

Books

The Norton Book of Modern War, edited by Paul Fussell.
New York: Norton, 1991. Pp. 830. \$24.95.

by Jack M. Shuttleworth

An LCI was just putting off from the ship, it couldn't have been many yards away, and the third bomb apparently landed directly on it. From that distance, probably a thousand yards or more, one faint but clearly discernible scream, high and shrill, and which actually did not reach them until after the geyser had already gone up, was heard by the men on shore, cut off and followed immediately by the sound wave of the explosion: some one nameless man's single instinctual and useless protest against the taking of his life and his own bad luck at being where he was instead of somewhere else, ridiculous, pointless, but not without a certain dignity, although, ironically, it was not heard, and appreciated, until after he himself no longer existed. His last scream had lived longer than he had. (Fussell, citing James Jones, 330)

Paul Fussell's latest book captures many protesting screams at the pointless, the ridiculous, the ironic loss of life in modern warfare. He also captures moments of quiet dignity, determined fortitude in face of deprivation, muck, hunger, and loss. For bringing together the voices of nearly a hundred writers and the many more ordinary soldiers the

writers present, every student of wars and their literatures owes Fussell yet one more debt. In two earlier books—*The Great War and Modern Memory* (1976) and *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1989)—he examined the literary and social effects of the two great wars of this century. In the present volume he brings together in screams and whispers the words, fears, and pains of those who fought and those whose lives were touched by battles from Ypres to the fall of Saigon and after.

Pervasive in the selections is the underlying ironic world view Fussell sees as inevitable following World War I, where the “wide gap between actuality and the language [previously] used to describe [war]” had been replaced by “the disclosure of the unpleasant reality lurking beneath such popular euphemisms as casualty, traumatic amputation, pacification, combat fatigue” (23). Along with the irony, Fussell situates warfare in a context of cultural modernism in which conscripts and volunteers, increasingly alienated from official culture and its rationalizing language, undergo the disillusion and the loss of heroic myths characteristic of twentieth-century society. Despite the loss of the heroic fictions, dignity and power both in action and word come through the writing. “If modern war is a catastrophe for humanity in general,” Fussell writes, “because of writers who will not be silenced it represents a triumph, ironic to be sure, for the civilized principles of impassioned free expression, as the selections in this book suggest” (25). And the breadth of the selections is equally triumphant.

All the classical poems and poets from the World Wars commonly found in poetry anthologies are here: Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Henry Reed, Randall Jarrell, for example. But the richness of the book comes from the uncommon, the unfamiliar, and often the private correspondence of uncelebrated soldiers. R.A. Scott Macfie, age 46, writes to his father about trench warfare in December 1914 that “it is amazing to me that I am

among the survivors considering my age, infirmities, and general want of muscular power” (43). Private Daniel J. Sweeney describes the battle of the Somme to his fiancée with an understated: “We have come out of action with 4 officers out of 26 and 435 men out of 1150”(49). Excerpts from longer works like Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or Eric Hiscock’s *The Bells of Hell Go Ting-a-Ling-a-Ling* present the immediacy of experience whether at home, in the German trenches, or in the British army.

Fussell cites Guy Sajer’s book *The Forgotten Soldier*, not only to describe part of the German experience in World War II, but also to point out, as Sajer says, “Only victors have stories to tell. We, the vanquished, were all cowards and weaklings by then, whose memories, fear, and enthusiasms should not be remembered” (414). But Fussell hardly accepts that view, including as he does the chilling excerpt from Rudolf Höss’ *Commandant of Auschwitz* and the painful *A Letter to My Sons: War’s End* by Heinrich Böll. He also includes a little known narrative of the Vietnam War by Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, which makes clear that bravery and stoic endurance were not solely the province of American troops.

Accounts of American bravery and endurance appear in numerous selections from WWII and later (along with Seymour Hersh’s *My Lai 4* to provide some of the characteristic disillusioning Fussell sees in modern war). That kind of balancing of the brave and the terrible, the destructive and the enduring also appears in the section called “Afterwords” where Fussell juxtaposes a grimly modernistic page from Harrison Salisbury’s account of war in the Crimea: “Hitler’s Aryan man died, a worse death than any he devised in the ovens of Auschwitz, anus open, spewing out his gut until a Red tommy gunner ended it with a lazy sweep of his chattering weapon” (816) to Douglas MacArthur’s grandly rhetorical “Address to the Corps of Cadets . . . 1962”: “I listen vainly, but with

thirsty ear, for the witching melody of faint bugles blowing reveille, of far drums beating the long roll. In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange mournful mutter of the battlefield''(817).

