

## BOOKS

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REVIEW BY SONJA PASQUANTONIO

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### *Loon: A Marine Story*

by Jack McLean

New York: Presidio Press, 2009

Literature is history with the truth left in it.

—Ralph Peters

I KNOW VIETNAM. MY FOSTER DAD IS A VIETNAM VET WHO WENT into a fugue state nine years ago. No warning signals, no hints, no precursory bizarre behavior. One minute he was standing in their Missouri condo; the next he was in the fetal position, dug down in a foxhole. He forgot his wife of thirty years and their four adult daughters. Just repeatedly called out for his buddies: most dead. Hysterical, his wife clasped his shoulder. She earned a trip to the emergency room; it took six weeks for her jaw to heal.

I know Vietnam, but I don't understand it. For years, my foster dad had a story to tell, but the world was oblivious. Jack McLean's book, *Loon: A Marine Story*, gives credence to a history systematically manipulated, covered up, and for many years, purposefully forgotten. A daunting task since McLean competes in a market flooded by 'true Vietnam tales'; tales related some thirty years after the war's end. Perhaps that's why he inserts the following caveat, "while all of the incidents...are real, certain dialogue has been reconstructed". Though not marketed as a memoir, McLean seems concerned about the public's reception to the veracity of his story. After all, we live in the aftermath of James Frey.

McLean is an educated man; he holds a degree from Harvard and is the Tsien writer-in-residence at Fort Lee, NJ. But his literary prowess is not what makes this book distinctive. The novel is not merely a catalogue of lives lived and comrades lost (although there's a profusion of both). What characterizes McLean is his ability to narrate a fiercely intelligent, rather sarcastic, and often laugh-out-loud *Bildungsroman*.

Like many of us, McLean joined the military for less-than-honorable circumstances. I chose the Air Force because the Class A 'blues' uniform matched my eyes; I was seventeen and vacuous. McLean picked the Marines because he wasn't accepted into college and wanted to wait two years before "doing" anything. "Unlike college," McLean wrote, "the marines wanted me." No noble ideals. No romanticized notion of patriotic duty. McLean's story is attention grabbing and he comes across as affable and expressive. His narrative offers a nuanced perspective of life at the front – an admixture of boredom, anxiety, terror, and exhilaration. The dynamic combination of the author and his text yields a compelling read.

An established writer, McLean *could* rely on literary artifice. At times, we recognize Harvard in his writing, but generally, the prose is profane and unpretentious; we admire him for avoiding an Ivy League education that contradicts clichéd marine persona.

For many Air Force Academy cadets, the concept of war is intriguing. Early in the campaign, Vietnam's starry-eyed eighteen-year-olds entered the war on the hands (and words) of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." —they were the same age as the freshman I teach. A few years later, still flicking on the tail of Kennedy's emboldening words, McLean describes how "avoiding war service reached an art form."

McLean begins his memoir with a dizzying array of events, all of which influence the world in a peculiar way. The chronology is important because it sets the foundation for the annals of Vietnam, which McLean unlocks by describing how, "The first act for most of our fathers upon returning home was to make us—millions of us, in unprecedented numbers." A few lines later, "[t]he society that spawned us, however, was unprepared for our arrival." Intrigued by his prediction, I'm primed for a good ride.

In the opening chapter, McLean integrates a lexicon of soldier slang, logging details on people we don't know and thus far, have no connection with. It reads like any Vietnam story. Marines cut off from their company. "Gooks" blitz Marines. The swashbuckling commander bucks authority; his cool head prevails and he

earns the respect and adoration of the company. The bad guys lose. Nonetheless, there's panache in his introduction. When you eventually meet the motley crew, McLean's seamless character development crafts realistic combat action.

The upper-middle-class McLean began Marine Corps basic training in 1966, a place where "healthy feet and clean rifles were nonnegotiable." Barely more than boys, they "marched back to the barracks with our new rifles in one hand; genitals in the other to the cadence of:

This is my rifle; this is my gun  
This is for fightin'; this is for fun.

