

## GEORGE MONTEIRO

### JOHN HERSEY'S GUADALCANAL REPORT DRAWING ON CRANE'S WAR



Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner admired *The Red Badge of Courage*. "It's the only good war story I know," said William Faulkner, while Scott Fitzgerald complained that Hollywood had never treated the Civil War realistically on the "model" of Stendhal, Ambrose Bierce, or *The Red Badge of Courage*.<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hemingway was even more complimentary. In *Men at War* he explains his decision to include *The Red Badge of Courage* in its entirety—the only novel so honored. There was no "real literature of our Civil War," he said, until *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Crane wrote it before he had ever seen any war. But he had read the contemporary accounts, had heard the old soldiers, they were not so old then, talk, and above all he had seen Matthew Brady's wonderful photographs. Creating his story out of this material he wrote that great boy's dream of war that was to be truer to how war is than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see. It is one of the finest books of our literature . . . it is all as much of one piece as a great poem is.<sup>2</sup>

For Hemingway or Faulkner or Fitzgerald, the accuracy of Crane's depiction of warfare is unimpeachable. Yet in Crane's day there were readers who impugned his dramatization of a recruit's unpredictable and erratic behavior in battle. One war veteran, General A.C. McClurg, attacked *Red Badge* as "a vicious satire upon American soldiers," totalled up the charges against it, and dismissed it as "a mere work of diseased imagination."<sup>3</sup> Sir Frederick Pollock, writing to Oliver Wendell Holmes, a Union

officer twice wounded, found the psychology of *Red Badge* “artificial and forced.” “If a recruit did go through all those complex emotions he would never remember them,” he reasoned. “For the general picture you can bear witness—but I guess the discipline must have been better in your regiment.”<sup>4</sup> In *The Rough Riders* Theodore Roosevelt went out of his way to refer unmistakably to Crane: “I did not see any sign among the fighting men, whether wounded or unwounded, of the very complicated emotions assigned to their kind by some of the realistic modern novelists who have written about battles.” His own experience gave the lie to such accounts, it seems. “At the front everyone behaved quite simply and took things as they came, in a matter-of-course way,” Roosevelt insisted (in this book of tribute to himself and his fellow volunteers); “but there was doubtless, as is always the case, a good deal of panic and confusion in the rear where the wounded, the stragglers, a few of the packers, and two or three newspaper correspondents were, and in consequence the first reports sent back to the coast were of a most alarming character, describing, with minute inaccuracy, how we had run into an ambush, etc.”<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt knew that Crane himself had reported on what his editors at the *New York World*, Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper, called the Rough Riders’ “Gallant Blunder,” one attributed to their “remarkably wrong idea of how the Spaniards bushwhack.”<sup>6</sup>

Ambush and bushwhacking—occasions for displays of courage and bouts of fear—constitute the main “action” of John Hersey’s *Into the Valley*, a “first book of reportage,” published in 1943.<sup>7</sup> If Hersey is now remembered for such fiction as *A Bell for Adano* (1944) and *The Wall* (1950) and nonfiction, such as *Hiroshima*, an account that in 1946 took up a full issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, and *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968), we would do well to recognize that *Into the Valley* survives as a modest classic of immediate, first-hand reporting, a book good enough to be included in Schocken’s “Witnesses to War” series in 1989.<sup>8</sup>

A revised, expanded report of fighting in the Solomon Islands that appeared in *Life* magazine in November 1942,<sup>9</sup> *Into the Valley* was published by Knopf in February 1943, fifteen months into the United States’ Pacific war against the Japanese. With three printings in that month alone, it won an award from the Council on Books in Wartime. By April Pocket Books had it out

as a "War Book Panel Imperative."<sup>10</sup> This paperback reproduces the pencil illustrations of Knopf's hardcover edition.<sup>11</sup>