Such juxtaposition of the horrific and the grand characterizes this book, both its judicious and sensitive selection of extraordinarily good writing and its embodiment of the thoroughly modern, ironic point of view. Because of the pain in so many of the passages, the disillusioning experiences of participant and observer, we can no longer hear the grand words, like MacArthur's, without a frisson of disbelief. Paul Fussell would likely say we have learned his lesson well, for he approvingly cites Hemingway's "Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime" (25). That reminder should forcefully strike every reader of this rich anthology, just as should the simple grandeur of men and women confronting and transcending the awfulness of war with voices—even screams of pain and triumph—that through art and report have outlived the screamers. □

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The Heart of a Man: A Naval Pilot's Vietnam Diary,
by Lt. Frank Elkins. Edited with a Prologue and Epilogue
by Marilyn Elkins. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991.
Pp. xvi-132. \$17.95.

by Thomas Bonner, Jr.

Frank Elkins was shot down over Vietnam in 1966, less than a year after his marriage. The Department of Defense listed him as missing until 1977 when Marilyn Elkins received from the Department a message indicating a "presumed finding of dead." In the early 1970s, Marilyn Elkins spent three years in Paris, daily petitioning the North Vietnamese legation about the status of her husband. During that period, she determined to publish her husband's wartime diary. She was more successful with her intention to publish the diary than with efforts to secure information from the North Vietnamese: W.W. Norton published the diary in 1973.

By the mid 1980s, she left her high school teaching post to pursue a Ph.D. in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a long-term mutual goal cited by her husband in his diary. In December 1989, the Navy contacted Marilyn about records that would assist in identifying remains thought to be her husband's. By late January 1990, the remains were identified to be Frank Elkins. In February, Lt. Frank Elkins was buried at the National Cemetery in Wilmington, North Carolina with military honors. In May 1991, Marilyn Elkins graduated from Chapel Hill and traveled across the country by train to Los Angeles, where she had accepted a university teaching post. The journey itself alluded to a cross-country trip that her husband had suggested in his writings and coincided with the publication of the diary and commentaries by the Naval Institute Press.

The Heart of a Man, a line from Robert Frost's poem "Reluctance" placed at the beginning of the volume, is also the heart of a woman. The line reminds us that the experiences and death of one human being form an intrinsic part of the lives of those whose affection extends to another. When one considers the complete book, the writings of husband and wife, the unexpressed thoughts of many missing and deceased soldiers, sailors, and aviators come to mind as well as those of their families and friends who suffer in their losses. But rather than being a text of melancholy, this Vietnam diary is one that inspires confidence in the capacity and spirit of human beings.

In a Forward to the diary, Retired Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence observes that Frank Elkins "embodied the finest qualities of the national character" (viii). Of course, that is what we expect leaders to say of the men who follow them. And with few exceptions American commanders from the Civil War to Desert Storm have been able to make that statement. Admiral Lawrence's observation recalls James Michener's novel of the similar Korean War, *The Bridges of Toko Ri*, in which the admiral seeing in the pilot protagonist something of his own son asks on learning of the flyer's death in action: what makes these young men go into the air everyday to face death? The question is rhetorical, contemplative in purpose. In his own diary, Frank Elkins answers a similar question, one that he seems to have asked himself: "I deeply believe in what's happening here I know I'm doing something necessary and striking a blow for the things I'm pledged to defend" (16). His comments are within the context of his acknowledging the horror of war and the impersonality of aerial bombardment. Marilyn reinforces Frank's statement by citing his death as "confirmation of his belief in himself, in his courage to die for what he perceived as national duty" (132). But she does not see a universal value in his death and feels "that his death did not help anyone else" (132). In her reaction lies the complexity of the tangled

web of Vietnam. She does, however, express hope that the diary might be able to make the contribution to others that his brief life did not.

The value of a life and a death is both a philosophical issue and a personal one. The cause may ennoble a life given in its furtherance; a life extended into the lives of others diminishes those lives when it is lost. Marilyn Elkins correctly expresses hope in the diary, not only because it is a contribution in itself but because it documents for many the contribution her husband made with his life. It demonstrates that his life has and will help others even in its brevity and violent end. And without doubt, it documents the intensity and depth of the self that she lost with him.