After a year hiatus working the supply warehouse in Barstow, California, McLean received orders to "*Iwo fucking Jima*" (99): a situation both exhilarating and frightening. Landing on the crowded tarmac in "shiny jungle boots and pink skin," McLean balanced his arrival against the "older guys" and recognized the inbounds were "ridiculously wet behind the ears." Imagine the gut-wrenching feeling, to recognize that even with intense training, you arrive barely prepared for combat or the realities of war. While we may have looked tough... we were all scared shitless. Anyone who tells you different is lying" (98).

The book is most compelling in its latter stages. There are narrative similarities to Tim O'Brien, but we get a good sense of combat and persona through McLean's ad-hoc observations. The charged informality of his style strives to capture the frenetic tempo of LZ Loon and you sense the grid of raw terror: "scared, oh my God so scared" (114).

Although the conflict is riveting, what appeals to me most is McLean's reintegration to civilian life. McLean returned stateside buoyed by the notion that returning vets fought bravely, defended liberty, and deserved the kudos of a grateful nation. Yet,

...there were no crowds.  
There were no parades.  
Perhaps, we thought, all of that would come later.  
So all waited.  
Several million of us.  
It never came.

I shouldn't feel his burden. Not even a sparkle in my mother's eyes, it was impossible for me to be there, waving chubby baby arms and welcoming warriors home.

The facts are resolute. He committed no atrocities. He was no baby killer. He had nothing to feel guilty over. The men of Charlie Company killed in order to stay alive: we can't fault them. On some level, McLean meant to reprimand an entire nation, castigating people openly venomous towards Vietnam, but still swooning over present-day veterans eight years after 9/11. You can feel the spasm of pain as he articulates the enduring struggle of merging into a country that evaporated veterans. "Each was left alone to fight his own private war, and face a country that was tired of the war and openly antagonistic to those veterans who'd fought in it" (211). Politics and ideologies are different now.

Another nuance is the stinging impact of physical trauma. Twenty years ago, my foster sister was in a car crash. For weeks afterward, we plucked glass from her head and scalp, the slivers, deeply imbedded in her skin, snaked their way up to glint diamond-like on the surface. Injured in a rocket explosion, McLean spent fifteen years removing microscopic shards tunneled parasitically under his skin.

My best education came from participation in war. Even from my limited perspective, I saw and experienced things that changed me forever, offering a glimpse into a humanity I'd never imagined. This is the story of Vietnam. The reason it took twenty plus years for my foster dad's memories to bubble forth parallels McLean's three decades of repressed silence. Locked away in a space of contained darkness, McLean's Vietnam experience was an "impenetrably dense little pellet deep within to which no one, including myself, was permitted access" (218). Similar to the shards imbedded in my foster sister's face, McLean, like so many other veterans, traversed a personal vicissitude that made the realism of war agonizing and its memories unbearable. McLean returned bearing mental *and* physical scars; but *Loon* is his catharsis, a narrative that embraces the brotherhood that sprung from LZ Loon's napalmed ashes.

We are wise to remember that war doesn't just happen; instead, soldiers fight, bleed, and die. *Loon* is not your typical war story; specifically, it lacks the passionate argument or political diatribe regarding iniquitous government behavior. "The war was wrong, but this is not an issue of the soldier...you are not paid to think" (224). Ultimately, Mclean is willing to extract the brutality of Vietnam, offering a forthright examination into the ugliness of war. Like the repressive pellet lodged deep within his psyche, *Loon* is the final fragment — buried for thirty years. The text, characterizations, and frank honesty sparkle like shards of glass, and far from

being injurious, readers should pluck the surfacing shrapnel and experience the war first-hand.

*A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard  
Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon*

by Neil Sheehan

New York: Random House, 2009

Sheehan's latest book is a compelling, fast-moving account of the postwar effort to fund, design, and assemble an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and space force for the United States and the role one Air Force officer, Bernard Schriever (a four-star general by the time of retirement) played in this struggle over nearly three decades. While *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War* does little to challenge the conventional wisdom of the nation's unconventional weapons program as developed during the Eisenhower years, the book nonetheless provides a knowing look into the strategies, politics, and egos involved at the highest levels of military research and development.