*Into the Valley* brought civilians on the homefront the kind of personal detail behind the war news that was carried daily in the newspapers, shown in movie-house newsreels, and broadcast over the radio. Assigned to cover the Marine campaign on Guadalcanal Island, Hersey focuses—not on a large battle that might be crucial to victory overall—but on what he characterizes as mere skirmish. He accompanies a complement of marines on a mission into what is thought to be unoccupied territory. "On the eighth day of October in the first year of our war, I went down into a valley with Captain Charles Rigaud of the United States Marines," Hersey begins. "The valley was on Guadalcanal Island, but it might have been anywhere. . . . The skirmish was just an episode in an insignificant battle." The author writes out of the knowledge that "the battle, and especially the skirmish . . . illustrate[s] how war feels to men everywhere." "This book," explains Hersey, attempts "to recapture the feelings" of the "men, and myself, when we went into that jungle valley." His goal is explicit. "If people in the homes could feel those feelings for an hour, or even just know about them, I think we would be an inch or two closer to winning the war and trying like hell to make the peace permanent." The *New York Times* agreed that this "moving little book brings home, as do few war stories, one of the hundreds of thousands of little episodes which make up this war."<sup>12</sup>

*Into the Valley* shows off the bravery of marines (without glossing over instances of hesitation, trepidation, and fear) and the discipline of men proceeding into battle—and retreating—not in "1942," as others might have written—but in this "first year of our war." As might be expected in a book elaborated in mid-war from reports written up originally for a mass-circulation magazine, Hersey's emphasis is on both the courage displayed by wounded and dying men and the necessary if sometimes reluctant resolution of their leaders. One could not expect otherwise in a book that at the time might itself have been seen as a part of an effort to win a war the outcome of which was still in doubt. Yet Hersey does not hesitate to offer a characterization of courage that is straight out of Crane. "Except for the hard knot which is inside some men, courage is largely the desire to show other men

that you have it" (77). Think here of the heroics dramatized in "A Mystery of Heroism" when an otherwise undistinguished soldier allows himself to be urged and goaded into making a suicidal run through deadly enemy fire to fetch a pail of water.

If there is anything particularly dated in *Into the Valley*, other than references to the enemy as "animals," it is its clear thrust of wartime patriotism. Hersey had had a similar problem, he later decided, with *Men on Bataan* (1942), his first book, one clearly "adjunctive to the war effort." He had simply been "too adulatory" of General Douglas MacArthur, quoting uncritically such characteristic, self-serving MacArthur pronouncements as "By God, it was destiny that sent me here."<sup>13</sup>

Beyond its right-and-wrong show of patriotism, there is quality in *Into the Valley* that is timeless. Hersey's terse account of an almost meaningless skirmish on what was then an obscure place stands up after half-a-century as a significant contribution to Anglo-American war writing. Early on Hersey insists on the truth of his account of actuality. In a nice turn, he resorts to a reversal of the usual disclaimers of works of fiction. "The characters of this book all are or were real men, and any resemblance to characters of fiction is purely coincidental" (1-2).

Hersey was taken at his word. *Into the Valley* established him "as a careful, honest reporter content to let the facts speak for themselves," it was decided; his book was a piece of "sensitive reporting, and nothing else."<sup>14</sup> Writing in 1956, John T. Frederick placed *Into the Valley* (along with Hersey's *Hiroshima*) among those works of journalism that "in the range, the intensity and the perceived significance of their shared experiences . . . surpass all but the scanty best of the fiction thus far written about the Second World War."<sup>15</sup>

Yet things are not that simple. It is not enough to praise *Into the Valley* as a piece of simple and direct reporting. It must be recognized that the book is an interesting case of literary journalism. That Hersey tells his story of men descending into an enemy-infested jungle valley with the aid of familiar literary—that is to say, fictional—models may account for some of its lasting appeal as a narrative of war.