Barely twenty-seven and six-months-married, Frank Elkins “donned [his] green fatigues and pistol for the first time” (1) on board the aircraft carrier *Oriskany* as it moved toward its station off the coast of Vietnam. On June 30, 1966, he flew his first combat mission. On October 13, 1966, his A-4 fighter bomber was shot down over Dien Chau, Vietnam. He died in the crash. During his three and a half months of combat duty, Frank kept a diary recording not only the events in which he was engaged but also his reflections. Unlike diaries kept by ground troops who have little respite from the nearness, if not the immediacy of combat, diaries kept by pilots allow for the reflection and thus the meaning of events as they touch the writers’ lives. No doubt there are exceptions, but the general conditions and environment of war for pilots and ground troops are quite different. I do not suggest that one role is better or worse than another; only that different circumstances contribute to different kinds of writing. In *The Heart of a Man*, we learn about Frank Elkins, the war in which he was engaged, and the people affected by that war.

Admiral Lawrence’s estimate of Lt. Elkins accurately corresponded with Elkins’ embodiment of the American Dream for many boys and young men. He was engaged in

an enterprise that was both exciting and value-laden in terms of the national character. Early in his narrative Elkins describes himself as "itching to get into things, absorbed in ribbons, medals, and glory" (8). Yet, from the beginning he also thinks about the nature of war, his responsibility, and the effects of his violent deeds. He reveals that he is made of "the right stuff" of American heroes: focused, earnest, bold, modest, brave, personable, honest, and generous. He has the marks of an All-American of national myth.

Even Elkins' personal life conforms to this image. He is a one-woman man. Understandably still in the glow of recent marriage, he appears the bridegroom in manner and spirit. His circumstances, however, are not conducive; miles from his bride, he experiences the stress and pressures of daily combat in the air and carrier landings at sea. There is an understanding of how men respond to this kind of life, which frequently involves social violence and sexual activity. Frank Elkins shows empathy with his pilot colleagues but he also demonstrates restraint and fidelity to his wife, the "girl he left behind."

In looking at the full dimension of the heroic in American experience and myth, one can not avoid the reflective temper found in figures like Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone, and Sergeant Alvin York. Such disposition often appears as a quietness in the character. The longer Frank Elkins is in combat the more capacity he seems to have for thinking things through with comparisons, analyses, and memories. He recalls his father with some complexity: "I used to also be proud of him because he never let me get close enough to love him. I was always sure he didn't like me too much, but still I was his and he was mine, and being the man I thought he was, that was better than having anyone else for a father. He was that. He was more of a father than a daddy" (74). Tied to the land like many heroes of his country, Frank Elkins felt the attachment to his home state North Carolina, where his family were farmers.

Elkins' degree in English is evident in the clarity of his descriptions of aerial combat and the naval operations at sea. He somehow sorts through the confusion of simultaneous actions to present orderly and understandable accounts. In one incident he describes the jet A-4s rendezvousing with propeller driven A-Ds: "If you think 150 knots in the tip of a high yo-yo with 120 [degrees] bank and 1.5 G's is a hairy trick in the daytime, try it in the black of night with three A-D's and three A-4's and a sky filled with stars that look like aircraft lights until you try to rendezvous with them and stall and fall" (21).

The descriptions of air combat ring with the voice of experience. In one engagement near Nam Dinh, Elkins paints this picture: "The MIGS came all right, but they shot the hell out of us There were F-8's yelling 'Break right, there's another one of them on your six,' 'Reverse, reverse!' Bowden got shot up, overstressed what was left of his aircraft He ejected over water and is okay" (38). One can certainly see the aircraft in action through these accounts, but more importantly, the images of the humans who fly them emerge.

Carrier aviators unlike land-based pilots live together in a confined space. Their personalities and characters are always present and the associations among them, as a result, have an unusual intensity. Elkins addresses this aspect of combat and the loss of comrades poignantly: "Flying with Bob everyday, I got to be much closer to him than I had meant to be. Also he was really my first wingman, and there's a lot to that too. Sort of like he was mine. And he was really coming along too. He was as good as anybody I ever met at that experience level. Gone. What a waste" (92). Elkins' images of the aircrews remind one easily of the tensions between innocence and experience found in the photographs of Edward Steichen and his team, who recorded the naval combat of World War II. Although the aura of a great crusade so evident in the images of that war does not appear in Elkins' portrayals,

in both cases it is not the machines but the flyers and crews who are truly memorable.