The book proper begins with the six-year-old Schriever's arrival at New York's Ellis Island from Germany in 1917 and speeds through his childhood and adolescence, during which time he develops great confidence as an athlete and superb golfer (Sheehan will later make much of how Schriever's golf skills consistently greased the social skids of his Air Force career). During World War II, as a bomber pilot and later as an engineer, Schriever catches the discerning eye of several influential leaders and is later handpicked by General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, for a key post in research and development in the postwar Air Force. The remainder of the book follows Schriever and his adventures and/or conflicts with countless bureaucrats, politicians, naturalized-citizen scientists, and top military brass. The chapters devoted to Schriever's career-long, ideological feud with larger-than-life Air Force general Curtis E. LeMay prove particularly entertaining and enlightening; we quickly learn, for example, that LeMay's firebombing philosophies of World War II survived the war intact and did not adjust to the dangerous radioactive realities inherent to a thermonuclear exchange.

The true strength of *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War*, however, lies in its representation of the myriad factors—doctrine, politics, persistence, technological savvy, and

institutional/personal ambitions—that went into the development of the national defense policies that shepherded us through horrific events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis (the standoff that serves as the culmination of Sheehan’s book). Through the guiding narrative thread that is Schriever’s remarkable life and career, Sheehan reveals the hopes, dreams, and fears of a nation that suddenly found itself the most powerful in the world and vowed to hold that title through its long-term commitment to technological superiority.

*6 Vietnamese Poets*

Nguyen Ba Chung and Kevin Bowen, eds.

Curbstone Press: Willimantic CT, 2002

To view a war from the other side of the enemy line is not something often done. Few of us know that Ho Chi Minh wrote a Declaration of Independence modeled on Thomas Jefferson, only to be rebuffed by America in his effort to free his country from the French (See Karnow, *Vietnam: A History: The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*, 135). Fewer still know that the Vietnamese rebellion against the French ended with the Geneva Accord of 1954, when Vietnam was “temporarily” partitioned into North and South, pending national elections in two years that never occurred because the South, backed by America, refused to allow elections (Karnow, 224; *6 Vietnamese Poets*, xvii).

But many of the poems in *6 Vietnamese Poets* do allow us to see the war from the eyes of the Vietnamese and how it was to fight against what they viewed as an invasion by Americans. In “Letter in Winter,” the poetess Y Nhi asks:

How is it that I can never forget  
“the artist felled by the canal near the river mouth  
in the glare of the claymore his hand slowly let go of the palm leaf.” (25)

Such images—of the violence and flash of light and death from an exploding mine, contrasted with the simple beauty of a palm leaf being let go, as if akin to peace forcibly abandoned—are searing.

For Y Nhi, whose father fought the French, life alone with her mother was always hard, hunger always near, and yet she wrote not so much of war but the shadow of war cast upon those all around her (xvii). Her quiet, precise, eloquent free-verse stands out in this anthology as poetry worth a much wider audience.

For a country that suffered more bombs than Nazi Germany, and did little to deserve it, consider how the poetess Lam Thi My Da transforms the horror of an exploding bomb into a symbol of a remnant Eden in “Garden Fragrance”:

Last night a bomb exploded on the veranda  
But sounds of birds sweeten the air this morning,  
I hear the fragrant trees, look in the garden,  
Find two silent clusters of ripe guavas. (95)

And then there is the timeless heartbreak of love and war, leaving love for war, with the hope to return from war to love again, as in Nguyen Khoa Diem's "A Piece of Loving Sky," which gives us these two exceptional stanzas:

Loving you is like loving the endless sky,  
the dew of morning, the dusk of night,  
the first wind foretelling April storms,  
the rain's enveloping warmth, the distance that calls us.