Looking to fiction for ways to incarnate the characters and events of nonfiction was not an uncritical act on Hersey's part. When asked in 1985 if it had been a "natural" move "to go

from writing nonfiction to writing fiction,” he answered directly and honestly: “I guess I’d been thinking from the very beginning, and had been experimenting a little bit in the pieces I did for *Life*, with the notion that journalism could be enlivened by using the devices of fiction. My principal reading all along had been in fiction, even though I was working for *Time* on fact pieces.”<sup>16</sup> The writers who excited him included Malraux, Silone, John Dos Passos of those years, Hemingway, Faulkner—“writers who were trying to break the molds in various ways” (112). Indeed, Hersey saw clearly how certain fictional techniques would enable him to do a better job in reporting the war and its aftermath. He was answering a question about *Hiroshima*—a book of six narratives, each presented from the viewpoint of one of the survivors of the bomb—but what he says about *Hiroshima* can be applied as well to *Into the Valley*.

I believe that the reader is not conscious of the writer of fiction, except through the author’s voice—that is, you are conscious of the person *behind* the work. But in journalism you are conscious of the person *in* the work, the person who’s writing it and explaining to you what’s taken place. So my hope was, by using the tricks and the ways of fiction, to be able to eliminate that mediation and have the reader directly confronted by the characters. In this case, my hope was that the reader would be able to become the characters enough to suffer some of the pain, some of the disaster, and therefore realize it. (116-17)

In the early 1890s Crane pioneered the employment of fictional techniques and devices when reporting, not on war, but on New York City. It was a mark of his genius, of course, that he was able to turn so smoothly from reporting to fiction and back again, as he did throughout his short but productive career.

To return to Hersey’s war book’s indebtedness to Crane’s war writings, there are similarities that are of a curious nature. In a moment of extreme crisis, for example—when retreat is the only sane course—the company commander sets down his request for permission to withdraw on a page taken from the

“little yellow pad” carried by the runner. He writes “as slowly and carefully as if he were at a desk in Marine Corps headquarters in Washington making out some leisurely requisition” (81). A similar “as if” link is made by Crane in a report filed from Cuba. He writes of a signalman, a clear target for deadly enemy fire all around him, who, with his back to Spanish bullets, sends his message to off-shore ships. His face is “as grave and serene as that of a man writing in his own library.”<sup>17</sup> How much the signalman’s performance meant to Crane is hard to say, but there appears to be little doubt that when later in the Cuban campaign Crane stood up fully exposed to enemy fire, as Richard Harding Davis reported, he was not grandstanding. He was at work. He was conducting an experiment. His intention was to stand there unarmed, as long as he had to, so as to discover for himself the precise feelings and exact emotions of the single marine at Guantanamo focused exclusively on the task at hand, signaling warships in the harbor. It is no wonder that Hersey includes in his list of the bravest of the brave those men who unroll wire to enable field-communications. Like Crane’s signaling marines, these men are uncommonly vulnerable to enemy snipers.

Scenes of death in Hersey and Crane bear comparison. In “The Price of the Harness” a regular is down. Nolan’s (*Wounds in the Rain*) comrades go to his aid, talk to him, argue with him, and, ultimately—having discovered the gravity of his wound—lie to him consolingly. He argues back that the ground is wet, which the others deny. He insists that someone put a hand under his back to see for himself. What he discovers, however, is that the wetness Nolan feels is caused by his own blood. The wounded man is bleeding to death, though he does not know it. He “thought he was holding an argument on the condition of the turf” (29).

In Hersey’s book the dying man is a wounded machine-gunner. One of the boys reaching down to help him finds “out the nature of Bauer’s wound—by putting his hand right in the middle of it. It was a big, soft, warm, wet place in the man’s back, and in the dark it gave [him] the shivers” (103). Bauer will not make it back. He whispers:

“Say fellows, would you help me to take a crap?  
My stomach hurts, if I could just take a crap.”

They took his pants down, propped him up and held him in such a way that he could do what he wanted. Afterwards he felt a little better. He leaned back seeming to be exhausted.

For a few minutes his head tossed quickly from side to side. Then he said very softly: "I wish I could sleep."

