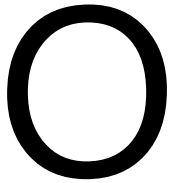


The Legacy of Edward Wood: An Introduction

Helen Thorpe



One evening some years ago, I went to Regis University to hear a panel of veterans speak about their experiences of combat, at an event organized by Regis's Center for the Study of War Experience. This particular panel consisted of people whose time in the service had led them to become pacifists. Among the panelists was Edward Wood Jr. He spoke eloquently about the experience of getting hit by enemy fire almost immediately after he had arrived in France in 1944. He had volunteered to go, signing up to serve in the infantry because he thought that was the honorable thing to do. Only 19 years old at the time, Ed incurred serious damage to his skull and pelvis, as well as a consuming sense of shame that he had suffered such debilitating injuries and thus could not serve for longer. He would carry the trauma of that experience with him for the rest of his life.

By the time I met him, however, he had metabolized those challenges and grown into a revered elder statesman in our local community. We both belonged to Mountain View Friends, as it happened—the local Quaker Meeting—although we attended different services. And, we were both dedicated writers who found enormous joy and fulfillment in our work. Despite the significant difference in our ages, Ed being in his nineties and me being in my fifties, we struck up an enduring friendship. Ed loved spending time with fellow writers, and he soon swept me into his orbit, inviting me to have lunch on a regular basis. Thus I became one of the many poets, novelists, and journalists with whom he liked to converse. We often went to a local diner, where he liked to order a sandwich and apple pie à la mode with a cup of coffee. Or if we had something to celebrate—such as when *The New York Times* published one of the many letters

Ed sent to that publication—then we might go to a nice restaurant where he would have a martini and oysters on the half shell. Ed was ardently engaged with the world, and always wanted to talk about the political landscape and the general state of America and what a writer could say to influence current affairs in a positive manner. We exchanged work, too. He read the first draft of my nonfiction account of the experiences of a handful of female veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, called *Soldier Girls: The Battles of Three Women at Home and at War*, and provided excellent advice for how to make the book better and more appealing to a veteran such as himself. Later, I read a draft of his unpublished book about how to address gun violence, called *Giving Up the Gun*, and offered him my critique.

After he turned 96, Ed began having fainting spells now and then, sometimes falling and hurting himself. One day, as we were getting out of the car to walk into a restaurant for lunch, his blood pressure dipped as he stood up, and he started to sway. I had to catch him before he hit the pavement and was shocked at how little he weighed, for he looked bulkier thanks to the tweed jacket he always wore when we went out to eat. But he rallied and we had lunch anyway—oysters and a martini, of course. Ed liked to make up a little phrase to remind himself how old he was and that year he was saying, “Ninety-six, still up to tricks!”

He often spoke about how meaningful it was to continue to be able to write. At the same time, he knew that living forever was not a realistic goal, and he wanted to set his affairs in order. Over lunch one day, he asked if I would serve as one of the executors of his literary estate. I miss Ed terribly, but it has brought me enormous comfort to go through his unpublished work along with his widow Elaine Granata and his daughter Nancy Wood. Together, we are finding the right homes for all the major essays, stories, and poems he left behind, as well as a couple of unpublished book manuscripts. We fervently hope we can publish *Giving Up the Gun*

posthumously—as we feel the world needs to hear his story of experiencing immense psychological relief after voluntarily giving up the many weapons he once owned—and working together with his family on that manuscript made me feel as though Ed was still with us in spirit.

Ed wrote and published prolifically. But perhaps the book for which he is best known is his beautiful, harrowing account of what happened to him in France as a young man, called *On Being Wounded*. One day, when I accompanied Ed to a gathering where he met someone who worked at the VA hospital that serves this region, the VA official commented how valuable that book had been in helping her understand what veterans had lived through. She told him that the book was considered a classic by all in her field, and that it was known and loved by many of the medical professionals who are presently helping today's veterans meet their more recent traumas with the same kind of undaunted dignity that Ed possessed. What follows is an excerpt from that work, and I believe that it is an example of Ed's writing at its finest.

Helen Thorpe is a lifelong journalist and an acclaimed author of four books. Her Irish family immigrated to the United States when she was a small child and she often writes about people who have changed countries. She presently teaches narrative nonfiction writing at Lighthouse Writers Workshop and coaches first-time authors on narrative structure. She lives in Denver, Colorado.