You are where my home is.  
How white is mother's hair, how green your dress.  
The Resistance path may lead in a hundred directions;  
but like the flower, my face always turns back to you. (43)

The hardship of a soldier in a campaign is well told by Nguyen Duc Mau in "Diary of a Fever" where he writes about a squad of soldiers suffering illness in the rainy season and how "the fever crept through your body, / twisted you inside out like a river" (137). Yet in "Song of the Lo River," there seems to be a kind of forgiveness, even as memories still burn, for while "the river's waters will never run dry of words, / the river will always sing . . ." (147).

Perhaps Xuan Quynh, another woman poet, best expresses her nation's spirit, fighting the most powerful military force on earth:

No road was too long, no mountain could separate us.  
In our eyes the blue sky was forever blue. (179)

This anthology, published seven years ago in 2002, has received little attention, but these poems shine with the kind of simplicity that can only be found in the words of those who have experienced what most of us fortunately have not. Maybe our task is to learn something, albeit belatedly, that we might have gathered from our own history before the war—that a rebel army of poor farmers, fighting for

country and freedom, can successfully use guerilla tactics to defeat a far more powerful force.

Before we invade or bomb any other nations, we might remember these lines from Nguyen Khoa Diem in “Love Poems Written in the War”:

I have dreamed  
a day when  
all the flowers  
speak the language  
of my love. (65)

Fighting for love and country is one thing. Fighting as if a mercenary to defend a political theory of dominoes espoused by politicians but not by common citizens is quite another. Common ground, shown by this anthology, is poetry and humanity. The editors, Nguyen Ba Chung and Kevin Bowen, have crafted a fine text from the eloquent voices of others who speak to our shared humanity.

REVIEW BY STEVEN TROUT

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## The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the Fiction of Mobilization

by Keith Gandal

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

Keith Gandal's *The Gun and the Pen* argues forcefully that classic works of American Modernism from the 1920s have less to say about the horrors of the First World War—horrors long thought to have shaped the so-called Lost Generation—than about the social and cultural upheaval introduced by wartime mobilization. Few who finish this study will find themselves in disagreement with Gandal's provocative thesis. Indeed, this is a book likely to change our conception of American World War I literature—or, more specifically, the relationship between the Great War and American Modernism—for good.

As Gandal reminds us, the three central Modernists of the interwar period (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner) were all losers where World-War-I mobilization was concerned. For all his martial bluster, Hemingway entered the Great War via a non-combatant organization, the American Red Cross. The US Army rejected him because of his nearsightedness. Fitzgerald, on the other hand, successfully pursued a commission as a Second Lieutenant; however, his superiors judged him largely incompetent, and the war ended before he could reach the Western Front. As for Faulkner, his mobilization story is the most pitiful of all. Too short to serve in the American military, the Mississippian lied his way into an RAF training camp in Canada, allegedly by perfecting a phony British accent.

Faulkner joined too late to see action in France (or even to experience actual flight training), but this inconvenient fact did not prevent him from dressing up as a fighter pilot and describing ferocious dogfights to gullible audiences in Oxford, Mississippi.

The anomalous nature of these writers' war experiences has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Never before, however, has a critic made "mobilization wounds"—Gandal's term for the emasculating trauma experienced by Anglo males who missed out on the fighting—the focus of a sustained rereading of canonical Modernist fiction. As explored here, even familiar works such as *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Great Gatsby* suddenly become quite different from the Lost-Generation chestnuts that we thought we knew. Setting aside the notion that these novels explicitly express postwar disillusionment, Gandal instead unpacks the bundle of mobilization-related anxieties (and resulting plot similarities) that they share. In particular, he demonstrates that each text pits a character of impeccable WASP credentials (a traditional recipient, that is, of the prestige attached to frontline service) against a hyphenated "upstart" who has benefited in some way from Progressive wartime policies. Thus, in *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan, the quintessential old-moneyed New Englander, collides with Gatsby, a German-American who successfully uses America's entry into the war as a springboard for his ambitions. And thus, in *The Sun Also Rises*, impotent Jake Barnes tussles with Robert Cohn, a Jewish-American who, while not a war veteran per se, utters the same chivalric language of chastity and righteousness absorbed by Gatsby in the AEF. For Gandal, such novels not only compensate in various ways for their creators' embarrassing war records, they also lash out at ethnic veterans, implicitly condemning mobilization policies that led members of minority groups to achieve a level of recognition once reserved exclusively for Anglo warriors.