Marilyn Elkins has both a textual and extra-textual part in this book. One cannot consider *The Heart of a Man* nor her husband without considering her. If Frank Elkins demonstrates much that is good, much that is heroic in the national character, one must consider her as an equally strong image of the best of American womanhood, one whose strong and loyal character transcends the particulars of change experienced by women over the past twenty years. In the Prologue she asks, "Why then did these men continue to fly?" (xv). It is a question the answer to which can only be approached, but it is equal to another question not asked but intimated in her Epilogue: How do the wives and family of the dead and missing cope with their losses? Both Frank and Marilyn's texts suggest that love, loyalty, and self-reliance will be part of the answer that will ultimately satisfy both questions. □

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Dictionary of the Vietnam War, edited by James S. Olson.
New York: Greenwood Press, 1988 (hardcover), New
York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1990.
Pp. vii-585. \$16.95 (paperback).

by **Matthew C. Stewart**

This reasonably priced reprint of James Olson's *Dictionary of the Vietnam War* should be welcomed by individual scholars who wish to add this useful work to their collection. The reprint also offers another chance for college and university libraries to acquire what should be a much-used reference tool. Students taking any course related to the Vietnam War—whether historical, literary, cultural, or political in orientation—would profit from the availability of this work for the reserve list or the reference shelves of their school's library. Olson's dictionary is both useful and reliable, and meets a need not fulfilled by any other work. It is sensibly laid out and clearly printed, and its entries are written in language that should put off neither advanced scholars nor student readers. In short, it can be used with ease and confidence.

The entries focus on the years between 1945-1975 and are of several types. Important personages, both American and Southeast Asian, comprise a large number of the entries. Eminent military and governmental figures are among those listed, of course, but one also runs across an occasional surprise such as Dr. Spock, included by virtue of his anti-war activities (also present are Abbie Hoffmann, Jerry Rubin, Jane Fonda, *et. al.*). Other listings include: important historical events; famous battles; geographical entries; military sectors and organizational terms; weaponry and equipment; military terminology; slang words, acronyms, euphemisms and phrases common to the time ("short-timer," "deros," "friendly fire,"

“silent majority”). Prominent novels and films about the war also have separate entries.

Writing with remarkable fairness and disinterest, Olson’s contributors have clearly taken pains to write descriptions that remain factual insofar as it is possible to remain so. Each entry refers the reader to one or more sources where fuller information can be obtained. Such referral is clearly a valuable feature, though some of the source listings could be fuller or more various. For example, the novel-title entries consistently refer the reader to Philip Beidler’s *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, despite the fact that there are several other good book-length discussions of Vietnam War literature readily available.¹

Besides the 498 pages of entries, there are also six useful appendices and an index which constitute an additional 84 pages. The appendices are entitled “The Population and Provinces of South Vietnam, 1971”; “The Minority Groups of South Vietnam, 1970”; “Vietnam War Acronyms and Slang Expressions”; “Selected Bibliography of the Vietnam War”; “A Chronology of the Vietnam War, 1945-1975”; “Maps of the Republic of Vietnam, 1975.” Perhaps the two most serviceable of the appendices for a general audience are the bibliographic list (itself broken into 23 sub-categories) and the list of acronyms and slang expressions. The utility of the latter list will be immediately apparent to scholars who have themselves been stumped by some obscure string of letters and to teachers who have been stopped after class by students perplexed with the jargon of Vietnam that a novel, film or memoir has thrown their way.

The bibliography, which lists only full-length books and films, is remarkably ample if already slightly behind the times, and it greatly compensates for the small number of sources listed after some of the main dictionary entries. The bibliography’s one substantive weakness is that it already needs updating. The number of works missing

because of their post-1987 publication serves as a measure of the academic industry spawned by the Vietnam War. Indeed, the editor may have been well-advised to update this reprint with important new entries. For example, neither John Paul Vann nor *A Bright Shining Lie*, Neil Sheehan's 1988 book about him have entries, yet scholars from here out will undoubtedly draw upon Sheehan's fine work and refer to Vann both as a real person and as the historical/cultural emblem Sheehan's book seeks to make him.