The wish was fulfilled: he dropped off in apparent peace. He gave a few short breaths and then just stopped breathing (106, 108).<sup>18</sup>

Besides these scenes of wounding and death, there are other significant ways in which Hersey draws on Crane. One must not miss his allusion to Tennyson's poem and the way it links his text to Crane. When Hersey originally reported on his observer-participant's experience on Guadalcanal for *Life*, his piece was entitled, simply, "The Battle of the River." The title he chose for his book, however, refers to "The Charge of the Light Brigade," Tennyson's elegiac celebration of military discipline about that doomed brigade marching—the image is derived from the Twenty-third psalm—"into the valley of death."

Even the ambushed Marines' retreat in Hersey's book has its parallel in Tennyson's poem, for the survivors at Balaclava ride back out of "the valley of Death." Now, if his title alludes to Tennyson, his subtitle—"A Skirmish of the Marines"—recalls, in structure and syntax, Crane's subtitle—"An Episode of the American Civil War." There is both parallelism and a scaling down from "episode" to "skirmish." Both *The Red Badge of Courage* and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" offered Hersey paradigms for his treatment of a "skirmish."<sup>19</sup> A wrongful command in Tennyson's poem becomes the destructive order in Crane's novel (it is expected that the charge as ordered will bring about the death of the troops) which, in turn, becomes the miscalculated order of Hersey's account. And if there is nothing in Tennyson's poem about preparing for the charge, Crane's narrative (especially at the beginning) and Hersey's book both attend to the details of preparation as well as to the mental states and morale of the men who are about to move into danger. Unlike Tennyson's poem, moreover, both Hersey's and Crane's narratives attend closely to the dead. As in Crane's account of

the death of the tall soldier, Hersey dwells on the words and gestures of a wounded man being carried out of battle. And although there is none of the macabre in Hersey that there is in Henry Fleming's encounter with a verdant corpse, there is in Hersey a more quiet, though no less obligatory, encounter with a corpse: "somebody had straightened the dead boy out and closed his eyes and thrown a poncho over him. His face, though, was not entirely covered, and we couldn't help seeing it" (66). Perhaps Hersey has in mind, besides *Red Badge*, Crane's haunting war story "The Uprturned Face," which tells of soldiers trying to give proper burial, in the midst of sniper fire, to a comrade whose uncovered eyes continue to confront them.

To *The Red Badge of Courage* and "The Uprturned Faced" as Crane titles familiar to Hersey can be added "The Open Boat." Hersey's own appearance in his narrative recalls Crane's appearance, slightly disguised, in his fictional account of an experience he shared with men—like Hersey's marines after escaping from the enemy's trap—who run through the emotions attendant upon their discovery that they are doomed.

In the early morning hours of October 8, 1942, the small group of marines whose mission the correspondent has joined stand in "a tight little knot right in the trail," (60-61) awaiting the information they need to proceed. They argue about the conduct of the war, especially the fact that they are never told anything that matters. Then, a remarkable thing happens. The conversation switches to something quite different. The correspondent has asked the men: "What would you say you were fighting for? Today, here in this valley, what are you fighting for?" (63). He is answered in a totally unexpected way. At first the correspondent thinks he is being made fun of, but then realizes that his question is being answered "very specifically." One of the men whispered:

"Jesus, what I'd give for a piece of blueberry pie."

Another whispered: "Personally I prefer mince."

A third whispered: "Make mine apple with a few raisins in it and lots of cinnamon: you know, Southern style." (64)

"Fighting for pie," marvels the correspondent, "here pie was their symbol of home" (64).

Hardly coincidentally, as they attempt to reach shore—to get back to the safety of "home"—two of the occupants of Crane's open boat hold a brief discussion.

The cook's head was on a thwart, and he looked without interest at the water under his nose. He was deep in other scenes. Finally he spoke. "Billie," he murmured, dreamfully, "what kind of pie do you like best?"

