, Keegan's perspective on the Somme addresses crucial topics that military history should have always been concerned with. He has, in many ways, applied the interdisciplinary approach toward an understanding of war that Clausewitz would have applauded. We reach a far better comprehension of the enormity that was the Somme campaign because Keegan has moved so gracefully from theoretical to technical to individual. But it is because so many of his own questions are timeless that he has also shown us how the First World War remains part of our cultural, economic, and political present. We remain leery of the vicious cycle of attrition; we are rightly sensitive to the question of how much a society can withstand of cost, loss of life, indecisive conclusions. These are First World War issues that are still with us.

Samuel Hynes, in *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, provides recent grappling with the issue of the First World War's influence. Published in 1991, Hynes' book provides a third perspective on that war's power to shape attitudes, expectations and contexts. While Fussell's attention focuses mainly on the Great War's influence on literature, and while Keegan describes the military details of the Somme in a social and political context, Hynes shows how certain details of the war came to be the overwhelming memory left of that conflict, and how that remembered legacy then affected English culture over the next twenty years. Hynes' work is certainly a more comprehensive look at the war's influence, yet it can be appreciated more completely because of the earlier views provided by Fussell and Keegan.

Hynes has written a thoughtful commentary, and he raises necessarily large issues regarding how a society, any society, sorts through, orders, and reacts to cataclysmic events. How, for

example, did the Second World War become “the Good War?” (Fussell, in *Wartime*, argues powerfully that WWII certainly wasn’t a “good” war.) How are we, presently, still shaping and dealing with the conflicting versions of the armed affair in Vietnam? How, in other words, does the process of public memory shape its own truth? Even if one were to disagree with Hynes’ thesis, the questions he asks are crucial for any society at any point in its history. Even if we don’t fully perceive the forces that create our perception of the past and the present, we need to be aware that our societal truth is only one of several possible truths. This perception is the great value of Hynes’ work.

A War Imagined is, however, a somewhat misleading title for Hynes’ work, and it tends to distract the reader from what really is a beautifully developed narrative argument. In his preface Hynes states,

That sense of radical change is the subject of this book: how English culture was transformed, and English imaginations were altered, by what happened between 1914 and 1918, and how that process of change determined what England after the war was like and what modern came to mean.
(xiii)

Here is a clear and accurate explanation of the over four hundred pages that follow, but the reader carries with him, as unwieldy baggage, the words “imagination” and “myth” as he reads Hynes’ well-written, well-argued account of the intellectual legacy of the war. “A war imagined” implies a war that didn’t happen, just as “myth” implies something untrue. Hynes disclaims these word associations, as when he states,

I use that phrase [the Myth of the War] in this book to mean not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved, and has come to be accepted as true . . . The Myth is not the War entire: it is a tale that confirms a set of

attitudes, an idea of what the war was and what it meant. (xi)

For the reader, however, there is a mental battle throughout one's reading of the book to embrace Hynes' usage of "imagined" and "myth," and one wishes he had perhaps turned to "perceived" or "saga," putting a slightly less "false" connotation on the concept of various truths. Having said that, let us turn to Hynes' comprehensively presented argument of the intellectual dynamics at work as English society attempted to absorb the enormity of the First World War.

The "myth" of the war to which Hynes refers is actually almost everyone's accepted version of the salient statements that can be made about the war. This is precisely Hynes' point—the parts of the truth which gained dominance even as the war was being fought are now seen by society as a whole as the whole truth regarding the war. Only late in his book does Hynes put an easily recognizable label on the collection of "truths" or assumptions—"Wilfred Owenism" (449). Finally the reader grins with relieved delight—yes, *that's* our war; we *do* believe that Wilfred Owen's war was the war. Wasn't it?

The "Wilfred Owenism" or "myth" of the war is a set of beliefs that, Hynes argues, shaped themselves as the war was shaping itself, and these beliefs gained overweening credibility and widespread acceptance by the end of the war. The beliefs, as Hynes relates them, are as follows:

... the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant, patriotic women; the growing sympathy for the men on the other side, betrayed in the same ways and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter

conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped. (439)

But the myth of the war, Hynes goes on to say, ends not just with those beliefs about the war, but includes also beliefs about what the war, thus perceived, created as a legacy, a belief about “the world that the war had made” (439). Hynes’ book, then, traces the development of those beliefs, and makes insightful and believable observations about the way English society saw its past and that past’s connection to the present of the 1920s and ’30s.

Reluctantly adopting Hynes’ phrase, one of the main precepts of the “myth” of the war is that it produced, by its unique shocks, a fissure between not only itself and the prewar era, but between that prewar period and whatever would follow the war. Hynes hints at the inaccuracy of this idea when he begins the book by discussing the “wars before the war.” As he points out, the various conflicts in Edwardian society belie the idea of halcyon days of peace and predictable, unchanging certainties. England was already changing, and in ways that would continue to be upsetting in the same ways after the war also. He discusses the “enemies”—new art, women’s suffrage, the Irish issue, the trade unions—all of which, during the course of the war or immediately after it, fall under increased attack—victims of the war as metaphor.