There is no need to quibble overmuch with the entries which appear in the dictionary proper. The terms which Olson has chosen are worthy of inclusion, and although he has not exhausted the possibilities—how could he?—his principles for selection within categories seem sound. The book titles chosen for inclusion are a puzzling exception to Olson's otherwise judicious principles of selection. All the books listed are fictional, which raises the question as to why important novel titles are entered, but important nonfiction titles are not. The matter is worth mentioning not so much because it is an instance of peculiar logic, but because several of the very best books about Vietnam are nonfiction. Also regrettable is the fact that book-title and film-title entries occasionally abandon the previously mentioned disinterestedness and descriptive quality of the dictionary. The film *Platoon* is described, for example, as the best film about Vietnam, a judgment which runs perilously close to contradicting the entry under *Go Tell It to the Spartans*, which is described as "perhaps" the best movie about Vietnam. This is the sort of subjective intrusion wisely avoided in other sorts of entries.

In an updated edition, no doubt new entries could be added. *Oral History* and *New Journalism* are terms intimately linked to the war which are not in the dictionary but well could be. Also, there are some categories of war-related experience and some cultural artifacts which receive little or no mention. For instance, there are no

references to popular song: the commercial rock-and-roll songs so often referred to by GIs in novels and memoirs, the protest songs on the radio back home, the folk music sung by protestors, and the songs made up by military personnel—none of these are present in this dictionary. Scholars of popular culture reading 50 or 100 years from now will be puzzled by some song frequently mentioned in memoirs and novels, but they will not find out about, say, Country Joe and the Fish's "Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die." Nor do the visual arts receive mention, although their absence is more understandable since several significant Vietnam art shows have only very recently been exhibited.²

Perhaps most importantly, news photos and television are given scant coverage. No photographs are included in the dictionary even though several appeared during the war which not only profoundly affected the public's perception of American involvement but which have since become a part of the American mythic landscape burned into the memory of millions. In fact these photographs probably resonate more deeply in the minds of the great mass of American people than all the novels which are listed in the dictionary. The image of militant Buddhists aflame in acts of self-immolation, or of General Loan executing a prisoner with a pistol at point-blank range, or of a young anti-war protestor inserting a flower down the barrel of the equally young military policeman who faces him—all of these images are inseparable from the public memory of the war, at least in the United States.

Similar statements can be made about landmark television broadcasts and news reports. There is a long entry under the word *television*, and wisely under *Cronkite*, but again one feels that there is an imbalance here. An extremely important facet of the war years and of subsequent discourse on the war receives too little attention. No doubt it is difficult to exemplify and explain visual media in a print-oriented work. This is especially true of television, which cannot truly be represented by example in a book,

as important photographs can be. Still, posterity, especially in the form of young students, would be well-served by the inclusion of important still photographs and more entries pertaining to both television and photography.

These criticisms, some of them minor, others relatively important, are not intended to detract excessively from Olson's efforts. It may be worth repeating the truism here that no book can possibly contain everything. This dictionary stands as a useful and reliable reference work which belongs on the shelves of reference libraries, large and small. It is remarkably comprehensive; it is authoritative and trustworthy almost without exception. Much of the subject matter treated by its entries is charged with emotional content and divergent political opinions, yet these entries remain fair and even-handed without sidestepping issues or succumbing to blandness. Surely a substantial number of professors will come to regard this dictionary as an indispensable scholarly resource and pedagogical tool. □

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Notes

¹ There are several books of criticism about Vietnam literature written by single authors. For example, see: Hellman, John. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia University, 1986. Melling, Philip H. *Vietnam in American Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990. Myers, Thomas. *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Wilson, James C. *Vietnam in Prose and Film*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1982. Beidler himself has recently published a new work through the University of Georgia Press entitled *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*. There are also several provocative volumes of collected essays in criticism of Vietnam War literature which is beyond the scope of this review to list. Interestingly, these collections have been published subsequent to Olson's 1987 publication date. Bibliography: Newman, John. *Vietnam War Literature: An Annotated Bibliography on Imaginative Works About Americans Fighting in Vietnam*. 2 ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988.

² In the spring of 1990, the DeCordova Museum of Lincoln, Massachusetts, mounted an exhibition entitled "A Different War: Vietnam in Art." During the spring of 1991 the William Joiner Foundation of Boston held an exhibition in conjunction with Boston University entitled "As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War." The DeCordova exhibition sponsored a day-long symposium on "Changing Cultural Perspectives in America on the Vietnam War," and the Joiner/Boston university exhibition held a day-long symposium entitled "Living Beyond the War: U.S.-Vietnam Reconciliation Through Cultural and Humanitarian Exchanges." Both exhibits published full-length program catalogues.