"Pie," said the oiler and the correspondent, agitatedly. "Don't talk about those things, blast you!"<sup>20</sup>

If Crane's reference hangs there, with no apparent further meaning beyond its seeming incongruity, Hersey the correspondent, unlike Crane as correspondent, takes the unexpected reply for an answer to a question that is less a matter of purpose or design than one of seemingly ordinary rationalizing during wartime. In that respect, Hersey's message appears to be closer to Tennyson's than it is to anything in Crane. Yet a half century later, looking back at the experience that went into *Into the Valley*, Hersey again linked his war book to Crane:

The quality of bravery is complex; courage earns a red badge for its mystery. A key passage in my book brought into common usage in the language a phrase that sometimes came to be spoken derisively: our men were "fighting for pie." When I asked a group of intelligent officers on their way into the valley what they thought they were fighting for they went vague before they spoke—got a look on their faces of men bothered by a memory. They began talking about different kinds of pie.<sup>21</sup>

Among other matters of influence and affinity—large and small—between Hersey and Crane, there are Hersey's decision to report on the fear that grips these veteran marines—with their eager acceptance of a false order to retreat—his account of

marching back with the walking wounded (including the shell-shocked and the spooked)—reminiscent of Henry Fleming's walk with the wounded—even a small episode in coffee-making that is right out of Crane—and, above all, his own penetrations into the mystery of heroism.

But finally it is not that Hersey “borrowed” from Crane or that there are affinities in their work that is the essential thing here. What Hersey got from Crane was something greater than these things—significant as they are in themselves. He went to school in Crane, just as Hemingway did, and what he learned from that experience can be simply put, if difficult to achieve. He learned four related things: how to see, what to look for, what to select out of myriad experiences, and how to convey his reports in the form of objective impressionism. In short, by following Crane—I would suggest—Hersey learned how to give embodiment and shape to his sense of reality.

Richard Harding Davis, Crane's contemporary, claimed that “Stephen Crane seems to me to have written the last word as far as battles or fighting is concerned.”<sup>22</sup> Surely Davis, who was himself no slouch as a war correspondent, was guilty of exaggeration. Crane might not have the “last” word, but his word has certainly lasted. For Hersey and countless others—from Hemingway to Tim O'Brien—Crane articulated literary terms for depicting soldiers at war that continue to this day.<sup>22</sup> ☞

## NOTES

1. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, Joseph Blotner, ed. (New York: Random House, 1977), 69; *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Andrew Turnbull, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1963), 597. David O. Selznick had just produced *Gone With the Wind*. In the 1950s he would do the remake of *A Farewell to Arms*.
2. Ernest Hemingway, ed., *Men at War* (New York: Crown, 1942), xvii.
3. A.C. McClurg, “The Red Badge of Hysteria,” *The Dial*, 20 (Apr. 16, 1896): 227-28.
4. *Holmes-Pollock Letters: The Correspondence of Mr Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock 1874-1932*, Mark De Wolfe Howe, ed.; with intr. by John Gorham Palfrey (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1941), I, 68.

5. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders* (New York: Scribners, 1899), 107-08.
6. Stephen Crane, "Roosevelt's Rough Riders' Loss Due to a Gallant Blunder," in *Reports of War: War Dispatches[,] Great Battles of the World*, vol. IX, The University of Virginia Edition of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, Fredson Bowers, ed.; with intr. by James B. Colvert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), 146.
7. John Hersey, *Into the Valley: A Skirmish of the Marines*, revised edition (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 113.
8. By 1989 Schocken's "Witnesses to War" series included, besides Hersey's *Into the Valley*, Tom Harrisson's *Living Through the Blitz*, A.J. Liebling's *Mollie & Other War Pieces*, Edward R. Murrow's *This is London*, Orwell: *The War Commentaries*, and Gilles Perrault's *The Red Orchestra*.
9. John Hersey, "The Battle of the River," *Life* (Nov. 23, 1942): 99-116.
10. John Hersey, *Into the Valley: A Skirmish of the Marines* (New York: Pocket Books, 1943), backcover. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
11. Schocken's 1989 edition reproduces only fifteen of Major Donald L. Dickson's illustrations. There were originally twenty-three. These fifteen are captioned "Jungle Warfare," "Dogfight," "Listening Post," "Lunga Bridge 8 Aug 42," "Point," "Runner," "Working Party," "Stream Crossing," "U.S. Marine Guadalcanal, B.S.I.P. Oct. 1942," "Sniper," "Big One Coming," "Walking Wounded," "Light?," and "Attack." The first illustration in the book, uncaptioned, shows the helmeted head of a marine in profile. Those illustrations dropped—silently—include illustrations captioned "Rock of Ages" (two marines reading something like a missal, one with his shirt off, the other with his shirt unbuttoned to the waist), "Field Day" (a single marine naked except for a towel and his belt, holster, and gun, carrying in his hand a toothbrush and, perhaps, a small mirror), "Jap heavy m.g.," "Corpsman," "Straggler" (a marine walking alone, his head down), "For a pal" (a marine, naked to the waist, sitting on a box, lettering a name on a cross) and "Marine's Best Friend" (a bare-headed marine sitting on a rock, cleaning his rifle). One uncaptioned drawing shows a marine, head down, looking at a marine's abandoned helmet and rifle. The copyright page of the 1989 edition reads: "Grateful acknowledgment is made to the U.S. Marine Corps Museum's art collection for use of the drawings by Colonel Donald L. Dickson, USMCR."
12. S.T. Williamson, "A Report on a Jungle Skirmish," *New York Times* (Feb. 7, 1943), 4.
13. David Sanders, *John Hersey Revisited* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 48, 44. While *Men on Bataan* received "glowing notices," including one in *Time* that saw it as filling the bill for a "hero-hungry United States," (5)

Hersey would later drop the book from his list of publications, persuading his publishers to do the same.

14. Kelsey Guilfoil, "John Hersey: Fact and Fiction," *English Journal*, 39 (Sept. 1950): 356; Robert C. Healey, "Novelists of the War: A Bunch of Dispossessed," in *Fifty Years of the American Novel*, Harold C. Gardiner, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1951), 269.

15. John T. Frederick, "Fiction of the Second World War," *College English*, 17 (Jan. 1956), 197.

16. Jonathan Dee, "John Hersey," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Eighth Series, George Plimpton, ed.; with intr. by Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 111-12.

17. Stephen Crane, "Marines Signalling Under Fire at Guantanamo," in *Wounds in the Rain* (London: Methuen, 1900), 188.

18. Besides recalling the death scene that concludes Crane's "The Price of the Harness," Hersey's scene looks forward to the scene in *Across the River and Into the Trees* in which Hemingway's hero recalls his own wounding.

19. For Crane's own use of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" in *The Red Badge of Courage*, see George Monteiro, "The Mule-drivers' Charge in *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Stephen Crane Studies*, 1 (Spring 1992): 9-14.

20. Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat," in *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 899.

21. John Hersey, "War: It's Hard to Get It Right," *New York Times Book Review* (Sept. 10, 1989), 45.

22. Arthur Lubow, *The Reporter Who Would Be King: A Biography of Richard Harding Davis* (New York: Scribners, 1992), 145.

23. Some contemporary reviewers noticed in passing that *Into the Valley* harks back to Crane. For example, the reviewer for the *Kansas City Star* wrote: "Half a century and more ago Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*, which became an American classic and which still is the standard for stories of men in battle. In the unpretentious manner of its telling and in the recording of significant detail *Into the Valley* resembles the Crane work" (Paul I. Wellman, "Red Badge to Company of Marines" [Feb. 6, 1943] F1). For other examples see J. Donald Adams, "A Cloud of Witnesses," *Yale Review*, 32 (June 1943): 791; the *New Yorker*, 18 (Feb. 6, 1943), 64; and Williamson, "Report."