As Hynes continues to trace the war’s progress we see how other elements of the myth develop—how the dichotomies develop in the world of the arts, between civilians and combatants, the survivors and the dead, the issues of the home front and the front. While society is being divided between those at the front and those at home, smaller splinterings are changing society at home: the home front wars are also creating a world that will be a different one for those who return. Hynes is especially effective in analyzing the significance of the war against modernism, seen as foreign by those misapplying patriotism; against a cosmopolitan culture, seen as a disloyalty toward English values; against dissent, seen as injurious to the cause; against the women’s war, seen as irrelevant in the face of

the larger conflict. The war, a factor in English society's response to each of these issues, managed to be a catalyst that, as Hynes observes, "altered the ways in which English men and women thought about their common past, and therefore about themselves" (96).

As Hynes analyzes the way the perceptions about the war evolve and shift, the underlying theme is that indeed, whether one accepts the "myth" or not, the existence of the war, directly experienced or not, continues to fragment English society in myriad ways, affecting language, the attitudes toward aesthetics (ugliness is seen, by many, as the only reality), toward style as a political statement, toward a war art that can only be achieved or understood by the participants themselves. The splinterings continue, and as the end of the conflict appears to be almost conceivable, the war appears to be the "dividing line between two distinct civilizations" (239), that which was England before the war, and that which will be England in the postwar world. Hynes' discussion of *Eminent Victorians* (244-8) as the first "postwar" novel is especially illuminating as a seemingly unlikely, but perfect, example of the complex changes which have occurred.

The last section of *A War Imagined*, dealing with the postwar period, is a convincing analysis of the forces at work on English culture and people. There are several observations that Hynes uses to great advantage as he discusses the calcification of the myth of the war, among them the analysis of the generational groupings; the way the war shapes the new conflicts of the 1920s, especially the General Strike of 1923; the idea of the General Strike as a final closure to the postwar period, which in turn frees the collective cultural mind of the country; and the effect that the resulting retrospective writing has on shaping the mythology of the war. In each of these areas, Hynes provides a new perspective on *how* the war was a force creating the meaning of "modern." In many of his observations the reader is reminded of the connectedness of Fussell's and Keegan's realizations, written from their slightly different perspectives.

In recognizing the generational divisions caused by the war, Hynes shares the observations of many, but what is unique in his analysis is how he has divided the various factions. He makes a clear distinction between the divisions age creates and those of experience, values, or expectations. Hynes also notes that the groups were conscious of themselves and each other, and tended to view other groups as foreign, possibly hostile. Thus we have five defined groups—the Old Men, the Edwardians, the Pre-War Avant-Garde, the War Generation, and the Post-War Generation. Obviously, such divisions make for a fragmented culture, disparate values, and unclear visions of the future. And, each group remembered a different war in the immediate postwar period. Thus, in 1922, as Hynes shocks us by reminding, not only was *Ulysses* published, but also *The Waste Land*, and . . . *The Forsyte Saga*. The only common element Hynes sees is satire, or, Fussell's irony?

Conflicts in the postwar period were also polarized, at least partially, because of the war's legacy. The General Strike, as Hynes sees it, is the last echo of the old wartime state of mind. The conflict that began with specific demands of the coal miners regarding wages and working conditions eventually brought the country to a virtual industrial and transportation standstill, only to end in bitter defeat for the working class and its hopes for fairminded dialogue. The battle lines were drawn with all the old "them" versus "us" ferocity, the old wartime rhetoric, the old necessity for complete resolution in utter defeat or utter victory by both strikers and the government. But even as the strike reactivated a wartime consciousness, its progress and culmination brought the final demise of three wartime ideas—the lessening of class divisions, inspired by the wartime relationships among the classes; the idea that peace would be more attractive than violence to anyone who had survived the war; and, finally, the thought that revolution for positive change was possible. With the death of these war legacies as viable possibilities, the war itself slipped into the past. The strike did for English culture what it had not been able to do for itself until 1926—put the war behind. With the strike as a punctuation mark ending the immediate postwar chaos of

direction, the war, now clearly in the past, could be dealt with from a changed angle of perspective. What had been inchoate Modernism, whether of the prewar Modernists or the War Generation, becomes, with the General Strike, politically engaged literature looking toward the future and its ramifications.

In a finely crafted last chapter, Hynes discusses the effect that the delayed writing of war memoirs and histories has on renditions of the war. As he safely observes, "A change of self not only alters the present, it alters the past, for it is the changed self who remembers" (434). The pity that Owen was perhaps one of the first to express in his poetry emerges to form the picture of the war in our collective inheritance, the "myth" Hynes believes also built our view of "life among the ruins, and a myth of the world that the war had made" (439).

As the war's immensity and indescribability meant that the past had to define itself as such before the war could be dealt with analytically by participants, so too have we had to continue the distancing before works like Fussell's, Keegan's, and Hynes' could be written. Keegan's uninflated description of the horror of the Somme, told with unemotional technicality and the perspective of social history, could not have been swallowed in an earlier decade. Neither would Fussell's poignant connections have revealed themselves so clearly. Hynes, writing so recently, could not have had as fine an appreciation of his intricate relationships of cause and effect without the kind of liberating work done earlier by writers like Fussell and Keegan. The faint echoes of the Great War, however, await other thoughtful minds; the echoes are still audible and will perhaps be so infinitely. □