

Vietnam War Literature: A guide to resources at Colorado State University

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HUMANISTS AND SOCIAL scientists, including military historians, often work across disciplinary boundaries in order to incorporate the insights and ideas of allied fields into their own findings and interpretations. Research libraries are now beginning to respond to requests from scholars for material selected not solely on the basis of quality, but more importantly on how well it fully represents a culture, concept or event. As research in many disciplines moves towards horizontal rather than hierarchical interpretations of information, increased attention is being given by libraries to collections of popular culture material, including magazines, novels and humor.

The Vietnam War Literature Collection at Colorado State University Libraries was established in 1975 as a pioneer effort to broaden information resources for scholars. It was begun after a nationwide survey of large research libraries revealed that none of them was collecting the fiction, poetry and other creative works about the American military effort in Vietnam. In fourteen years, the collection has grown to become a unique and complete resource for scholars interested in Vietnam War Literature.

The Colorado State collection contains fiction, plays, poetry, sketches, cartoons and miscellaneous works of imagination. Excluded are historical, political and autobiographical reports of the war as well as protest literature set outside of Vietnam. The collection now numbers over twelve hundred items, and it is being developed actively.

Of the works written during and just after the war, many were published by vanity presses, issued in short-lived journals or not published at all, making their identification and acquisition more challenging and still not entirely complete. While searches for older items continue, most current sources for additions to the collection are trade and paperback publishers.

Scholarly and critical studies enhance understanding of the core collection. There have been numerous reviews of individual novels and other books, review articles and scholarly books. In recent years, Vietnam literature has been studied in the academic environment, and the resultant theses and dissertations are also included in the Colorado State collection.

In the literature, the most common perspective is that of a combat infantryman, and many novels cover a twelve-or-thirteen month tour of duty. Examples of these which are also notably well-written are Joe Haldeman's *War Year* (1972) and Charles Durden's *No Bugles, No Drums* (1976). National Book award winners among Vietnam writers are Tim O'Brien for *Going After Cacciato* in 1978 and Larry Heinemann for *Paco's Story* in 1987. Other novels and short stories tell the experiences of nurses, officers, spies, reporters and the whole variety of persons who were involved in the war. Readability and other literary qualities vary greatly.

Prominent among poets of the war are John Balaban, Walter McDonald and William D. Ehrhart. In addition to

his own poetry, Ehrhart's excellent anthology, *Unaccustomed Mercy* (1989) includes a thoughtful and informed selection of other poets' work. Important too, is the journal *DEROS*, published between 1981 and 1987 and devoted entirely to Vietnam War poetry.

Motion pictures and television are outside the scope of the Colorado State collection, and the printed scripts of many plays are not always available through known bibliographic channels. Nonetheless, the collection includes plays by Megan Terry, David Rabe, Amlin Gray and many other dramatists. The miscellaneous section has a surprising amount of humor, especially cartoon collections, such as *Sorry 'Bout That* (1966), *With Sgt. Mike in Vietnam* (1970) and *Absolutely No U.S. Personnel Beyond This Point* (1972).

This unique collection of Vietnam War literature has the potential to address the research interests of scholars in a number of disciplines. Students of American literature can use it as a basis of thematic, narrative, characterization and stylistic studies. Historians and political scientists will find representations of changing political views of Vietnam veterans and others who were affected by the war. Cultural historians can observe relationships between factual and fictional treatment of veterans, as well as the causes and effects of shifting popular attitudes about U.S. servicemen. Health and medical professionals will learn something about the minds and psyches of those who know war firsthand.

There have been important and influential changes in the public view of those involved in the Vietnam War. It is still too soon, perhaps, to chart these changes or to describe them objectively, but access to the words of those who served is important if understanding is to evolve. The collection of Vietnam War literature at Colorado State allows one to step beyond factual descriptions of the war.

While it would be unfair to evaluate these imaginative works as history, they contain unique elements, including the ability to bring an experience to life powerfully.

If events from other recent wars and their literature hold true for Vietnam, novels and other accounts of the war will continue to be written for some time to come. Recently, for example, several paperback adventure series have begun to feature Americans in Vietnam, and comic books continue to appear. These, too, are being added to the collection in furtherance of its goal to be the single, comprehensive national resource for all imaginative literature of the Vietnam War.

Items in the Vietnam War Collection have been cataloged, and records are available through major national bibliographic utilities. Access has been further expanded by the second edition of Newman's annotated bibliography, *Vietnam War Literature* (1988). Interlibrary Loan requests are considered on an individual basis, but some items are too rare or fragile to circulate. Scholars are welcome to use the collection at Colorado State and are encouraged to discuss research plans in advance by writing to the Special Collections Department, Colorado State University Libraries, Fort Collins, CO 80523, to ensure that the material will be on hand when they arrive.