For many readers, this part of Gandal's thesis may seem a stretch. After all, World War I historiography has long emphasized the War Department's hostility toward ethnic and racial minorities. Bogus intelligence tests, we have been told, prevented non-Anglos from rising in the ranks. And then there is the AEF's notoriously discriminatory treatment of African-American troops, most of whom served as laborers in uniform. Fortunately, however, Gandal's rethinking of 1920s American Modernism coincides with an ongoing historical reevaluation of the US Army in World War I. Indeed, *The Gun and the Pen* is an excellent example of intellectual fertilization across disciplinary lines. Drawing upon the recent work of social historians such as Nancy Gentile Ford and Jennifer Keene, Gandal demonstrates that despite their built-in bias, World-War-I era intelligence tests actually gave

many troops—particularly second-generation immigrants—unprecedented access to positions of authority. Of course, African-American soldiers benefited little from this progressive side of wartime mobilization; skin color trumped ethnicity where intolerance was concerned. Nevertheless, Gandal's radical new construction of American Modernism dovetails persuasively with an equally revolutionary vision of The Great Adventure of 1917-1918 as The Great Opportunity for many hyphenated Americans.

Since the central argument in *The Gun and the Pen* rests so heavily upon social-historical evidence, Gandal understandably spends much of the book backing up his claim that American participation in World War I was, more than anything else, a *mobilization* event. He even goes so far as to suggest that War Department policies pertaining to draft eligibility, progressive standards of soldierly conduct, and merit-based promotion ultimately mattered more, in terms of Twentieth-Century American history, than the (relatively brief) experience of the AEF in battle. However, the most exciting moments in this study come when familiar texts suddenly change before our eyes. Unlike lesser New Historicists, Gandal does not eschew close reading. On the contrary, he proves himself a master at bringing text and context into dialogue. Consider, for example, his detailed analysis of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. As Gandal observes, “a common misreading” of Fitzgerald’s text “is to perceive Daisy as a traditional woman and a foil to Jordan Baker’s new woman” (108). Why a misreading? As it turns out, the object of Gatsby’s obsession is no less shaped than he is by the social and sexual turmoil of mobilization. However, while Gatsby embraces and absurdly exaggerates the AEF’s official standards of clean-living and selfless devotion to an idealized girl at home (a moral posture that he maintains even during his subsequent career as a bootlegger), Daisy discovers that mobilization brings sexual empowerment and variety. It is she, in fact, who makes Jordan aware of the erotic possibilities opened up in a society knocked sideways by total war. After marshalling evidence from passages in the novel that are rarely, if ever, discussed in detail, Gandal asserts that Daisy is “a romanticized version of the charity girl” (111); in other words, she bears a strong resemblance to the kind of woman (one overly susceptible to the charms of a man in uniform and thus likely to engage in promiscuity) specifically targeted as a threat by the US Army. Indeed, we learn that military authorities in 1917 and 1918 rounded up more than 30,000 such “charity girls” in a bizarre program of “misogynistic law enforcement” (112). Read in this way, Gatsby’s romance with Daisy is itself a mobilization event; the rapidly shifting social conditions of wartime bring the two characters together, but

not, ultimately, in a way that will allow their relationship to flourish beyond the Armistice.

One can quibble with parts of *The Gun and the Pen*. Although always absorbing, Gandal's close reading sometimes seem overly determined to draw everything back to the theme of mobilization, and his excessive defense of his methodology, an entire chapter in length, seems to have been, well, mobilized unnecessarily. But these are minor matters. By any standard, *The Gun and the Pen* is the most important book on American Modernism and World War I to appear in decades. And no one who claims to know the works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner can afford to ignore it.

